

2018

## Widening the Sphere: Mid-to-Late Victorian Popular Fiction, Gender Representation, and Canonicity

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WIDENING THE SPHERE: MID-TO-LATE VICTORIAN  
POPULAR FICTION, GENDER REPRESENTATION,  
AND CANONICITY

BY

ANNA J. BRECKE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN  
ENGLISH

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2018

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

OF

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UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND  
2018

## ABSTRACT

When Victorian fiction entered academic study in the mid-twentieth century, the texts that were considered essential had been influenced by a small group of scholars primarily concerned with studying the novel form across periods rather than studying literature of the Victorian Era. The collection of authors that became “the” Victorian canon included Dickens, Thackeray, Hardy, the Brontës, Trollope, Henry James and George Eliot, limiting the Victorian novel to realist fiction. The choices of these critics did not accurately represent the diverse range of authors and genres in fiction published during the period. Particularly absent from this canon are the popular works produced by women writers in the subgenres of Sensation fiction, New Woman fiction, and Supernatural or Speculative fiction. Their absence helped the realist novel to reinforce assumptions about gender roles and gendered space in Victorian literature and culture, by upholding tropes like the “angel in the house” and the doctrine of separate spheres. This study examines the history of work on the Victorian novel and texts by women writers in popular novelistic subgenres featuring transgressive female characters and hybrid public/private spaces.

A history of criticism on the Victorian novel from 1881 through to contemporary scholarship reveals that before the mid-century period, works on the Victorian novel included a broader range of writers than works produced when the canon took form. Since the last third of the twentieth century, scholars have worked to redress this thinning out of the genre by recuperating popular writers and genres. I examine women’s behavior and gendered space in three popular genres where female characters transgress norms associated with the separate spheres and angel in the

house. Female characters like Sensation fiction's pretty horsebreakers, New Woman novels' working women, and the women affected by supernatural influences in supernatural texts, challenge supposed norms of Victorian femininity in ways that would have been apparent to scholars sooner had they considered genres other than the realist novel. Additionally, gender and space interact differently in popular genres where the separate public and private spheres of domestic and economic life are frequently intertwined in the home-shop and the country house. In supernatural fiction, normative femininity is undermined when female characters disrupt rather than create safe home-spaces. I trace these trends in gender representation in popular novels and short stories by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Marie Corelli, Rhoda Broughton, Florence Marryat, Amy Levy and Eliza Lynn Linton.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor Carolyn Betensky is owed my deepest gratitude for her unflagging support, advice, and guidance throughout my doctoral process. Words cannot express how much I appreciate her mentorship and friendship. Thank you to my dissertation committee members Professors Jean Walton, Annemarie Vaccaro, David Faflik, and Ian Reyes for their feedback and advice. Additional thanks to Director of Graduate Studies Professor Kathleen Davis and to Graduate Program Administrator Michelle Caraccia, who helps us all navigate the slings and arrows of graduate school with infinite care and grace.

Rachel May provided a sympathetic ear, sage advice, and much needed laughter and love over the course of this project. Thank you to Kristen Bennett for last minutes and lost evenings. Without their friendship I doubt I would have succeeded. Thank you to Rebekah Greene for being a sounding board for my ideas and for tirelessly offering feedback and suggestions, and to Mary Beth Ray for all her encouragement and commiseration.

To all the friends and colleagues who have offered support, collaboration, and guidance along the way— Devon Sprague, Susan Wall, Todd Gernes, Nancy Hammerle, Marlene Tromp, Ashton Foley-Schramm, Courtney Floyd, Christiana Salah, Danielle Dirocco, Kelly Hager, Sarah L. Leonard, Diane Costagliola, Chris Cormier-Hayes, Jason Shrontz, Beth O’Leary Anish, Emanuela Sala, Donna Hayden, Gabrielle Malcolm, Kate Mattacks, Andrew King, Kara Lewis, Kim Evelyn, Kara Watts, Amy Foley, Jenny Platz, Clarissa Walker, Tamar Heller, Michael Becker, Sara Murphy, Lindy Briggette, Madeleine Seys, Rachel Beusee-Kauffman,

Serap Hidir, and Theresa Lang— thank you for being there for me. Special thanks to the online communities that offered distraction, sympathy, and entertainment when I needed a break, the due South bar and CFxMFM.

Thank you to the organizers and delegates who have made the Victorian Popular Fiction Association conference at the Senate House a welcoming place to share developing research and generate ideas over the past ten years, especially Greta Depledge, Jane Jordan, Janine Hatter, Anne-Marie Beller, and Helena Ifill, and to my MAPACA family Jordan McClain, Colin Helb, Leigha McReynolds, Beth Anne Cooke-Cornell, Pam Detrixhe, Diana Vecchio, Mary Behrman, Tom Grochowski, MJ Isola, Shannon Cole, Raj Singh and Meredith Guthrie.

The University of Rhode Island Center for the Humanities, Graduate Assistants United, and the Graduate Student Association provided grant funding that allowed me to travel for research and conferences. Many thanks to Carolyn Oulton at Canterbury Christchurch University for her assistance with accessing the Braddon Family Archive held by the International Center for Victorian Women Writers.

Thank you to my brother Matt Brecke for being the best listener, even when he has no idea what I'm talking about. Thank you to my parents Ann Yoost Brecke, Michael Brecke, John Haule, and Betsy Titterington for their faith in me, and to Lukas, Sabrina, and Oscar Haule. All my gratitude and love to Esmé Haule for the conversations about fairy tales. And finally, thank you to Edison Carter, who showed up on my porch shortly after my exams as though he knew I would need the gentle support of feline friendship to complete my dissertation.

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## **Introduction: A Gap in the Study of Victorian Literature and Culture**

Until the turn of the twenty-first century, academic study of Victorian fiction was primarily focused on a relatively limited canon of realist authors. This narrow selection of authors and texts did a disservice to our understanding of the period by excluding the wide variety of authors and popular genres that made up the bulk of material available to the Victorian reader. Popular fiction in the period included the realist novel, but also adventure fiction, sensation fiction, and speculative or supernatural fiction. This project began by questioning why these popular genres in fiction, which made up the majority of the literature published in England in the middle and latter parts of the Victorian period, had for so long been absent from the general study of Victorian literature. Differentiating between popular fiction and realist fiction, or high and low artistic forms in the novel, is a mid- twentieth-century project retroactively applied to Victorian fiction. The Victorians themselves and critics of the Victorian novel prior to WWI did not make this distinction. Rather they explored work by Victorian writers from all the various genres popular during the period in order to give a holistic impression of Victorian fiction. A major consequence of excluding popular fiction from the study of Victorian literature was a series of misconceptions about woman's role during the period that were reinforced by realist texts representing only certain types of female character.

Victorian ideas about gender roles and woman's physiological capabilities contributed to the way female characters in realist fiction were read. The main concepts for creating the limited lens through which women's experiences in the period we interpreted in fiction are the angel in the house and the separate spheres of

influence. The angel in the house refers to an idealized version of womanhood popular in the Victorian cultural imaginary, but not often found in practice outside the pages of fiction. The angel type perpetuated an idea that women were physically and mentally suited to domestic roles. The angel in the house type supports the idea of separate spheres, which organizes men and women into separate public and private social roles. Men exercise influence in the public spheres of politics and business, and women maintain the private, domestic, sphere of the home. The intersection between these nineteenth-century ideas of appropriate femininity forms the groundwork for many female characters in realist novels of the period. Separate spheres ideology and the angel in the house work together to create an idealized myth of appropriate femininity that is frequently challenged or undermined in other genres of fiction. In popular genres, the idea of separate spheres is destabilized by blurred physical and conceptual distinctions between public and private spaces, as well as by the normative presence of female characters who defy the angel in the house type.

This project approaches the problem posed by the absence of popular fiction over much of the history of the field of Victorian Studies in two parts. It joins a small group of critical texts that are relatively new to the field of Victorian Studies in challenging the canonical ideas about womanhood in fiction of the period. Recent movements in criticism that address women in the Victorian novel challenge the primacy of the marriage plot, which plays a foundational role in the idea of separate spheres as well as the presence of the angel in the house as a desirable female character. Recuperative work on popular genres is also on the rise in Victorian Studies. This project intends to articulate the importance of further expanding the field

of Victorian Studies to include a broader range of authors and genres, particularly in order to more fully understand representations of women and their social roles in the period. First, I conduct a survey of critical work and scholarship on Victorian fiction beginning in 1882 with a study of English fiction commissioned to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee and ending with late-twentieth century scholarship that works to recuperate popular women writers. Considering the absence of popular work from the bulk of these critical and scholarly texts, I then examine three popular genres—Sensation fiction, New Woman fiction, and Supernatural fiction—to articulate the way female characters and domestic spaces in popular fiction transgress the angel in the house and separate spheres ideals. The absence of popular fiction in historic study of the Victorian period is an absence of women writers and female characters who challenge and subvert traditional thinking about gender roles in the Victorian period. Women writers and their female characters in non-canonical genres explored in this project fail to adhere to the separate spheres theory of Victorian gender roles that played an important part in the establishing critical work on Victorian fiction. Extensive study of popular fiction is fundamental to understanding the history of women's writing and the inestimably important role played by women writers and female characters in mid-to-late Victorian popular genres. Including the popular in a broader study of Victorian fiction undermines the still persistent ideas of separate spheres and the angel in the house<sup>1</sup> by revealing that in Victorian fiction public and private spaces, and therefore gendered occupations, are not sharply delineated.

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<sup>1</sup> Leonore Davidhoff and Catherine Hall in *Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class 1780-1850* trace the rise of separate spheres ideology as a part of the codification of the new middle class in the first half of the nineteenth-century.

### **Context: The Angel in the house and the separate spheres**

The concept of the “angel in the house” encompasses a host of qualities that combined to create a Victorian image of ideal womanhood. An angel in the house is characterized by her perfect execution of womanly duty which she performs in the private, domestic sphere that is a woman's natural place. The phrase comes from Coventry Patmore's 1854 lyric poem *The Angel in the House* which takes as its central themes ideal femininity and the necessity of marriage for domestic happiness. Broadly characterized, the domestic angel is moral, chaste, obedient, demure, and best suited for the tasks of homemaking and child rearing. Angelhood requires that women be the moral center of home and family creating a specious connection between housewifery and morality. Public intellectual John Ruskin used his fame as a critic and tastemaker to speak on the importance of women’s education and domestic duty. In an 1864 public lecture, later titled “Of Queen's Gardens” and published in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), Ruskin outlines his theory for educating women that will provide them a basis for their eventual, and natural, role as wives and mothers. With a strong invocation of the separate spheres, Ruskin’s lecture captures the platonic ideal of the “true wife.” She is a morally infallible domestic guardian who maintains the safety and tranquility of home as a peacefully ordered oasis for her husband and children. The angel in the

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Their study shows how the separation of work and home lives that arose from a trend towards suburban housing came to be a marker of economic success for the middle classes by allow them to remove domestic space from work space. They do point out that in farm communities this was the hardest to achieve as work and home spaces were much the same. Davidhoff and Hall’s work also shows that women frequently worked outside domestic labor in family businesses, as unrecognized labor attached to a husband’s position, or by monetizing traditionally domestic roles, indicating that Victorian lived experience does not support the ideological separation of gender roles.

house fulfills the role out of a natural desire and ability that the Victorian considered to be inherently tied to her biology. Medical consensus of the period was that women were physiologically incapable of performing labor outside the home. Conflict often arises in Victorian literature when women earn money for working outside the home, as it breaches this norm, but that does not mean that women did not participate in the labor force. The myth of the angel in the house, grounded as it was in the assumption that it was inherent to woman's nature to be homemakers, provides a foundation for separate spheres ideology.

Separate spheres ideology supports a binary gendered organization of work, which is also referred to as duty, lending a moral quality to the idea of separate male and female spheres. The male sphere, or public sphere, encompasses economic and political life. The female, or private sphere, is domestic management, the purview of the angel in the house. The underpinnings of separate spheres ideology can be found in fiction and non-fiction writings from the Victorian period, especially in the public intellectual debate on women's roles in the workforce and their education, referred to as the Woman Question. The Woman Question conversation, which occurred in editorial writing, conduct literature, and public lectures, solidified the separate spheres, which were then used by mid- twentieth century scholars who perceived them as being omnipresent in the way gender roles are depicted in the realist novel. Although the Woman Question appeared to debate whether women should have a role outside the domestic sphere, in the reality Victorian women were already working outside the home. Conservative estimates imply that in the middle of the century around "a third of women over twenty were independently supporting themselves and

their households” (Foster 7). This data suggests that separate spheres ideology was an intellectual exercise that was not indicative of Victorian women’s lives. Additionally, looking at numbers of working women fails to take into account the ways women participated in the economy through family businesses or the volunteer work women were doing outside the home. Davidhoff and Hall show us that since women’s labor was often adjunct to men’s it is difficult to get an accurate picture of how many women participated in business and what roles they played. Lyn Pykett’s work indicates a political aspect to separate spheres ideology in that questioning the gendered division of public and private roles was to question the very structure of Victorian middle class society. It is important to note that spheres ideology was specific to the middle class, since it discounted the working classes and poor women laborers who did not have the option to remain at home. While it may be possible to read support for the binary division of labor wherein the private domestic sphere belongs to women and the public economic sphere to men in fiction by examining the work by a handful of realist writers who came to be considered canonical, that binary is more reflective of an ideological construction than it is of lived experience or the broader roles women play in other genres of fiction. The reality that women were occupying roles beyond their sphere is supported in popular fiction where the absence of strictly delineated women’s roles and domestic spaces is more often the norm.

The website for the Victoria and Albert museum exemplifies the reductive way we have come to think about gender roles in the Victorian period. Their page on “Gender Ideology & Separate Spheres in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century” emphasizes a binary division of social and labor-based expectations and points out the supposed

contradiction implied by an empire ruled by a woman where women had to fight for equal rights. The authors of this introduction to Victorian gender roles claim the period subscribes to either “an overarching patriarchal model which reserved power and privilege for men” and “a process of determined but gradual female challenge to their exclusion.” I close this discussion on the ideology of separate spheres with quotes from the Victoria and Albert website to highlight the pervasive tenacity with which the doctrine of separateness continues to hold space in the rhetoric and myths surrounding the Victorian period. The idea of separate spheres and women’s domestic role was paid a great deal of lip service by public orators and editorialists hoping to influence attitudes and policy about women’s lives, but the notion that public and private activities such as labor were divided along strict gender lines is difficult to find in Victorian lived experiences or Victorian popular fiction. The ideological notion of separateness was rooted in the moral conception of the middle-class home that Ruskin and women’s lifestyle writer Isabella Beeton<sup>2</sup> upheld as the ideal, but this “home” is itself a fiction that was not attainable for the majority.

### **On Popularity**

Popular literature has a varied critical and educational history. Eighteenth-century anthologist and nineteenth-century critics are not as likely to make distinctions that exclude popular literature as a separate category of its own. Leah Price’s work on the history of the anthology as a teaching text in *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* reveals that late eighteenth century educational texts were in fact dictated by

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<sup>2</sup> Beeton’s work in the 1850s and 1860s followed earlier conduct literature for homemakers like Sarah Stickney Ellis’ 1842 *The Daughters of England*.

popular opinion. Price quotes anthologist Vicesimus Knox<sup>3</sup> as saying “the best pieces are usually the most popular. They are loudly recommended by the voice of fame” (68). He goes on to state that his responsibility is to collect works that are “publically known and universally celebrated” not to “insert scarce and curious works” that have not been vetted by the voice of public opinion (68). Price’s analysis of Knox emphasizes not just a compatibility between popular texts and educational material, but shows that they were inexorably linked in the mind of the textbook anthologist. She writes “far from standing above the undifferentiated passivity of the reading public, the anthologist exemplifies it” (69). Working decades after Knox, Arnold Bennett espouses a similar opinion on the study of popular literature. In *Fame and Fiction, an Inquiry into Certain Popularities* (1901), Bennett questions why a popular novel’s merit should be dismissed on the basis of its popularity. His study of Victorian fiction includes only popular writers on the grounds that they have been judged worthy of consideration by the reading public that admires them. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (2001), Simon Eliot notes the longevity of popular Victorian fiction by saying that Ouida, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Ellen Wood remained in high demand in the circulating libraries well into the twentieth-century<sup>4</sup>. Popular fiction was not excluded from conversations about the Victorian novel until

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<sup>3</sup> Knox is the author of the educational texts *Elegant Extracts, or Useful and Entertaining Passages in Prose, selected for the improvement of Scholars at Classical and other Schools in the Art of Speaking, in Reading, Thinking, Composing, and in the Conduct of Life* (1783) and *Elegant Extracts, or Useful and Entertaining Pieces of Poetry, selected for the improvement of Youth* (1789) among other anthologies.

<sup>4</sup> Braddon, Wood, and Marie Corelli’s work was also frequently adapted for film through the early years of the twentieth-century, further indicating their enduring appeal.

twentieth-century scholars made decisions about what should and should not be considered in a study of the novel itself.

### **This study**

The exclusion of popular fiction from academic study of the Victorian period can be traced to mid twentieth-century scholars who elevated a small group of authors—Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Trollope and sometime James or the Brontës—to canonical status. This movement towards a limited realist canon was spearheaded by Q. D. and F. R. Leavis, and J. Hillis Miller, who were most concerned with the form of the English novel. Their selection of Victorian novelist then was not intended to accurately represent fiction from the Victorian period, but rather to represent Victorian novels that adhered to a certain set of standards for the realist novel as a genre. Within this group, women writers are underrepresented and male and female characters are more likely to be seen upholding their gendered separate spheres. Prior to this movement, non-academic works of criticism on Victorian literature include a wider range of authors and genres popular in the period. Authors of the novel were not divided into subgenres by early attempts to address Victorian fiction. Henry Morley and Clement Shorter, both working on the Victorian novel before the period ended, approach their work as surveys of literature that was available to the reading public. In the broader scope addressed by late nineteenth and early twentieth-century critics, the number of women writers is more substantial and the inclusion of writers working in popular genres offers a reader female characters and domestic spaces that challenge the separate spheres. The Victorian canon established by the Leavises and Miller remained relatively unchallenged during the mid-twentieth century until the

introduction of feminist theory in the 1970s to academic study of the Victorian novel resulted in scholarship like Martha Vicinus's edited collection *Suffer and Be Still* (1973) and Sally Mitchell's *The Fallen Angel* (1981). The authors in Vicinus's collection challenge the assumed norm of the angel in the house by examining the real conditions of Victorian women's lives. They then consider "changes in behavior and beliefs...in regard to a model of femininity the 'perfect lady'" (ix) in light of the varied nature of Victorian women's lived experiences. Mitchell's work builds on *Suffer and Be Still* by extending the challenge to separate spheres ideology into fiction. The groundbreaking work in these two volumes helped to usher in an era of critical attention to women in the period and in the canon; however, it was not until the turn of the twenty-first century that critical attention is paid to non-canonical popular fiction. Gilbert, Tromp and Haynie's seminal edited collection, *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context* (2000), participates in this new phase in Victorian Studies by paying close attention to popular fiction, genres and authors, but the critical work in this area has only just begun to uncover the difference in how we view women's roles in the period. In order to fully appreciate the importance of popular fiction to Victorian Studies, continuing in-depth study of under-examined popular authors is needed.

In Victorian popular fiction, three genres consistently present a challenge to the angel in the house and the idea of separate spheres. The angel in the house may appear in these genres, but she is accompanied by a disparate variety of feminine characters who challenge the normative nature of the angel ideal by presenting alternative versions of desirable femininity. Sensation fiction and New Woman fiction

also present challenges to the separate public and private spheres of influence, while Supernatural domestic fiction challenges the assumption that a female presence will be a stabilizing factor in a home. In the Sensation novel, I am focusing on the trope of the pretty horsebreaker as an alternative female character to the angel in the house. The pretty horsebreaker appears in this genre with regularity. Pretty horsebreakers are young women characterized by their participation in the normatively masculine hobby of riding horses. The pretty horsebreaker figure is common in Sensation fiction not as a foil to the angel in the house, but instead as the heroine of the text. As a heroine, the pretty horsebreaker serves to undermine the feminine norm of the angel in the house due to her participation in the marriage plot that is central to the Victorian novel. By replacing the angel in the house in the domestic space of marriage, with its implications of household management and childbearing, the pretty horsebreaker becomes an alternative type of normative femininity in Victorian fiction. My examples in this section come from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* and *Vixen*, and Ellen Wood's *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*. All three texts were published in the 1860s and 1870s and span the height of the Sensation novel's popularity. Braddon is particularly of interest as her work appears to contain the earliest version of the pretty horsebreaker figure. Additionally, the rural country house setting frequently used by authors in this genre illustrates the blurring of public and private spaces within the home in a way that complicates the idea of separate spheres. Country estates were not purely domestic spaces: they served as economic, social, and political hubs for a rural community. The public nature of the country home meant that domestic or home-

space was also open for use as public or business space. Living and earning were done in the same physical locations.

The combined domestic and business or public and private space of the home-shop makes the New Woman novel another location in which the separate spheres fail to serve as an adequate model for character's lives. New Woman fiction is primarily concerned with the tension caused by the presence of women in the workplace that was addressed by the Woman Question. In these novels, middle-class young women find themselves in positions where they must earn a living and typically chose socially transgressive ways to do so. Although the middle-class ideal required that women not work outside the home, there were limited options that still fell within a woman's sphere of influence, such as being a governess or music teacher, that were socially acceptable enough that they were not damaging to a woman's character or social standing. Working outside these parameters threatened a woman's reputation and class standing.

The New Woman texts addressed in this study feature female characters who choose to work in traditionally masculine positions. In Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Rebel of the Family*, protagonist Perdita Winstanley works as a postal clerk and eventually enters into marriage with a chemist where she will participate in his business. Amy Levy's *Romance of the Shop*, tells the story of the orphaned Lorimer sisters who turn the hobby taught to them by their father, photography, into a successful business. Like Sensation fiction, New Woman novels also feature domestic space where the delineations of public and private are blurred. In this case, it is the domestic space of the home-shop. City dwelling New Women characters in these novels participate in

the shop owner's practice of living above or behind the shop space, reversing the move to suburban domestic separation chronicled by Davidoff and Hall. Business frequently bleeds from the shop into home-space, making it difficult to see the boundaries between the two.

Lastly, in Supernatural fiction the idea of the angel in the house is refuted by female characters whose bodily presence in domestic spaces unravels or destroys those spaces rather than holding them together, as Ruskin implies. This chapter uses the framework of environmental constructed identity as described by William James in *Psychology: the Briefer Course* (1892) and Shannon Sullivan in *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism* (2001). Although published over one hundred years apart, James and Sullivan both posit a theory of identity that relies in part on our interactions with physical spaces outside the human body. James' "material me" and Sullivan's "transactional body" provide groundwork for my reading of female characters whose bodies are linked to supernatural forces in ways that disrupt home-space in several works of supernatural fiction. In short stories by Rhoda Broughton, Marie Corelli, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, ghosts, mesmerism, and prophetic dreams are carried into domestic spaces by female characters' physical presence. This section also addresses the popular subgenre of vampire fiction in two vampire texts by women writers, Braddon's "Herself" and Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire*. In these psychic vampire stories, women's bodies are the medium through which supernatural creatures are able to destroy multiple types of domestic space. Marriage space and family space are equally at risk in these

supernatural domestic tales in which female characters challenge the angel in the house trope by bringing destruction rather than tranquility into domestic space.

The texts addressed in this project are by popular writers whose work was until the latter part of the twentieth-century excluded from serious scholarly consideration. My argument centers on the fact that by examining the understudied or excluded popular authors of the Victorian period, we gain a very different picture of female characters and women's social roles than the one depicted in the realist fiction that was considered the Victorian canon for many years. In popular genres, normative femininity is varied rather than monotone. We see women engage in masculine pursuits with impunity, take paid work outside traditionally feminine occupations, and serve as the catalyst for supernatural disruption of domestic spaces. The ubiquity of this non-normative feminine representation in popular fiction suggests that the angel in the house and the separate spheres were not as normative as foundational work in Victorian Studies suggested. This is not to say that the angel in the house might not be present in popular fiction, but she often exists only to be subverted. Likewise, the separate spheres appear most clearly when female characters behave in ways that challenge or contradict the concept. By excluding popular genres, the mid-twentieth century scholars obscured a large cross section of women writers and female characters that do not align with the angel in the house and the separate spheres. This exclusion resulted for many years in an incomplete understanding of Victorian gender roles and Victorian fiction perpetuated by the limited scope of the realist novel. Popularity did not deter Victorian critics or their immediate successors from considering a work of fiction noteworthy. That demarcation was overlaid onto the

Victorian period by twentieth-century scholars working on the form of the novel, not on fiction from the Victorian period. The current movement towards recuperating popular texts indicates growing interest in the alternative perspectives in Victorian Studies offered by popular fiction.

## Chapter I: Creation and Disruption of a Victorian “Canon”

A recent discussion thread on the long-standing Victoria listserv focused on an opinion piece called “The Tottering Block House of Culture,” by John O. Beaty, published in the February 1939 issue of *The Virginia Teacher*. Beaty posited the following as a manageable but essential reading list of nineteenth-century authors for what he refers to as the educated, or culturally informed, individual of 1939. Beaty was not interested in a scholarly list or in a comprehensive list of authors, but rather in identifying the essential list of authors needed to accurately represent the period. His list spans the long nineteenth-century, balances prose and poetry, and only includes one woman writer.

Wordsworth  
Keats  
Tennyson  
Robert Browning  
D.G. Rossetti  
Scott  
Austen  
Lamb  
Dickens  
Dobson  
Carlyle  
Ruskin  
Mill  
Huxley  
Newman  
Tom Robertson  
W.S. Gilbert

Beaty’s argument is an algebraic one that attempts to manage the sheer volume of work produced in English during the nineteenth-century. Understandably, it sparked a heated debate among the Victorianist members of the list about the nature of an essential but representative list for the Victorian period. For Beaty, the purpose of such

a list was to cope with perilous situation “culture” faced in the 1939 social climate where literature competed with modern technological advances and entertainments that took people away from reading for pleasure, such as cinema, the automobile, and the radio (22). For the scholars of Victorian literature on the listserv, Beaty’s list was a jumping off point to consider what an essential reading list of Victorian writers would like today. Listserv participants immediately chimed in with a series of jokingly indignant statements wondering why well regarded Victorian writers like Swinburne, Wilde, Eliot, Hardy or the Brontës were excluded (*Victoria: 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Culture & Society*). Others balked at the absence of women writers whom we now consider essential by even the most conservative standards-- the Bröntes, Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell.

Notably absent from both this list and the following discussion were authors of so-called popular fiction, who began to disappear from critical work on Victorian fiction in the period between the world wars and had faded from the public eye almost completely by the mid-twentieth-century. The online conversation about Beaty’s list among contemporary scholars in Victorian studies highlights the still-contentious nature of an “essential” reading list for the long nineteenth-century as well as the ways that even contemporary revisions of such lists that account for gender inclusivity still omit crucial texts. Examining the history of criticism of Victorian literature, particularly the Victorian novel, reveals a steady trend away from generic inclusivity and gender diversity that was common in the Victorian era and early twentieth-century, and towards the canonization of five or six realist novelists. This canon further evolved to focus entirely on the realist novel and to exclude popular writers

who comprised a majority of authors from the mid to late nineteenth-century, most markedly the women whose work drove the burgeoning Victorian publishing industry.

In this chapter, I survey a sample selection of critical work on the Victorian novel ranging in perspective from E. A. Bennett's 1901 claim in *Fame and Fiction: An Inquiry into Certain Popularities*<sup>5</sup> that wide-spread readership ought to be considered as a mark of success, to Q.D. Leavis' 1939 *Fiction and the Reading Public*, where we see the importance of form, or the unique structure of the novel as opposed to other types of writing, emerge as the essential benchmark for studying the novel. Criticism addressed in this section spans several major movements in work on the Victorian novel. I begin with attempts from the Victorians themselves to identify the Victorian novel. I then address the mid-century critics and their immediate successors in the 1970s who introduced feminist theory to Victorian Studies, and close with a brief overview on contemporary work on popular fiction. For the purpose of this study, I am not including contemporary critical reviews of individual texts, authors, or genres from the Victorian period. I am focusing on work that attempts to create a broad but cohesive picture of Victorian fiction or the Victorian novel. This survey engages with criticism that exemplifies the changing notion of an essential Victorian fiction reading list as it was recorded over approximately 140 years of critical material to show how our study of the Victorian period came to exclude popular fiction and women writers. The exclusion of this vast number of writers from the period

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<sup>5</sup> The essays included in *Fame and Fiction* were published in *The Academy* between 1898 and 1901 and compiled into an edition in 1901.

contributed to formation of ideas about Victorian fiction and women's roles in Victorian society that failed to represent an accurate picture of either.

The Victorian novel became an object of study for the Victorians themselves before the end of Victoria's reign, but was not considered a standard part of English Literature curricula until the mid-twentieth-century when it was included for academic study at Oxford University. Early critical work on the Victorian novel written between the 1880s and around 1920 is inclusive of a much broader range of authors who were considered valuable contributors to Victorian fiction than the relatively small group of authors eventually canonized. These critics are not necessarily literary scholars and their main concern with the Victorian novel is to represent the literature of the period. The mid-century scholars who follow this first group of critics are the first to bring the Victorian novel into academic study. Although the mid-twentieth-century critics do not agree on an exact canon, a main group of writers emerges from their work who were then included in scholarship and curricula as the representative Victorian novelists. When referring to the canon, I am referring to the grouping of authors whose work came to represent the Victorians in academic study to the exclusion of most other novelists from the period. However, critics working before the mid-twentieth-century include many more popular writers and women writers than are seen in this canon. The regular appearance of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, Marie Corelli, Ouida, Margaret Oliphant, Ellen Wood, Charlotte Yonge and Olive Schreiner on lists of important novelists published between 1880 and 1920 is not uncommon. Once the Victorian novel comes under academic scrutiny in the mid-twentieth-century, this list narrows to the canonical group of authors; Dickens,

Trollope, Eliot, Thackeray, and Charlotte Brontë, who is sometimes included in a section on “the Brontë sisters” but was singled out as the superior writer. Other critics include Hardy and James, and some exclude the Brontës and instead take a long nineteenth-century approach by including Austen, as Beaty does. Collins, Meredith, and Disraeli may be mentioned, but are not often afforded their own chapters. Restricting study of the Victorian novel to a small group of realist authors and texts, while excluding the prolific writers from popular genres persisted until the 1970s. In the 1970s, feminist critics like Martha Vicinus spearheaded a movement towards expanding our study of the Victorian era to include popular genres like periodicals and women's fiction. However, it wasn't until the early 1990s when critics including Pamela Gilbert and Marlene Tromp<sup>6</sup> began investigating popular women's fiction in earnest that these writers were recuperated. Now we are beginning to broaden our study of the period to a more accurate picture of Victorian literature and publishing through the inclusion of a wide range of writers and genres. However, despite a growing body of critical work on periodicals and popular fiction, the canon that was constructed in the mid-twentieth-century persists in exercising undue influence over academic study of the Victorian novel.

Furthermore, scholars who continue to write our histories of the Victorian period may allow their own specializations to obscure the wider range of writers available to us to represent the period. As Beaty writes in his *Virginia Teacher* article,

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<sup>6</sup> Gilbert, Tromp and Aeron Haynie edited the collection *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, published in 2000. This collection includes work by Elizabeth Langland, Jennifer Carnell, Tabitha Sparks and Lyn Pyckett, all of whom were part of the 1990s movement to recuperate Mary Elizabeth Braddon and popular fiction for academic consideration.

“critics—academic and otherwise—have been adding names to the roster of culture according to the hobby or the specialty or the whim or the faith of the critic with no regard to for culture as a unit” (22). He uses the metaphor of a child building with blocks to explain that haphazard insertion to our study of Victorian fiction of a different writer here and there does not build a comprehensive picture of important works from the period. An example of this might be seen in Simon Eliot’s chapter on Victorian publishing in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*. Eliot, a Walter Besant scholar, cites Besant wherever an example of a popular writer is needed. The practical outcome of Eliot’s specialization on Besant in *The Cambridge Companion* is a chapter on the Victorian publishing industry that only cites a single, male popular writer, so that even this attempt to be more inclusive does not address the important role women writers played in the publishing industry.

Study of the Victorian novel, like the Victorian novel itself, has been a “baggy monster,” shifting continually over the course of the decades since critical attention was initially paid to it. In the current critical moment the trend tilts back towards a comprehensive and inclusive approach to studying the Victorian novel, but there remains a great deal of uncovered ground and the legacy of a canon delimited in part by gender persists. The mid-twentieth-century critics like the Leavises, to whom we owe the perspective that shaped scholarship on the Victorian novel for decades, were not primarily Victorianists. Their project was determining a place for the Victorian novel in a broader study of the form of the English novel and English literature. Their influence on Victorian studies came from a desire to make the Victorians fit into a study of the novel, rather than a desire to study the Victorian period itself. One

perhaps unintentional outcome of their narrow focus was the gross misrepresentation of women and women's social roles in fiction. Without reading beyond the canon, it is easy to see how separate spheres rhetoric persisted well into the latter part of the twentieth-century. Women in realist fiction are restricted to domestic roles, and as Amanda Anderson has argued in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*, are treated punitively in texts where they fail to uphold that version of normative femininity. Early critics may have had more in common with critics from the close of the twentieth-century who see the important role played by women writers and popular fiction and seek to include them in a comprehensive picture of Victorian fiction.

### **Survey of Criticism before 1930**

The Oxford English Dictionary shows the first usage of "Victorian" to refer to Victoria's reign in print within two years of her ascendancy to the throne. Important to this study, the first usage cited refers to periodization of literature. The 1839 entry attributed to *The Athenaeum*<sup>7</sup> reads "perhaps the Annean authors, though inferior to the Elizabethans, are, on a general summation of merits, no less superior to the latter-Georgian and Victorian." While the dictionary does not include an entry for the phrase "Victorian novel,"<sup>8</sup> usage of the word in the sense of "a person, esp. an author, who lived during the reign of Queen Victoria" appears in print in 1876, as the Victorians began to consider the literary legacy of their age. Attempts at a comprehensive study

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<sup>7</sup> *The Athenaeum Journal of Literature, Science and the Fine Arts* is a British journal that ran from 1828 to 1921.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase "Victorian novel" does appear in several unrelated entries in the OED, the earliest of which is a quotation on "fulfillment" from L. W. Sprague *Syllabus Course Lect. Social Forces in Victorian Novel*. Chronologically the next citation is in the entry for "preëminent" from F.T Russell's 1920 work *Satire and the Victorian Novel*.

of Victorian literature appear as early as 1881 in the form of surveys or biographies of notable authors. Not surprisingly there is a wide variety of authors represented in these works. Nicola Diane Thompson points out that “Victorian readers read, reviewed, enjoyed and gave critical acclamation to works we now consider non-canonical alongside those we now consider great” (7). The earliest collections included here, Henry Morley’s *Of English Literature in the Reign of Victoria with a Glance at the Past* (1881) and Clement J. Shorter’s *Victorian Literature: Sixty Years of Books and Bookmen* (1897) uphold this assertion. Both discuss writers who are now considered minor novelists in the period, some all but forgotten, and many who are now being recuperated for serious study alongside undisputedly canonical authors under the moniker of “popular fiction.” Thompson goes on to make a claim that “most pre-feminist studies strongly emphasize that Victorian women novelists do not reach the high canonical standards” (10); however, the first critic she discusses is W.L. Courtney who was writing in 1904. Earlier studies than Courtney, such as those by Morley and Shorter examined here, suggest that popularity rather than gender was deciding factor for the inclusion of a novelist in their work. Popular male and female writers are both well-represented in these studies produced before the 1901 close of the Victorian period, as well as in other studies not cited by Thompson between 1901 and 1920. In these early attempts to define the literature of the era, critics do not make the same kind of distinctions between high and low artistic forms that become common in the middle part of the twentieth-century. As they assess the literature of their time and make predictions about which novels and novelists will have longevity, these early critics tend towards inclusivity of genre and gender.

Morely and Shorter's editions were commissioned by publishers to define literature in the Victorian Era. These commissioned works mark some of the first attempts to form a comprehensive history of Victorian Literature and to record ongoing readership trends of the period. Shorter's work was commissioned to celebrate Victoria's Jubilee, while Morely's project was solicited by the publisher Baron Bernhard Tauchnitz to commemorate his internationally acclaimed British Authors series reaching its 2000<sup>th</sup> volume. While their approaches and purposes differ, both critics attempt to define a comprehensive body of work that would represent the Victorian period in the broader history of English literature.

Henry Morely, professor and editor, was commissioned by Tauchnitz to write "a memorial stone" of Tauchnitz's progress in the publishing industry. *Of English Literature* became the 2000<sup>th</sup> volume in the Tauchnitz Collection of British Authors series that ran for almost 100 years and eventually comprised 5300 volumes. Fittingly, Tauchnitz had founded his press in 1837, the year that Victoria ascended to the throne.<sup>9</sup> In his introduction to Morely's work, Tauchnitz writes that the press's mission is "spreading and strengthening the love for English Literature outside of England and her colonies" (v). The Tauchnitz collection was inarguably influential in promoting the wide-spread readership of Victorian fiction outside of England due to several savvy business decisions. Tauchnitz compensated authors fairly and offered incentives for high sales. He took advantage of railway bookstalls to target tourists and "an absolute condition of success was that the Tauchnitz edition came out

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<sup>9</sup> Biography and publishing history from "Transmission of culture and ideas: the Tauchnitz Series" by Frans Korsten.

simultaneously with the English hardback edition, and thus well before any other cheaper reprints were made. Then there was the price; Tauchnitz paperbacks were very cheap” (Korsten 330). The frontispiece of Morely’s 2000<sup>th</sup> commemorative edition includes photographic reproductions of signatures for 173 authors who were then under contract with Tauchnitz to publish and distribute their work outside the United Kingdom. Tauchnitz editions were the most widely read versions of some of the most popular and successful authors of the period and it was difficult for a British writer to reach audiences in America<sup>10</sup> and on the Continent without publishing through his imprint (Korsten 330). Tauchnitz’s series included poetry and non-fiction as well, but the bulk of his series was composed of novelists, including now well-known names like George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë as well as more obscure writers. Importantly, many women writers of popular fiction who appear in our contemporary studies were considered “top authors” of Tauchnitz’s catalogue. “Braddon, Florence Marryat, Charlotte M. Yonge and Ouida” are included as “top authors” and many canonical male authors are eclipsed by “Mrs. Braddon who had as many as 58 titles in the Series” (Korsten 332). The variety of writers and genre represented in this 2000<sup>th</sup> edition of the Tauchnitz Collection is reflective of the breadth and scope of the Victorian publishing industry. Morely’s assessment of those authors is equally indicative of contemporary attitudes towards fiction. His discussion of contemporary novelists indicates that twentieth-century notions of so-called high and low art forms were not particularly relevant to Morely’s assessment of the Tauchnitz Series. He

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<sup>10</sup> Two notable American authors appear in the signature list, Mark Twain and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Later, the series would be renamed The Tauchnitz Collection of British and American Authors.

categorizes writers by age, by gender, and by genre. Although he does subtitle Chapter VII “of those by whom cheap literature was made useful,” the chapter does not address the artistic merits of “cheap literature” and rather discusses innovations in the printing industry that allowed a publisher like Charles Knight to turn a profit. Morely uses cheap literally to refer to cost of publications like Knight’s *Penny Magazine*.

Morely takes a long nineteenth-century approach to his survey of “literature in the reign of Victoria” by grouping authors according to age. He begins with the Romantic poets, who remained popular when Victoria took the throne, and concludes with the youngest living authors of 1881. Like many contemporary scholars, Morely questions periodicity in his assessment of the transitional decades of Victorian literature. He classifies Wordsworth and Southey as Victorian authors, but notes that Coleridge died three years before the start of Victoria’s reign and so does not qualify for his edition. His assessment of writers according to their age leads him to include as Victorian many authors who produced the bulk of their work before 1837, like Frederick Marryat and Walter Scott. The arbitrary nature of the periodization is evident in Morely’s assessment. Most authors we would consider Victorian, canonical or not, are not mentioned until the closing chapters of the text where he considers the future of Victorian literature. Here Morely lists what he calls “the ninth wave...breaking now upon [the] shore of time” and says that “the new waves that roll up behind it must grow yet before” their impact can be known (319). The authors in his last chapters were widely read at the time of publication, with some just beginning their careers. Familiar names to the twenty-first century scholar appear in this chapter: Dickens, Thackeray, “the Misses Brontë,” and Mrs. Gaskell. Additionally, Morely

mentions many women writers-- Ellen Wood, Eliza Lynn Linton, Georgiana Fullerton, Julie Kavanaugh, Margaret Oliphant, Braddon, Ouida, Broughton and Harriet Parr -- as “novelists who are active now and whose works are widely enjoyed” (358). These are among the authors whose “force” or influence and longevity have yet to be determined. Their inclusion at the close of Morely’s work where he postulates the future legacy of Victorian fiction implies a willingness to consider popular writers as valuable representatives of the literature of the period.

Shorter’s work more closely adheres to our understanding of periodicity, but he too discusses popular and canonical works together as important facets of Victorian fiction. Like Morely’s study, Shorter’s work was commissioned by a publisher. In his introduction, he states the purpose of the edition is to create a bibliographical survey “to furnish the young student, in handy form, with as large a number of facts about books as can be concentrated in so small a volume” (n.p.). Also like the 2000<sup>th</sup> Tauchnitz edition project, Shorter’s work is commemorative. His “sixty years of books and bookmen” was written in celebration of Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897. It professes to be a reference book rather than a critical work. His purpose is to make a record of literature from the first sixty years of Victoria’s reign—poets, novelists, historians and critics.<sup>11</sup> Not a fan of Victorian prose, Shorter claims that the finest era of the English novel is the Georgian, writing that the “great epoch of English fiction began with Goldsmith and Richardson, and ended with Sir Walter Scott.” He begins

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<sup>11</sup> Shorter does not refer to literary critics here. He seems to use the term referring to arbiters of aesthetics, like Ruskin, political philosophers, like J.S. Mill, social reformers, and scientists. Any type of published work, barring journalism that was not prose, poetry, or history falls under the category of “criticism.”

his bibliography with Dickens, who he says is chiefly of value as a humorist. Shorter claims Dickens is derivative of Georgian humorists, having learned his craft by reading Fielding and Smollett. This assessment of Dickens may be surprising to twenty-first century Victorianists accustomed to viewing Dickens as a quintessentially *Victorian* novelist. Like Morely, Shorter thinks ahead to the future legacy of the Victorian era and questions whether Dickens will have the longevity to remain popular with the coming generations of readers.

Shorter's bibliography includes names we might expect to see, Eliot, Thackeray, the Brontës, and some unexpected insights. Shorter calls Charles Reade "one of the most successful of the *greater* novelists of the day," (my italics) and categorizes him alongside Dickens and Thackeray. He also notes that women novelists have flourished in the Victorian Era, but considers their success to be due to Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth and Fanny Burney having previously made a place for women in publishing. Halfway through his chapter on "The Novelists" Shorter passes "from the acknowledged masters" to the more popular who have "charmed" a broad audience (65). He includes Ellen Wood, who he claims enjoys "well-deserved popularity" for her novels *The Channings* and *Mrs. Halliburton's Troubles*, which he considers her strongest work. *East Lynne*, which we now consider Wood's greatest achievement, he thinks will probably live on only in its reincarnation as a stage play, which it has not. He places popular women authors into three categories. Those "who have had a large amount of fame" but are already forgotten, including Mrs. Marsh, Mrs. Archer, Lady Georgiana Fullerton, Mrs. Stretton. Those who are still read widely in 1897 but are no longer living-- Anne Manning, Mrs. Norton, Dinah Mulock, Julie

Kavanaugh. Finally, the popular living women writers of the latter part of the century. He claims that he “might easily devote many pages to the living women novelists who have impressed themselves upon the era; but that scarcely comes within the scope of this little book. There are, to name but a few, Mrs. Linton, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, Ouida, Miss Braddon, Miss Marie Corelli, Miss Olive Schreiner, Miss Rhoda Broughton, Edna Lyall, Lucas Malet, Miss Charlotte Yonge, Miss Adeline Sergeant, Mrs. Macquoid, Mrs. Alexander, Mrs. W. K. Clifford-- names which recall to thousands of readers many familiar books and some of the happiest hours they have ever spent” (47).

Some of the writers Shorter includes in his chapter on women writers are names which remain unknown in contemporary scholarship, but a pattern starts to emerge from his assessment as well as in Morely's where an identifiable group of popular women writers are repeatedly discussed as important to understanding Victorian fiction as a comprehensive body of work that includes a broad spectrum of genres and writers. Braddon, Broughton, Corelli, and Schreiner consistently appear in this group. It is evident from reading Morely's and Shorter's editions that our contemporary separation of Victorian fiction by genre and aesthetic or formal concern was not relevant to the Victorian reader. Sensation fiction, the Realist novel, New Woman texts, and speculative/ supernatural fiction co-exist in these early non-academic studies of the Victorian novel, creating a much more diverse and dynamic body of work than the limited canon of the mid-twentieth century critics would suggest. This inclusive trend towards viewing Victorian literature comprehensively and not separated by generic concerns continues into the early decades of the

twentieth-century in work by Arnold Bennett, Walter C. Phillips, and G. K. Chesterton.

Celebrated novelist and critic Arnold Bennett, who also published under E. A. Bennett, authored a series of columns on popular authors and literary trends that ran in *The Academy* between 1889-1901 and were collected into a volume by publishers Grant Richards in 1901. His collection is important to this project as he argues for the significance of popularity when considering authors that are representative of the Victorian novel. His selection of popular authors includes a mixture of names we are beginning to see in Victorian Studies, such as Braddon, Broughton, and Corelli, and a selection of authors who remain obscure today—Miss E.T. Fowler and Mr. James Lane Allen. What this diverse range of authors have in common according to Bennett is that their popularity, measured by widespread readership and economic success, does not negate their value as skilled authors who should be considered among the greats of the period. Bennett's argument in favor of popularity addresses concerns raised by critics like Margret Oliphant and Henry Mansel, who felt that Sensation novelists such as Braddon, Wilkie Collins, and Ellen Wood wrote unrealistic, plot driven works intended to stimulate the body rather than the intellect, thus appealing to a broad readership. The argument in favor of popularity could also be seen to contradict advice about what and how to read by Victorian tastemakers. One example is Ruskin's assertion that "lively or pathetic story-telling in the form of novel" are "books of the hour" not "books of all time," meaning they are acceptable for passing entertainment but should not take the place of books in which "author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful" (29-32). For

Bennett, popularity does not exclude novels guilty of “lively or pathetic storytelling” from serious consideration as the defining literature of the Victorian age. Rather, he argues that popularity is a vital component of how we ought to evaluate the literature of the era. Texts with widespread readership are indicative of the interests of a broader range of Victorians therefore better suited to represent the legacy of the Victorian period.

Bennett opens his collection with an essay written for the 1901 collected edition, titled “The Average Reader, and the Recipe for Popularity,” in which he seeks to reconcile what he calls the majority and minority of readers and the “frontier between art and morals” (7). The majority and the minority readership are divided along lines drawn by using the following imagined conversation between the two groups: “The minority says curtly, ‘This is not art’; the majority answers, ‘Never mind, it is what we like. Besides, it *is* art. Who are you that you should define art? Anyhow, it is popular.’” (4-5 authors italics). Using this imaginary conversation between the majority and minority groups of readers, Bennett attempts to preempt any argument against the artistic merit of popular fiction. First, he notes that all popular authors have qualities that demand respect, but that these are not always the same qualities. He makes a case that sometimes a popular author’s appeal is “moral rather than artistic” but claims that in “the wide kingdom of popularity the two provinces of art and morals overlap” (7). He claims further support for the popular by citing Matthew Arnold’s work on classical literature from the 1853 edition of his *Poems*. In the “Preface to the Poems,” Arnold makes a case for the value of plot-driven literature that is enjoyed by a wide readership. He writes that the “eternal objects of poetry” are

“actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves” (6). According to Arnold, “it is not enough that the poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him that he should add to their happiness” (4). This argument in favor of literature for “happiness” is echoed by Bennett for whom the broad, plot-driven popular literature like Sensation fiction deserves our attention because it is *enjoyed* by a wide variety of readers. Bennett rightly points out that popular fiction appeals to the average reader who likes “an imposing plot, heroic characters, and fine actions” (11). A general criticism of popular genres like Sensation fiction or speculative fiction is that they are driven by series of improbable events and require characters to act as plot devices. Referencing Arnold’s work on Greek epic, Bennett claims that the same argument could be made about the classics. The Greek poetry Arnold cites in his “Preface” could also be accused of being grand in scope and subject and driven by implausible character actions. Bennett argues that an emphasis on plot and character should never disqualify any written work from being considered artistic and worthy of critical attention.

Walter C. Phillips makes a similar claim to Bennett’s in his 1919 work *Dickens, Reade, and Collins: Sensation Novelists*. Attempting to claim Dickens as the first sensation novelist in this group of writers he refers to as the Dickensians, Phillips traces the important elements of Sensation fiction backwards to the romance and the Gothic. In Dickens’ work he sees the primary legacy of these genres. Perhaps to justify his emphasis on Dickens, Collins and Reade in a genre that was dominated by women writers, Phillips tries to discredit all women writers, not just the Victorian ones. Despite this disregard for women writers in general, he is unable to disregard the

enduring popularity of women Sensation authors. Phillips concedes that Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* has remained in print into the nineteen teens and may "serve as an example of the most durable of the lot" of sensation novels (28). He also gives grudging credit to Ouida for her popularity and endurance. In fact, the popularity of plot-driven fiction is a main point in his overall argument. Even in the groundwork he lays for his critique of the genre, he begins with a woman writer. Phillips quotes Scott on Mrs. Radcliffe and the fundamental importance of plot to the Gothic forerunners of Sensation fiction: "the force, therefore, of production lies in the delineation of external incident, while the characters of the agents... are entirely subordinate to the scenes in which they are placed... The persons introduced [...] bear the features, not of individuals, but of the class to which they belong.' Now when the force of the production depends upon external incident, there is a new emphasis upon artificial plot" (7). Like Bennett's use of Arnold, Phillip's use of Scott extends the validity of a plot driven genre backwards, creating a historical lineage for this important aspect of popular fiction. He argues that Dickens "gave the sensational in our fiction a creed and definitive methods" (12) through his reliance on melodrama and "the appeal to fear."<sup>12</sup> For Phillips, Dickens is the ur-sensation writer. He claims that Reade and Collins, "adoption of [Dickens'] narrative preferences and practices" (12) that were influenced by the romance and Gothic genres, created the modern taste for plot driven popular fiction. His analysis of plot-driven popular fiction using a framework from the past is

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<sup>12</sup> Phillips uses this phrase often and calls the Dickensian texts "terrorist" novels. In his analysis, "terrorist" writers are working to excite the reader's sense of fear or terror. He is attempting to create a new set of terms to describe the physical and emotional sensation caused by this genre, as noted by Victorian critics Lewes and Mansel that give Sensation novels their name.

not uncommon for critical surveys in this grouping; however, Bennett is the critic who most broadly examines the value of popular genres through the historical lens and in contemporary terms.

Bennett's next point following his use of Arnold addresses negative criticism often leveled against popular genres: that they are too conventional or sentimental to merit close study. For example, a Sensation novel might give the reader an outlandish plot involving mistaken identity, a murder victim coming back from the dead, and a married woman who commits adultery. That same novel might conclude with the fallen woman on her deathbed, repenting in Christian sorrow, the "dead" man reunited with his family, and the case of mistaken identity happily resolved. The chaotic and outrageous sensation plot is resolved in a series of conventionally acceptable scenes. Bennett points out that another plot-driven popular genre, adventure fiction, was also criticized for sentimentality and cites Kipling as his main example of sentimental adventure tales. The outlandish and the sentimental often coexist in plot-driven texts, but as Arnold shows us, this is not unique to the Victorian period. Bennett concludes this introductory essay by giving a series of recommendations for the novel. It should be plot driven, not cut too deep in any emotion, and keep in mind that the reader primarily wants to enjoy their reading experience. But Bennett is careful to remind us that none of these criteria delegitimize popular fiction as art. He writes in closing "is there any reason why such a novel as I have described should not be distinguished as a work of art?"

Bennett's *Popularities* represents a possible early attempt at creating an "essential" reading list for Victorian fiction. Unlike later attempts that canonize

realism and its main practitioners, Bennett's selection includes a range of genres and takes the reaction of a general reading public into account. Popularity, he says, should not be seen as at odds with art when it comes to the novel, because the nature of the novel is such that a well-executed one will most likely be popular. In other words, art for art's sake has no place in the novel as the novel needs an audience. Here Bennett may be responding to the aestheticism of Walter Pater, who notably influenced Oscar Wilde (Teukolsky). Pater and the aesthetic movement he undoubtedly helped to form, were concerned with the beauty of a work of art, whether that art took the form of a written text, a painting or an aria. Pater's 1875 *The Renaissance* takes the approach that for art to be valuable it must produce uniquely pleasurable sensations, or emotions, in an audience. He cites Wordsworth as an example of a writer who can articulate "that strange, mystical sense of a life in natural things, and of man's life as a part of nature, drawing strength and colour and character from local influences, from the hills and streams, and from natural sights and sounds" (page needed) to stir an emotional response in his reader. An aesthetic approach to literary criticism considers value in a text through its ability to move or insight emotion in a reader. Akin to the formalists, the aesthetic approach asks us to consider the text free from context. Popularity would not matter to a critic interested in the beauty of a text. As Bennett argues, the reader of popular fiction says, "never mind [if it is art] it is what we like." Discussions like these on the role popular fiction plays in an overall study of Victorian fiction continue in critical work over the next few decades. Artistic merit and widespread readership coupled with economic success are not seen as mutually exclusive occurrences until later in the development of twentieth-century criticism.

Bennett applies this theory of popularity in his essay series, beginning with Braddon who he considers the greatest writer of the Victorian period based on her combined literary merit and popularity. He writes of Braddon that “it is a fact that there are thousands of tolerably educated English people who have never heard of Meredith, Hardy, Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Kipling, Barrie, Crockett; but you would travel far before you reached a zone where the name of Braddon failed of its recognition” (24-5). He praises her writing for its “excellence,” “honesty” and “sound rigor.” While he doesn't credit her with a “first rate passionate imagination,” the merits of Braddon's writing, her ingenuity of plot and her accuracy in depicting the “‘dailiness’ of life” outweigh “passionate imagination” for Bennett (30). As exemplified in his entry on Braddon, Bennett's theory of the popular, unintentionally, makes a strong case for the so-called women's genres, Sensation fiction, the New Woman novel, and speculative/supernatural fiction that were generally excluded from study in the mid- twentieth-century. The early twentieth- century scholars, even Phillips with his dislike for women writers in general, include these genres of popular women's writing as part of an essential reading list of Victorian Fiction.

In 1913, author and critic G.K. Chesterton produced a study of Victorian literature at the invitation of publishers Henry Holt and Company that emphasizes the importance of women writers to the period and the development of the novel. Like the earlier studies by Morley and Shorter, Chesterton's project is not intended as a definitive critical work. Rather he claims to be surveying the important genres that emerge as influences on and trends in Victorian literature. In addressing the novel, Chesterton claims that the accomplishments of women in the novel as a genre are

indisputable and makes a carefully hedged assertion that without women writers, the “modern” novel would not exist. Although he clearly does not allow women to have made any lasting cultural impact in political or philosophical writing, he sees the history of the *novel* as one that is inseparable from women writers:

There are several things that make this form of art unique. One of the most conspicuous is that it is the art in which the conquests of woman are beyond controversy. The proposition that Victorian women have done well in politics or philosophy is not necessarily an untrue proposition: but it is a partisan proposition.... There has been at any rate, no [woman] writer on moral or political theory that can be mentioned without seeming comic, in the same breath with the great female novelist. But when we come to the novelists, the women have, on the whole, equality; and certainly, in some points, superiority (57-8).

According to Chesterton, a study of the novel in general and of the Victorian novel specifically ought to be a study of women's writing. He discusses Austen, Burney, the Brontës, Gaskell, Oliphant, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, Olive Schreiner and Ouida, notably not separating the minor or popular authors of the period into a different category. In contrast to Bennett's theory of the importance of plot, Chesterton reads the novel as a character study, which is a main support for his argument that it is a genre best produced by women. Agreeing with Anne Eliot's somewhat bitter lines in Austen's *Persuasion*, Chesterton seems to think that women are best suited to write novels because they “live at home, quiet, confined” making them uniquely suited to close observation of human nature. His words echo Bennett's praise of Braddon for her

ability to write the “dailiness of life.” The novel is “a hearty and exhaustive overhauling of that part of human existence which has always been woman's province...their kingdom; the play of personalities in private, the real difference between Tommy and Joe” (Chesterton 59). Here his argument that women make better novelist because their life circumstances have been historically restricted to the home directly contradicts much of the Victorian criticism of Sensation fiction, which was so often questioned for its unrealistic plot and lack of character study. Despite this contradictory claim, Chesterton makes a strong case for the female lineage of the novel. He addresses male writers we would expect to see in a study of the Victorian novel like Dickens and Thackeray, but claims that “the first fact about the novel” is “that it is the introduction of a new and rather curious kind of art; and it has been found to be peculiarly feminine, from the first good novel by Fanny Burney to the last good novel by May Sinclair” (59). Important to this study is that Chesterton concludes this discussion by observing that Victorian literature is notable for two new categories of fiction. He cites the advent of literature for children and literature for pleasure, both of which are considered women's genres.

Each critic discussed here can be seen to make a case for the inclusion of popular fiction and women writers in any study of the Victorian novel that hopes for accurate and comprehensive representation of the period. Some critics like Chesterton argue that the novel is fundamentally a women's genre, while a Victorian critic like Shorter saw the impact of popular fiction, a genre dominated by women, as integral to the future of the novel. This grouping of early critics, some writing before the Victorian period had come its close, reveals that including popular fiction and

women's fiction was a norm of criticism from the 1880s through the early decades of the twentieth-century. Popular fiction and women writers were widely distributed and read, and as the success of the Tauchnitz catalogue shows not just in England.

Unfortunately, by the time the Victorian novel became an object of focused academic study, these considerations were displaced by an attention to form and realism that precludes the majority of popular fiction written and published in the Victorian era.

Critical studies on form and the Victorian novel by mid-twentieth-century critics distill the hundreds of authors and thousands of texts from the Victorian period down to a small collection of realist authors. The ability of this small collection of texts to accurately represent the Victorian novel as a whole was not commonly disputed until the early 1990s.

### **The Great Tradition**

The term Great Tradition refers to a mid-century critical work by F.R. Leavis in which he sought to establish a history of the tradition of the novel, and where various writers might fit within that tradition. Leavis, his wife Q. D. Leavis, and J. Hillis Miller represent the movement in criticism popular at this time towards establishing a long nineteenth-century canon of novels that should be read in order to study the form of the novel itself. Audrey Jaffe observes that twentieth-century scholarship on the novel is most interested in realism and values the novel as "a genre whose significant features are its attention to circumstantial detail and empirical experience" (425). It is this realist tradition that the new critics of the mid-twentieth-century endorse when they limit study of the Victorian novel to such a narrow handful of authors. Working in a scholarly climate that valued poetics and form, this era of

critics are primarily responsible for “transforming what had long been considered an inferior genre into one that could be deemed worthy of serious study” (Jaffe 427).

However valuable to the future of the novel as a genre worthy of serious study, this transformation occurred at the expense of the vast majority of Victorian writers who produced popular fiction.<sup>13</sup>

In *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1939), Q. D. Leavis asks “what has happened to fiction and the reading public since the eighteenth century?” (15). Leavis proposes to address the complex history of the novel as a medium through which “questions of [contemporary] standards and values are raised which bear on the whole history of taste” (16). She begins her project from a position that “the past can only be estimated through... its relation to the present” (16), which means that she is reading the Victorian novel through a contemporary lens rather than considering it as a product of its time. Through her investigations into the history of English publishing and reading, she finds evidence of a general deterioration in what she calls *public taste* for fiction. Leavis notes that this deterioration coincides with the invention of the steam press and subsequent publishing boom in the Victorian period. New printing technology and increasing literacy in the period led to a desire for reading material that was met by mass-produced widely available fiction. One consequence of the public demand for the printed word was production of literature intended for previously unaddressed audiences, such as stories specifically for children or the short fiction that ran in women’s magazines. Popular fiction as a form of entertainment for

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that this process culled almost all of the women writers who drove the publishing industry’s success and captured wide-spread readership in the latter half the nineteenth-century.

the general public gave rise to new genres, like Sensation fiction and supernatural fiction as well as adventure stories, and gendered publications for children. Leavis considers the “sudden opening of the fiction market to the general public” as “a blow to serious reading” that resulted in the production of what we would now call commercial fiction, or fiction intended to turn a profit.

Because Leavis is interested in readership, she approaches the Victorian novel and contemporary reading trends partially in terms of popularity. Like Shorter, she claims that eighteenth century novelists are far superior to those of the Victorian period and she echoes his feelings on Dickens. Like Chesterton, she groups Dickens with Reade and Collins as a popular novelist. In her assessment of the Victorian novel, Leavis groups writers into types to distinguish popular fiction from what she determines to be “serious reading.” The categories she uses are the Dickens-Reade-Collins and Trollope-Thackeray-Eliot schools. Leavis summarily rejects all popular fiction, the Dickens-Reade-Collins school, of the Victorian period. She is particularly vitriolic towards Marie Corelli, about whom she writes: “nothing can better illustrate the immense drop from the highly critical and intelligent society... to later Victorian taste than the nature of Marie Corelli's success” (345). However, it is when making claims like this one that Leavis stumbles into contradictory statements. She condemns Corelli as the worst of the “low brow” but also points out that Tennyson, Queen Victoria, Gladstone, and various academic and religious luminaries “were among her firmest admirers”<sup>14</sup> (345-7). When Leavis tries to make a broad case for her two

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<sup>14</sup> Q. D. Leavis lists Theodore Watts-Duncan, the Dean of Gloucester, Dean Wilberforce, Dean Farrar, the Dean of Westminster, Lord Haldane, Lord Charles

categories of novelist, Dickens-Reade-Collins and Trollope-Thackeray-Eliot, she has a hard time also distinguishing their separate readerships. She writes that there is “no occasion...to talk of a ‘lowbrow’ and a ‘middlebrow’ public” when discussing readership, and that “all that can be said is that because of new commercial conditions the beginnings of a split between popular and cultivated taste in fiction is apparent” (397). Likewise, she cannot avoid pointing out that “the people were not by any means restricted from reading and enjoying the ‘better’ fiction, since it too was running as serials in the shilling magazines and even in Dickens's twopenny weeklies” (328-9). An underlying classist nature to her argument cannot go unnoticed, as she continues to use binary comparisons like “the educated” versus the “newly literate” to describe the Victorian reading public<sup>15</sup>. However, the argument itself is complicated by Leavis’ own admission that, due to serialization, all genres of fiction were readily accessible to anyone with the funds to purchase a paper or magazine.

Coming back to her original argument about the publishing industry, Leavis claims that cheap editions by companies like W. H. Smith and Routledge’s Railway Library carry much of the blame for creating public taste for ‘low brow’ fiction by issuing ‘yellow back’ and shilling editions of popular writers. However, the decision

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Beresford, Father Ignatius and Ella Wheeler Wilcox as having publically professed their admiration of Corelli.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Rose has called this kind of binary a common fallacy among historians who study reading. He notes a tendency to think that “the canon of “great books” is defined solely by social elites. Common readers either do not recognize that canon, or else they accept it only out of deference to elite opinion” (48). He goes on to point out that so-called uneducated readers are perfectly capable of recognizing the difference between a popular romance and a politically driven novel without guidance from the “elites.”

to publish those editions was calculated based on preexisting public interest in fiction that was already popular in serial form and the lending libraries. Cheap editions were profitable because public demand meant there was already a market for them. It is only possible to support her argument that *taste* in the reading public has undergone a serious and steady degeneration since the Georgian period if we accept that there is very little from the Victorian period worth serious consideration. By making this assertion, even Leavis acknowledges that she is limiting the Victorian novel to “Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, Thackeray, Trollope” whom she calls “the novelists of the educated,” and excluding the majority of fiction published and read during the period.

Similarly, F.R. Leavis rejects the notion that any value can be obtained from the popular or “minor novelists of [the Victorian] period” (1). In *The Great Tradition* (1964)<sup>16</sup>, Leavis famously claimed that “there are no novelists in English worth reading” save Austen, Eliot, James, and Joseph Conrad (1). He makes three exceptions. *Hard Times* is included as an example of Dickens’ “dramatic creation and imaginative genius” (248), but nonetheless lacking in style, and a “note” on the Brontës where he asserts that Emily was the “genius, of course” (27). Disraeli appears only as a footnote. Among the novelists Leavis claims have no place in “the great tradition” of the English novel are popular writers Trollope, Charlotte Yonge, Gaskell, Collins, Reade, Charles and Henry Kingsley, and Marryat<sup>17</sup>. J. Hillis Miller in “The

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<sup>16</sup> The full edition was first published in 1964, but the essays on Eliot, James, and Conrad collected therein appeared between 1937 and 1946 in *Scrutiny*, a literary journal Leavis co-founded and edited from 1932 through 1953 when the publication folded.

<sup>17</sup> It is unclear whether he refers to Frederick or Florence Marryat, but presumably Frederick and not Florence is meant.

Form of Victorian Fiction” (1968) considers Thackeray, Trollope, Eliot, Meredith and Hardy the greatest Victorian novelists. Richard Stang, in his survey of Victorian critics of Victorian novels from between 1850-70, states “in [the Victorian] period any study of the novel... [should] limit itself...merely to matters of technique and form” supporting the critical consensus of the time (xi). He only mentions “Wilkie Collins and his prolific followers—Miss Braddon, Mrs. Henry Wood, Ouida and a score of others” as unsuccessful attempts to “rise above the flatness of the usual domestic novel” (58). By the time *The Victorian Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism*, edited by Ian Watt,<sup>18</sup> was published in 1970, the representative authors of the period included Dickens, Gaskell, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Thackeray, Eliot, Trollope and Hardy. This grouping of writers was established as the Victorian canon and a formalist critical approach continued to dominate criticism on the Victorian novel.

The exclusionary nature of mid- twentieth-century scholarship created a body of work that supported the idea of separate spheres by excluding the majority of popular women writers and by focusing on realist texts in which female characters are more likely to be depicted in domestic roles. Realist novels by canonical authors reinforce the dual notions that the novel was primarily a masculine genre<sup>19</sup> and that women, as depicted in realist work, only worked outside the home when tragic circumstances necessitated it. We now know that in the Victorian era there was a “significant tradition of female authorship” (Jaffe 424) and that myth of the angel in

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<sup>18</sup> Watt’s previous work *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957) contributed to the formalist school of thought that was so influential in establishing the Victorian canon.

<sup>19</sup> Watt.

the house was ideological rather than practical. Complicit in constructing this revisionist image of Victorian women and fiction is the realist novel's middle-class origins<sup>20</sup> and overall tendency to depict middle-class characters. As Lyn Pykett and Leonore Davidhoff and Catherine Hall have called to our attention, the angel in the house was a middle-class figure predicated on a binary division of labor in which men are earners and women are nurturers. When we look more closely at a cross section of Victorian households, we see that women were widely involved in public life in both paid and unpaid positions. Here it is worth mentioning that, as this study intends to show, the divisions public and private as delineated by the closed door of the family home rarely exist even in Victorian fiction. Fiction of the period frequently contains characters who break the model of separate spheres as a matter of course. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* have main female characters who work for their living caring for other people's homes and children. In Dickens, we find male and female characters who live and work in the same domestic space. In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot introduces the complicated character of female performer. These canonical texts working women are a ubiquitous presence and yet they are often depicted as varying from a norm that is not supported in those same texts. An estimated forty percent of women were gainfully employed outside the home and countless others organized charities, educational societies, and other social reform movements.<sup>21</sup> However, in texts by the writers considered canonical, middle-class working women and women's work are

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<sup>20</sup> Jaffe and Armstrong.

<sup>21</sup> Fictional examples of this type of public female reform work are seen in the character of Bell Blount in *The Rebel of the Family* and public lectures in *The Odd Women*. Davidhoff and Hall trace the connection between middle-class Protestantism and women's volunteer work for charities and missions organizations.

depicted as temporary or stopgap measures before marriage or in the face of economic hardship. Jane Eyre and Becky Sharpe become governesses out of necessity, not career minded ambition. Women's organized charity work may be negatively portrayed, as is the case with Dickens' Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle from *Bleak House*, because it detracts from their domestic responsibilities. Gaskell's Margaret Hale is rebuked in *North and South* for her classist attempts to be charitable, and even Eliot's paragon Dorothea Brook is chastened for her ambitious social reform schemes. Appropriately feminine middle-class women in the realist novel, often struggle with the notion that earning money is unladylike even when faced with true poverty. Characters like Dickens' Amy Dorrit or Gaskell's titular Ruth are "angels," despite earning their own living, because they are ashamed of having to work at all. It is this realist, masculinist tradition that feminist critics confronted in the 1970s by questioning the validity of separate spheres, and later by recuperating women writers whose female characters did much more than keep house.

### **The 1970s and beyond**

In her "Introduction" to *Suffer and Be Still* (1973), Martha Vicinus called for an examination of popular Victorian literature and periodicals as part of a new branch of literary criticism, using the newly popular term "woman studies." The edition grew out of the September 1970 issue of *Victorian Studies* on "the theme of the Victorian Woman" which requested articles to be "interdisciplinary in outlook and offer either new material or a new approach to familiar subject matter" (viii). Vicinus continues, saying that although "a number of excellent literary studies have been published focusing on the portrayal of heroines in novels either written by women or men,

women's magazines, annuals and *other popular literature* should now be examined” (my italics, viii). Her request is indicative of a main issue in the early days of feminist critics along with other new schools of criticism in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, namely that they too were restricted from truly widening the scope of Victorian Studies by adherence to the canon. The essays included in *Suffer and be Still* for example differ somewhat from that canon by including mention of Wilkie Collins, W.S. Gilbert, and Elizabeth Gaskell, in addition to realist authors: Charlotte Brontë, Thackeray, Dickens, and Eliot. Trollope, James and Hardy are absent from the edition. Importantly, *Suffer and be Still* instigates a new interdisciplinary trend in Victorian Studies by including essays on periodicals, theatrical productions, painting, medical and scientific literature, biographical material, and social reform texts. In this essay collection, the “women's magazines, annuals and other popular literature” that Vicinus claims we need to examine to advance the field, make up many of the primary texts brought to new scholarly consideration. By focusing on alternative texts to the realist novel, this collection shows women, women writers, and female characters in a much different light than in the critical studies of the “great tradition.”

By the late 1980s and the 1990s, additional critical approaches like New Historicism and Cultural Studies, joined Feminist theory in giving scholars new ways to consider women in nineteenth-century texts. Nancy Armstrong's 1987 *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, posits an alternative origin for the realist novel that is inseparable from “other popular literature,” the history of women's domestic experiences, and the creation of the English middle-class. Armstrong's focus on the relationship between conduct literature and the marriage plot lead her to spend more time with women

writers and female characters. Her alternative approach to the history of the novel contradicts Ian Watt's earlier claim that the novel is a masculine genre, but still remains rooted in the study of canonical writers, mainly Austen, the Brontës, and Richardson with some attention to Dickens. Even studies that challenge the status quo in this period by focusing on women writers and female characters, like Sally Mitchell's 1981 *The Fallen Angel*, remain hampered by a kind of classism inherited from Q. D. Leavis. Mitchell struggles with the false distinction between high and low culture through the need to distinguish between "fiction for the lower class" that should be considered separately from "novels that have been received into the canon" (165-6). It has taken the better part of two decades for the popular authors who were deemed necessary to a compressive view of the Victorian period by the early critics cited here to re-emerge in Victorian scholarship. While notable and groundbreaking work on the canon appears concurrently with and subsequent to *Suffer and be Still*<sup>22</sup>, those working in Victorian Studies have only relatively recently begun to pay serious attention to popular fiction as a valid location for inquiry into "woman studies."

An era of inquiry into popular fiction with an emphasis on women writers begins approaching the turn of the twenty-first century. Lyn Pykett's *The Improper Feminine* (1992), and Pamela Gilbert's *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (1997) pay serious scholarly attention to the Sensation and

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<sup>22</sup> Jaffe notes that early attempts "to define what was uniquely feminine in literature [in the 1970s and 1980s] echoed the masculinist model, seeking to define an alternate 'Great Tradition'" by studying "images of women in literature." Examples include Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women* (1978) and *Woman and the Demon* (1982), and Spivak's postcolonial essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985).

New Woman genres. They highlight the way the concerns about women's lives addressed in these nineteenth century genres bear continued relevance to ongoing social and political issues of women's lives in the late twentieth-century. Pykett frames her argument in favor of Sensation and New Woman fiction as a critique of "the masculinised version of the history of fiction," particularly "the traditional history of the later Victorian novel [that] is entirely dominated by male writers" (3). She continues in this vein by noting that "the great tradition" of the canon tends to justify Eliot's presence because she is "accepted as an honorary man" (3). Her main concern is to expand Victorian Studies through an in-depth examination of women's writing and the discursive and material conditions that produced it, which she sees as part of the ongoing feminist project to uncover the true historical condition of women's lives (199). Pykett writes that the "irruption of the feminine" and the vast success of Sensation authors like Braddon, Wood, and Ouida, and New Woman authors like Sarah Grand and Mona Caird, had a profound effect that holds "importance for both present day feminists and students of nineteenth-century literature and culture" (4). Although there were men writing in both these genres, Pykett maintains that women writers and women's writing are formally and stylistically separate and should be considered as such in order to understand women's experience in the Victorian period. Adherence to a masculinist perspective that discounted this difference resulted in a "canon" that filters out "virtually all of the fiction produced by women" (3). She argues that because so much of women's writing "grew out of specific concerns about women's social and familial roles," we miss much of the cultural significance of the Victorian novel when women's writing is excluded (199).

Pioneering Braddon scholar Pamela Gilbert takes the perspective that contemporary “critical fascination with transgression and boundaries” which in the late 1990s and early 2000s led to work on identity and the body, can be equally applied to the Victorian period where Britain and Britishness can only be defined by rhetoric of the Other (“Introduction”). She acknowledges that these themes are present in canonical work, but claims that by focusing on “writers who exemplify Victorian popular literary tastes” she is participating in the overall project to recuperate women's writing that had been critically ignored. Gilbert points out that when she was writing in 1997, even feminist critics had focused their attention on female realist novelists who maintained a tenuous hold on their place in an expanded canon. Instead, she proposes to work with “women's popular literature” for “the opportunity for a clearer evaluation of the function of gender in articulations of the ‘body’ of culture in the context of an emerging ‘popular’ fiction, as object of consumption, representation of identities (national, authorial, class, and otherwise) and ‘subject’ of discourse” (“Introduction”). In other words, to examine popular women's fiction is to gain access to subversive, “othered” representations of identity in a historical period that “often constructed its identity as active, healthy, and masculine” (n.p.). Her focus on bodies, boundaries and contagion brings to light anxieties of the Victorian era that clearly spoke to the late twentieth-century—contextualized by the AIDS crisis and abortion debates<sup>23</sup>—and remain relevant today.

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<sup>23</sup> Gilbert also raises early concerns about technology, citing Donna Haraway's work on the cyborg and popular films like *The Terminator* series that ask very different questions about bodies and boundaries.

Additional studies by Tamar Heller on Collins, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the female Gothic* (1992) and the edited collection *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context* (2000), paved the way for focused attention on individual popular authors. Surveying these and other contemporary critical works shows a shift from acceptance of the separate spheres and the “angel in the house” as a normative but problematic social construction of the Victorians. Critical work on non-canonical writers moves us towards an understanding that spheres rhetoric was always an untenable ideological ideal easily debunked by the achievements of popular women writers and the analysis of women characters in popular fiction. While interest in this recuperative work is growing, as the March 2016 Victoria listserv conversation shows, progress has yet to be made towards the broader acceptance of popular fiction and women writers in our current incarnation of the canon. Without returning to the method employed by Shorter and Morely that took Victorian fiction as a comprehensive body of work, and reintroducing the popular into our consideration, studies on Victorian fiction cannot hope to accurately represent the scope and complexity of the era. Particularly, our ideas about women and women’s work will continue to be misconstrued from a limited number of texts. However, also in 2016 Michael Wolff commented on that same listserv that the attention now paid to what used to be considered “minor authors” is changing the field of Victorian Studies. His assertion that these authors may no longer be considered minor is heartening, but not necessarily true. We have shifted from using the word “minor” to using “popular” but the desire to qualify and separate these mostly female writers from the “highbrow,” mostly male, novelists of the canon persists. The following two chapters examine

popular works from “minor writers” that give a very different impression of Victorian femininity in practice and in fiction than the history of the angel in the house and separate spheres would have us believe.

## Chapter II: Alternative Constructions of Femininity and Domestic Space in the Sensation Novel and the New Woman Novel

This chapter focuses on popular texts from the mid-to-late Victorian period featuring female protagonists whose characterization challenges the doctrine of separate spheres by not conforming to the angel in the house stereotype. In these popular texts, the angel in the house type may be overlooked or rejected and alternative feminine types are lionized in her stead. These texts come from two distinct categories: Sensation fiction and New Woman fiction. In the Sensation category, I will examine the alternative femininity of the “pretty horsebreaker” who frequently appears as a privileged female character in this genre. Importantly, the pretty horsebreaker is pursued as a potential wife, placing her in the same position as the angel in the house, even though her unconventional behavior appears to contradict contemporary conventional wisdom about the feminine behavior that made women good wives. Because she is presented as marriageable, the pretty horsebreaker becomes a valid version of female representation in the context of the marriage plot in nineteenth-century domestic fiction. Nineteenth-century fiction gives us many women who are never expected to marry or who have broken pre-existing marriages in the character of the fallen woman, but the pretty horsebreaker exists within the boundaries of middle-class respectability and so she can participate in a marriage plot. The texts in this category are Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd* (1863) and *Vixen* (1878), and Ellen Wood’s *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863). In New Woman texts, which represent working womanhood, female characters’ dissatisfaction with the traditional roles open to them, leads them to enter into the public sphere of business. Female characters in these texts challenge the aspect of the angel in the house ideal purporting

that women are not suited to public, economic life. The New Woman texts addressed here are Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Rebel of the Family* (1880) and Amy Levy's *Romance of the Shop* (1888). Alternative feminine representation in these novels is further complicated by the way authors in the Sensation and New Woman genres reveal domestic space to be far from private. Not only do female characters behave in ways that contradict the idea of separate spheres of influence, the spaces they occupy complicate the idea of separate public and private spaces. The country home or the living kept above the city shop is hybrid space that blends the public and the private, resulting in a kind of public domesticity that cannot be easily classified as woman's private sphere. The examples I have chosen from popular fiction exemplify the way femininity and domesticity in Victorian popular fiction of this period are not governed by the separate spheres ideology. Instead they are rendered in a more nuanced and multifaceted manner: angels of the house exist beside pretty horsebreakers and working women, and none are exempt from acting in the public sphere.

In Sensation and New Woman fiction, several factors combine to undermine the legitimacy of Victorian theories about womanhood and femininity. The first is the ubiquity of feminine tropes that dispute the angel of the house. Although the angel type of homemaker may be present in these texts, she is frequently outshone by alternative feminine representations like the pretty horsebreaker. In these situations, alternative types of femininity are privileged as objects of both masculine and feminine desire. Male characters pursue them in the marriage plot structure and female characters often vie for their attention and friendship. A second factor that undermines readings of the separate spheres in these popular genres is the way in which public and

private spaces are blurred and the domestic home-space can be read as public space. The country house and the city shop best illustrate the blurring of the public and the private. They are spaces where living and earning coexist and business is conducted in family spaces. In direct contradiction to Ruskin's image of a home-space sheltered from the "anxieties of the outer life" that ceases to be a home when its threshold is breached (75-6), the thresholds of country houses and home-shops are already breached by their hybrid nature. They are best described as permeable membranes that allow the passage of domestic and economic concerns indiscriminately. The city home-shop depicts the class implications of women's work in a way the middle- or upper-middle-class country house cannot. Women working in home-shops blend domestic duties with commercial duties in that hybridized space where their work becomes visible. In nineteenth-century novels, this kind of visibility is typically a hallmark of lower-class or working-class work where the reader expects to see the necessity of earning a living. Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have already argued that the myth of middle-class domesticity relied on the banishment of productive work from family spaces to create an illusion of female leisure (359). Middle-class women driven by circumstances in the Victorian novel to earn a living are frequently shamed by the necessity to conceal their need to work. Unsurprisingly, it is this hybrid public/ private space in popular fiction that is a home for "pretty horsebreakers" and working women alike. Like the spaces they occupy, these feminine tropes are a challenge to Victorian definitions of womanhood as they go against the grain of normative femininity.

Appearing in the Sensation genre as a main alternative to the angel in the house, the active, even aggressive, publically visible pretty horsebreaker is a direct opposite of the home-bound angel (Mitchell *The Fallen Angel*). The term was coined in 1861 as an alternate title to Landseer's controversial portrait of a young woman lounging with her horse, officially titled "The Taming of the Shrew." The term was soon applied to the "fast" young women of fashionable London seen exercising their horses in Hyde Park's Rotten Row, and was specifically used to allude to "Catherine Walters, or 'Skittles,' a famous courtesan and accomplished horsewoman" who was rumored to be the model for Landseer's painting (Dorré 73). By the 1870s the term was in such common usage that Braddon titled the opening chapter of her 1878 novel *Vixen* "A Pretty Horsebreaker." This figure also appears as the heroine of numerous Sensation novels where her ability as a horsewoman contradicts the assumed biological weakness of women<sup>24</sup>. In popular fiction, the pretty horsebreaker is not only a feminine norm, but frequently is the heroine who is rewarded by the narrative suggesting her womanhood is not compromised by her seemingly inappropriate or unfeminine behavior.

The working women of New Women fiction are equally hindered by the idea of compromised womanhood. According to Lyn Pykett, "the New Woman was the embodiment of a complex of social tendencies" who was either the solution to the problem of "what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere" or a "cultural

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<sup>24</sup> Although the pretty horsebreaker type was not common until popularized in sensation fiction, it is worth noting that good horsewomen were not a new phenomenon in fiction. Austen's *Fanny Price* and Emily Bronte's *Catherine Earnshaw* are earlier examples of fictional horsewomen.

demon” bent on undermining the proper feminine, depending on whether her proponents or critics were describing her (*The Improper Feminine* 139). Unlike “The Girl of the Period” who was criticized for being artfully feminine, the New Woman was vilified for being decidedly unwomanly in dress, manner, and behavior. However, she also avoided accusations of “mercenary marriage” by seeking her own means of economic support. She rejected traditional home duties in favor of social activism and “demands for inclusion in political life” (Pykett 139). Characterized by a tension between traditional views of womanhood and the new “opening up of white-collar work to women” (Young 128), New Woman novels are a fictional representation of the Woman Question debate. New Woman novels also provide a counterpoint to the separate spheres tenet that woman’s domestic activity was in fact her career, or that housekeeping was practically a professional occupation<sup>25</sup>. Isabella Beeton’s work certainly supports an argument that homemaking is a fulltime job as does Ruskin’s more lyrical discussion of woman’s home duty. However, this idea of the home and the homemaker only applies to middle-class women. Davidoff and Hall argue in *Family Fortunes* that middle-class domesticity was heavily reliant on women’s unpaid labor and Monica F. Cohen’s *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work and Home* extends a similar argument from the historical to the

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Rowbotham points out that this idea comes from the “domestic associations of the feminine stereotype” (221) in *Good Girls Make Good Wives*. She rightly argues that acceptable work for middle-class women was work that kept them in the domestic sphere, or even better was not considered “work” at all-- such as being a companion or caretaker for older or younger relatives. These domestic companionate positions allowed middle-class women to maintain the fiction that their “womanliness” made them unfit for work, while still earning their own living.

fictional. New Woman fiction, with its shop-girls, female shopkeepers, women typists and office clerks, provides a perspective in which the domestic sphere is both an economic privilege of the middle-class and an unattainable-- often undesirable—option for working women.

### **Pretty Horsebreakers:**

Although she appears across the spectrum of popular fiction, the pretty horsebreaker seems most prevalent in the sensation novel. Pretty horsebreakers appear in the work of many popular authors but her earliest appearance in fiction may be traced to “queen of sensation” Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s work<sup>26</sup>. The type appears first as Alicia Audley, a minor character in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, and is repeated throughout Braddon’s career in *Aurora Floyd*, *Vixen*, and *Thou Art the Man*, to name a few examples. Young female characters who prefer sport to more traditionally feminine activities might be characterized by the “horsiness and dogginess” of their life style preferences. “Horsiness” and “dogginess,” defined as the qualities of being horsey and doggy respectively, both appear in the Oxford English Dictionary with a “first in sense” example from Braddon’s *Mount Royal*. These qualities are often

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<sup>26</sup> Braddon herself was an avid horsewoman and rode daily when the weather allowed. Her Blackwood’s Scribbling Diaries from 1880-1889 held at the Braddon Family Archive show a preoccupation with her own “horsiness.” She rarely mentions people in these entries, but she does note her riding practice, riding dress, sales or acquisition of horses, and visits from the farrier. Examples of these diary entries are typified by the following selection from 1880: January 26<sup>th</sup> – “Rode around the park-hard frost”- Mar 20<sup>th</sup>- “ordered riding hat”-- Sept 23<sup>rd</sup>- “Belhus sale of hunters”--- Oct 22- “Grey Mare ‘clipped’.” When she was not travelling, Braddon’s daily rides took place in Richmond Park just south of her suburban London home. In 1873 she immortalized the park and its riding and driving routes in a midnight carriage ride scene that compromises the virtue one of a young artists’ model in her novel *Lost of Love*.

assigned to young female characters that choose the outdoor pursuits of the country or the typically masculine world of horseracing and breeding over other entertainment, which broadens the definition. In Braddon's work, and in the work of other popular fiction authors, the pretty horsebreaker is so commonly present that she becomes as much of a norm of feminine representation as the angel in the house. Importantly, she is presented as equally as if not more desirable than the angel as a potential wife in these texts when overtly or implicitly pitted against the tropes of appropriate feminine behavior. She does not exist in a vacuum without other feminine types, but is presented to the reader alongside the angel in the house and appears just as frequently. To create a clearer picture of the "horsey" heroine, I will begin with Braddon's two most well developed examples of the type, Aurora in *Aurora Floyd* and Vixen in *Vixen*.

The "horsiness" associated with Aurora's character can be traced to early rumors surrounding her antecedents. When, at the age forty-seven, wealthy bachelor banker Archibald Floyd marries the much younger, mysterious, Eliza Fodder, the "thousand tongues of rumor [are] set to work" in his Kent county neighborhood (8). Among the many potential backgrounds Braddon's gossipers give Eliza—actress, factory girl, gypsy performer, or the implication that she was a prostitute-- is the career of equestrian performer: "Sometimes they say she was an equestrian, and it was at Astley's, and not in the manufacturing districts, that the banker had seen her first; nay, some were ready to swear that they themselves had beheld her leaping through gilded hoops, and dancing the cachuca upon six barebacked steeds, in that sawdust strewn arena" (8). All of these potential backgrounds share the taint of scandal. They

range from being merely an inappropriate class match for Archibald, the factory girl rumor, to the implication that Eliza was prostituting herself. However, it seems to be the equestrian rumor that is most important when considering the character of Aurora, Eliza's daughter. The reference to Astley's Amphitheatre<sup>27</sup> carries the inference of performing in public for money, like the actress and gypsy accusations, but it carries a second kind of accusation by linking Eliza to horses. Unlike the tightly laced, well-tailored image of middle-class equestrian ladies Alison Mathews David discusses, Braddon's image here is of an unrestrained relationship between woman and horse. She is said to have "leapt" and "danced" while riding bareback. If the sidesaddle, with its imperative to keep a woman's legs together for propriety, was the appropriate method for engaging in equestrian behavior, then Eliza's supposed equestrian performance here is as inappropriate as one can get. Later in the text, Aurora's rejected suitor John Mellish attempts to remove her from his mind by attending fashionable amusements, including a circus where he "was well-nigh in love with a fair manegé rider, who had black eyes, and reminded him of Aurora" (76). Mellish's association between Aurora and a female performance rider creates another allusion to the idea that there is horsiness in Aurora's background. The reader eventually learns that her career as an equestrian is merely a rumor and Eliza had been a provincial actress<sup>28</sup>. However, the vivid image of Eliza as equestrian performer seems to

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<sup>27</sup> From 1795 through the 1890s Astley's Royal Amphitheatre became known for circus performances, particularly actress Adah Isaac Menken's scandalous equestrian performances in which her theatrical tights made her appear almost naked.

<sup>28</sup> Much like Braddon's own career as a provincial actress between 1852 and 1860.

foreshadow the relationship Braddon creates between “pretty horsebreaker” Aurora and the masculine worlds of racing and betting.

Eliza Floyd dies in childbirth and the narrative quickly transfers to her daughter Aurora, who is associated throughout the text with the masculine elements of horsemanship and sport racing. She is not only an accomplished rider, but she is an intimate of the sporting side of hunting, horseracing, and betting. As a child of ten she “could converse fluently upon the subject of pointers, setters, fox-hounds, harriers and beagles.... At eleven she talked unreservedly of the horses in the Lenfield stables as a pack of screws<sup>29</sup>; at twelve she contributed her half-crown to the Derby sweepstakes... at thirteen she rode across the country with... a member of the Croydon hunt” (21). In this grouping of horsey and doggy concerns, Aurora’s fascination with betting on sport is the most damning in terms of her ability to be considered an appropriate type of woman. Braddon calls her “fast” at this young age and the connotations of the words follow Aurora into adulthood. To be characterized as fast is to be considered slightly immoral or “devoted to pleasure” (Oxford English Dictionary). When applied to a woman, fast also carries the suggestion of sexual impropriety or permissiveness of behavior with men. The adult Aurora is socially stigmatized for her interest in this masculine hobby. Her first meeting with potential suitor Talbot Bulstrode—the man who eventually marries her cousin Lucy, a “fair-faced, blue-eyed, rosy-lipped, golden-haired” angel in the house—is marred by Aurora’s preoccupation with the outcome of a race. Bulstrode is impressed by Aurora’s appearance at a party, thinking her “a

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<sup>29</sup> This phrase appears in June 1864 in *Bailey’s Monthly Magazine of Sports and Pastimes and Turf Guide* and appears to be slang for an untrained group of dogs or horses.

divinity! imperiously beautiful in white and scarlet” (33). Through his eyes the reader sees her difference from expected young female behavior: “his gaze lingered upon the graceful head, with its coronal of shining scarlet berries, encircling smooth masses of blue-black hair. He expected to see the modest drooping of the eyelids peculiar to young ladies with long lashes, but he was disappointed for Aurora was looking straight before her” (34). The positioning of Aurora’s gaze in a manner contrary to expectation does two things in the scene. It serves to pique Bulstrode’s interest in her, but it also provides the reader with a sense that the norms of feminine behavior are not a part of her character. This feeling is reinforced when Bulstrode approaches her “wondering what he should say to her,” and Aurora asks, “the strangest question he had ever heard from girlish lips.” Inquiring after a horse she has bet on, she asks, “Do you know if Thunderbolt has won the Leger?” Bulstrode’s immediate reaction is the one the reader might expect (34). Faced with an unwomanly woman, he is shocked and “confounded.” He shudders and experiences a physical feeling of horror. Bulstrode’s subsequent inner monologue provides context for the reader to react to Aurora’s “horsiness.”

Bulstrode condemns Aurora as “a horrible woman” and a “miserable girl” (34-5). While he continues to admire her physical appearance, thinking of her as “queenly” and “a Cleopatra with a snub nose,” but his thoughts on her personality are a vitriolic denunciation of her future as a wife and mother. He:

Pictured the heir of all the Raleigh Bulstrodes receiving his infantine impressions from such a mother. She would teach him to read out of the ‘Racing Calendar’; she would invent a royal alphabet of the turf, and tell him

that ‘D stands for Derby, old England’s great race,’ and ‘E is for Epsom, a crack meeting-place’ . . . . She ought to carry a betting-book instead of those ivory tablets. How *distract* she was all the time she sat here! I dare say she has made a book for the Leger and was calculating how much she stands to lose. What will this poor old banker do with her? Put her in a madhouse, or get her elected a member of the Jockey Club? (author’s italics 34-5)

Bulstrode’s reaction is partially based on his own musings about Aurora after he finds himself attracted to her, but he then becomes the mouthpiece for the social conventions that Aurora flouts. He presupposes her to be like the other women of his acquaintance, one of Linton’s “girls of the period” who wants a husband and social standing. Bulstrode fantasizes that Aurora, being a “nobody,” “wanted position, and had no doubt read up on the Raleigh Bulstrodes in the sublime pages of Burke”<sup>30</sup> (34). Aurora’s lack of interest in him and subsequent query about a horse race earns Bulstrode’s ire, but contradictorily creates his interest in pursuing her.

Despite this seemingly disparaging beginning, Braddon endorses Aurora’s horsey femininity over Lucy’s angel in the house through Bulstrode’s attention to her. That said, she continues to make it clear for the reader that Lucy’s femininity should be seen as the more valuable type. In the throes of his initial attraction to Aurora, Bulstrode muses on “the ideal woman” and the ways in which Lucy fits this profile. Braddon writes: “Talbot Bulstrode’s ideal woman was some gentle and feminine creature with an aureole of pale auburn hair; some timid soul with downcast eyes,

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<sup>30</sup> *Burke’s Peerage, which* listed the family histories of the aristocracy and is frequently referenced as a way for the families of unmarried young women to vet potential husbands.

fringed with golden tinted lashes; some shrinking being... exceling in all womanly graces and accomplishments, but only exhibiting them in the narrow circle of home” (40). For Bulstrode, there are two main characteristics beyond the physical that make an ideal woman—a requirement Lucy, “this graceful girl” with golden hair and “a modest droop in her white eyelids” easily meets (40). First, she needs to be submissive and display the inherent passivity that contemporary medical opinion assigned to women’s biology. Second, she needs to remain in the home and not display her talents in public. There may be an allusion here to Aurora’s background as the daughter of a performer. A perceived connection between female performers and prostitutes was established by this point in the century and a display of accomplishments outside the home may refer to the “prostituting” of oneself by taking money for any kind of performance. In her work on the historical conflation of actresses with prostitution, Tracy Davis cites economic identity as a main reason the two were frequently united in the public imagination. She writes: “both actresses and prostitutes developed a line of business,” “moved up or down economic and professional scales” and importantly, “no other occupations could be so financially rewarding for single, independent Victorian women” (83-4). Thus, exhibiting accomplishments in public becomes a kind of prostitution in which women take money for services that should only be rendered in the home. Bulstrode’s desire for “an ideal woman” who only exhibits her accomplishments “within the narrow confines of home” is a comment on his desire for modesty. Aurora Floyd, in addition to not meeting the physical requirements of the ideal, is not modest. She is “fast” the opposite of Bulstrode’s ideal in physicality and

personality, yet hers is the type of horsey femininity that is privileged in the novel by Bulstrode and Mellish's desire to marry her.

Jeni Curtis has called *Aurora Floyd* a text that “exposes the division of separate spheres... as a dangerous construct for women” (78). One way in which the novel does this is by revealing that the unattainable angel in the house trope forces a woman like Aurora into an untenable position. In her work on what she calls Braddon's “frauds,” Jan Schipper claims that like other heroines in Braddon's early novels, horsey Aurora is a “fraud” as a Victorian heroine. Schipper defines her use of the word fraud based on the disparity between generalized expectations about feminine behavior, the “ideal” woman in Bulstrode's fantasy, and the dissatisfaction Braddon's unconventional heroines express over those expectations. Pointing out that “Braddon's fiction spoke to women's discontent caused by the Victorian unrealistic expectations regarding... the proper female and showed how some women had to become frauds—using deception... to fulfill these expectations” (2), Schipper uses Aurora and Lucy Audley as her examples. In *Aurora Floyd*, the “fraud” seems less like an intentional action on Aurora's part and more like a fraud committed by the novel in trying to pass Aurora off as an appropriate object of desire for the men in the text when she is so clearly “unsuited...for the prescribed female role” (Schipper 61). Maia Macaleavey makes a related claim in her recent work on what she calls the bigamy plot. She argues that Aurora's story, while sharing elements with a courtship plot, can be more accurately read as a bigamy plot, in which bigamy is the driving force of the narrative taking precedence over the marital contract plot Nancy Armstrong identifies as essential to the staying power of the novel as a popular genre

in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. While *Aurora Floyd* does contain several courtship narratives, it does not conclude with a wedding, and we see the second half of the novel dealing with marriage and bigamy rather than courtship. Braddon acknowledges this in authorial intrusion approximately a third of the way through the text:

Now my two heroines are married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, that the green curtain is ready to fall on the last act of the play, that I have nothing more to do than to entreat indulgence for the shortcomings of the performance and the performers. Yet, after all, does the business of real life drama always end upon the altar steps?... And is it necessary that the novelist, after devoting three volumes to the description of a courtship of six weeks' duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two-thirds of a lifetime? (163)

This passage shows Braddon to be very aware the way she is deviating from the courtship plot in marrying off her main female characters too early in her story. This common practice of her novels from the 1860s seems indicative of a second way in which Braddon's female protagonists, or frauds, challenge assumed conventions of femininity, here by undermining the stereotypical plot structure of courtship ending in marriage. *Aurora Floyd* shares this structure with Braddon's other bigamy novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, which also features an unconventional heroine, although not one of the horsey variety. Aurora's horsiness signals for a reader that she is an unconventional feminine type, allowing her character to become the "fraud" Schipper identifies. As a horsey heroine who struggles against stereotypes of appropriate Victorian femininity by exercising her right to satisfy her own desires (Schipper 61),

Aurora marks the beginnings of the pretty horsebreaker trope as a viable and commonly appearing alternative to the angel in the house.

Like Aurora, Braddon's equally horsey heroine Violet "Vixen" Tempest, is defined by her love of country sporting life, although in *Vixen* we do not see the "fast" qualities that give Bulstrode pause about his feelings for Aurora. Serialized in Dickens' *All the Year Round* between 1878 and 1879, *Vixen* follows the life of Violet Tempest through her coming of age, the death of her beloved father and her mother's remarriage to rakish Captain Winstanley, and ending with her eventual marriage to neighbor and childhood playmate Roderick "Rorie" Vawdry. Vixen's horsiness is confined to an emphasis on country life over the more fashionable life lived in town. In some ways *Vixen* is the opposite of "fast" in her preference for the country lifestyle and Braddon shows the reader that horsey femininity is multifaceted. Braddon's emphasis on Vixen's sportsmanship is an ongoing thread in the text used to contrast Vixen to more worldly female characters, such as her mother Mrs. Winstanley and her rival for Rorie's affection, his cousin Mable Ashbourne. Albert C. Sears and P.D. Edwards have argued that while the combination of Vixen's nickname and her "horsey" femininity create an expectation of sensationalism in the reader, *Vixen* is not a sensation novel and the heroine's horsiness serves to subvert our expectations about both her sexuality and the novel's content<sup>31</sup>. In *Vixen* nature-loving Violet is characterized by her love of hunting and riding on her family estate, which is

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<sup>31</sup> From Sears' essay "Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the 'Combination Novel': the subversion of sensational expectation in *Vixen*" in which he argues that in *Vixen* Braddon experiments with tropes she herself created and uses them to a different end by writing an "antisensation" novel.

presented as a contrast to the social conventions and activities prized by her mother. Violet's mother is in a constant state of confusion over a daughter she loves but cannot relate to due to Violet's disinterest in conventional feminine behaviors. Nevertheless, Mrs. Tempest persists in pursuing her daughter's love and approval, albeit unsuccessfully. By rewarding Violet and her rejection of fashionable life in favor of country sporting pursuits, this novel posits a second kind of horsey femininity as the appropriate alternative to both the angel in the house and Linton's "girl of the period."

The first chapter of *Vixen* describes fifteen-year-old Violet described as "a pretty horsebreaker," alluding to her skill at and preoccupation with riding. In this chapter, Violet rejects fashionable town life by saying, "Catch me- going to London... Papa hates London and so do I" and in the same exchange "I shall always love Papa, I shall always love fox hunting" (10). She equates being grown up with riding "a horse instead of a pony" and aligns her interest with those of her father rather than her mother. At fifteen, Violet's twin passions in life are her father and her horse. Combined, they represent her ties to the country environment that come to distinguish her from other women in the text, especially her mother and her later rival, Mabel Ashbourne. The reader first sees Violet in her riding dress wearing "a short Lincoln-green habit" and "a coquettish little felt hat" (6). In her work on the social history of riding dress, Allison Matthews David notes that by the mid-nineteenth-century, women's riding habits had become sober, masculine, suit-like affairs. The complex garment, which had to hang modestly while standing or sitting sidesaddle, was created by a tailor instead of a dressmaker and was required to be free of embellishment or ornamentation. Color also sent an important message about the female rider. David

writes that, “by mid-century, the only appropriate colors for a lady's riding habit were black, navy, gray, and brown, though blondes might wear a dark rifle-green. Etiquette manuals repeatedly emphasize the mistake of wearing colorful clothing for riding, often with moralizing anecdotes” (182). Three of the four times the color of Violet’s riding habit is mentioned in the novel it is green with brass buttons. Violet, who is described as having brown eyes and auburn hair, is not one of the blondes who could be excused for wearing dark green. Violet’s “Lincoln green” is a warm, bright color with yellow undertones, while the socially sanctioned “rifle-green” is what a twenty-first century reader might know better as the almost brown, military olive drab (Oxford English Dictionary). Her coloring combined with the brighter green riding habit indicate the unconventionality of Violet as a heroine that is typical of Braddon’s work from the 1870s and 1880s. She is not conventionally beautiful or conventionally concerned with appropriate norms of dress and behavior. When socialite Mabel Ashbourne criticizes Violet, Rorie defends her by saying “I’ll warrant there wouldn’t be a better *horsewoman* or prettier girl” giving Violet’s horsiness preference over her appearance (my italics, 28). Overall the word “horse” or some variation of it appears 164 times in the novel and the “horsiness” of Violet’s chosen life in the country comes to symbolize her unconventionality as an object of desire. Violet’s “horsiness” qualifies her as the “natural” type of heroine who Gina Dorré in her work on “horsiness” in the nineteenth-century novel calls “a full-blown horse girl” (85). “Horse-girl” Violet is pursued by Captain Winstanley and by Irish peer Lord Mallow, but remains steadfast in her conviction that she will not marry if it means abandoning

her country home. Her eventual union with Rorie combines their adjoining estates and reads as a validation of a horse-girl's devotion to her horsey and doggy lifestyle.

While Braddon may have popularized the fictional pretty horsebreaker, she is not the only sensation author to use this trope. Ellen Wood uses the horsiness of female characters as a means to display them as valid objects of desire. Her use of the pretty horsebreaker in *The Shadow Ashlydyat* further expands and complicates the type. If Braddon's Aurora and Vixen are fundamentally defined by their horsiness, Wood gives her reader a heroine in whom horsiness is one of several characteristics used to depict non-normative or transgressive femininity. Wood's Charlotte Pain is an accomplished sportswoman, but unlike Aurora or Vixen she does not embody the loose sexual and moral behavior implied by the term "fast." This horsey heroine is not a proto-typical "pretty horsebreaker," but she carries the trope of the pretty horsebreaker into new narrative territory by presenting her as an antagonist to the main male character.

The pretty horsebreaker does not always appear as a positive alternative to the angel in the house. Her presence in popular fiction is varied and nuanced in the same way that other representations of femininity are. Just as Braddon polluted the image of the fair-haired, blue-eyed, angelic child-bride with her portrayal of Lucy Audley, Ellen Wood uses the pretty horsebreaker in a way that showcases her transgressive behaviors. In *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*, Wood gives us Charlotte Pain, a horsey and doggy foil to Maria Goldolphin's angel in the house and an antagonist to Maria's husband George. Charlotte is consistently linked to her horses and dogs throughout the text, but unlike Braddon's use of the trope, here Wood denigrates Charlotte's

“masculine” behaviors and they become an outward example of her mercenary interior. Charlotte Pain teases children and flirts with Maria’s husband George, eventually causing a rift in their marriage and breaking Maria’s health. She is also an accomplished horsewoman, the only woman in her circle who rides in the hunt, and the keeper of three spoiled dogs. Charlotte’s horsey-femininity makes her attractive while her character makes her repellant.

Wood asserts Charlotte’s difference from the other women in the text early in her first chapter by creating a clear distinction between them based on Charlotte’s horsiness. *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* opens with a hunt. In Prior’s Ash, where the novel is chiefly set, women do not take part in the hunt itself. The local tradition requires that they remain quiet spectators. The scene opens with the men milling about on horseback while “ladies were chiefly in carriages; a few mounted, who would ride quietly home again when the hounds had thrown off; a very few—they might be counted in units—would follow the field. Prior’s Ash and its neighborhood was supplied in very limited degree with what they were pleased to call masculine women: for the term ‘fast’ had not yet come in” (4). The role of women as spectators in this passage is clear. Most are seated in carriages to see the outset of the hunt. Those who are riding will return home or follow the hunt slowly to see its outcome. They are not going to participate in the sport itself. By contrast, Charlotte is depicted as a horsewoman in her first introduction in the text and to several of the other characters in the novel. She is “on the outskirts of the crowd, sitting on her horse” wearing “a well-fitting habit of bright grass-green... ornamented with buttons of silver gilt.... A cap, of the same bright green, rested upon the upper part of her forehead.... It was a

dress that had not yet been seen at Prior's Ash, and was regarded with some doubt"

(4). Like Violet Tempest, Charlotte Pain wears a habit in a too-bright color. Her habit is also green, which again was not considered an appropriate color for sporting dress. Wood situates her novel in the past, telling the reader that this style of habit is new and that the term 'fast'<sup>32</sup> has not yet come into common usage. To emphasize Charlotte's difference and distance from the other female characters of Prior's Ash, Wood gives us their reactions to her appearance:

"An open barouche had drawn up and its occupants, two ladies, were looking towards [Charlotte].... It was Lady Goldophin. She held her eye-glass to her eye, and turned it on the crowd. "Maria, whatever is that on horseback?" she asked. "It looks green." "It is Charlotte Pain in a bright-green riding habit," was the young lady's answer.... Which was certainly not the style of Maria Hastings. Quiet, retiring, gentle, she could only wonder at those who dressed in bright-coloured habits with gold buttons and feathers, and followed the hounds over gates and ditches" (7)

In the next moments, Charlotte Pain is "galloping in the wake of the pack," (9) a full participant in the hunt. Importantly, Charlotte is the only woman who regularly appears on horseback or driving her own carriage in the novel. Her horses (like her dogs) are frequently too unruly for anyone else, male or female, to handle. Her horsiness and ability as a sportswoman make her suspicious to some characters and a

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<sup>32</sup> "Fast" as in a person or place being "fast" is first referenced in the OED with a quote from 1841, but the word seems to have into common use by the early 1860s. It is difficult to fix a year to the events in *Ashlydyat*, but it is not an historical novel and so the color and style of riding habit might be taken as evidence of Charlotte's morally ambiguous character.

curiosity to others. They also characterize her as ‘fast.’ Her convenient marriage to a man involved in financial fraud, her friendship with another swindler, and her too-close relationship with a married man are juxtaposed to her horsey and doggy pursuits so that horsiness becomes part of her “fast” or immoral lifestyle. In Charlotte Pain we see an implication of the dangerous sexuality that horsey women may possess. She is a “pretty horsebreaker” who supports the reading of feminine horsemanship as potentially suspicious or immoral. Like Landseer’s rumored model for “The Taming of the Shrew,” Charlotte is sexualized through her association to horses.

These authors use horsiness and the pretty horsebreaker trope as a valid type of femininity in their novels. However, each uses the trope differently. In Braddon, we see the pretty horsebreaker as a validated object of masculine desire. Aurora and Violet, despite their foibles, are eventually inserted into feminine domestic space through marriage. Wood’s Charlotte Pain validates a Victorian reader’s fears or suspicions of a good horsewoman, but she too is pursued as marriageable. What these texts have in common is the appearance of the horsey heroine as an equally valid type of feminine character recurring in popular fiction. The frequency with which the type appears leads in part to her validity.

### **The hybrid space of the country home:**

The second way in which sensation novels work to subvert the idea of the separate spheres is through their blurring of the boundaries between public space and private space. The home space of the country house, although technically existing in the private sphere, was always open to non-family members. In country house novels, where the pretty horsebreaker most frequently resides, woman’s sphere extends

beyond the confines of the house, and the public is frequently invited into what should be private space. The domestic is constantly penetrated, infiltrated, or breached from the outside by visitors, friends, and neighbors who participate in surveillance of those who operate within the home. In her work on *Lady Audley's Secret* comparing “the relationship between the enclosure of land” from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth-century to the “enclosure of bodies reflected the descriptions of country houses,” Elizabeth Langland argues that the physical and social architecture of the country house “put [women] continually on display” in space that was equally public and private (3, 6-7). Langland notes that the country house “operated most effectively through its continual visibility, it was thus open to random visitors and even its most intimate spaces could be penetrated with impunity” (7). Paying attention to the conventions of the middle and upper-middle-class home, Langland writes, “the logic of class demands visibility of even private space, so the lady, like the house with which she is identified, is subject to continual scrutiny” (8). A result of this hybrid public/private space is that women’s private lives are often lived visibly. Langland bases much of her argument on the ease with which other characters are able to penetrate Lucy Audley’s private space in *Lady Audley's Secret*. In contrast to her approach, I will consider the way the country house is less insidiously public. Langland’s argument presupposes that the publicness of the country home in a text like *Lady Audley's Secret* should be read as a way the text operates against Lucy’s character. Rather than seeing the public aspect of country house domestic space in this negative light, I am considering the way in which it is a normative aspect to this type of domesticity. Publicness is an essential component to the daily operations of

domestic country house in Sensation novels. Without the intrusion of the public, there would be no catalyst for the events that move this plot driven genre. Using two examples, the publicness of family life and the publicness of death, my analysis focuses on the way in which private lives experienced in these home-spaces were very much available to the public.

In *Aurora Floyd*, the most private of moments in the country house can become public. Taking place on Christmas Eve, the dissolution of Aurora and Bulstrode's engagement becomes a public affair. The pageantry of a country house Christmas is a recurring image in Braddon's work. It appears in *Aurora Floyd*, *Vixen*, *Flower and Weed* and *The Christmas Hirelings*. In *Aurora Floyd*, she creates a nostalgic image of the open house party landed gentry held for the occupants of their estate and its surrounding village: "On Christmas-eve... there were certain rejoicings at Felden held in especial honor of the younger visitors.... blazing-raisins... blindman's bluff... games of forfeits... charades." Adult visitors include members of the extended family and Aurora's two suitors who have been invited to stay for the holiday season. It is also worth noting that one is rarely truly alone in a country house due the immense staff required to keep house and estate operating smoothly. In the midst of this crowd--family, visitors, and servants—Aurora and Bulstrode try to conceal the breaking of their engagement, leading to a series of awkward scenes. Leaving Aurora after the break-up, Bulstrode encounters the following: "the jangling, jarring of the second dinner bell," "Lucy Floyd coming towards him in in her rustling silk dinner dress," the open door of the dining room where Archibald Floyd "had all his nieces and nephews and their children grouped around him," and "his servant

waiting” (106-8). Aurora is not granted any more privacy as we see her father “standing at the door of the dining room... telling his servant to look for his daughter” and when she takes ill the same evening “a telegram summoned two grave London physicians to Felden Woods” (107, 108). A private moment between the two becomes public through the interference of family, guests, medical professionals, and servants.

Life at this country house, Felden Woods, is framed in multiple places in the text as being fair game for public consumption. For instance, the dining habits of the family are announced nightly: “at half past six the great bell at Felden Woods rang a clamorous peal... to tell the countryside that the family were going to dress for dinner... and another peal at seven... to tell the villagers round Beckenham and West Wickham that Maister Floyd and his household were going to dine” (46). The tolling bell also signals to the surrounding villagers that the country house kitchen is open to them. Felden Woods engages in the practice of feeding the country poor from its kitchens. The pealing bells tell “the hungry poor” that it is time to make their way to the “servants offices” to ask for leftovers that “would have gone to fatten the pigs ... but for Archibald Floyd’s strict commands that all should be given to those who come for it” (46). Braddon employs this idea of an open kitchen again in *Vixen*, prior to Captain Winstanley’s introduction of austerity measures to the household economy. The Abbey House kitchen is a place where the “clusters of cottages within a two-mile radius of the house” had been provided for in times of need (186). The kitchen door is described as open to “the beggar and the cadger,” to “come boldly asking for what they wanted in time of trouble—broth, wine, jelly for the sick, allowances of new milk, a daily loaf when father was out of work, broken victuals at all times” (187). The

practical implication of this open-kitchen policy is that the family occupying the house would never be sure how many people and from what class background would be using their land and home at any given time. In addition to the medical professionals, tradesmen, peddlers, odd-jobs men and others who might be calling at the back of the house to do business, an open kitchen ensures a steady stream of other villagers coming and going from the private home-space.

Illness and death also created moments in which the country house became an open house. Illness required the presence of doctors, physicians, and nurses hired from outside the family circle, and death brings another kind of publicness in its wake. In the following passage from Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* in which Lord Mount Severn has just died, the private process of mourning is interrupted by the insertion of business in the role of debt collectors into the country house.

The earl died Friday at daylight. The news spread rapidly. It generally does on the death of a peer... the consequence of which was, that by Saturday morning, early, a shoal of what the late peer would have called harpies, had arrived, to surround East Lynne. There were creditors of all sorts;....Some were civil, some impatient, some loud and angry; some came to put in executions on the effects, and some—  
*to arrest the body!* (author's italics, 132)

Mount Severn's daughter Lady Isabel finds her grief has become a public affair when two debt collectors, allowed into the house by the kitchen-maid and approved by the butler, take possession of her father's body and refuse to vacate the house "until their claim was satisfied"

(133). Isabel attempts to visit her father's body and "had gained the bed before she ventured to lift her eyes from the carpet" only to encounter "two strange-looking men... sent down to arrest the corpse" (143). Isabel's momentary shock is justified at the very least for her having been surprised, but more important is the shock of interruption. The private act of a child grieving for a dead parent is observed by two working class employees of a loan agent, the epitome of publicness. The emotionless workings of business arrest her grief in the same way that the "strangers" and "interlopers" from various creditors have come to arrest the body of her father. Isabel's private grief is not seen as an excuse for her to ignore the demands of business, as one of her father's creditor's says "here we are a shameful crowd of us, swindled out of our own, told there's nobody here but the young lady, and she must not be troubled." (134). In fact, they want more than to be spoken to, several of the creditors have come hoping to take away the furniture, carriages, and horses against outstanding debts. Isabel's grieving process is displaced in this chapter by the public business of economic reality. In the doctrine of separate spheres, money is often the distinguishing factor that delineates public and private spaces. A woman may volunteer extensively for charity, visiting the poor, making and delivering home-goods and food, but her "work" in this capacity is unpaid. Likewise, a man may "work" from home by taking various business-based appointments in the library or study and conduct extensive business from home. The spheres are not indicated by physical space in these examples. They are indicted by the presence or absence of earning money and participation in the spaces of charity or of business. In *East Lynne*, death creates an avenue for the public space of business to penetrate the home-space of

Isabel's grief, which in turn offers her privacy for public scrutiny.

In a companion work to her critical attention to the Enclosure Acts, Langland argues that it is not only that private home spaces were penetrated by public activities like participation in commerce or the pageantry of the landed gentry in domestic country houses, but that legal movements like the Contagious Diseases Acts made women's presence in public spaces an erasure of bodily privacy (*Telling Tales* 80-3). She makes a case that as a consequence of legislation that quite literally opened women's bodies up for public scrutiny, the cultural space of femininity became public. Bodily publicness was not a new point of contention however. In Fanny Burney's *The Wanderer*, the nameless heroine cancels a planned musical performance by which she has hoped to earn a living due to her concerns about the public nature of putting herself on display to earn money. Concerns like this one exist in many texts where women performing any task in a public context for compensation aligns them with the underlying threat of the prostitute that pervaded Victorian period. Perhaps as a result of a new addition to women's bodily publicness in the Contagious Diseases Acts, domestic or home-spaces in mid-to-late Victorian texts are further complicated. However, Langland also asserts that ideas about public and private space within the middle-class home are only applicable to the male master of the house who can claim privacy as his right. Women, children, servants and other dependents were not afforded the guarantee of privacy at home. This second part of her argument seems to contradict her use of the Contagious Diseases Acts as a date marker for the dissolution of women's privacy. The type of privacy as male privilege she suggest here is seen in fiction much earlier than the Contagious Diseases Acts. Examples include the sanctity

of Mr. Bennett's library in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Brontë's Rochester holding court in his study, a space that the women of his household enter by invitation only. Langland rightly suggests that this is an especially class-based situation, since the home spaces and private business of the poor were open to philanthropic and legal intervention at any time (*Telling Tales* 87-90), but her location of the phenomenon as after the mid-1860s does not take into account earlier fictional cases. Like her assertion that the home-spaces of the poor were always available to outsiders, the home-shop spaces of the working classes were equally available for public scrutiny.

### **Shop Girls and Working Women**

The blurred lines between public and private spaces are also prevalent in the popular fiction phenomenon that developed later in the Victorian period, the New Woman novel. Appearing around the 1880s, New Woman fiction features working women and illustrates the benefits of labor to women, but also engages with the social and political hurdles women faced in trying to join the workforce. New Woman fiction speaks to a sense of spiritual and personal dissatisfaction felt by female characters when faced with the limited options of traditional homemaking. Like the Sensation novel, New Woman texts at their heart question and refute the combined ideas of separate spheres and an ideal version of appropriate womanhood. Unlike the Sensation novel, with its focus on disruption of the domestic arrangements of the upper middle-classes, New Woman fiction often features characters who straddle the classes; women raised in middle-class homes who find themselves unexpectedly members of the working poor; shop-keeping families seeking to carve out a level of middle-class respectability; and the artists and activists of late Victorian Bohemia. Novels of this

type often engage the complex political rhetoric of the separate spheres debate by echoing Ruskin, Ellis, and Cobbe. Like these public opinion piece writers, the novelists working in the New Woman genre attempt to establish what the New Woman will look like. Authors such as Eliza Lynn Linton and Margaret Oliphant wrote both politically motivated essays advocating for the traditional role of women and fiction that explored that changing role as the nineteenth-century moved towards its close. There is a contradiction in Linton's work as the reader sees her characters struggle to reconcile more traditional values of appropriate femininity with the necessity of working to earn a living. Even the staunchest advocates for women's economic rights like Frances Powers Cobbe felt the need to temper their rhetoric with reminders that marriage was of course the ideal situation for woman, but when a good marriage was not possible there ought to be viable alternatives available to her ("What Shall We do with Our Old Maids?"). These attempts to reconcile seemingly opposing views appear in New Woman novels where female protagonists are equally conflicted about work and marriage.

Like the pretty horsebreaker, the New Woman is not monolithic. She exists in many variations; however, one consistency in the genre is that the New Woman novel is groundbreaking for its broadening of the way women are represented in popular fiction. Linton's *The Rebel of the Family* and Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* depict two variations on the working woman type. Linton's Perdita Winstanley argues that there must be a moral usefulness to women's work, while the Lorimer sisters in *The Romance of a Shop* approach public business life in a purely practical manner. Both texts begin with a familiar situation for the reader of Victorian novels. A group

of sisters are in economic trouble and must marry or find means to support themselves. While very different in tone and political perspective, these two texts present similar problems with similar outcomes.

Eliza Lynn Linton is typically considered a conservative novelist and essayist<sup>33</sup>. Linton's 1868 essay on "The Girl of the Period" famously laments the state of young, English, womanhood. Linton's criticism of the girl of the period focuses on her failure to uphold her sacred domestic duties. An advocate for "woman's sphere," Linton's political leanings were often at odds with her own unconventional life as a writer. In *The Rebel of the Family*, (1880) Linton attempts to portray a misguided New Woman through the character of Perdita Winstanley, a political reformer in theory who advocates for women's work as long as the work is Important. The story of the Winstanley women, a widow and her three adult daughters, living in genteel poverty and trying to marry their way out is a common enough trope. The eldest and youngest daughters are expected to make admirable marriages, but middle child Perdita, the "rebel" without prospects, is a self-proclaimed "democrat" who feels that women in their situation should be able to earn a respectable living without being socially stigmatized. Perdita is ideologically pulled between the several women who try to mentor her by offering conflicting options: a mercenary marriage for the sake of financial security; working for her financial independence and forsaking marriage

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<sup>33</sup> Linton's work as an essayist is critical of women who advocate for increased political and economic presence outside the home. Her "The Wild Women: Politicians" and "The Wild Women: Social Insurgents" in particular address her opinion that women are unsuited for political involvement and public life. Both essays criticize the "unwomanliness" of New Women in term of physical appearance and morality.

altogether; or a life of appropriate womanhood characterized by filial duty and conservative living. In a conversation about “the extension of the sphere of female usefulness,” (75) Linton elucidates the argument Perdita’s character will struggle with through the course of novel. The following exchange between Perdita and her mother reveals the main question of Perdita’s life:

“I think that women should work,” she said eagerly and shyly with passion and reserve all in one. “So they do,” said Mrs. Winstanley. “What do servants and milliners, governesses and shop-girls and charwomen do but work? A great deal is done by women.” “No, I mean a higher class than these--poor ladies,” rejoined Perdita. “My dear, how can *ladies* work?” asked Mrs. Winstanley with emphasis. “Physique, education and the opinion of the world are all against ladies doing anything menial.” “But there is much they may do that is not menial,” said Perdita...., “Admirable dreams, my child, but impracticable,” returned her mother (my italics, 76).

The question of Perdita’s life is in many ways the basis for the Woman Question. She feels the stigma attached to *ladies* working but also has a desire to do something meaningful with her life. Mrs. Winstanley’s intentional misunderstanding of her daughter in this passage is indicative of the main conflict in that question. Women are doing plenty of work in what we today might consider the service industry. With exception of the position of governess, all the examples given here are physically demanding without intellectual stimulation. All of these positions, including that of the governess, were characterized by hard labor and short pay. The emphasis placed on “how can *ladies* work” highlights the fact that women’s labor is not respectable

labor. Mrs. Winstanley's argument is supported by contemporary medical opinion that considered women's minds and bodies unfit for certain kinds of activity. The medical argument also supports her classist objection to *ladies* working, since *women* are working and they are working at physically hard labor but *ladies* are not included in her statement. Perdita's conviction that women's work be "higher class" is at once admirable and dismissive of the work women were doing in the period. She does not consider the menial work being done by "servants and milliners, governesses and shop-girls and charwomen" to be the type of work that women could do without sacrificing their dignity. Her dismissal of the work women are already doing denotes Perdita's own classism, which the reader sees her struggle to overcome before her eventual marriage to the respectable working-class chemist Leslie Crawford. Her marriage to a man who works to earn his living is a rejection of her mother's conviction that work and respectability are irreconcilable. It is also a validation of the women whose work she dismisses at the start of novel. There is nothing politically or intellectually grand about shop-keeping, but it is valid and important, if menial, labor.

In *The Rebel of the Family*, we see an unromanticized portrait of New Womanhood embodied by the women Perdita works with in her first job at the Post Office. In Linton's description of Perdita's fellow Post Office clerks the reader sees perhaps a glimpse of truth at the heart of The Woman Question. Instead of finding companions to share in her impassioned stance for the importance of women's work, Perdita finds the monotony of office life. Linton writes: "neither heroines or martyrs were they, but just a congregation of commonplace young women whose family finances were scanty, and who preferred employment that took them away from home

and into society, to that which would have kept them within four walls and in the bosom of their family” (175). Although Linton’s use of the phrase “bosom of their family” seems to indicate a subtle preference on the author’s part for home-based work, her revelation that “they were of all kinds; no kind after the pattern of Perdita” (175) indicates that these women do not see their work as a political action. They work “because of the pressure of poverty and for the sake of salary” and feel more personally satisfied by employment in a public space than by taking in sewing, doing piece-work, or other home-space employment. What Linton does not point out in this passage is that the earning potential for a clerk, even as a woman, was much higher than anything these women could have done to earn at home. The narrative positions these female characters as failures since that they are not “wives and mothers” is “the world’s loss” (175) but the depiction of them as contentedly working for their own keep seems to contradict this.

Although Linton is now frequently called an anti-feminist, a main message in this text seems to support the primary platform of the movement she claimed to resist. An 1880 review of *The Rebel of the Family* articulates this central problem in the novel. The anonymous reviewer writes that it is difficult to discern whether “the author’s advocacy of strange views is serious or not, whether she means to sympathize with or to laugh at her heroine’s convictions... and whether or not she thinks Perdita’s example a desirable one to follow” (399). It is difficult for the reader to decide where Linton’s sympathies lie if we focus on earnest Perdita, but in shifting attention to the minor characters at the Post Office the reader sees a positive example of the diverse representation of New Women that Linton cannot quite suppress.

Similar in its initial premise to *The Rebel of the Family*, Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* (1888) uses again the familiar trope of a family of orphaned, middle-class women left to fend for themselves. After the sudden death of their father, Levy's four Lorimer sisters are left without an income that will support them. However, unlike other New Woman texts that use this trope, such as Gissing's tragic *The Odd Women*, the Lorimers have been taught photography by their father and so are left with the skills and equipment to establish themselves in business. This is a departure from the commonly found marriage driven plot in texts featuring destitute middle-class women. Levy's work does eventually endorse marriage for the Lorimers, but not at the expense of her characters' agency within that institution. Also, marriage and work are not pitted against each other as either/ or options in this text. The emphasis in the opening scenes of *The Romance of the Shop* are on the Lorimers desire to establish themselves in as self-sufficient tradeswomen, but as the narrative progresses relationships with men are given equal concern. In this way questions of class enter the text, as their aunt and eldest sister object to their working for a living on the grounds that it will limit their potential to make appropriate marriages. As a representative of the older, socially conservative generation, Aunt Caroline laments that "girls don't seem to marry these days" (72), but she is eventually proven wrong when the three remaining Lorimer sisters<sup>34</sup> marry despite their involvement in trade. Their participation in the photography trade widens the scope of their social circle and brings them economic success and additional prospects for husbands. In this way, Levy's new women offer an alternative version of womanhood that does not require

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<sup>34</sup> The youngest, consumptive Phyllis, dies unmarried.

women to settle for one or the other.

The novel makes short work of the old-fashioned view that the sisters' best option is to marry quickly, while introducing the problem of social class. Various family and friends in London and in India offer to take them in "until [they] have found suitable occupations" (73) or have found husbands, but they firmly reject these offers in favor of the photography shop plan. The shop they envision and eventually establish is a studio in which they will practice photography for hire. Unlike Victorian female photographers Julia Margaret Cameron and Lady Clementina Hawarden, who were considered artists and who displayed their work in galleries and took commissions, the Lorimer sisters are not proposing an artistic enterprise. It is the commercial rather than artistic purpose of the studio that categorizes it as a shop and therefore objectionable. Aunt Caroline's doubt that going into a trade is appropriate reveals a concern that the Lorimers will damage their class standing. Levy writes that she "spoke freely of loss of caste; damage to prospects... and of the complicated evils which must necessarily arise from an undertaking so completely devoid of chaperons" (80). Her objections are clearly grounded in the concerns of the marriage market, but are equally predicated on an understanding that *ladies* do not participate in labor. Loss of caste and time spent without chaperons speak directly to her desire that the Lorimers maintain their respectability, even in the face of reduced economic circumstances. When read in conjunction with the reactions of other characters in the novel, Aunt Caroline's concerns appear outdated. As Judith Walkowitz notes, the 1880s featured "new public services and transportation that facilitated the movement of respectable ladies across urban spaces" (46). And the new city center, made

possible by a rise in economic leisure, was space in which women both shopped and kept shops. In fact, the Lorimer sisters shop joins this kind of thriving urban trade accessible to women. They are established in Baker Street, in a building with a landlady, Mrs. Maryton, and a female dressmaker, already in residence. The ground floor is occupied by a chemists' shop, run by Mr. Maryton, but it is Mrs. Maryton who oversees the rental of the upstairs properties. Class considerations aside, the Lorimers will not be establishing their shop in a masculine dominated environment, but the proximity to other shops reinforces the fact that they are not opening an artistic studio. Theirs is to be a commercial undertaking. Although Aunt Caroline denounces the scheme as "dangerous and unwomanly" (80), the Lorimer's new shop is in company with other shops kept by women who work.

Notably absent from *The Romance of a Shop* is the ongoing political or philosophical discussion of working women that characterizes other New Woman texts. Linton and Gissing devote considerable time to using characters as mouthpieces for the politics of professional women. In *The Odd Women*, Everard Barr and Rhoda Nunn's potential marriage depends on the resolution of their difference regarding the Woman Question. Linton's Perdita agonizes over how she can reconcile her philosophical views with the need to earn a living. Levy on the other hand presents work and women working as a practical necessity. The Lorimer sisters need money and they do not want to be split up and married off; therefore, they need to earn their living. The novel concludes with the remaining sisters married<sup>35</sup>, but Levy makes it

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<sup>35</sup> Levy scholar Melvyn New points out that Deborah Nord Epstein considered this ending an Austen-like failure.

explicit that Gertrude and Lucy, now Mrs. Jermyn, who had displayed the most expertise in the photography business are still working. Although the premises of their shop are “to let,” the “photography, however, has not been crowded out by domestic duties.” We learn that Lucy has begun to specialize, that “no infant with pretensions to fashion omits to present itself before Mrs. Jermyn’s lens... and only the other day [Lucy] carried off a medal for photographs... from an industrial exhibition” (195). In this way, the close of the novel maintains the pattern of behavior Levy establishes for her female characters. Lucy Jermyn’s marriage provides some economic relief, but there is no indication that she should stop working. Unlike earlier texts where marriage is a deliverance from having to work, here work is integrated with “domestic duties” and we see Lucy as an example of a working mother<sup>36</sup>.

There is perhaps an argument to be made that of her three novels, *The Romance of the Shop* draws most closely on Levy’s own experiences as a working woman. In her work on female communities in 1880s London, Deborah Nord Epstein discusses what she calls “a generation of women that imagined and, for a time, lived out the possibility of social and economic independence” (1). Epstein argues that for women like Levy, who were looking for social and economic self-sufficiency, London “represented the antithesis of those private and protected spaces that middle-class women traditionally had occupied” (2). This is the London where the Lormier sisters establish their professional photography business. Being in business allows the Lorimer sisters to occupy a new social and economic space as working women. They

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<sup>36</sup> Arlene Young. *Culture, Gender, and Class in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents and Working Women*

are of the non-working middle-class by birth, but their trade potentially puts them in the same cultural category as shop girls. Arlene Young emphasizes that keeping a shop classifies them as “down-at-heel-lower-middle class,” (139) which suggests that the photography shop allows the Lorimers to barely maintain their middle-class status. However, Elizabeth F. Evans argues that “shop girl” is actually a more useful lens through which to examine Lorimer sisters. They represent the shifting roles for women that allowed them to participate in economic life like the urban shop girl. Evans claims “*The Romance of a Shop* is crucially engaged with discourses about the female shop worker that were prevalent in contemporary social criticism, literature, and popular culture” (2). Her essay also draws on Judith Walkowitz’s work on department stores in *The City of Dreadful Delight* by considering the way the “shop itself is a threshold space that inherently blurs the boundary between public and private” (4).

### **The Public Space of the Home/Shop**

In *The City of Dreadful Delight*, Walkowitz argues that in the 1880s the department store created a newly public and heterosocial space for use by women. She claims that department stores create this space for women in two important ways. First, they allowed women a way into city center space, a previously male dominated space associated with commerce. In this newly created space, women could participate in the hitherto exclusively male role of the flaneur. Walkowitz points out that the “controlled fantasy world of the department store” was space in which women were simultaneously protected and in public. It was space in which they could “observe [as flaneurs] without being observed” (48). Secondly, Walkowitz argues that the department store policy to employ shop girls, replacing “male assistants with females,

further enhanced the seductive and intimate atmosphere of shops” (49). Akin to Sharon Marcus’ work on the erotics of fashion magazines, Walkowitz claims that shopping became a pleasurable pastime charged with new intimacy facilitated by large, enclosed spaces that were both public and private. Additionally, department stores often provided housing for shop girls and other young staff that lived, worked, socialized, and ate under the same roof<sup>37</sup>. The idea of a team of employees living as a family comes readily to mind.<sup>38</sup> While there is no doubt that department stores served this function, the small home-shop prevalent in an earlier commercial model did much in its own right to bring public and private spaces together under one roof. As residents of home-shops, real women and fictional female characters occupy spaces that are simultaneously domestic and economic. Texts featuring home-shops, like *The Rebel of the Family* and *The Romance of a Shop*, show public and private spaces to be much of the same for working families and indicate how tenuous the fiction of separate spheres is in home-shop situations.

According to Davidhoff and Hall, the home-shop was a common practice in reality in the first half of the nineteenth century. It appears in fictional representations of working class and lower-middle-class shop-keeping families. Well-known fictional examples of the home shop include Matty Jenkyn’s front room tea-shop in Gaskell’s

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<sup>37</sup> Although not in a department store, Monica Madden’s position in Gissing’s *The Odd Women* is this kind of housing and working arrangement.

<sup>38</sup> In ““The Halls of Temptation”: Gender, Politics, and the Construction of the Department Store in Late Victorian London,” Erika D. Rapport writes that the mingling of off-duty lower-class employees and middle-class shoppers in spaces like department store dining halls was a main point of contention to the advent of the department store.

*Cranford* and the Plornishes Bleeding-Heart Yard establishment in Dickens' *Little Dorrit*. Dickens' version of the home-shop is perhaps the clearest example of the "fiction" of separate spheres for public and private activities in spaces that serve dual economic and domestic purposes. The Plornishes' "shop-parlor" is described as presenting "on the side towards the shop a little *fiction* in which Mrs. Plornish unspeakably rejoiced" (my italics, 593-4). This "little fiction" is a tromp l'oeil mural depicting the façade of a thatched country cottage painted on the wall that separates the shop and home sections of the building. Extending the "fiction" is a faux wooden exterior painted on the door between the two rooms on which "(when it was shut) appeared the semblance of a brass plate, presenting the inscription Happy Cottage, T. and M. Plornish" (594). This wall in what Dickens calls the "shop-parlor" is painted to resemble a private dwelling and apes the habit the leisured classes had of naming their homes. The image of separate economic and domestic spaces mimics the mid-century middle-class suburbanization movement in which business owners moved their families to new domestic spaces away from the shop (Davidhoff and Hall). This painting masks the entrance into the part of the shop where the family lives and creates an illusion that the home and shop exist in different spaces, when quite the opposite is true. Visitors to this space must pass through the shop-door, equipped with a business-like bell, and again through the "wooden" door of Happy Cottage to access the home, but in practice, the separation is insubstantial<sup>39</sup>. In a scene where friends of the Plornishes are gathered to tea behind the "cottage" door customers keep interrupting,

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<sup>39</sup> Monica F. Cohen in *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel* calls Happy Cottage a "failed home" as the façade of the cottage cannot protect the Plornishes from the economic reality of Bleeding-Heart Yard.

via the tinkle of the shop-door bell, and a private family evening is disrupted by the “entrance, at various times, of two or three customers” (598-9). Dickens makes the publicness of this private home explicit through the joke of the Happy Cottage contained within a bustling urban shop. In New Woman texts, home-shopkeepers serve as a reminder that questions about women’s role in the work place were restricted to the middle and upper-classes, as women from the lower-classes worked and had been working<sup>40</sup>. Even when they do not work directly in home-shops, women are a constant presence in the work place by the nature of a building that housed both economic and domestic spaces.

Home-shops in New Woman fiction are removed from the village-like communities found in *Cranford* or *Little Dorrit*. They exist in the anonymous urban bustle of city space. The home-shop keepers in *The Rebel of the Family* are Leslie Crawford and his mother, who keep a chemists in a busy neighborhood. The Crawfords are a constant presence in the background of Perdita’s journey through the working, radical, and upper class environments vying for her attention. They come to symbolize a “quiet theory of home duties and womanly suppression” (184), but also the economic stability and independence offered by business ownership. Perdita’s initial experience with their home-shop occurs when she becomes faint in the chemists shop and Leslie Crawford carries her into the living space for treatment. Although they are slightly acquainted, Crawford’s action in carrying a customer from the shop

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<sup>40</sup> In 1862, Cobbe estimates in “What Shall We do with Our Old Maids” that three million women in England earned their own living. Davidhoff and Hall claim these numbers are difficult to trace due to high numbers of women working unofficially in family owned businesses.

through to the private residence to treat her with smelling salts, the stock in trade of the shop, implies an indeterminacy of where one ends and the other begins. Linton's description of the "home" and Perdita's experience in it is framed by the inseparable nature of the home and the shop spaces. Coming out of her faint, Perdita struggles with her foreign surroundings: "For a few moments she was dazed and uncertain, not knowing where she was...but by degrees her brain regained its ordinary power and she understood how things were" (153). The curious phrasing "how things were" suggests that Perdita is coming to terms with the Crawford's living situation as well as her own illness-muddled senses. As the passage continues, she rationalizes both what has happened to her and where she is. Perdita thinks, "she had fainted in the shop, and had been carried up here to their private room, where she was being cared for by the chemist and, she supposed, his mother" (153). Linton's comingling in this passage of the public and private aspects of the Crawford's life is indicative of the way the home-shop operates. Perdita assumes herself to be in "private rooms" that are above the shop, where "the chemist" and "his mother" have been caring for her. This is true. Mrs. Crawford has administered "something disagreeable" from a medicine bottle, the stock of the chemist's shop, in the living room of the home space. Importantly, after establishing this connection between the public and private spaces occupied by the Crawfords, Linton makes note that Perdita "was obliged to go" home, but she "did not pass through the shop" (158) as she left. Her exit from the home through the private access point allows her to mask the reality that the chemist's business is a fundamental part of the Crawford home. As denizens of the home-shop, the Crawfords cannot uphold a fiction that they do not work for a living, but like the Plornishes' Happy

Cottage, they ineffectively attempt to create a distinction between home and shop, public and private.

Social class holds an important place in Perdita's relationship with the Crawfords from the outset and is tied to her initial introduction to them as home-shop dwellers. As Davidoff and Hall note in *Family Fortunes*, the middle-class ideal home was largely constructed on two separations: the separation of productive housework from living space and the separation of the home from the business (357-9). The Crawford's home-shop very clearly indicates that they have not achieved this second separation and serves as a constant reminder of class that Perdita, despite her "natural democracy," struggles to overcome. Not only does she conceal the friendship from her snobbish mother and sisters, but her friendship with the Crawfords reveals Perdita's inherent classism to the reader. At their first social meeting Perdita is "anxious to look nice" for "almost the first time in her life (161). This extra care in her appearance is due in part to her subconscious desire to impress Leslie Crawford's mother, but also because she is acutely aware of their class differences. Linton writes that Perdita "should be sorry if she herself a lady by birth, should fall below the standard set by a shopkeeper's mother!" (162). Perdita's inner monologue foreshadows Mrs. Winstanley's outrage on learning that Perdita is on intimate terms with "a man who keeps a shop!" (284). Similarly, Perdita experiences an internal conflict when she finds herself sexually and romantically attracted to Leslie Crawford. She is "pleasantly surprised that this man...had cared enough about her to find out who she was" and at the same time "keenly alive to the terrible fact that her ideal...had resolved itself into the undeniable prose of a pharmaceutical chemist, standing behind a counter

and...serving the public with rhubarb draughts and aloes pills” (154-5). Linton persists in describing Leslie Crawford as “the chemist” long after his friendship with Perdita progresses to the point where she may refer to him by name. Her use of “the chemist” keeps the image of the shop in the foreground whenever Leslie Crawford threatens to become a serious romantic interest for Perdita. He is always, as Mrs. Winstanley reminds her daughter, “a man who stands behind a counter and sells drugs” (284). Like Perdita’s exit from the Crawford home after her first visit, when she does not “pass through the shop,” this class distinction between herself and the Crawfords is indicative of her struggle to reconcile her political and philosophical ideals with her innate prejudices. Although the conclusion of the novel offers Perdita sanctuary in the Crawford home as Leslie’s future wife, throughout the majority of the text the Crawfords are considered through their relationship to the shop, which occupies the same space as Perdita’s eventual home.

As with its practical approach to women working, *The Romance of a Shop* takes a practical approach to the combined domestic and professional space of the home-shop. Establishing their shop and establishing their new home are part of the same process. The new photography business and the new Lorimer home are described as “two floors to be let unfurnished above a chemist’s shop” with “a photographer’s studio built out from the house” (81). Levy writes the process of decorating and improving both spaces as simultaneous: the decorating of the private sitting room and the shop sitting room are described in the same passage. We see this process through the Maryons’ eyes, described as playing “at photographers and house decorators” (86). Expanding the individual home-shops into a kind of collective home-

shop, Mrs. Maryon offers the Lorimer sisters an “arrangement for sharing [her housemaid’s] services” since the Maryons “inhabited the basement and the parlor behind the [chemist’s shop]” (84). Domestic and professional arrangements intertwine and become inseparable as a landlady shares her own domestic servant with the renters who are setting up their shop. In *Culture, Gender, and Class in the Victorian Novel*, Arlene Young claims that establishing the shop may actually serve a domestic purpose first and an economic purpose second. The sisters do not want to be broken up or sent to various family members to be married off. Young argues that “Gertrude, the driving force behind the business scheme” sees the shop “less as a romantic adventure” and more as a way in which to “re-establish a home” that all four of them can occupy together (138). She continues by calling the photography shop “more refuge than business” (138), suggesting that it is the home qualities of this home-shop that make it most valuable to the Lorimers. As both home and shop, the photography business provides domestic protection from well-meaning relatives seeking to divide the sisters and economic protection from pressure to marry for financial security.

The home-shop in New Woman fiction provides working class female characters the same opportunities Walkowitz attributes to the department store for the middle and upper-middle-classes. The home-shop places women in business centers. It allows them a freedom of movement and requires them to navigate city spaces independently. Home-shops also coningle the economic and domestic duties of working women. Gertrude Lorimer says of the photography business and living independently, “this is work, this life. I think we have never worked or lived before” (82). Her exclamation gives voice to the excitement of the 1880s as a “pivotal time in

the public lives of women” as they gravitated towards London to “find intellectual, political, and professional engagement” (Nord 734). The department store, although new, was not a new ground for women to experience economic freedom or the blurring of public and private life that came from living and working in the same space.

## **Conclusion**

These coexistent popular fiction tropes, alternative or inappropriate feminine character representation, give us a drastically different depiction of Victorian femininity from the domesticated angel. By studying femininity and domesticity in texts long absent from work on the Victorian novel we see that both are more varied and unstable than the history of the field suggests. Additionally, the idea of the separate spheres is easily destabilized by consideration of texts where women’s lives and work are carried out in hybrid spaces that cannot be considered entirely public or entirely private. Ruskin’s romantic vision of a peaceful home, impenetrable by the cares of the outside world, is a fantasy image that is not supported by fictional representations we have of home life and working life. Equally difficult to locate is Beeton’s managing angel who was to gently preside over this sequestered domestic kingdom. In the popular genres of Sensation and New Woman fiction, alternative femininity and alternative domesticity are as present as the so-called norms of the angel in the house and the separate spheres. In Sensation fiction, pretty horsebreakers are as equally present as their angel counterparts and are likely to be privileged in to the text as the more desirable female character. New Woman fiction features women

who work as frequently as women who do not and that work is not incompatible with respectable domesticity.

The fact that these tropes are so visible but remain understudied speaks to the domination of the realist novel in Victorian studies for many years in the twentieth-century. Neither the norm nor the alternative is likely to override the other when there are representations of both across the gamut of the Victorian novel. My analysis here would support what I see to be a main problem in historical approaches to studying the Victorian novel. As Lyn Pyckett rightly notes in *The Improper Feminine*, “one of the problems of the existing studies...[is that they] tend to represent women’s writing as ancillary to, or merely prefigurative of, the dominant and achieved forms of male writing” (4). By extending this argument to encompass writing about women in these women’s genres as well as women’s writing, it is possible to argue that the exclusion from study of popular genres in general is complicit in the problem Pyckett cites. What is important, if we are to have a holistic picture of gender and home-space in Victorian fiction, is to include the popular genres alongside the realist novel to create a better understanding of how the feminine and the domestic are complicated by the subversive, the non-normative, and the unconventional.

### **Chapter III: Alternative Constructions of Femininity and Domestic Space in Supernatural Domestic Fiction**

A third genre from the mid-to-late Victorian period in which the angel in the house trope is subverted by female characters that challenge normative femininity is supernatural domestic fiction. Kin to the Sensation genre, supernatural domestic fiction features the disruption of feminine coded home-space by supernatural influences such as ghosts, vampires, prophetic dreams, spiritualism, and mesmerism. The texts covered in this chapter continue to complicate the nature of home-space in their frequent subversion of domestic safety through the presence of the supernatural. Reliant on the juxtaposition of normative femininity with supernatural beings that breach domestic thresholds, this genre offers another fictional representation of womanhood where we can see a relationship between alternative femininity and non-traditional home-space. An important feature of these texts is the contemporary Victorian assumption that there existed an inherent relationship between female bodies and domestic spaces. Using nineteenth-century texts on womanhood and women's roles in the home and contemporary work on nineteenth-century women and spiritualism to contextualize the home/body connection, this chapter examines the role played by female bodies in domestic spaces that are adulterated by supernatural influences. The normative femininity of the angel in the house or the Beeton-esque household manager is corrupted in the supernatural domestic genre when female characters are conduits for malevolent supernatural influences entering home-space. The resulting representations of female characters are another way in which we can read the varied face of womanhood in popular fiction. Home-space and the female

body become uncanny<sup>41</sup> as they are made strange in familiar locations and situations. Uncanniness of home-space in this genre reinforces an alternative reading of femininity due to the relationship between the female body and domestic home-space.

The Victorian spiritualist and occultist movements were places where women took a principal role as mediums and writers of supernatural fiction. From the emergence in 1848 of the table-rapping Fox sisters to celebrated mediums Mrs. Guppy and Helena Blavatsky in the latter part of the century, spiritualist and occult practices were frequently performed by women in domestic space. The popular movement was not without critics, whose objections were often linked to the gender of spiritualist practitioners. Joseph B Rotherham's "Familiar Sprits, Past and Present: A Warning against Spiritualism" (1868) invokes the biblical Witch of Endor as an example of the "female medium" and her dangers to the social fabric of Victorian England. In her extensive study on spiritualism *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism*, Marlene Tromp notes that "when channeling ghosts, young women mediums might radically violate social codes" (6), thus opening both mediumship and spiritualist practice at home to critical attention based on gender. The common practice of holding séances at home brought spiritualism into the feminized private sphere and created a tension between spiritualist practice and normative domestic femininity. At the same time, female spiritualists were criticized for semi-public performances that could be bodily transgressive of social norms. Gail Owen's *The Darkened Room* posits that

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<sup>41</sup> In Sigmund Freud's essay the term "uncanny" is translated from the German *unheimlich* or un-home-like. The *unheimlich* occurs when the familiar and the strange occur in the same location.

“femininity was crucial to the entire enterprise of Victorian mediumship” and calls spiritualist events like séances and public lectures a “spectacle of femininity gone awry” (n.p.). She argues that female spiritualist practices “subverted Victorian class and gender norms.” Additionally, spiritualism coincided with “the developing controversy over sexual inequality and women’s rights,” and became inseparable from “the consideration of woman’s proper sphere which became known as the Woman Question” (1). As spiritualism became a popular trend in England in this latter half of the Victorian period, supernatural domestic fiction also gained in popularity, particularly with women writers.

In “Ghosts of Ghosts,” a hybrid article and review of work by Diana Bashman and Vanessa Dickerson, Nina Auerbach explores the connections contemporary scholars make between Victorian womanhood and ghosts. Auerbach writes that Dickerson especially sees ghost stories as a natural outlet for women writers, who, like ghosts themselves, existed in liminal space. Their lives were not entirely public or private. They were not fully allowed to participate as citizens, yet were vital to the backbone of English identity (278). Although she finds both these studies lacking, her criticism in part is due to the authors Dickerson chooses to focus on, while overlooking the popular women writers whose ghost stories might uphold reading of uniquely feminine experience. Auerbach provides grounding for this chapter’s exploration of the non-normative representations of femininity in supernatural domestic fiction by Rhoda Broughton and others writing in the genre, who remain understudied. Victorian short ghost stories and other portrayals of the supernatural in fiction frequently rely on the disruption of domestic spaces for their spine-tingling

effects. When the supernatural penetrates a domestic space, it often does so in the guise of a female character or by affecting a female body. The assault by spirits, vampires, or other unfamiliar creatures through women's bodies and in women's spaces in supernatural domestic fiction is another way in which the doctrine of the separate spheres is undermined in popular genres. If we read domestic bodies and domestic spaces as codependent, then we can also read the disruption of the sanctified domestic space that played such an important role in Victorian identity myths as an expression of non-normative femininity. Victorian social critic John Ruskin describes an ideal home as a safe harbor from the storm of the outside world. His version of home as an impenetrable fortress is often undermined in supernatural domestic texts where home itself is deceptively unsafe.

The texts in this chapter are works of supernatural domestic fiction by women in which the connection between home and body lays an important groundwork for the presence of the supernatural in domestic space. Short supernatural fiction was staple content as serials and in annuals and journals, but towards the end of the century supernatural fiction in novel form became increasingly popular. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897) are notable supernatural themed novels from this period. *Dracula* of course became the standard Western vampire myth in popular culture and Marsh's *The Beetle* has gained recent critical attention. The distinction between these popular supernatural texts and the works examined in this section is one of scope. Stoker and Marsh work on a large canvas with supernatural creatures from foreign countries that invade England and prey on English men and women. The subtextual concern in supernatural works like these and

supernatural and sensation author Sheridan Le Fanu's short story collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872) is a threat to England from outside, whether from other locations in the Empire or exoticized Eastern Europe. In contrast, the texts examined here by less studied women writers feature the narrower focus of domestic home-spaces and threats born from native soil. As Vanessa D. Dickerson points out in *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide*, male writers did produce ghost stories in this period, but there is a distinct feminine experience that emerges in supernatural fiction by women writers. Broughton particularly offers a model of the ghost story, and other works of supernatural domestic fiction, that "adheres to women's experience" (Auerbach 281). In her work the reader can see evidence of what Jill Galvan calls "a distinct feminine trope in literature and culture" with supernatural themes (n.p.). Broughton's ghost story heroines have highly personal experiences with the supernatural in traditional domestic and feminine spaces. These experiences serve to undermine the angel in the house figure by showing ways that femininity can be threatening or destabilizing to home-space. The femininity of these characters is not incidental. It is essential to the narrative that the characters who cause this kind of disruption be women, not only for their tie to the domestic space, but also for their cultural and historic connection to the supernatural. In these works of supernatural domestic fiction, supposedly safe home-space becomes the site of horror and death. The texts in this chapter fall under three supernatural subcategories. Mesmerism and prophetic dreams are represented by two Rhoda Broughton texts, "The Man with the Nose," and "Behold, it was a Dream!" The ghost stories are Marie Corelli's "The Withering of a Rose" and Braddon's "The Shadow in the Corner." I will also be discussing two psychic vampire texts,

Braddon's short story "Herself" and Florence Marryat's novel *The Blood of the Vampire*, both of which depict female characters who challenge the normative femininity of the angel in the house figure through a bodily experience of the supernatural.

### **Domestic bodies/ domestic spaces**

In order to fully realize the way women's bodies and domestic spaces co-exist in these texts, I am turning to a theory of identity that assumes a transactional relationship between bodies and space. In *Living Across and Through Skins* (2001), Shannon Sullivan claims identity is formed through the ways that bodies exist in a relationship to their environment. Her work focuses on the constitutive nature of gender identity formed through a combination of experiencing an external environment and the bodily practice of habit. Sullivan makes the case that "humans are not 'located' within the epidermis in an isolated, self-contained way; they are instead constituted as much by things 'outside' the skin as 'within' it" (13). She argues that social factors, or spaces, are always already in transaction with the bodies that inhabit them, resulting in transactional humans and transactional spaces. For example, Sullivan writes: "human bodies construct buildings, but... buildings also fashion people as abled or disabled depending on the degree to which building structures correspond" to human bodies (21-2). Sullivan's concept of the bodily self that is constituted in relation to an environment is curiously similar to one that predates her work by more than a century. In *Psychology: a Briefer Course* (1892), William James also theorizes an environmentally influenced self he calls the "material me." The material aspect of the self includes "the sum total of all that [a man] can call his. Not

only his body and psychic powers, but his clothes, his house, his wife and children, his ancestors, his reputation, his works, his lands, his horses, and yachts and bank-accounts” (44). For James, an important aspect of the self is a body existing in relationship to other cultural spaces. Identity is comprised of the transaction between these spaces, the body inhabiting them, and the mind inside that body. He makes a point to connect conceptual spaces like “family” or perceived “reputation” of the individual, which rely on social and cultural norms, to the materiality of the body. The domestic is one of these conceptual spaces, included by James as “his house, his wife, his children” (44).

The connection between the female body and the concept of home was established in mid-Victorian culture by two well-known works, Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* and Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House*, but also appeared frequently in public writing on gender and social organization. To create an idea of appropriate femininity, Patmore and Ruskin rely on a perceived relationship between the home environment and the female body that implies a house is not a home without a female presence. The presence of a woman in both their works becomes a requirement for an ideal conceptual home that carries significance beyond the physical space of a house. Patmore’s work gives us the term “angel in the house” to describe a woman who makes a physical house into a conceptual home. Ruskin expands the boundaries of home-space outside the physical house by relying on the female body to carry conceptual *home* with it. He explains this concept of home as not a physical space, but the cultural space occupied by an appropriately socialized female body called “the true wife” (76). He says, poetically, that “wherever a true wife comes, this home is always

round her... home is wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her,” (76) whether she is located in the physical confines of a house or not. Ruskin’s home, a sanctuary from the corrupting or disturbing influence of modern life, requires a female body at its heart. She is a literal home maker because home-space cannot exist without her. Puritan non-conformist George Swinnock makes a similar claim in 1665 his work “On the Christian Man’s Calling,” which was reissued as part of his collected works by English publishing house James Nichols in 1863. Swinnock uses Biblical references to link women’s bodies physically to the home-space. He considers that “housewife” has a strongly rooted meaning in the connection between woman’s role and her physical place. She is a “wife” in the “house” and not someone who ventures into the outside world. To support this claim, Swinnock reaches back to the Greek sculptor Phidias who “when he was to draw a woman, painted her sitting under a snail’s shell, signifying that she should imitate the snail, which goeth not abroad without her house on her back” (510). Phidias’ image of a snail-woman carrying her home with her prefigures Ruskin’s idea of a true wife who carries the *sense* of home wherever she goes. The concepts of home-space and femininity are inextricably linked in these images showing women as a central requirement for home, like the cultural myth of the angel in the house. The implications of a domestic angel to stabilize the home is frequently seen when male characters in nineteenth-century fiction attempt to manage their own domestic affairs without the influence of a woman as a homemaker.

### **A house that is not a home**

Isabella Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* (1861) is a comprehensive guide to the practical side of homemaking. In it she indicates a more practical way of

considering domestic sanctuary rooted in daily practice and habitual organization. For Beeton, the household should be a well-oiled machine that operates so seamlessly that its machinations will only be visible if they fail. Taking a much more concrete approach to a “true wife” than Ruskin, Beeton claims that two elements of domestic happiness, regularity of schedule and financial management, are the main responsibilities of a seasoned homemaker whose “knowledge of household duties” is required for “the happiness, comfort, and well-being of a family (7). These duties include “early rising... the parent of health,” frugality and economy, “virtues without which no home can prosper,” and the punctual and precise keeping of a household account book (8-13). She depicts the domestic angel in the house as the commander of an army, who will set a tone and imbue her spirit “through the whole establishment” making “her husband and her children happy” by the virtues of good housekeeping practices (1). Beeton acknowledges that her program may “seem incompatible with the enjoyment of life,” (8) but in fiction the absence of this type of domestic management is often depicted as destabilizing to home-space. In turn, that destabilization leads to a lower quality of life for the characters who experience it.

The images of domestic order and tranquility referenced by Beeton and Ruskin presided over by the “angel in the house” are a sharp contrast to fictional images of bachelor rooms, where the absence of a female presence causes discomfort and unhappiness. For example, the picture of bachelor life given by Dickens in *Great Expectations* (1861) is one of domestic inquietude and never-ending debt. Pip and Herbert, who live together in shared rooms, have an increasingly less and less wholesome system of domestic management. Breaking Beeton’s first rule of early

rising for health, Pip notes that they “gradually fell into keeping late hours and late company” and that Herbert consequently “looked about him with a desponding eye at breakfast-time... and he drooped when he came home to dinner” (270). The bachelors also fail at managing their finances appropriately. Pip recounts the financial aspect of their life together by saying: “We spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us. We were always more or less miserable, and most of our acquaintance were in the same condition. There was a gay fiction that we were enjoying ourselves, and a skeleton truth that we never did. To the best of my belief, our case was in the last aspect a rather common one” (270-1).

Dickens gives Pip and Herbert two bases for domestic inquietude— failure to keep regular hours and failure to live within their means. We can see in Pip and Herbert’s experience that the so-called enjoyment of late hours, expensive habits, and rich food is nothing more than “a gay fiction.” In managing their own affairs without a homemaker, the two young men violate the primary principles of Beeton’s requirements for a happy home.

### **A home that is not a house**

The connection between physical space and domesticity also works in reverse in nineteenth-century fiction. Like Ruskin’s “true wife” who carries home with her, we see examples of home-spaces that are created by familial or spousal relationships or through the attentions paid by an angel in the house character to domestic tasks outside of traditional domestic space. In *Little Dorrit*, Amy oversees her father’s cell as if it were the family home, thus creating domestic space within the walls of the Marshallsea prison. Auerbach makes a similar argument in her analysis of Dickens’

Little Nell in *Woman and the Demon*. Auerbach uses the “true wife” passage from Ruskin to solidify a shift in the text where the iconography of the angel in the house can be used to consider characters that are outside a physical home. Through Ruskin’s passage, she reads Dickens’ Little Nell as an angel in the house without a house. Auerbach argues that although “we cannot doubt that Little Nell is an angel... for roughly two-thirds of the novel she is also a houseless, doughty little pilgrim” (82). Amy Dorrit and Little Nell take their ‘angel’ duties into spaces not typically associated with the domestic. This same kind of home-space is present in supernatural domestic fiction, where we often see an emphasis on the family space, the marriage space, or the relational spaces between couples, in lieu of physical houses. Domestic borders are malleable and expansive, adhering to a woman’s body and following her as she moves through public or private space. Although we have seen in the previous chapter that the divide between the so-called spheres-- public and private, domestic and business, and male and female spaces-- is one delimited by permeable boundaries, there exists in supernatural domestic fiction a clear connection between transgressive female characters and disrupted home- space. In supernatural domestic fiction, expansion of the home-space is seen in the way that transactional or relational spaces are equally disrupted within or without of a house. The supernatural, under the guise of intentional spiritualist or occult practice or the existence of ghosts, vampires and prophetic dreams, breaches the sanctity of the home-space by acting on or through the female body. The violation of home-space by forces acting on female characters disrupts the relationship between normative femininity and domestic space by creating the uncanny sense that home-space is not safe space.

## Ghost Stories and Prophetic Dreams

Texts in this section feature the violation of home-space when ghosts or prophetic dreams are inserted into that space by or through a female character's bodily presence. In this grouping of texts a Victorian pseudoscientific notion of female biology is essential to the role female characters play as bodily conduits for supernatural forces. In *The Sympathetic Medium*, her work on the relationship between spiritualist practice and late Victorian ideas about the female body, Jill Galvan argues that mediumship was a naturally feminine occupation to the Victorians. She discusses nineteenth-century medical community assumptions that female minds and bodies were less developed than men's and thus inherently passive. She argues women's assumed passivity made them seem like natural conduits for passing unadulterated information from the spirits to the living. Galvan cites the feminized professional positions of typist and switchboard operator, positions in which women passed information from point A to point B without altering or absorbing that information, as being akin to the role played by a medium. She writes that "portraits of female media of all kinds commonly return to two allegedly feminine traits: sensitivity or sympathy, often imagined as the product of women's delicate nervous systems; and an easy reversion to automatism or a state of unconsciousness" (Galvan 12). In other words, an innate passivity of body and mind made women the "natural" choice for spirits to communicate with the living. Vanessa Dickerson's *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide* extends the innate connection between women and the spiritual into the realm of fiction by arguing that women's already liminal position in Victorian social and economic institutions made Victorian middle-class women a type of ghostly

presence already. She uses this metaphor of the woman as ghost to emphasize the way in which tales with supernatural themes then are particularly suited to represent feminine experiences and to examine supernatural themes in texts by Victorian women authors.

Both Galvan and Dickerson provide useful background here for the connection I am making between the female body, home-space, and supernatural domestic fiction. In supernatural domestic fiction, female characters often act as conduits by creating an opportunity for spirits or prophetic dreams to enter home-spaces. The nature of woman's position in the home makes them the natural choice to experience and operate as aids to supernatural element in the texts. As Austen's Anne Eliot says, women who typify the private existence of the angel in the house "live at home, quiet, confined" prone to introspection and are "prey" to their own feelings. The confined nature of home-space also makes women prey for supernatural forces in domestic fiction. As transactional bodies, female characters are more prone to physically experience supernatural disruptions to home-space, as well as being more likely to play the role of catalyst or conduit for those disruptions. The connection between a female body and the home-space operates in two ways in this grouping of texts. In Braddon's "The Shadow in the Corner" and Broughton's "Behold! It was Dream!" a new female character is inserted into functional home-space and becomes the catalyst for a supernatural event that destroys that home-space. In Marie Corelli's "The Withering of a Rose," and Broughton's "The Man with the Nose" we see the potential for a home-space thwarted before it can be established, as two young brides fail to become homemakers due to interaction with supernatural forces. The female

characters in this group of texts represent a corruption of Ruskin and Beeton's normative femininity, the true wife and the domestic manager, as their presence is what dissolves home-space rather than bolstering it.

"The Shadow in the Corner"<sup>42</sup>, features a highly functional, Beeton style home-space that is broken by a ghost when a new female servant is introduced to the household staff. Braddon's text exemplifies two themes that recur in supernatural domestic fiction-- the role a female character plays in allowing the supernatural to access a home-space and the underlying assumption that female characters are bodily and mentally weaker than male characters. This second assumed premise, tied to the Victorian medical community beliefs cited by Galvan, plays an important role in this genre. Often the other characters in a text dismiss a female character's experience as hysterical or fanciful, giving the supernatural element more time to disrupt the home-space. This is certainly the case in "The Shadow in the Corner" where despite bodily signs of Maria's experiences with the home's ghost, the other characters prefer to believe that she is suffering from "foolish fancies" and weak nerves.

In the story, bachelor Michael Bascom has lived a solitary and scholarly life at isolated Wildheath Grange for many years with his servants Skegg and Mrs. Skegg. Braddon avoids the pitfalls of bachelor life described by Dickens in *Great Expectations* through the character of a competent housekeeper in Mrs. Skegg. Although not a member of the middle-class usually associated with the angel in the house, Mrs. Skegg is presented as a picture of middle-class domestic management

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<sup>42</sup> "The Shadow in the Corner" first appeared in the 1879 Summer Number of Dickens' *All the Year Round*.

along the model provided by Beeton. She is described as “[ruling] over the solitude of a kitchen, that looked like a cathedral, and numerous offices of the sculler, larder, and pantry class...[she] ministered diligently to her master's wants” (3). Braddon even uses Beeton’s military metaphor in the ranked “offices” of sculler, larder, and pantry. As the text opens, this picture of military-ordered domesticity is beginning to break down due to Mrs. Skegg’s encroaching old age, and she requests the hire of a local girl to help with the housework. Her husband offers Bascom the warning that it will be hard to find someone willing to take on the position “because [the] house is known to be haunted,” but Bascom dismisses this warning as superstition, and Maria is hired from the village to assist. Maria’s introduction into this home is briefly beneficial to the military precision of the household, but she quickly becomes the conduit through which the ghosts of the house come to light and domestic order is disrupted.

Wildheath Grange, like many houses in supernatural domestic fiction, is partially characterized by the kind of superstition that appears in Gothic fiction. The house is rumored among “the country people” to be haunted by the ghost of Bascom’s ancestor who supposedly committed suicide on the property. The rumored haunting allows Bascom to be dismissive of Maria’s experiences with a ghost as superstitious fancies brought on by weak nerves. After she has been employed at the house for a few weeks, Bascom notices a change in her physicality: her “lips had lost their rosebud hue; the pale blue eyes had a frightened look, and there were dark rings round them, as in one whose nights had been sleepless” (4). When confronted, Maria reveals that she has been troubled at night by a sensation of terror with a physical manifestation. She has “felt weighed down in [her] sleep as if there were some heavy

burden laid upon [her] chest” (4). This physical manifestation of a spirit-- both Maria’s account of what is happening to her at night and her increasingly deteriorating appearance-- are dismissed by Bascom and Skegg as superstitious nonsense. However, Maria’s body has already carried the spirit presence down from her attic room and into the regular household. From this point on, its disrupting influence is unavoidable. Her presence in the home-space is intended as a drop of oil to lubricate Mrs. Skeggs’ domestic machinery, but instead Maria’s presence becomes a conduit for the dormant ghost. The “weighed down” feeling she reports having on her chest in her sleep accompanies her when she descends from her attic bedroom and infects the main part of the home. When Bascom spends a night in the haunted attic to validate his dismissal of Maria’s fears, his physical experiences mirror hers. Ultimately, Maria dies. Whether she dies by suicide<sup>43</sup>, according to the coroner, or due to contact with a ghost who haunted her regularly, is unclear, but what we do see is that the comfortable home-space of Wildheath Grange dissolves after her death. Braddon writes: “The girl's melancholy fate darkened the rest of Michael Bascom's life. He fled from Wildheath Grange as from an accursed spot, and from the Skeggs as from the murderers of a harmless innocent girl” (11). Following the pattern that occurs in the short stories in this section, it is the introduction of Maria, a young woman, into this

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<sup>43</sup> In a 2005 discussion forum called “Ghosts and l'écriture-femme,” Judy Geater has suggested that like a passage in Dickens’ *The Uncommercial Traveller*, where a young woman is goaded to suicide by two adult men, we might read Maria’s returning to the room the night of her death as her having been “goaded” by Bascombe and Skegg into suicide at the hands of the ghost. This forum is part of an early online Victorian Studies discussion community maintained and moderated by Trollope scholar Ellen Moody and documented in her book *Trollope on the 'Net* (2000).

home and the subsequent action on her body by a supernatural force that achieves this disruption of home-space in this supernatural domestic tale.

Like “The Shadow in the Corner,” Broughton’s “Behold, it was a Dream!” (1873), features the dissolution of a previously happy domestic arrangement through the introduction of a new female body to the home-space. Unlike Braddon’s text, Broughton’s short story shows the reader a home-space constructed by the domestic angel figure of a happily married woman. Similar to several other stories in the *Twilight Tales* collection where it was first published, it is told through the relationship between two female friends and is part epistolary text, with the opening pages taking the form of letters between Jane Watson and Dinah Bellairs, and part first person narration from the point of view of Dinah Bellairs. Framing her supernatural tales in female friendships provides a clear grounding for supernatural experiences in feminized domestic spaces in Broughton’s work. Auerbach writes that Broughton’s ghost stories do “everything feminist critics want women’s ghost stories to do—they show the horror and pain lurking in ordinary female experience” (281). “Behold, it was a Dream!” is rooted in the ordinariness of Victorian feminine norms, revealed to the reader through Dinah and Jane’s friendship, and relies on them to create “horror and pain.” Through this friendship, the supernatural element of prophetic dreams enters the narrative and begins a series of events that lead to the gruesome death of Jane and her husband. Although their death comes by human hands, the events are presaged by Dinah’s prophetic dreams, which insert the disruptive supernatural element into Jane’s happy home-space.

By inviting her younger, unmarried, friend to stay with her, Jane Watson intends to demonstrate the pleasures of the home-space of marriage to Dinah. The text opens with the invitation, as Jane writes in her letter to Dinah, “you *must* come.... We lead an exclusively bucolic, cow-milking, pig-fattening, roast-mutton eating, and to-bed-at-ten-o’clock-going life.... I want you to see how happy two dull elderly people may be, with no special brightness in their lot to make them so” (author’s italics, 33). She espouses her marriage as an example of domestic tranquility and the sanctuary of home-space. The language used here in the invitation evokes happy, sated, well-fed married bliss. The pastoral images—bucolic and pig-fattening—are combined with a happiness brought on solely by the married state in that Jane and her husband Robin have “no special brightness” to make them happy but are happy nonetheless. Like Ruskin’s “true wife” Jane seems able to create “home” with nothing more than her presence. Additionally, her happiness and domesticity are framed by descriptions of her bodily appearance. Positive changes to her physical self are connected to the positive changes to her environment.

Dinah’s first meeting with Jane upholds this idea for the reader. The friends have been parted for two years and Dinah notes the alteration in her friend:

Two years ago Jane was thirty-five, the elderly eldest daughter of a large family, hustled into obscurity, jostled, shelved, by half a dozen younger, fresher sisters; an elderly girl addicted to lachrymose verse about the gone, and the dead, the for-ever-lost. Apparently the gone has come back, the dead resuscitated, the for-ever-lost found again. The peaky, sour virgin is transformed into a gracious matron, with a kind,

comely face, pleasure-making and pleasure-feeling. Oh Happiness!  
what powder or paste, or milk of roses, can make old cheeks young  
again in the cunning way you do? (35).

We see that marriage has transformed Jane from the rather unappetizing person Dinah remembers into a “gracious matron” who exhibits qualities that epitomize a happy homemaker. She credits “Happiness” itself for restoring her “peaky” friend to plump, satisfied, health. The following morning, she is described as “fresh” and in an aside to the reader Dinah says “yes, skeptic, of eighteen, even a woman of thirty-seven may look fresh in a print gown on an August morning, when she has a well of lasting quiet happiness inside her” (37). Jane’s transformation suggests that domesticity is essential to female happiness and comfort and that female presence creates domesticity. Jane’s shift can be attributed to the transactional relationship between a female body and domestic space. Removed from her previous, unsatisfying role as an unmarried eldest daughter and inserted in her new role as married matron, Jane thrives. By showing her to be a woman changed for the better through her participation in marital home-space, Broughton’s text helps to solidify a connection between domestic stability and feminine influence. Domesticity and the physical environment of this home space are also addressed in the text through the introduction of Dinah’s prophetic dreams.

Emma Liggins points out the importance of prophetic dreams and visions in Broughton’s work overall in her “Introduction” to *Twilight Stories*. Two other tales in *Twilight Stories*, “Poor Pretty Bobby” and “Under the Cloak,” involve dreams or dream-like visions and Broughton’s novel *Cometh up as a Flower* features the spiritualist influenced dream experiences of protagonist Nell Lestrangle. Dinah’s

dreams in “Behold” are prophetic in the sense that she has a recurring nightmare while staying at the Watsons’ home that eventually comes true. Liggins calls this dream a “horribly prophetic vision of the future” (iv) as Dinah dreams that Jane and her husband were “*dead—murdered—drowned* in [their] own blood” (author’s italics, 40). Dinah urges her friends to “go from home—anywhere—anywhere—until the danger has passed” (46) but they continue to insist that her vision is only “a dream—a fancy—a nightmare” (46) and remain at home. Broughton’s use of “go from home” emphasizes that Dinah is asking the Watsons to leave their safe home-space on the grounds of nothing more than a bad dream, while their counterarguments that it is only “a fancy” undermine the seriousness of Dinah’s experience.

In the passages describing the Watsons’ reaction to Dinah’s dream, Broughton hints at an additional reason why they might not believe her—Dinah’s femininity. At first Dinah hesitates even to share the dream, fearing Jane will call her “vaporish” and “sottishly superstitious” (38). Sottish here carries an early connotation of the word and means foolish or doltish while vaporish appears to mean related to nervousness or nervous depression (Oxford English Dictionary). Both words are indicators of nineteenth-century attitudes towards the weaknesses of women. They point to the idea that women, as the physically weaker sex that lacked the mental capacity of men, are more prone to disorders of the nervous system (Russett). However, it is this very weakness that Galvan argues made women the perfect conduit for supernatural influences. Dinah’s words- *sottish* and *vaporish*- anticipate that feminine weakness may be blamed for her intense reaction to the dream and her insistence that it is prophetic. Although Robin Watson eventually dismisses the farm hand Dinah thinks

looks like the murderer from her dream, her fears that she is being humored are justified when he claims that any resemblance between a real farm worker and the dream murderer is the product of “the highly excitable state of [her] imagination” (46). This accusation of nervous excitability emphasizes a perceived feminine weakness that could explain Dinah’s reaction to the dream. Nineteenth-century physicians believed that women with their less developed nerves could suffer a disordering effect on the mind caused by female reproductive organs that made them susceptible to hysteria<sup>44</sup>. Her prophetic dream, conducted as it is through the unreliable body of a woman, is dismissed by the Watsons as “imagination” but the prophetic nature of the dream proves to be true.

Dinah next hears from Watson that the man, Watty Doolan, has been dismissed for a poor work ethic, drinking and disorderly conduct via a letter that arrives the same day that the following notice appears in Dinah’s local newspaper:

**SHOCKING TRAGEDY AT CAULFIELD. DOUBLE MURDER.**

From an early hour in the morning this village has been the scene of deep and painful excitement in consequence of the atrocious murder of Mr. and Mrs. Watson.... The housemaid, on going to call them at the accustomed hour on Wednesday morning, received no answer.... The rest of the servants, attracted by her cries, rushed to the spot, and found

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<sup>44</sup> Hysteria as a diagnosis of course existed well before the Victorian period, but in nineteenth-century medical practice it gained credence as both a scientific and mental disorder tied to female physiology. Andrew Mangham explores diagnoses of hysteria, female murderers, and sensation fiction in *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Fiction*.

the unfortunate lady and gentleman lying on the bed with their throats cut from ear to ear.... The room presented a hideous spectacle, being literally swimming with blood.... An Irish labourer, by the name of Watty Doolan, discharged by the lamented gentleman a few days ago on account of misconduct, has already been arrested.... On being apprehended and searched, several small articles of jewelry identified as having belonged to Mrs. Watson, were discovered in his possession (49).

The newspaper account matches Dinah's dream exactly, from the copious amount of blood to the detail concerning the jewelry theft. Liggins' "Introduction" questions whether we are to believe that "Dinah has precipitated her friends' death by pointing out the Irish labourer she saw in her dreams" (v). I am arguing that either way Dinah's presence in the home is the catalyst that leads to the Watsons' deaths. The act of "seeing," a preternatural gift associated with female literary figures going back to the mythological prophet Cassandra, is closely tied with the practice of mediumship. In both cases, a female figure transmits information that is not her own. Here, "seeing" through a prophetic dream brings about the destruction of the home-space of the Watson marriage. The interjection of Dinah into the scenes of pastoral bliss Broughton describes at the opening of the text directly causes the murders by giving Doolan reason to lash out at his former employer. The conditions of femaleness, a less developed intellect and a passive body, allow her to be the conduit through which the prophetic dream is introduced into the house, setting the events of the dream in motion.

Both stories discussed in this section rely on normative tropes of Victorian femininity, the angel in the house and the domestic manager, for their premises to work. In order for Maria to be a bodily conduit for the Wildheath Grange ghost, Mrs. Skegg needs to see her domestic arrangements slipping and to desire a younger female figure to assist her in maintaining her Beeton-like standards. Likewise, in “Behold! It was a Dream!” Jane Watson’s domestic transformation is necessary in order to establish the transactional relationship between marriage space and her female body and to give reason for Dinah to visit and see her new situation first hand. In each case the presence of a new female body acting as a conduit disrupts a functioning home-space.

### **Home-space unrealized**

Supernatural domestic fiction has also been touted as a location for expression of uniquely feminine, often transgressive, experience due to what Clare Stewart calls the genre’s ability to explore “dangerous territory which would have been closed off completely [from women] in other contexts” (112). A kind of transgressive femininity that often appears in supernatural domestic fiction occurs when a female character fails to live up to the conventional expectations placed on her as a potential wife and future homemaker. Female characters may fail to nurture or fail to thrive in the marriage-space. The lack of ability to become a “true wife” marks these characters as representations of alternative femininity when they cannot become angels in the house. Marriage is a conceptual home-space akin to James’ use of conceptual “family” that can be read as a component in feminine identity construction. Female characters that do not create or are not capable of creating these home-spaces are

disruptive to assumptions about normative femininity. As Stewart notes, the supernatural text can be a location for expressions of fear or desire tied to female sexuality. Marie Corelli's "The Withering of a Rose" and Rhoda Broughton's "The Man with the Nose" are examples of unrealized potential in "true wife" figures whose failure is in part due to anxieties about the bodily actions expected of them in a marriage. These two stories feature young women who fail to fulfill the promise of wife-hood they make by marrying, while also indicating that sexual relationships may be the cause of their difficulties in fulfilling the expectations of marriage-space. Both texts depict instances where supernatural forces acting on female characters' bodies preempt formation of home-space by disrupting the transactional marriage-space before it can be fully realized.

In Corelli's short story the titular Rose Allingham is unable to establish a home-space and we see her "wither" in her marriage rather than thrive. Emotionally younger than her twenty years, Rose marries an older man and dies under the strain of expectations placed on her to create marriage-space between herself and her husband. Her shortcomings as a wife coincide with the legend of a Haunted Mere at the house she will share with her husband and imagery throughout the text prefigures Rose as a ghost. This pairing of unpreparedness and ghostliness create an impression that Rose is not physically or mentally substantial enough to be a "true wife." Rose's unpreparedness for the actuality of marriage speaks to the character as an alternative type of feminine representation. She is an ideal bride—an image or impression of an ideal-- but not an ideal wife as she does not understand what the marriage space will demand of her. Rose has only been prepared for marriage by the Romantic notions

found in fiction and poetry. Like many female characters in popular fiction,<sup>45</sup> Rose “had read many love stories, many love poems” that did not prepare her for marriage (97). She is very much a product of what Nancy Armstrong calls “the sexual contract” in reference to the way the eighteenth-century conduct manual ceded to the nineteenth-century novel and created a “distinctly feminine discourse” with its own rules for social relations prior to marriage, but gives very little information about the expectations placed on women as wives (Armstrong 63). Rose’s ideas about marriage cannot extended beyond courtship, which is the main plot of much popular literature she has read. She says, “I don’t know quite where I got all my silly ideas from” but it is clear in Corelli’s text that she got them by reading (103). In her childish estimation “a married woman meant somebody fat and important looking,” which is an image she cannot reconcile with either her married self or her ideas about romantic love (103). Rose grew up thinking love was “like the poets write about” and not expecting the practical weight of marriage that follows the initial “great excitements” of courtship.

Additionally, Corelli hints that Rose may not have been prepared for the sexual experience of marriage. She writes that Rose “had not realized the weight and seriousness of marriage until it was *consummated*” (my italics, 97). Corelli’s use of *consummated* here, a word referring to the legal ramifications of sexual intercourse between married persons, implies that Rose came into her marriage expecting the language of poetry and was unprepared for the “weight and seriousness” of a physical relationship. Not knowing about the “prosaicness of married life” contributes to her

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<sup>45</sup> Rose’s anticipating life through fiction is reminiscent of Austen’s Marianne Dashwood, Flaubert’s Emma Bovary and Braddon’s Isabel Gilbert.

own sense that she is not fulfilling the bodily expectations placed on her by wife-hood. Her sense of her own inadequacy is echoed by artist Mr. Fane, who befriends the Allinghams on their Swiss honeymoon. Fane has to force himself to remember that Rose is “not a woodland sylph as she seemed, but a ‘married lady’ of position” (102). Even Corelli’s use of quotation marks around the phrase “married lady” serves to reinforce the way in which Rose is not a *real* married lady. Later, when she is established as the overseer of Allingham’s ancestral home and the Haunted Mere at Dunscombe Hall, the married women of her acquaintance “look upon [her] as quite an absurdity.” Rose fails again, this time as a domestic manager, by not feeling herself “equal to the management of such a large house” (116-7). In fact, she claims that Dunscombe Hall “does not agree with [her]” and “a little woman ought to live in a little house, to be comfortable” (110). Although Corelli’s use of foreshadowing to introduce the idea that a ghostly presence in the Haunted Mere will be the reason for Rose’s “withering,” the text supports a reading in which Rose is already one of Dickerson’s ghostly Victorian women due to her failure to thrive as a home-maker or fit into her social role. Corelli’s Rose also supports a reading of physical weakness in women that is often linked to supernatural experiences in fiction through a consumptive body.

When Rose is first introduced to the reader Corelli uses language implying that she is insubstantial. Later this same insubstantial language works to create a link between Rose and the description of the Mere ghost. Her bodily weakness eventually manifests when she falls ill at Dunscombe Hall, but Corelli creates an impression that she is ghostly earlier in the text. Fane remarks repeatedly on Rose’s ghostly qualities

beginning when they first meet in Switzerland. He describes her in ghostly terms, saying she is dressed in youthful white, cold and pale and “a small lost angel” (105-6). The phrase “a small lost angel” has an elegiac quality that foreshadows the way Rose will be lost in her husband’s home, as well as her premature death. Later at Dunscombe Hall, Fane observes that Rose in her illness has “grown so thin and pale and fragile that it seems as if the merest puff of wind would blow her out of existence all together” (111). A few days later he remarks, “I have seen the Mere, but not the ghost. Do you know, Mrs. Allingham, I begin to think that you must be the ghost—you look like one this morning” (115). The Mere ghost retreats into the background of the story as it becomes clear that Rose is the one “haunting” Dunscombe Hall. Her mental inability to bear the burden of being a “married lady” manifests through her body as she has “fainting fits, weakness, nerves” that deplete her physical strength and make her “not equal to the effort” of presiding over her husband’s house (113). Her faintness is twofold. She faints but also, she *is* faint. She is an insubstantial figure who cannot impress herself strongly enough in her husband’s house to create a home. The initial distance between Rose and Allingham in the marriage-space that caused her to rethink her fictional views on love while traveling for their honeymoon expands at Dunscombe Hall.

Rose’s inability to act like either a “married lady” or a “true wife” gives way to illness and her eventual death marks the first and only appearance of the Mere ghost. The image itself, “a woman’s figure veiled in misty white,” mirrors Fane’s first sight of Rose in her “simply white morning dress” (120, 94). Rose’s connection to the home-space of Dunscombe Hall is less substantial than that of the Mere ghost. The

ghost has been in residence seemingly as long as there has been a Mere to haunt, while Rose has been presiding over the Hall as its matron for less than a year. As a failed “married lady,” Rose is the true specter of the story. Hours before her death Mr. Allingham remarks that Rose’s illness has been “inconvenient” to him and her treatment requires an interruption of his routine (119). Allingham’s statement that her illness has inconvenienced him implies perhaps the removal of her body from Dunscombe Hall will restore equilibrium to his home. This “inconvenience” is traceable to the beginning of their marriage where Rose’s youthful desire for physical affection, buoyed by her reading, unsettled her husband. His unsettled feeling follows the couple to their house, where Rose’s illness prevents her from establishing herself as the manager of the home-space. In this case, femininity and ghostliness coexist in Rose’s person as Corelli uses descriptive language that collapse the two into one body. Rose’s death is marked by the appearance of the real ghost, but it also appears that her removal will mark the end of a period of domestic instability at Dunscombe Hall.

In Broughton’s “The Man with the Nose,” another selection from *Twilight Stories*, the home-space of marriage is disrupted by a mesmeric experience paired with a female character’s anxiety about the physical realities of marriage. The unnamed narrator and his wife Elizabeth find their honeymoon, and subsequently their marriage, forever altered by the lingering after-effects of Elizabeth’s prior participation in a mesmeric demonstration. The specter of “the man with the nose” penetrates their marital relationship through Elizabeth’s encounter with a mesmerizer, who chose her because “he said [she] should be such a good medium” (15-6). His reasoning echoes Galvan’s argument that cultural connotations of the feminine made

women appear to be better suited to psychic or spiritualist transactions. Elizabeth recounts her experience to her husband, saying, “I believe I did all sorts of extraordinary things that he told me—sang and danced, and made a fool of myself—but when I came home I was very ill, very—I lay in bed for five whole weeks, and—and was off my head, and said odd and wicked things that you would not have expected me to say—that dreadful bed! shall I ever forget it?” (16). Elizabeth’s mesmerizing follows the pattern of a demonstration of the mesmeric arts that was commonly attended as entertainment. A main feature of these spectacles, still seen in contemporary hypnotist performances, was the participation of an audience member.

Alex Owen gives an account of this kind of mesmeric display in *The Darkened Room*. She describes a “mesmeric séance” given by mesmerist Miss Chandos at James Burns’s Spiritualist Institution in the mid-1870s. During the “mesmeric séance<sup>46</sup>,” Miss Chandos asked for audience volunteers “and proceeded to mesmerize each in turn” (124). One young man “prowled up and down like an animal in the zoo, agreed that his name was Mary Jones, and sang a sweet ditty.” One woman was asked to sing while under the effects of the mesmerist and “responded with a song entitled ‘The Slave Girl’s Love’” (124). These “entranced helpers” from the audience perform acts much like those Elizabeth recalls, but, unlike Elizabeth’s story, Owen’s account does

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<sup>46</sup> In chapter 5 of *The Darkened Room*, Owen notes that “spiritualist healing was a polyglot affair” and events like Miss Chandos’s “mesmeric séances” combined spiritualist practice, mesmerism and other techniques from “the ‘pseudo-sciences’” so that it is difficult to discuss mesmerism and spiritualism as separate practices. She goes on to say that many mediums of the latter part of the century used mesmerism in their practice to the extent that some, like renowned “healing medium” Mrs. Olive professed to spiritualist-like communicating with Mesmer himself during séances, adding his ‘healing power’ to her own.

not follow the mesmerized subjects out of the performance hall to capture any ill side effects.

Elizabeth carries the aftermath of her mesmeric experience within her body for years after the experience and the after effects lead her to a tragic end. However, the bodily after-effects displayed in this text could also be read as anxiety about the sexual relationship Elizabeth is about to embark on with her husband. Evidencing sexual knowledge prior to her marriage, Elizabeth rejects Killarney as a honeymoon location because the fleas there will make her body unattractive to her husband, but it is the after effects of mesmerism that come to interrupt the way her husband relates to her body. It seems not accidental that her mesmeric illness reflects a fear of “that bed” which she will never forget. Attempting to speak of the experience causes Elizabeth’s “supple body to shiver” and “[tremble] exceedingly” (160). Broughton makes a point that this is “mid-July” and Elizabeth is not reacting to any external stimuli. The cause of her shivering or trembling lies within her own body. Each appearance of the Man with the Nose is marked by Elizabeth’s physical reactions. Her teeth chatter; she is cold in warm places; she suffers from tremors, shudders, and quivers. The marriage bed becomes a location of horror, as Elizabeth is haunted nightly by visions of the Man with the Nose. Alison Jaquet has argued that in domestic supernatural fiction “supernaturalism often becomes an alternative discourse with which to express feminine desires and fears” (247). Here Elizabeth’s fear of the man with nose can be read as fear of sex that manifests in Broughton’s use of language that could indicate physical expression of fear *or* of pleasure. Like Corelli’s Rose, Elizabeth may be unprepared for the physical reality of married life, and her unpreparedness is

expressed in the manifestations of her fear of the Man with the Nose. Her prior knowledge does not exempt her from anxiety caused by the physical expectations placed on her body. Even the “nose” itself, described as “pronounced and peculiar” can be read as a phallus that disturbs Elizabeth's sleep on her honeymoon.

The primary home-space that is disrupted by mesmerism in this supernatural domestic tale is the marriage-space. The tale ends with Elizabeth having been carried off by the Man with the Nose during her husband's absence, never to be seen again. Broughton's ending echoes Rotherham's “Warning.” He claims that “hundreds of families have been broken up” by spiritualism as once loyal spouses abandon their marriages because the spirits have told them there is a man or woman elsewhere with whom they share a greater affinity. The “affinity-hunters,” he cautions, may also use spiritualism and mesmerism as a method to seduce or “lead off” impressionable young women (14-5). In Broughton's text, Elizabeth's brush with spiritualism in the form of a “mesmeric séance” results in her being led off by a man she associates with that experience. The promised home of her marriage dissolves and the husband ends the tale as a bachelor once more, or perhaps a widower. Elizabeth is ill-suited to be a wife because she carries the supernatural, in this case the effects of mesmerism, within her conduit-body and into the home-space of marriage. Despite their not having reached the point of home-making, the couple's home-space is nevertheless disrupted by the supernatural. Elizabeth transgresses normative femininity through her inability to create a home-space, but her transgressive quality stems from the bodily experience of mesmerism that disrupts her marriage before it is established in a home. Unlike Corelli's Rose, who is herself not substantial enough to create a home, Elizabeth is

acted upon by outside forces that disrupt her honeymoon and remove her from domestic space.

### **Psychic Vampires**

The dangers of the conduit body to normative femininity and domestic space are also prevalent in nineteenth-century vampire stories. Today, we have a standardized idea of vampirism that includes characteristics like drinking blood, avoiding sunlight, and an aversion to mirrors. These characteristics were solidified by Stoker's *Dracula*, and the legacy of that novel has had a profound influence on contemporary vampire texts. However, vampire texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries vary widely in the type of vampirism represented. Vampires could be blood drinkers, but there are also stories of medical vampires who use transfusion, like Braddon's "Good Lady Ducayne" and E. Nesbit's "The Haunted House," and psychic vampires whose abilities are more closely related to mesmerism by practicing the transfer of energy or life-force rather blood<sup>47</sup>. Psychic vampirism, or vampirism in which the vampire drains life-force rather than blood, appears as frequently as the blood drinking type of vampire, but may not be readily recognizable to the contemporary reader as vampirism. Even blood-drinking vampires are often depicted with a level of psychic vampirism in their abilities. Stoker's *Dracula* and Le Fanu's *Carmilla* can emotionally influence their victims. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "Luella Miller" (1902) is possibly the most widely read example of the psychic vampire

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<sup>47</sup> The idea of transferring life-force is echoed in Stoker's Renfield character. Renfield's belief that by consuming life he can prolong his own life leads him to consume insects and small animals alive. Although he physically ingests these creatures, the logic behind his actions is reminiscent of the psychic vampire.

subgenre. In “Luella Miller” the titular Luella drains the energy from everyone who becomes close to her- friends, family, husbands- until they die. Luella is complicated by the way Freeman presents her to the reader. Her victims all love her and volunteer to care for the vampire, making Luella a passive recipient of their attentions rather than a predator. Passivity or ignorance of their own powers is not uncommon in the psychic vampire subgenre. These vampires are not monsters. They are supernatural forces or characters who seem fully human. Psychic vampirism like that in “Luella Miller” is prefigured by the two texts discussed in this section.

Marryat’s novel *The Blood of the Vampire* and Braddon’s short story “Herself” rely heavily on the nineteenth-century assumptions about femininity and the female body for the function of their vampiric elements. Braddon’s “Herself” is a tale of psychic vampirism in which the vampire figure preys on protagonist Lota Hammond through a pre-existing weakness in her body. Similar to Dinah’s experiences in “Behold! It Was a Dream!,” in “Herself” the other characters dismiss Lota’s vampiric experience as a hysterical byproduct of her weaker, consumptive, female biology. *The Blood of the Vampire* features psychic vampire Harriet Brandt, whose power might more closely resemble mesmerism to the contemporary reader than the more familiar blood-based vampirism found in *Dracula*. Like the underlying theme of consumption and feminine weakness in “Herself,” disease enters *The Blood of the Vampire* under the guise of Harriet’s vampiric ability and the danger she represents to normative femininity through her racial identity. Marryat’s text also explores the theme of anxiety about female sexuality and marriage that is present in “The Withering of a Rose” and “The Man with the Nose,” but through Harriet’s lineage is able to do so in a

way that puts these anxieties into conversation with the late Victorian concerns around racial miscegenation often cited as an underlying theme in vampire stories<sup>48</sup>.

Additionally, the longer novel form allows for an important subplot explored in *The Blood of the Vampire* that links Harriet's real psychic vampirism with a false medium, Madam Gobelli. Although she is a fake, Madam Gobelli's participation in spiritualist practice as a medium is nevertheless the cause of domestic disruption. Her false mediumship is an extension of the character's greed and participation in commerce that mark her as a transgressive feminine character. These two psychic vampire texts offer additional ways to consider how the presence of the supernatural, even the falsified supernatural, disrupts home-spaces and allows for contradictory representation of femininity in supernatural domestic fiction.

Drawing on the recognizable tropes of tourism and Gothic fiction, Braddon positions Lota in "Herself" as a character who transgresses normative social conventions for a young woman of her background. "Herself" begins with Lota's self-characterization as different from respectable young women. Having inherited a villa, the Orange Grove, in out of the way and socially unfashionable Taggia, Italy, orphaned Lota proposes to live in the house despite protest from her legal advisor Mr. Dean and her closest friend and the text's narrator, Helen. Further distancing herself from the social norms expected of a young woman in her situation, Lota insists she will renovate and live at the Orange Grove. Mr. Dean calls her "willful" and claims that "a sensible young lady" would rather take a place in Nice to be close to other

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<sup>48</sup> Greta Depledge explores the relationship between concerns about miscegenation and vampire stories in her "Introduction" to the Victorian Secrets edition of *The Blood of Vampire*.

British tourists. Lota describes Nice as a “huge towny place” reducing the Riviera to a similar characterization as the boardwalk at Brighton. She counters Mr. Dean’s statement by distinguishing herself from “the sensible young lady” who “likes a first floor in Regency Square, Brighton, with little room under the tile for her maid. I am not sensible” (152). The allusion here to Brighton is in keeping with Braddon’s general tone toward the location as an overpopulated tourist destination. In *Asphodel* (1881), she disparages Brighton for its towniness<sup>49</sup> and using “towny” here further removes Lota from the normative practice of young ladies who travelled to well-known, therefore safe, destinations.

By separating her desires from those of the “sensible young lady,” Braddon lays the groundwork for Lota’s vampire encounter through her inappropriate choice of making a home at the Orange Grove. In this same passage, Braddon also acknowledges the Gothic genre with a nod to the reader that foreshadows Lota’s supernatural encounter. Lota concludes her affirmation that she will live at the Orange Grove by asking “What kind of ghost is it that haunts the Orange Grove? I know there is a ghost” (152). As Mr. Dean assure her there is no ghost—“there is nothing to tell.

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<sup>49</sup> Towniness, defined in the OED as “the fact of having characteristics associated with town or town dwellers” appears to carry the same disparaging connotation as the more contemporary ‘townie.’ Braddon uses variations on towny and towniness to indicate a lack of sophistication and aesthetic education in the characters who appreciate towny locations. In doing so, she seems to be using the term not merely mean an urban resident as opposed to a country resident, but to indicate a lack of sophistication and sense of inferiority in the “towny” character. In *Mount Royal* (1882) she uses “towny” to describe Mr. Hamleigh who is not only a city-dweller, but enjoys a “life of excitement and variety” and the “passing frivolity” town life has on offer. His “towny” enjoyments are juxtaposed with the more contemplative life lived in the country by Christabel Tragonell, exemplified in his desire for the daily papers while Christabel’s home offers a library featuring Shakespeare and Chaucer.

Neither the people in the neighborhood nor the servants of the house went to far as to say the Orange Grove was haunted”—here Braddon revisits the haunted house cliché she used in “The Shadow in the Corner,” but like Austen’s satirical *Northanger Abbey*, “Herself” is a text that is aware of this cliché. Braddon alludes to the fact that a reader of Gothic or supernatural tales would be expecting a ghost from the situation of the story. A young woman inheriting a remote house in an isolated region and insisting on living there alone against the better judgment of her friends and advisors certainly reads as the introduction to a Gothic ghost story. It speaks to the assumed relationship between a young woman and supernatural peril seen so regularly in Gothic texts that Braddon can make this allusion. Nevertheless, Mr. Dean is right. There is no ghost at the Orange Grove, but there is a supernatural force which eventually brings an end to Lota’s life.

The secret of the Orange Grove is that it is home to a psychic vampire-like force that drains the life from those who fall under its influence. Unlike traditional corporeal vampires, this psychic version relies on the fascination of the victim to draw them in. Housed in an ancient Venetian mirror, the mechanism of the vampire-like force is to offer the victim a vision of themselves as they will be in the moment of their death. The more the victim becomes fascinated by the vision, the more the creature/thing/vision draws their life-force<sup>50</sup>. Lota begins the story as a “young, fresh beauty” in “all the bloom of girlhood” (156), but the three months she spends living at

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<sup>50</sup> “Herself” was first published in the *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph Christmas No* in 1894, three years after Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which has a similar relationship between body and image. Braddon knew Wilde, but there is no evidence to date that “Herself” was consciously inspired by Wilde’s novel.

Orange Grove under the influence of the mirror transform her into “a haggard, anxious looking woman” with a “wan, pinched face” that shows “the markings of a nervous depression” (156). The physical transformations wrought on Lota are a reversal of the transformation Mrs. Watson experienced in “Behold! It Was a Dream!” In Broughton’s story, normative domesticity transforms a “peaky, sour virgin... into a gracious matron, with a kind, comely face” (35). A woman who had been living the wrong sort of life is inserted into the home-space of marriage and it serves to correct the problems of her emotional and physical health indicated by the appearance markers “peaky” and “sour.” In “Herself” we see the opposite. Lota chooses to inhabit an inappropriate home-space and suffers the consequences. The villa Orange Grove is an attractive house, described as “a fairy palace with lighted windows shining against the back-ground of wooded hills” (157), but it is not a congenial home for Lota since it contains a supernatural presence that preys on her weakened, conduit body.

The perceived weaknesses of female physiology manifests in Lota’s character, allowing access to her for the psychic vampire-like force of the mirror. Like Maria in “The Shadow in the Corner,” Lota is accused of “nerves,” the term often used to gloss a number of diseases associated in the nineteenth-century with female biology, but she also shows symptoms of consumption similar to Corelli’s Rose. Lota claims that “the seeds of disease” have been dormant in her chest since before she came to Italy. Her self- diagnosis is supported by her physical symptoms, weakness, weight loss, and “paroxysm[s] of coughing” (167); however, her physical deterioration appears to have begun weeks before the symptoms of consumption appear, leading her doctor treat her illness as a mental one of “nerves” until she begins to cough. The doctor’s initial

diagnosis of Lota's illness as "nerves and fancies" (169) is similar to the accusations of "fancy" we see in "Behold! It was a Dream!" While Helen and Lota's fiancé Captain Holbrook are distressed by Lota's physical deterioration, they also see it as a mental or emotional illness. Helen goes so far as to address her concerns about the "uncanny" influence of the house to Lota's physician, who "laugh[s] all ideas of occult influence to scorn" (162). But Helen persists in her opinion that there is an unnatural influence in the house that is affecting Lota's health. The twinned feminine weaknesses of consumption and "nerves" make Lota the perfect receptacle for the psychic vampire. She perceives herself as carrying "the seeds of disease," consumption, that is almost always fatal, and was predisposed by her awareness of the haunted house cliché to believe in the existence of a supernatural presence at the villa. Lota's transgressive behavior of choosing to live in the inappropriate home-space of the villa, creates an opportunity for the psychic vampiric force in the Venetian mirror to gain influence over her. The "seeds of disease" she perceives as having been with her all along are encouraged to flourish by the life-force draining experience she has when gazing at her own death-mask in the mirror. Lota's death is brought on by the combined weakness of a feminine body and mind, and the future home-space of her marriage to Holbrooke is cut short.

Florence Marryat's 1897 *The Blood of the Vampire* features similar themes of disease, transmission, and disrupted home-spaces due to psychic vampire activity. Although criticism on the novel has tended to focus on late Victorian fears of miscegenation and disease, the text also provides female characters whose relationship to the supernatural disrupts normative home-spaces. The most prominent of these

characters are psychic vampire Harriet Brandt who unknowingly has vampiric power to drain the life-force of others, and false medium Madam Gobelli<sup>51</sup>. Additionally, the dissolution of two parent/ child relationships and one marriage through Harriet's powers make *The Blood of the Vampire* a text that is about failed home-spaces as much as it is about the surface narrative of vampirism. Harriet Brandt is a woman who literally kills when she attempts to perform femininity by participating in normative home-spaces. We see in Madam Gobelli the negative consequence on home-space of a woman who rejects home-making in favor of commerce. Their combined presence in the novel represents femininity and wifhood as something dangerous and deceptive.

Jamaican born Harriet is described sensationally as the child of a mad scientist and a Haitian Obeah practitioner who was bitten by a vampire bat while giving birth. Harriet is said to have inherited the taint of that bite and in her body the influence of the vampire bat takes on a psychic or mesmeric quality. She possesses a magnetic attraction that draws the life-force from anyone she is in close contact with, particularly men who find her sexually attractive. Harriet's racial heritage also marks her as an alternative representation of femininity in this text. Her racial heritage complicates her body's domestic potential, yet her ability to "pass" allows her access to normative home-spaces. Ultimately, the novel does not vilify Harriet for her race as much as for the other undesirable aspects of her heritage, her supernatural abilities and lack of social training. Harriet's racial heritage does give her license to transgress normative femininity through an expression of her sensual enjoyment of life. She

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<sup>51</sup> Madam Gobelli is one of the only instances in Victorian fiction of a character who is a practicing medium. Despite spiritualism's wide-spread popularity during the period, it is more often present in fiction after the turn of the century.

passionately embraces what she desires whether it be food, romance, or childlike amusement at a local parade. Her exoticized desires are presented in contrast to representations of Anglo-femininity in the motherly Margaret Pullen and frigidly proper Elinor Leyton.

The first image the reader sees of Harriet shows her otherness from Margaret and Elinor. The combination of Harriet's striking looks, a product of her "quadroon" racial status, and her lack of table manners establish her as an outsider from the group of English tourists staying in the same hotel. Her appearance is notable for being decidedly un-English but racially ambiguous to the other characters. She is "a remarkable looking girl.... Her figure was tall but slight and lithesome. It looked almost boneless as she swayed easily from side to side of her chair. Her skin was colorless but clear. Her eyes, long shaped, dark and narrow with heavy lids and thick black lashes.... Her mouth however was large with lips of a deep blood color....to crown all, her head was covered with a mass of soft, dull blue-black which was unaccustomed to comb or hairpin" (4). In this same passage, she exhibits an appetite for food that foreshadows a characteristic indulgence of all her bodily desires. Harriet "ate rapidly and with evident appetite... she kept her eyes fixed upon her food as if she feared someone might deprive her of it.... As soon as her plate was empty she called sharply to the waiter in French and ordered him to get her some more" (4). She is described as having "inherited her half-caste mother's greedy and sensual disposition" (77) linking her appetite for food to a sexual appetite. Like Sheridan Le Fanu's earlier

*Carmilla*<sup>52</sup> (1872), Marryat's vampire tale is one in which transgressive female sensuality contributes to the othering of a vampiric character.

Harriet is aggressively greedy for affection in the same way she is greedy for food. Her openly physical romantic encounters serve to further indicate her otherness from appropriate behavior exhibited by Elinor. Walking after dark on the beach with Ralph Pullen, Elinor's fiancé, she "sway[s] against him" and her "hot breath fan[s] his cheek" until he gives in to her and turns his head to be kissed (62). Later, when Ralph removes himself from Harriet's influence, he slights her and returns to England with his fiancée. Harriet's reaction to Ralph leaving is uncontrolled emotion despite the Baroness' attempts to reign her in, another indication that she transgresses feminine norms.

But Harriet Brandt only answered her appeal by rushing away down the corridor and up the staircase to her bedroom like a whirlwind. The girl had not the slightest control over her passions. She would listen to no persuasion and argument only drove her mad.... The girl put her head down on the pillow, and taking the corner of the linen case between her strong white teeth, shook it and bit it as a terrier worries a rat! (89-90)

Her thwarted sexual passion for Ralph reveals this second, destructive type of passion. There is a clear danger to the kind of unchecked feminine passion Harriet displays that Ralph recognizes when he is away from her mesmeric pull. As an alternative feminine

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<sup>52</sup> Nina Auerbach discusses the "alien female" eroticism of *Carmilla* in *our Vampires, Ourselves*. Auerbach omits *The Blood of the Vampire*, despite addressing *Dracula*, which was published in the same year.

representation, her expression of appetite and satiation of her body separates Harriet from the appropriately feminine women in the text, Elinor and Margaret.

Harriet's vampirism operates through a bastardization of the "true wife." It is when Harriet is at her most maternal or most nurturing, that the contamination hiding in her body is able to consume the people around her. Harriet's mesmeric ability to draw the life-force out of people she feels affection for succeeds in disrupting the family-space of two mothers when her attempts to nurture their children result in death. Harriet's powers also destroy her own home-space when her affection for her husband kills him. Typical of late Victorian vampire texts, Marryat introduces a medical professional to explain vampirism to the reader. Dr. Phillips explains that Harriet's condition "may render her love fatal to such as she may cling to" because the condition of her body causes "Harriet [to] draw upon the health and strength of all with whom she may be intimately associated" (79). Dependent on the intimacy of physical proximity, Harriet's vampiric actions often mimic maternal or nurturing behavior towards children or lovers. Her behavior is a mockery of the true domestic tranquility that Ruskin's normative "wife" figure creates. Harriet takes an "evident pleasure" in "playing nursemaid" to baby Ethel Pullen and walks the line between maternal and courtship behavior with Madam Gobelli's teenaged son Bobby, who at times rests his head on her shoulder and at others put his arms around her waist. By performing the nurturing behavior expected from a woman, Harriet causes deaths of the Pullen baby and Bobby. Her vampirism reverses the aspect of normative Victorian femininity in which women give to others selflessly. Harriet instead draws sustenance from children

and dependent figures and her version of mothering is fatal to those she chooses to care for.

Despite their being very different characters, Marryat creates a parallel between the grieving mothers. Margaret Pullen is the epitome of appropriate femininity. She is kind, generous, giving, unassuming, and primarily concerned with the health and safety of her child. Baroness Gobelli is as unnatural a Victorian woman as imaginable. She is brash, dirty, abusive and vulgar. However, both women are allowed surprisingly similar space to mourn their dead children. Faced with the loss of a child, each woman collapses, suffering from a secondary physical consequence of Harriet's mesmeric power. They are both struck down by the bodily symptoms of grief. The Baroness and Margaret are also portrayed as understanding their own identities through their claims to maternity, the aspect of James' "material me" that comes through family, children, and ancestry. Margaret's dialogue is most often about the baby, the baby's health, and her concerns over the baby's future. Although the Baroness is overbearing and possibly abusive to Bobby, she is without out a doubt proud of being his mother. Losing this aspect of normative femininity is devastating to both mothers. In this way, Harriet destroys two different familial spaces. The physical locations of the deaths are also worth considering. Ethel Pullen dies in a simulacrum of home, a Brussels hotel catering to English tourists, and Bobby dies in his own house, a domestic home-space that has been disrupted by the spiritualist practice the Baroness uses as a guise to practice the more lucrative art of blackmail. Baroness Gobelli's "Red House" is an example of house that is not a home because the Baroness

does not exhibit any talent for or interest in domestic management. She is a business woman whose priority is earning and accruing wealth to the detriment of her family.

Those who do not know the truth about Baroness Gobelli's blackmail business think that it is her spiritualist power that that makes the Red House seem unhomelike. Her son Bobby introduces Harriet to the Baroness's self-professed occultism to dispel Harriet of the idea that the Gobellis travel in upper society circles. For the reader, this offers an explanation for the strangeness of life at the Red House and the Baroness' secrecy. The Baroness causally drops the names of royalty and gentry as friends, but Bobby explains they are clients:

"O! Yes!" rejoined Harriet, "the Baroness has told me about them, Prince Adelbert and Prince Loris and others! She said they come very often to the Red House!"... "Yes, they do come, very often, and plenty of other people with them.... But—did Mamma tell you *why* they come?" "Not exactly! To see her and the Baron, I suppose!" "Well! yes! for that too perhaps," stammered Bobby. "But there is another reason. Mamma is very wonderful you know! She can tell people things they never knew before. And she has a room where—but I had better not say more." (author's italics, 83).

As a false medium, the Baroness character alludes to the already feminized practice of mediumship, but corrupts both it and the home-space through her decidedly unfeminine immorality as a blackmailer and her general vulgarity. Her body is ill-suited to being one of Galvan's "sympathetic mediums" lacking as she does the stereotypical feminine traits like passivity required to take on that role. In contrast to nurturing, family-centered, Margaret Pullen, the Baroness bullies her son and

dominates her husband. Instead of bringing a sense of calm and safety to her home, she ridicules guests and enjoys being the center of the chaos she creates. Even so, after Bobby's death the reader sees her as a grieving mother, just like Margaret. Both deaths caused by Harriet serve to disrupt the familial space between mother and child and occur in spaces that we might read as domestic through the nature of their function, but do not meet the requirements of being home-space.

The alternative femininities of supernatural domestic fiction come in disparate forms and are not easily unified as a single type of feminine character. What connects them is the opposition they provide to the normative angel in the house and domestic manager types that dominate realist fiction. They range from those who attempt normativity, like Braddon's doomed Maria, through those who are unaware of the consequences of dabbling in the occult, like Broughton's Elizabeth who falls victim of the "Man with the Nose," to the blatantly supernatural character of Harriet Brandt. In each instance, the conduit female body, with its weaker constitution and easily disturbed nerves, provides an inroad for the supernatural to breach and disrupt home-spaces, marriage-spaces, and filial spaces like the ones James cites as necessary for the creation of the transactional self. Likewise, Ruskin's notion of the "true wife" who carries the concept of home bodily is complicated in these texts where women's bodies become the tools to penetrate and destroy the sanctity of home space. By playing into and then undermining Victorian medical and social theories that conflated women's bodies with domesticity, child nurturing, and passivity, supernatural domestic fiction offers the reader a subversion of these feminine norms.

### **Conclusion: A New Critical Conversation**

The works of criticism and fiction covered in this study shed light on several normative aspects of Victorian fiction that are historically absent from study of the period. Acceptance of the separate spheres as fact rather than an idealistic construct led to assumptions about binary gender roles in Victorian fiction that were perpetuated by the narrow scope of the realist novel. These assumptions were then reinforced by the mid-century critics who were more interested in historical form of the novel than they were in studying fiction of the Victorian period. By focusing on popular fiction, alternative genres, and fiction by women writers, this study joins a new movement in critical work on the Victorian novel that addresses this absence and creates a broader lens through which to consider gender roles in the period.

Several recent critical works offer alternatives to traditional readings of gender in Victorian fiction. Kelly Hager's 2010 *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce: The Failed Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition* and Maia McLeavey's 2015 *The Bigamy Plot: Sensation and Convention in the Victorian Novel*, work to complicate readings like those by Ian Watt and Nancy Armstrong that focus on the primacy of the marriage plot in Victorian fiction. The marriage plot refers to an arc which follows the courtship and eventual marriage of protagonists in the text. Hager argues that the failure of marriage, exemplified by unhappy couples, marriages of convenience and potential marriages that fail to happen, are equally important plot devices in Dickens' novels. Her work directly challenges Ian Watt's work on plot in *The Rise of the Novel*. Watt notes that the novel's use of "non-traditional plots" enacted by "particular people in particular circumstances, rather than...by general human types" made it difficult to

study in terms of literary tradition when compared to writers of other genres who “took their plots from mythology, history, legend, or from previous literature” (14-5). The successful marriage plot between “particular people in particular circumstances” is an essential formal thread running through the eighteenth and nineteenth-century realist novel, but Hager argues that it is not the only way that marriage and courtship drive the plot of the novel.

Mcaleavey works in a similar vein to construct the bigamy plot as a parallel to the courtship plot. She traces the bigamy plot through multiple genres in an argument that links *Jane Eyre* to *East Lynne* and *Aurora Floyd* to Thomas Hardy. Her heavy emphasis on women writers- Gaskell, Braddon, Wood and Eliot, demonstrates that more extensive study of women writers and popular genres is proving fruitful to scholars who hope to uncover alternatives to feminine norms typified by the angel in the house and separate spheres. Mcaleavey argues that in novels like *Jane Eyre* and *East Lynne* “the space of the house” (18) contains the bigamy plot so that domestic home-space is disrupted by bigamous courtship. Bigamy plots offer an additional subversion of the Victorian home by mimicking the marriage plot. Hager’s failed marriage plots that feature unhappily married couples do similar work to undermine the stability of home-space. In Ruskin and Beeton, happy homes are made possible by stable marriages, but Mcaleavey and Hager show us that stable marriages coexist with unstable marriages, failed marriages, and illegal marriages in Victorian novels. Both critical works seek to trace a tradition in Victorian fiction for an alternative to the marriage plot in which women play a subversive, even criminal, role. Examining the bigamy plot and the failed marriage leads to discussions of female characters that

contradict the angel in the house and whose presence destabilizes the idea of home-space.

Equally destabilizing to the idea of marital space as home-space, are Sharon Marcus' *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007) and Talia Schaffer's *Romance's Rivals: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (2016). Marcus complicates the focus on marriage and courtship plots by emphasizing female friendships and passionate relationships between women that coexisted with heterosexual marriages in real Victorian lives and in fiction. She writes "the perceived wisdom has been that all bonds between women are structured by opposition between women and men" when in fact "what becomes thinkable if we suspend the assumption that heterosexual order opposed bonds between women" are varied and nuanced relationship roles between women, both platonic and romantic, that function without the gender binary (11). Marcus cites intense female friendship, familial relationships between women, and women living in same-sex marriages as locations to read bonds between women that shape Victorian fiction without the binarism of separate spheres ideology.

In *Romance's Rivals*, Schaffer argues against separate spheres ideology through examples of the "vocational marriage" or marriage necessary between people intending to work together, like the missionary marriage St. John Rivers offers Jane in *Jane Eyre* (2). Schaffer also cites companionable marriages such as those between cousins and neighbors, or marriages for the sake of caregiving, as alternatives to the marriage plot based in romantic love in the Victorian novel. Although Schaffer's

examples come primarily from the Brontës, Austen, Trollop and Eliot, she could easily have used Violet Tempest's marriage to Rorie Vawdry in *Vixen* as an example of companionate marriage. Their relationship is loving, but not a romantic one. In fact, Braddon ends the novel with a fairytale-like image of siblings -- "the simple and unalloyed delight of Rorie and Vixen, in their home among the beechen wood whose foliage sheltered them when they were children" (380) -- that removes any passion from their marriage and returns them to the companionate days when they played together as children. By revealing the prevalence of relationships not based in heterosexual romantic love in Victorian novels, Schaffer and Marcus offer us ways to consider Victorian women's emotional lives without privileging the courtship plot or heterosexual passion.

Although these newer critical texts do challenge assumptions about normative gender roles in the Victorian novel, apart from Mcleavey's work, they primarily focus on alternatives to the marriage plot in the canonical realist novel. More work has yet to be done in examining alternative versions of womanhood, femininity, and domestic space offered to us by Victorian fiction in different genres from the realist novel. Texts in this study by women writers who enjoyed wide-spread readership and longevity prior to WWI, offer opportunities for reading non-normative feminine representation and complicated public and private spaces that belie previous readings influenced by the formalist canon. The presence in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century critical work of a broader range of authors and genres indicates that the Victorians considered those authors and genres essential to the literature of their own time. In this current moment of recuperation for popular writers, texts, and genres,

there is the potential to reshape our conception of gender roles in Victorian Literature through an inclusive approach to studying the period that mimics the Victorians' own approach to their literature and culture.

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