

Marriage and Paradoxical Christian Agency in the Novels of
Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Anne Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell

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Abstract

Between 1790 and 1850, the novel was used widely “for doing God’s work,” and English female authors, specifically those who identified themselves as Christians, were exploiting the novel’s potential to challenge dominant discourse and middle-class gender ideology, particularly in relationship to marriage. I argue in this thesis that Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Anne Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell used the novel to construct Christian heroines who, as unlikely agents, make resistive choices shown to be undergirded by faith.

All practicing some form of Christianity, Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell engage evangelicalism’s belief in “transformation of the heart.” They construct heroines who are specifically shown to question the value of a narrative that assumes wayward husbands would somehow be transformed as a result of the marriage union. The heroines in this study come to resist such reforming schemes. Instead, they paradoxically leverage the very Christian faith that dominant discourse would use to subjugate them in unequal unions.

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Introduction

There seems nothing improbable in the thought, that this supremacy of woman over the novel is one which will go [on] widening and deepening, and that only through her shall we learn what resources there are in it for doing God's work. (Ludlow qtd. Easson 285)

The above statement, made by John Malcolm Ludlow in an unsigned review of *Ruth* in the *North British Review* (May 1853), delighted Elizabeth Gaskell. By the time this was written, women had indeed proved their supremacy over the novel.

Furthermore, as this thesis will demonstrate, the novel was already being used widely “for doing God’s work,” and female authors were exploiting the novel both to embrace and to challenge Christianity’s transformative potential by constructing heroines who leveraged their faith in order to question marriage as a narrative resolution. Instead, these heroines employed differing types of agency to assert their spiritual equality with men, thereby challenging the doctrine of coverture.

This research begins by examining proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *Christian Rational Dissent* has been relatively ignored by critics until recently. She died while writing the novel *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* (1798) as a sequel to her influential treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).¹ In *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft demonstrated that the union of spiritually equal agents in marriage was an essential prerequisite for the educational and legal reform she envisioned for the women of England. Individual agency, an emerging ideology of the revolutionary 1790s, was particularly important to Wollstonecraft, and the same concern is evident, although in slightly different forms, in the writing of other authors: Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), Anne Brontë’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*. These authors use the novel to

¹ Subsequently referenced as *Vindication* and cited parenthetically as *VRW*.

confront the contemporary paradox of religion that could be manipulated to confine women while at the same time insisting upon feminine redemptive influence within marriage.

The four novels around which this research is structured were written by women who not only leveraged Christian narrative, but more precisely, who self-identified as Christians. Given the era in which the novels were written, this designation seems unexceptional. The choice of widely read and much-discussed novels for this thesis is not a recapitulation of other scholars' previous arguments; rather, this thesis challenges previous readings of these texts. In particular, it asserts that the pervasive religious bias of the authors as well as the societies wherein these texts were received has been too-much disregarded or maligned by scholarship of the late 20th century. Recently, historical scholars have situated these texts more fully within their original context, but this work looks microscopically at how spiritual agency, a term I subsequently detail, sat in concert with the secular culture of individualism and its evangelical twin that negotiated "transformation of the heart." Each heroine is shown to focus upon the individual paradoxically to manipulate the very Christian narrative that threatens to confine her. Christianity, I argue throughout, was not wholly oppressive as some scholarship suggests—neither is it shown to be embraced without question by the heroines discussed here. The paradoxical nature of spiritual agency this thesis explores exposes the ways that cultural and political bias manipulated Christian practice, but simultaneously demonstrates that heroines expose and confront this contradiction by living-out their faith in in empowering and unexpected ways.

I argue throughout this thesis that these novelists, devoutly attached to their faith, manipulate Christianity in paradoxical and peculiar ways, and when examined

together, they demonstrate the ways that Christianity could confront oppressive gender ideologies. In the first place, each novelist represents a different subset of Christian practice: Wollstonecraft's Rational Dissent, Austen's Anglicanism, Brontë's evangelicalism², and Gaskell's Unitarianism are apparent as each of their novels explores the contemporary intersection of secular individualism with evangelical introspection. Even with these distinctions, the religious beliefs of each of these women were nuanced and complex, ultimately failing neatly to map unambiguously onto a particular religious affiliation. During the time period in which these authors lived and wrote, Evangelicalism, a widespread and diverse movement within the Anglican Church and within contemporary English society, challenged traditional lines of church authority in favour of a belief in individual responsibility, made possible by "transformation of the heart." Evangelicalism influenced the way these novelists characterized their heroines and developed their narratives. Ultimately, all of the authors saw ways to appropriate their Christianity for feminist ends

Secondly, the novels chosen for this research are situated in resistance to unwanted marriage—in each case, the heroine is shown to leverage her faith in order to reject an unwanted union. To put it another way, each heroine embraces the same religious strictures that threaten to confine her and employs her faith to influence the resolution or dissolution of marriage within the novel. While each of the authors wrote other works, what sets apart the particular novels I analyse here lies in their resistance to commonplace narratives of marriage. For each of the heroines, the resolution of the plotted narrative is situated in a rejection, not simply a completion,

² Throughout this thesis, the lowercase use of "evangelical" indicates a broad religious movement, whereas the uppercase use of "Evangelical" indicates specific reference to the evangelical sect of the Anglican Church. This is keeping in line with the *Oxford Handbook* definition of "Evangelical" (Noll).

of marriage. Maria fiercely asserts her right to divorce the husband who would prostitute her; Fanny refuses to marry the profligate Henry Crawford; Helen illegally extracts herself from her marriage; and Ruth refuses to resolve her seduction by marriage to her perpetrator. Each resolution within these novels, then, is a resolution of resistance. The heroines' courage to take such action, I argue, is found in the very Christian faith that oftentimes threatened to subjugate.

Finally, the chosen texts cross retrospectively-constructed divisions of literary history, spanning 1798-1853. This expansive timeline demonstrates the ongoing concern with gender relations throughout this long period, enabling me to identify broader trends that a study bound by narrower period divisions would obscure. From the revolutionary 1790s to the reforming 1850s, the general role of women in society at large, and their particular role in the family, was a subject of constant discussion and debate. The novelists in this study confronted contemporary gender ideology with the novel, all the while living-out the oftentimes conflicting expectations of womanhood. Without exception, the authors in this study somehow managed to fulfil their culturally-mandated roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and devoted sisters. Even Mary Wollstonecraft, who maintained a great deal of independence throughout her lifetime, nevertheless maintained dual roles as writer and domestic manager.³ The historical parameters of this thesis begin with the publication of *Vindication* in 1792, and end with Parliament's Divorce act of 1857. This law gave greater custodial access by mothers to their children in the event of a

³ For example, even though she and Godwin were wary of the institution of marriage and kept separate lodgings, she nevertheless somewhat stepped into the role of domestic manager even while simultaneously writing. A letter to Godwin [November 10th, 1796] reveals her actions and her subsequent dissonance: "I send you your household linen – I am not sure that I did not feel a sensation of pleasure at thus acting the part of a wife, though you have so little respect for the character."

hard-won divorce.⁴ The heroines who form the focus of this research—heroines who either resist marriage altogether or who struggle to extract themselves from an abusive union—anticipate such civil reform. Deprived of the ability legally to extract themselves from marital contract, they instead leverage their Christian faith, thereby manipulating the very force exploited to subjugate them.

The texts chosen for examination here, then, are centred upon the heroines' rejection of marriage as the narrative solution. Of course, Fanny does marry Edmund in *Mansfield Park* and Helen's marriage to Gilbert marks the conclusion of the *The Tenant*; however, both of these marriages are thin conclusions to novels that are dominated by a more important concern: the resistance of the heroines to undesired unions to Arthur Huntington and Henry Crawford, respectively.

It is the dominant theme of ultimate and conclusive resistance to the Byronic⁵ heroes George Venables, Arthur Huntington, Henry Crawford, and Henry Bellingham that justifies the choice of texts for this thesis. An otherwise obvious, but excluded, choice of text, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), by contrast, is a narrative that succumbs to earlier constructs of sentimental fiction by its heroine's ultimate marriage to the reformed rake—the Byronic hero, Edward Rochester. In spite of her initial resistance to Rochester, their ultimate marriage propagates, rather than confronts, the fallacy of redemptive womanhood this thesis exposes. That is to say, Jane's pious, conscience-driven decision to resist a bigamous union with Rochester situates her as the idyllic Christian heroine—the angel whose goodness

⁴ See Mary Lyndon Shanley's *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*. Shanley explains, "The provisions of the Divorce Act and its amendments helped only women whose husbands were guilty of adultery in combination with incest, bigamy, or extreme physical cruelty. Nonetheless, the broad discretion granted to the Divorce Court contrasted sharply with the limited powers Parliament had given to Chancery eighteen years earlier" (138). See chapter three of this thesis for further explication.

⁵ Though Venables and Crawford technically predate the Byronic hero, the reformed rake that made its rebellious construction possible at the turn of the nineteenth century is evident nonetheless.

ultimately and supernaturally transforms the narrative. This is just the type of solution that Anne Brontë rejected in the construction of Helen Huntingdon, a heroine who unsuccessfully transforms her husband. Arthur's "transformation of the heart" is not brought about by Helen's goodness; but seemingly, Rochester *does* transform due to Jane's Christian influence, as he says at the conclusion of the narrative, "Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to my Maker. I began to pray: very brief prayers they were, but very sincere" (455). Of course, these prayers were to God. But it is not God who audibly answers Rochester. It is Jane. Rochester explains, "I pleaded; and the alpha and omega of my heart's wishes broke involuntarily from my lips in the words—"Jane! Jane! Jane!". . . a voice—I cannot tell whence the voice came, but I know whose voice it was—replied, "I am coming, wait for me;" and a moment after, went whispering on the wind, the words—"Where are you?"" (456). Jane, Rochester's "alpha and omega" replaces the Alpha and Omega. She is Rochester's redeemer. Jane's agency does not seem conclusively to strengthen her resistance; instead, it leads to a predictable marriage resolution reminiscent of the very type of sentimental novel Wollstonecraft decried.

Jane's resistance, instead, is marked by her rejection of St John Rivers, the Calvinistic, cold hero who offers Jane a loveless marriage, but one centred upon Christian devotion. Jane desires no such union. Jane *does* demonstrate in this rejection, of course, that in spite of St John's evangelical appeal, the complete lack of passion between the pair made a potential marriage unfathomable, even downright sinful. Explaining her rejection of St John, she says, "He has told me I am formed for labour—not love: which is true, no doubt. But, in my opinion, if I am

nor formed for love, it follows that I am not formed for marriage. Would it not be strange, . . . to be chained for life to a man who regarded one but as a useful tool?" (423). This provocative narrative choice—a choice that privileges female, even Christian, passion—was revolutionary for Charlotte Brontë's contemporary readers. Yet, the Protestant insistence upon individual conscience in concert with the culture of individualism that dominated the early nineteenth century makes Jane's decision somewhat obvious. Even so, further scholarship centred upon the spiritual nature of Jane's choice is certainly warranted. Jane's Christianity prompts her to *reject* the Christian hero, and this is, indeed, paradoxical. However, Jane's ultimate choice and transformation of the Byronic Rochester succumbs to the very narrative resolution that the other authors in this research reject.

Each heroine in this study, in different ways, demonstrates agency. Although the question of women's agency has commonly been associated with the rise of first- and second-wave feminism from the late nineteenth century onwards, nearly a century before Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, Mary Astell had already asserted in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) that choice and agency were inextricable, and importantly, were tied to principles: "[E]very one who pretends to Reason, who is a Voluntary Agent and therefore Worthy of Praise or Blame, Reward or Punishment, must *Chuse* his Actions and determine his Will to that Choice by some Reasonings or Principles" (128). Astell further argues that having the ability to choose action distinguishes a rational human from an animal (129). The heroines examined here assert their right to make choices (which implies the right to resist), especially in relation to that most pressing of decisions, the choice of a marriage partner. I argue throughout this thesis that for the heroines in this study, proactive decision making, a precursor to physical action, is a form of agency, so long as it is situated in "the

intention to settle a question” (Schlosser 2.5). Although the resistance they show in the face of social pressures may provide the most obvious evidence of their agency, even their obedience or compliance may be interpreted as a form of agency to the extent that it is shown to be grounded in their exercise of moral reasoning. Their agency is an “ability or capacity to act” (*OED*) that depends upon their Christian conviction. It involves the exercise of will or intention in combination with a process of religious contemplation, or “the action of thinking about a thing continuously; attentive consideration, study . . . religious musing, devout meditation” (*OED*). The coupling of religion with reason would not have been seen as antithetical or anti-intellectual by the authors chosen for this research. Wollstonecraft, for example, argued that “reason is illuminated and exalted by contemplation” (*VRW* 249), and saw the habit of reflection as “implanted in us by the Author of all good” (249). For the heroines in this study, the giving over to religious meditation was intentional—and is not shown to be a giving up of reason; rather, it demonstrates a seeking of divine inspiration and insight—deliberately initiated by the seeker. I contend here that the heroines’ agency is bound up with their spiritual conviction.

The agency demonstrated by the heroines in this thesis is inextricably tied to Christian practice, and can best be described as spiritual agency. That is to say, Christianity for each heroine is an *act of faith*. Christian practice is more than cultural practice; it is shown to be situated in relationship with one’s maker, and this relationship often emboldens counterintuitive, and certainly counter-cultural action. That is to say, rather than seeing their faith as an oppressive force from which they must break free, the heroines examined here are shown to leverage their Christianity in paradoxical and unexpected ways, and they do this by way of spiritual agency described above. The contemplative practices of the Christian faith, coupled with the

compelling need to act based upon one's spiritual conviction, undergirds the radical choices that the heroines that form the focus of this research make. Their choices are often counter-cultural in that their Christian practice is shown to be driven by the Protestant privileging of the individual conscience, yet their individually realized convictions often sit at odds with legal constructs as well as cultural expectations for middle-class womanhood.

The undergirding of Christianity as a cultural practice, nourished by contemplation and conviction, proved empowering for women during this time period, women such as the novelists chosen for this thesis, who saw their faith as a force with which to be reckoned. Their heroines are shown to leverage, then, spiritual agency—deeply held conviction that would prompt action—to question the manipulative practices of dominant discourse, a cultural dialogue that quite often manipulated Christian rhetoric to drive false guilt and acquiescent, subservient womanhood. This reality has been fully examined by modern feminist literary scholarship. I contend, by contrast, that many Christian women rejected such debilitating views of the Christian faith, and instead, saw individual access to God, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit as greatly empowering. Their religious faith did not prompt them fully to succumb to oppressive gender norms. It prompted them to question contemporary gender constructs. The execution of such empowering faith was situated in spiritual agency, and is evident in the heroines examined here.

Wollstonecraft suggests the importance of agency in her cry for women to embrace “active citizen[ship]” (*VRW* 333). She felt that women were precariously dependent upon the benevolence of those—fathers, husbands—who exerted authority over them. As is widely known, Wollstonecraft argued that women should

reject complicit dependence and instead take an active role in their own education, otherwise, they would render themselves helpless subjects. What is less widely acknowledged, and what is detailed in Chapter 1, is that for Wollstonecraft, this “active citizen[ship],” or, agency, was inextricably informed by Christian practice. This is evident in her heroine Maria who is shown to bewail her legal non-existence when she addresses the court in Darnford’s defense saying, “I wish my country to approve of my conduct; but, if laws exist, made by the strong to oppress the weak, I appeal to my own sense of justice, and declare that I will not live with [my husband], who has violated every moral obligation which binds man to man” (197). In this appeal, Maria both censures the oppressive judicial system that subjugates women to the caprices of men, and simultaneously claims moral right to resist such injustice. She rests on religious conviction when her legal rights are stripped from her. In other words, Venables’s lawful actions deprive Maria of active citizenship, but she insists that moral law should guide her action. Earlier, she stated, “I consider all obligations as made void by [Venables’s] conduct; and hold, that schisms which proceed from want of principles, can never be healed” (196). Her first loyalty, she argues, is to a morality that I argue throughout this thesis is tied to Christian practice, and comfortably can be deemed spiritual agency.

For Jane Austen, female agency was largely tied to individual responsibility for the shaping of one’s disposition. For example, in a personal prayer, she speaks of the need to evaluate and modify individual action, writing, “Teach us to understand the sinfulness of our own hearts, and bring to our knowledge every fault of temper and every evil habit in which we have indulged to the discomfort of our fellow-creatures, and the danger of our own souls” (*Minor Works*, 453). This contemplative practice, the active responsibility Austen indicates, is of a piece with the

consequential change in action she further asserts as necessary: “may we now, and on each return of night, consider how the past day has been spent by us, what have been our prevailing thoughts, words and actions during it, and how far we can acquit ourselves of evil” (453-454). This prayer demonstrates that Austen believed that faith informed agency, but also shows that this was a deliberate, contemplative process. She saw spiritual agency as the genesis of action. She gives her heroine Fanny Price a similar agency. Fanny’s contemplations lead her to resistance, “the action of resisting, opposing, or withstanding someone or something” (*OED*). Fanny resists both Henry Crawford and Sir Thomas Bertram. Fanny’s active resistance is situated in conviction, and informs her agency.

Anne Brontë’s understanding of agency is similarly spiritually situated in individual responsibility—particularly, autonomous accountability to God. In spite of her belief in purgatorial universal salvation, she was still strongly influenced by Wesleyan Arminianism, which insisted upon taking careful account of one’s actions. This concern for personal accountability is evident in a letter she wrote to Universalist Revd D Thom (30 Dec 1848) with worry that the security of universal salvation would prompt profligate action: “We see how liable men are to yield to the temptations of the passing hour.” I further explicate this passage in Chapter 3, but mention it here to foreshadow my argument about Brontë’s concern with spiritual agency—individual action, and its inextricable ties to spirituality—particularly Christian salvation. This motivation drove her to write *The Tenant*. She defends the construction of Arthur Huntingdon and his male companions in the preface to the *second edition*, stating, “if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain” (4). The “natural error” her heroine

embraces, I argue here, is one of a grandiose perception of her influence. Instead of understanding that spiritual change is an inward transformation, Helen initially perceives herself to be a conduit of spiritual transformation for Arthur. Brontë seems to be arguing that transformative agency is wholly personal, and strongly alludes to the fallacy of redemptive marriage throughout the novel.

Elizabeth Gaskell, a Unitarian largely concerned with societal reform, envisioned agency both as an internal transformation, as well as a conduit of change in societal frameworks. She saw inward action turned towards outward change as a form of spiritual agency. Her heroine Ruth embodies such agency. Gaskell's letters reveal the importance she placed upon reforming schemes, or to put it another way, "doing God's work." In a letter written to Eliza Fox (February 1850), one that I further explicate in Chapter 4, she states, "we have some appointed work to do, . . . [it is] *our* work; what *we* have to do in advancing the Kingdom of God." The work of which she speaks is that of a reforming, Christian agent. Informed personal conviction guides this work. Throughout *Ruth*, Gaskell suggests that only through personal agency—evidenced by internal transformation—is external reform possible. To put it another way, an individual such as Bellingham, who ultimately remains unrepentant, is incapable of change. Ruth, his would-be redeemer, is unable to prompt his transformation. Ruth's agency is reformatory but is limited by individual choice.

In the societies in which these novelists lived and wrote, however, physical agency for women proved difficult. Gender hierarchies constructed spiritual authority, as patriarchal interpretations of Pauline strictures had long justified the subjugation of women. Furthermore, persistent Puritanical doctrines placed men and women in complementary roles, with men as lords of the home and women as

subjects.⁶ This is in spite of the fact that wider questions of spiritual authority had been addressed by earlier Protestant reformers who took issue with Catholic hierarchy. Martin Luther had famously asserted the priesthood of all believers, claiming that mankind no longer needed a human intermediary to commune with God. However, during the time when the novel rose to a position of cultural influence—the period covered by this study—middle-class gender ideology continued to place women in subjection to men. Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell each used the novel to confront, in distinct ways, the contradiction within Protestantism that required autonomous responsibility while simultaneously restricting female agency.

Historian Lawrence Stone explains in *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* that as church authority diminished and familial authority held firm, spiritual jurisdiction was simply transferred from one body to another: from priest to patriarch. The husband became the household priest in lieu of Catholic institutional authority, with particular importance given to Miltonic wifely obedience. Furthermore, with the loss of Catholic authority, “the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers meant in practice that the husband and father became the spiritual as well as the secular head of the household” (111). Many, such as Wollstonecraft, were not accepting of Milton’s idea of wifely subjugation. Wollstonecraft asserted that if access to God was truly free, then logically, this access belonged to women as well as to men. As Barbara Taylor has pointed out,

⁶ In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong explains, “the Puritan doctrine of equality insisted only upon the difference of sexual roles in which the female was certainly subordinate to the male, and not upon the equality of the woman in kind” (18). This was based upon the idea of “opposition of complementary genders” (19). This Puritanical influence was seen well into the late eighteenth century, and very much challenged the culture of individualism. Women were suppressed in that the roles offered to them were necessarily dependent and enforced by law, culture, and religion.

“Wollstonecraft invoked the Protestant imperative for direct dealing with one’s Maker. If no priest may stand between creature and Creator, why should a mere man stand between a woman and her God?” (*Feminist Imagination* 105). But women were kept ignorant—uneducated—and therefore dependent upon their spiritual protectors. In short, it can be argued that the elevation of the father to the spiritual head of the home further exacerbated marital tyranny. This is not to say that the nuclear family replaced the church; but rather, patriarchal authority within the home was bolstered in relation to its diminution within the established Church.

Additionally, economic constructs further marginalised and subjected women by rendering them dependent upon men. During the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, among the middle and upper classes, there was a tremendous push to amass property. Inheritance was passed through primogeniture, whereby the firstborn son acquired the family fortune. Marital alliances were commonly based upon such economic motivation. Women brought small shares of family wealth to marriage, which would then become the property of their husbands. In this sense, women could add financial value to marriage, but were a liability as daughters, as Ruth Perry explains: “shifts in the social and economic purposes of kinship in the course of the seventeenth century resulted in a reconception of the daughter’s place in the family as temporary, partial, and burdensome” (114). Families desired property to remain with the family, making financial provision necessary for daughters: “Women’s hereditary rights in property were thus inexorably made secondary to the imperative for accumulation—‘engrossing’ was the eighteenth-century word—in large landowning families” (119).⁷ Their inability

⁷Though financial concerns dominated marriage partnerships, overwhelmingly favouring the husband’s economic security, Stone argues that the rise of “companionate marriage” complicated power relations within the union. He claims that the call for companionship within marriage, largely

to act on their own behalf economically made them dependent but also threatened, I argue here, their access to God.

The Ideological Work of the Novel

This examination of the novel, following a long, narrow path beginning in 1798 and ending in 1853, covers both the Romantic and Victorian eras, and is bookmarked by revolution and reform. As I have pointed out, it challenges these period divisions by pointing out continuities across them. Throughout the cultural and religious shifts that would have an impact upon the long eighteenth century and the long nineteenth century, the changing roles of women, and specifically, their contribution to cultural debate via the novel, were significant. The domestic novel of the long nineteenth century has been much studied, and a general recognition of the use of Christian morality and didacticism to complete narrative plotlines is widespread in literary criticism. My study intervenes in this scholarship specifically to demonstrate how authors with unusually close connections to Christian practice paradoxically manipulated seemingly restrictive gender norms by constructing heroines shown to leverage Christianity to demonstrate resistant agency. In constructing such heroines who challenged existing gender norms, the authors used the novel form itself as an agent.

The epigraph to this chapter demonstrates the ways in which the contemporary public generally viewed the power of the novel in the hands of women. This is not to say that it was only women who were utilizing the novel to enter the public cultural debate, nor was it the only vehicle for reform. However, as

championed by preachers, was contradictory because wives were still subjects expected to obey. Ultimately, however, the call for “emotional satisfaction” in marriage “had its effect in equalizing relationships between husband and wife” (217). The shifting, contradictory expectations noted by Stone inform the paradox I draw out.

separate spheres ideology influenced the period, the novel's ubiquitous presence did provide women with an avenue to enter public dialogue in powerful and widespread ways. Nancy Armstrong has authoritatively demonstrated the power of the domestic novel, specifically in the hands of women, to effect change.⁸ The novel, argues Armstrong, was seen as a distinctly female form, and this reality, rather than diminishing the novel's influence, in actuality allowed the female narrator or protagonist the ability to offer critique as "having no claim to political power" (29). She explains, "Although concerned mainly with the vicissitudes of courtship and marriage, and fictional courtships and marriages at that, fiction that represented gender from this gendered viewpoint exerted a form of political authority" (30). I build upon Armstrong's insights specifically to focus upon how Christian authors used the novel to critique marriage and gender ideology, by constructing heroines who leveraged their faith in order to resist unwanted unions. In doing so, the authors exert what Armstrong contends is "political authority," and what I argue throughout would have also been seen by the authors as "doing God's work."

My research focuses upon the use of fictional narrative via the novel intimately to capture the experience of the middle-class female. This is particularly apparent in *Wrongs of Woman*, which, as a sequel to *Vindication*, was written to influence its readers by way of storytelling inherent to the novel that *Vindication*, as a treatise, was not intended to accomplish. As Wollstonecraft notes, "In writing this novel, I have rather endeavoured to pourtray passions than manners" (*Wrongs* 73). By writing *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft exploited, to a degree, the ability of the novel to prompt the "improvement of the age" (73). But this choice of the novel

⁸ Armstrong argues that fiction itself is an agent (23). And in the hands of women, the gendered, particular domestic authority assigned to women gave female novelists command over the domestic novel because under the direction of women, "the most basic qualities of human identity were supposed to develop" (3).

confronts her own vexed appreciation of the genre, a form that she had previously asserted in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) disrupts clear thinking. Women who have educated themselves about marriage via the novel, she claims, will be disappointed—for if by chance a woman marries well, she will not appreciate her husband, because “he will be found much inferior to the lovers described in novels . . . when the fault is in human nature” (95). But in *Wrongs of Woman*, Maria’s lovers are anything but ideal. In this way, her novel confronted contemporary notions of marriage by personifying in fiction the possible harsh realities of the union. She insisted that her novel was distinctly different from her previous non-fiction treatments of the topic, noting that she has attempted to demonstrate “the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society” (73), arguing: “The sentiments I have embodied” (73). This “embodiment” of sentiment is accomplished through fictional narrative, which David Herman defines as “a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change” (3), and what Marie-Laure Ryan describes as “the outcome of many different mental processes that operate both inside and outside stories” (28). With these definitions of fictional narrative in mind, I argue throughout this thesis that Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell utilized narrative by way of the novel to describe women’s experience, not only within the novel form, but as a commentary upon contemporary society.

The novel form, then, intentionally utilised by the authors in this study, was believed to hold particular weight. As Anne K. Mellor has argued, the novel was educationally “*democratic*” (98) in that the novel “could be read and understood by everyone, regardless of whether one had an education in Greek and Latin” (98). Certainly, Mellor’s assertion is particularly true for middle-class readers, most of

whom not only would have had the education necessary to read the novel form, but the financial resources necessary to acquire the texts. The novel's potential influence was wide. In its early stages, Mellor notes that the novel was seen as a vehicle to promote "[m]orality, probability, right feeling—this is what the good work of literature must aim to provide its reader" (98). Furthermore, she argues that during the rise of the novel, literary critics such as Joanna Baillie and Anna Barbauld saw the novel as evoking empathy (98), and its function as moral education:

"Generically, the novel provides the largest scope and most finely woven texture for . . . realistic portrayals, followed by the drama—which enables its viewers to participate sympathetically in the resolution of human conflict" (99-100). The ability for the novel to evoke sympathy, and more specifically, its assumed capability to do so, is an insight central to understanding how the texts in this study work.

As Ruth Jenkins has pointed out, at the turn of the nineteenth century, "although women were judged unable to participate in a true reformation Christianity—men must interpret the word, must mediate their salvation—women functioned as channels and conduit for the men's salvation; both symbolically and physically, then, women functioned as cultural filters" (23). Writing, and publishing their own work, provided a platform for women to voice their concerns about such beliefs: "they aligned themselves with and consciously participated in an extant tradition of Christian prophets, who voiced truths whether or not they were listened to or believed" (26). Jenkins argues that Elizabeth Gaskell uses *Ruth* to champion Christian ideology, and I argue the novel form was used in similar ways by Wollstonecraft, Austen, and Brontë.

Much commentary about marriage throughout this period was embedded in the novel form. And often, this commentary promoted a reform-driven notion of

marriage. Such was the case with outspoken evangelical Hannah More. In fact, More was among the first to utilize the novel form as a means of religious persuasion, and significantly, chose marriage as its focus. In *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* (1809), More embodied the role of female preacher when she explicitly utilized the novel to promote the evangelical ideal of marriage. In her recent biography of More, *Fierce Convictions: the Extraordinary Life of HANNAH MORE—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist* (2014), Karen Swallow Prior claims that *Cælebs* was a “narrative treatise on the selection of the right marriage partner” (233). She notes that the rising middle class was confronting the emergent companionate ideal, and that the simultaneous rise of the evangelical movement “promoted the religious factor in the choice of marriage partner” (233). More accepted the growing spiritual importance of marriage, and saw the novel as a means of instructing the middle class regarding the “proper” choice. Prior argues, “What better instrument to teach those given this new freedom of choosing a marriage partner—and a whole host of other social and religious lessons—than the literary form they turned to for entertainment?” (232-34). Indeed, *Cælebs* was entertaining and instructive for its contemporary readers, but most modern readers would find it insufferable in its Miltonic didacticism.

When Charles, the cœleb of the narrative, investigates his love-interest Lucilla Stanley, he learns that she is a “proper” Christian woman. In reality, Charles performs the modern-day equivalent to a background check, investigating and prying with little regard for her privacy. He learns that she has rejected immoral suitors, and is grounded in humility (More, *Cælebs* 240). We learned that she is “governed by a simple, practical end in all her religious pursuits. She reads her bible, not from habit, that she may acquit herself of a customary form; not to

exercise her ingenuity by allegorizing literal passages, or spiritualizing plain ones, but that she may improve in knowledge, and grow in grace” (239). Lucilla’s “simple, practical” Christianity, is celebrated. The application of Lucilla’s faith, one in which, “[s]he accustoms herself to meditation, on order to get her mind more deeply imbued with a sense of eternal things” (239), anticipates the kind of contemplative faith that Austen’s Fanny or Gaskell’s Ruth might have practiced. But More’s emphasis on Lucilla’s simplicity is reinforced when More writes, “She has read much scripture and little controversy. There are some doctrines that she does not pretend to define, which she yet readily adopts” (239). Lucilla’s ready subservience to her future husband’s seemingly wiser, more informed direction is certain because Lucilla’s faith neglects intellectual reasoning. Here is where More deviates from Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell, who required their heroines to resist blind devotion.

Cælebs confounds the modern reader, in part, because Lucilla seems stripped of agency when her father and her suitor talk around her, and about her, throughout the narrative. In a closing letter, her father writes that Lucilla, “who derives her principles from the Bible, and her amusements from intellectual sources, from the beauties of nature, and from active employment and exercise, will not pant for beholders” (396). This, he contends, is the proper Christian woman “to behold.” More’s next lines agree with Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell’s emphasis upon female agency, when she writes that for such a woman, “Her resources are within herself. She possesses the truest independence” (396). This statement ironically is made by Lucilla’s own father writing to his future son-in-law. Lucilla is absent in this exchange. *Cælebs*, didactic and patriarchal, then, ironically fails to do what it asserts is necessary. It strips the heroine of “resources . . . within herself.”

Interestingly, writing to a friend about *Cælebs*, Hannah More asserted that “The Novel reader will reject it as dull; the religious may throw it aside as frivolous. The one will accuse it of excessive strictness; the other of censurable levity” (37). But she justifies her use of the novel, asserting that *Cælebs* is an attempt “to show how religion may be brought to mix with the concerns of ordinary life” (39)—this in spite of her own reservations about the novel form. This explanation embodies, to a degree, the work she believed the novel was capable of doing. Soon after the publication of *Cælebs*, Revd Sydney Smith, in the *Edinburgh Review* (1809) dubbed the forthrightly religious *Cælebs* a “*dramatic sermon*” (70), a description that aptly describes More’s use of the novel form. While Wollstonecraft used the novel to embody sentiment, More used the novel to evoke religious change within the heart of the reader. Both women, intensely interested in female experience during the late eighteenth century recognized that the novel was capable of doing work that pamphlets, essays or political treatises were unlikely to accomplish. Certainly, the novels of Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell have continued, even today, subtly to do “God’s work” in ways that More never could have imagined.

Challenging Coverture

The analogy between marriage and slavery, well established by the 1790s, demonstrates the contemporary struggle with female subjugation. Wollstonecraft famously saw women chained as “house slave[s]” within marriage (VRW 213). For Wollstonecraft, who witnessed the French Revolution first-hand and who dined and exchanged ideas with Thomas Paine and the forward-thinking intellectuals of her day, the call for emancipation was commonly heard. Even Dr John Gregory, in *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), with all his condescension towards his

daughters advising them upon “propriety of conduct,” asserted that they should not fall prey to the role of house slave. He stated that he saw women “not as domestic drudges, or the slaves of our pleasures, but as our companions and equals” (1:3). One would not assert that Gregory and Wollstonecraft were of like mind, but on this point they agreed: wives should not be reduced to slavery, but should be companions of their husbands. British women may not have been slaves, but this does not change the reality that the physical limitations placed upon women meant that many were spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually bound.

In many ways, women were denied basic rights of personhood in that their legal rights were absorbed into the “person” of their husbands upon marriage. Sir William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765) clearly articulated the crippling disadvantage facing wives. After describing marriage as “a method of acquiring property,” he explains “the notion of an unity of person between the husband and wife; it being held that they are one person in the law, so that the very being and existence of the woman is suspended during the coverture, or entirely merged and incorporated in that of the husband” (433). The “coverture,” as a law that would strip women of property rights, left women exposed. Their loss of legal identity challenged the notion of egalitarian, or even companionate, relationships celebrated in eighteenth-century literature and art by many subsequent historians. And even though the Court of Chancery enforced marriage contracts, affording the wife some, even if woefully unequal, financial protection, the practical reality was that the husband was the sole owner of all of the wife’s property. In the sense that women were totally dependent upon their husbands economically, it seems clear that they were forcibly stripped of authority over their very person. This lawful, physical disempowerment of women simultaneously placed them in need of

protection. Their economic agency (the ability to maintain control of their resources) and their physical agency (the ability to protect their bodies) were interconnected, because the lack of resources created dependence upon male protection.

Historically to situate this project requires an understanding of the cultural mores surrounding marriage between the 1790s and 1850s that Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell were confronting. Stone has argued persuasively that the rise of the nuclear family elevated companionate and romantic love in relationships and simultaneously complicated the business-like nature of marriage so prevalent during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries among the middle and upper classes. And as many scholars have argued, during this same time period, rising separate-sphere rhetoric complicated gender ideology. But as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have argued in *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, separate sphere ideology was complex, and women were not without influence. Marriage still served to undergird the economic stability of Britain as the marketplace depended upon the consumption of the family, as they note: “There were myriad ways in which men depended upon the capital, labour and contacts of their wives and other female relatives to support and maintain both family businesses and establishments” (xv). But with the rise of the nuclear family, the home was championed, particularly in evangelical circles, as a training ground for religious and political realms. Separate-spheres ideology would attempt to elevate the home as a critical building block of England. However, while women were given cultural jurisdiction over the private sphere, and clearly influenced the public sphere in ways that scholars now acknowledge, the laws of coverture would limit their legal autonomy. Women would remain legal non-persons while

simultaneously being asked to influence the religious moral climate of the home.⁹ This ideologically contradictory role—that of powerless influencer—disconcerted many male and female reformers alike. However, the use of Christian narrative to justify this subjugation was interrogated and then leveraged by the authors in my study to note the ways in which a relationship with God, the answering to a higher authority, could enable women of faith to transcend to a limited degree, the boundaries of legal coverture.

My analysis considers the ways that the state of legal coverture prompted what I identify as “spiritual coverture”. This essentially describes the belief that women, legally “covered” by their male counterparts, were equally subject to their spiritual dominance in the home. Contradictorily, domestic ideology persistently suggested that marriage was curiously redemptive and prompted by feminine piety. Patricia Ingham alludes to this phenomenon. Middle class males, she argues, were spiritually supported by their pious wives: “For by uniting himself in marriage to a satisfactory exponent of femininity, a typical exponent of middle-class masculinity could subsume her identity into his, and become possessed of her high-mindedness and purity, along with a domestic haven of comfort” (22). This is not to say that husbands seriously conflated their own spiritual salvation—protection from damnation—with that of their wives. Rather, it suggests that during this period, the conflation of one flesh doctrine with coverture had spiritual implications that are yet underexplored by modern scholarship. Considering the ways that a husband might “possess” his wife’s “high mindedness and purity,” my reading of Wollstonecraft,

⁹ In *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, Mary Poovey asserts that by the early nineteenth century, women were perceived as agents of hope—this “[f]rom metaphorical agent of damnation to literal agent of salvation” (ix). She asks, “How, in the course of the eighteenth century, did woman accomplish this dizzying ascent to the Victorian pedestal?” (ix). The authors in this study, however, confront this perplexing double bind that Poovey draws out. In particular, they use the novel to do so.

Austen, Brontë and Gaskell uncovers the ways in which these authors respond to and resist this unarticulated but implied cultural suggestion—that a good and godly wife would be an agent of spiritual reform, deflecting her husband’s spiritual responsibility.

This is not to say that marriage somehow influenced redemption, but rather—and more explicitly—that ideal Christian wives were seen as agents of transformation directly leading wayward husbands towards, but not guaranteeing, salvation. Women, of course, were expected to operate from a position of subservience while wielding this influence. But while generations of scholars, perhaps most vocally Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have pointed out the ways women were placed in a position of subjugation, my analysis shows that this increasing awareness of spiritual responsibility proved to be individually empowering to women who were thereby awakened to their autonomous position before God. Early rhetoricians such as Astell had argued that a lack of education threatened women’s spiritual development. In *A Serious Proposal*, she confronts this lack of education by observing, “why should she be blamed for setting no great value on her Soul, whose noblest Faculty her Understanding is render’d useless to her?” (70). The “value” of a woman’s soul, and the privilege of developing its worth through education, suggest the spiritual conviction and subsequent agency with which this thesis is concerned. Although religious rhetoric attempted to justify women’s “confinement” to the domestic sphere, it simultaneously enabled women to challenge their ideological positioning. Perceiving themselves as spiritual equals to men, many women shunned the idea of both legal and spiritual coverture, and recognized the need for a more egalitarian approach to marriage.

In much the same way that financial resources and physical protection were interconnected, Wollstonecraft envisioned marital unions in which spiritual and intellectual interdependence were ideally free of despotic rule and full of companionship, but her contention that interdependence had to be built upon education had been the subject of activism for quite some time. Stone explains that in the late seventeenth century, a serious call for female education, with the purpose of preparing women better for companionship, was proposed by women, and aided by John Locke, William Law, Jonathan Swift, John Dunton, and Daniel Defoe (228). Stone notes that in *A Serious Proposal*, Astell argued that denying women access to formal education was a hindrance to companionate marriage due to the impossibility for a husband to respect a woman whom he holds in contempt (228). Early female educational reformers, Stone explains, “were no wild-eyed political or moral radicals, but devout Christians of impeccable virtue, and loyal subscribers to the standard doctrines about the naturally subordinate role of wives. All they wanted to see was their sex better prepared to be companions with their husbands” (228). Wollstonecraft, then, was not alone (nor was she the first female voice) in her desire to move towards a more egalitarian marriage model. She recognized that such a marriage model was dependent upon female education that would in turn give women the ability to reason. And without education, spiritual conviction would be similarly limited because women would be ill-informed regarding Biblical scripture.

Authorship and Christian Practice

This study begins with an examination of Mary Wollstonecraft’s novel *Wrongs of Woman*, specifically examining the ways that Wollstonecraft’s Christianity informed the construction of the heroine Maria. Wollstonecraft’s loyalty to the Anglican

Church remained intact throughout her lifetime, although she was not a practicing member of the established church. In fact, she embraced Rational Dissent. This revolutionary spiritual movement dissented from the Anglican Communion. Even so, Wollstonecraft maintained her church membership, while simultaneously being influenced by Dr Price, founding influential Unitarian minister, famed philosopher, mathematician, and famous supporter of the French Revolution.

Wollstonecraft's religious education was informal at best as a child, but the Clares in Hoxton contributed to her Anglican upbringing. Reverend Clare was a retired Anglican clergyman, and he and his wife mentored and tutored Wollstonecraft when she was a teenager. Her father had offered her very little physical security, and we can assume his spiritual leadership was lacking as well. Janet Todd similarly argues that Wollstonecraft "had been nominally raised an Anglican but seems to have had little pious example at home" (Wollstonecraft, *Letters* 54n). In *Memoirs of Wollstonecraft* (1798), Godwin claims that Wollstonecraft's early upbringing was one of neglect, and "the despotism of her education cost her many a heart-ache" (8). Wollstonecraft alluded to this in a letter she wrote to childhood friend Jane Arden in 1780 from Bath when she discussed the Clares. After mentioning her father's "misconduct" in financial matters, she continued: "I must not forget to tell you that I spent some time with a Clergyman and his lady—a very amiable Couple—They took some pains to cultivate my understanding (which had been too much neglected)." Her father's apparent lack of spiritual leadership and lack of concern for Wollstonecraft's education were coupled with physical domination. Godwin states that "[h]er father was a man of quick, impetuous disposition, subject to alternate fits of kindness and cruelty" (7), and that Mary would often intercept blows intended for her mother (9). In much the same

way that her father failed to offer her protection and education, Godwin says, her mother was distant at best: “The mother’s partiality was fixed upon the eldest son . . .” (7). Wollstonecraft was no favourite. She was reared with minimal support as the daughter of a tyrannical father and neglectful mother. Yet, this abandonment and contempt seem to have created within her a fierce independence ensuring that her faith would remain personal and free.

Wollstonecraft first began to drift away from the Anglican Church as a young woman after a stay in Newington Green where she and sisters Eliza and Everina, along with Fanny Blood, attempted to establish a day school. Newington Green was the centre of Rational Dissent, under the influence of Dr Price. His sermon *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789) sparked widespread debate regarding the merits and pitfalls of revolution in its call for limiting the authority of kings and increasing liberty for people, stating, “And now methinks I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience” (50). Significantly, Dr Price’s call for liberty was situated in religion, grounded in reason, and governed by individual conscience. His articulation reflects a wider shift in religious thought that was abandoning unchecked loyalty both to church and to state. This philosophy, a belief in reason guided by conscience, had a marked impact upon Wollstonecraft. According to Moria Ferguson and Janet Todd, this time gave her “fresh ideas about education, pedagogy, and rhetoric. These caused her to reexamine her religious standpoint, at that time in loose conformity with the tenets of broad-church Anglicanism” (6). According to Godwin, she was influenced by Dr Price’s teachings, but her interest “was not accompanied with a superstitious adherence to

his doctrines” (35). Wollstonecraft’s faith was especially inclined to the dissenting adherence to optimistic rationalism.

As non-conformists, then, dissenters were Protestants especially inclined to optimistic critical inquiry. Taylor summarizes the tenets of Rational Dissent: “The most cerebral of the Nonconformist sects, Rational Dissent offered its adherents a bracing brew of Lockean psychology, Newtonian cosmology, rationalist morality and reform politics” (“Religious Foundations” 108). Part of the “reform politics” preached in dissenting circles was the belief in the Christian principle of benevolence. In *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, Dr Price recalled the parable of the Good Samaritan, stating, “Our Lord and his Apostles . . . have recommended that UNIVERSAL BENEVOLENCE . . . They have laid such stress on loving all men, even our enemies, and made an ardent and extensive charity so essential a part of virtue, that the religion they preached may, by way of distinction from all other religions, be called the Religion of Benevolence” (8). Wollstonecraft was attracted to this elevation of benevolence, which she saw as a practical and rational application of her Christian faith.

Wollstonecraft especially seems to have been attracted to Dr Price’s liberal religious perspective that called for benevolent reform. Taylor explains this, describing his teaching as a “radicalised version of neighbourly love” (*Feminist Imagination* 219). Importantly, the neighbourly love he preached from the pulpit extended to his own life. Janet Todd notes that Dr Price was a devoted husband, caring for his invalid wife (Wollstonecraft, *Letters* 78n). For Wollstonecraft, a woman given to good works and inclined to rescue those whom she loved, Dr Price’s goodwill was attractive in part because his teachings supported her view of a benevolent God. Godwin explained her belief in the goodness of God in *Memoirs*

(1798) when he stated, “When she walked amidst the wonders of nature, she was accustomed to converse with her God. To her mind he was pictured not as less amiable, generous and kind, than great, wise and exalted. . . . The tenets of her system were the growth of her own moral taste, and her religion therefore had always been a gratification, never a terror, to her” (33-34). For Wollstonecraft, this view of God nevertheless aligned with her desire to cultivate her spiritual understanding in a rational way.

Wollstonecraft believed humankind to have a God-given ability to reason, and that the ability to reason would lead humankind towards improvement. In *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Wollstonecraft defended her beloved mentor, Dr Price, whose support for the French Revolution had drawn the ire of Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolutions in France* (1790). She chastised Burke: “[T]here are rights which we received, at our birth, as men, when we were raised above the brute creation by the power of improving ourselves—and that we receive these not from our forefathers, but from God . . .” (21). This God-given right—the right to think, and the right to improve the mind—was fundamental to Wollstonecraft’s vision of human understanding.

Her challenge of political and cultural structures was a necessary spiritual discipline for Wollstonecraft: “These lively conjectures are the breezes that preserve the still lake from stagnating” (*VRM*, 2nd ed. 38).¹⁰ Yet for all of these logical assertions that the faculty of human understanding is God-given, and therefore must be exercised for the betterment of humankind, it is her comparison of the fear of

¹⁰ In its entirety, the addition to the second edition of *VRM* reads, “To argue from experience, it should seem as if the human mind, averse to thought, could only be opened by necessity; for, when it can take opinions on trust, it gladly lets the spirit lie quiet in its gross tenement. Perhaps the most improving exercise of the mind, confining the argument to the enlargement of the understanding, is the restless enquiries that hover on the boundary, or stretch over the dark abyss of uncertainty. These lively conjectures are the breezes that preserve the still lake from stagnating” (38).

change to the rejection of Christ that remains the most poignant, as she rebukes Burke, “had you been a Jew—you must have joined the cry, crucify him!—crucify him! The promulgator of a new doctrine, and the violator of old laws and customs, that did not, like ours, melt into darkness and ignorance, but, rested on Divine authority, must have been a dangerous innovator, in your eyes . . .”. Wollstonecraft’s powerful invective strikes a sharp, accusatory tone when she adds, “. . . particularly if you had not been informed that the Carpenter’s Son was of the stock and lineage of David” (*VRM* 21-22). Wollstonecraft’s allusion to Christ’s radicalism informs, then, her own Rational Dissent. Questioning traditional authority, Wollstonecraft embraced innovation—agency—herself.

Wollstonecraft’s faith, fiercely independent, was therefore situated strongly in Christian thought. Scholars such as Taylor have made significant headway in demonstrating the significance of Wollstonecraft’s faith for understanding her politics and have pointed out the ways in which her Christianity has been overlooked by modern scholarship. My study demonstrates the specific ways that Maria, the eponymous heroine of *Wrongs of Woman*, paradoxically embraces the very faith that sanctioned constraining middle-class gender roles. Wollstonecraft consistently uses religious imagery and logic to open up Maria’s options within the novel. And Maria’s agency, limited and largely a simple demonstration of intellectual contemplation, nevertheless undergirds her resistance to an unfavourable marriage.

I next turn in Chapter Two to an examination of Jane Austen’s Fanny Price, who often evokes within readers agreement with the villainous Bertrams who regard her as “so odd and so stupid” (Austen, *MP* 21). Austen characterises Fanny Price as a heroine who exercises her faith in order to influence the outcome of the marriage

narrative which dominates the domestic novel in general, and the Austenian novel, in particular. Jane Austen's faith was deeply personal, but we know from her diary and letters that hers was a traditional Anglican faith practiced daily within the Austen household. Her father George Austen was a respectable and quintessentially Anglican minister, performing his duties faithfully and seemingly well. And while her brother Henry's conversion to Evangelical Anglicanism and eventual entrance into the church as curate certainly had an impact upon her faith, it did not dominate the ways in which she practiced it. The narrative of *Mansfield Park* does, however, directly confront evangelicalism's insistence upon personal transformation.

Jane Austen's devotion to the Anglican Church, as well as her Christian practice, were representative of mainstream Christianity in early nineteenth-century England. Nevertheless, Austen exploits evangelicalism to influence the actions of her heroine Fanny Price. Fanny is also made to wrestle with the challenging force of individualism which gathered significant momentum throughout the early nineteenth century.¹¹ Austen constructs Fanny's response to the crippling individualism around her by firmly situating her actions within orthodox Anglicanism. Nevertheless, evangelicalism, as my thesis will show, equally presses upon the choices Fanny is shown to make within the novel, even though she is not constructed as an evangelical heroine.

¹¹ In *The Culture of Sensibility*, G.J. Barker-Benfield similarly argues that rising individualism correlated with the rising influence of evangelicalism and its call for a reformation in manners, whereby "transcendent self-expression" could be civilized (82). Furthermore, individualism is tied specifically to Protestantism at large. He notes that "Protestantism's aggrandizement of an individual's sense of private self" (83) contrasted with the previous "hierarchy of limited and communal roles mediated by confession . . ." (83). This self-interest also correlated with the rise of the novel. Marilyn Butler argues in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* that interest with individualism was predominant during Austen's lifetime as the novel promoted the exploration of subjective experience (15), as she argues, "over a broad area the form of the novel itself pleads for the individual, for his innate well-meaningness and for his value" (10).

The blurred line between transformation of the heart and reasoned religion, or between Evangelical Anglicanism and orthodox Anglicanism, proved problematic for Austen's contemporaries, and similarly confounds modern scholarship. Lisa Wood reminds us that "evangelicalism itself in the eighteenth century is far from homogeneous and incorporates a range of groups and movements, some within and some outside of Anglicanism" (1). As Valentine Cunningham similarly asserts in *Everywhere Spoken Against, Dissent in the Victorian Novel*, dissent in the nineteenth century was pervasive, and evangelicalism itself was by no means united.¹² Both Anglicanism and evangelicalism as a movement within the Anglican Church, are distinctly Christian, but the emphasis upon individual experience is the key point of differentiation upon which my argument turns. My study of Austen explores the influence of evangelicalism, a faith largely based "on the actions and experiences of the individual" (3). The importance of individual accountability within a given faith had widespread implications because it called for a rigorous examination of personal behaviour. Influential Evangelical Anglican William Wilberforce was particularly concerned that Anglican Church members take responsibility for their individual action. His 1797 treatise is revealing enough in its title, *A practical view of the prevailing religious system of professed Christians, in the higher and middle classes in this country, contrasted with real Christianity*. Wilberforce more than implies that many professed Anglican Christians were not

¹² Though Cunningham asserts that "Primitive" Methodism, a form of Anglican evangelicalism, dominated the period as "the most important Methodist secession group" (26), the fact remains that "the life-blood of Dissent is dissent" (27). This explains, to a degree, why Wesleyan Anglican Evangelicalism, Methodism, Calvinism, the Brethren and the Quakers only touch on the dizzying numbers of "schism[s]" (27) within the dissenting community during the period. Each of the dissenting communities noted here were, without exception, divided within themselves. Though Cunningham adeptly identifies the broad scope of dissenting influence upon Victorian society, and the Victorian novel in particular, this thesis focuses upon Rational Dissent and Unitarianism, both outright departures from orthodox Anglicanism; and also, Wesleyan evangelicalism, Calvinism, and Methodism—of which the latter three religious communities broadly fall under the term "evangelical."

“real” Christians. The reform he called for with other influential evangelicals was a transformation of the heart, or a conversion experience. Wilberforce asserts that for many false Christians, “not to Christianity in particular, but at best to Religion in general, perhaps to mere Morality their homage is intended to be paid” (7). He acknowledges that members of the Anglican community are knowledgeable regarding the precepts of Christianity, but, “[of] practical uses . . . they have few ideas, or none at all” (8). He felt that religion should so internally transform an individual that a change in action would naturally follow.

Wilberforce issued a call for a reformation of the hearts of men that they might be willing and able to perform their duties (25). According to Wilberforce, the “unreserved conversation of [individuals’] confidential hours” reveals true Christianity: “Here, if any where [sic] the interior of the heart is laid open, and we may ascertain the true principles of their regards and aversions; the scale by which they measure the good and evil of life” (11). What he suspected would be found in the interior of the hearts of many who professed to be Christians, however, was an absence of religion: “Here, however, you will discover few or no traces of Christianity. She scarcely finds herself a place amidst the many objects of her hopes, and fears, and joys, and sorrows” (11). As Elisabeth Jay notes, Wilberforce compared “almost” with “altogether” Christians in *Practical View*, imploring Christians to work out their faith. This evangelical appeal to work out one’s faith, notes Jay, “is balanced by language advocating quiet meditation in which reason will play its part in revealing man’s sin” (*Faith and Doubt* 4). As an influential advocate for evangelicalism, Wilberforce promoted this change of heart as a remedy for the hypocrisy he felt was prevalent in early-nineteenth-century England. Yet Austen creates Fanny Price as a character suspicious of improving schemes and

equally adherent to traditional Anglicanism. In fact, we know that Fanny “cannot act” (Austen, *MP* 171), implying that for Fanny, transformation must be absolutely authentic, yet she remains incredulous about such change throughout the novel.

Fanny Price is a heroine whose devotion to the Anglican Church is shown to draw her to Edmund Bertram, its representative within the text, and to prevent her from falling prey to the seductions of worldly-wise Henry Crawford. Fanny’s Anglican faith undergirds her determination to remain constant and steady. She rejects a marriage plot which would propel her into a marriage where her redeeming qualities would cleanse her lover at the expense of her own feeling and conviction. She instead chooses the steady companionship of the Anglican minister. And she fights stubbornly but consistently to bring about this action. Fanny’s “odd and stupid” behaviour is that, I conclude, of a Christian heroine.

While Fanny Price is shown to practice traditional Anglicanism, Helen Huntingdon, the subject of Chapter Three, is a distinctly evangelical heroine. The youngest of the Brontë sisters, Anne Brontë embraced wholeheartedly the evangelicalism practiced by her father, and gives this same faith to the heroine of *The Tenant*. Brontë’s father Patrick Brontë was an Anglican clergyman whose ministry was affected by the teachings of John Wesley. Anne’s faith was additionally affected by her belief in universal salvation, the belief that all souls will eventually be restored to God—a Protestant purgatorial rejection of eternal damnation. This rejection of eternal punishment was fuelled in part by her disgust with the Calvinistic doctrine of election, the belief that Christ’s personal sacrifice was limited and available only to a select few whose salvation was predetermined. In contrast, the belief in universal salvation asserts that Christ’s sacrifice was made

for all, so that even those who do not seek Christ on earth will be refined through a purgatorial afterlife. In the end, all will be saved.

Anne Brontë's evangelicalism was also the product of her upbringing in a household strongly concerned with internal change. However, her profligate brother Branwell challenged the redeeming powers of internal transformation. A slave to destructive personal behaviour, Branwell's physical and spiritual salvation appeared hopeless. Anne's gravitation towards universal salvation seems to have been prompted, in part, by the painful realization of Branwell's persistent despair. She therefore believed that the best path to salvation was one of humble acquiescence to God's precepts, and it is this same belief she gives to the character Helen Huntingdon.

Transformation of the heart, so central to evangelicalism, informs the portrait of Helen Huntingdon who is so certain of the direct path to righteousness, and so certain of her holiness, that she initially believes herself capable of redeeming her deviant spouse. This fallacy is soon exposed, and Helen leans upon the same faith which bolstered her belief in her salvatory potential instead to remove herself from marriage to her wayward husband. She rejects coverture, and acts outside of the law in order to free herself. By doing so, she achieves attenuated autonomy. She recognizes that marriage has neither saved her, nor will it save Arthur Huntingdon. She rejects, then, both spiritual and physical coverture.

Finally, Elizabeth Gaskell, wife of Unitarian minister William Gaskell, embraced wholeheartedly the Unitarian belief in toleration and reform, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four. Shirley Foster explains that "In broad terms, Unitarians rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and denied the divinity of Christ (and thus the doctrine of Atonement), arguing that Jesus was an exemplum, not a

redeeming saviour who intervened on behalf of mankind” (12). She contends that nineteenth-century Unitarians were either followers of Joseph Priestly (1733-1804) who emphasised the rational aspects of faith, or James Martineau (1805-1900), whose approach to faith was based upon “emotion and intuition as well as rational thought” (12). Foster argues that Gaskell’s faith was influenced the most by Martineau. William and Elizabeth Gaskell’s focus upon toleration and reform was nevertheless influenced as well by the evangelical appeal, well established by this point, to the transformation of the heart. Unitarians also denied original sin and this was seen as a heretical form of Christianity by evangelicals. However, both the evangelicals and the Unitarians agreed upon the importance of Christian charity. Priestly, foundational Unitarian, for example, had noted the importance of reform-driven living. In a sermon “On the Duty of not Living to Ourselves” (1791), he exhorted: “If any set of duties shine with particular lustre and make a greater figure than the rest in our holy religion, they are those of humanity and compassion” (Price and Priestly 193). He insists that scripture pays special attention to the “poor and distressed,” stating: “when we undertake those humane and kind offices, we may with more propriety than [in] any other sphere, consider ourselves as acting the glorious part of God’s deputies, and of stewards of the divine grace and goodness here below” (193). Christian charity was part of the very fabric of what it meant to be a Unitarian. This ethic informs Gaskell’s writing. Certainly Gaskell intended her readers to see the heroine Ruth as poor and distressed. But while she intended the reader to see Ruth as uniformly needy, she also gave Ruth free will. The existence of free will, both a secular and religious construct, is dependent upon agency. For the non-Calvinistic evangelical, the Christian who believes that personal action has an impact upon salvation, personal choice informs the individual’s response to God.

Gaskell's own faith was strongly situated in individual spiritual conviction and subsequent action, and she gives Ruth this responsiveness.

But while Gaskell would have seen religious compliance as essential to the development of agency, as a Unitarian, she believed the development of personal conscience was not automatic. Instead, it would be the result of proper moral education. The education of one's conscience would increase spiritual agency, and that internal change would prompt action. Anita Wilson explains: "The Gaskells' shared Unitarian faith emphasized the importance of an individual's reasoning and personal conscience, but such freedom required self-discipline in order to be exercised wisely" (20-21). Elizabeth Gaskell's own life attests to the importance of self-disciplined agency, and her heroine Ruth similarly exercises this same agency when she comes to realize the importance of personal action. While Ruth's conscience is evident in the opening chapters of the text, what she is shown initially to have lacked is the discipline to exercise reasoned, spiritual contemplation to make difficult decisions.

Gaskell's Unitarian faith was sharply criticized by evangelicals because of the denial of the Trinity noted above. Unitarians instead believed in God's superiority over Christ his son and the Holy Spirit. This denial of the triune nature of God created for Unitarians an interpretation of Jesus Christ as a spiritual example, a brother to emulate. This emulation of selfless faith demanded self-sacrifice and hinged upon magnanimous forgiveness. Gaskell's heroines are all shown to be flawed and Ruth is certainly shown to be fallen, but her ability to follow Christ's sacrificial example in order to find personal transformation is distinctly Unitarian in nature. In spite of the criticism Unitarianism received from evangelicals, Gaskell's Unitarianism was nevertheless influenced by the evangelical movement's emphasis

upon transformation of the heart—utilizing evangelical rhetoric to effect change within her heroine.

I argue that Gaskell engaged her Unitarian faith using culturally acceptable evangelical language to create characters who challenged cultural expectations of marriage. For the Victorian Unitarian woman, marriage was one of relative egalitarianism, yet the fact that Gaskell, seemingly embracing Victorian gender ideology, remained a devoted wife often has prompted a dismissal of her work.¹³ In particular, I argue that Ruth rejects the redemptive marriage plot when she frees herself from the narrative of seduction by embracing the very faith that would otherwise subjugate her. Gaskell's Ruth, the fallen woman, paradoxically becomes the ideal Victorian female. In her role as the town nurse, she sacrifices her very life, and thereby physically "saves" both her estranged lover as well as those who would condemn her for her behaviour. She socially redeems herself outside the patriarchal narrative, and she does this by using a profound faith.

The varied forms of faith held by Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë, and Gaskell, then, were similarly influenced by the evangelical movement as we see in their depiction of their heroines. The evangelical movement was the consequence in large part of Charles and John Wesley's itinerant preaching at Anglican congregations throughout England. Though individual responsibility was already a basic premise of the Protestant movement, the evangelical movement expanded this call to assert that spiritual change is a supernatural transformation of one's soul, and

¹³ In "Feminist Critics and Literary mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell," Deanna Davis argues that Gaskell has been dismissed by modern feminists because of Gaskell's focus upon "feminine nurturance" that can be interpreted as both "unappealing" and "traitorous" (507). However, feminist critics have now begun to construct her nurturance, argues Davis, as subversive: "Thus the root of both the feminist neglect and the feminist celebration of Elizabeth Gaskell is the equivocal status of the mother within feminism and feminist criticism themselves" (66), all of which is situated in the paradox inherent in feminism's interpretation of motherhood (509).

the ability to actuate external change was predicated upon this internal change. This concept minimized the necessity for the institutionalization of religion; in other words, it challenged the existing Anglican Church. If religion is at its core an individual, internal change, then external, liturgical processes become attenuated agents of spiritual change. The individual responsibility for actuating change proved to be empowering for women who could then separate themselves from the patriarchal confines of the Anglican Church, autonomously seeking God's assistance in the transformation of their souls. As they did, women were realizing spiritual authority which could then be translated into other aspects of their lives. The call for the transformation of the heart, situated squarely within the evangelical movement, thus became a source of strength for them. Maria, Fanny, Helen, and Ruth all employ their faith better to influence the marriage narrative through resistance. Significantly, each of the authors in my study utilizes the novel to create these heroines who challenged or manipulated existing middle-class gender ideology.

Re-visiting Christianity and Feminism

Other scholars have noted the importance of religion to the lives and works of the individual women writers who are the focus of this work, but my approach specifically examines how the Christian heroines depicted by these authors are shown to appropriate Christian, and oftentimes evangelical, rhetoric to justify agency to surprisingly feminist ends. Taylor, for instance, draws out the critical relevance of Wollstonecraft's Christian faith while pointing out the gaping void in scholarship that acknowledges it and its influence upon her work. She argues that Wollstonecraft's work was unabashedly Christian, and when scholarship fails to acknowledge this much is lost: "The religious bias of Wollstonecraft's radicalism is

its least-explored aspect, yet it is impossible to understand her political hopes, including her hopes for women, outside a theistic framework” (Taylor, *Feminist Imagination* 4). She goes on to point out that Wollstonecraft’s contemporary readers “probably took [her religious bias] for granted” (4) and that secularising this bias is a misreading of her works. Her writing, she contends, is built upon “that unwavering faith in divine purpose that, suffusing her radicalism, turned anticipations of ‘world perfected’ into a confident political stance” (4). The absence of significant scholarship regarding Wollstonecraft’s faith has particular consequences for our understanding of her feminism, as Taylor explains: “If Wollstonecraft’s faith becomes a dead letter to us, then so does much of her feminism, so closely are they harnessed together” (Taylor, “Religious Foundations” 99). My analysis attends directly to this hitherto neglected relationship noted by Taylor, to explicate how Wollstonecraft’s faith had an impact upon the construction of Maria. As noted above, I argue that Wollstonecraft leveraged Christian practice subversively to offer Maria resistance.

Jane Austen’s Christianity, and its influence upon her novels, has been more widely acknowledged. My research specifically demonstrates that Fanny Price, as a conscious agent, differs from other Austen heroines in that her timidity often masks her characterization as a heroine intent upon individual choice. My reading draws on Marilyn Butler’s assertion that “Jane Austen’s novels belong decisively to one class of partisan novels, the conservative” (3); yet, I disagree with Butler’s view that Austen was intellectually “orthodox” (3). *Mansfield Park*, widely considered to be the most religious of Austen’s novels, is clearly engaging with evangelical, and therefore, potentially radical ideas about personal transformation even while representing Anglicanism within the text. Similarly, Austen’s nuanced faith,

grounded in classical Anglican ideas of morality, also acknowledged the redemptive work of Christ—a doctrine especially central to evangelicalism. Jane Austen gives Fanny this grounding in Anglicanism, but the heroine is shown to leverage her faith as she remains actively engaged in resistance, persistently individual. As Alistair Duckworth notes, “Jane Austen declares her belief, not in man as the creator of order but in man’s freedom to create within a prior order” (34). He likewise notes Fanny’s role as a resistant heroine (7). I build on his study to explain how an unlikely heroine, such as Fanny Price, maintains her constancy in a setting marked by changing “improvement.” The realism with which Austen creates Fanny Price, however, can be disarming because Fanny embodies a series of seeming contradictions, demonstrating her status as one of Austen’s most complex heroines. *Mansfield Park* both embraces and confronts contemporary cultural norms, and this tends to confound the modern reader. I agree with Michael Giffin that many critics “find Austen’s intelligent and approving representation of a highly gendered and religious and capitalist world-view they disagree with—and wish to censure or discredit—quite confronting” (2-3). Giffin’s broad approach to Austen informs my analysis of a single character within a single novel: Fanny Price, a troubling Christian heroine. Similarly, Laura Mooneyham White’s work broadly studies Austen’s Anglican faith, and strongly argues that her faith and loyalty to the established Church inform her fiction, but elliptically asserts that the absence of religious allusion is, itself, allusion: “religious decorum . . . itself *prevented* her from making religious material more conspicuous” (40). Instead of relying upon the absence of religion within *Mansfield Park*, I draw out the ways in which Fanny Price intentionally appropriates her Anglican faith in order to resist marriage to the worldly Henry Crawford, and instead to marry Edmund Bertram, the representative

of the Anglican Church within *Mansfield Park*. As a heroine, Fanny Price demonstrates the manipulation of evangelical ideology and rhetoric in order to effect the narrative's conclusion without abandoning her devotion to the established church.

When it comes to scholarship on the Brontës, in comparison with her sisters, Anne Brontë's work has received relatively little attention. Lucasta Miller explains the way that Charlotte Brontë helped push Anne Brontë to the margins of scholarship. Charlotte's reaction to Anne and *The Tenant*, she says, was designed to assuage public criticism of her sister's work; even so, it was Emily, not Anne who received the majority of Charlotte's attention, and Anne "was left on the sidelines" (171). Elizabeth Leaver notes that *The Tenant* is often wrongfully overlooked, and asserts it is "the most controversial and provocative of the seven Brontë novels, and . . . deserves to be repositioned at the centre of the Brontë fiction" (227). The sparse critical attention given to Brontë's novel begs the scrutiny I give it, specifically to demonstrate the provocative nature of Christianity in the text and its role in undergirding the choices Helen is shown to make.

Recently, Brontë's work has more carefully been studied within the religious context that dominated the Victorian era. Marianne Thormählen's seminal work *The Brontës and Religion* most significantly began this investigation. Thormählen boldly argues of *The Tenant*: "[i]n believing that she can save him from his profligate companions and 'recall him to the path of virtue', Helen . . . forgets a central religious tenet . . . While human agents may well assist a fellow creature's efforts to live virtuously, the fundamental desire to improve must originate within the person himself/herself, and only God can inspire it" (83). Helen eventually learns this "central religious tenet." Ironically, however, as this thesis will demonstrate, the

very religion that teaches Helen that she cannot save her husband is the same religion that buttressed the middle-class ideology of self-sacrificial womanhood in Victorian culture. While commentators have long taken an interest in the ways in which Helen disallowed Arthur's possession of her body, Thormählen notes, "what irks him from the first to last is his inability to take possession of her soul" ("The Villain" 837). My argument extends Thormählen's by demonstrating that the spiritual conviction Helen claims ultimately undergirds the physical agency she later asserts. The deeply personal evangelical doctrine of internal transformation, rather than oppressing Helen, offers her the strength necessary to leave her dissolute husband. Her fierce struggle to maintain spiritual autonomy ultimately secures her a measure of physical freedom as well, albeit hedged about with other restrictions. Thus Helen's spiritual independence enables other forms of agency, giving her the determination and courage to make material changes in her life. She acquires this small measure of independence by behaving counter-culturally.

In addition to Thormählen's study, Maria Frawley's *Anne Brontë* has been an important influence upon my argument. She posits that, "Once married, [Helen] attempts to secure her husband's salvation by educating him, finding numerous occasions to remind him of his moral failings, and warning him of the implications for his ultimate redemption" (132). My reading expands greatly upon the depth and breadth of Frawley's brief observations, however, to show the extent to which Victorians saw marriage as redemptive. This, in spite of the reformed Protestant understanding that marriage was not in and of itself sacramental.¹⁴ Even so, the evangelical glorification of marriage suggested that marriage directly contributed to

¹⁴ In *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition* (2012) John Witte Jr explains that Martin Luther denied the sacramental nature of marriage. Instead, Luther and later Protestants interpret marriage as a "social institution," whereas sacrament is a "promise of redemption" (130).

the transformation of the heart necessary for the saving of one's soul. Marriage was not just intended to reform behaviour or physical action. It was also considered a conduit of internal transformation. The expectation of such transformative potential emboldened agency in women, undergirding their own spiritual strength. As Frawley argues, "Helen's religiosity—particularly her belief in duty to God first—allows her to articulate the individuality that her marriage deprives her of" (133). In this way, Helen's individuality becomes an outgrowth of her evangelicalism: Helen "identifies herself as an instrument of God working to reform her husband and secure his salvation" (133). Frawley points out that Brontë shows in *The Tenant* that "angel in the house" rhetoric "seemed to empower women with moral responsibility [but the rhetoric] also proved debilitating" (135); and my research demonstrates that Helen overcomes these potentially debilitating effects, as she instead paradoxically utilises her faith to challenge oppressive gender ideology. I essentially share Frawley's argument, but extend it by focusing upon the physical and spiritual implications of coverture; in order to do so, I provide extensive contextualisation and explication of the role played by faith in the creation of Helen Huntingdon.

Gaskell's Unitarianism has been the subject of critical study by Michael Wheeler, R.K. Webb, and Ruth Jenkins;¹⁵ Amanda Anderson has specifically demonstrated the ways that *Ruth* confronts Victorian culture's depiction of female fallenness. My reading directly builds upon Hilary Schor's argument that *Ruth* challenges readers to re-evaluate their interpretation of the fallen woman by way of the novel: that it "make[s] readers uncomfortable with the story of the abandoned woman they are accustomed to reading. It must present that story as a 'text' to be

¹⁵ See Wheeler, Michael. "Elizabeth Gaskell and Unitarianism." *Gaskell Society Journal* 6 (1992): 15–24; and Webb, R. K. "The Gaskells as Unitarians." *Dickens and Other Victorians: Essays in Honour of Philip Collins*. Edited by Joanne Shattock, 144–171. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1988; and Ruth Jenkins's *Myths of Power*.

interpreted—that is, the novel must remind its readers of interpretation, for Ruth’s ‘story’ is the story of conflicting, powerful interpretations placed on her” (57).

Ruth’s controversial contemporary reception is evidence that, indeed, the novel challenged readers’ perceptions of the fallen woman. The real story, then, is the story of the readers’ reactions to *Ruth*. Gaskell’s novel was meant to challenge the preconceptions of her readers; it was meant to reform the *reaction* to the fallen woman more than reform the fallen woman herself.

The changes evoked within the readers of *Ruth*, I argue, explicitly demonstrate the transformative potential of the novel. As Christine Krueger contends in *The Reader’s Repentance*, Gaskell endorses the heroine as “divinely sanctioned by doing God’s will” (158). Gaskell uses this heroine to give voice to the marginalized fallen woman (159). Krueger notes, then, that Gaskell’s message is not reconciliation, but confrontation. Ruth “has ‘fallen’ outside patriarchal law, but remains within God’s law” (186). In this statement Krueger also articulates the leveraging possibilities of Christian morality which I contend both confronted and supported the Victorian woman. She argues that Gaskell “appreciates the ideological conflicts in scripture which, by contrast with more homogeneous patriarchal narratives, can actually raise feminist consciousness and lead to an evangelical witness on behalf of women” (187). My research extends this argument explicitly to demonstrate the ways in which Gaskell’s heroine appropriates her Christian faith better to become an agent of change. Similarly, Yoko Hatano, argues that Ruth, a redeemable depiction of a Magdalen, challenges prevailing domestic ideology: “By portraying Ruth, who has sinned yet is redeemed in death by her self-sacrifice and saintliness, Gaskell tactfully conveys her plea for fallen angels, a message she has in common with Evangelical magdalenism” (641). While Hatano argues that Ruth’s

death is necessary for her reconciliation to God and man, I contend that Ruth needed no such resolution at the end of the narrative. Instead, her death challenges the judgemental reader who would banish the fallen woman in contemporary society when Mr Bradshaw's pharisaical behaviour is exposed.¹⁶ Ruth's fall was the result of compliance and demonstrates the contradiction Gaskell exposes throughout *Ruth*.¹⁷

In order to historicise my analysis of the novels of Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell, I read them in the context of contemporary religious debates. I also draw upon biographical material to show how the Christian faith of each author informs her fictional narrative. While feminist theory has long noted the ways that religious rhetoric has been manipulated to subjugate women, attention to its enabling effects is wanting. Arguably, it was the feminist uses to which the faith of the heroines was put that drew shocked responses from conservative readers and reviewers. And these uses involved a mixture of responses to the precepts and

¹⁶ Other scholars such as Nataka Freeland have explored the ways in which the fallen woman was an economic strain upon society. In "Ruth's Perverse Economies: Women, Hoarding, and Expenditure" (2003), she argues that by emancipating Ruth from economic exchange, Gaskell is better able to free Ruth from spiritual bondage. By refusing to participate in the economic transaction of marriage, Ruth exposes the spiritual hypocrisy of marriage contracted for economic and social gain (199). Though my reading of the text focuses upon the spiritual implications of marriage and not the economic ones, for the Victorian woman, marriage and money were largely inseparable as Freeland's analysis explains. Sarah Malton similarly notes in "Illicit Inscriptions: Reframing Forgery in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*" (2005) the economic disruption inherent to the fallen woman. Fallen women, she argues, are "marked" as permanently degraded (189). Malton contends that fallenness is often a social construction too closely tied to economic security. Because the fallen woman is often financially desperate, "*Ruth* reveals the fraught but inextricable interrelation between morality and money. It encourages its readers to reconsider fallenness as not merely a moral or a sanitary problem, but an economic circumstance as well" (190). Ruth, then, transgresses in part as a result of her desperation, which was borne out of financial need.

¹⁷ John Kucich contends in "Transgression and Sexual Difference in Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels" (1990) that Gaskell uses the same deviant "transgressive energies" to "revitalize a vision of successful community" (202). This contradictory use of deviance parallels the ways which I contend Gaskell used restrictive religious mores to empower Ruth.

rhetoric associated with the Bible – the source of the era’s overwhelming cultural narrative as Timothy Larsen has shown.¹⁸

Certainly, work on the domestic novel and its role in dominant discourse at the turn of the nineteenth century and throughout the Victorian era is extensive. Yet more work remains to be done regarding the subversive and unexpected ways that Christianity in particular, and religion in general, was used to confront dominant gender ideology and its influence over the novel. But much of Christianity’s influence in the development of proto-feminism remains ignored by modern scholars. The idea that traditional religious practice was, at times, an empowering force when so much rhetoric during the era celebrated Miltonic subservience, seems counterintuitive. I suggest that modern critics should continue to look to the subtle influence of “transformation of the heart” and the ways in which this religious awakening also was a feminist awakening.

¹⁸ Larsen’s work *The People of One Book* (2011) asserts that the Bible established the overwhelming cultural narrative, particularly throughout the Victorian era, claiming that in spite of modern scholarship’s acknowledgement of Biblical influence upon the time, that “the Bible loomed uniquely large in Victorian culture in fascinating and underexplored ways” (1). He claims that in spite of one’s religious inclination, the Bible “mark[ed] the rhythm of life,” becoming “the lens through which people saw their own experiences” (6). The dominance of biblical text, and I argue here, cultural subtext, still begs exploration, particularly in framing the ways in which women approached marriage.

Chapter One:

“Through a Glass Darkly”: Mary Wollstonecraft

and Christian Agency in *The Wrongs of Woman; Or, Maria* (1798)

Why have we implanted in us an irresistible desire to think—if thinking is not in some measure necessary to make us wise unto salvation. Indeed intellectual and moral improvement seem to me so connected—I cannot, even in thought separate them. . . . It is true our reasonings are often fallacious—and our knowledge mostly conjectural—yet these flights into an obscure region open the faculties of the soul. St. Paul says, ‘we see through a glass darkly’—but he does not assert that we are *blind*. (Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters* 120-21)

In 1786, on her long journey to Ireland where she would serve as a governess, Mary Wollstonecraft’s travelling companion, with whom she would correspond for years to come, was a young clergyman, Henry Dyson Gabell. From Dublin on 16 April 1787, Wollstonecraft wrote the above to Gabell, asserting that rigorous thought was an act of faith. In this letter, Wollstonecraft outlines the principles that influenced her faith throughout her lifetime: intelligent rationality and critical inquiry. For Wollstonecraft, spirituality was inherently rational. And in her critical inquiry into the metaphysical, she was assured by St. Paul’s words: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12, KJV). Wollstonecraft’s reference to Paul is a purposeful irony here. Rejecting the cultural obsession with Pauline strictures against women and ministry, Wollstonecraft utilises her Christian faith to enter into dialogue with Gabell, a young male clergyman. She sees darkness, or doubt, as an opportunity to practice reason and to contemplate God, while her Christian faith undergirds her intellectual pursuits. That is to say, her faith informs the active critical thinking that was the hallmark of her ongoing inquiry. The heroine Maria, the title character of her unfinished novel *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798),

acts according to the same principles. Maria manipulates her Christian faith to achieve a spiritual transcendence of her circumstances. Stripped of physical agency, specifically the legal ability to act on behalf of herself, Maria nonetheless interrogates the marriage plot by which she is imprisoned in the text's opening by spiritually disentangling herself from the sacred union. In the process, she paradoxically leverages the same Christian faith that contemporary culture would manipulate to obligate and bind her to her marriage and subservience, instead to imagine a means of salvation.

As the introduction to this thesis has noted, Wollstonecraft described her practice of critical inquiry as “restless,” writing: “Perhaps the most improving exercise of the mind, confining the argument to the enlargement of understanding, is the restless enquiries that hover on the boundary, or stretch over the dark abyss of uncertainty” (Wollstonecraft *VRM* 2nd ed. 38). This restless enquiry informed Wollstonecraft's religious contemplation. She implied that even when clarity evades us, the act of thinking improves us. In this assertion, an addition to the second edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), she contended that reason, when dormant, diminishes “moral excellence” (38). The habit of critical inquiry prompted ongoing shifts and transitions in Wollstonecraft's faith, so that her Christianity defied clean theological lines. Her Christianity was messy and complex as William Godwin captured in his assertion in *Memoirs of the Author of Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) that: “her religion was almost entirely of her own creation” (34). In this assertion, Godwin clarified for his readers that Wollstonecraft's faith was boldly personal. But he sparked long-standing confusion when he also explained that “Her religion was, in reality, little allied to any system of forms; and, as she has often told me, was founded rather in taste, than in the

niceties of polemical discussion” (33). Unfortunately, Godwin failed to appreciate the rational arguments for faith that Wollstonecraft practiced throughout her lifetime. In fact, Wollstonecraft valued taste, sensibility, *and* reason when considering her faith, as is clear in the letter she wrote to her sister Everina on 9 October, 1786, which urged that her sibling should, “Try to cultivate a taste for religion—read the scriptures and you will soon relish them” Wollstonecraft also, I argue, *cultivated* her religious faith. To cultivate is “to improve and render fertile by husbandry” (*OED*); in other words, as she directed Everina, faith becomes manifest in active contemplation through the reading of scripture.

By asserting that Wollstonecraft’s faith was grounded in taste, Godwin at once minimised its rational basis and condescendingly described her as a sentimental female, the very type of woman Wollstonecraft railed against. As Taylor has previously explained, “the idea of a uniquely feminine emotionality was anathema to her, a central target of her feminism” (*Feminist Imagination* 97). The fact is, Godwin found it nearly impossible to reconcile the emotional components of Wollstonecraft’s religion with her commitment to rational argument. Godwin seemed to be suggesting that “taste,” a conventionally feminised attribute, was partially responsible for Wollstonecraft’s religious sentiments. Godwin’s interpretation of Wollstonecraft’s faith set in motion a long-standing misunderstanding of Wollstonecraft’s Christianity that has not fully been overcome.

In much the same way that Godwin struggled fully to comprehend Wollstonecraft’s faith, it can be troubling for modern feminists and scholars to account for Wollstonecraft’s Christianity. The perceived tension between Wollstonecraft’s faith and feminism, as Taylor has pointed out, is perhaps one reason why her Christianity has been marginalised in modern, predominantly secular

feminist literary scholarship. Yet, even Wollstonecraft's own relationship with her faith was vexed. Wollstonecraft's Christianity, grounded in the practice of critical inquiry and reflection, often made her distrustful of traditional Anglican Christianity, especially if its expression became ceremonial. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)¹, she built upon her earlier complaint in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) that “religion, confounded with irksome ceremonies and unreasonable restraints, assumes the most ungracious aspect: not the sober austere one that commands respect whilst it inspires fear; but a ludicrous cast, that serves to point a pun” (370). This statement makes obvious her mistrust of the institutions of religion. Still, her evident Christianity challenged contemporary conventions of womanhood that would strip women of their intellect: “What has she to reflect about who must obey?” (VRW 196). Her Christianity is evident despite her disputes with the organised church as an institution and its insistence upon female submission. She shared this concern with many radical political and public thinkers of the 1790s including her mentor Dr Richard Price. While she was a member of the dissenting community rather than a traditional Anglican, her Christianity had a marked impact upon her personal character and radical ideology.

Wollstonecraft's faith and feminism were as unique and rebellious as she was herself, making this seeming incongruence bothersome to onlookers, but acceptable to her. Wollstonecraft challenged Paul² by publicly asserting her

¹ As previously noted, subsequently referenced as *Vindication* and cited parenthetically as VRW.

² Of course, Wollstonecraft was not alone in this. Other women writers were confronting the manipulation of religious rhetoric to justify the subjugation of women. Mary Hays complained in *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain on Behalf of Woman* (1798), for example, that women were kept in “PERPETUAL BABYISM” (97). Hays's novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) further asserted the philosophical and religious independence of women. Mary Robinson's *Thoughts on the Condition of Women, and on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799) decried against “the long established laws of custom, [that] have decreed [woman] passive” (8). Barbara Taylor's “Gallic Philosophers” in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* fully details the radicals of the 1790s who shared and challenged Wollstonecraft's proto-feminist views.

interpretation of scripture in much the same way she publicly challenged her male contemporaries and contemporary Christian practice. Yet in order better to understand her, we must accept a simple fact: Wollstonecraft was a Christian feminist. And while there is no question that Wollstonecraft drifted away from the loosely enforced Anglicanism of her youth and towards Rational Dissent, she undoubtedly practiced Christianity throughout the entirety of her lifetime. Her ideas about faith and marriage transitioned, and in the latter years of her life, when she wrote *Wrongs of Woman*, she was certainly disillusioned,³ but that disillusionment does not prove an abandonment of faith.

Taking Wollstonecraft's Christian feminism as it informed her convictions about women and marriage as its focus, this chapter demonstrates how her final, unfinished novel *Wrongs of Woman* leverages Christianity to offer spiritual transcendence to the title character. Maria's agency is situated in the personal nature of Christian faith that requires individual action. Specifically, Maria's physical and spiritual salvation are both prompted by the renewing of her mind⁴, a very specific evangelical construct utilized by Wollstonecraft to evoke this radical transformation. Maria cultivates her ability to think critically in order to actuate change within herself as an independent force. Specifically, Maria becomes wilfully unfettered to marital obligation. In this, the novel is not making a straightforward call for physical agency; rather it makes a call for spiritual conviction that prompts change as well. It is a call for spiritual agency as a prerequisite for subsequent action; Maria must act. Maria seeks change, in part, through her relationship with the texts supplied to her

³ As Barbara Taylor notes, towards the end of Wollstonecraft's life, though she abandoned orthodox Anglicanism, her commitment to her own faith was strengthened "to what had become a highly personal faith" (*Religious Foundations* 100).

⁴ Romans 12:2, KJV "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

by Jemima and which prompt her transformation. Also, Maria and Jemima exchange narrative better to reform one another. She is reader of text, a reader of marginalia, and a literal writer of letters. This interaction with text prompts Maria metaphorically to revise her own life in order to transcend her circumstances. This means that though Maria is shackled in a literal prison, her mind cannot be bound.

By using the novel as a vehicle to imagine such transcendence, Wollstonecraft faces a twofold challenge. First, *Wrongs of Woman* rejects the marriage plot, one commonplace construct central to the contemporary novel. Maria's salvation is not found in marriage; but rather, in its dissolution. Secondly, Wollstonecraft's use of the novel, a genre she famously viewed with suspicion, manipulates the narrative to demonstrate the "wrongs of woman," and thus directly challenges the unrealistic ideal of womanhood generally found in the novel by depicting the oppressive consequences of uneducated womanhood, and it interrogates the complicit nature of women who refuse to think critically about marriage. In the preface to *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft tenaciously argued on behalf of women for the right to personal development: "the hero is allowed to be mortal, and to become wise and virtuous as well as happy, by a train of events and circumstances. The heroines, on the contrary, are to be born immaculate; and to act like goddesses of wisdom, just come forth highly finished Minervas from the head of Jove" (73). Wollstonecraft chastised this unrealistic, oppressive expectation of perfection. Instead, she argued that women should actively be engaged in personal growth, thus becoming intellectual and, consequently, spiritual agents. The heroine Maria demonstrates this ideal. Without such agency, Wollstonecraft demonstrates that the sacred union is corrupt. The argument that marriage offers women protection becomes precarious at best as women, often uneducated, find themselves

exploited. Maria's relationship with Venables demonstrates in narrative Wollstonecraft's assertion that marriage mirrors prostitution. Further, Wollstonecraft confronts, through Maria, the vexed nature of sexuality within marriage, and its manipulative possibilities. Ultimately, Maria imagines personal salvation, both physically and spiritually after immersing herself in reading. Maria is assisted in imagining and then actuating personal change in tandem with Jemima, a woman whose status as a socially inferior woman confirms that agency must be embraced by all women. This companionship suggests the need for widespread political change. At the same time, Maria benefits from the protection of her benevolent uncle, offering her readers a picture of a faux marital union, but one that depicts an ideal picture of interdependence. After her escape from the asylum, Maria finds that external protection is a fallacy, and therefore she is only under the authority of self; her salvation is autonomous. This salvation transcends and transforms her physical circumstances, because Maria's best hope for physical and spiritual security is outside of marriage.

Rejecting Blind Submission: Spiritual Disentanglement

Acknowledging her physical bondage, the title character of *Wrongs of Woman* clearly demonstrates the importance of agency, or personal action, when she declares intentional spiritual disentanglement from her immoral husband, saying, "He cut the Gordian knot which my principles, mistaken ones, respected; he dissolved the tie, the fetters rather, that ate into my very vitals—and I should rejoice, conscious that my mind is freed, though confined in hell itself; the only place that even fancy can imagine more dreadful than my present abode" (139). The mistaken principles Maria references reflect contemporary expectations of female

subservience, particularly within marriage. But Maria declares that although she is physically restricted, she is spiritually free.

Wollstonecraft believed that agents⁵ should exercise their free will to act on behalf of self and others. Individual female authority over spiritual matters had been a subject of debate among women writers for some time. Mary More (d. c. 1713), Mary Astell (1666-1731), and Mary Wollstonecraft were only three notable women of a multitude who entered the discussion. They argued that spiritual transformation was unique to the individual: it was autonomous. Mary More's early treatise "The Woman's Right" (1680) asserted that women were equal before the fall, proving the subsequent equality of their souls. But, as Sarah Apetrei notes, since they were excluded from religious ministry and education, they were denied that equal right (8). As referenced in the introductory chapter, Astell's *A Serious Proposal* followed, proclaiming the same gender equality of the soul. Astell concluded that females had equal access to divine knowledge: "[S]he is GOD's Workmanship, endow'd by him with many excellent Qualities, and made capable of Knowing and Enjoying the Sovereign and only Good; so that her Self-Esteem does not terminate in her Self but in God, and she values her self only for God's sake" (233). Astell thus explained that women were capable of independent, autonomous knowledge of God. According to this premise, free and equal access to God was individually actuated and unmediated. The logical conclusion to this theological idea was that women did not require priests, fathers *or* husbands to access their maker. According to Apetrei, Astell argued that "[t]he pattern of subordination and domination had emerged from men's exploitation of their animal physicality and not from any rational superiority"

⁵ As the introduction has explained, in *Vindication* Wollstonecraft alludes to the importance of agency by contending that wives should be as active as their husbands. Just as a husband should fulfill the "the duties of a citizen," so too "his wife, also an active citizen, should be equally intent to manage her family, educate her children, and assist her neighbours" (333).

(132). The attempt to deny women free access to God, then, was a way for men to maintain control over women, and as far as Astell was concerned, was illogical at best. Astell made clear the aims of her proposal: “Its aim is to fix that Beauty, to make it lasting and permanent, which Nature with all the helps of Art cannot secure: and to place it out of the reach of Sickness and Old Age, by transferring it from a corruptible Body to an immortal Mind” (51). Astell’s *A Serious Proposal* called for the spiritual education of women: to nurture their minds. It was a call for intellectual reasoning, which she felt would lead them to independent salvation.

Wollstonecraft later echoed Astell’s proposal that education would promote spiritual autonomy. This concept was undergirded, in part, by Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). Locke had famously proposed that man was born as a *tabula rasa*, or a blank slate, and thus proper educational practices were crucial for forming children’s minds to constructive ends. What Locke proposed for his male counterparts, women logically applied to themselves as well. Such was the case with Astell, and later Wollstonecraft. As Barker-Benfield argues, “The corollary of Locke’s assumption that human minds were born as if they were blank sheets of paper was the unleashing of the power to shape their own lives” (2). If women, too, were blank slates, then improving their educational opportunities would be beneficial not only for the improvement of their minds as autonomous beings, but would also reform the social and political landscape for men as women became mothers and raised a nation of citizens.⁶

⁶ Ann Mellor’s *Mothers of the Nation* speaks to this point, arguing that in England between 1780-1830, women held significant influence over the private sphere, championing “moral virtue and an ethic of care”, and ultimately “infiltrating and finally dominating the discursive public sphere during the Romantic era” (11). In particular, she argues that women writers were fully engaged in the public sphere, influentially “shaping public opinion” (144).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762) was similarly a pivotal document in the revolutionary awakening that would dominate the times in which Wollstonecraft lived. It articulated the role that the government might perform as a vehicle of freedom rather than as an enforcer of subjugation. In this treatise, Rousseau stated, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they" (1). This finely phrased liberating cry was circulated relentlessly. Yet as Wollstonecraft knew all too well, Rousseau's word choice, *man*, quite specifically referenced males, and not females. This became abundantly clear when Rousseau elucidated that "The family then may be called the first model of political societies: the ruler corresponds to the father, and the people to the children; and all, being born free and equal, alienate their liberty only for their own advantage" (2). Rousseau's assertion compared the rule of a political sovereign to the rule of the patriarchal lord: Rousseau saw the family as a microcosm of the state; in both, women played the role of subordinates.⁷

However, Wollstonecraft challenged women to forgo such blind submission. Their expected subordination was the consequence of twofold action. First, men were denying women a proper education that would accelerate equal citizenship, and secondly, women were willingly submitting to an inferior state of mind and existence. Wollstonecraft believed in universal rights, and made her call for a "REVOLUTION in female manners" (VRW 92) as a platform for her argument that reason and capability were of no sex. She imagined a woman who had been "trained up to obedience" who nevertheless was married to a benevolent man, "a sensible

⁷ John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762) both form the basis of the social contract theory from which both Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft drew the most heavily in their attempt to advocate for the placement of women in a relatively equitable position within society.

man, who directs her judgment, without making her feel the servility of her subjection” (99). Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft argued, a husband’s life could not be guaranteed, as “he may die and leave her with a large family.” Wollstonecraft recognized the danger for such a helpless woman, contending, “A double duty devolves on her; to educate them in the character of both father and mother; to form their principles and secure their property. But, alas! She has never thought, much less acted for herself” (99). Wollstonecraft concluded that even in a benign scenario with a benevolent husband, women left themselves open to exploitation due to wilful ignorance. She told her audience that this revolution of manners lay within. It required women first to *think*, in order to *act*. The ability to think clearly would pave the way for egalitarian ideals. Instead of privileging blind obedience, Wollstonecraft desired that women apply reason to action.

Wollstonecraft and many of her contemporaries in the dissenting community such as Godwin and Mary Hays did not, in fact, see women as “naturally subordinate.” However, many women accepted this “natural” subordination blindly. Even so, Joanne Bailey asserts that the rhetoric which drove the rally against marital oppression during the late eighteenth century did not necessarily reflect broad revolutionary cries. She claims that modern scholars are prone to overemphasize the perception of gender inequalities during the period claiming the practical experiences of married women of the period were more pragmatically motivated than modern scholarship tends to acknowledge: “The benefits of marriage for both men and women . . . outweighed any of its disadvantages. Husbands and wives were not puppets of an unfair gender order, but reacted to and against the circumstances of life cycle, social and financial status, and changing ideologies. They determined themselves whether they had quiet lives” (204). Wollstonecraft, however, directly

engaged the “changing ideologies” Bailey references, arguing in *Wrongs of Woman* that many women were denied “quiet lives.” Widespread change was necessary to correct cultural and legal standards which potentially, and practically, left women defenceless.

In *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft confronts the defencelessness of women, and in particular, the inequitable nature of the marriage union as it stood in the 1790s. As Stone explains, women had been defined since the beginning of the eighteenth century as devoid of selfhood once they entered the marriage union (136). Theologians preached the same, reminding men of women’s subordinate status, and their fault in the fall of man (138). And Stone asserts that while the public rhetoric promoted this subordination, private realities were not always of this nature: “All that is claimed here is that the theoretical and legal doctrines of the time were especially insistent upon the subordination of women to men in general, and to their husbands in particular, and that many women accepted these ideas” (139). Wollstonecraft’s creation of Maria, who would not be intellectually subordinate to her husband, reflected a shifting of societal norms that challenged the widespread promotion of this subjugation.

On a practical level, women struggled for authority, not only over their individual persons and property, but also over their spiritual lives. Wollstonecraft sharply challenged such spiritual control. But Wollstonecraft did not merely challenge the principle of hierarchy and the incongruous expectation of devotion it excited, but she disdained the misuse of power by the corrupt. This misappropriation of power was evident in the state, but she saw this corruption in the church as well, leaving her terribly disillusioned. She became a dissenter in part due to the widespread corruption and privilege she saw within the church and partly in

opposition to the arbitrary authority the Anglican Church claimed. She addressed unworthy political privilege in *Vindication of the Right of Men* when she challenged Burke regarding his political viewpoints. She further complained to Burke that the church, along with the country, was overstepping its bounds: “You love the church, your country, and its laws, you repeatedly tell us, because they deserve to be loved; but from you this is not a panegyric: weakness and indulgence are the only incitements to love and confidence that you can discern, and it cannot be denied that the tender mother you venerate deserves, on this score, all your affection” (116-117). The church, as an extension of her country, had failed Wollstonecraft in its weakness. She mocks the epithet, “OUR SOVEREIGN lord THE King” (39), by asking, “[W]hoever at divine service, whose feelings were not deadened by habit, or their understandings quiescent, ever repeated without horror the same epithets applied to a man and his Creator?” (39). Here, Wollstonecraft asserts that it is only God who deserves one’s total devotion. To apply that devotion to another human being, even one’s king or queen, she implies, is sacrilegious.

Misapplied devotion, sanctioned by the Anglican Church, informed the institution of marriage— a patriarchal institution in need of reform. Wollstonecraft’s faith offered practical solutions to the subjugation of women in the marital union, and in *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft demonstrated this reality. Maria is shackled to a husband whom she considers an inferior being, and writes in the memoir to her daughter, “Men who are inferior to their fellow men, are always most anxious to establish their superiority over women” (147). But bound by law, Maria has no choice but to obey her unworthy husband, “as a victim to the prejudices of mankind, who have made women the property of their husbands . . .” (146). The state, as well as the church, was complicit in this appointment of authority to the

husband in spite of obvious disparities in moral worthiness. “Lordship,” a corruption of what Wollstonecraft saw as a divine privilege belonging to God alone, was instead arbitrarily assigned based upon birthright or gender. Wollstonecraft urged: “Let us then, as children of the same parent. . . reason together, and learn to submit to the authority of reason” (VRW 225). Women, who would exercise reason alongside their husbands, should be, she argued, elevated as citizens of the state, and as partners in marriage.

However, during the 1790s, women who sought to be agents of change were often left with a crippling disadvantage: their education did not properly train them to be, as Mellor describes, “mothers of the nation.”⁸ Women were, in fact, wielding influence, but in order to do this well, they needed to be educated. The problem this created for men, however, was that as women gained greater levels of education, men were more likely to be challenged and held accountable for their own moral choices and actions. The political authority held by men, came into check because as women grew in their own sense of intellectual authority, many came to question their arbitrary subjugation. Within the marital union and its growing companionate ideal, the transference and distribution of authority was not willingly relinquished, but calls for reform touched dominant discourse.

In part, this reform was championed nearly a century after Astell’s forward-looking *A Serious Proposal*. For Wollstonecraft’s title character Maria, the central question was whether or not she maintained ultimate authority over her spiritual

⁸ As alluded to in the previous footnote, Mellor challenges historians and literary scholars to rethink the perception of limited roles women played in the formation of public life in the second half of the eighteenth century, and asserts that men and women did not exist in exclusively public and private spheres. Instead, she claims, “It may be time to discard this binary, overly simplistic concept of separate sexual spheres altogether in favour of a more nuanced and flexible conceptual paradigm that foreground the complex intersection of class, racial, and gender differences in this historical period” (7). Growing consumerism, she claims, put women in an interesting position of control: “Increasingly, women came to determine the social status—and thus the access to political influence—of other women and their husbands” (9).

choices. Maria certainly exclaims against her political subjugation, but what concerns her the most is the way that marriage threatens her spiritually. Earlier, in *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft was exploring theological questions of free will versus predestination, power versus subordination, and dependence versus autonomy. All three questions hinged upon personal liberty and personal spiritual conviction. Denying women the education needed to think critically was denying them the opportunity to learn and to take responsibility for their very souls. In *Vindication* Wollstonecraft argued: “[I]f it be allowed that women were destined by Providence to acquire human virtues, and by the exercise of their understandings, that stability of character which is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes upon, they must be permitted to turn to the fountain of light, and not forced to shape their course by the twinkling of a mere satellite” (34-35). She asserted here that it was a providential imperative to develop virtue, but that that opportunity was denied women forced into subservience.⁹ She felt that the exercise and development of reason and spirituality were inextricably connected, and were not, by definition, gender-specific.

Several of Wollstonecraft’s female contemporaries also engaged in public dialogue regarding the role of women in marriage. Among them was Wollstonecraft’s critic Hannah More. While their viewpoints were often at odds, and their mutual regard cold, Wollstonecraft and More’s goals were, in fact, similar. Both Wollstonecraft and More envisioned better educational practices for women of their day, and both were disgusted with the marriage market, which seemed to value, in potential wives, ignorance rather than intelligence and empty accomplishments

⁹ In the words Ferguson and Todd, Wollstonecraft saw the exercise of reason as a spiritual right that must be extended to men and women alike, as, “in Wollstonecraft’s view, the degraded situation of women affronts the God who created men and women in his own image” (67).

rather than the cultivation of minds. If Wollstonecraft was an influential female voice of Rational Dissent during her lifetime, her contemporary More was her conservative evangelical counterpart. Wollstonecraft's status as a radical dissenting Christian and More's status as a conservative evangelical place them at quite opposite poles on the spectrum of Christian doctrine, yet their philosophies were so intertwined that it is hardly possible to reference More without relating her life and work to Wollstonecraft, and vice versa. Even so, More was applauded for not having ever read Wollstonecraft's famous *Vindication*. In fact, according to Harriet Guest, "Horace Walpole wrote congratulating Hannah More on not having read the *Vindication*" (273). Wollstonecraft and More differed, in part, in that More saw the end of female education solely for the betterment of the nation's wives and mothers as helpmates to men; Wollstonecraft argued for the betterment of women first as individuals *as well as* wives and mothers.

Wollstonecraft saw the widespread over-glorification of marriage as promoting a temporal, worldly goal, one which failed to account for the spiritual essence of women. In *Vindication* she sarcastically charged, "If all the faculties of woman's mind are only to be cultivated as they respect her dependence on man; if, when she obtains a husband she has arrived at her goal, and meanly proud, is satisfied with such a paltry crown, let her grovel contentedly" (62). But More did not question the restriction of women to familial roles. In *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), she explained the profession of ladies as "that of daughters, wives, mothers, and mistresses of families" (1:98), and felt that their education should reflect this. What does a man want? "It is not merely a creature who can paint, and play, and dress, and dance; it is a being who can comfort and counsel him; one who can reason and reflect, and feel, and judge, and discourse, and

discriminate; one who can assist him in his affairs, lighten his cares, sooth his sorrows, strengthen his principles, and educate his children” (1:98). She felt that the education commonly afforded to ladies centred on accomplishments that “too much resembles that of an actress” (1:105). More saw “indolence of mind” (1: 114) as “frequently mistaken for the Christian graces of patience, meekness, and forbearance” (1:115), demonstrating the importance of active thought. Thus, More’s conservative evangelical perspective and Wollstonecraft’s Rational Dissent were both impacted by gender politics. Kathryn Sutherland agrees that their differing perspectives changed the way More and Wollstonecraft viewed the role of women: “For More, the assertion that social arrangements are as they are by virtue of divine authority serves to constitute the female position not as the weak point in the structure but the anchor” (41). With this in mind, she sought to educate women fully to accept their domestic roles, and attempted to elevate this domesticity to a position of influence. Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, saw education as a vehicle “to maximise their potential as rational beings and to minimise their dependence on the life of the senses . . .” (41). For More, the education of women was essential to elevate their minds, but the end of this elevation was service to men. Wollstonecraft’s vision of education was not so that women could *serve* men, but so that women could be their equal *companions*.

Complete emancipation from male influence, however, was not entirely Wollstonecraft’s goal because such freedom was an almost unfathomable political reality. Instead, along with Astell, Hays, and in a somewhat different way More, she argued for the spiritual and intellectual equality of women. These women sought to right the wrongs of women for their generation and for generations to follow. They rallied for both the private and public elevation of women as individuals. Their goal

was that women's spiritual identities would not be consumed or overshadowed by their male counterparts. Personal agency, acting on behalf of oneself, was required for autonomous self-realisation. For Wollstonecraft, independence from unjust social and political structures began with personal faith.

Wollstonecraft's concern with reform is demonstrated in her heroine Maria who bemoans the political and cultural structures that would inhibit her agency. Contemplating the painful and declining state of her marriage, Maria asks, "Why was I not born a man, or why was I born at all?" (*Wrongs* 139). In a very real sense, Maria had become a "victim" of marriage. But her eventual agency would be situated within the spiritual choices she would make; choices made possible by her critical thinking. It was this thinking which would allow Maria ultimately to manipulate the marriage plot that paradoxically structured her very characterisation as a heroine.

Transcendent Intellectualism: Maria's Contemplations

Wollstonecraft was particularly at odds with the romantic delusions created by the novel as a genre, which generally sacrificed the development of the heroine's intellect to the ultimate goal of marriage. Writing to her daughter, the heroine Maria complains that novelists often mistake compliance for virtue, saying, "When novelists or moralists praise as virtue, a woman's coldness of constitution, and want of passion; and make her yield to the ardour of her lover out of sheer compassion, or to promote a frigid plan of future comfort, I am disgusted" (*Wrongs* 153). Maria's disgust is at the complacency that drives the conduct that she deems immoral and the behaviour that would sacrifice intellect for marital security. This error, she claims, is situated in an inactive mind. These women lack, she says "*active* sensibility, and

positive virtue” (153). The terms “active” and “positive,” italicised by Wollstonecraft for emphasis, of course, connote agency. Both are intentional actions applied to the development of morality, and for Wollstonecraft, are religiously motivated. Mary Wollstonecraft uses the novel form, and *Wrongs of Woman* specifically, to challenge women to embrace intellectual reasoning situated in spiritual rational inquiry to confront their complicit subjugation; and by doing so, ultimately to reject marriage as the ultimate narrative solution.

Instead of pursuing marriage as the goal of female existence, Wollstonecraft wanted women primarily to educate themselves with the goal of moral virtue. She argued, “Without knowledge there can be no morality!” (VRW 134). Wollstonecraft was particularly concerned with the type of knowledge young women were acquiring through reading. In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) she cautions against frivolous reading, stating, “Those productions which give a wrong account of the human passions, and the various accidents of life, ought not to be read before the judgment is formed, or at least exercised” (50), and then warns against the novel when she says, “Gallantry is made the only interesting subject with the novelist; reading, therefore, will often co-operate to make his fair admirers insignificant” (51). Wollstonecraft’s very early Christian premise in *Thoughts*—that reason is the first principle of proper judgement—stood to the very end of her life; however, her creation of Maria suggests that she was ultimately disillusioned about reason’s ability to transform the individual fully. In fact, Maria’s perfect lucidity is so unusual that she is, practically speaking, a social deviant. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft varies the novel’s usual trajectory to create a heroine whose actions, while socially unusual, are rooted in Christian principles. Maria’s religious faith, the same faith that culture would use to bind her to her husband, paradoxically propels

her to flee from her marriage thus subverting the usual trajectory of the novel genre's insistence upon marriage as a primary narrative solution.

Wollstonecraft felt that women were to some extent responsible for their own intellectual inferiority because they internalised the logic of the sentimental literature to which they turned and its central marriage plot. In *Thoughts*, she writes explicitly about this danger: "Reading is the most rational employment, if people seek food for understanding, and do not read merely to remember words Judicious books enlarge the mind and improve the heart" (49). Without logical understanding, however, Wollstonecraft is even wary of such works as Milton, Pope, and Shakespeare if the reader lacks the ability to discern meaning. She is concerned that the uneducated "could not enter into the spirit of those authors, or understand them" (53). Yet the inability to rise to a level of meaningful understanding was denied women whose education was deficient.¹⁰ Interestingly, Wollstonecraft used *Wrongs of Woman* as a platform, through the novel, to express the dangers of the very genre she utilized. Maria, the novel's heroine, has a vexed relationship with self-education. For while her reading promotes her agency as it activates her intellectual faculties, it also propels her into intellectual disunion with Venables. Further, it was not simply reading that Wollstonecraft, requires of Maria, but rather, the reading of "proper" books.

Wollstonecraft was specifically concerned with the disordered thinking promoted by romance and sentimental literature—fiction that encouraged female readers to refine upon feelings rather than to cultivate reasoned principles. She was

¹⁰ Daniel O'Quinn argues this "educational confinement" was explained in *Vindication*, but came to life in *Wrongs of Woman*. O'Quinn asserts that in *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft showed how Maria's self-delusion was complete when she transferred her fantastic desires upon Venables, mistaking his seduction as acts of kindness (772). And this delusion was possible due to her education at the hands of the "novel." Maria is incapable of rational thought; as such, she is truly "mad." While being deluged by fiction offers Maria an escape, it contributes to her imprisonment.

less suspicious of the novel in general, a genre she herself utilised cautiously. Her concern was with the total abandonment of sound educational practices often reflected in the novel that left women dependent and helpless. She articulated this objection in *Vindication*: "‘Educate women like men,’ says Rousseau, ‘and the more they resemble our sex the less power they will have over us.’ This is the very point I am at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (134).

Both *The Female Reader* (1789) and *Thoughts* attest to Wollstonecraft’s desire that women choose texts and genres well and apply critical thought whilst reading. In *Thoughts* she gives some cursory advice regarding the choice of books, she ultimately concludes, “I recommend the mind’s being put into a proper train, and then left to itself. Fixed rules cannot be given, it must depend upon the nature and strength of the understandingThe mind is not, cannot be created by the teacher, though it may be cultivated, and its real powers found out.” (54). Once the mind is cultivated, “The mind set to work, may chuse books for itself, for every thing will then instruct” (51-52). With the faculty of critical thought intact, women would gain the ability to read critically, discern, and as she says, have power “over themselves” (134). Similarly, Vivien Jones explains that in *The Female Reader*, Wollstonecraft made recommendations in order for young ladies to “read well” (130), and to “awaken affections and fix good habits” (131). Jones explains Wollstonecraft’s approach: “[She] begins her course of improving reading with questions of difference and sameness: implicit approval of a gendered division of social responsibility is followed by a concern that women have allowed difference to render their minds ‘despicable’” (133). But in *Wrongs of Woman*, by choosing educational tools to assuage the pains of an aggrieved mother, Wollstonecraft demonstrated her belief in the power of the intellect.

Indeed, in the asylum, Maria's education, through proper reading, trains her to have power over herself, and is situated strongly in Christian principles that are in stark contrast to the potential madness that threatens Maria's agency. Wollstonecraft turned the sentimental novel against itself when she wrote *Wrongs of Woman* and allowed her heroine initially to fall into fantastical delusion whereby Maria loses self-command. In the opening lines of the narrative, Maria is found confined to the asylum, a "mansion of despair," psychologically bound in "[s]urprise, astonishment, that bordered on distraction [which] seemed to have suspended her faculties, till, waking by degrees to a keen sense of anguish" (74). Maria's anguish is not simply due to her confinement to the asylum, or to the loss of her daughter, but is the result of the choices she made to lead to such an existence. Maria's initial wilful anti-rationalism is seen in Maria more than once before she "awakens" to critical thought. This awakening mimics the evangelical "transformation of the heart" but uses the mind as the vehicle for change. After her reckless marriage to Venables fails, Maria continues to struggle properly to apply reason to her choices. Similarly, in both a physical and spiritual sense, Darnford later proves that he is no saviour for Maria. It is incumbent upon her personally to actuate change and to protect her right to operate as a free agent, an individual capable of autonomous decision-making and action. For Wollstonecraft, selfhood, faith, and morality were interconnected. By subjugating personal authority and blindly turning her heart over first to her unworthy husband, and second to Darnford, Maria is shown to have neglected her intellect and thus becomes complicit in her own subjugation. Wollstonecraft believed in the power of reason, but understood that this power had to be refined by education. For Maria, the delusions created by Darnford began in the margins of texts where she was unable to separate sentimental hero from fallible man. When

she eventually found escape from the asylum, Maria found it necessary to re-educate herself when she discovered that Darnford did not live up to her idea of the perfect hero: “[S]he endeavoured . . . to eradicate some of the romantic notions, which had taken root in her mind, while in adversity she had brooded over visions of unattainable bliss” (*Wrongs* 193). Maria’s intellect was intact, but it had been ill informed by romantic delusions reflective of the sentimental novel; however, her willingness and ability to re-educate herself proved the power of her mind.

Wollstonecraft used Maria, then, to confront one of her primary concerns about fiction: that it threatened reason while setting unrealistic expectations for women and promoting delusion.¹¹ She argued that romantic and sentimental novels made women slaves to sensation¹²: “This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain . . .” (*VRW* 131). For a woman to have sovereignty over her own mind, she had to reason. This would transform woman from helpless victim in need of rescue to capable heroine. So, as much as Wollstonecraft’s writing was a reaction against dependence, it was an argument for education. And through this education, women would gain the ability to act as citizens.

Maria’s ability to act on her own behalf, then, is made possible by books. Jemima’s ability to secure reading material is a source of new life for Maria, whose contemplation of the deteriorating human condition leaves her to wonder about the

¹¹ Ferguson and Todd explain that in *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft argued against the depiction, in fiction, of women as weak and in need of direction. Wollstonecraft was acutely aware of the rise of the novel and the female novelist who sometimes promoted this idea of womanhood (60).

¹² The “false feelings” Wollstonecraft so often decried, then, were considered the result of exaggerated sentimentality. With this in mind, it seems clear that Wollstonecraft felt that much of the sexual negotiation and abandonment of rational thought within marriage was due to the rise of unchecked sentimentalism. Wollstonecraft’s call for deep contemplation and the cultivation of intellect was challenged by the sensationalism of “stupid novelists” and their tales that served to “corrupt the taste, and draw the heart aside from its daily duties” (*VRW* 425-426).

sanity of humankind. With Darnford's texts in hand, she immediately finds companionship. She expostulates: "They come . . . perhaps, from a wretch condemned, like me, to reason on the nature of madness, by having wrecked minds continually under his eye; and almost to wish himself—as I do—mad, to escape from the contemplation of it'" (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 85). Maria developed an attachment to the stranger, one whom she was certain could not be mad. Her awakened lucidity had been the antecedent to her imprisonment; seeing the world with painful accuracy, she had asserted her right to independence. The consequence of this assertion was imprisonment. In a world where madness was accepted as reason, and reason became madness, Maria was lost. But rescue, through the development and affirmation of her sanity, was found amongst her books as she learned from their content in spite of her delusional fantasies about the owner.

Among these books, *Dryden's Fables* (1700), *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Rousseau's *Heloise* serve as primary texts for Maria's education. The reading that Wollstonecraft would have seen as degrading is not Maria's chosen curriculum. Maria reads for true enlightenment; for Maria, reading becomes a spiritual act, and does exactly what Wollstonecraft wants education to do: it activates her reason to draw her to God. That she would have been able to appreciate *Dryden's Fables* reflects something of her educational fortitude; Maria's interest in the translated works of Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio, and Chaucer indicates Wollstonecraft's desire for her heroine to have a familiarity with the classical canon. Though we do not know exactly what Darnford had to say about each text in particular, we know that his reflections resonated with Maria. Also, reading modern political pamphlets, she scrutinized the marginalia, noting to herself that "These remarks were written with a degree of generous warmth, when alluding to the enslaved state of the labouring

majority” (86). The omniscient narrator confirms that these notations are “perfectly in unison with Maria’s mode of thinking” (86). Darnford’s concern about the socially oppressed was apparent from his notations; in him, Maria assumed she had found companionship.

As part of Maria’s ongoing education, Wollstonecraft allowed the reading of Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). Taylor asserts that its heroine, Julie, “is very much the Wollstonecraftian woman: strong-willed, morally authoritative, and engaged in a ‘perfect union of souls’ with her lover, St. Preux, that ultimately draws them both closer to God” (Taylor, “Religious Foundations” 116). Julie represents Wollstonecraft’s ideal modest woman. Not one without passion, but one who bows only to God. This was a radical feminist ideal at the time, as Taylor reminds us, Wollstonecraft’s goal was “to liberate women from masculine tyranny not in order that they should become free-floating agents, stripped of all obligatory ties, but in order to bind them more closely to their God” (116). Maria recognizes the change that takes place within her while reading Rousseau and becomes philosophical regarding the improvement of her mind: “[S]he sat reading with eyes and heart . . . She had read this work long since; but now it seemed to open a new world to her—the only one worth inhabiting” (88). Maria’s ability to read with her heart indicates somewhat the spiritual transformation occurring within her. Wollstonecraft describes Maria’s contemplation as “the sublime sensibility which renders the consciousness of existence” (89). The prominence of sensibility in this passage may appear antithetical to the goal of reasoned judgement Wollstonecraft so clearly articulated, but it is perfectly logical. Barker-Benfield has analysed Wollstonecraft’s relationship with the sensibility she invoked and its conjunction with the reason she so often venerated. According to Barker-Benfield, Wollstonecraft rallied against the

“cripplingly exaggerated sensibility, utterly dependent and subject to emotional binges,” and at the same time, she praised “the writer, capable of reasoned analysis, physically strong, independently minded, yet inspired with the positive warmth of sensibility” (361). Wollstonecraft, in this sense, worked to “modify sensibility with reason” (362), thus tempering sensibility’s potential danger. When sensibility and reason are applied together to reading, then, they contrast with reading simply as a mechanism of escape, or simply to gain a sense of accomplishment. For Wollstonecraft, the coupling of sensibility and reason became a path to enlightenment.

Wollstonecraft’s choice of *Paradise Lost* for Maria’s education is curious and somewhat disconcerting for the modern reader. Nevertheless, it remained a textual touchstone throughout the eighteenth century, engaging readers and opening discussions of gender roles and the religious underpinnings of the subjugation of women. Milton, who in *Vindication* Wollstonecraft references as a man of reason “as well as genius” (150), remained for Wollstonecraft and others during this period a fascinating combination of venerated poet and religious oppressor. Yet, Wollstonecraft, in spite of her admiration of Milton, also chastises him for his characterisation of Eve who looked to Adam as the arbiter of God’s law (35). Milton’s descriptions of Eve in the iconic *Paradise Lost* have been widely studied; his depiction of Eve as the feminine ideal demonstrated a difficult double bind. Eve was at once perfection and temptation. Her exquisite exterior was matched by her unspoilt interior that was so childlike, reinforcing her ability to be deceived. *Paradise Lost* as a primary educational tool denoted the promulgation of the subservient position of women and their inferior intellectual capabilities. Wollstonecraft desired women to be educated and to have authorial control over

their futures, but in order to do so, it was necessary for her to engage Milton's *Paradise Lost* due to its ubiquitous cultural and religious influence.

Milton wrote that man was created for God, and woman was created for man: "Hee for God only, shee for God in him" (IV: 299). Milton's assessment of Adam and Eve candidly evaluated the sexes: "Whence true authority in men; though both/ Not equal, as their sex not equal seem'd/ For contemplation hee and valour form'd,/ For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace" (IV: 295-298). According to Milton, man was created to "contemplate"; man was created to think. Woman, on the other hand, was created to be beautiful. Thoughtless, tender submission, according to Milton, was the perfect virtue of womankind's first mother. After all, according to Milton, men and women were not spiritually equal. Wollstonecraft disagreed with Milton, whose assertions reflected and promulgated ideas about women, their roles in society, and their spiritual nature; the idea that women were natural subjects of men, argued Wollstonecraft, was theologically illogical.

Milton's depiction of Eve had long-term implications, and Wollstonecraft expresses her dissatisfaction in *Vindication*: "Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man" (33). She continues to complain about the view that the duty of woman is simply to be beautiful. If this is obtained, "every thing else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives" (33). She sees this inadequate education reflected in Milton's depiction of Eve, "though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were

beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience . . .” (33). She rejects this “blind obedience,” which she would see as an emptying of humanity: “How grossly do they insult us, who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes!” (33). For Wollstonecraft, Eve’s innocent ignorance was not in any sense virtuous; in fact, it was the absence of morality altogether.

Milton’s highly influential work, then, reflected widely accepted cultural barriers. As Wollstonecraft explained, Milton’s depiction of women argued that women emptied of their reasoning faculties would be secure in their ignorance. Carolyn Weber explains that Wollstonecraft’s reference to “the Mahometan strain” alludes to an ongoing debate during her lifetime regarding whether Islamic women had souls. Weber argues, “Her comment implicitly connects education with the soul, or, to put it more precisely, the lack of education with the state of being ‘soul-less.’ . . . having a soul also means owning true independence, as well as ‘humanity’” (99). This “ownership of true independence” places the onus of responsibility on the shoulders of the very females Milton would attempt to subjugate. If Wollstonecraft thought that intelligent contemplation was tantamount to spiritual conviction, then women who failed to engage themselves in spiritual improvement became complicit in their subjugation. Wollstonecraft’s direct attack upon Milton in *Vindication*, and her inclusion of Milton in *Wrongs of Woman* indicate that her frustration with Milton went beyond his influence upon sociological paradigms. Milton’s impact upon generations was spiritual as well. But Wollstonecraft challenged Milton’s authority to tell the story of the fall of man, placing the full onus of responsibility on Eve’s shoulders. In doing so, Wollstonecraft questioned Milton’s ability to write the spiritual history of women as well. She took due note of Milton’s confined and

restricted Eve whose incompetence denotes an emptying of informed spiritual conviction.

In contrast to Milton's Eve, Jemima and Maria manipulate narrative to create common ground between these unlikely allies. Jemima affirms to herself: "She could not heroically determine to succour an unfortunate; but, offended at the bare supposition that she could be deceived with the same ease as a common servant, she no longer curbed her curiosity; . . . she would sit, every moment she could steal from observation, listening to the tale, which Maria was eager to relate with all the persuasive eloquence of grief" (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 79). Maria's narrative demonstrates, in a practical way, the power of story to transform the listener. And Jemima's determination to listen to Maria's tale exemplifies her personal intellectual fortitude. She judges her own mind capable of independent thought and analysis, and simultaneously knows her obligation to herself to protect her physical circumstances and security. Maria's tale sparks her curiosity, and Jemima feels that she can be an observer-actor in Maria's scene. In this, she paradoxically acts as an agent by choosing disentanglement from the action, and this ability is made possible by Jemima's intellectual strength.

Wollstonecraft uses the novel to construct Maria as a heroine intent upon intellectual inquiry. Maria educates herself, thereby becoming competent, but this competency, while liberating, also illuminates her subjugation. The reality that women were often suppressed while forcibly joined to their intellectual inferiors was distressing to Wollstonecraft and formed a central focus of *Wrongs of Woman*. Wollstonecraft explained the oppressiveness of intellectual disunion in a letter to George Dyson (1797) saying, "These appear to me (matrimonial despotism of the heart & conduct) to be the particular wrongs of woman; because they degrade the

mind.” For Wollstonecraft, the line between mental and physical oppression was blurred. Certainly her heroine Maria was physically oppressed with the crippling economic barriers placed in her life by her husband Venables: the attempted prostitution of her body, the removal of her baby, and her confinement to an asylum. However, Wollstonecraft’s primary concern is the “matrimonial despotism of the heart and conduct.” Physical oppression, she argues, is simply the overflow of disordered thinking.

Such disordered thinking is personified in the asylum. Maria’s confinement demonstrates a practical and physical reality of the loss of self, but this device serves as a metaphorical commentary as well in its representation of madness. Wollstonecraft went to great lengths to understand the asylum environment, in order properly to do justice to her work; yet *Wrongs of Woman* reflects some daunting realities experienced by the Wollstonecraft sisters. Her sister Eliza’s early marriage resulted in the birth of a child, after which it appears Eliza suffered from acute postpartum depression. The circumstances of the marriage are unclear, but Wollstonecraft felt her situation was so dire, that she assisted her sister Eliza in escaping from her husband Bishop. Yet this decision separated Eliza forever from her young, nursing baby. To escape with the child would have been to remove her husband’s “property.” As a result, Eliza suffered ongoing punishment. Bishop refused to communicate with Eliza regarding their child, and sadly, the child Elizabeth Bishop died within months. *Wrongs of Woman* reflects this traumatic memory, an experience that scarred Wollstonecraft and Bess forever. Lyndall Gordon explains, “[Eliza’s] story is central to Wollstonecraft’s exploration of psychic damage” (343). This emotional trauma is a central theme in *Wrongs of Woman*, articulating the evils of mental oppression.

Maria's confinement in an asylum exploits Gothic sensationalism and horror to demonstrate that her entrapment is both physical and psychological. And while the reader clearly knows her to be perfectly sane, her "insanity" is marked by her deviation from social norms. In this way, it is Maria's rational thought that proves to be socially deviant. As Claudia Johnson explains, "Maria seems doomed to painful lucidity that makes her look like the crazy one in the corrupted and corrupting world she lives in" ("Wollstonecraft's Novels", 201). As for her daughter, Maria contemplates the realities of her future. Even with Maria's protection, her daughter would face a gross cultural imbalance. In this state of mind, nevertheless, Maria remains resolute. She asserts, "life, however joyless, was not to be indolently resigned, or misery endured without exertion, and proudly termed patience" (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 76). She does not resign herself to accept her fettered existence. Confined to a literal prison, she escapes spiritually through mental exertion. More to the point, she does not misconstrue needless enduring of oppression as piety. Discerning the need to act on her own behalf, she asks, "What was to be her employment? This roused her spirit" (76). Maria longs for action, and she defines action, in part, as mental exertion.

Maria's despondency in her physical asylum is apparent in her physical separation from her beloved child, yet it is fascinating that what seems equally to press upon Maria's mind is the lack of intellectual stimulation. Her wrongs are multiplied as "the want of occupation became even more painful than the actual pressure or apprehension of sorrow; and the confinement that froze her into a nook of existence, with an unvaried prospect before her, the most insupportable of evils" (79). Her life seems to her to be without purpose without a sense of agency, as she asks, "Was not the world a vast prison, and the women born slaves?" (79). Her

presence in a madhouse is, to a degree, created madness until she finds meaning when she later relates her story to her daughter and to Jemima whose help she seeks to obtain.

Wollstonecraft had already asserted the importance of intellectual stimulation in *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) in which she most fervently championed the idea that genius, when given breadth, is self-made, an educational philosophy that Rousseau applied to men but Wollstonecraft applied to her heroine. This theme reached beyond simple ideas about transforming traditional education. For example, her character Mary is free, much like Rousseau's Emile, to discover truth and knowledge on her own. Mary's education is, to an extent, ideal. While she is afforded coveted freedom in her educational pursuits, she is still disabled due to her lack of access to information; as such, she remains at a disadvantage compared with the men of genius who are her counterparts. But Wollstonecraft demonstrates that Mary's education is superior nonetheless. Mary's ideal education is the knowledge of self, acquired over time by an imperfect character.

Despite similarly creating an imperfect heroine in Maria, Wollstonecraft in no way asserted Maria's natural inferiority. Instead, she left her readers free to explore the recesses of Maria's active, improving mind. Maria's ability to observe and learn from her circumstances, to rise above her subjected state, is not a sign of inferiority; but rather, demonstrates her moral superiority over her husband Venables who degenerates as she simultaneously develops. When Maria discovers Venables's gambling, she gains a sense of perspective and relief; she states, "This discovery, strange as you may think the assertion, gave me pleasure; my husband's embarrassments endeared him to me. I was glad to find an excuse for his conduct to my sisters, and my mind became calmer" (144). It seems odd that Maria would find

relief in tangible proof of her husband's degeneration; however, his behaviour justifies to her mind her feelings of superiority, and offers an explanation. There is no question that the sense of relief she felt is paradoxically logical and illogical. While it does elevate her morally, Venables's inability to manage material property ultimately leads to her ruin. She soon reflects upon her status as wife with Venables and rethinks her amiable response to his actions: "These were, at first, spontaneous emotions, though, becoming acquainted with men of wit and polished manners, I could not sometimes help regretting my early marriage; and that, in my haste to escape from a temporary dependence, and expand my newly fledged wings, in an unknown sky, I had been caught in a trap, and caged for life" (144). Maria's physical bondage to her marriage was as of yet insurmountable; her growth as a heroine, imperfect. But through this incident, which is but one example of Venables's indiscretions, Wollstonecraft depicts Maria as a rational, intelligent, developing heroine who grows in her ability spiritually to transcend her husband.

With the transcendent possibilities of intellectual contemplation in mind, Maria considers the asylum garden from her place of confinement as a representation of the crumbling human soul. She contemplates, "What is the view of the fallen column, the mouldering arch, of the most exquisite workmanship, when compared with this living memento of the fragility, the instability of reason, and the wild luxuriancy of noxious passions?" (83). Maria's contemplations lead her to consider the utter lack of stability of the human mind; interconnected and reliant one upon the other, human conventions such as law, societal framework, and even notions of beauty are fleeting at best. Maria's own struggle to remain lucid and calm in the midst of staggering darkness about her represents her personal fortitude. For Maria, the ability to transcend the human structures that seek to confine her is the

embodiment of action. The ability to transcend her physical circumstances to achieve a higher spiritual state gives Maria a unique perspective. She is able to observe her circumstances from an external viewpoint, and to evaluate possible solutions. Transcendence offers immediate relief from the pains of present oppression, and opens pathways for future escape. Confined, she is still able to consider herself as a detached observer. This capability of self-perspective and observation leads to self-fashioning.

Maria's ability to self-create is tempered by the potential of over-active imaginings. In the absence of proper employment, or purposeful activity, Maria is in danger of creating for herself romantic fantasy akin to delusion as she contemplates the ambiguous Darnford's presence, a temptation she recognises: "She was ashamed at feeling disappointed; and began to reflect, as an excuse to herself, on the little objects which attract attention when there is nothing to divert the mind; and how difficult it was for women to avoid growing romantic, who have no active duties or pursuits" (87). This observation underpins Wollstonecraft's argument that women were so ill-educated and idle that they easily fell into mental degradation without critical mental employment. Yet while Maria is poignantly self-aware as a result of her confinement, she still is able to exert only a measure of self-control; she falls victim to Darnford's alluring faculties. Her confinement literally seeks to overpower her ability to reason. Others, "free" in the world, failing to take time to think critically and reflectively, fall into this personal delusion all the more.

Maria demonstrates rational intellectual inquiry because her confinement does not ultimately render her insane though it threatens to do so. Even with her physical confinement to an asylum, the greatest degradations Maria experiences within marriage are intellectual and spiritual. In spite of her degradation as a wife

and the continual attempts to violate her conscience, Maria maintains her personal, intellectual faculties—she maintains her ability to think, and subsequently, to make moral decisions. This is demonstrated before her confinement when Maria provides the necessary funds to aid Venables' ailing illegitimate child. Upon seeing the helpless girl with her caregiver, she writes to her daughter, "I grew sick at heart. And, fearing Mr. Venables might enter, and oblige me to express my abhorrence, I hastily enquired where she lived, promised to pay her two shillings a week more, and to call on her in a day or two; putting a trifle into her hand as a proof of my good intentions'" (150). Maria's desire to succour the unfortunate child demonstrates both her personal charity, and her husband's degenerate state. His previous denial of funds for the girl was in hopeful anticipation of his daughter's death (149). Maria's desire to extend aid to the child is an act of selfless benevolence actuated by Wollstonecraft's belief in the transcendent nature of the human spirit.

Maria's benevolence, situated in her ability to transcend physical barriers, reflects Wollstonecraft's personal and self-made faith. Maria's self-reliance distinguishes her from the helpless heroines who were romanticized in the contemporary fiction Wollstonecraft criticised. From the outset of *Wrongs of Woman*, we see that Wollstonecraft was determined to create a character motivated to strive for individual action. Maria explains, "By force, or openly, what could be done? But surely some expedient might occur to an active mind, without any other employment, and possessed of sufficient resolution to put the risk of life into the balance with the chance of freedom" (77). Her determination is somewhat extraordinary considering her circumstances. Poovey states that Wollstonecraft sought to set forth a rational argument for the female autonomy she valued. Stripped

of selfhood, the eighteenth-century female would often look to a male “hero” for fulfilment, but the irony is seen in the fact that through marriage, their “rescue” was often their doom (“Gender of Genes” 116). In *Wrongs of Woman*, however, Wollstonecraft created a heroine who transcends reliance upon male benevolence and “rescue.”

In much the same way that Maria transcends her confinement in the mad house, we learn that Jemima’s self-determination and relentless individualism have sustained her through the rigours of working-class womanhood. In Jemima, Maria sees a woman whose manner and education are developed beyond the norm for someone of her station. Jemima is capable of critical thinking, so Maria determines to assure Jemima of her innocence, and subsequently appeal to her for help. In this process, Wollstonecraft insists that Jemima’s mind first be educated and clear so that she is not manipulated. It is evident that Maria is entirely dependent upon Jemima’s kindness, yet Maria’s belief in Jemima’s rational capabilities is a catalyst for Jemima’s altered perspective. Though not social equals, their shared womanhood creates common ground between them. They are able to communicate intellectually without subversively manipulating one another. Maria pushes for solidarity; Jemima resists and relents in turn. They both remain very much in control of their own thoughts and minds throughout.

Maria’s escape from the asylum is brought about by sound reasoning, but this reasoning is specifically tempered by and subject to Maria’s spiritual choices. Before Maria is able to make a physical escape, she first is transformed by critical thinking, and for Maria, a distinctly Wollstonecraftian heroine, this rational transformation is simultaneously a religious awakening. This does not demonstrate evangelical salvation of Maria’s eternal soul, but rather, Maria’s salvation is the

ability spiritually to transcend physical circumstances thereby ultimately demonstrating the redeeming powers of critical inquiry. In doing so, Maria proves, rather than obtains, her ability to resist sin. Furthermore, Maria and Jemima work in unison to redeem one another through rigorous inquiry and communication. First, their intellectual exchanges redeem these women as they share their stories: their minds are no longer enslaved as they receive mutual affirmation regarding the wrongs to which they have been subjected. Secondly, this rational redemption and the subsequent freeing of the mind allow for a way of physical escape.

Throughout *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft discusses the importance of women taking control of their intellects. Maria writes to her daughter of the prevailing idea, "that the husband should always be wiser and more virtuous than his wife, in order to entitle him, with a show of justice, to keep this idiot, or perpetual minor, for ever in bondage" (159). For Maria, bondage is most likely when moral and intellectual degradation are present. Yet her communication with Jemima is evidence of her persuasive powers, and of Jemima's discernment. Janice H. Peritz argues that personal storytelling "transforms sensibility into an ethical issue of responsibility, an issue of listening, speaking and otherwise responding to diverse and heterogeneous others" (257). This, Peritz argues, is "fundamental to being human" (257). The shared humanity between Jemima and Maria is understood by personal, mutual intellectual exchange. The vehicle for this exchange is personal narrative. Much as the novel evokes emotion and change within the reader, Jemima's and Maria's individual stories prompt a change of heart in one another.

Wollstonecraft embraced narrative when she wrote *Wrongs of Woman*, using Maria's imprisonment in a madhouse to illuminate the madness of wilful acceptance of tyranny. Wollstonecraft demonstrates that the acquisition of contemplative

womanhood, so desperately needed for the spiritual conviction she envisioned for her female contemporaries, would not be passively acquired. Maria's clarity of thought is painful in its accuracy. The education, which Wollstonecraft deemed necessary for women, would also be difficult, as it would expose injustice. By increasing their ability to discern, women would no longer be blind to their subjugation. Thus, the freedom of mind gained through knowledge would subsequently remind them of their limited authority. However, Wollstonecraft gives her readers Maria, who contemplates another unfortunate and unknown woman confined in the asylum, a woman who truly had "lost her senses." She says, "Woman, fragile flower! Why were you suffered to adorn a world exposed to the inroad of such stormy elements?" (88). Women, who had only been trained to adorn the world, at the expense of mental exertion, could not possibly withstand harsh realities. For them, transcendence was impossible. Women without proper training had limited authority even over their own minds. Wollstonecraft's confrontation of marriage as a simplistic narrative solution began with the acknowledgement that to overcome oppression, women must reject complicit subjugation, and instead educate themselves to be active agents.

Sacred Sexuality: Flawed Protection and "Prostitution"

Maria references the sacred nature of marriage by pointing out its current state of corruption. She complains that the ignorance of wives not only subjugates them, but corrupts their husbands as well. Writing to her daughter, she explains, "By allowing women but one way of rising in the world, the fostering the libertinism of men, society makes monsters of them, and their ignoble vices are brought forward as a proof of inferiority of intellect" (137). These "ignoble vices" are the result of the

corruption of the marriage market. As Wollstonecraft has pointed out, marriage was the primary means of security for women. Maria, feeling the need to escape an oppressive home, similarly married Venables, only later to learn of the questionable genesis of their union. With good intentions, even her benevolent uncle is complicit in Maria's subjugation: "I heard with pleasure my uncle's proposal; but thought more of obtaining my freedom, than of my lover. But, when George, seemingly anxious for my happiness pressed me to quit my present painful situation, my heart swelled with gratitude—I knew not that my uncle had promised him five thousand pounds" (138). Maria flees her unpleasant home to seek the protection of Venables, but ultimately she is a victim of a mercenary scheme. Her lover is, for all practical purposes, paid to protect her. In spite of her uncle's benevolent plan, Maria ultimately is offered no such protection. However, the faux-protection offered Maria in marriage was reflective of contemporary marital norms and often mirrored prostitution, a particularly vexed manifestation of sexuality.

Maria demonstrates that dependence upon God is the only form of assured protection. Furthermore, active dependence upon God is, paradoxically, spiritual agency. Wollstonecraft had previously asserted in *Vindication*, "If [women] are really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves; or, like the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man, when they associate with him; but cultivate their minds, give them the salutary, sublime curb of principle, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves only dependent on God" (71). This remarkable assertion—that women should "feel themselves only dependent upon God" is demonstrated through Maria's actions throughout *Wrongs of Woman*. However, Wollstonecraft does not posit that life should be lived in isolation free from human camaraderie. For Wollstonecraft, who believed that we

see through a glass darkly, the act of *seeing* both literally and metaphorically created freedom; Wollstonecraft gave Maria the ability to think, to inquire into the known and into the unknown. The act of seeing through the glass darkly was an individual, spiritual act. For Wollstonecraft, the ability to call upon God in this process was a means by which that dark glass became clearer. The solution to the problem of the subjected, dependent state of women was not immediately apparent. Maria and Jemima both have the ability to act as intellectual and spiritual agents, empowered by free and equal access to God. In this sense, though physical agency could be restrained and limited, spiritual conviction and intellectual reasoning could not.

Wollstonecraft's fellow radicals shared this call for spiritual and intellectual independence. On 25 November 1792, after reading an apologetic introduction to a work written by Hays, Wollstonecraft wrote to her dear friend, chastising her for her apologetic tone, "when weakness claims indulgence it seems to justify the despotism of strength." She admonished Hays to write authoritatively, "—Rest, on yourself—if your essays have merit they will stand alone . . ." Hays's novel *Emma Courtney* (1796) and likewise *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of the Women* (1798) asserted that ignorance was the pariah of actuated womanhood. Emma Courtney's mentor, a character fashioned after Godwin, tells her, "The growth of reason is slow, but not the less sure; the increase of knowledge must necessarily prepare the way for the increase of virtue and happiness" (Hays, *Emma* 48). For Hays's heroine Emma, reason is given by God, and as a woman, she is endowed with the ability to be the agent of her own choices: "The Being who gave to the mind its reason, gave also to the heart its sensibility. I make no apologies for, because I feel no consciousness of—weakness. An attachment sanctioned by nature, reason, and virtue, ennobles the mind capable of conceiving and cherishing it: of

such an attachment a corrupt heart is utterly incapable” (82). In Hays’s *Appeal*, she similarly argued that God created woman with the ability to reason, and this ability was repressed in women by men: “[M]en, not content with women as they come from the hands of the all-wise Creator . . . will not allow their women to be, what Heaven has made them” (32). She further states that the moulding of women by men gave women “the least chance possible for women to emancipate themselves” (32). This argument for equality of the sexes in spiritual and intellectual matters was tantamount to a cry for reform; the very act of thinking threatened to usurp traditionally accepted subjugation.

Denying women the opportunity to exercise reason left them with a spiritual void. When this void was present within marriage, and when the woman lost legal personhood, she became spiritually oppressed. Scholars generally agree that the state of marriage for women during the late eighteenth century was unjust¹³. What modern scholarship often fails to consider is that the political reality of female independence was painfully remote during the late 1790s. Wollstonecraft was frustrated that what many women wanted was simply dependence upon benevolent authority. The problem, as Wollstonecraft articulately pointed out, was that this benevolence was not guaranteed. She reminds the readers of *Vindication* that women are trained to be beautiful in order to obtain “the protection of a man . . . for, at least, twenty years of their lives” (33). It is not difficult to hear the sarcasm in Wollstonecraft’s tone; beauty is fleeting at best, and women who rely upon its powers to ensure security are sure to be disappointed. Women needed to maintain an

¹³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s influential *Madwoman in the Attic* explores a long tradition of female authorship that decries patriarchal oppression fuelled by Miltonic misogyny. However, the literary scholarship that has grown from this work overstates the point. Since the time of its publication, a more nuanced understanding of female influence has challenged the idea that patriarchal authority was totalitarian.

educated state of existence, one in which their ability to enter and exit marriage was based upon personal choices, and situated in moral principle.

Maria's most interesting and provocative choice during her marriage to Venables is her decision to conceive her daughter, this in spite of her repulsion for her husband. Writing to her daughter, she says, "The greatest sacrifice of my principles in my whole life, was the allowing my husband again to be familiar with my person, though to this cruel act of self-denial, when I wished the earth to open and swallow me, you owe your birth; and I the unutterable pleasure of being a mother'" (*Wrongs* 153-154). Wollstonecraft shows Maria to make this choice intentionally. Unlike the women Wollstonecraft held in contempt who persisted in wilful ignorance, Maria demonstrates clear forethought.

Maria did not submit blindly to Venables, but her marriage stripped her of economic and physical agency. Significantly, both threatened to usurp her spiritual conviction. She defended *Wrongs of Woman* to George Dyson¹⁴, who read an early draft, and apparently did not find the heroine's situation overwhelmingly distressing. Wollstonecraft responded to his letter, saying, "I cannot suppose any situation more distressing than for a woman of sensibility with an improving mind to be bound, to such a man as I have described, for life—obliged to renounce all the humanizing affections, and to avoid cultivating her taste lest her perception of grace, and refinement of sentiment should sharpen to agony the pangs of disappointment" She continued, "I should despise, or rather call her an ordinary woman, who could endure such a husband as I have sketched—yet you do not seem to be disgusted with him!!!" (c. May 16, 1797). It is significant that Wollstonecraft's primary argument

¹⁴ George Dyson was a translator, writer, painter, and friend of Wollstonecraft and Godwin. Their relationship was formed through a mutual acquaintance with the radical publisher Joseph Johnson (Todd, *Letters* 385). George Dyson is unrelated to Henry Dyson Gabell whom Wollstonecraft met on her journey to Ireland and with whom she maintained correspondence for years.

for Maria's unequal union was not simply the crimes that were attempted against her body, but rather, the degradation of her mind. Wollstonecraft sharply challenged the notion that women should passively accept dehumanising marital unions. Maria was "bound" to Venables. Her ability to see the madness of such bondage clearly was at once freeing and debilitating for her.

It is the final extant and unfinished chapter of *Wrongs of Woman* that most clearly articulates that informed spiritual conviction is necessary in order to reject tyrannical rule that fails to offer protection. Maria makes this argument while simultaneously delineating the acceptance of a moderate imbalance of power within marriage. Maria's defence before the courts not only confirms her agency, but also demonstrates the voluntary submission she mistakenly offered her husband who proved unworthy of her trust. Maria states, "I exclaim against the laws which throw the whole weight of the yoke on the weaker shoulders, and force women, when they claim protectorship as mothers, to sign a contract, which renders them dependent on the caprice of the tyrant, whom choice or necessity has appointed to reign over them" (195). Wollstonecraft, through Maria, acknowledged that marriage had the possibility to offer protection to women, but at the same time, could be a state of slavery. Maria declares, "Various are the cases, in which a woman ought to separate herself from her husband; and mine, I may be allowed emphatically to insist, comes under the description of the most aggravated" (195-196). In order to reverse this state of bondage, a woman must be given the power to change her circumstances. On a practical level, women, as agents of change, she claimed, must be allowed to leave the marital union as well. Her argument for divorce was as much an argument for marriage as it was an argument for its dissolution. Within marriage, Maria argues that a woman is exploited when she should be protected, but more importantly, she

argues against subjugation to illegitimate moral authority. She argues for the right to effect change.

Wollstonecraft had herself experienced the difficulties that beleaguered women in a world where marriage dissolution was practically impossible. When in Paris, Wollstonecraft was faced with the reality of being an unprotected, unmarried woman. France's liberal divorce laws far surpassed England's at the time, and Wollstonecraft had the opportunity to contemplate divorce's merits there. Her journey to France came on the tails of Henry Fuseli's rejection of her, and her mind was consumed with the breakdown of their relationship, her disillusionment and her helplessness. Godwin claims that her journey to France was an attempt at re-establishing mental composure: "It was in vain that she enjoyed much pleasure in [Fuseli's] society, and that she enjoyed it frequently. Her ardent imagination was continually conjuring up pictures of the happiness she should have found, if fortune had favoured their more intimate union" (97-98). Her attempts to attach herself to Fuseli were fruitless, but her attempt to heal was purposeful. Godwin explains: "the single purpose she had in view [was] that of an endeavour to heal her distempered mind" (100). She had wilfully given Fuseli control of her heart, but she was subsequently keen to assert control over herself. Much like Maria, Wollstonecraft desired self-rule not to lord tyrannically over another, but simply to maintain a measure of security as an autonomous human who could not be guaranteed outside protection.

In *Wrongs of Woman*, Maria is an outsider; like the historical women her character represents, she lives without the full protection of her country. She makes this reality clear when she defends Darnford's conduct against the charge of seduction. Of her own actions, she states: "I wish my country to approve of my

conduct; but, if laws exist, made by the strong to oppress the weak, I appeal to my own sense of justice, and declare that I will not live with the individual, who has violated every moral obligation which binds man to man” (197). For Maria, circumventing the laws of her country becomes a matter of personal will. Grown into the woman who actuates change, she transcends her marginalized state and answers only to herself. By this action, *self* becomes entirely autonomous. If the law offers Maria no protection, she argues, then she is no longer obligated to the law. Her marginalized status moves her beyond victimization and transforms her into a free agent. Her country has abandoned her; the laws do not protect her. Her madness is a fictional construct of her husband’s, and he is shown to be an incompetent legal tyrant.

The “protection” offered by marriage often exposed women to unchecked exploitation. But much contemporary discourse promoted such subjection. James Fordyce’s widely read sermons, for example, argued that in an ideal marriage, the wife lived to please her husband. In *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) which relies heavily upon Pauline tenets, he asked, “What honour can be enjoyed by your sex, equal to that of showing yourselves every way worthy of a virtuous tenderness from ours?” (33). Female self-sacrifice, according to Fordyce, was natural. Wollstonecraft took issue with Fordyce’s construction of gender relations within marriage, exclaiming that his sermons are just the type of education young women should eschew: “I should not allow girls to peruse them, unless I designed to hunt every spark of nature out of their composition, melting every human quality into female weakness and artificial grace. I say artificial, for true grace arises from some kind of independence of mind” (VRW 206-207). The independence of mind Wollstonecraft

references indicates the use of reasoned decision-making that is in contrast to Fordyce's idea of wifely obedience.

Maria is shown to reject the cultural ideal that would subjugate her to unworthy authority. It is not simply authority that she rejects, but rather, she rejects loyalty to one who instead of protecting her, would even go so far as to sexually exploit her. Discovering the attempted prostitution of her very person, she becomes indignant, evoking the sacredness of marriage, and the vows she made before God, a union formed "in the sight of heaven" (162). Maria determined to remain married in spite of the unfavourable nature of her tie to Venables until her conscience and her spiritual conviction were violated. Surely her religious principles prompted her to remain shackled for so long a period of time in a most injudicious union. Yet, those same principles paradoxically give her the determination to leave. She makes a vow, full of spiritual conviction, when this decision is made: "I lifted my hands to heaven, 'that, as solemnly as I took his name, I now abjure it'" (162). For Maria, the deliberate detachment from her husband was as sacred as its formation.

Wollstonecraft's character, full of spiritual consciousness, could do no less.

Maria mentally and spiritually frees herself from the double-bind of marriage that occurs when protection turns to exploitation, and disentangling herself creates for Maria a type of spiritual rebirth. Her resolution to dissolve her marriage is recalled as a transcendent spiritual awakening: "'The face of heaven grew fairer as I viewed it, and the clouds seemed to flit away obedient to my wishes, to give my soul room to expand'" (163). Not only does Maria see "the face of heaven," but she also feels empowered, as the clouds are obedient to her. She continues, "'I was all soul, . . . A seraphic satisfaction animated, without agitating my spirits; and my imagination collected, in visions sublimely terrible, or soothingly beautiful, an

immense variety of the endless images, which nature affords, and fancy combines of the grand and fair'" (163). This freeing of self from the bondage of an oppressive union is, for Maria, both spiritual and rational. After 'divorcing' her husband by sheer force of personal will, she writes to her daughter, saying, "may you, my child, never be able to ascertain, by heart-rending experience, what your mother felt before the present emancipation of her mind! '" (163). It appears evident that Maria's conscience was free before heaven; this "emancipation" was a wilful abandonment of marriage law and unjust human institutions. Wollstonecraft argued that when the marital union failed to offer protection or when it devolved into a master-slave union, wives must be given the freedom and means to leave.

Not only did marriage often fail to offer protection, but in many ways, it was something much worse: an institution, argued Wollstonecraft, reflective of prostitution. Wollstonecraft famously makes this point in *Vindication*: "To rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, [women] must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted" (127-128). Prostitution is clearly the exchange of sex for material goods, and using this line of thinking, Wollstonecraft argued that intellectual and spiritual degradation in exchange for physical protection was a form of prostitution as well. Physical and economic disempowerment put women at a sharp disadvantage, but Wollstonecraft pleaded with her female counterparts to embrace spiritual and intellectual agency in its stead. Women desperately needed to be given the tools to act on their own behalf; they needed the resources to right wrongs.

In *Wrongs of Woman*, Maria resists the sex-for-goods marital construct and exerts clear personal agency when she refuses to become the open lover of a suitor

arranged by her husband. After discovering the proposal, the men involved in the exchange seem astounded that Maria refuses. Yet her adherence to traditional marital ideals makes the prospect of open adultery, for which her husband would receive financial benefit, repugnant: "I have formed a tie, in the sight of heaven—I have held it sacred; even when men, more comfortable to my taste, have made me feel—I despise all subterfuge!—that I was not dead to love'" (162). Maria's open acknowledgment of potential attachments at once acknowledges her individuality as well as her moral superiority. Yet her intelligence and agency also inform her that sacred ties need not bind her henceforward. Maria declares herself free: "I leave him as free as I am determined to be myself—he shall be answerable for no debts of mine'" (162). Maria's assertion of independence confirms that she remains simultaneously woman and individual. She maintains that her spiritual union with Venables is severed, and she takes ownership over her own person in spite of man's law.

The attempted prostitution of Maria's body was not simply an attempt to tyrannize over her physically and sexually. It had spiritual implications as well. If marriage is a "sacred union" confirmed by consummation, the corruption of the body violates the spiritual nature of marriage. At the same time, this violation of Maria's body by her husband is juxtaposed with her wilful submission to him after knowing that she was unequally yoked. For her, this is a violation of her conscience; it is not her sexuality that is the issue, but the perversion of her sexuality. Her sexual consent consciously "purchases" for Maria a precious child. According to Claire Tomalin, "Maria embodied a whole series of case histories illustrating the iniquities of the legal position of women, defending their right to sexual freedom and bitterly attacking society's refusal to allow them proper employment" (*Life and Death* 253).

Tomalin states: "The most striking thing about *Maria* was probably its outspoken assertion that women had sexual feelings and rights, and that the supposed refinement which tried to obscure this was actually degrading" (253). The question of sexuality within Wollstonecraft's work, however, is vexed. What seems to have offended Wollstonecraft the most was the degradation of the sexual action she considered sacred. In *Wrongs of Woman*, she demonstrates the degradation of this sexuality by portraying prostitution as the greatest spiritual oppression.

Wollstonecraft's contempt for the ways that contemporary institution of marriage exploited female sexuality in fact demonstrates her high regard for marriage. Wollstonecraft's ideal vision of marriage was imagined as the companionship of two intellectually and spiritually free individuals. At the same time, there is no evidence in Wollstonecraft's personal life that would suggest that she imagined marriage as being wholly free from mutual dependence. Yet there is no doubt that she wished women to be free from base servitude within the marital relationship. Strikingly, it is in the relationship between Maria and her uncle, that Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman* gives us the clearest picture of an ideal marital relationship, yet one where the role of the protector and the protected could not be clearer. Maria describes her uncle as "'more than a father'" (156), and multiple times, he manages to offer Maria assistance without patronizing her helplessness. With his financial assistance, Maria marries Venables. This misguided help is later recognized, and her uncle seeks to rectify his mistake. When he travels to Lisbon for his health, sure to die, she regrets that she will be unable to "'smooth the pillow of death'" (156) for her beloved benefactor. For Maria, this attempt at reciprocity would have been a natural consequence of a healthy relationship with one whom she loved. In their last meeting, he encourages her to leave her husband and travel with

him, so that *he* can protect *her*, though the reader knows him to be weak. This mutual regard demonstrates the companionate ideal. He is heartbroken to find that she is pregnant with the unworthy Venables's child: "He expressed himself unfeignedly sorry that any new tie should bind me to a man whom he thought so incapable of estimating my value; such was the kind language of affection'" (157). Maria's uncle dearly wishes to protect her from a marriage that is so grossly inequitable. He echoes Wollstonecraft's insistence on the equal union of minds when he asserts, "for a woman to live with a man, for whom she can cherish neither affection nor esteem, or even be of any use to him, excepting in the light of a house-keeper, is an abjectness of condition, the enduring of which no concurrence of circumstances can ever make a duty in the sight of God or just men'" (157). This declaration confirms that her uncle seeks to protect Maria from an unequal mental and spiritual union. He, himself, the thoughtful, intelligent protector, is the antithesis to Venables.

By pointing out the ideal relationship between Maria and her uncle, I am not arguing that Wollstonecraft is positing incestuous or asexual unions as viable alternatives to marriage. Nor do I assert that she, a highly passionate and emotional being, envisioned marriage without sensuality. Wollstonecraft's fundamental concern was the presumed capacity of men to be more innately rational. If this were the case, women would be degraded sexual beings, and the abuse of power within marriage would be likely. Cora Kaplan explains that Wollstonecraft was suspicious of female sexuality, but this fear was grounded in the dangers she felt sexuality could pose for women: "she saw the damage and danger first of all to women themselves, whose potential independence were potentially stifled and broken by an apprenticeship to pleasure, which induced psychic and social dependency"

(“Pandora’s Box”157). As Kaplan explains, “At every possible point in her text, Wollstonecraft links the liberation of women from the sensual into the rational literally and symbolically to the egalitarian transformation of the whole society” (161). Wollstonecraft seemed to be concerned that when women used their sexuality as a source of power, their reason was potentially compromised in the process.

Wollstonecraft was interested in a nuanced view of sexual identity. Though she did not talk about sexual identity in any modern sense of the term, she did argue, simply but clearly, that gender and supposedly gendered traits are culturally rather than biologically determined. This, in spite of her view of physiological inequality between men and women. The devotion of her uncle, for example, could be perceived as feminine, and Jemima’s attempts to rescue Maria masculine. By placing Maria in separate relationships with both her Uncle and Jemima, Wollstonecraft challenges static interpretations of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. As always, Wollstonecraft defies clean interpretation. Andrew Elfenbein argues that Wollstonecraft “reinvents female masculinity as a positive trait” (237). Her heroine Mary, for example, has masculinity situated in her “opinions” (237), and therefore, traditional marriage becomes a near impossibility for her. Wollstonecraft created heroines who challenge the conventional norms of womanhood.

In “Mary Wollstonecraft’s Reception and Legacies,” Kaplan explores how modern scholars have interpreted “questions about gender, sexuality, and modernity first raised in the late eighteenth century by Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries . . .” (247). Wollstonecraft wanted women actively to be engaged with their families and society at large, and not to be distracted by sexuality, which was defining women’s worth and giving men unnatural control. Rousseau had argued for this

dominance when he educated the fictional Emile to maintain control over Sophie. Taylor explains, “Sophie exists as a sexualised cipher not to gratify the ungratifiable . . . but rather to provide Emile (and Emile’s author) with an illusion of masterly control” (*Feminist Imagination* 82). Wollstonecraft’s disagreement with Rousseau on this point underpins her assertion that only God should rule woman. She wanted women to be thinking creatures whose choices were motivated by rational inquiry; certainly sexual choices required this scrutiny. Wollstonecraft wanted women to be deliberate agents of their own thought processes and to reject the sex-for-goods marital norm.

Wollstonecraft exposed the ways in which marriage often failed to offer protection for women who were not even aware of or concerned about its exploitative potential. Even more so, she exposed and argued against marital prostitution, even while holding sacred the sexual union inherent in marriage itself. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft required that the sacred union involve the conjoining of two equals; not only should wives be given the necessary education to commune equally with their husbands, but similarly they should not be forced into unions with spiritual and intellectual inferiors. Wollstonecraft imagined marital unions as spaces reserved for intellectual interdependence free from tyranny. This is seen in the independent thought and subversive action she offered Maria and Jemima in *Wrongs of Woman* as well as the faux marriage that Maria shared with her uncle. Neither of these relational alliances are, practically speaking, equal; but they are entered into by intellectually independent beings.

Imagining Salvation: The Female Agent

Women were often blind to their own subjection and ruled by men who similarly refused to apply sound reason to the oppressive state of marriage. Wollstonecraft writes, “But, alas! husbands, as well as their helpmates, are often only overgrown children; nay, thanks to early debauchery, scarcely men in their outward form—and if the blind lead the blind, one need not come from heaven to tell us the consequence” (*VRW* 39). Women needed to exert control over their lives.

Wollstonecraft felt this was a moral imperative, and as I have demonstrated, sought to give her heroine Maria the spiritual agency she hoped contemporary women would embrace. Yet Maria was obliged to enact this agency as an outsider in a society that would exploit her and devalue her intellect. Thus, in *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft issued a warning about the dangers of marginalization. As I will demonstrate, Maria’s relationship with Darnford literally began in the margins of the texts provided to her by him. Maria’s education, as well as her confinement, prompt her to rely upon her imagination, a faculty that paradoxically threatened both to derail her and to strengthen her. But similarly, Jemima’s ability to wield knowledge and imagine change creates between Maria and Jemima female sorority. Ultimately, both women leverage the transcendent capabilities of motherhood in order to find both physical and spiritual salvation.

Darnford’s imprisonment makes him a marginalized outsider. And in a very concrete and practical way, his marginalia demonstrate his place as an observer. Maria subsequently becomes observer and critic of his notations. She states, “they were written with force and taste” (*Wrongs* 85). Similarly, in *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft asserted that writing is a tool used for the construction of individual thought, stating, “Writing well is of great consequence in life as to our temporal

interest, and of still more to the mind; as it teaches a person to arrange their thoughts, and digest them. Besides, it forms the only true basis of rational and elegant conversation” (46). To Wollstonecraft, who valued thinking above all else, writing became an active pursuit of the mind. As has been demonstrated, Maria’s education as a result of reading Darnford’s books was profound. But for Maria, in many ways, the text itself becomes less important than the marginalia, adding complexity to her education. Observation requires thinking; it requires intelligence and imagination.

This elevation of observation is acutely tied to Wollstonecraft’s insistence upon an active imagination, a quality she considered to be a sign of genius. She wrote to Gilbert Imlay (1794) of its animating powers:

. . . you have not sufficient respect for imagination—I could prove to you in a trice that it is the mother of sentiment, the great distinction of our nature, the only purifier of the passions—animals have a portion of reason, and equal, if not more exquisite, senses; but no trace of imagination, or her offspring taste, appears in any of their actions. The impulse of the senses, passions, if you will, and the conclusion of reason, draw men together; but the imagination is the true fire, stolen from heaven, to animate this cold creature of clay, producing all those fine sympathies that lead to rapture, rendering men social by expanding their hearts, instead of leaving them leisure to calculate how many comforts society affords. If you call these observations romantic, a phrase in this place which would be tantamount to nonsensical, I shall be apt to retort, that you are embruted [sic] by trade and the vulgar enjoyments of life—(1794)

For Wollstonecraft, imagination and reason worked in tandem to call forth true and complete understanding. In *Vindication*, references Dr Gregory, who she

complained cautioned women against revealing their “sensibility or affection” (VRW 56), saying, “If Dr. Gregory confined his remark to romantic expectations of constant love and congenial feelings, he should have recollected, that experience will banish what advice can never make us to wish for, when the imagination is kept alive at the expense of reason” (63). Imagination, in fact, prompted Wollstonecraft’s visionary rhetoric. She gave this animating passion to her heroine Maria: the ability to see things as they are, and then imagine them as they could be. Maria uses reason to solve the practical problem of her subjugation. Wollstonecraft demonstrated with Maria that the actions, which move individuals from present reality to future self, begin with contemplation, but insisted that imagination cannot be sacrificed to stale reasoning.

But for Maria, the ability to imagine life beyond the normative cultural script became its own private madness because she knows what she does not have. Maria, accustomed to the shrieks of disordered minds, considers the marginalia brought before her, and wonders at its author. She observes acutely—she studies carefully—to determine the author’s state of mind: “‘Was he mad?’ She re-perused the marginal notes, and they seemed the production of an animated, but not a disturbed imagination. Confined to this speculation, every time she re-read them, some fresh refinement of sentiment, or acuteness of thought impressed her, which she was astonished at herself for not having before observed” (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 86). Maria investigates the notes, attempts to form an opinion of Darnford, and makes a judgement. Accustomed to subterfuge and deceit, she is rightly cautious. Her attempt to interpret meaning is a wilful exercise of reason. This process, though directed at Darnford, her would-be surrogate saviour, nevertheless activates Maria’s mind. She does more than imagine him as a hero who will rescue her, but also

considers his notes and wonders at his sanity. When she receives new books, “her heart throbbed with sympathetic alarm; and she turned over the leaves with awe, as if they had become sacred from passing through the hand of an unfortunate being, oppressed by a similar fate” (85). She refers to the texts as “sacred,” for she fancied the possessor of these books was like herself, searching for a source of reasoned thought in the midst of madness. Maria’s reasoning is an act of faith.

Unfortunately, Maria’s initial reading of the marginalia is informed by her training via the sentimental novel, and therefore Darnford largely becomes a faux-creation of her own unchecked imagination. As she pines for more marginalia, Maria considers her disconnected status, and imagines safety with the author of the notes. She waits for more books, and thus more marginalia, and contemplates, “Thus shut out from human intercourse, and compelled to view nothing but the prison of vexed spirits, to meet a wretch in the same situation, was more surely to find a friend, than to imagine a countryman one, in a strange land, where the human voice conveys no information to the eager ear” (86). Maria’s imagination creates a safe haven in her own mind. Rationally, this sphere offers her more protection than the physical world. Yet she seeks physical companionship and camaraderie.

Somewhere amongst the act of reading for entertainment, the act of reading for spiritual knowledge, and the elevating powers of imagination, Maria’s interaction with the marginal notes created by Darnford excites a rational internal transformation similar to the evangelical transformation of the heart, but Maria’s transformation begins intellectually. She begins by transferring her own dependency onto the page. She not only becomes an author in the obvious physical sense that she creates an instructive anti-conduct book for her daughter, but this very act of authorship transforms Maria from within. It transforms her from observer to

actor. This call to action was tempered with a need for imagination to excite reason; it was not a call to sentimentalism. That reason must temper desire is obvious in her letter to her daughter when she states her purpose for writing: "I would . . . lead you very early in life to form your grand principle of action, to save you from the vain regret of having, through irresolution, let the spring-tide of existence pass away, unimproved, unenjoyed—Gain experience—ah! gain it—while experience is worth having, and acquire sufficient fortitude to pursue your own happiness; it includes your utility, by a direct path'" (124). Maria longs for her daughter to take action, saying, "—Had I not wasted years in deliberating, after I ceased to doubt, how I ought to have acted—I might now be useful and happy'" (124). Maria has been transformed. She recognizes that agency is necessary for happiness.

For the female learner, the lesson is that of independence. Maria warns her daughter that it is incumbent upon her to take the pursuit of happiness on her own shoulders alone. Maria makes this point clear in prompting her daughter to make action the "grand principle" of her life. At the same time, the Christian principle of usefulness is obvious. The call to action would have had economic implications as well; by striving towards usefulness, Maria's daughter would reduce her dependence on others, allowing her to be at once independent and benevolent. Wollstonecraft, who fully embraced personal responsibility in the acquisition of happiness, also fully embraced Christian service. The balancing of useful Christian service against thoughtless slavery is a clear imperative with agency as its guiding principle. Wollstonecraft, who passionately argued for the full acceptance of motherly duty, also acknowledged it required a resolute state of mind. She said, "To fulfil domestic duties much resolution is necessary, and a serious kind of perseverance that requires a more firm support than emotions, however lively and true to nature" (VRW 147).

She continued, “Whoever rationally means to be useful, must have a plan of conduct; and, in the discharge of the simplest duty, we are often obliged to act contrary to the present impulse of tenderness or compassion” (147). Wollstonecraft did not, in any way, neglect the responsibilities she saw as moral imperatives in the quest to act.

As Wollstonecraft was all too aware, this call to action was tempered by harsh physical realities during the 1790s. The character Maria gains wisdom through experience, but it places her in a literal prison: a madhouse of body and mind. The call to act thoughtfully on behalf of self and others was necessary for spiritual and physical survival. For Maria, the instructive act of writing to her daughter, then, becomes a cathartic act with practical applications. Maria’s life has been stolen from her, but she seeks to empower her daughter through her recollections and instructions. Of her written thoughts, “They might perhaps instruct her daughter, and shield her from misery, the tyranny, her mother knew not how to avoid” (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 82). By this action, Maria becomes an absent agent, directing her daughter by proxy. But her task is not complete. She says, “Though this employment lightened the weight of time, yet, never losing sight of her main object, Maria did not allow any opportunity to slip of winning the affections of Jemima; for she discovered in her a strength of mind, that excited her esteem, clouded as it was by the misanthropy of despair” (82). Maria seeks to direct her daughter from afar, but she seeks to transform Jemima, her ever-present jailor, into her protector.

Jemima and Maria represent together the need for female sorority in the cultural struggle to reorganize lines of traditional authority. Through Jemima and Maria, Wollstonecraft offered to her readers women who embrace agency and who

retell their life stories as they simultaneously write new ones; ultimately, they establish authority in this process. Though commentators have differed greatly in their interpretation of the relationship between Jemima and Maria, their relationship undoubtedly seems to be a call to solidarity. According to Johnson, Jemima offers Maria this solidarity in the face of the ubiquitous corruption of patriarchal society (“Wollstonecraft’s Novels” 204). Taylor further argues that in *Wrongs of Woman*, “feminine fellowship” (Taylor, *Feminist Imagination* 239) is explored through the lives of socially divergent Jemima and Maria to confront the extreme social injustices towards women still plaguing eighteenth-century culture: “A woman, whatever her class, is differently positioned from a man, and it is precisely this difference that most reformers preferred to overlook” (245). Jemima’s presence in the text, then, creates for Wollstonecraft an opportunity to explore the role of women in eighteenth-century culture across economic boundaries. Jemima is exploited due to her lack of wealth and low station; Maria is exploited because of her wealth and high station. The causes of oppression are different, but their status as “other” remains constant. Clearly, Wollstonecraft communicated that women, regardless of social standing, faced repression.

Jemima’s assurance that she can contemplate Maria’s story without falling prey to manipulation is an indication of education’s universal elevating effects. Her story tells us that her education, however unusual, promoted communication between Maria, her social superior but one whom she confines, and herself.

Jemima’s intellect was self-cultivated. As a mistress of a retired, educated libertine, she frequently spent her unoccupied hours reading and listening to learned men who frequented her master’s house. She tells Maria, “You may easily imagine, that it was only by degrees that I could comprehend some of the subjects they investigated, or

acquire from their reasoning what might be termed a moral sense. But my fondness of reading increasing, and my master occasionally shutting himself up in this retreat, for weeks together, to write, I had many opportunities of improvement” (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 111). Jemima’s education was essentially traded for sexual favours, but the elevating effects of knowledge were not lost. Jemima paradoxically manipulates the same sexual economy that would threaten to subject her—the same economy that would affront Maria—instead to transform herself into a capable agent. This, coupled with hard years of base survival through manipulation and menial service, gave Jemima equally valuable hard-bought knowledge of the world. The combination of traditional knowledge and practical knowledge oddly seals Jemima’s place as the subjugated protector of Maria. Unable to see herself as superior, and fettered to her cultural identity, Jemima restricts her relationship with Maria to that of servant, a decision which often pains modern readers. Nevertheless, we must respect the cultural forces at play; total egalitarianism as a political and social ideal was still in its prolonged infancy.

Jemima’s raw, bold, unrefined nature makes her an unlikely heroine, but her presence indicates Wollstonecraft’s interest in equality. In Jemima, we see a woman of a different class, who “like Maria. . . has been prostituted” (Gordon 345). Gordon explains that “Hers is no sentimental story—she is a thief, criminalized and hardened to some degree by her will to survive, yet still with a residue of compassion” (345). Similarly, Tomalin argues that *Wrongs* is an attempt “to see life through the eyes of the poorest sorts of women, without caricaturing them” (*Life and Death* 254). Jemima “is the finest character in the book, and her attempt to find any work above the most menial is described in detail as the bitter farce any such attempt was bound to be” (254). Working class Jemima and upper class Maria yoke

together in the struggle to change social dynamics. The ability to establish greater female authority in the establishment of independence without this unity was unlikely. Wollstonecraft's own life bore witness to this solidarity of purpose. As is obvious, she was one of many female voices who petitioned for a change in female status, particularly within marriage.

Certainly Jemima's devotion to Maria is often uncomfortable for modern readers; however, Jemima's personal sacrifices for Maria are acts of Christian service. This behaviour was central to Wollstonecraft's very core. Throughout her lifetime she sacrificed her comforts in service to others: shielding her mother from her father's violent blows, offering companionship to Mrs. Dawson of Bath, nursing her dying and emotionally distant mother, rescuing Eliza from Bishop, travelling to the dying Fanny Blood, writing *Thoughts* in order to fund the Bloods' return to Ireland, and so on. These were the acts of an individual with moral conviction, and this conviction was situated in her Christian faith. Wollstonecraft saw strong affection and the abandonment of selfish ambition as the mark of refined humanity; as she wrote to her sister Everina (9 October 1786): "I like to see starts of affection and humanity—and on many occasions would have people consult their own heart only and if conscience does not check them act with vigor [sic] and dignity—as St. Paul would advise, and not be conformed to this world" (*Letters*). Wollstonecraft alludes to Paul's words, referenced in the introduction to this chapter, "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:2, KJV). These words from Paul perfectly encapsulate Wollstonecraft's assertion that mental exertion was an inherently spiritual action. For Wollstonecraft, the

renewal of her mind transformed her physical action; it had an impact on her ability to act on behalf of herself and others as an agent of change.

In much the same way, Wollstonecraft's devotion to Fanny Blood, while passionate and potentially overwhelming, was also manifestly benevolent. Yet, Wollstonecraft herself was authoritative in her acts of service, and it must be acknowledged that her forceful action often domineered over those whom she chose to love. In the same way, the fierce devotion Jemima offers Maria is seemingly illogical. It is disappointing to consider that in spite of her obvious role as rescuer-redeemer, Jemima's subsequent subjugation occurs. For Wollstonecraft, however, this total emptying of self is not so much a commentary upon appropriate social structure as it is the proper actuation of devotion. Wollstonecraft desired to love in such a way, and she desired to be the recipient of such love herself.

Maria's devotion to Jemima is a relationship that was built over time. Godwin and Wollstonecraft's relationship was similar in that it grew after a period of acquaintance and communication as Godwin said of their romance, "It was friendship melting into love" (153). The devotion that Jemima and Maria hold for one another is the result of mutual reflection and growing affection. There can be no question that Maria comes to love Jemima—the mutual act of protection exacted by both women on behalf of the other is clear. Maria's social position offers to Jemima security in a world that had turned its back on her.

Jemima—full of sympathy—is challenged due to her personal circumstances of life. Maria herself noticed, "Jemima indeed displayed a strange mixture of interest and suspicion; for she would listen to her with earnestness, and then suddenly interrupt the conversation, as if afraid of resigning, by giving way to sympathy, her dear-bought knowledge of the world" (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 82). For women in

Wollstonecraft's world, agency, employment, and even the basest level of independence were not basic human rights granted by law, but ones that were often won by subterfuge, manipulation, and concession. Even Maria's manipulation of Jemima to her own ends is essentially an act of emotional deceit. Yet as Wollstonecraft repeatedly argued, the degradation of women was due to their position in society, exacerbated by the absence of education. Maria's education was traditional and formal; Jemima's was an education brutally won by life experiences. Both women were crippled in their ability openly to practice their dearly bought wisdom.

Ultimately, it is nearly impossible to determine between Maria and Jemima who is the protector and who is the protected. Both characters rely one upon the other in a symbiotic relationship. In Jemima, Wollstonecraft alludes to the biblical presence of suffering and its possible rewards. Jemima is the name of the Biblical Job's first daughter, born as a blessing after his endurance of unspeakable trial: "And he called the name of the first, Jemima; and the name of the second, Kezia; and the name of the third, Kerenhappuch. And in all the land were no women found so fair as the daughters of Job: and their father gave them inheritance among their brethren" (Job 42:14-15, KJV). Jemima becomes significant as an equal heir to Job's estate; she is the reward for Job's obedience, whereby his temperament and judgement is proven worthy. The Biblical Jemima not only *receives* a reward, but her presence in Job's life *is* a reward. If we interpret Jemima's name as a Biblical allusion, and I argue that we should, then we can consider her character as a source of hope for Maria. Jemima is rewarded for her loyalty to Maria, and Maria is rewarded with Jemima's friendship. Jemima and Maria's solidarity becomes an act

of transcendence for both characters as they relate their past and present sufferings one to the other.

Jemima and Maria's relationship, then, demonstrates that in order to actuate societal change, this female sorority was imperative. Johnson argues that when Maria is repeatedly hurt by the men in her life, she ultimately turns outwardly to Jemima: "Maria . . . finally judge(s) male culture to be so corrupt as to make reciprocity between the sexes impossible" ("Wollstonecraft's Novels" 201). It is in her role as a mother, that Maria is "humanized" (205), and she extends this opportunity to Jemima, "not to take the father's place but rather to double in the mother's" (206). The extension of the honour of motherhood to Jemima demonstrates the extent to which Maria values, honours, and trusts her female counterpart.

We can see in this exchange, whereby Maria offers motherhood to the capable and intelligent Jemima, that Wollstonecraft saw education as an elevating force able to put agency into the hands of women, but she also fiercely defended the role of motherhood and its need for protection under the law whereby women should have been afforded full legal access to their children during and after marriage. Throughout *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft bemoaned the disgraceful Venables whose actions egregiously fail to offer protection and instead threaten and destroy Maria's ability to mother. With the loss of her child, Maria is denied the employment of motherhood and its life-giving force. She states, "I, alone, by my active tenderness, could have saved," she would exclaim, 'from an early blight, this sweet blossom; and, cherishing it, I should have had something still to love'" (81). To cherish life in its first bloom is the particular office of *mother*.

The tender agency of motherhood and its denial is a pain deeply felt by Maria, and the explication of this tragedy resonates with readers. Wollstonecraft writes, “In proportion as other expectations were torn from her, this tender one had been fondly clung to, and knit into her heart” (81). For Wollstonecraft, emotional attachment was fully reasonable for a mother; in fact, it was expected. In *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft admonished young mothers to “suckle their babes,” and stated that “[t]he first years of a child’s life are frequently made miserable through negligence or ignorance” (4). While Wollstonecraft urged consistency in discipline, she also called for tenderness when she exhorted, “it is only in the years of childhood that the happiness of a human being depends entirely on others—and to embitter those years by needless restraint is cruel” (7). Wollstonecraft herself felt her role as mother to be of particular importance. Of her daughter Fanny, she wrote to Ruth Barlow from [Le] Havre in 1794, exclaiming at the joys of motherhood: “I feel great pleasure at being a mother—and the constant tenderness of my most affectionate companion makes me regard a fresh tie as a blessing” (*Letters* 253). For Wollstonecraft, motherhood offered reciprocal companionship. In much the same way, Maria’s tenderness for her babe was a life-giving relationship for both mother and child, and when stripped away Maria would be changed. Having her babe taken from her threatens to propel her into despair, but paradoxically, it undergirds her efforts to remain strong. For Maria, motherhood offers transcendent, almost spiritual, power. It prompts her to write her daughter, marking the genesis of regaining the physical, intellectual and spiritual fortitude necessary to attempt escape. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, both Helen Huntingdon and Ruth Hilton similarly find renewed strength as the result of the transcendent nature of motherhood. And the very act of mothering, stripped from Maria, marks the void that psychologically

damaged the struggling Jemima, for “no mother had ever fondled her, no father or brother had protected her from outrage; and the man who had plunged her into infamy, and deserted her when she stood in greatest need of support, deigned not to smooth with kindness the road to ruin” (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 82). This exploration of Jemima’s neglect tells us something of the roles that Wollstonecraft desired for men and women to play. The mother was the source of nurturing and tenderness; father was to be the source of protection. This delineation is quite traditional; Wollstonecraft’s thinking was nevertheless a product of her time.

Therefore, Wollstonecraft’s vision of motherhood and marriage resonates with the modern reader. At the same time, Eileen M. Hunt agrees that Wollstonecraft’s ideas about egalitarian familial roles were slightly more conservative than commonly acknowledged, noting that Wollstonecraft did not call for “the abandonment of motherhood or marriage, disillusionment with heterosexual love, the denial of religious ethics, the subversion of parental authority, the neglect of the crucial role that fathers play in raising and caring for children, or inattention to the needs of boys in favour of caring for the needs of girls” (86). Instead, Hunt asserts that Wollstonecraft was a “religiously motivated and morally conservative thinker whose vision for the egalitarian reform of the family and female education was decidedly moderate compared to many of the views of the suffragettes and socialists who invoked her name in support of their more radical causes a century after her death” (86). This is not to say that Wollstonecraft did not desire and argue for the equality of minds, and the progressive reorganization of familial relationships. She certainly did. From her earliest works, she argued that intellectual development would not make a wife less companionable. In *Thoughts*, she wrote: “No employment of the mind is a sufficient excuse for neglecting domestic duties,

and I cannot conceive that they are incompatible. A woman may fit herself to be the companion and friend of a man of sense, and yet know how to take care of his family” (55).

I am simply arguing that Wollstonecraft was disgusted with husbands who failed to protect their wives, and wives who failed to account for this likelihood. She likewise urged women to embrace, and to be allowed to embrace, their role as nurturing wives and mothers. Beyond this, there can be no question about Wollstonecraft’s assertion that intellect and rationality were equally attainable amongst the sexes, and failing to pursue this end was wilfully holding one sex in arbitrary contempt. While Wollstonecraft fiercely argued for the intellectual and spiritual equality of the sexes, the fact remained that she recognized that this reality was not guaranteed, and women were not always afforded protection. This reality is reflected in her heroine Maria. Maria was not equivalent to Wollstonecraft’s Mary, the self-made genius, but Maria had no choice but to rely upon self for a type of faux-salvation that rested only in her mind. She activates salvation when she works to save her own daughter. In one potential conclusion, after a suicide attempt, Maria sees her child. Just as she willed herself to die, she wills herself to live: “‘Maria gazed wildly at her, her whole frame was convulsed with emotion; when the child, whom Jemima had been tutoring all the journey, uttered the word ‘Mama!’ . . . She remained silent for five minutes, crossing her arms over her bosom, and reclining her head, —then exclaimed: ‘The conflict is over!—I will live for my child! ’” (Wollstonecraft, *Wrongs* 203). If Wollstonecraft’s Christian faith was personal and driven by conscience alone—so too her heroine Maria rose to position of protector in the absence of protection.

Wollstonecraft, through Maria, seemed to argue that minimally, the authority granted to husbands by the church and state should be benevolent, yet benevolence was not enough. Wives who were exploited and abused in marriage needed the freedom to leave. Benevolence was not guaranteed protection. It may be true that Wollstonecraft's comparison of marriage to slavery and prostitution was exaggerated. However, through Maria, we encounter a representative of practical marital realities in the 1790s who refuses to relinquish her personal, spiritual, agency in spite of egregious subjugation and the emptying of personal rights. Even if Maria's personal identity is shown to be denied her in the legal sense, man-made law does not empty her of spiritual conviction. Maria does not willingly submit to tyrannical rule, but instead, she seeks protection from tyranny.

In consideration of the tyrannical rule exacted over wives, but more broadly, women, Wollstonecraft was quite explicit with her readers. In *Wrongs of Woman* Wollstonecraft wrote, not to explicate the wrongs of humankind in general, but instead to show the specific misery of womankind, as she explained, "[T]he history ought rather to be considered, as of woman, than of individual" (73). This distinction is necessary for the modern reader to consider, as Wollstonecraft lived under conditions where gender binaries were an accepted reality. Wollstonecraft wrote to, for, and about women. Using the novel, she challenged women to resist complicit subjugation, especially within marriage, and instead challenged them to embrace intellectual inquiry. Her heroine Maria's agency is primarily situated as a spiritual strength of character, which empowers the physical and economic exertions she would undertake. Maria, an imperfect heroine, was purposefully developed to fly in opposition to contemporary convention. Wollstonecraft bemoaned the character development seen in male heroes, and the flatness of female heroines. For

Wollstonecraft, who felt she was writing about the state of womanhood and its development, the passionate, emotional Maria, who struggled in a personal quest for wisdom, was an accurate picture of womanhood; whereas the picturesque, condescendingly perfect heroines common to eighteenth-century fiction did not reflect the realism Wollstonecraft sought to communicate. For Wollstonecraft, heroism was a developed trait won after thinking, inquiry, and agency. This state of existence was developed, not inborn. The lack of tenacity in commonplace heroines Wollstonecraft bemoaned, then, was a lack of agency. To allow character development in the hero, and to deny it in the heroine, was to allow agency in one, and to disallow it in the other. Women, by forced subjection, specifically within the marital relationship, became nothing more than fanciful creations of despotic imagination wilfully disconnected from the reasoning faculties necessary to look through the glass darkly.

In one of the possible conclusions to *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's disillusionment is embodied in fiction. Defending herself and Darnford before the courts, the heroine Maria complains, "I was treated by the world, as bound for ever to a man whose vices were notorious" (196). Maria exclaims against the inequality of her situation; not only as a citizen who is deprived of her rights, but also as a spiritual being who is forced into subjection to such an obvious inferior: "A false morality is even established, which makes all the virtue of women consist in chastity, submission, and the forgiveness of injuries" (196-197). In the world's eyes, Maria's worth would have been elevated by blind submission; she exclaims against the absurdity. With perfect lucidity, Maria decries the laws of the land all the while challenging the immoral tenets upon which they are built. She determines herself free: "While no command of a husband can prevent a woman from suffering for

certain crimes, she must be allowed to consult her conscience, and regulate her conduct, in some degree by her own sense of right” (197). Maria’s conscience could not be regulated from the outside. Her decisions were entirely her own, based upon overwhelming evidence of her husband’s misconduct. The loyalty she was obligated to give, however, was not to her husband, but to herself and to her God: “The respect I owe to myself, demanded my strict adherence to my determination of never viewing Mr. Venables in the light of a husband” (197). By leveraging the very faith that society would use to bind Maria to an unfavourable marriage, she declares herself free.

Maria exerts authority over self—she exerts this independence in spite of the fact that society does not recognize it. After offering overwhelming evidence, which clearly frees Maria from the moral obligation of marriage, the judge scoffs: “What virtuous woman thought of her feelings? –It was her duty to love and obey the man chosen by her parents and relations, who were qualified by their experience to judge better for her, than she could herself” (199). Wollstonecraft uses the judge’s words as a mouthpiece for society’s illogical notions about women and marriage. His words demonstrate the absurdity of false virtue; denying self to execute blind duty is far from proper morality. Furthermore, he suggests that Maria is too ignorant to know her own mind and to know her own needs; the reader sees clearly that this is uniformly false. The judge’s desire to strip Maria of her ability to think for herself instead demonstrates that *he* lacks clarity of mind. In the end, after struggling to see through the glass darkly, Maria sees with crystal clarity.

Chapter Two:

“Fanny, So Odd and So Stupid—”:

Christian Resistance and Rational Change in Austen’s *Mansfield Park*

“But I must tell you another thing of Fanny, so odd and so stupid. Do you know, she says she does not want to learn either music or drawing.”

“To be sure, my dear, that is very stupid indeed, and shows a great want of genius and emulation. But, all things considered, I do not know whether it is not as well that it should be so, for, though you know (owing to me) your papa and mama are so good as to bring her up with you, it is not at all necessary that she should be as accomplished as you are;—on the contrary, it is much more desirable that there should be a difference.” (Austen, *MP* 21)

Readers have long struggled with Jane Austen’s “dear Fanny” whose seemingly perverse displays of timid Christian morality appear, frankly, “stupid.” Our initial reading of *Mansfield Park* (1814) often leaves us angry with the pliable Fanny whose propensity to turn the other cheek smacks of acquiescence to a conduct book foolishness that would hold women in bondage. Yet I argue that Fanny Price, whom her cousins berated as “so odd and so stupid” (*MP* 21), exhibits a constant disposition guided by “self-knowledge, generosity, and humility” (22). Despite the fact that readers recognize the spoiled Bertram sisters and the pernicious Mrs Norris as examples of flawed character, we often fail fully to appreciate Fanny, the heroine whom even the Christian apologist and literary theorist C.S. Lewis called “insipid” (366). Fanny is essentially a character who disturbs our sense of proper heroism with which her timidity and traditionalism are at odds.¹ We may question Fanny’s placement alongside Austen’s more fallible, gregarious heroines, but suspicious of improving schemes and devoted to traditional Anglicanism, she rejects the idea that as a good and godly wife, she would be an agent of salvation for a wayward

¹ In *Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England*, Michael Giffin contends that modern readers are not troubled by *Mansfield Park*’s difficulty, but rather, “it presents the twenty-first-century reader with both a cultural pretext and a historical context that are now politically incorrect” (126).

husband. Instead, her constancy, a trait that manifests itself in resistance, secures for her marriage to her moral equal. Fanny does not undergo paradigmatic shifts as a fallen and mistaken heroine who finally, in a moment of epiphany, comes to recognize her error. On the contrary, Fanny's consistent clarity of mind exposes the faulty thinking of those around her.

Fanny's resistant constancy proves to be her redemption. This chapter demonstrates that this "steadfast attachment to a person or cause" (*OED*) is the result of her devotion to Anglicanism and equally to its representative in the text, Edmund Bertram. Like the other heroines in this study, Fanny uses her faith in unusual ways—in paradoxical and "odd" ways—to resist her attempted subjugation at the hands of the Bertrams. While readers often misinterpret Fanny's steady character as an indication of flatness or weakness, Fanny judges rightly: Fanny wins. This is despite generations of scholars holding with views such as those of Reginald Farrer, who perceived Fanny's victory as an artistic failure: "fiction holds no heroine more repulsive in her cast-iron self-righteousness and steely rigidity of prejudice" (308). Mary Waldron similarly accuses Fanny of docile goodness, stating that Fanny is "passive and submissive, fond of silence and anonymity—everything the conduct-books recommend" (261). I contend, by contrast, that Fanny is socially timid, but she is also spiritually stalwart—perplexing, but not "repulsive."

Of course, Fanny's "steely rigidity" is less than winsome, but it marks her strength. It is precisely this trait that allows Fanny to resist marriage to a man who demonstrates moral failure. Fanny's repeated willingness to comply with relatively insignificant demands, such as retiring early after the ball, does not signal her compliance to larger, significant demands, such as succumbing to an undesired marriage. Fanny, a character at once timid and rigid, often proves difficult to

appreciate.² This chapter will demonstrate that Fanny is not merely an acquiescent character. Rather, her actions, especially as she grows into adulthood, are shown to be expressions of Anglican faith, and are evidenced by her ultimate success—resisting an undesirable marriage and securing a favourable one. Fanny *is*, at times, a compliant heroine, but it is to Anglicanism, not to a conduct book, that she remains faithful.

Throughout the narrative, Fanny operates as an unlikely agent whose constancy and contemplation allow her to judge action or inaction and to infer the possibility of subtle womanly influence. Readers do not need to fall in love with Fanny. Nonetheless, they do need to understand, through Fanny's relationship with Edmund, that *Mansfield Park* is a novel that confronts key issues facing the Anglican Church. In particular, it engages the evangelical call for personal transformation. In the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century the Anglican Church faced a challenge to its authority in the form of emerging evangelicalism and the rising focus upon the individual.³ Through the characterization of Fanny and Edmund, *Mansfield Park* responds to such urgings to ask where lines of spiritual and moral authority should be drawn, and to what extent members of the Church should arrive at salvation either autonomously as the growing evangelical movement asserted was necessary, or through the liturgical practices of the Anglican tradition.

² As Jan Fergus has demonstrated in *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*, Austen gives her readers an intentionally difficult heroine, arguing, “[this] is a risk Austen deliberately runs. She intends to write a novel in which responses and judgement are highly problematic, for the characters and for the reader” (127). Fanny's unlikeable characterisation, she argues, “is a thematic necessity” (128). Certainly, that Austen created a character so many readers find odd gives pause for thought, for certainly she intended it to be so. As William Galperin contends in *The Historical Austen*, Fanny is “fully formed as an ethical subject,” but also “remarkably *deformed* and—in arguably the high point of Austen's practice as a realist—all too human” (156).

³ Elisabeth Jay demonstrates in *Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* that emergent Anglican Evangelicalism, on the rise in the early nineteenth century, posed challenges to the established Church due to the “emphasis upon the authority of individual judgement” (6) that was a key aspect of evangelical faith.

In *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions* (1797), Anglican Bishop Thomas Sherlock, a minister whom we know Austen to have admired, asked similar questions, reflecting upon the precarious Reformation, Inquisition, Rebellion and Restoration. The Anglican Church, he argued, must continually remain stalwart, as the “The Pastors and their Flocks were equally animated with a *Constancy* [italics mine] and a Courage above Temptation. And the Clergy of the Established Church . . . [maintained] honour both at home and abroad” (1745).

As an aspiring clergyman who struggles with change, but who acquiesces and resists in turn, Edmund together with Fanny, resist indiscriminate improvements. Their conversations and intimate relationship illuminate larger issues facing the Anglican Church at the turn of the nineteenth century. In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Marilyn Butler explains the evangelical movement during Austen’s lifetime as “a powerful upper-middle-class pressure group directed towards reforming abuses and combating vice” (163). Butler further reminds us that “the Evangelical concept of the Good Life—visibly Christian, humble, contemplative, serviceable—is realized in Fanny . . . As always with the Evangelicals, there is a stress not simply on religious feeling of a private kind for its own sake, but on good works, active utility within the social world” (243). The “utility” Butler speaks of here, is manifest in the dutiful agency that characterizes Fanny. Fanny practices this agency within the context of a community that consists of a close-knit group of family members and acquaintances. In this way, she mirrors the practices of widely influential Evangelicals, led by reformation-minded Anglican ministers, who demanded larger, widespread reform of individuals in order to transform society about them. Irene Collins, for instance, documents how Wilberforce formed the Vice and Immorality Society, “to win open support from persons in high places for a

campaign to promote the cause of good behaviour throughout the nation” (144). Wilberforce’s rhetoric directly confronted the Anglican Church, to which Austen was loyal.⁴ Of all the characters in *Mansfield Park*, it is Fanny who most clearly understands the demands of personal duty, and the subtle difference between acquiescent morality and religious conviction. At the same time, as an individual, she responsibly maintains the power of choice. Barker-Benfield notes how the reforming potential of education, foregrounded by Wollstonecraft, would come to shape choices for women in the later eighteenth century: “Wollstonecraft laid claim on behalf of women to the open-ended ‘education’ that some in her age saw nurturing individualism. Of course, individualism existed in a dialectic with ‘general rules’” (280). Austen seems similarly to be communicating the importance of reasoned compliance within a greater community, that relationship between an individual and society is often influenced by education.

Fanny’s education, vastly different than that of the Misses Bertram, is marked by contemplative improvement, not unchecked transformation. Ultimately, Fanny resists the reckless desire for change that so permeates *Mansfield Park*. The desire for indiscriminate improvement—a much-commented upon aspect of the novel—is of a piece with the allure of acting. Improvements and acting both impose illusions of reality; Fanny’s resistance to both signifies Fanny’s opposition to changes that threaten Mansfield Park as a stronghold of tradition. Fanny understands, as other characters do not, the potential consequences of indiscriminate

⁴ The importance Austen places upon personal character has caused some scholars to assert her adherence to evangelical ideals. In “*Mansfield Park* and Evangelicalism: A Reassessment,” David Monaghan, for instance, notes that scholars often assert that Jane Austen converted to evangelicalism around 1810 (215). He disagrees with his assertion, pointing out that most of Austen’s evangelical allusions appear in earlier writings, meaning that she would have had to have become an evangelical by 1796 (217). He also points out that while much common ground is shared by Evangelicals and traditional Anglicans, *Mansfield Park* is clearly and strictly, an Anglican text. Evangelicals put God before state-sanctioned religion, and “Edmund speaks consistently in a manner befitting a serious, traditional Church of England clergyman” (220).

change. In his influential work, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels*, Alistair Duckworth similarly argues that in *Mansfield Park*, “it is precisely the resistance of the heroine to those forces endangering her world which permits the continuity of an integral society” (7). Fanny “cannot act” (Austen, *MP* 171). She cannot be something that she is not; in the same way, the novel implies, the Anglican Church must resist calls for unnecessary change. In spite of individual transformation called for by the evangelical movement, Jane Austen’s nephew and Victorian biographer, James Edward Austen Leigh suggests that *Mansfield Park* pre-dated widespread change in the Anglican Church: “[N]o one in these days can think that either Edmund Bertram or Henry Tilney had adequate ideas of the duties of a parish minister. Such, however, were the opinions and practice then prevalent among respectable and conscientious clergymen before their minds had been stirred, first by the Evangelical and afterwards by the High-Church movement which this century has witnessed” (300). Edmund Bertram, as a typical Anglican minister, was orthodox for his time. He and Fanny together recognize, anticipate, and react to the overwhelming influence of evangelicalism upon the Church of England. These changes are worked out and explored as Fanny and Edmund sort out their romantic relationship. Ultimately, Fanny, a Christian heroine, operates as an agent of resistance. Her choices undergird the security of the community at large.

Fanny is easily interpreted as “so odd and so stupid”, in part, because she is a serious character who privileges spiritual and moral responsibility. She is suspicious of transformation and improvement, and this inclination is situated in her disposition—her “natural tendency or bent of the mind” (*OED*)—that certainly strikes the reader as odd. Fanny’s disposition is not marked by evangelical transformation or secular improvement, nor does she have faith in such schemes.

But Fanny's natural disposition is informed by her relationship with Edmund, the representative of the Anglican Church within the text. Fanny looks to him from childhood onward as a source of stability and comfort. However, although morally upright, he fails to recognize the danger of transformative improving schemes. It is Fanny's resistance to a prevailing marriage plot—which would necessitate the transformation of an errant lover—that saves both her and Edmund from marriage to partners they would fail to “save.” Ultimately, Fanny's constancy of character allows her to navigate the threat of change that would consume her. Fanny's constancy, often marked by resistance, but different than evangelical transformative schemes, informs Fanny's sense of responsibility. She does not comply with demands placed upon her to marry the rakish Henry Crawford. Instead, using her devotion to the Anglican Church to establish strength, Fanny wields her resistance as a form of agency. Specifically, it is Fanny's spiritual agency that undergirds her strength and resistance. Fanny both resists and provokes significant change at Mansfield Park when she secures the marriage partner of her choice, the resident Anglican Clergyman, Edmund Bertram.

Educating Fanny: Cultivating Disposition

Fanny's “ignorance,” as a child, delights her cousins and justifies their treatment of her, even though she desperately needs their care. This opinion is widely held by the adults in the Bertram household as well, who hope to capitalize upon Fanny's timidity. The narrator tells us that after Fanny's initial adjustment, “Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris thought with greater satisfaction of their benevolent plan; and it was pretty soon decided between them that, though far from clever, she showed a tractable disposition and seemed likely to give them little trouble. A mean opinion of

her abilities was not confined to *them*” (Austen, *MP* 20). In fact, the majority of the Bertram household agrees, and “as her cousins found her ignorant of many things with which they had been long familiar, they thought her prodigiously stupid, and for the first two or three weeks were continually bringing some fresh report of it into the drawing-room (20). Fanny’s “ignorance” becomes a point of entertainment for the Bertrams, requiring her to take solace in private virtues. Her disposition seems reflective of the Biblical assertion, “But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” (1 Cor 1:27, KJV). We know that ultimately, Fanny’s “foolishness” does ultimately come to shame the Bertrams. Fanny is *not* tractable; the Bertrams misread her disposition. Fanny’s education, far different than that of her cousins, shapes her as a heroine capable of resisting marriage to Henry in spite of the contempt from the residents of Mansfield Park that plagues her.

Readers of *Mansfield Park* often agree with the Bertrams’ evaluation of Fanny’s character as malleable and ultimately ignorant. But it is a common assertion that while most of Austen’s heroines are treated with irony, Fanny is to be interpreted more straightforwardly. In “Jane Austen, Public Theologian,” for example, Peter Leithart reinforces this notion: “Unless we are to suspect Austen of a hyper-ironic stance where Austen’s *lack* of irony toward Fanny is a way of reinforcing irony, then we should accept at face value that Austen considers Fanny morally and intellectually exemplary” (34). Like Leithart, I do not wish to assert that Fanny is an ironic character. However, as the above excerpt from *Mansfield Park* indicates, one of the qualities that made Fanny so desirable an addition to the Bertram household was her seemingly “tractable disposition” and her ignorance. Notably, the narrator tells the reader that these are the Bertrams’ evaluative

statements, but Fanny is not ultimately tractable, nor is she “stupid.” The members of the Bertram household are simply too self-absorbed correctly to interpret Fanny’s character. Ironically, readers tend to agree with their evaluation.

Disposition was considered malleable by Austen’s contemporaries, and Fanny’s disposition is cultivated through her distinctive education, far different than that of her cousins. At the turn of the nineteenth century, when Austen published *Mansfield Park*, the education of women, who had so long been denied its benefits, held a particular urgency because lack of education meant that women were at a distinct disadvantage, not simply vocationally, but as moral agents. In contrast to the development of accomplishments such as received by the Misses Bertram intended to assist with successful husband-hunting, Fanny’s education develops her moral character. As Chapter One has demonstrated, from Mary Wollstonecraft to Hannah More, many women writers warned of the development of accomplishments as a false form of education, designed to make women “alluring mistresses [rather] than rational wives” (Wollstonecraft, *VRW* 2). The Misses Bertram essentially demonstrate such faulty education. And while Wollstonecraft’s Maria operates as an exemplar of a morally-educated female, the characterisation of Fanny’s education exposes that it is actually the Bertrams’ training that is, in fact, “so odd and so stupid.”

Male authors were similarly concerned with reforming education for women. Thomas Gisborne, whom Austen first read resistantly but later appreciated, complained in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) that “ornamental accomplishments occupy the rank and estimation which ought to have been assigned to objects of infinitely greater importance” (77). *Mansfield Park* echoes this complaint. What the Bertrams value the most, Fanny resists altogether: “But I must

tell you another thing of Fanny, so odd and so stupid. Do you know, she says she does not want to learn either music or drawing'" (Austen, *MP* 21). Their aunt Norris shares these misplaced priorities, leading to Fanny's further ostracism: "'To be sure, my dear, that is very stupid indeed . . . [but], it is not at all necessary that she should be as accomplished as you are;—on the contrary, it is much more desirable that there should be a difference'" (21). Clearly the ignorance is Mrs Norris's. However, this means that to a large degree, Fanny remains uncorrupted by her influence.

What is at stake for both Fanny, as well as for Maria and Julia Bertram, is what Austen would have seen as the proper development of Christian character, demonstrating Wollstonecraft's assertion that "women at present are by ignorance rendered foolish" (*VRW* 447). Austen blames the faulty education at Mansfield Park on its patriarch. The narrator notes: "[I]t is not very wonderful that, with all their promising talents and early information, [the Misses Bertram] should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility. In everything but disposition they were admirably taught" (*MP* 21-22). While Mrs Norris's agency is obvious, it is Sir Thomas who is shown ultimately to be culpable: "Sir Thomas did not know what was wanting, because, though a truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their spirits before him" (22). His neglect ensures their mis-education, as Giffin notes: "The malaise at Mansfield Park itself focuses on the lack of properly developed Christian conscience in most of the Bertram children" (135). Sir Thomas's absenteeism, contends Griffin, has spiritual consequences: "ultimately, we are [left] to wonder whether they fall into disgrace as adults through a spiritual deficiency in their relationship with their emotionally absent father; and by analogy,

a deficiency in their relationship with God” (135). The disadvantage of the Bertram sisters is a spiritual one.

Instead of receiving intentional guidance from an engaged father and mother, the children are left virtually orphaned, given over to the pernicious rearing of a scheming aunt. Much to their dismay and malicious delight, the Bertram sisters find Fanny’s lack of formal education fascinating, and, they gossip to their Aunt Norris. But their astonishment is fueled by her preference: “‘My dear,’ their considerate aunt would reply; ‘it is very bad, but you must not expect everybody to be as forward and quick at learning as yourself’” (20). Noting Fanny’s “stupidity,” Aunt Norris encourages a “difference” (21) between Fanny and her cousins: “There was no positive ill-nature in Maria or Julia; and though Fanny was often mortified by their treatment of her, she thought too lowly of her own claims to feel injured by it” (22-23). They were educated to hold Fanny in contempt, she to humbly accept their censure.

Interestingly, Mary Jean Corbett posits that Fanny’s unusual placement as an outsider within the household eventually makes it possible for her to marry Edmund: “The familial ‘distinction’ that has always operated to separate Fanny from the Misses Bertram ultimately qualifies her to become a Mrs. Bertram instead” (250). This is true, even though the manipulative Aunt Norris hopes that educating her as a subjugated sister will be a safeguard against any attraction growing between Fanny and her male cousins (251). But Fanny is educated by Edmund’s informal, but nonetheless formative, tutoring. Precisely because Edmund, operating as young Fanny’s tutor, never considers Fanny as a potential mate, her position as an outsider secures for her a curious advantage. She is educated to be the rational wife—a very Wollstonecraftian companion—of her future husband.

Fanny's education represents a different pedagogical model: it is one of character. Fanny's education epitomises the education called for by Astell, More, and Wollstonecraft. Jane McDonnell notes that Fanny is a neglected, abused child, and maintains an emotional hunger which is sated by education. But unlike her cousins who are educated for the marriage market, Fanny's self-education leads her to "the sounder principles of a Christian discipline" (204). These "sounder principles" eventually lead Fanny to become the novel's heroine, capable of judging properly where others cannot. Butler agrees that Austen was particularly concerned with her heroine's moral development: "Fanny's sense as a Christian of her own frailty, her liability to error, and her need of guidance outside herself, is the opposite of the Bertram girls' complacent self-sufficiency" (222). Their different educations nudge the dispositions of Bertram sisters and Fanny in opposing directions.

Like Wollstonecraft before her, Austen's theory of education relied upon the Lockean concept of the blank slate. Giffin explains that Locke's theories, widely discussed during Austen's lifetime, shaped her view of education: "Locke's *tabula rasa* is not a denial of the reality of sin, either original or continual, but it does suggest that human beings are not victims of fate, or of their fallen nature." He further notes that "[H]uman agency can cooperate with divine agency to effect *soteria* [salvation] in this world—and in the next world—if the human mind is properly formed, and if given the means of obtaining 'correct' knowledge, so it can become an agent of free will" (13). Austen's theme, according to Giffin, is whether her heroines "engage, or struggle to engage, or refuse to engage, in the process of reasoning by reflecting on their experience in order to arrive at 'correct' knowledge" (13). This engagement and participation in one's salvation is a means by which passivity is challenged; *disposition*, or predisposal towards particular character, must

be actively shaped. Austen implies in her letters that she believes in the doctrine of original sin (Chawton, Feb 20, 1817), but her novels resist the idea that we must abandon ourselves to temptation. In order to influence one's moral character, disposition must be confronted and shaped. Such training is denied to the Bertram sisters.

The Bertram sisters' lack of "self-knowledge, generosity, and humility" implies the presence of these traits in Fanny. I will later more fully explicate Fanny's adherence to a contemplative lifestyle, but even as a child, Fanny's propensity towards self-reflection contributes to the development of her disposition. Upon her heartbroken arrival, the residents of Mansfield are perplexed by her slow acclimation: "[Fanny's] feelings were very acute, and too little understood to be properly attended to. Nobody meant to be unkind, but nobody put themselves out of their way to secure her comfort" (Austen, *MP* 15). Fanny's feelings, a painful sign of introspection, torment her as a child but later become a sign of contemplation. Fanny's subjugation throughout the text is obvious, but it forces her to turn inwardly for resources. Fanny appropriates this inclination to introspection in order to learn resistance, a trait she later manipulates to her advantage. Aunt Norris exploits Fanny's natural inclination to timidity; in the same way, Maria and Julia's selfishness is indulged and encouraged.

Fanny's disposition is formed in large part by the marginalization and oppression that comes not only from men who would seek to dominate and control her such as Sir Thomas, Henry, and her negligent father; but also, from the women who fail to protect her. This lack of feminine companionship is quite opposite of the feminine solidarity exhibited by Jemima and Maria. William Galperin argues that Austen's inclusion of female characters who act as scapegoats for larger societal

problems is disingenuous, as “Mrs. Norris is also the product of a misogynistic economy whose transparent delectation in the deformation of women (notably Lady Bertram) works disingenuously to absolve both the culture at large and the male agents, who are its beneficiaries, of any concomitant blamability” (170). Johnson similarly asserts in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* that Austen blames men for their negligent roles in protecting vulnerable females, creating vulnerable women, who are both “unsheltered and uneducated” (57). As a result, “Women must, then, guard both their outward behaviour and, more onerously, their inward wishes” (59). Fanny is just such a neglected, unprotected woman. Yet, as much as male agents are, in fact, negligent in their cultural ‘duty’ to protect Fanny, Galperin and Johnson largely overlook the active and aggressive role women played in Fanny’s long-standing marginalization. In addition to the obvious tormenting received at the hands of the immature (and therefore ‘not-yet fully educated’) Bertram sisters, the more shocking treatment is by women who should protect her in an act of solidarity. Unlike the feminine fellowship enjoyed by Wollstonecraft’s Maria and Jemima, Fanny virtually lacks any semblance of female mentorship, necessitating her dependence upon the church and upon Edmund, its representative.

Fanny’s own mother is preoccupied by her poverty; as such, Fanny’s home in Portsmouth offers her little of the security necessary for the cultivation of her disposition. Fanny is virtually abandoned by her mother and father, which creates a void that would easily be filled by the relative stability of Mansfield Park. Mrs Norris, in her condescension, suggests that her overburdened and impoverished sister, Mrs Price, would be happy to relinquish young Fanny: “she could not but own it to be her wish, that poor Mrs Price should be relieved from the charge and expense of one child entirely out of her great number” (*MP* 6). And so it is. As a

neglected child, Fanny's love of Mansfield is reasonable in that it gives her hope for a secure future; unfortunately, women such as Aunt Norris and Lady Bertram make Mansfield's security tenuous at best.

Lady Bertram is characterised as indolent. Ill-equipped to fulfil even her duties to her own children, Lady Bertram is unable to assist Fanny in any way. Instead, she exploits Fanny's humility to turn her into a vehicle of usefulness. Fanny is forced to assume the role of caregiver to the woman who should be nurturing her. From the earliest moments of Fanny's entrance to Mansfield Park, we are faced with the reality of Lady Bertram's complacency: "From about the time of her entering the family, Lady Bertram, in consequence of a little ill-health, and a great deal of indolence, gave up the house in town, which she had been used to occupy every spring, and remained wholly in the country, leaving Sir Thomas to attend his duty in Parliament, with whatever increase or diminution of comfort might arise from her absence" (*MP* 23). It is noteworthy that Lady Bertram remains curiously absent not only from the affairs of her household, but also from her duties as a wife. The affairs of managing her household are given wholly over to the malicious Mrs. Norris. Even so, Lady Bertram's ability to consider Fanny's affairs would have hardly benefited the child: "To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting, nicely dressed, on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter when it did not put herself to inconvenience" (22). Yet Lady Bertram did have energy enough to confirm Fanny's "stupidity": "As for Fanny's being stupid at learning, "she could only say it was very unlucky, but some people *were* stupid, and Fanny must take more pains: she did not know what else was to be

done; and, except her being so dull, she must add she saw no harm in the poor little thing, and always found her very handy and quick in carrying messages, and fetching what she wanted'" (22). Fanny becomes *useful* to Lady Bertram for twofold reasons. First, Lady Bertram sees thinking as an unnecessary inconvenience. Second, Lady Bertram sees Fanny's seeming ignorance as a convenient addition to Fanny's willingness to comply. Unlike her mother who simply neglects Fanny out of impoverished desperation, Fanny's neglect at the hands of Lady Bertram serves manipulative ends.

Aunt Norris's position as both Fanny's aunt and as the wife of a clergyman makes her lack of charity towards Fanny particularly disturbing, and represents tremendous moral failure. Aunt Norris's generosity is hypocritical in that everything she begrudgingly "gives" actually belongs to Sir Thomas. The idea that charity is an essential Christian virtue was championed by the evangelical movement. More discussed charity as an essential quality in a wife and companion in *Cælebs in Search of a Wife*. Mr. Stanley, the moral referee of the text, states, "I have often heard it regretted that ladies have no stated employment, no profession. It is a mistake. *Charity is the calling of a lady; the care of the poor is her profession*" (228). Had this "profession" been Mrs. Norris's only calling, her only duty, she would have had moderate, though somewhat disingenuous, success. But Austen seems to take this modern call beyond the boundaries of simple vocation. She demands of Mrs. Norris a *truly* charitable spirit, but she fails in this. Sherlock likewise spoke of the importance of Christian charity in *Discourses Preached on Several Occasions* (1797). The nature of Charity, according to Sherlock, must be motivated by genuine love: "for our good Works themselves have neither Merit nor Righteousness, but as they begin and end in Christ: the love of Christ is the Fountain

of Christian Charity” (36). Charity is both an evangelical and an Anglican ideal, and Fanny exemplifies such Christian charity. The unreasonable generosity and patience extended by Fanny to her oppressors is not that of a suffering and grateful slave-figure; rather, it is an example of paradoxical Christian virtue. But whereas Austen’s most fiscally secure heroine, Emma, is financially charitable, Fanny’s charity is extended by offering relational grace where it is not deserved. In this sense, we can see agreement between More and Austen; charity given with inferior motives is no charity at all.

Even though Fanny receives charity from the Bertrams, their general lack of compassion demonstrates a marked absence of “personal transformation.” Simple compliance to duty, therefore, is inferior to undertaking conscientious action. This suggests that Austen, while not espousing Evangelical Anglicanism herself, was influenced by its tenets. She articulated as much in a letter to her niece, Fanny Knight who was contemplating marrying an evangelical, but was concerned about her suitor’s potential fanaticism. Austen attempts to temper Fanny’s concern: “And, as to there being any objection from his *goodness*, from the danger of his becoming even evangelical, I cannot admit *that*. I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be evangelicals, and am at least persuaded that they who are so from reason and feeling must be happiest and safest” (Chawton, 1814). Evangelicals, she seems to suggest, have a tendency to be self-righteous and overly concerned with “goodness”; however, if this goodness is prompted by rationality, it can lead to happiness. Religion, then, can be satisfying and promote happiness if it is preceded by rational thought. However, evangelicalism, with its reputed emotional basis, often concerned Anglicans who would create boundaries for their faith with an adherence to tradition. Anglicanism could easily be practiced with duty but without

a sense of individual responsibility. Aunt Norris, for example, feels only a modicum of responsibility towards her niece who so desperately needs her attention. This, from the wife of an Anglican minister: one committed to the Church of England. Austen clearly disapproves. Sherlock spoke of the importance of a charitable spirit. For both the evangelical Anglican and the traditional Anglican, charity was a necessary virtue of Christian character; patronizing condescension and charity are incompatible Christian virtues, and Austen makes this point clearly throughout *Mansfield Park*.

While Fanny's education drives her to become charitable, the Bertrams become selfish. Both the Crawfords and Fanny exhibit the influence of the cult of individualism, but what they do with this freedom differs, as their dispositions and educations vary widely. Leithart asserts that individualism is a central concern of the novel. *Mansfield Park*, he says, addresses "uncontrolled individualism" (29). This lack of control sets no parameters and creates no responsibility: "And it traces this insidious individualism precisely to the marginalization of the Church in the life of England, the failure of the clergy to be the makers of English manners, and the consequent intrusion of other forces as the makers of manners" (29). Edmund's duty, therefore, is as one who would create boundaries for the expression of individualism.

For other members of the Bertram household, duty connotes obligations incumbent upon individuals, obligations which are often subverted or resisted. The Bertram sisters needlessly circumvent and neglect duty whenever possible, and Tom Bertram actively resists dutiful action, bringing financial strain and social shame to the family. While Mrs. Norris engages in the duties assigned to her, she does so with such little transformation of character, her obligations are only superficially fulfilled.

As such, duties performed but internally resisted fall short. Fanny alone exemplifies the proper execution of duty within the novel. Her decision to fulfil certain duties is both a matter of faith and survival. Fanny is responsible first to herself and her convictions, and within these parameters, she transforms the narrative.

Fanny is capable of correct action in spite of internal pulls to the contrary. This particularly strong attribute of calculated morality signifies Fanny's concession to insignificant compliance. Rather than behaving like the spoilt Bertram sisters, Fanny complies when the costs to her are minimal or spiritually insignificant. The examples of her compliance are many. Of particular note is that throughout her stay at Mansfield Park, Fanny does without a fire to warm her room. This was maliciously ordered by Aunt Bertram and only remedied *years* after its implementation, but Fanny's quiet acceptance required no moral compromise for her. In the same way, throughout her stay at Mansfield Park, Fanny indulges the childlike Lady Bertram whose passive lack of concern for Fanny is complicit with Aunt Norris's aggressive negligence. This is apparent when Aunt Norris and Lady Bertram together fatigued Fanny for the sake of her gathering roses. Fanny becomes ill as a result of being in the sun, and Lady Bertram later notes to a very frustrated Edward, "I am very much afraid she caught the headache there, for the heat was enough to kill anybody. It was as much as I could bear myself. Sitting and calling to Pug, and trying to keep him from the flower-beds, was almost too much for me'" (*MP* 86). Fanny indulges her ungrateful aunts regularly, yet fears ingratitude within herself. This concerns the reader who would then conclude that Fanny's pliability to relatively minor demands connotes a malleable character. In fact, it does not.

Sir Thomas also makes this assumption, and attempts to prove to Fanny's aggressive suitor that Fanny would be an obedient wife. After the dance given in her

honour, “Sir Thomas was again interfering a little with her inclination, by advising her to go immediately to bed. ‘Advise’ was his word, but it was the advice of absolute power, and she had only to rise, and, with Mr. Crawford's very cordial adieus, pass quietly away” (326). Austen’s authorial commentary reads like literary criticism. It illuminates to the reader Sir Thomas’s attempted control. Yet, this manipulation and Fanny’s obedience prove deceptive: “In thus sending her away, Sir Thomas perhaps might not be thinking merely of her health. It might occur to him that Mr. Crawford had been sitting by her long enough, or he might mean to recommend her as a wife by shewing her persuadableness” (326). In such a manner, Austen foreshadows with irony the polar opposite reality. Fanny is not, in fact, persuadable. Uncommon desire to please even her oppressors such as Mrs Norris, whom she loves in spite of Mrs Norris’s shortcomings, speaks not of Fanny’s malleability, but of her ability to employ calculated Christian charity, the very kind of charity the residents of Mansfield Park lack. As the festivities of the ball conclude, Fanny is tearful, not because the fun has ended, but because “she now felt as if she had wasted half [William’s] visit in idle cares and selfish solitudes unconnected with him” (327). Fanny feels guilt, even if we are frustrated by her concern. She even offers charity to those unworthy of her regard, as “[her] disposition was such that she could never even think of her aunt Norris in the meagerness and cheerlessness of her own small house, without reproaching herself for some little want of attention to her when they had last been together” (327).

Fanny is charitable; she is not malleable.⁵

⁵ As we have seen, even the charity received by Fanny was a “duty” performed from her Mansfield relatives. Emma Woodhouse similarly cares for the cottagers who depend upon her goodwill, and Anne Eliot cares for her infirm friend Mrs. Smith. Responsibility, however, is a matter of personal conscience. Fanny moves beyond duty many times throughout the novel, making thoughtful and personal responsible choices. Fanny’s focus upon individual conscience was of a piece with

While the general populace of Mansfield Park attempts to manipulate Fanny, Edmund's attention take a different turn. Fanny is genuinely loved and regarded by Edmund, the second son, whose life is given to the service of the established Church:

Kept back as she was by every body else, his single support could not bring her forward, but his attentions were otherwise of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind, and extending its pleasures. He knew her to be *clever* [italics mine], to have a quick apprehension as well as *good sense* [italics mine], and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself. (24-25)

This critical passage, which concludes the chapter that introduces us to Fanny's "stupidity," constitutes an important authorial intervention; Edmund's evaluation of Fanny's character must be the reader's guide. It essentially summarizes all Austen wants us to believe about her heroine who characters and readers alike tend to find odd and insipid: Fanny, *clever*, and with *good sense*, will be guided by Edmund, the resident clergyman. Though Austen notes that "his single support could not bring her forward"—Fanny must be her own agent—, his intervention will help educate Fanny's disposition to be anything but "stupid."

Compatible Virtue: Anglican Morality and Marriage

As a young woman, Fanny's seemingly compliant disposition is attractive to the rakish Henry; however, the very traits that initially draw him to her are the same

evangelicalism that called for personal transformation, charity, and most significantly, the abolition of the slave trade. Interestingly, these calls to personal responsibility were tenuously connected to the secular culture of individualism. Both influence *Mansfield Park*, and for Fanny, both lead her to contemplate personal action. Essentially, how Austen's heroines engage duty and responsibility exposes their morality.

ones that eventually will empower her to refuse him. Fanny acts in compliance with her faith, and she uses it to inform her intellectual reasoning in order to make sound decisions regarding her potential compatibility with Henry. Her conviction is so firm that she and Henry would be mismatched, that she even resists the patriarchal Sir Thomas Bertram who heartily endorses Henry. He tells Fanny that she should accept his offer of marriage in spite of her reservations: "He is a most extraordinary young man, . . . young as you are, and little acquainted with the transient, varying, unsteady nature of love, as it generally exists, you cannot be struck as I am with all that is wonderful in a perseverance of this sort against discouragement'" (MP 380-381). Sir Thomas seems to be saying that Henry's persistence should drive Fanny to abandon her principles. Fanny, Sir Thomas insists, should appreciate the feelings that have prompted Henry's admiration: "With him it is entirely a matter of feeling: he claims no merit in it; perhaps is entitled to none. Yet, having chosen so well, *his constancy has a respectable stamp* [italics mine]" (MP 381).

The source of Henry's constancy is ambiguous, but Fanny's inability to love him is seen as a moral failure by Sir Thomas. But Fanny will not change her mind, and readers have historically been frustrated by her seeming lack of sympathy. As Lewis states, "One of the most dangerous of literary ventures is the little, shy, unimportant heroine whom none of the other characters value. The danger is that your readers may agree with the other characters. Something must be put into the heroine to make us feel the other characters are wrong, that she contains depths they never dreamed of" (366). He concedes that Austen does give Fanny "rectitude of mind" but complains that Fanny has "neither passion, nor physical courage, nor wit, nor resource" (367). While it is true that Fanny is neither physically courageous nor

witty, his acknowledgement of her rectitude suggests that she is not without resource. In fact, Fanny does have “depths [we have] never dreamed of.”

So with Lewis’s own words, we can explore the importance of Fanny Price’s stalwart rectitude of mind, guided by religion. Lewis points out the importance of this reality in all of Austen’s novels: “The hard core of morality and even religion seems to me to be just what makes really good comedy possible. . . . Where there is no norm, nothing can be ridiculous, except for a brief moment of unbalanced provincialism in which we may laugh at the merely unfamiliar. Unless there is something about which the author is never ironical, there can never be any true irony in the work” (51). In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny accordingly becomes the norm. Irony is evident, not in her behaviour but rather, in the behaviour of those who would judge her, both characters and readers.

As alluded to in the introduction, Austen’s own prayers illuminate the importance she placed on constancy, a type of devotion to one’s faith. Her prayers demonstrate, in a practical way, Austen’s understanding of the tension present between emergent evangelicalism and the Anglican Church: the tension between a personal conversion experience and compliant faith. Her own prayer pleads, “Look with mercy on the sins we have this day committed and in mercy make us feel them deeply, that our repentance may be sincere, and our resolution steadfast of endeavouring against the commission of such in future” (*Minor Works* 453). It seems clear here that she accepted personal responsibility for her religious faith, seeking individual transformation of thought and action. In her prayer, Austen qualifies individual religious practice, referencing the importance of accountability to the established church in this process, saying, “we implore thee to quicken our sense of thy mercy in the redemption of the world, of the value of that holy religion

[Anglicanism] in which we have been brought up, that we may not, by our own neglect, throw away the salvation thou hast given us, nor be Christians only in name” (454). Fanny, like her creator, values the “holy religion” of Anglicanism. Fanny is developed as a character to demonstrate that while evangelical ideals might prompt one to be mindful of sinful inclination, moral success is firmly grounded in accountability to the established church.

Fanny’s devotion to Anglicanism does not suggest that Austen wishes to portray in her heroine’s character normative contemporary Christianity. Instead, Fanny is shown to wrestle with moral choices and change. Butler, who identifies Austen as steadfastly conservative, argues that during Austen’s lifetime, religious focus turned to subjective individual experience, and the sentimental movement turned to the novel to explore individual choice and correct judgement (11-15). This judgement was firmly situated in belief in the validity of natural law, and undergirded Anglican theology during Austen’s lifetime. This theology, proposed by Thomas Aquinas, purported universals of good and evil, and “Man, as a rational creature has the strict duty of knowing what eternal law exacts of him and conforming to it. This might be an insoluble problem, were this law not in some ways written in his very substance, so that he has only to observe himself and discover it there” (Gilson, Eschmann, Shook 266). This law, then, is “written on the fleshly tablets of the heart” (267). Austen’s texts repeatedly and similarly suggest that rationality would lead to right thinking so long as serious contemplation, not simply sentimental imagining, guides the act of reasoning. Peter Knox-Shaw further explains that Anglicanism’s tendency towards “natural religion” was directly the result of the Enlightenment’s focus upon the observable. He argues, “Discourse of this kind gave a new and exhilarating dimension to religious authority. It pointed to

the way things actually worked in the world, grounding the dictates of scripture on all-too-human needs and nature” (8). Austen, he says, in her propensity towards realism would have embraced this outlook.

The underlying belief that morality was “reasonable” and “natural,” then, guided Fanny’s choices. In *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*, Sarah Emsley explains that recognising Austen’s belief in natural law allows us to see her work complexly, eliminating the dichotomy between radicalism and conservatism which has tended to structure recent Austen scholarship: “An exploration of the classical and theological context for Austen's philosophy of the virtues can help to broaden our understanding of what it means for her to be a moralist” (4). Emsley posits that “An exploration of how religion and faith form the grounding of everyday life for Austen's characters can help to explain moral decisions in the novels” (7) and she “maintain[s] that Christianity, not just the forms of religion but also the deep faith in Christ's atonement for the sins of the world, underlies the way Jane Austen understands the virtues and shows them in action and in tension in her fictional characters” (10). But Austen’s belief in the atoning work of Christ was not necessarily based upon an evangelical conversion experience, but based upon what Mooneyham White, author of *Jane Austen's Anglicanism*, asserts were “probabilistic arguments” (30). Sherlock’s sermons used this reasoning, she says, whereby “the appeal is made to human nature as an argument for scriptural probability” (30). This rational, contemplative approach to the interpretation of scripture, therefore, prompts personal change through reason and education as opposed to an evangelical transformation of the heart. Fanny’s Anglicanism is the basis of Fanny’s moral judgements as Anglicanism itself is based upon a classical understanding of natural law. Archbishop Whatley (1821) similarly asserted an

ethical basis for Austen's faith, situated in classical morality: "We know not whether Miss Austin [sic] ever had access to the precepts of Aristotle; but there are few, if any, writers of fiction who have illustrated them more successfully" ("ART. V"360). Fanny is a character who illustrates this acceptance of natural law guided by the established church.

Fanny's incredulousness about schemes for improvement demonstrates her loyalty to traditional Anglicanism as does her commitment to Edmund. The Anglican Church's role during this time period was very much that of an arbiter of ethics, as Jane Austen knew very well. This was especially incumbent upon country clergymen beyond the watchful eye of Church governance. Her nephew, James Edward Austen Leigh, commented upon this responsibility, undertaken by his great uncle George Austen, Jane Austen's father: "I believe that a century ago the improvement in most country parishes began with the clergy; and that in those days a rector who chanced to be a gentleman and a scholar, found himself superior to his chief parishioners in information and manners, and became a sort of centre of refinement and politeness" (182). Clergy were what Leithart calls the "makers of manners" (29).

But the evangelical call for personal transformation, permeating the Anglican Church during Austen's lifetime, confronts Fanny: the *one* character in *Mansfield Park* who is not in need of transformation. At Sotherton, she is disappointed with the modernization of the chapel, but she is even more concerned that the practice of daily prayer has been discontinued. Mary Crawford sees this as an improvement, but Fanny is disheartened by the change: "It is a pity," cried Fanny, "that the custom should have been discontinued. It was a valuable part of former times. There is something in a chapel and chaplain so much in character with a great house, with

one's ideas of what such a household should be! A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer is fine!" (101). Fanny's sympathetic agreement with Anglican rituals is evident. The "great house," the guardian keeper of principles and judgement for an entire estate, guides a community. In this way, Duckworth argues that Fanny is an outsider and simultaneously the keeper of the Mansfield estate—not its financial order, but its spiritual order. Fanny is "representative of Jane Austen's own fundamental commitment to an inherited culture" (73). Fanny is committed as a character "to a social order founded in religion, which the country house can in fact embody, but which, more importantly, it can be made aesthetically to represent" (73). In this way, the chapel at Sotherton is an aesthetic representation of the culture that Fanny longs to keep. Her fierce loyalty and compliance to the Church is apparent upon her visit to Sotherton, where she is disappointed.

Fanny, as a keeper of "spiritual order," is especially concerned with correct judgement, unlike other characters in the novel. Ruth Bernard Yeazell has argued that Fanny's judgement is fixed from the start. "Even when she is assiduously wooed by the novel's charming young man, it is not Fanny but Sir Thomas and Edmund who are nearly seduced by the performance. Like the flirtations of Willoughby, Wickham, and Frank Churchill, Henry Crawford's pursuit of the heroine serves as a lesson in proper judgment, but in this case the heroine herself requires no enlightenment" (141). Henry tempts her to waiver in Portsmouth, but ultimately, she does not bend (141-142). She asserts that "Events do not compel the heroine to grow; they simply drive others to recognize what she has always been" (142). This particularly important lesson was a counterargument to the prevailing notion during Austen's lifetime that a rake could be reformed. Archbishop Whatley applauded Austen's efforts to remedy this apparent misconception, stating that

Fanny rejects Henry because he lacks true religion. In his anonymously published article, he asserted, “In this respect she presents a useful example to a good many modern females, whose apparent regard for religion in themselves, and indifference about it in their partners for life, make one sometimes inclined to think they hold the opposite extreme to the Turk's opinion, and believe men to have no souls” (ART. V. 366). Instead, Fanny demonstrates the utmost concern for Henry's soul: a man to whom she would be united for life should the residents of Mansfield Park have their way. It is Fanny's faith that enables her properly to judge Henry; importantly, she resists him.

Paradoxically, it is Fanny's obedience to her faith that ultimately frees and rewards her. In part, this is because lacking external physical structures of security in terms of meaningful relationships, she turns inwardly and leverages her faith in order to find redemption. Anna Despotopoulou confirms Fanny's victory: “Fanny Price may initially seem an unlikely candidate for such a view of feminine success, given her timidity and ineffectuality even in the domestic realm of her uncle's and father's houses. And yet . . . Fanny's ‘success’ is much more significant and groundbreaking than that of Elizabeth Bennet, Emma, or other Austen heroines who assert more control over their households” (570). The “success” Fanny enjoys, she argues, is not due to underlying morality: “Fanny Price's character indeed requires no correcting throughout the novel . . . but not because of a strict moral code which limits her feelings. From her early childhood she builds a unique feminine space for herself which remains uncontaminated and uninterrupted by male involvement” (570). I agree that Fanny creates for herself a “unique feminine space,” but differ from Despotopoulou in asserting that it *is* by employing a moral code that Fanny is

able to create for herself autonomous space that is not controlled by the men in her life. Her constant morality is guided by her faith.

Fanny's concern with correct judgement is strongly evident in her unrelenting opposition to performing in *Lovers' Vows* (1798). The inclusion of the play within the novel illuminates the underlying deceitfulness amongst the residents of Mansfield. A stronghold of English traditionalism, Mansfield Park externally complies with quintessential Englishness; however, this stronghold is not impenetrable. Throughout *Mansfield Park*, the characters continually revisit themes of deception and revelation. The deceptive quietude that permeates Mansfield masks reckless desire. This reckless desire is not simply manifest in the sexual attraction embodied by Henry and Mary Crawford; its scope is much more far-reaching, as multiple characters struggle with varying forms of ambition: Aunt Norris desires control and domination; Sir Thomas desires personal peace and prosperity at any cost; Lady Bertram desires indolence; Tom desires indulgence. The lust-struck youth merely represent the physical manifestation of unchecked want. This manifestation is possible because Mansfield Park depends upon illusions of reality. The open quarrelling of Portsmouth disturbs Fanny because she cannot hide from its influence, yet the same disruptive forces would destroy Mansfield Park from within. Even so, Fanny resists this unchecked craving that so permeates the deceptively quiet Mansfield Park. Behind what Johnson calls a "drapery of decency" (*Jane Austen* 103), a lack of legitimate authority threatens to undo Mansfield Park.

The deceptive quietude of Mansfield Park is disrupted, in part, by the introduction of acting. The allure of acting suggests an ambiguous reality and is referenced throughout *Mansfield Park*. In spite of its dominant presence in discussions of *Mansfield Park* in literary criticism, the least significant instance is

the presence of *Lovers' Vows*. Instead, the inclusion of play-acting in the home theatre prepares Austen's readers to question the sincere or fictional motives of characters within the text. We know the Austen family to have enjoyed acting, and can therefore surmise she was not broadly condemning its practice.⁶ Gisborne, however, communicated a commonly heard complaint: "[T]he opinions, the dispositions, and the actions of the frequenters of the theatre will acquire some degree of similitude. What is heard with admiration and pleasure, will be remembered: what is seen under those impressions, will be imitated" (162). Gisborne felt that young ladies were especially prone to its influence (163). Similarly, Austen seems to suggest that the impressionable Bertram sisters, unsteady in their character, scarcely know the line between reality and artifice: a dichotomy also blurred by the theatre. Clearly, Austen's play choice for the private theatricals in *Mansfield Park* is ironic, and illuminates to her reader that reality and fiction are closely connected. But Fanny, incapable of deception in any form, assures the residents of Mansfield that she cannot deceive, even in jest: "Indeed you must excuse me. I could not act anything if you were to give me the world. No, indeed, I cannot act'" (*MP* 171). Fanny, who "cannot act," is painfully authentic. *Lovers' Vows* blurs the line between what is "real" and "right." The play's sanctioning of prohibited relationships driven by desire allow for their performance in ways that make it difficult to see if the novel's protagonists are acting in or out of character. Fanny's faith is a grounding force leveraged against reckless desire that is all too realistically evident in the play-acting at Mansfield Park. In what seems to be

⁶ Both Paula Byrne's *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (2002) and Penny Gay's *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (2002) speak to the role and extent to which theatre influenced and captured the Austen household, and how this fascination influenced Austen's own work.

agreement with evangelicals, Austen demonstrates the need for authentic, necessary improvement situated in duty and responsibility—not acting.

But considering Fanny's ability to judge correctly and constantly, we can observe Edmund's conversation with Sir Thomas the morning following his return and discovery of the events: "'We have all been more or less to blame,' said he, 'every one of us, excepting Fanny. Fanny is the only one who has judged rightly throughout; who has been consistent. *Her* feelings have been steadily against it from first to last. She never ceased to think of what was due to you. You will find Fanny everything you could wish'" (*MP* 219). Her ability to be everything Sir Thomas should wish is significant. He is keeper of the estate; he is the patriarch; and he is authority. Or at least, he should be all these things. In fact, it is Fanny who is Mansfield's most ardent keeper. As such, Fanny aligns herself with traditions of strength. In much the same way, Edmund, the Anglican clergyman in *Mansfield Park*, approves of Fanny's insight. Despotopoulou similarly contends, "throughout the novel, Fanny is the only one who sees clearly the sexual rivalry among her cousins, the duplicity of the Crawfords, and the blindness of Edmund, and he presents her views boldly to the reader—and occasionally to her uncle and Edmund—establishing her superiority as the impartial spectator of the novel" (578-579). She is blameless.

But even Fanny herself questions her own correct judgement. When faced with the undesirable possibility of living with Aunt Norris after Mr Norris's death, Fanny frets, fearing ingratitude within herself. Similarly, the joy felt by Maria and Julia Bertram's notice of Sir Thomas' exit is tempered but present within Fanny's own heart. She struggles with guilt caused by happiness: "Fanny's relief, and her consciousness of it, were quite equal to her cousins'; but a more tender nature

suggested that her feelings were ungrateful, and she really grieved because she could not grieve” (37). While other characters shift their moral perceptions as circumstances press upon them, Fanny’s judgement stands, even when it pains her.

Fanny’s constant disposition only guarantees obedience to her faith. Giffin points out the remarkable nature of Fanny’s decision to defy Sir Thomas’s wishes: Sir Thomas, he states, confronts Fanny in ways he cannot or will not confront his own daughters: “Sir Thomas subjects his niece to the kind of emotional pressure that he would never subject his own daughters to; and she responds to him in a way that Maria and Julia cannot, with a Christian disposition they do not have. Because of this disposition she stands up to her uncle on principle—and it should be recognised that she is the *only* character in the novel who ever does so, including Edmund” (141). Ultimately, in spite of her love for Mansfield Park and her deference to Sir Thomas, its figurehead and authority, Fanny refuses to betray her conscience.

Ultimately, Fanny and Edmund, as a unit, represent reasoned morality guided by the church. Sherlock spoke of the need for reasoned compliance to religious practices, arguing that religion is the “Service of a free Agent.” Therefore, “all external Force is excluded as absolutely improper: Instruction is the proper Application to a reasonable Mind.” However, since mankind is born with passion, “Authority is wanted as well as Instruction, to form the Mind of Men to Virtue and Religion” (269-270). In other words, Sherlock felt that man will adopt a reasonable acceptance of religion as a matter of natural law, but this acceptance must be nudged by the Church in order to temper the passions of man. Fanny adopts this logic of reasoned compliance within a larger community. She does not give blind submission.

Fanny's willingness to comply is balanced by resistance. And throughout the novel, Fanny's choices most emphatically revolve around her role in the choice of her future marriage partner. Noticing Fanny in a contemplative state, Mary creates for Fanny a picture of Henry as the hero of an (ironically) fictitious story of love and heartbreak, exclaiming, "Why, Fanny, you are absolutely in a reverie. Thinking, I hope, of one who is always thinking of you . . . Henry is quite the hero of an old romance, and glories in his chains. You should come to London to know how to estimate your conquest" (*MP* 416). Butler notes, "What is important about Fanny's cogitations is that they involve scrupulous self-examination, the critical mental process that everyone else in the novel neglects" (231). Fanny's quiet moments "are the appropriate social demeanour of the Christian heroine, who is humble and unassertive" (240). This is because "Religion in the novel partly means private meditation, a consciousness of our own failures and a will to do better" (242). Fanny's contemplations, therefore, are central to her agency, and are spiritual in nature. Similar to Wollstonecraft's Maria, Fanny's introspection is at once rationally intellectual and spiritual. They lead her to her unwavering determination to resist Henry. Austen uses Fanny's contemplations about marriage to confront how reasoned religion, firmly situated within the Anglican Church, should be employed to form the most important decision of most women's lives: that of a marriage partner.

Fanny longs for intellectual and spiritual compatibility, the kind she shares with Edmund. Fanny and Edmund serve not so much as a romantic hero and heroine, but as vehicles for larger questions facing England and its Church. The rising ideal for marriage continued to be based upon companionship, as Hazel Jones articulates in *Jane Austen & Marriage*: "Most writers of conduct literature, from the

radical Mary Hays to the conservative James Fordyce, agreed, that happiness in marriage depended on a union of minds, strong affection and mutual respect” (120). Fanny and Edmund’s togetherness is established almost immediately from Fanny’s entrance into the house. Even so, their relationship is not the primary focus of Austen’s work. Together, the future Mr and Mrs Bertram engage questions facing their immediate community and society at large, and they firmly represent Anglican traditionalism. Giffin holds a similar viewpoint, asserting that “what *Mansfield Park* is most truly about [is] a novel that never once invokes providence to resolve a narrative resolution . . . because it is a novel about human maturity not about divine intervention or a fairy-tale romance” (148). I would add that while Austen does not promote divine intervention, she clearly champions Christian ideology. As Giffin asserts, “this novel—her most didactically religious—is about how . . . maturity comes about in the context of human fallibility and free will in an ever-changing and ever-vulnerable world” (148). While Austen does not completely abandon a commonplace marriage plot, she refuses to align Fanny and Edmund with spiritually incompatible marriage partners.

Fanny’s ability to resist Edmund’s unwanted matchmaking is remarkable considering his role as mentor, teacher, clergy, and object of her affection. Painfully, Edmund indiscriminately and inappropriately discusses his admiration for Mary with Fanny, telling her that Mary “is the only woman in the world whom I could ever think of as a wife. . . . I cannot give her up” (489). In this, Edmund is clearly mistaken. His confidante, Fanny, is in fact his future wife. In much the same mistaken way, he encourages Fanny to unite with Henry, saying “Fanny, let him succeed at last. You have proved yourself upright and disinterested, prove yourself grateful and tender-hearted; and then you will be the perfect model of a woman,

which I have always believed you born for'" (401-402). In this, Edmund asks Fanny to be the opposite of the "perfect model of a woman." He asks her to marry against her conscience. He even accuses her of faulty logic, saying, "'This is not like yourself, your rational self'" (402). But Austen wants us to see that it is Fanny, in fact, who is rational. She attempts to correct his thinking regarding her feelings for Henry: "'We are so totally unlike. . . . so very, very different in all our inclinations and ways, that I consider it quite impossible we should ever be tolerably happy together, even if I *could* like him. There never were two people more dissimilar. We have not one taste in common. We should be miserable'" (403). Edmund seeks to guide Fanny, but it is judgement that is mistaken even while he is her mentor, and she his protégée.

Similarly, Mary challenges Edmund's judgement. Mary is Fanny's foil. She represents the contemporary and newly modern ideals that threaten the potential Anglican stronghold of Mansfield Park. As critics have noted, Mary is suggestive of many of Austen's most beloved heroines. Like Elizabeth Bennet, Mary displays her sharp wit openly. However, unlike Marianne and Elinor Dashwood who painstakingly grapple with the balance between sense and sensibility, Mary seems to accept change for its own sake with little regard for the consequences of her choices. The reader's tendency to sympathise with Mary is reflective of Edmund's inability to decipher Mary's charm. Mooneyham White argues that Mary's unwillingness to temper her wit distinguishes her from Elizabeth Bennet: "Blinded by Mary's attractiveness, Edmund for much of the novel attempts to claim that Mary's wit cannot have any source of ill-nature or immorality" (154). He is blinded by his growing attachment. Jan Fergus similarly notes this lesson when she considers Jane Austen's didacticism, asserting that Austen is concerned with the way charm

threatens sound judgement: “The reader should become conscious first, that enthusiasm and sympathy for sheer charm and liveliness often induce blindness to what lies beneath the charm, and second, that the absence of brilliance or flamboyance . . . will often immobilize, or at least discourage, the flow of sympathy” (57). Mary seems to embody the precept of Psalm 31 that charm deceives. Yet Austen wants her readers to see that Mary’s ideas are not based upon reasoned contemplation. Virginia Woolf also notes Austen’s subtle revelations of Mary’s character: “She lets her rattle on against the clergy, or in favour of a baronetage and ten thousand a year with all the ease and spirit possible; but now and again she strikes one note of her own, very quietly, but in perfect tune, and at once Mary Crawford’s chatter, though it continues to amuse, rings flat” (201). Mary’s ease, therefore, prompts sympathetic regard, whereas Fanny’s natural timidity frustrates.

Fanny, however is incredulous about Mary’s charming nature and her ease of communication. The disconnect between Mary’s charm and morality is suggested throughout the text, but most disturbingly to Edmund and Fanny on two separate occasions. First, Mary, in addition to berating the office of the clergy, does something even more interesting. She challenges the relationship between the individual and the Church. At Sotherton Chapel, learning of the discontinuation of daily prayer, she is pleased: “At any rate, it is safer to leave people to their own devices on such subjects. Everybody likes to go their own way—to chuse their own time and manner of devotion. The obligation of attendance, the formality, the restraint, the length of time—altogether it is a formidable thing, and what nobody likes” (*MP* 101-102). This admittance of a shifting cultural more is disturbing enough to Fanny, but Mary goes on to minimize its significance: “if the good

people who used to kneel and gape in that gallery could have foreseen that the time would ever come when men and women might lie another ten minutes in bed, when they woke with a headache, without danger of reprobation, because chapel was missed, they would have jumped with joy and envy'" (102). Certainly we can concede Mary's point. The needless guilt for a missed service, however, was not the premise of Mary's argument. Instead, it seems as if Mary wishes to cast off the influence of the church altogether.

The solemnity with which Edmund and Fanny perceive the intersection of the church community and the domestic sphere is obvious. Edmund corrects Mary's insensitivity: "Your lively mind can hardly be serious even on serious subjects. You have given us an amusing sketch, and human nature cannot say it was not so. We must all feel *at times* the difficulty of fixing our thoughts as we could wish; but if you are supposing it a frequent thing, that is to say, a weakness grown into a habit from neglect, what could be expected from the *private* devotions of such persons?" (102). Edmund points out to Mary that what is not practiced privately cannot be expected publically. Informed, personal reason, he suggests, is necessary for communal worship: "Do you think the minds which are suffered, which are indulged in wanderings in a chapel, would be more collected in a closet?" (102). Mary and her lively mind reject contemplation. Conversely, Edmund asserts its importance but notes the complementary nature of private and public worship: he argues such contemplation must be guided by the church.⁷ Through Mary, Fanny

⁷ Bernard Yeazell explains how private and collective worship intersect in *Mansfield Park*, noting that Christian practice is "a peculiarly domestic religion" (138). Fanny is particularly concerned with the close boundaries of private worship: "Fanny's sense of the sacred is typically rooted in domestic ground, and to her way of thinking, the collective disciplines of large households and of religious practice are naturally linked" (138). Oppositely, Mary champions wholly independent worship (138).

views shifting culture, and Fanny is perplexed. Specifically, Mary resists traditional notions of the Church and its influence upon the domestic.

Next, Mary's interpretation of the affair between Henry and Maria Rushworth exemplifies her moral disconnect from the concerns of the church, and terminates Edmund's infatuation. Leithart argues that Mary's presence in the novel puts Edmund's integrity as a clergyman at risk. He contends that Edmund, the country clergyman, must do battle with the appeal of Mary, the London progressive: "Edmund's calling lends an almost allegorical tone to the story. Edmund, the future guardian of morals, is attracted to the flashy novelty of Mary Crawford of London, and fails for some time to see her true character" (35). In fact, it is not until Maria and Henry's affair that Edmund is able to see her clearly. "Choosing [Mary] would lead him far from his calling and, because the clergy are the protectors of morals, would contribute by omission to the decline of English morals" (35). Furthermore, Mooneyham White contends that readers should recognise Maria's unwillingness to love, honour, and obey her husband, and subsequently "readers are to register that [Maria] makes a travesty of the marriage vows" (58). As Leithart and Mooneyham White point out, Mary's acceptance of Maria's behaviour exposes her incompatibility with Edmund, and by extension, her unsuitability as a clergyman's wife.

Edmund communicates similarly as he complains to Fanny of Mary's interpretation of the affair: "The want of common discretion, of caution: . . . it was the detection, in short—oh, Fanny! it was the detection, not the offence, which she reprobated. It was the imprudence which had brought things to extremity, and obliged her brother to give up every dearer plan in order to fly with her'" (*MP* 526). The "detection" of the offence as the primary misdeed signifies Mary's

misunderstanding of Anglican marital vows. Edmund further complains that Mary Crawford blamed Fanny for her unwillingness to comply with Henry's wishes "She would have fixed him; she would have made him happy for ever" (526). In this regard, Mary most pointedly misunderstands the Christian message of salvation, though she gives voice to contemporary notions of marriage; for it would have been impossible for Fanny's alliance with Henry to *change* him. Personal transformation is axiomatic. Mary complained, to Edmund, "Why would not she have him? It is all her fault. Simple girl! I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him as she ought, they might now have been on the point of marriage, and Henry would have been too happy and too busy to want any other object" (527).⁸ But we know that Henry would likely have continued the affair, as Mary had previously suggested: "It would have all ended in a regular standing flirtation, in yearly meetings at Sotherton and Everingham" (526). Such judgement, wholly at counter-purposes with Edmund's commitment to the church and its clearly delineated marital vows illuminates Mary's unsuitability as a clergyman's wife. This is primarily a revelation for Edmund, who complains to Fanny of Mary's reaction to such news, bemoaning, "the manner in which she spoke of the crime itself, . . . considering its ill consequences only as they were to be braved or overborne by a defiance of decency . . . an acquiescence in the continuance of the sin" (529). Mary's acceptance of the affair convinced Edmund of his own faulty judgement: "this together most grievously convinced me that I had never understood her before, and that, as far as related to mind, it had been the creature of my own imagination, not Miss Crawford,

⁸ Gisborne similarly complained about novels which promoted marriage as an opportunity to reform such a character as Henry: "At the conclusion of almost every comedy the hero of the piece . . . [has a] sudden change of heart, and become[s] a convert, as by a miracle, to the ways of religion and virtue"; this, he says, is a "preposterous reformation" (238). Austen similarly suggests here that Henry, the quintessential, sexually alluring rake, is beyond reform.

that I had been too apt to dwell on for many months past'" (529-530). Though Mary's reaction was a revelation for Edmund, it was not for Fanny. His lack of insight is particularly alarming because Edmund represents the church.

Just as Mary is unfit to marry Edmund, Henry and Fanny are shown to be equally incompatible. Mary takes pains to point out Henry's sexual appeal, something that interests Fanny in the least, with hallmark Austen subtlety: "You should come to London, to know how to estimate your conquest. It [sic] you were to see how [he] is courted, and how I am courted for his sake! . . . Innocent and quiet as you sit here, you cannot have an idea of the *sensation* that you will be occasioning'" (MP 416). Fanny notes his tendency to indiscriminate flirtation, pointing out to Mary, "I could not but see that Mr. Crawford allowed himself in gallantries which did mean nothing'" (419). Mary confirms this: "Ah! I cannot deny it, he has now and then been a sad flirt, and cared very little for the havock [sic] he might be making in young ladies' affections'" (419). But Henry, the object of widespread interest, seeks an "innocent" bride, suggesting a sexual fascination with the undefiled virgin. Telling Mary of his growing love, he describes Fanny in much the same way Milton describes the innocently wanton Eve. Henry explains that Fanny was tending to her Aunt's needs "with such ineffable sweetness and patience, to all the demands of her aunt's stupidity . . . her colour beautifully heightened as she leant over the work, . . . her hair arranged as neatly as it always is, and one little curl falling forward as she wrote, which she now and then shook back, and in the midst of this, still speaking at intervals to *me*, or listening, as if she liked what I said" (343). Henry is clearly taken with Fanny's perceived innocent, compliant subjection, yet through this, notes of sexual appeal are present as Fanny's hair playfully tempts

Henry, suggestive of Eve's ringlets.⁹ He is fantasizing. Though his admiration appears sincere, it also seems precarious. Austen asks the reader to question this alliance as an emotional, even sexual, accord.

Independently of one another, both Fanny and Edmund reasoned that spiritual like-mindedness was impossible with either of the Crawfords. Once the full revelation of their incompatibility is revealed, Edmund loses no time in turning his attentions to Fanny. Despite the fact that many readers fail to find the love between Fanny and Edmund believable, the fact remains that the narrator asks us to accept that Edmund easily forgets Mary in a moment of epiphany, realizing that the reasonable and desirable choice in a wife is Fanny: "Scarcely had he done regretting Mary Crawford, . . . , before it began to strike him whether a very different kind of woman might not do just as well, or a great deal better: whether Fanny herself were not growing as dear, as important to him in all her smiles and all her ways, as Mary Crawford had ever been" (543).

Edmund contemplates a possible union, and his reflections lead him to recognize that long-standing compatibility forms the basis of a secure marital relationship. He wonders "whether it might not be a possible, an hopeful undertaking to persuade her that her warm and sisterly regard for him would be foundation enough for wedded love" (544). This telling passage, however, does not necessarily suggest Edmund's lack of feeling for Fanny. Rather, it expresses his humble uncertainty regarding her love for him. He hopes to persuade her that even if *she* only feels sisterly affection, this alone would be "foundation enough." The reader tends to be frustrated with Austen, however, when she fails to create romantic

⁹ Milton writes: "Her unadorned golden tresses wore/ Dishevell'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd/ As the Vine curls her tendrils, which impli'd/ Subjection, but requir'd with gentle sway,/ And by her yielded, by him best receiv'd,/ Yielded with coy submission, modest pride, / And sweet reluctant amorous delay" (IV: 305-311).

exultation, when the narrator very matter-of-factly states, “Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny as Fanny herself could desire” (544). Fanny and Edmund become the picture of companionate marriage.

One must assume that he desired much more than sisterly affection from her. The attachment, the narrator later points out, is very sincere, a mutual regard based upon long-standing communication and care: “With such a regard for her, indeed, as his had long been, a regard founded on the most endearing claims of innocence and helplessness, and completed by every recommendation of growing worth, what could be more natural than the change?” He would continue to *love, guide, protect,* and *care* for her (544). Austen provocatively claims Fanny’s innocent helplessness had endeared her to Edmund, but her “growing worth” speaks more to Edmund’s personal revelation of her value, than any need for Fanny’s improvement.

In contrast to the other couples represented in the text, Edmund and Fanny alone represent a romance based upon contemplation. Though Austen suggests their attachment was quickly formed after the thwarted attempts at love by the Crawford siblings, it is reasonable to surmise that nearly a decade of transparent conversation and mutual understanding made theirs a contemplative marriage, formed without reservation. And while conduct book authors, as well as the church, would stress the importance of wifely obedience, Fanny clearly offered Edmund something much more valuable. Hazel Jones agrees that like Wollstonecraft before her, Austen essentially asserted wives must be moral equals to their husbands: “Men did themselves no favours by demanding such unquestioning obedience and diffidence, she argued; a tractable, repressed woman rarely made a good companion, while wives with minds of their own were better able to understand and befriend their husbands” (122). Be this as it may, we have no doubt that Fanny would, without

hesitation, recite the marital vows contained in the *Book of Common Prayer* to “obey, serve, love, honour and keep.” At the same time, Edmund looks to Fanny, and to rely upon her for future decisions, as her judgement has been tested and found blameless. If, as a traditional Anglicans she and Edmund saw marriage outlined as ordained “for a remedy against sin . . . for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the other ought to have of the other,” then only with one another, could their marriage be honourable. Fanny could not have possibly honoured Henry, and Mary would not provide a remedy against sin for Edmund. Austen tells us as much: “With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune and friends, the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be. Equally formed for domestic life, and attached to country pleasures, their home was the home of affection and comfort” (*MP* 547).

Challenging the Clergy: The Influence of “Improvement”

The coming of Henry and Mary Crawford best exemplifies that Fanny’s ability to judge rightly ultimately transforms her circumstances. Representative of London, the epicentre of ever-changing fashion, their presence in the traditional English countryside arouses Fanny’s resistance. While Maria and Julia Bertram are immediately mesmerized by the Crawfords, Fanny hesitates. In the same way, the dull Mr. Rushworth is blindly directed by their presence, taking cues from the very man who would eventually usurp him. Discussing potential improvements at Sotherton, Henry even notes, “I do not wish to influence Mr. Rushworth” (66), but we know him very much to want control of impending improvements.

Henry, the champion of modern improvements within the narrative, is an improbable match for Fanny in moral character in part because he champions the

destruction of tradition.¹⁰ Austen's beloved William Cowper called improvements "the idol of the age", "fed with many a victim." In *The Task*—"The Garden" (1785), he goes on to complain of "tasteless" modern improvements which are erected as they destroy history, simply to "enjoy th' advantage of the north" (130). The call for improvements collided with Romanticism and its elevation of the natural order. And it is the idolatry of improvement, the elevation of its merits above a thoughtful respect for divine order which similarly seems to concern Fanny. Laura Dabundo explores just how closely Romantic notions of the natural aligned with questions of faith: "English Romanticism acknowledges and celebrates a kind of community . . . which is not just a secular coalition with which its writers deal but something that also derives meaning from a religious association and, in fact, a particularly defined religion" (69). This "defined religion," she argues, drives the marriage plot in *Mansfield Park* which "is resolved with an intimate network of like-minded close relatives and friends who have proven to be true and good, surrounding and, as it were, hedging off the hero and heroine, fresh from their Anglican marriage blessings, at the close of the texts" (71). In this sense, the importance of the preservation of the estate, as Duckworth so forcefully argues, is of a piece with a Romantic tradition that would preserve the natural order, including the Anglican community and Anglican marriage, both of which concerned Fanny.

But Henry, Fanny's fleeting suitor, represents a threat to this 'natural order.'

In raptures at nearly every novel idea he encounters, embracing the new wholeheartedly, he is unable to remain constant even to his own schemes. Lewis

¹⁰ Duckworth asserts that in *Mansfield Park*, "a traditional religious and moral ethos is, in a real sense, embodied in the estate's fabric and where the changes effected or proposed by Henry Crawford in house and landscape carry strong overtones of the disorientation of a whole culture" (57-58). This "disorientation of a whole culture" blurred the lines between the physical, or the "material" estate, and the spiritual or "invisible" one. Fanny is concerned with preserving both in their traditional forms.

finds Austen's depiction of Henry incredulous, complaining, "I cannot accept his intention of marrying Fanny. Such men never make such marriages" (367). But Henry's interest, while seemingly sincere, is simply a mismatch for Fanny. This, of course, is Austen's point entirely. Like Lewis, the serious reader cannot believe that Austen means for Henry fully to commit to a lifelong attachment to such a girl as Fanny. His fascination with Fanny is as real and as fleeting as the moment in which it exists. This creates an ambiguity in his moral character, and creates a problem for Fanny, a resolutely constant heroine. Indeed, it is difficult to discern if Henry's motives and actions are sincere, or if he is an actor—a manipulator—throughout.

While Henry vacillates, Fanny and Edmund contemplate. In particular, they consider and navigate calls for legitimate improvements.¹¹ Mary, a devotee of popular and hence fashionable society, challenges Fanny and Edmund to establish the parameters of the Church's authority. In fact, it is her devotion to popular culture, distinctly separate from the church, which most threatens her relationship with Edmund. He communicates his concerns to Fanny: "It is the influence of the fashionable world altogether that I am jealous of. It is the habits of wealth that I fear. Her ideas are not higher than her own fortune may warrant, but they are beyond what our incomes united could authorize" (*MP* 489). Edmund is appropriately concerned that his modest means could not satisfy Mary as his future wife. Still, this pains him less than the prospect of her refusal to marry a clergyman: "There is comfort, however, even here. I could better bear to lose her because not rich enough,

¹¹Giffin notes Austen's recognition of the necessity of change. Austen's view of the Anglican Church, he says, was "*via media*," or mainstream; however, she also recognized the church "as always being reformed and always being in need of further reform" (24). He asserts that this mainstream Anglicanism prevents Austen from dealing harshly with her foolish characters (25). For Austen, changes that violated her Christian religious principles were out of the question, and we can see this reality in Fanny. Change itself was not feared; change as a mindless demand of popular culture was, however, resisted.

than because of my profession. That would only prove her affection not equal to sacrifices, which, in fact, I am scarcely justified in asking; and, if I am refused, that, I think, will be the honest motive'" (489). To Mary, "'a clergyman is nothing'" (107), and he is nothing, as she says, "'For what is to be done in the church? Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines distinction may be gained, but not in the church'" (107). For Mary, that which is not material, tangible, and fashionable is nothing at all.

Interestingly, it is Mary's poignant challenge to Edmund's future role as clergymen that sadly exposes the need for change within the Anglican Church. Confronting Edmund, she explains the general perception of clergymen: "'[H]e has the best intentions of doing nothing all the rest of his days but eat, drink, and grow fat. It is indolence, Mr. Bertram, indeed'" (128). Mary perceives this behaviour as perfectly commonplace amongst the clergy: "'Indolence and love of ease; a want of all laudable ambition, of taste for good company, or of inclination to take the trouble of being agreeable, which make men clergymen. A clergyman has nothing to do but be slovenly and selfish—read the newspaper, watch the weather, and quarrel with his wife. His curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine'" (128). One cannot help but note that Austen knows a clergyman's role as infinitely more involved than Mary's perceptions. However, Mary believes her opinions to be commonplace: "'I speak what appears to me the general opinion; and where an opinion is general, it is usually correct'" (129). But her desire for improvement within the church is not shown to be a push towards piety. This contrasts with evangelical William Cowper, who felt that the church was becoming negligent in the execution of its duty. In *The Task*, "*The Time Piece*," (1785) he complains:

When I am hungry for the bread of life?
 He mocks his Maker, prostitutes and shames
 His noble office, and instead of truth,
 Displaying his own beauty, starves his flock. (67)

Austen gives voice to the more liberal heroine Mary, but conservatives such as Cowper agree with her assessment. The perception of the clergy's failure in their execution of duty was seemingly a widespread concern. Edmund certainly does not resist this type of call for transformation.

Earlier in the text, Edmund had communicated clearly the obligations and expectations for a proper Anglican clergyman. He claims that London clergymen are not proper representatives: "The clergy are lost there in the crowds of their parishioners. They are known to the largest part only as preachers" (108). Their anonymity precludes their ability to influence and affect manners. He goes on to define "manners" as distinct from proper social manoeuvring: "The *manners* I speak of might rather be called *conduct*, perhaps, the result of good principles; the effect, in short, of those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and recommend; and it will, I believe, be everywhere found, that as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation" (109). This clear explanation of the role of the clergy directs Edmund's ambition. The evangelical call for reform is evident in this passage, but quite obviously lacks the emotional pathos Austen found disturbing. The need for legitimate improvements amongst the clergy and the church at large was both rational and clearly articulated. Interestingly, both instances in which Edmund and Mary converse about the role of the clergy, Fanny is present and voices her concurrence with Edmund's opinions.

Mary Crawford's assertion that "'A clergyman is nothing'" (*MP* 107) reflects and vocalizes the diminishing influence of the Anglican Church during Austen's lifetime. In *The Evangelical and Oxford Movements*, Elisabeth Jay argues that it was these movements that changed mid-eighteenth century England from a society with very little religion, to a society where by the 1850s, "one third of all books published were religious in content" (1). But it was dissent from the Anglican Church, not the established church itself, that effected such religious change. The Church, where "aristocratic patronage rather than spirituality obtained livings" (2), was confronted by the Evangelical revival.¹² The loosening hold of the church is evident at Mansfield Park, and without the authority of the church, the characters are left to their individual interpretations of truth and falsehood, interpretations driven by the call for improvements. Certainly Austen saw this potential lack of accountability as dangerous, and gives this concern to Fanny.

The residents of Mansfield Park, aristocratic makers of manners, were especially culpable when the influence of the church diminished. Mooneyham White similarly asserts that Austen's belief in the Church's role as regulator of morality is evident in her work. Because during Austen's lifetime, clergymen weren't expected to have "supernatural virtue" (20), or even to have a "special calling from God" (20), she notes that forces including evangelicalism challenged Anglicanism with its "undemanding spirituality and worldly offices" (21). In *Mansfield Park*, Austen demonstrates that "[s]he was not troubled by the linkage between gentry society and the clerisy; in fact, she celebrated that link and would have had every personal

¹² Though many Anglican clergymen embraced the Evangelical movement, wholly dissenting sects threatened its primacy. Furthermore, notes Jay, "The theological emphasis upon the primacy of the individual experience, reinforced by a new awareness of fields of social endeavour, in which the laity might sometimes be better equipped to operate than the clergy, meant that laymen achieved prominence in religious affairs" (*Evangelical and Oxford* 5).

interest in reinforcing it, and she strongly believed in the establishment of the church” (24). Edmund, the picture of reformed clergy, suggests that “the Church will reform itself, given time” (24). I would extend Mooneyham White’s claims to note that for Edmund, Fanny becomes a particularly important judge of the changes that Edmund, and thus, the Church, must make.

But even with this concern for the clerisy, Fanny contends that Thornton Lacey—the Anglican parsonage—should remain stable, and her desire for Thornton Lacey to remain connected to the surrounding village is evidence of this concern.¹³ Her anxiety is heightened when Henry threatens to transform the parsonage into a gentleman’s estate. Edmund resists his meddling, but Mary insists that the help which was extended to Sotherton should be extended to Thornton Lacey. This alarms Fanny: “Fanny's eyes were turned on Crawford for a moment with an expression more than grave—even reproachful; but on catching his, were instantly withdrawn” (*MP* 284). Henry notes her concern, and attempts to revise this interpretation: “I should be sorry to have my powers of *planning* judged of by the day at Sotherton. I see things very differently now. Do not think of me as I appeared then” (285). Even Henry’s desire to improve has improved. Henry suggests that it has shifted to the more respectable notion of thoughtful, contemplative *planning*. Yet Austen allows Fanny to remain the arbiter of what constitutes a “good” improvement and a “bad” improvement.

¹³ Duckworth posits that the importance of the stability of the estate is especially apparent in *Mansfield Park*. Fanny resists unnecessary change, as for her, this change would cause moral compromise. *Mansfield Park*, he argues, explores the relationship between the individual and society (36). The reason why marriages between Edmund and Mary, and Henry and Fanny wouldn’t work, he argues, is because “they would require a traditional morality to capitulate to relativism, and ‘society’ to surrender to ‘self’” (38).

Active Resistance: Undergirded by Faith

Fanny's security at Mansfield is obtained by her union with Edmund, but her esteemed position is evident by the changed judgement of Sir Thomas Bertram: "Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted. His charitable kindness had been rearing a prime comfort for himself. His liberality had a rich repayment, and the general goodness of his intentions by her deserved it" (546). Yet here, Austen acknowledges that Sir Thomas' generosity had initially been misguided at best, and even insufficient: "He might have made her childhood happier; but it had been an error of judgement only which had given him the appearance of harshness, and deprived him of her early love; and now, on really knowing each other, their mutual attachment became very strong" (546). His judgement was, in fact, corrected by a seemingly timid heroine, who ultimately exhibits a type of modern, Wollstonecraftian strength. After settling at Thornton Lacey, Fanny, not Sir Thomas, became the central figure: "After settling her at Thornton Lacey with every kind attention to her comfort, the object of almost every day was to see her there, or to get her away from it" (546). Peace is restored at Mansfield Park, not through the formidable patriarch Sir Thomas Bertram, but through the "stupid," "insipid" Fanny.

Jane Austen, fully capable of producing more obviously active heroines, fashioned Fanny, a character who at first glance seems uncompromising, melancholy, and even stagnant. Reading Fanny as such a heroine is a misreading of the text. Fanny is a powerful example of the leveraging of Christian faith through informed reason. As Giffin points out in his exploration of the paradigmatic changes that transpire at Mansfield Park, "Sir Thomas, Edmund and Fanny . . . represent the novel's evolving Anglican conscience" (133). He argues the evolution that occurs is

most notably evidenced in Sir Thomas, a representative and proponent of deistic absenteeism. This means that Sir Thomas neglects his domain—Mansfield Park—by his regular absence. Because of this, the patriarch has very little influence over Mansfield’s inhabitants. Instead, it is Fanny who is shown to guide the moral conscience of the characters. Ultimately, Sir Thomas “opens his eyes and makes him see the need for reform in Mansfield” (135). Sir Thomas becomes present and engaged, and it is Fanny who prompts such transformation. Throughout the narrative, Edmund is naively transparent in his communication with Fanny, whose disposition tempers his misguided footsteps. Consequently, *Mansfield Park* should not be read as a disappointing romance novel, but rather, as an example of subtle victory for the female heroine. Fanny is an agent of change, her resistance a struggle that requires proactive choices.

Fanny’s compliance and resistance is intentional, and her choices are situated in her faith. For example, after Fanny refuses Mr Crawford’s proposals, Edmund attempts to persuade her to accept; he wants her to comply: “Crawford's *feelings*, I am ready to acknowledge, have hitherto been too much his guides. Happily, those feelings have generally been good. You will supply the rest; and a most fortunate man he is to attach himself to such a creature—to a woman who, firm as a rock in her own principles, has a gentleness of character so well adapted to recommend them” (*MP* 405-406). In this simple statement, he acknowledges to Fanny that Mr Crawford’s guide is not reason, but sincere emotion. Yet Fanny’s character, “firm as a rock,” would stabilise Henry’s character. He continues, “He has chosen his partner, indeed, with rare felicity. He will make you happy, Fanny; I know he will make you happy; but you will make him everything” (406). Making Mr Crawford “everything” is far from Fanny’s mind. She protests: “I would not engage in such a

charge,' cried Fanny, in a shrinking accent; 'in such an office of high responsibility!'" (406). Fanny resists. She believes it is the duty of a wife engaging in Anglican marriage vows seriously to undertake the charge: "love, honour, and obey."

Fanny's resistance is a poignant demonstration of agency. Hazel Jones speaks of this "power of refusal." The power to say "no" during Austen's lifetime was an unusual opportunity for women to assert their autonomy forcefully as is apparent by Emma Woodhouse's refusal of Mr Elton, as well as by Elizabeth Bennet's refusal of Mr Collins, both suitors being clergymen, neither considered worthy of commitment. Even so, Jones points out that Mr Collins is enticed by initial refusal. However, "Women are rational creatures, [Elizabeth Bennet] claims, who know their own inclinations and are capable of judging for themselves. When they say no, they mean no" (28). This power of refusal, as Jones describes, is obvious in Fanny, though her ability to exercise this right is astonishing to Sir Thomas, Henry, and even the normally uninvolved Lady Bertram who claims Fanny is remiss in her duty by refusing Henry: "[Y]ou must be aware, Fanny, that it is every young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this" (*MP* 384). Fanny, however, resists such "duty."

Fanny perceives marriage as a deep and sacred spiritual responsibility. Austen seems to echo Gisborne's assertion, one which was rising in popularity due to wider discussions of women's rights, that the obedience owed to a husband was "not unlimited obedience" (227). Since Henry is not loyal to the Church, Fanny, its loyal devotee, could not in good conscience, be his "obedient" wife. Butler asserts that "All Jane Austen's stories concern a young girl's choice of partner in marriage, and all make the choice the occasion for a number of critical and far-reaching ethical

decisions” (23). Fanny’s ability to be rational in this decision is made possible as she leverages her Anglican faith in order actively to resist.

Lewis comes closer than many scholars to understanding Fanny’s character, yet also argues that the solitary nature of Fanny’s temperament makes her passive. He argues that Fanny, like Austen’s later heroine Anne Elliot, is an observer: “They are shut out and compelled to observe: for what they observe, they disapprove” (366). But Lewis fails to note that Fanny’s seeming passivity would hardly be possible without active resistance. Neither Anne Elliot nor Fanny Price are passive observers. This paradoxical ideal is wrapped in Austen’s hallmark irony. I have argued here that her very lack of action is intentional resistive energy situated in reasoned conviction. As Susan Fraiman points out, Fanny’s resistance to Sir Thomas, the slave-owning nobleman is a central point of the novel, noting, “the key moral and political confrontation of the book remains, in my opinion, that played out between this nobleman and the timid young woman who, astonishingly, stands up to him by refusing to marry Henry Crawford” (811).¹⁴ But Fanny’s reputation as a rigid heroine is unfounded. Fanny’s resistance is anything but “stupid.”

Even so, Fanny’s moralistic choices are sometimes painful for the reader. As Lionel Trilling’s now-famous commentary reminds us, Fanny fails to engage many

¹⁴ Sir Thomas’s fortune, built upon slavery, is more problematic for the modern reader than it would have been for Austen’s contemporaries. My reading appreciates this dilemma, but contends that Austen’s treatment of slavery in the text connotes her vexed understanding of the slave trade. In our own time, Edward Said asserts in *Culture and Imperialism* that Jane Austen turned a blind eye to the problem of slavery and its role in financially underpinning estates such as Mansfield Park. Certainly Sir Thomas’s fortune is dependent upon imperialism. However, Giffin argues that Austen’s works were critiques of institutions, that they are “metafictional works; that is, they are fictions conscious of themselves as fictions, but with an intention to convey a message about life outside the text” (4). Understanding how closely Austen’s depiction of her world matches impressions of reality helps us understand the inclusion of an imperialistic estate. Austen uses this reality purposefully as a reflection of reality within her world. Yet, I argue, this reflection of reality hardly proves total complicity. Said himself notes, “Everything we know about Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery” (96). I agree, yet like Said I understand that “Austen belonged to a slave-owning society, but do we therefore jettison her novels as so many trivial exercises in aesthetic frumpery?” (96).

readers as a heroine because she is consistently virtuous: “We think that virtue is not interesting, even that it is not really virtue, unless it manifests itself as a product of ‘grace’ operating through a strong inclination to sin” (212). What we want, he says, is failure: “We take failure to be the mark of true virtue, and we do not like it that, by reason of her virtue, the terrified little stranger in Mansfield Park grows up to be virtually its mistress” (212). Fanny’s legitimacy as a heroine, facing issues which would plague *all* of Austen’s heroines, is obvious, even if we resist her as the exemplary protagonist. In the end, it is Fanny’s resistant agency that most strongly influences the conclusion of the narrative.

The most obvious proof of Fanny’s resistance is her rejection of Henry. In this instance, she not only embraces the power of “no” towards her suitor, but she risks losing the security and protection of Sir Thomas as well. He feels that Henry’s declaration necessitates Fanny’s acceptance. After Sir Thomas’ disclosure of Henry’s intention, she declines. Sir Thomas is shocked and asks her three times in succession to confirm it: “‘Am I to understand,’ said Sir Thomas, after a few moments’ silence, ‘that you mean to *refuse* Mr. Crawford?’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘Refuse him?’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘Refuse Mr. Crawford! Upon what plea? For what reason?’ ‘I—I cannot like him, sir, well enough to marry him’” (364). He attempts to manipulate her, reminding of her obligations to himself and to Henry for financial security, but she does not budge. Sir Thomas’s tactic was common, as Hazel Jones notes: “Emotional blackmail operated successfully in some instances” (30). In spite of her unrequited love for Edmund, and knowing his fondness for Mary, she still does not relent. But Fanny’s resistance is in direct opposition to expected obedience. She “disobeys” because she has made an ethical, moral decision not to marry Henry. Johnson notes that even with her willingness to act upon conservative principles, Fanny violates

expectations egregiously when she insists upon thinking: “The only character in *Mansfield Park* whose hands remain clean has to think for herself and defy the figureheads of social and religious authority in order to remain guiltless” (*Jane Austen* 105).¹⁵ But Fanny defies Sir Thomas’s expectations, and like a Wollstonecraftian heroine, “ungratefully” rejects marriage to Henry.

Fanny’s decision to say “no” to Henry is situated in her morality, and shows her fully to be in control of her choices. Sir Thomas questions Henry’s temperament, asking Fanny if she has reason to suspect its weakness. She says no. However, she does question his principles: “Her ill opinion of him was founded chiefly on observations, which, for her cousins' sake, she could scarcely dare mention to their father. Maria and Julia, and especially Maria, were so closely implicated in Mr. Crawford's misconduct, that she could not give his character, such as she believed it, without betraying them” (*MP* 366). But her graciousness for her cousin’s misconduct prevents her from disclosing what she believes about Henry’s disposition. Fanny rejects Henry on moral grounds. Even so, in *Jane Austen: A Life*, Claire Tomalin argues, “Austen the novelist was interested in the way religion could be invoked in different causes and practiced in different styles; about inner spiritual struggles she has nothing to say” (142). I disagree. In a striking passage of *Mansfield Park*, Austen’s heroine essentially asserts that it is sinful to marry without companionship: “for the purity of her intentions she could answer; and she was willing to hope, secondly, that her uncle's displeasure was abating, and would abate farther as he considered the matter with more impartiality, and felt, as a good man

¹⁵ Johnson asserts that the kindnesses extended to Fanny are condescending, and she becomes a slave-like figure reflective of Maria Edgeworth’s “The Grateful Negro” (1802), which portrays slaves bound to “a man who believes that the emancipation of his slaves would not make them happy, who sees his guardianship as an act of kindness on behalf of dependents who cannot act for themselves, and who renders his slaves orderly and obedient by developing their capacity to feel grateful for his own kindnesses” (107).

must feel, how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless, and how *wicked* [italics mine] it was to marry without affection” (374). The implication is that Fanny deems marriage to be sacred, and manouevering marriages, executed without regard for love, are unethical; to put it bluntly and theologically, they are sinful. As such, Henry—a man whom she “should have” loved as Edmund—was ruled out as a potential suitor for Fanny and by Fanny.

In this rejection, Fanny leverages her informed reason, as well as her spiritual conscience in order to resist unwanted “progress.” Aligning herself with Henry would mean financial security for her, would eliminate her dependence upon her uncle, and would benefit her family. She seems ungrateful, and Sir Thomas tells her as much:

[Y]ou have disappointed every expectation I had formed, and proved yourself of a character the very reverse of what I had supposed. For I *had*, Fanny, as I think my behaviour must have shewn, formed a very favourable opinion of you from the period of my return to England. I had thought you peculiarly free from wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit which prevails so much in modern days, even in young women, and which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence. But you have now shewn me that you can be wilful and perverse; that you can and will decide for yourself, without any consideration or deference for those who have surely some right to guide you, without even asking their advice. You have shewn yourself very, very different from anything that I had imagined. The advantage or disadvantage of your family, of your parents, your brothers and sisters, never seems to have had a moment's share in your thoughts on this occasion. (367)

In her refusal, Fanny *is* willful. Very independently, she decides for herself, regardless of disappointed expectations, and in spite of temporal loss or gain. She *cannot love* Henry. When Fanny rejects Henry, she rejects entrapment. She avoids the pitfalls that befall every other heroine in this study: Maria's marriage to George Venables, Helen's marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, and Ruth's seduction by Henry Bellingham. Fanny's avoidance of such destructive choices is no less significant. Austen herself suggests this potential of marital entrapment when Maria Bertram, like Laurence Sterne's confined starling, complains to Henry "I cannot get out" (116). Henry taunts Maria, noting her confinement within Rushworth's literal gates, as her impending marriage looms heavily: "And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr. Rushworth's authority and protection" But Maria scoffs, "Prohibited! nonsense! I certainly can get out that way, and I will" (116). Maria *does* get out of both the iron gates as well as her marriage, but is ruined in the process. Conversely, Fanny chooses to wait within the confines of the gates as others choose to leave. This is reasoned action.

Scholars often struggle to recognize Fanny's agency; specifically, they struggle to recognize the ways in which her constant, contemplative disposition demonstrates resistance. For example, Said claims that Fanny's rise to central influence within Mansfield Park is not due to her own choices, but rather, is an action taken upon her. He claims she lacks agency in this endeavour: "Fanny Price is relatively passive. She resists the misdemeanours and the importuning of others, and very occasionally she ventures actions on her own: all in all, though, one has the impression that Austen has designs for her that Fanny herself can scarcely comprehend, just as throughout the novel Fanny is thought of by everyone as 'comfort' and 'acquisition' despite herself" (85). But as this chapter has

demonstrated, Austen sets no such “designs” upon Fanny as an unwilling, or more importantly, an unaware recipient of others’ choices. Indeed, Fanny is quite influential in determining the conclusion of the narrative. Her faith provides the resistant energy needed to do so.

Chapter Three:

“Devotion to Her Earthly Lord”: Redemptive Marriage

in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

“It is nothing you have done or said; it is something that you are—you are too religious. Now I like a woman to be religious, and I think your piety one of your greatest charms; but then, like all other good things, it may be carried too far. To my thinking, a woman’s religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord. She should have enough to purify and etherealise her soul, but not enough to refine away her heart, and raise her above all human sympathies” (Brontë, *Tenant* 173).

In the above remark, Arthur Huntingdon petitions his young bride to reform. From his point of view, her evangelical zeal has distracted Helen from her duties as his wife and has placed her loyalties beyond the coverture of marriage. Arthur’s complaint encapsulates a central dissonance of Victorian womanhood. Middle-class women, whose culturally-sanctioned jurisdiction was the home, were called to embrace ideal Christian virtue in order to reform the nation even though as wives and mothers their roles were subsumed under the federal headship of their husbands. However, the agency they acquired while embracing middle-class Christian womanhood proved to be surprisingly liberating, often transforming them unexpectedly into spiritual agents. The culture of individualism and the evangelical movement intersected in unexpected ways, creating opportunities for women to circumvent coverture: for example, wives could answer to God as a higher authority above their earthly lords. Helen asserts her right to be accountable to God first when she responds to her husband in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848): “I will give my whole heart and soul to my Maker if I can, . . . and not one atom more of it to you than He allows. What are you, sir, that you should set yourself up as a god, and presume to dispute possession of my heart with Him to whom I owe all I have and

all I am . . . ' (173). Helen's clear-sightedness in this exchange is groundbreaking. She leverages her Christian faith to justify her actions.

My previous chapters have argued that earlier novelists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen interrogated the dominant discourse of womanhood by creating narratives designed to exploit Christian morality in order to affect marriage within the novel; similarly, this chapter argues that Anne Brontë created Helen Huntingdon as a heroine whose choices within her marriage are made according to Christian morality, and specifically situated in evangelicalism. That is to say, Helen's understanding of morality, a basic judgement of right and wrong, is informed by her Christianity in general, and her evangelicalism in particular. Helen utilizes her evangelical faith to justify behaviour that challenged normative Christian womanhood, paradoxically turning seemingly restrictive norms into opportunities for agency. Though the freedoms she achieves are limited, Helen does manage to leave an abusive marriage, abandoning the role of reforming wife, saving herself and her son from the damning influence of her husband. Helen is shown to leverage her Christianity in ways similar to other heroines in this study. While Wollstonecraft's Maria experiences egregious marital wrongs which physically confine her to an asylum, she resists intellectual and spiritual bondage, choosing instead reasoned conviction situated within the Christian tradition. By contrast, Helen's resistance ultimately earns her limited physical freedom as she labours against the corrupting influence of Arthur. In much the same way that I have shown Anglicanism undergirding Fanny's steadfast character in Chapter Two, Helen's evangelical faith proves to be a stabilising force, one which allows her to make brave choices. Helen does not resist an unfavourable marriage as did Fanny. But ultimately, Helen experiences more freedom than does Maria. Like Fanny and Maria, Helen leverages

her faith. She opposes her husband, notwithstanding the gender constrictions otherwise associated with the patriarchal norms of her evangelical Anglicanism. Rather than being constrained by religion, Helen appropriates the personal transformation inherent in nineteenth-century evangelicalism as a point of strength.

This chapter interrogates the conflicting ideological demands placed upon Victorian women. Through her rejection of Victorian gender ideals, Helen confronts the limits of evangelical transformation of the heart. She maintains control over her own moral choices, but she is unable to transform her husband through her goodness. She is not an agent of grace, for her marriage to Arthur does not prompt the saving of his soul. Helen's autonomous spirituality confronts competing imperatives associated with legal and spiritual coverture as her conscience will not allow her to remain submissive to her dissolute husband. As I will show, she opts to leave her "earthly lord" in favour of saving herself and her son from his immoral influence. In the end, Helen leverages her faith and abandons reforming schemes: the very earthly mission that Victorian gender ideology would impose upon the evangelical Christian woman.

Rejecting Victorian Gender Ideals

While countless other scholars have interpreted the Brontës in relation to the details of their lives, my own reading specifically focuses upon the significance of Anne Brontë's evangelical faith and its influence upon the construction of Brontë's own gender ideology, an ideology that is given to the heroine of *The Tenant*.

Additionally, Brontë's construction of Arthur is inextricably influenced by her brother Branwell's dissolute behaviour and the responses of the evangelical members of the Brontë household. In much the same way that the fictional Helen

leaves her husband, Brontë's father Patrick advised the wife of the abusive, alcoholic Revd John Collins to leave her husband, showing something of the progressive environment in which Anne Brontë was raised. Juliet Barker notes: "Anne seems to have been especially fascinated by the fact that Mrs Collins had not only survived the physical and mental degradation of her marriage but emerged as an independent and morally strong woman—and in doing so had saved her children from corruption at the hands of their father" (626). The example of Mrs Collins's moral strength is reflected in Brontë's creation of Helen. It is evangelical morality that saved Mrs Collins and justified her flight. Similarly, the heroine Helen is moved by her faith to leave her husband.

The criticism in contemporary response to *The Tenant* is very well known. What seems to have concerned reviewers the most was Helen's apparent rejection of Victorian gender ideals and their implications for marriage. To have a Christian heroine behave in such a way, confronting vice unashamedly and taking decisive action without the sanction of the Church or the State, proved shocking. *The Tenant* was written at a time when divorce was nearly impossible. Marriages could be annulled ecclesiastically or by an Act of Parliament, but these arrangements overwhelmingly favoured the husband. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, inspired in part by the extraordinary nature of Caroline Norton's public and inequitable divorce, provided other means for divorce, but even this change in law, which would transpire nearly ten years after the publication of *Tenant*, was wholly insufficient. It favoured husbands who could petition for divorce on the grounds of adultery alone, whereas wives were required further to prove the existence of an

aggravating factor such as incest.¹ Helen circumvents these restrictions, avoiding the legal ramifications of her actions by subterfuge. However, her actions were not simply shocking to contemporary readers because they were unlawful, but also because she violated the cultural expectations of middle-class womanhood by choosing to act boldly and independently.

Helen's ability to act independently is strongly situated in evangelical Christianity. Half a century after the publication of Wilberforce's evangelical *Practical View* calling for a reformation of the heart among the English, Anne Brontë found continuing hypocrisy in society and boldly chastised her countrymen with her candid portrayal of vice in *The Tenant*. Her candour elicited criticism from reviewers. *The Athenaeum* (8 July 1848), for example, complained of the publications of the Bells "for dwelling upon what is disagreeable" (Allott 251). Regarding *The Tenant* specifically, the *Spectator* (8 July 1848) grumbled that Helen's plight was due to "licentiousness, drunkenness, and downright blackguardism of her husband and his associates. . . . *The Tenant* . . . suggests the idea of considerable abilities ill applied." Nevertheless, the author of the *Spectator* noted Brontë's powerful narrative, but complained of her refusal to censor the representation of excess (Allott 250). The accusation of coarseness in Brontë's novel was pervasive. Simply put, *The Tenant* pitted moral degradation against the constraining expectations of ideal Victorian middle-class womanhood and this

¹ As the introduction has explained, Mary Lyndon Shanley's *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895* details the Divorce Act, noting that for wives, only physical cruelty, incest, or bestiality coupled with adultery would justify legal divorce. Abandoning a marriage without first obtaining a divorce was considered desertion, and all property, including children, was forfeited (9). Ian Ward notes that Brontë's portrayal of Helen's flight was troubling for reviewers because "It displayed, in harrowing detail, the reality of marriage for many Victorian women—and not just any women, but middle-class bourgeois women, the kind of women who could, indeed, be expected to read a Brontë novel" (151).

ideological clash upset some of Brontë's contemporaries.² With a clearly exasperated tone, the "gentle" sister stood her ground unapologetically in the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant* (1848), where she asserts that she wishes her readers to listen closely and carefully to the message of the text: "I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" (3). She insists upon the realism of her narrative³, and refuses to coddle her readers, claiming, "To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light is, doubtless, the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers?" (4). Clearly, Brontë's "coarseness" was an unwelcome by-product of her realism. But by drawing out the irreconcilable demands placed upon Helen, Brontë sharply confronted conflicting aspects of the gender ideology of her culture.⁴

"Working Out" Salvation: Evangelical Womanhood

The evangelical call for transformation of the heart is made clear in *The Tenant*.

Early in their relationship, Helen sees Arthur's external actions as "good," but notes that his heart remains unchanged: "Arthur, your actions are all right, so far; but I

² *Sharpe's London Magazine*, August (1848) especially warned its "lady readers" against *The Tenant*, (Allott 263). Lucasta Miller claims *The Tenant* was more controversial than the work of Brontë's sisters. Because of its unapologetic exposure of "masculine vice" (171), it is an "explicit piece of social and moral criticism" (171).

³ Derek Stanford explains that Brontë's unapologetic pursuit of realism must not be disregarded; however, her truth-telling was not appreciated because it exposed harsh reality too candidly, causing a backlash of defensiveness (Harrison and Stanford 236). Joan Bellamy similarly argues the public outcry about the novel was not a denial of the prevalence of faults within society. Instead, Brontë's "temerity in bringing them further out into the open" was decried (256).

⁴ Brontë's confrontation of culture is often situated as unapologetic realism and is reminiscent of Jane Austen's viewpoint. Both Jane Austen and Anne Brontë considered rational matches the most appealing, but both knew realistically that passion, often mistakenly, overtook rationality. Brontë remedies the pull of passion by allowing her heroine to renegotiate after a mistaken match is made. Elizabeth Langland contends, "The Austenian balance of reason and passion is endorsed in Anne's novel" (*The Other One* 39). Langland sees Brontë's rational approach to love as one which Austen would have endorsed, as "feelings should not approve a match which the mind revolted" (39).

would have your thoughts changed; I would have you to fortify yourself against temptation, and not to call evil good, and good, evil; I should wish you to think more deeply, to look further, and aim higher than you do'" (*Tenant* 175). Her wish demonstrates a distinctly evangelical idea: transformation is personal, and must be intentionally sought. In the early stages of the narrative, she nevertheless hopes to be the catalyst of such change.

Transformation ideology directly touched the Brontë household. In *A Man of Sorrow: The Life, Letters and Times of the Rev. Patrick Brontë*, John Lock and Cannon W.T. Dixon write that Patrick Brontë's evangelical conversion was first inspired as a young Irish boy when John Wesley spoke of the "bread of heaven" at an open-air service (5). In his later career, Patrick Brontë would become the perpetual curate at Haworth, a Wesleyan stronghold. It was here in 1751 that Charles Wesley, standing upon a tombstone, preached to a crowd of over three thousand. Wesley continued to visit Haworth for years to come, holding large outdoors services (210). But Patrick Brontë's path to Haworth began years before when he entered Cambridge. The son of working-class Irish parents, he struggled financially, and the Methodist Church Missionary Society appealed to Wilberforce for assistance on Brontë's behalf. Brontë was awarded £10 annually (18) from the same fund that served Charles Wesley's widow (18). This close association with Wesleyanism strongly influenced Patrick Brontë and his beliefs, which were at odds with Calvinistic evangelicalism—a doctrinal viewpoint he "abhorred" (24). The Calvinistic doctrine of predestination asserted that God pre-ordained only the elect to receive salvation and grace, a belief especially offensive to Patrick Brontë (Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion* 86). In contrast, Arminianism, taught in the Brontë household, asserted individual responsibility and choice for one's salvation.

Arminian doctrine postulates that salvation is open to all who would accept Christ's sacrifice. Like her father Patrick, whose firm belief in Arminianism fueled evangelistic sermons that called his congregants to repentance and reform, Anne also believed that if individuals are afforded the opportunity to *choose* Christ, as opposed to being *elected* by God, then they must be informed through evangelistic efforts,⁵ and this is evident in her fiction.

Evangelicalism contained numerous doctrinal streams⁶, but each agreed that an internal change of heart was evidence of salvation. Though divided within themselves and by no means exclusive, of particular note during the period were three dominant, but not conclusive, evangelical groupings: the Calvinists, the Wesleyan Methodists and the Anglican Evangelicals (Davies 215). Both the Wesleyan Methodists and Anglican Evangelicals asserted that salvation was open to all. The Brontë household, although clearly influenced by Wesley's teachings, was nevertheless Anglican Evangelical. Still members of the Anglican Church, Anglican Evangelicals incorporated Wesley's teaching and doctrine without dissenting from the Anglican Communion. Patrick Brontë's view of salvation is delineated in his sermon notes on conversion where he writes, "Conversion is a *spiritual and*

⁵ The emphasis upon choosing Christ and inner change reflected Patrick's religious fervor. Marianne Thormählen similarly contends that a central aspect of the theology taught in the Brontë household was individual responsibility. This responsibility, she argues, was situated in "freedom of the individual to pursue truth and goodness unencumbered by restraints imposed by earthly institutions and their human representatives . . ." (*Brontës and Religion* 50). Thormählen contends that the evangelical focus upon individual responsibility threatened the established Church as it gave "unwarranted spiritual license in spiritual matters, arguing that the authority of the Church must be upheld and that too great a latitude weakened the belief in fundamental Christian dogma" (50).

⁶ Valentine Cunningham argues that Patrick Brontë was very much indebted to the Evangelical Revival that was heavily influenced by Wesleyan Evangelicalism. Cunningham refers to this as the "old-boy network" that was "yet untainted by Whitefield's or the Countess of Huntingdon's extreme Calvinism" (113). But the varied nature of evangelical dissent was evident even in Haworth, where both General Baptist and Congregational Baptist churches sprung from this staunch stronghold of Wesleyan Methodist revival. Patrick Brontë, though an Evangelical Anglican, believed in cooperation with Wesleyan Methodists, and according to Cunningham, attended Wesleyan Chapel on Sunday evenings in old age (115). These small examples of evangelical dissent in Haworth are representative of broader and more diverse evangelical dissent in Victorian society at large.

universal change. It is effected by the agency of the Holy Ghost . . . Its effects will be manifested in the heart and life. The understanding will be enlightened to discover the evil of sin, the need of a Saviour, the excellency of religion, the vanity of the world, the importance of eternal things” (quoted in Scrunton 72). According to Patrick Brontë, then, salvation transforms the individual from within, and this change is evidenced outwardly by a change in action.

In agreement with her Anglican father, the idea that only the elect could experience this transformation was abhorrent to Anne. Her tenderness of heart embraced the free grace doctrine of Arminianism, but she expanded this doctrine to a belief in universal salvation. In her poem, “A Word to the Elect,” she complains:

You may rejoice to think YOURSELVES secure;

You may be grateful for the gift divine—

That grace unsought, which made your black hearts pure. (1-3)

In these lines, Anne chastises the Calvinists who would believe themselves saved while others are helplessly damned. Her evangelical beliefs—her concern for souls—is evident as well:

And when you, looking on your fellow-men,

Behold them doomed to endless misery,

how can you talk of joy and rapture then? – (21-23).

For Brontë, spiritual happiness would be impossible with such a belief as she cries, “May God withhold such cruel joy from me!” (24). Both Calvinists and Arminians believed in original sin, but Arminian theology asserted the possibility of perfection of the saints, an idea which seems to have distressed Brontë in its difficulty of accomplishment. However, Brontë’s belief in universal salvation settled this

concern. Even if perfection was not attained, eternal damnation could be avoided.

She gives this belief to Helen.

Although she believed in universal salvation, writing to Revd D Thom (30 December 1848) she expressed concern that should individuals feel too secure in their salvation, the practical consequences would be dire. She notes, “We see how liable men are to yield to the temptations of the passing hour” (Brontë and Smith, *Letters* 160). She acknowledges that the biggest problem with the doctrine of universal salvation would be the propensity for mankind to take advantage of God's goodness: “and if so many thousands rush into destruction with (as they suppose) the prospect of Eternal Death before their eyes, —what might not the consequence be, if that prospect were changed for one of a limited season of punishment, far distant and unseen, however protracted and terrible it might be?” (160). This potential lack of motivation to secure salvation deeply concerned Brontë for its potential purgatorial consequences. Her comprehension of human agency in salvation, then, was based upon the Arminian evangelical doctrine that individuals must consciously choose faith, and Helen is shown to share this belief.

Although Helen is hopeful that all will eventually be saved, she grieves for the purgatorial consequences of Arthur's depravity. She initially trusts that she will transform her husband, saving him from the damning fire, claiming, “And as for the danger of the belief, I would not publish it abroad, if I thought any poor wretch would be likely to presume upon it to his own destruction, but it is a glorious thought to cherish in one's own heart, and I would not part with it for all the world can give!” (*Tenant* 150). With this in mind, she persists in viewing Arthur's reform

as inevitable.⁷ In the last hours of his life, Helen describes to him pathways to salvation, explaining, "No man can deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him . . . it cost the blood of an incarnate God, perfect and sinless in Himself, to redeem us from the bondage of the evil one;—let *Him* plead for you" (381). Helen's distinctly evangelical language in this passage is followed by a hopeful declaration of universal salvation, as she contemplates: "How could I endure to think that that poor trembling soul was hurried away to everlasting torment? It would drive me mad! . . . —whatever fate awaits it, still, it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that he hath made, *will* bless it in the end!" (382). The evangelical call for transformation of the heart, together with the Arminian assertion that salvation is open to all, permeates Brontë's portrayal of Helen who holds out hope for Arthur, even in his dying hour. Though he has not achieved temporal salvation from the degradation of his choices, she continues to plead with him to turn to God. She has not prompted his reform, but she hopes God will save his soul from eternal damnation, and begs Arthur to choose such hope for himself.

In contrast to the deeply personal faith Anne thought would prompt salvation, the Reverend Michael Millward represents a particularly negative illustration of Anglicanism, one that focuses upon religious rules. Through Mr Millward, Brontë illustrates the consequences of a form of faith that does not centre upon the evangelical imperative of inward change. Gilbert Markham notes that Mr Millward "was a man of fixed principles, strong prejudices, and regular habits,—

⁷ Surely Anne Brontë gives Arthur the capacity to understand his depravity, but his heart will not bend. He refuses to choose transformation. Instead, he is an extreme example of the Victorian evangelical belief, a belief explained by Elisabeth Jay, that sin is "endemic to man's nature," the solution to its eradication being the Holy Spirit (*Evangelical and Oxford* 3) who would work to change the endemic sinfulness of the heart. Jay further states that Anglican Evangelicalism was aware of the dangers posed by the choice "between the Scylla of conformity to the world and the Charybdis of willful singularity" (*Religion of the Heart* 46).

intolerant of dissent in any shape, acting under a firm conviction that *his* opinions were always right, and whoever differed from them, must be, either most deplorably ignorant, or wilfully blind” (17). He has particular habits, bordering on rituals, such as his habit of swallowing a raw egg prior to delivering his sermons (18). His style as a minister is “mighty in important dogmas and sententious jokes, pompous anecdotes and oracular discourses, dealt out for the edification of the whole assembly in general . . .” (32). He is shown to be pretentious and formulaic, and this view of his character is reinforced by his assumption that Helen’s unusual circumstances could have no other explanation than sinfulness. She deviates from his pre-conceived picture of a proper middle-class female when she fails to offer an explanation for her behaviour, and is likely damned. He confronts her about her evasive behaviour, and she is offended. She complains to Gilbert, “I did not think Mr Millward a fool . . . it is not pleasant to be looked upon as a liar and a hypocrite, to be thought to practice what you abhor, and to encourage the vices you would discountenance, to find your good intentions frustrated, and your hands crippled by your supposed unworthiness, and to bring disgrace on the principles you profess” (87). Mr Millward attacks Helen’s actions to be sure, but what bothers her most is the attack upon her integrity. He neglects to look at her motivation, or to put it another way—her heart. He fails to recognize two essential aspects of Helen’s evangelical faith. First, while she must protect her privacy to maintain her physical freedoms, significantly, this privacy is a hallmark of her spiritual discipline as well. Personal contemplation, and answering to one’s conscience, were grounded in Puritanical practice, and were of particular importance to the evangelicals. Secondly, Helen’s actions, while unlawful and counter-cultural, are nevertheless shown to be ethical and moral. Helen’s evangelically grounded judgement prompts her agency,

even though her actions appear damning to uninformed onlookers such as Mr Millward who would look for simple compliance to social norms as evidence of proper religion.

Specifically, Helen rejects the intervention of the established Anglican Church. Instead, she makes spiritual choices autonomously.⁸ The evangelical doctrine, after all, is “founded upon a personal apprehension of God. No human mediator is admitted to distance the relation between God and man” (Jay, *Religion* 51). Brontë similarly demonstrates this belief in *Agnes Grey*. Anglican rector Mr Hatfield’s High Church tendencies smack of Catholicism, which would keep authority in the hands of the church rather than the individual, and are accordingly criticised. Nancy, a local cottager, complains to Agnes about Mr Hatfield’s advice. Full of condescension, he tells her, “‘you must come to church, where you’ll hear the Scriptures properly explained, instead of sitting poring over your Bible at home’” (Brontë 70). Nancy, in an acute crisis of faith, unable to attend services due to her health, longs to hear words of comfort. However, Hatfield asserts again, it is her “duty” to attend services: “‘But if you get no comfort that way,’ says he, ‘it’s all up.’ ‘Then, sir, says I,’ ‘should you think I’m a reprobate?’ ‘Why,’ says he—he says, ‘if you do your best to get to Heaven and can’t manage it, you must be one of those that seek to enter in at the strait gate and shall not be able’” (71). This is a double blow: the necessity to obey the Church as a mediating agent and the doctrine of election as predetermined devastate Nancy’s religious security. Critically, evangelicalism’s insistence upon the absence of human mediation conforms to

⁸ Elisabeth Jay argues that evangelicalism’s challenge to the Anglican Church was acute. Evangelicalism’s emphasis upon the spreading of the gospel created, she argues, a particular form of religious zeal. Evangelicals often found the established church lacking, as “‘luke-warmness was disgusting to God and infidelity a disease of the heart rather than of the understanding . . .” (*Evangelical and Oxford* 3). Helen Huntingdon is shown to have this disgust towards Reverend Millward.

Protestantism in general. However, evangelicalism in particular emphasizes evidence of religion's transformative powers, prompted by the Holy Spirit, independently of official church sanction. It is this conception of Christianity that supports Helen the night she learns of Arthur's affair. She pleads with God: "Then, while I lifted up my soul in speechless, earnest supplication, some heavenly influence seemed to strengthen me within" (*Tenant* 258). This deeply personal crying out to God is expressed autonomously and answered. Helen does not seek the established Church's sanction before she takes personal action. She seeks God directly herself.

Individual accountability before God, then, was central to evangelicalism, and for women, this proved to be especially empowering. As David Bebbington explains, "[t]he tone of Evangelicalism permeated nearly the whole of later Victorian religion outside the Roman Catholic Church, and yet the Evangelical tradition remained distinct" (2), and, while highly proselytising, it was also highly personal. In this distinctly Protestant ideology, as Barker-Benfield notes, "one's 'self' lay in one's own hands, to be shaped and presented publicly or not at will, in contrast to the enforcement of that hierarchy of limited and communal roles mediated by confession, a rite reaching deep into the individual's most private self" (83). This very autonomous action of religious self-fashioning diminished one's accountability to the Church because evangelicalism prompted individuals to personal reform, and decreased the sense of communal loyalties to family and the Church at large.⁹ The "dangerous" consequence of an intimate and individual

⁹ Horton Davies similarly asserts that from 1690-1850, there was "excessive individualism . . . which not only deprecated tradition but also lost all sense of the Church as the Communion of Saints and of the worshipper sharing in a corporate status as part of the divine-human organism, the Church" (57). This lack of loyalty to the universal church was similar to the secular culture of individualism which would call for personal introspection. He explains that when evangelicals spoke of "fellowship," it

relationship with one's maker, then, is the potential loss of accountability and fellowship in relation to one's religious community. When one thinks for oneself and communes directly with God, the consequences of those actions can challenge the dominant culture. Frank M. Turner notes that for women, questioning religion was particularly difficult within the confines of the family (27) due to "rejection of the expected vocations of dutiful, obedient daughter and future pious wife" (28). It is in this context that we should interpret the behaviour of Helen Huntingdon, who finds liberation by rejecting expected obedience. Instead, she desires for each woman "the will to watch and guard herself" (30). The will to watch oneself, and the ability to do so, mark the role Brontë envisioned women would play in transformation.

Brontë gives this quality of introspection—"the action of looking within, or into one's own mind" (*OED*)—to Helen Huntingdon. Helen's diary, which she willingly shares with Gilbert Markham, evidences her propensity for Protestant evangelical contemplation. While some critics have argued that Gilbert's possession of the diary suggests his power over the story, it is equally important to realise that the diary as a form demonstrates Helen's spiritual self-reflection.¹⁰ Helen's control is situated in this practice: self-writing forms a lens onto her most intimate thoughts, exposing her spiritual life. Helen relinquishes her diary, and though there is no monetary exchange, she does, in a sense, purchase Gilbert's esteem with her disclosure. As a narrative genre, the diary format conventionally communicates

was the fellowship of the individual with God, not as a "horizontal correlate of the primary Godward relationship" (58).

¹⁰ Gilbert's seeming control of the narrative has distracted critics from the candid nature of Helen's diary in which she is able to relate her story. As Langland so carefully points out, the first-person female narrative Brontë employed with Helen's diary was groundbreaking: "Male writers. . . had employed female narrators, and women writers like Jane Austen and Fanny Burney had used third-person narrators who took a female point of view, but women writers had not yet claimed for themselves the authority of speaking directly through a woman as narrator" (*Other One* 31).

private contemplation, having historical antecedents in the form of the religious confession. Brontë's heroine uses the diary in this way. Her musings are strongly grounded in Helen's evangelical Christian faith, but the diary also gives Gilbert, as well as the reader, access into Helen's religious world. The diary offers a rare glimpse into the contemplative world that prompts Helen's self-preservation—where Helen leverages her Christian faith to make unexpected and counter-cultural choices. While the inclusion of Helen's diary is an aesthetic decision for Brontë, as John Paul Kanwit claims, it is also a genre which allows the reader better to understand the struggles of Victorian womanhood and to view those struggles through a deeply personal, religious lens.¹¹ To put it another way, Anne's drive for realism certainly informs the narrative structure, but more importantly, the diary form candidly expresses the spiritual struggles faced by the married Victorian woman.

Helen's diary is evidence that she is shown to take personal responsibility for her faith. She practically demonstrates spiritual conviction, and the "working out" of salvation¹² so critical to evangelical households, showing that for Brontë, reform was practically applied with action. The "working out" of salvation was a commonplace requirement among Victorian evangelical households and its illustration in Brontë's portrait of Helen is therefore unsurprising, as Biblical precepts were commonplace.¹³ What is unusual, is that Helen soundly rejects the

¹¹ Kanwit argues that through Helen, Brontë demonstrates that artistic mediums, including narrative and painting, "communicate certain ideas in an original composition" (91). But through the artistic medium, she communicates through Helen "the importance of symbolic and narrative interpretations, which often underscore Helen's emotional connections to her paintings" (92).

¹² Arminianism is based upon individual action working alongside God's grace to achieve salvation: "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have also obeyed, not only as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12, KJV).

¹³ As noted in my introduction, Timothy Larsen asserts that for Victorians, the Bible was the "one book" which became the benchmark for the entire society that that would mark the point of adherence or deviation from dominant discourse. The bible provided metaphorical and symbolic

idea that working out her faith means that a wife's religious goodness will transform her husband. She seems to echo Hannah More's assertion in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) that complementary marriage should not reduce the wife to a fictive creature who fails to engage her husband intellectually: "I do not wish to bring back the frantic reign of chivalry, to reinstate women in that fanatic empire in which they sat enthroned in the hearts, or rather the imaginations of men," and she praises the common sense and rational emotions of the day (1:19). More's position seems to be aligned with Brontë's admonition that idealistic views of women are fallacious and dangerous. More, like Brontë, seems particularly concerned with the "gross maxim, that a reformed rake makes the best husband," and notes that it is a "preposterous supposition . . . that habitual vice creates rectitude of character" (2:119). More's warnings bear upon Helen's initial expectation that she will reform Arthur. Yet one doubts that Hannah More would have approved of the unusual steps taken by Helen, which are more reminiscent of Mary Wollstonecraft's Maria who unashamedly rebelled against her husband's demands.

Mary Wollstonecraft, too, as we have seen, called for reform. In particular, she argued that women should be educated in the same manner as men in order to refine autonomous morality. She complains that women are called to marriage as an occupation, saying "Girls are sacrificed to family convenience, or else marry to settle themselves in a superior rank" (*VRM* 45). Further arguing, "Affection in the marriage state can only be founded on respect—and are these weak beings

language, so "Scriptural knowledge is a required pre-requisite for entering into a Victorian author's imaginary world; it is what Northrop Frye called 'the great code' for understanding their works" (4). As he points out, for the Victorians, the Bible was primarily a source of hope. This perspective can be perplexing to those who see scripture as a set of rules, but to Victorians, "a main feature of the Scriptures is that they [were] seen as an uniquely bountiful source of comfort, consolation, encouragement, divine promises, and emotional sentiments which correspond to their own" (269).

respectable?” (46). In fact, she continues to rail against the weak woman, stating, “The affection produced by them . . . should not be tinctured with the respect moral virtues inspire, lest pain should be blended with pleasure, and admiration disturb the soft intimacy of love. This laxity of morals in the female world is certainly more captivating to a libertine imagination than the cold arguments of reason, that give no sex to virtue” (107). The central route to morality, argues Wollstonecraft, is through the education of moral reasoning. Wollstonecraft, like Brontë, complains that women are loved as beautiful objects, not as morally companionate equals.

Helen is Wollstonecraftian in her complaint regarding the inequitable education afforded girls, saying that they are “taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil” (*Tenant* 30). This shielding, she argues, creates female victims while males are afforded education meant to teach rational morality. Men are guided by experience “while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others” (30). This withholding of worldly knowledge is seen as an impediment to agency. Helen believes that experience should be balanced by religious instruction: “Now *I* would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression” (30). Knowledge of good and evil, then, is a prerequisite for the decisions that precede action. Religious education, she argues, is necessary: “I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path: nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power, or the will to watch and guard herself . . .” (30). The “self-respect” and “self-reliance” she refers to here form the basis of agency. Helen’s

comment here suggests regret for her previous ignorance. Though initially she was loved by Arthur primarily for the coquettish beauty she displayed in her courtship, Helen abandons this persona in favour of autonomous morality. In order to maintain this spiritual agency, however, she must free herself from the physical chains of marriage.¹⁴ Unfortunately, like Wollstonecraft's Maria, Helen's agency is somewhat restricted because she is financially entangled to her degenerate husband. But she exercises economic agency as an artist who supports herself and her child, albeit that the mediation of her brother is necessary for her marketable skills to earn an income. Helen becomes a Wollstonecraftian heroine capable of earning a livelihood. And though her ability to produce an income is forced upon her by Arthur's degradation, her ingenuity allows her to take actions which are motivated by morality. Her marketable abilities are utilized as she "cannot afford to paint for [her] own amusement" (41). Helen demonstrates that for most middle-class females who had been trained simply to be a wife, leaving an abusive marriage would have been impossible due to lack of education or marketable skills.

But the effects of Helen's artistic talent are shown to be mixed.¹⁵ Her evangelicalism, a fiercely personal form of religious worship built around careful personal contemplation, is exposed in her artwork, an outward representation of inward thought. She is forced to "sell" her goods, and though she does so willingly, there are hints that Helen is somehow personally violated in the transaction, as she is

¹⁴ Patricia Ingham similarly asserts that Brontë's novels depict women "bent on some independence" (*Brontës* 129). However, this independence was necessary because in 1851, there were far more women than men, and women were considered "redundant" (129).

¹⁵ Kanwit recognizes that both Helen Huntingdon and Mary Grey produce income due to artistic pursuits, and he considers this subversion of female stereotype, as well as Brontë's authorship, subversive. (88). Helen's individualism and inner life are portrayed in her art. However, her paintings betray her on more than one occasion. Arthur discovers Helen's initial infatuation with him through the medium of art. Similarly, Gilbert Markham discovers what otherwise might have been hidden. Frawley argues that Helen's artwork, as well as her diary, give Gilbert "access to otherwise private feelings" (130). In this way, Helen's "personal, private property . . . becomes public property" (131).

obliged to offer glimpses into her private mind in order to scrape together a basic existence. Her privacy had earlier been threatened when her artwork was shown to have betrayed her innermost thoughts to Arthur in chapter 28. Helen's artistic vision, then, creates opportunities at the same time that it entails risks. Her mind, as expressed through artistic creation, becomes public property. It might be argued, then, that she exploits her own privacy in order to gain agency. Helen's habit of contemplation, a hallmark of evangelicalism, is manipulated. More to the point, Helen cultivates the habit of observation in order to develop a means of escape. She produces artwork that finances her limited independence, and her contemplative practices allow her to imagine life apart from Arthur. In both instances, she applies the capacity to reason that Wollstonecraft desired women to bring to marriage.

In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Wollstonecraft's statement regarding the dependent state of women in marriage is quite biting: "If we were born only 'to draw nutrition, propagate and rot,' the sooner the end of creation was answered the better; but as women are here allowed to have souls, the soul ought to be attended to" (93). She wanted women to use reason in marriage, and notes: "In a comfortable situation, a cultivated mind is necessary to render a woman contented; and in a miserable one, it is her only consolation" (101). Like Hannah More, Wollstonecraft recognized the need for women to cultivate the soul. This higher purpose, however, was potentially at odds with the middle-class gender ideology of companionate marriage. Wollstonecraft's paradoxical combination of conformity and radicalism, then, anticipates the viewpoint evident in *The Tenant*. Arguing for more rigorous education for women, for example, Helen contends that they must be informed of evil before they most assuredly would encounter it. The prevailing ideal, however, was to keep women ignorant, as she complains to Gilbert Markham:

“—It *must* be, either, that you think she is essentially so vicious, or so feeble-minded, that she *cannot* withstand temptation, —and though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint, yet, being destitute of *real* virtue, to teach her how to sin, is at once to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity,—. . . .” (*Tenant* 30)

Helen would have the makers of morals, the women who were to direct the religious development of their families, educated. Her call was consistent with the growing interest in individual accountability that became predominant in Victorian culture as evangelicalism firmly took hold.

Helen is shown to be an evangelical heroine who as a hallmark Arminian, takes full responsibility for her faith and actions. And by this action, she simultaneously becomes a Wollstonecraftian heroine. By focusing upon reasoned action, Helen at once demonstrates the “working out” of her salvation so essential to the Christian practice Brontë reveals.

Reforming Schemes: Helen as Subservient Saviour

While the evangelical emphasis upon transformation of the heart represents one way in which Brontë challenged the doctrine of redemptive marriage, the novel also exposes a crucial ideological tension within the concept of coverture as part of this process. In the early stages of her relationship with Arthur, Helen sees her role as redemptive: “There *is* essential goodness in him; —and what a delight to unfold it! If he has wandered, what bliss to recall him! If he is now exposed to the baneful influence of corrupting and wicked companions, what glory to deliver him from them!—OH! If I could but believe that Heaven has designed me for this!” (129).

Helen's fascination with such a divine calling, however, situates her as saviour, a role impossible for her to fulfil. In the early days of their courtship, Helen's aunt asks her if Arthur is "a man of *principle*" (126). She responds, "Perhaps not, exactly; but it is only for want of thought: if he had some one to advise him, and remind him of what is right—my principles are at his service!" (126). She forgets that it is up to Arthur to change his thoughts, that he must be responsible for his own salvation. Yet ironically, the same dominant religious discourse that would champion individual transformation would simultaneously champion the emphasis upon female "influence" as part of the middle-class ideology of womanly virtue within Victorian culture.

The idea that no human mediation is needed to access God is central to Helen's comprehension of her spirituality. She is enticed by the symbiotic spiritual union of marriage that would be elevated as a means to the transformation of the heart so desired by reformers such as Wilberforce. But at the same time, the dominant religious discourse asserted that the pervasive sinfulness of mankind would be rectified by spreading the gospel. The nation would be reformed, and women—or, more to the point, wives, mothers, and devoted daughters—would be key players in this process, influentially rearing households of virtuous Britons. However, the focus upon the individual human heart and the absence of human mediation championed by the evangelical movement proved to create conflicting forces for women who were committed to evangelical marriage: an institution perceived by the Victorians as a union comprised of individuals occupying distinctly separate spheres, both of which ultimately would be governed by the husband. Because of the authority granted to the husband, the wife was placed in a double bind: she was called to be at once both independent and dependent. Her spiritual

independence was required in order for her to exert her saving influence; however, this “independence” was subsumed under her husband’s lordship. Helen is shown to reject this construct. Marriage would threaten to place a wedge between Helen and God, while simultaneously placing expectations upon her for reforming her husband.

Even while being expected to be the redemptive force of the family, women looked to marriage for a sense of physical security situated in the hierarchal structure of the home, where they attempted to rest easily under coverture. Conflict is evident as wives, who were culturally instructed to be passive, supportive members of the household, were at the same time urged by their evangelical faith to give their first allegiance to their maker while simultaneously submitting to the caprices of oftentimes dissolute husbands, all while attempting to prompt reform within their partners. The religious refashioning of self, inherent in evangelicalism, however, had the ability to override the normative requirements of the angelic ideal of womanhood, as *The Tenant* shows. Helen navigates these contradictions. What she finds is spiritual justification to abandon her role as wife and to circumvent the coverture of marriage in order to make difficult moral and ethical decisions which she feels rightly align with her faith. In her attempt to reform her husband, she experiences liberation and reform herself. In fact, Helen notes that, in a sense, she is unmarried due to the limited relationship she shares with Arthur: “[H]ow little real sympathy there exists between us; how many of my thoughts, and feelings are gloomily cloistered within my own mind; how much of my higher and better self is indeed unmarried—doomed either to harden and sour in the sunless shade of solitude, or to quite degenerate and fall away for lack of nutriment in this unwholesome soil!” (206). Her vivid description of her marriage here connotes the death of the spiritual union she had hoped to have with Arthur. Her soul is dying for

absence of companionship due to his lack of nurturance, and as she notes, her “higher self” is “unmarried.” She has been unable to save Arthur; and as a result, she feels herself to be “doomed.”

In part, the belief in female salvatory power was fuelled by the accession of Queen Victoria,¹⁶ whose role, while clearly active, was portrayed as the burden of Divine Providence. For example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem, “The Young Queen” (1838), as Elizabeth Langland explains, constructs Victoria’s crown as burdensome. Victoria’s accession was seen as providential and therefore incontestable. Similarly, for the general populace of middle-class women, “The notion of woman’s work as providential or as a divine calling is embedded in [Victoria’s] self-representation [to the public], and it both reflects and helps create an idea of work for women as distinctively different from man’s monetarily remunerated labours” (*Nobody’s Angels* 66). The labours of womanhood, however, were directed in the home under the leadership of the husband, the domestic sphere in which the middle-class wife was sanctioned to operate.¹⁷ The fallacy of redemptive marriage, then, was buttressed by the contradictory elevation of domesticity to a form of subservient spiritual service.

¹⁶ Langland explains the way that this phenomenon exploded when young Queen Victoria ascended the English throne in 1837. She argues that since the turn of the nineteenth century, “the idea of woman’s salvatory potential” was pervasive. Queen Victoria’s ascension, however, demonstrated “tangible and visible proof of a woman’s power—not only her capacity for individual redemptions but also her talent for ordering and enabling the emergence of a new England” (*Nobody’s Angels* 65).

¹⁷ Patricia Ingham further explains that it was the middle class woman who was primarily responsible for the widespread codification of the “womanly woman” (21). The female, she says, was entrusted with “the guardianship at home of morality,” so “by uniting himself in marriage to a satisfactory exponent of femininity, a typical exponent of middle-class masculinity could subsume her identity into his, and become possessed of her high-mindedness and purity, along with a domestic haven of comfort” (*Language of Gender* 22). It was possible for husbands to possess the high-mindedness of their wives, she notes, as the law recognized husbands and wives as one (22). A husband’s morality, then, is purchased as a wife’s character and integrity are exploited for his particular use.

While other scholars have noted the redeeming qualities perceived to reside within the institution of Victorian marriage, my argument exposes the double bind such redeeming qualities imposed upon the Victorian wife.¹⁸ This is seen in the conflicted position occupied by Helen. She is expected—she is bound by a marital knot—to be a moral exemplar, an irresistible redeeming force that will draw Arthur to Christ’s redeeming work. But Helen is simultaneously bound and restricted as a moral agent. Helen’s union with Arthur places her in an impossible position where she must be at once submissive and independent. Her devotion to Christ, the very redeeming force she is called to champion, is the same force that draws her away from her dissolute husband, as her aunt had tried to warn her: “I must say, Helen, I thought better of your judgment than this—and your taste too. How you can love such a man I cannot tell, or what pleasure you can find in his company; for what fellowship hath light with darkness; or he that believeth with an infidel?” (149). But Helen incredulously insists that Arthur is not the sinner her aunt imagines: “He is not an infidel; —and I am not light, and he is not darkness, his worst and only vice is his thoughtlessness” (150). Helen eventually realises the double bind of the redemptive marital ideal.¹⁹ She cannot save Arthur, in large part, because she is a restricted agent, and instead of reforming him, her exposure to his depravity threatens to weaken her faith. Furthermore, her position as a subservient wife weakens her limited spiritual influence. Importantly, Helen’s devotion to God

¹⁸ Jill Matus, for example, argues that *The Tenant* confronts the “tradition of the rake” and the companion tradition that it is the “duty” of women to rescue and reform them (“Strong Family Likeness”100).

¹⁹ Frawley similarly asserts that initially, Helen embraces the redemptive ideal (132). Helen’s determination to fulfil the role of angel is buttressed by her sincere spirituality, whereby Helen fancies herself capable of saving Arthur. She sees herself as “an instrument of God,” Frawley argues, “working to reform her husband and secure his salvation” (133).

paradoxically draws her away from the very man the dominant discourse would insist she redeem.

Helen's virtue becomes offensive to her husband. It is at this point that Arthur expresses his dissatisfaction with her Christian practice, complaining, "But will you promise to reform if I tell you?" "Yes, if I can—and without offending a higher authority." "Ah! There it is, you see—you don't love me with all your heart" (172). Arthur is offended by Helen's religious loyalties; specifically, he is concerned that evangelical religion of the heart has displaced his supremacy as lord of her heart and soul. But in fact, it is not Arthur who is reformed; rather, he attempts to proselytise her towards misplaced lordship. The Christian fervour that promises to sustain her in a loveless marriage is the very cause of his jealousy and contempt. Helen is caught in a double bind, whereby either choice offered to her requires a personal loss. Arthur is jealous of her faith, so asks her to place it entirely within the hierarchal structure of marriage. Her dilemma is clear: if she abandons her first loyalty to God, she is left without spiritual protection, left to the capricious whims of a selfish overlord; yet, if she maintains her loyalty first to God, she risks losing physical protection and earthly love. Her situation exposes the conflict between gender ideology and the dictates of Christian conscience in Victorian middle-class culture. Helen's virtue, far from creating security for her, seemingly threatens her because it compromises her loyalties, and thus, earthly protection.

This type of conflicting gender ideology was not uncommon. It created complex ambiguities for the Victorian woman, as Davidoff and Hall explain: "It was clear that women were subordinate, yet they had influence; it was evident that the home and children were their sphere, yet sometimes they had to engage in male pursuits and help to support, or indeed entirely support, a family" (117). Clearly,

strict lines of separation between the dissonant requirements placed upon them were impossible to hold, especially as women gained strength from their faith. Davidoff and Hall point out that Protestantism “endowed women with a strong sense of self” making them feel the importance of “individual responsibility for their own souls which could inspire action among the weakest. Indeed the possibility that serious Christianity might give women too much power through moral influence was a continuing point of tension” (117). But while women did not always gain moral influence over others, a growing interest in individual faith strengthened personal choice. This tension complicated both religious and social responsibilities, and made questionable the roles women were designated to fulfill.

In spite of the expectation that women were to hold positions of influence in the home, some of Brontë’s contemporaries, such as Sarah Stickney Ellis, insisted upon their inferiority. In *The Daughters of England* (1843), Ellis claimed that for Christian women, “the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men—inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength” (6). Notwithstanding this premise, she argues that women should educate themselves as she chastises those girls who would be content with ignorance: “I have heard it pleaded by young women, that they did ‘not care for knowledge’—‘did not wish to be clever.’ And if such persons would be satisfied to fill the lowest place in society, to creep through the world alone, or to have silly husbands, and idiot sons, we should say that their ambition was equal to their destiny” (18). She claims that these women, however, are nevertheless “jealous of their rights as intellectual beings, aspiring to be companions of rational men” (38). Contradictorily, Ellis would have women be rational, intellectual beings who concurrently accept their inferiority to men. If, as she claims, neglect of intellectual

pursuits is “ingratitude to the great Author of their being” (39), and failure to pursue knowledge is “deliberately to choose to consign to oblivion and neglect the intellectual part of their nature, which may justly be regarded as the highest of these gifts” (39), and if intellectual powers for women are naturally inferior to those of men, then it follows that moral equality is impossible within the marriage state. As the primary goal of a woman’s life, marriage in this view was a place of inferiority.

Sarah Stickney Ellis was not the only female contemporary of Brontë who insisted upon the inferiority of women. Eliza Lynn Linton similarly argued just six years after the publication of *The Tenant* that a woman’s place was one of subservient influence. She recognized the laws which inflicted “grave legal and social wrongs” (159) upon women. But despite her concern for the inequitable legal position of women, Linton nevertheless believed that they should remain confined to the private sphere: “Give woman public functions, and you destroy the very springs of her influence. For her influence is, and must be, moral more than intellectual—intellectual only as filtering through the moral nature; and if you destroy that moral nature, if you weaken its virtues and sully its holiness, what of power or influence remains?” (159). Against Linton’s view that a woman’s influence is moral rather than intellectual, Anne Brontë, like Wollstonecraft before her, argues in *The Tenant* that morality and reason are inextricably connected.

The insistence upon female moral influence, particularly in marriage, was pervasive. And this prevailing religious rhetoric, championing women’s salvatory power, is evident in *The Tenant* the morning after Arthur’s declaration of love. Helen sits musing in the garden, and her quiet reveries wax spiritual. She is to be engaged: “It was a splendid morning; and I went out to enjoy it, in the quiet ramble in company with my own blissful thoughts. The dew was on the grass, and ten

thousand gossamers were waving in the breeze; the happy red-breast was pouring out its little soul in song, and my heart overflowed with silent hymns of gratitude and praise to Heaven” (146). Helen holds these silent meditations, which are prayerful in nature, all the while knowing that Arthur is somewhat of a “prodigal” (146). Romance has brought her bliss for which she is thankful, and in turn, she will reward her admirer with her goodness, acting the part of redeemer. However, the saving grace Helen offers Arthur *must be accepted by him*. She is restricted in her influence by the very role that would insist upon her power. As Arthur’s wife, Helen’s physical agency is threatened. Nevertheless, the predominance of Christian, and specifically evangelical faith, would continue to insist upon the leveraging power of the middle-class female, conflating marriage with redemption.

Helen does come to realize that her faith cannot save Arthur. Instead, she leverages personal responsibility—spiritual conviction—to decide upon action. Helen does not feel confined by faith. She feels empowered by it. When Helen determines to leave Arthur, she is full of resentment as his wife, saying “I HATE him!” (263); but at the same time, she is burdened with an evangelical regard for his soul, wishing him to feel guilt that would prompt transformation: “I ask no other vengeance! If he could but fully know and truly feel my wrongs, I should be well avenged; and I could freely pardon all; but he is so lost, so hardened in his heartless depravity that, in this life, I believe he never will” (263). Helen’s conflict is apparent. This internal dialogue, however, indicates that Helen is under no spiritual obligation to stay bound to Arthur, a man she cannot save.

Brontë confronts the messy connections between legal and spiritual coverture by constructing a heroine who must negotiate both. As my introduction has demonstrated, the legal implications of coverture were made clear by Blackstone

in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* : “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs every thing . . . under the protection and influence of her husband, her *baron*, or *lord* . . .” (430). But coverture did more than simply entail debilitating legal ramifications for women, such as the loss of “being or legal existence.” Legal coverture was justified by distinctly Christian “one flesh” doctrine, but contemporary rhetoric constructed the “flesh” as that of male. Blackstone states, “For this reason, a man cannot grant anything to his wife, or enter into covenant with her: for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence; and to covenant with her would be only to covenant with himself . . .” (430). Brontë’s novel helps us to see this denial of the woman’s legal, and I argue, spiritual personhood. Blackstone admits that “Our law considers marriage in no other light than as a civil contract. The *holiness* of the matrimonial estate is left entirely to the ecclesiastical law: the temporal courts not having jurisdiction to consider unlawful marriages as a sin, but merely as a civil inconvenience” (421). Nevertheless, “holy” marriages sanctioned by the church were regulated at the point of marriage by debilitating civil laws. Blackstone clarifies, “And, taking it in this civil light, the law treats it as it does all other contracts; allowing it to be good and valid in all cases, where the parties at the time of making it were, in the first place, *willing* to contract; secondly, *able* to contract; and, lastly, actually *did* contract, in the proper forms and solemnities required by law” (421). Therefore, the conception of marriage as a spiritual union established by the church became a legal contract under which women were to operate. Man and wife were therefore lawfully bound to a religious covenant. *The Tenant* wrestles

with the consequences of this conflation of contract and covenant. As the resident angel, Helen is restricted in her salvatory endeavours by the loss of personhood inherent in the legal coverture of marriage, the constraints of which—upon Helen as a woman—are ironically situated in the very Christian faith she hopes to promote.

The wife's legal existence was suspended, in part, then, due to a bastardisation of the one flesh doctrine. The *Book of Common Prayer* commands that the man should love his wife "even as his own flesh" (198). In this way, the man "covers" his wife. This spiritual ideal, exploited by English law, suspended a wife's legal existence, as I have just noted. However, the doctrine of "one flesh" does not assign a gender to that unity: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24, KJV). This passage directly expresses the "one flesh" ideal. However, it does not mandate the loss of female identity. A gender-biased interpretation of this passage, however, gives undue spiritual authority to the husband. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette explains, "male law easily severed the androgynous body whenever it was convenient for men that it be two" (160). In such a scenario, the redeeming potential of marriage, whereby husband and wife might influence one another to deeper spirituality, is lost. The doctrine of "one flesh," far from constituting the union of equals, becomes exploitative. Both legal and spiritual coverture, then, originate in the "one flesh" doctrine, but the husband is situated as the intercessory between his wife and God. As Milton had previously articulated, "Hee for God only, shee for God in him" (IV: 299). While Protestantism had endorsed such gender ideology, evangelicalism's greater emphasis upon personal responsibility for one's own salvation, and direct access to God, exposed the

contradictory position in which women found themselves even as it insisted upon their exemplary moral influence.

The Tenant exposes the spiritual privileging of masculinity apparent in the hierarchal ordering of “equals.” This privileging is a type of federal theology that drove the Victorian perception of marriage. The *OED* explains federal theology as “the system based on the doctrine of covenants made by God with Adam as representing mankind, and with Christ as representing the Church.” If, as some would interpret, Adam represents, not an abstraction of humankind, but is representatively male, then within the family, spousal authority rests with the husband who then becomes the “one” privileged covenantal mediator with God. Woman becomes the “other,” the outsider whose relationship with God must be mediated first by a father, and later by a husband. A clear problem with the conception of marriage which privileges patriarchal mediation and access to God is that women were supposed to reform society through their goodness, but in order to gain access to God, the husband’s authority needed to be circumvented, thus upsetting the hierarchal structuring of the Victorian household.²⁰ Contradictorily, women were expected to persuade from a place of extreme submission,²¹ as restricted saviours. The construction of femininity as dependent sat in conflict with the responsibility given to women, both to manage and to save their households. These responsibilities, which when successfully accomplished would evidence the woman’s salvation, were circularly situated in her ability to save her own family.

²⁰ The hierarchy of the household, as Patricia Ingham explains in *The Brontës*, was structured around the idea that “more logical, more rational” men “were natural agents, capable—as women were not—of sound decision-making and effective action” (146).

²¹ As Davidoff and Hall explain, during the nineteenth century men were perceived as created in God’s image “while woman was defined as ‘other’” (110). So, man’s masculinity was situated in his “ability to support and order his family and household” (114) whereas a woman’s femininity was situated in dependence. They argue, “Dependence was at the core of the evangelical Christian view of womanhood, and the new female subject, constructed in real religious terms, was the godly wife and mother” (114).

Helen fails to understand not only the full implications of legal coverture, but she misinterprets the spiritual implications of coverture as well. Marriage strips her of her legal personhood and diminishes her influence. Her uncle recognises that part of the problem is Helen's inability to make a reasoned choice due to her fascination with romantic love. He comments, "At your time of life, it's love that rules the roast [sic]: at mine, it's solid, serviceable gold" (151). He recognises what Helen does not, that infatuation prohibits her from considering the consequences and financial implications of marriage: "I suppose now, you'd never dream of looking into the state of your husband's finances, or troubling your head about settlements, or anything of that sort?" "I don't think I should." "Well, be thankful, then, that you've wiser heads to think for you" (151-152). But it is just this type of superficial thinking—thinking about the material union of finances—that Helen chooses to ignore; she anticipates a deeper, more spiritual union, as she naively explains, "all I have will be his, and all he has will be mine; and what more could either of us require?" (152). She anticipates a truly companionate marriage, a spiritual union that will naturally lead to a complementary material and spiritual exchange. What Helen fails to anticipate is that her union with Arthur will not be the union of equals. Although his moral superior, she will live in subjection to his caprices. The coverture of marriage, as was so often the case, would not offer protection, but rather repression and restriction.

As Brontë's novel shows, the relationship between spiritual union and legal coverture was blurred. Helen makes plain to Arthur in the epigraph of this chapter that her obligation to him as her earthly lord would not prompt the spiritual devotion he so desired. She looks beyond marriage for lordship. Rejecting the "one flesh" justification for coverture, she looks to God, not her husband, as her authority. She

asks Arthur to devote himself similarly to God so as better to fulfil his role as husband, complaining, "you don't love me half as much as I do you; and yet, if you loved me far less than you do, I would not complain, provided you loved your Maker more" (173). Her understanding of marriage is strongly situated in the evangelical ideal whereby mutual devotion to God would prompt greater marital intimacy, as she argues, "the more you loved your God the more deep and pure and true would be your love to me" (173). But Arthur does not grow closer to God as a result of his marriage to the evangelical Helen. Instead, her Christianity is shown to justify marital dissolution. As Arthur dies, Helen admits that his salvation has not occurred, or if it has, it has not been due to matrimony. She states, "I cannot do him any good; he will neither be enlightened, nor roused, nor comforted by anything I say; and yet he clings to me with unrelenting pertinacity—with a kind of childish desperation, as if *I* could save him from the fate he dreads" (379). In fact, throughout their marriage, it is Arthur's negative influence that has threatened to overtake Helen, as she laments, "Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural. I know them to be wrong, because reason and God's word declare them to be so; but I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion which was given me by nature, or instilled into me by the precepts and example of my aunt" (222). Helen's moral perception is prone to slippage.²² As a wife, Helen has neither mediated nor prompted salvation.

Brontë's challenge to the concept that marriage was in some sense redemptive should be seen in the context of its persistence within Victorian culture.

²² Elizabeth Langland explains that Helen's inability to reform her husband partially drove the ire that followed the publication of *The Tenant*. This is worsened by the fact that Arthur "begins to ensnare her in his fall" (*Other One* 142). His influence is seen in spite of the fact that Helen is given nearly idyllic Christian virtue, but this characterisation only demonstrates the Huntingdons' differences: "With brilliant insight, she recognizes that, for all of Helen's virtues, her nature partly fuels Huntingdon's self-destruction because their personalities are incompatible" (143).

Though Protestant Victorians did not see marriage in the same light as a Roman Catholic sacrament, or “an opportunity for the reception of divine grace” (*OED*), marriage was nevertheless seen as a vehicle for the transformation of the heart. Both John Calvin and John Wesley, Protestant theologians who dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth century, disagreed with the Catholic view of marriage as a sacrament. In *Institution of the Christian Religion* (1536), Calvin observed, “Marriage is a good and holy ordinance of God; and farming, building, cobbling, and barbering are lawful ordinances of God, and yet are not sacraments. For it is required that a sacrament be not only a work of God but an outward ceremony appointed by God to confirm a promise” (236). Similarly, John Wesley, a significant influence upon Patrick Brontë as I have already noted, disregarded the idea of sacramental marriage. In “Roman Catechism, and Reply” (ca. 1756), Wesley responded to the Catholic assertion that one who denies the sacramental nature of marriage is “accursed,” asserting, “St. Austin saith, that signs, when applied to religious things, are called sacraments. . . . But then matrimony doth no more confer grace, than washing the feet, or using the sign of the cross” (127). Both Calvin and Wesley had significant influence upon the religious doctrine associated with the evangelical movement within the Anglican Church, and both asserted the holy, but not sacramental, nature of marriage. Victorian evangelicalism too, quite firm in its anti-Catholicism, eschewed marriage as a sacrament. Yet, the idea of the redemptive nature of the union persisted and was strongly rooted in the middle-class ideology of the domestic angel. Coupled with evangelicalism’s general elevation of personal redemption, and its call for a reformation of manners, marriage became a culturally-approved reforming scheme believed to elicit salvation.

Helen, far from capable of saving her husband, rejects coverture in order to save herself and her young son. Arthur will not be reformed. In fact, his flaws are shown to be so irrevocable, that he would eventually “give” Helen to any of his companions who would take her, claiming he has no wife, at all, “or if I have, look you, gentlemen: I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her and welcome: you may, by Jove, and my blessing into the bargain!” (301). The exchange is strangely reminiscent of Wollstonecraft’s Maria as she discovers George Venables’ schemes as he would similarly prostitute her, his wife. It seems that for both men, marriage is shown to prompt their further degradation. Soon after the above exchange, when Walter Hargrave attempts to seduce Helen, she is momentarily tempted. As has been shown, not only has she failed to reform Arthur, but he has influenced her to the extent that her moral judgement briefly fails. Christine Colón notes the significance: “Not only is she tempted to sin, but she also feels she is unable to benefit from her trials the way a good Christian should. At the beginning of the marriage, Helen is confident that she is morally superior to her husband and can reform him, but gradually she recognizes that she, too, may have sinful inclinations” (“Enacting the Art” 407). These inclinations mean that Helen must remove herself from Arthur’s influence. What she learned in the end was that the moral superiority she held over her husband would be the strength she needed simply to save herself from his grip.

Leveraging Virtue and Abandoning Reform

In spite of her efforts to reform her rakish husband, Helen demonstrates clear piety when she abandons her reforming schemes. Helen *does* overcome potential enslavement by saving herself and her child from destruction when she leaves her

marriage to Arthur. But on his deathbed, Arthur derides Helen for failure. She *could* have saved him, he contends, but for her selfishness. She writes in her diary, “If I had reasoned with him like a rational creature, he says, it never would have happened; but to be treated like a baby or a fool, was enough to put any man past patience, and drive him to assert his independence even at the sacrifice of his own interest—” (375). Arthur claims that Helen has failed as a faithful wife. He even imagines himself suffering in Hell, while Helen looks on carelessly: “[W]hen once you have secured your reward, and find yourself safe in Heaven, and me howling in hell-fire, catch you lifting a finger to serve me *then!*—No, you’ll look complacently on . . .” (375-376). According to Arthur, Helen’s ultimate worth as a wife, then, upon her husband’s deathbed, is measured by her ability to save him.²³

In the end, Arthur dies unwilling to take personal responsibility for his salvation, and Brontë leaves the eternal destination of his soul ambiguous. But teaching the reader “how to live” is central to *The Tenant*, and is central to Brontë’s evangelicalism. Similarly, in *Agnes Grey*, Agnes quite pointedly advises Lady Ashby regarding the secret to a happy life, which she asserts is more important than death itself: “The best way to enjoy yourself is to do what is right, and hate nobody. The end of Religion is not to teach us how to die, but how to live; and the earlier you become wise and good, the more happiness you secure” (Brontë 143). The question of whether all will be saved in the end, or whether only the pre-determined elect will receive salvation, obscures the fact that, according to Brontë, reformation during one’s lifetime cannot be brought about by others. Both poles of the theological debate about salvation, Calvinistic limited election or universal salvation, potentially

²³ Frawley notes that Helen ultimately understands that she will not be Arthur’s saviour, as “the moment when Helen Huntingdon literally becomes free of her husband is interwoven in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with the moment when she finally divests herself of the missionary role endorsed by her society’s domestic ideology” (136).

remove the responsibility of the individual for its achievement. It is just such responsibility that Helen cannot take upon her shoulders on her husband's behalf. Helen's ultimate rejection of redemptive marriage re-iterates her belief in individual, autonomous reform.

Helen's renunciation of marriage to Arthur is a moment of epiphany—and marks the total abandonment of her former reforming schemes. She laments, “Fool that I was to dream that I had strength and purity enough to save myself and him!” (222). The wilful refashioning she had applied as an artist to his portrait was impossibly applied to his character, as she recalls. After her escape, she gazes at his likeness: “It struck me with dismay, at the moment, when I took it from the box and beheld those eyes fixed upon me in their mocking mirth, as if exulting still in his power to control my fate, and deriding my efforts to escape” (333). Even in her flight, the sheer memory of his presence threatens to usurp her autonomy, but the recollection of her painful life with him prompts her to reflect upon the false viewpoint from which she had considered him before: “How widely different had been my feelings in painting that portrait to what they now were in looking upon it! How I had studied and toiled to produce something, as I thought, worthy of the original!” (333). Making the painting “worthy” of Arthur reflects the emotional attachment she felt towards its owner, as opposed to knowledge of the owner himself. She continues, “Now, I see no beauty in it—nothing pleasing in any part of its expression; and yet it is far handsomer and far more agreeable—far less repulsive I should rather say—than he is now: for these six years have wrought almost as great a change upon himself as on my feelings regarding him” (333). Instead of growing worthier, he lost her regard altogether. Helen, not Arthur, experiences reformation. Her thinking and her feelings are no longer skewed with a false sense of saving

power. Arthur, Helen's earthly lord, is no longer capable of holding her gaze. Instead, she sees past him to find her strength in religion. She puts God first.

Eventually, Helen is able to extract herself from Arthur in part because throughout her marriage, she continually exercises intellectual reasoning whereby she judges his behaviour in order to calculate her actions. For example, in the early weeks of her marriage, she admits his faults, while intending to persist in her efforts to reform him: "[I]f I had known him in the beginning, as thoroughly as I do now, I probably never should have loved him, and if I had loved him first, and then made the discovery, I fear I should have thought it my duty not to have married him" (171). But she does marry Arthur, and therefore, attempts to play the part of the dutiful wife, saying, ". . .my duty, now is plainly to love him and to cleave to him; and this just tallies with my inclination" (171). Helen is inclined to act virtuously according to the dictates of evangelical womanhood. She intends to proselytise him through her own self-sacrifice. His fault, she believes, is self-love: "But Arthur is selfish— I am constrained to acknowledge that thought at once. And, indeed, the admission gives me less pain than might be expected; for, since *I* love him so much, I can easily forgive him for loving himself: he likes to be pleased, and it is my delight to please him, —and when I regret this tendency of his, it is for his own sake, not for mine" (171-72). This internal dialogue, which can initially be perceived as troubling acquiescence to Arthur's behaviour, reveals Helen's ability to judge clearly even as it reveals an unwillingness to give up her reforming schemes. Certain truths she willingly admits: he is selfish. But she intends by her goodness to delight him, hoping her virtue will reform his evil tendencies *for his own sake*. She fears for his soul. She intentionally and knowingly allows him in these early days to maintain authority, in spite of himself. But her goodness is turned against her.

Helen's reforming schemes are situated between conflicting imperatives: between belief in her influence and consciousness of the restrictions of her gender. Her role as a spiritual influencer comes to the fore with the birth of her son, and his life prompts Helen to become a most determined agent even while her loyalties to her son complicate her commitment to her husband. In a most telling passage, Helen articulates the gravity with which she approaches motherhood. The joys are stolen as she proclaims, "God has sent me a soul to educate for Heaven, and given me a new and calmer bliss, and stronger hopes to comfort me. But where hope rises fear *must* lurk behind . . ." (202). The fear that follows her is profound, for she earnestly prays that her son would be "unsullied from the world," yet concedes that he may become "a slave to sin, the victim of vice and misery, a curse to others and himself—" so she prays, "Eternal Father, if Thou beholdest such a life before him, tear him from me now in spite of all my anguish, and take him from my bosom to Thine own, while he is yet a guileless, unpolluted little lamb!" (203). This passionate concern for her son's soul, as well as fear for his security in this world, sits in stark contrast to his father's lack of concern for his wellbeing.

Helen contends that Arthur sees his son as an "acquisition" (203) and "an object almost of indifference" unless the child becomes too needy, in which case "his impatience is roused by its 'utter helplessness' and 'imperturbable stupidity'" (203). What seems to upset Arthur most is the babe's attachment to his mother. This rouses Arthur's jealousy, and he exclaims, "Helen, I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly! You are absolutely infatuated about it. . . . As long as you have that ugly little creature to doat upon, you care not a farthing what becomes of me'" (204). Arthur exhibits the jealousy which motivates his constraint of Helen, but he perceives her love of her son as a threat, a perversion of the

protectiveness which normally both fathers and mothers would naturally feel for children. Instead, Arthur exclaims, "How the devil can I waste my thoughts and feelings on a little worthless idiot like that?" (204). Helen chastises him for his behaviour oddly by rewarding him with a kiss, and Arthur concedes that he likes his son well enough, "only I can't *love* it—what is there to love? It can't love me—or you either; it can't understand a single word you say to it, or feel one spark of gratitude for your kindness" (205). This example of patriarchal "love" is evidence of the logical consequence of coverture, taken to its extreme, encouraging the self-absorption of men. Arthur asserts it is his right to receive, and not his duty to give, love. But Helen corrects him: "If you were less selfish yourself, Arthur, you would not regard it in that light.' 'Possibly not, love; but so it is: there's no help for it'" (205). Indeed, Arthur's love is self-love.

But as young Arthur grows, his father is not content simply to be loved by his son. He purposely corrupts the child simply to exasperate his wife and to foil her efforts properly to educate the young boy and to fulfil her duty as the maker of morals within the home. Little Arthur, certain to prefer his father's permissiveness to his mother's commands, develops a preference for the man who certainly still perceives him as an idiot. Helen complains: "If I, for his good, deny him some trifling indulgence, he goes to his father, and the latter, in spite of his selfish indolence, will even give himself some trouble to meet the child's desires: if I attempt to curb his will, or look gravely on him for some act of childish disobedience, he knows his other parent will smile and take his part against me" (276). Arthur, she complains, "counteracts my arduous labour for the child's advantage, destroys my influence over his tender mind, and robs me of his very love; —I had no earthly hope but this, and he seems to take a diabolical delight in

tearing it away” (276). She nevertheless persists in the proper education of her son, simultaneously violating the Victorian ideal of the passive wife and fulfilling the ideal of maternal devotion, by actively engaging in the moral education of her child in spite of her husband’s—her earthly lord’s—fervent objections.

Helen’s capacity to violate the passive norms of womanhood, instead exercising agency, is perhaps anticipated in the characterization of her traits displayed even before she becomes a mother. Hattersley, contemplating becoming a husband, comments to Arthur that he does not seek a wife with Helen’s wilfulness: “I must have somebody that will let me have my own way in everything—not like *your* wife, Huntingdon, she is a charming creature, but she looks as if she had a will of her own, and could play the vixen upon occasion’ (I thought, ‘you’re right there, man,’ but I didn’t say so) ” (187). Hattersley and Arthur seem to agree that the ideal wife is passive rather than pious. The *OED* defines a ‘vixen’ as “An ill-tempered quarrelsome woman,” and Hattersley implies that Helen’s pious wilfulness *is* ill-temper. He continues: “I must have some good, quiet soul that will let me just do what I like and go where I like, keep at home or stay away, without a word of reproach or complaint; for I can’t do with being bothered” (187). Hattersley exhibits a need for complete headship, and determines that he will not reform. We know, of course, that he *does* reform, but he cannot thank his wife for the change. In fact, it is Helen who asserts herself and alerts Hattersley to his need for reformation. She acts the part of ministering angel, but she is no agent of change. Instead, Helen evangelizes Hattersley, encouraging him to choose for himself transformation of the heart.

Helen, at times, is capable of wielding her wilfulness in order intentionally to fulfil ‘expected’ supportive roles. She does this with dogged hope that her superior

behaviour will evoke within Arthur guilt for his reckless actions. For example, upon Arthur's return from a stay "amid the dust and smoke of London,—perhaps, shut up within the walls of his own abominable club" (189), she finds him physically and emotionally deprived. She turns into the dutiful wife: "I play and sing to him for hours together. I write his letters for him and get him everything he wants; and sometimes I read to him, and sometimes I talk, and sometimes only sit by him and sooth him with silent caresses" (190). Helen's acquiescent servitude disturbs us as readers, but her wilfulness remains. Her passion for "right" action prompts her disgust, when she says, "I know he does not deserve it; and I fear I am spoiling him; but this once, I forgive him, freely and entirely—I will shame him into virtue if I can, and I will never let him leave me again" (190). The "shaming" into virtue Helen desires to achieve exemplifies strength. She concludes that she is morally superior, and treats her husband as a child, is concerned with "spoiling" him, but actively loves him nonetheless. Her actions are not the result of mindless acquiescence, but demonstrate her efforts to effect change.

Upon her first suspicions of his attachment to Lady Lowborough, Helen confronts Arthur, asking, "'Are the marriage vows a jest; and is it nothing to make it your sport to break them, and to tempt another to do the same?'" (199), but Arthur maintains his superiority, claiming, "'You are breaking your marriage vows yourself,' . . . 'You promised to honour and obey me, and now you attempt to hector over me, and threaten and accuse me and call me worse than a highwayman. . . . I won't be dictated to by a woman, though she will be my wife'" (199). In the most flagrant way possible, Arthur persists in his libertinism, and resists Helen's passionate pleas for change. Referencing her promise to obey him, he will have her passively accept his behaviour. She informs him that his behaviour could cause her

to hate him, to which he arrogantly replies, “You cannot hate me, as long as I love you” (199). This statement is a travesty of coverture. Arthur concludes that he determines the extent to which love between the partners will be extended or withheld. Helen’s role as the purifying influence is nothing whatsoever to him.

After Helen witnesses the open admission of her husband’s adultery, her strength is immediately found in her religious ideals: “It seemed all dim and quivering now to my darkened sight. My burning, bursting heart strove to pour forth its agony to God, but could not frame its anguish into a prayer; until a gust of wind swept over me, which, while it scattered the dead leaves, like blighted hopes, around, cooled my forehead, and seemed a little to revive my sinking frame” (258). She immediately turns with her cares and hopes to God, but cannot even supplicate, until the wind, like the breath of the Holy Ghost, touches her softly and gives her strength: “I saw distinctly the pure moon shining on, and the light clouds skimming the clear, dark sky; and then, I saw the eternal stars twinkling down upon me; I knew their God was mine, and he was strong to save and swift to hear. ‘I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,’ seemed whispered from above their myriad orbs” (258). God is shown to hear her even when she does not speak, and here, as the coverture of her marriage is challenged, she senses, “No, no; I felt He would not leave me comfortless: in spite of earth and hell I should have strength for all my trials, and win a glorious rest at last!” (258). She begins to plot a means to escape her abusive marriage. This decision begins and ends with her Christian faith.

The end result of Helen’s piety, then, is not passive acquiescence to her husband’s damaging alcoholic and adulterous behaviour. Instead, Brontë creates a character so certain of the call to virtue that she leaves her marriage altogether. Her initial declaration of independence demonstrates the rejection of sexual intimacy

when she asserts, "[Y]ou need not trouble yourself any longer, to feign the love you cannot feel: I will exact no more heartless caresses from you—nor offer—nor endure them either—I will not be mocked with the empty husk of conjugal endearments, when you have given the substance to another!" (261). The severing of sexual ties is noteworthy, but even more so, is Helen's abandonment of reforming schemes which are central to Brontë's narrative. Helen claims, "Hitherto, I have struggled hard to hide your vices from every eye, and invest you with virtues you never possessed—but now you must look to yourself" (261). Helen ceases to invest in her salvatory role, insisting instead that Arthur take personal responsibility for his actions. She engages with the paradox of evangelical Christianity, which called at once for both personal responsibility and social evangelism.

Ironically, it is Helen's conformity to the tenets of her Christian faith, not her rebelliousness, which prompts her to leave her husband. She muses as she flees Arthur's home: "Oh, what delight it was to be thus seated aloft . . . a prison and despair behind me, receding further, further back at every clatter of the horses' feet; and liberty and hope before! I could hardly refrain from praising God aloud for my deliverance, or astonishing my fellow-passengers by some surprising outburst of hilarity" (330). She is supported in her joy by the conviction that she has judged correctly: "As I bade farewell for ever to that place, the scene of so much guilt and misery, I felt glad that I had not left it before, for now there was no doubt about the propriety of such a step—no shadow of remorse for him I left behind" (330). She notes the "propriety" of leaving her husband, yet her action places her outside the law. Her statement directly challenges English law as well as the prevailing ideology of middle-class womanhood, the rejection of unrealistic notions of wifely submission. Helen feels no shame before God.

Ultimately, Helen exercises agency she finds in spite of, not because of, her marriage. The redemptive marriage plot is challenged when she leaves Arthur, for her triumph lies in the transformation of self when she divests herself of her role of saviour and looks after her own soul and the security of her child. It must be noted, however, that throughout Brontë's writing, she was hardly cavalier in her suggestion that wives might leave unfavourable marriages, in spite of the radical schemes suggested in *The Tenant*. In *Agnes Grey*, for example, Lady Ashby, formally Rosalie Murray, is miserable in a marriage she contracted for little more than the purpose of social elevation. Agnes does her best to encourage her, suggesting a contemplative life to assuage the loss of love: "advising her, first, by gentle reasoning, by kindness, example, and persuasion to try to ameliorate her husband; and then when she had done all she could, . . .—to wrap herself up in her own integrity, and trouble herself as little about him as possible. I exhorted her to seek consolation in doing her duty to God and man, to put her trust in Heaven" (142). The first line of defence for the evangelical heroine after an unfavourable marriage has been formed, then, is reform without, or reformation of the spouse. When that plan fails, the wife must reform within. She must transform herself.

Helen's flight is a small demonstration of agency even though she lives in constant fear of discovery. Gail Malmgreen reminds us that Victorian women "made their faith a means of escape from domestic confinement, or a statement of individual identity. Religious commitment and expression was, after all, an approved outlet for female assertiveness—within limits" (5). The line of demarcation of the culturally accepted "limit" of spiritual assertiveness, then, was contested. Helen's ability to flee her marriage rests not in her utter rejection of her role as angel, but in her commitment to her faith which gives her the strength

necessary to act in defiance of prevailing gender ideology. Brontë shows her readers that the true end of virtue will not result in blind coverture. Helen's independent determination anticipates Elizabeth Gaskell's character Ruth, a heroine whose actions I explicate in the next chapter, who works out her salvation through self-sacrifice ultimately resisting marriage altogether.

Chapter Four:

“All and Everything”:

Rebellion, Responsibility, and Redemption in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*

“Low and soft, with much hesitation, came the ‘Yes;’ the fatal word of which she so little imagined the infinite consequences. The thought of being with him was all and everything.” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 49)

In *Ruth* (1853), Gaskell interrogates the Victorian obsession with the fallen woman. Not only does Gaskell allow Ruth to be redeemed, she argues that Ruth’s fall paradoxically propels her towards salvation. In the beginning stages of the narrative, Ruth’s naiveté and need intersect and she becomes Bellingham’s victim. Gaskell’s narrator later notes that Ruth is “like a child” (50), and suggests that her trusting nature makes her scarcely more than a simpleton “little accustomed to oppose the wishes of any one—obedient and docile by nature, and unsuspecting and innocent of any harmful consequences” (51). Ruth’s vulnerability, then, stems from her innocence. Ruth’s initial “fatal word” was “yes” (49) and thus she fell to Bellingham’s seduction. But later, she is shown to challenge a type of redemptive marriage plot, the same plot which—as I have suggested in previous chapters—attempts to resolve spiritual conflict for both husband and wife; Ruth protests a commonplace path to social redemption when, as a consequence of her virtue, she declines an offer of marriage by her seducer. Though Ruth’s seduction and fall are in keeping with those conventions of the domestic novel that suggest the heroine’s potential reward for her moral fortitude,¹ her redemption is found when she rejects the marriage that would offer her social reconciliation. She instead manipulates the very faith that meted out judgement against her, transforming the pharisees in her

¹ Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) epitomises this domestic typology. It similarly and earlier features a resistant heroine. Pamela’s virtue allows her initially to resist her seducer, but she eventually succumbs to his advances. Conversely, Ruth initially succumbs to her seducer but eventually resists him.

midst, thereby paradoxically propelling herself towards both spiritual and social salvation. In the process, *Ruth* seeks to transform the reader alongside the characters within the narrative.

Gaskell's *Ruth* advocated the reform of society's response to the fallen woman, adding to the contemporary conversation regarding women who had violated, by choice or by force, normative sexuality. Just prior to the publication of the novel, W.R. Greg, in the *Westminster Review* (1850), complained of the contemporary response to the quintessential fallen woman, the prostitute. The negative rhetoric attached to her, he grumbled, is inflammatory and unfair: "No language is too savage for these wretched women. They are outcasts, Pariahs, lepers. Their touch, even in the extremity of suffering, is shaken off as if it were pollution and disease" (450). His empathy for the prostitute's position was predicated on a belief in her initial blamelessness. Like Gaskell, Greg outlines the slippery slope to fallenness as a sexual awakening, the result of a first error in judgement. He contends that the prostitute, as a general rule, despises her occupation. Those who would believe the prostitute actually enjoys her employment, he says, have fallen prey to a cultural fallacy: "Alas! there is no truth in *this* conception, or only in the most exceptional cases" (451). This first step, he argues, begins a downward spiral, until "—passing over all this, what is her position when she has reached the last step of her downward progress and has become a common prostitute? Every calamity that can afflict human nature seems to have gathered round her,—cold, hunger, disease, often absolute starvation" (451-452). The "first false, fatal step" (451) Greg outlines is in accord with Gaskell's contention that Ruth's fallenness was the result of her initial fatal "YES." The fallen woman, however manipulated or pressured into her position, begins this downward spiral, both Gaskell and Greg contend, with an

initial poor choice.² Five years after the publication of *Ruth*, William Acton (1857) would take a similarly sympathetic view of the fallen woman reminding his readers, “But most immediate Scriptural sanction can be found for the views of the mercifully-minded. Do we read in St. Luke’s Gospel that our Saviour forbid the presence and the contact of the Magdalen? His answer to the scandalizing pharisee was, ‘Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much’” (11). The rising concern about the fallen woman fuelled in part the activity of the Magdalenists, evangelical reformers. These developments provide an important context for considering the ways in which Gaskell’s novel intervenes in the contemporary debate regarding fallenness. *Ruth* directly involved itself in this reformist movement, leveraging the Unitarian belief in toleration while embracing evangelical rhetoric. The novel challenges the inconsistent nature of Victorian definitions of and responses to fallenness. While Gaskell portrays Ruth’s fall, she minimizes her culpability³. Instead of hopelessly giving the fallen woman over to lifelong indignity, she asks her readers to believe that spiritual and social redemption are possible, and that importantly, redemption can be found outside of marriage.

Ruth’s fall has as one of its precipitating conditions her obedience to Mr Bellingham. The necessity of womanly obedience to men was a concern for middle-class Victorian women, and Gaskell herself struggled to understand how she would

² Though those women fallen into prostitution and extreme measures of livelihood were not always met with such a sympathetic ear. William Tait (1850), for example, contended that a prostitute generally “delivers herself up to a life of impurity and licentiousness” (2). Tait’s implication that prostitutes somehow openly and willingly choose this lifestyle is directly confronted by commentators such as Greg and Acton.

³ Krueger contends that Gaskell endorses the heroine as “divinely sanctioned by doing God’s will” (158). Gaskell uses this heroine to give voice to the marginalized fallen woman (159). Krueger notes, then, that Gaskell’s message is not reconciliation, but confrontation. As Krueger notes, Ruth “has ‘fallen’ outside patriarchal law, but remains within God’s law” (186). In this statement Krueger also articulates the leveraging possibilities of Christian morality which I contend both confronted and supported the Victorian woman. She argues that Gaskell “appreciates the ideological conflicts in scripture which, by contrast with more homogeneous patriarchal narratives, can actually raise feminist consciousness and lead to an evangelical witness on behalf of women” (187).

become “obedient” to Mr Gaskell. Just prior to her own marriage, she wrote to Harriet Carr (August the 8th [1832]), mockingly noting, “I am to learn obedience on the 30th of this month. Never having received a letter from any body similarly situated, I don’t in the least know how to express myself on the occasion but I fancy ‘to learn obedience’ is something new—to me at least it is” (Chapple and Shelston 19). The more companionate Unitarian ideal of marriage that underlies her comment sat at odds with the solemn evangelical call to wifely obedience. Instead, it envisaged marriage as a relatively egalitarian partnership. Gaskell minimizes the evangelical cultural mandate by juxtaposing her imagined subjection with the triviality of finding just the right attire to commemorate the event: “I have got the very prettiest bonnet for the occasion that ever was, and cannot help trying it on every time I go into my room” (19). Although she had very little actual fear of being held as Mr Gaskell’s thrall, the expectation of wifely obedience was pervasive in Victorian gender ideology. As my previous chapters have shown, however, the cultural understanding that wives would quietly submit and obey their husbands sat uneasily beside the widespread belief that marriage would operate as a redeeming force for the husband and wife, the woman serving as the primary conduit for redemption. The ideal of womanly obedience and submission proves to be equally problematic in *Ruth*, where it contributes to the heroine’s fall.

When Ruth says “yes” to Bellingham, she manifests the passive feminine role assigned to her by contemporary society. But Gaskell challenges this passive role by depicting the punishment of Ruth for her acquiescence, suggesting that Ruth’s fall is the result of misplaced obedience. To remedy this passivity, Gaskell argues that Ruth’s redemption lies in personal action, demonstrating that reform is the responsibility of the individual. Without abandoning her Unitarian theology that

was critical of traditional notions of original sin, Gaskell manipulates evangelical rhetoric to show the transformation of Ruth's heart; this transformation is manifestly a strengthening of Ruth's moral character as Ruth humbly accepts responsibility for her actions. Though many scholars have argued otherwise, I contend that Ruth is an active agent in her redemption, which is both spiritual and social. Ruth paradoxically leverages the very faith which society uses to condemn her in order to reject the redemptive marriage plot; she earns her own redemption.

I argue throughout this chapter that Gaskell uses the novel as a vehicle for the reformation of her readers by depicting Ruth's fall and reform. First, I look at the contemporary reviews of Gaskell's narrative and argue that she used *Ruth* in its novel form to challenge perceptions of fallenness. Secondly, I argue that Ruth's rejection of Bellingham is evidence of her virtue, and embodies her resistance. Simultaneously an innocent victim and a fallen woman, Ruth demonstrates the ways in which contending impulses of obedience and rebellion work within her as she alternately complies with and contests expectations within the novel that hinge upon marriage as a narrative solution. Next, I examine the reformation of characters in the text who judge Ruth while they themselves are desperately in need of transformation. Ruth's social redemption marks the denouement of the novel's crisis, one that is often worked out in the domestic novel by the successful culmination of marriage. However, Ruth resists such resolution. She is instead vindicated by acts of service, driving others to repentance. Ultimately, Gaskell seeks to transform the hearts of her readers by pointing out Ruth's relative blamelessness and the inequity of her social consequences. Ruth is shown paradoxically to utilize the very faith that others would use to judge and restrain her, instead to find redemption and restoration.

She “does not preach”: Narrative Transformation in *Ruth*

As I have argued in preceding chapters, the domestic novel both propagated and critiqued contemporary ideas about marriage. In particular, I argue here that novelists such as Anne Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell utilized the novel first to embrace and then to challenge the concept of redemptive marriage. In *Ruth*, Gaskell utilizes the novel in ways that were especially likely to offend conservative Victorian readers and social commentators. She challenges the reader to re-evaluate the role of marriage in the ideologies of both fallenness and redemption.

It is not the heroine who needs transformation, but the readers of her narrative who would sympathise with the heroine in the text while simultaneously judging the fallen women within society. While the preacher challenges parishioners to reform by direct and oftentimes confrontational sermonising, Gaskell uses powerful third person narration to guide readers to shared identification with Ruth in order to prompt transformation of the heart. But while Gaskell’s use of narrative was meant to prompt marked change in the reader, she sets no such designs of transformation on her heroine. The subtle changes in Ruth are almost imperceptible. Beyond her initial revelation of “guilt,” Ruth’s sweetness and purity are constant. What she gains is the courage and fortitude to demonstrate morality. Although modern readers remain perplexed at the way Gaskell seems to punish Ruth with death after having done so much to exculpate her, contemporary critics noted Gaskell’s ability to produce a sense of guilt within the reader. An unsigned review of *Ruth* in *The Sunday Times* (20 February 1853), for example, minimised Gaskell’s narrative by interpreting it as a lesson in “the value of truthfulness,” but nevertheless recognized her moralizing as eclipsing a sermon: “Mrs. Gaskell does not preach this moral, but she does better—she works it out with great force and consistency”

(Easson 250). Notably, Gaskell “does not preach,” yet the effect of her storytelling accomplishes similar ends. George Henry Lewes also regarded Gaskell’s use of the novel as being more effective than a pulpit. His review of *Ruth* in *The Westminster Review*, 1 April 1853, explains that “the details of a narrative may be so grouped as to satisfy the mind like a sermon. It is an exhortation, if you like, not a demonstration, but does not the less appeal to our moral sense. What does a sermon prove? And can a sermon prove anything? Yet, by appealing to the moral sense, it works its purposes” (264). This “appealing to the moral sense” is exactly Gaskell’s motive, and Lewes recognizes the power of narrative to transform the heart in much the same way that an orator challenges his listeners: “The novel may carry its moral openly on its very title-page, through all its conclusions; or, it may carry within it, not one but many moral illustrations, naturally arising out of the way the incidents are grouped, and the way the characters express themselves” (265). According to these reviewers, Gaskell uses the novel to produce moral change by manipulating sympathetic feeling. Ultimately, readers are led to identify with Ruth, the sinner, rather than Mr Bradshaw, the character most emblematic of self-righteousness, even though he best encapsulates contemporary judgement of fallenness. Lewes recognizes Gaskell’s command over the narrative, challenging his audience to heed Gaskell’s message: “‘Ruth’ has a moral carried in the story; not preached, but manifested. It is a story of seduction—a subject of the most delicate nature that can well be taken up; being one which has rarely if ever been looked fairly in the face; and one on which, of all others, it is the rarest to hear a rational word spoken” (265). So, using the novel as an alternative pulpit, Gaskell confronts the novel’s contemporary readers with their own pharisaic treatment of fallenness.

An unsigned review of *Ruth* in the *Prospective Review* (May 1853) similarly noticed the power of Gaskell's novel, noting, "All genuine fiction . . . is the idealized transcript of actual experience" (Easson 288); yet the reviewer contends that this transcript fulfilled "a high and holy mission in the present; it conjures up an ideal world in the midst of our prosaic realities, and men, absorbed in selfish interests are awakened to more generous sympathies." (288). Fiction, then, has the ability to awaken the heart of the reader; it can enable transformation, and *Ruth* is shown to prompt such change.

Gaskell, writing to Catherine Winkworth [c. January 1853] noted, "The *North British Review* had a *delicious* review of 'Ruth' in it. Who the deuce could have written it? It is so truly religious, it makes me swear with delight" (Chapple and Pollard 222). Here, Gaskell references John Malcolm Ludlow's unsigned review of *Ruth* (May 1853). The review points both to Ruth's innocence, and to the redeeming powers of motherhood. When she is at the Welsh inn, the reviewer argues, Ruth is not debased: "Ruth is still the simple girl, country-bred, delighted with the new sight of mountain-scenery, with all her sympathies not deadened, but heightened, by the new power which has been developed in her, the entire devotion of a most humble, trustful love" (Easson 274). Naïve about her sexual awakening, at this point in the narrative, Ruth innocently becomes Bellingham's victim. But later, she feels the weight of her error and subsequently becomes an active agent in her own reform: "Ruth is able to look back upon this period of outward sunshine and inward ignorance as one of guilt and sinfulness, and bears her life-long penance of self-abasement always, and latterly of outer abasement, as the just wages of her fault" (274). Ruth's "life-long penance," however, is assuaged with motherhood. Though the world might see her illegitimate child as a consequence of Ruth's sin,

Gaskell challenges her readers to see the child as a reward. In motherhood, she is not punished: “the authoress of *Ruth* is a mother, and the duties of hallowed motherhood have taught her own pure soul what its blessings may be to the fallen” (276). The “duties of hallowed motherhood” are characteristic themes of the domestic novel, but Gaskell paradoxically uses the fallen woman to play the role of Angel.

Gaskell’s fallen woman—the victimized Ruth—was an improper heroine of the domestic novel, and negative reactions to *Ruth* upset Gaskell. In a letter to Eliza Fox (pre—14 February 1853), she complained, “I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people. Now should you have burnt the 1st volume of *Ruth* as so *very* bad, even if you had been a very anxious father of a family? Yet *two* men have; and a third has forbidden his wife to read it; they sit next us in Chapel & you can’t think how ‘improper’ I feel under their eyes” (Chapple and Shelston 81). While scholars have long recognised Gaskell’s disquiet regarding the novel’s negative reception, it is particularly noteworthy for the purposes of my argument that her conscience was disturbed; her message was valid in her eyes, but like a preacher called a heretic, Gaskell is particularly concerned that she, the improper woman, must endure her accusers’ gaze. She similarly complains to Mrs Mary Rich (1853): “I can’t think how it is, that I who am such an arrant [sic] coward, *must* always go headlong into people’s black books; and *good* people’s too. Well! If I have but got the smallest edge of the wedge in, any how, I will be thankful to God” (Chapple and Shelston 84). Arguably, Ruth too is “an improper woman without knowing it,” a heroine who “*must* always go headlong into people’s black books.” Gaskell recognized for herself what she characterized in her heroine: that honest but non-normative public manifestation of virtuous womanhood is costly. She told Anne Robson (before 27 January 1853), “‘An unfit subject for fiction’ is

the thing to say about it; I knew all \this/ before; but I determined notwithstanding to speak my mind out about it; only how I shrink with more pain than I can tell you from what people are saying, though I wd do every jot of it over again to-morrow" (Chapple and Pollard. 220). Interestingly, Gaskell's *Ruth* was banned in the Gaskells's home as well, as she explains to Robson: "Of course it is a prohibited book in *this*, as in many other households; not a book for young people, unless read with someone older (I mean to read it with MA quite some time or another;) but I have spoken out my mind the best way I can . . ." (Chapple and Pollard. 221). In spite of its widespread prohibition, even within Gaskell's own home, *Ruth* is a transformative religious narrative: an alternative to the pulpit. The novel's detailed reconstruction of fallenness exposes both sinful action and pharisaic response and confronts the Victorian myth of angelic womanhood in ways certain to offend.

Innocent Victim, Fallen Woman

For Ruth, rebellion begins and ends with obedience. Her submission to Mr Bellingham's desires dooms her to deviance, as measured against the normative ideal of female purity. But her real rebelliousness lies in her rejection of the societal norms that would shackle her to her aggressor when she rejects his proposal of marriage. It is Ruth's acquiescence which causes mischief; it is her action, informed by experience, which leads to social redemption. Playing the role of widow, Ruth enters society and works out her reconciliation.

But Ruth is shown to exemplify the Unitarian denial of original sin because she falls without apparent awareness of her wrongdoing. If Ruth is innocent, naive, and manipulated, then her fall is attenuated, her culpability minimal. If, however, as the world around her is shown to perceive, Ruth's fall is the result of a giving over

to evil, then she is fully culpable for her actions. In portraying Ruth as a victim and engaging the reader's sympathy for her plight, Gaskell challenges the construction of the fallen woman as irrevocably sinful. Ruth's relative blamelessness contradicts Victorian notions of the core nature of the fallen woman,⁴ and *Ruth* actively engages with and contributes to this shifting focus. Bellingham exploits Ruth's innocence and timidity when he sees her naïveté as opportunity. Because of her lack of experience, Ruth is predisposed, he reasons, to his influence. She is inclined to sinfulness. This seemingly helpless predisposition to error imagines Ruth stripped of agency, victim to external forces and circumstance. As Bellingham plots Ruth's seduction, the omniscient narrator makes his perception clear: "There was, perhaps, something bewitching in the union of the grace and loveliness of womanhood with the *naïveté*, simplicity, and innocence of an intelligent child. . . . It would be an exquisite delight to attract and tame her wildness, just as he had often allured and tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park'" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 28). Bellingham sees Ruth's innocence as provocative, and exploits her innocence to seduce her. The reader anticipates Ruth's inevitable fall, but notes that she will be *tainted* rather than *tamed*.

Bellingham later arranges for a day alone with Ruth. Contemplating the joy she hopes to receive as she treks to her parents' home, she inquires of Bellingham, "But do you think it would be right, sir? It seems as if it would be such a great pleasure, that it must be in some way wrong" (37). Ruth's concerns are not just objections to pleasure, but rather are grounded in piety. This is seen when Bellingham asks what could possibly deter her. She responds, "In the first place, I

⁴ Shirley Foster also notes that Gaskell knew her construction of fallenness in *Ruth* would disturb the Victorian concept of the domestic sphere (101). Gaskell challenged the glorification of the home, but not by denying its redeeming qualities.

miss going to church by setting out at two'" (37). Bellingham shares none of her concerns regarding missing church. Gaskell not only constructs an image of a pious but mislead heroine in this concern with the church attendance, but she also identifies Ruth's initial error as a spiritual one when Ruth defers to her future lover rather than following her conscience in commitment to worship. Ruth's spiritual error is firmly situated in her deference to the man who she will soon perceive to be her protector. Just as Helen Huntingdon disregards early warnings of Arthur's lack of respect for religious and spiritual accountability, so too Ruth fails properly to be warned by Bellingham's lack of religious concern, and this leads, in part, to her victimisation.

Her apparent victimisation led several contemporary critics to note the seemingly unjust nature of Ruth's vulnerability, victimhood, and subsequent punishment. They complained in much the same way that modern readers do of the harsh consequences of Ruth's actions. An unsigned review of *Ruth* in the *Guardian* (2 February 1853) protests: "Ruth is a fallen woman, the victim in extreme youth of her own ignorance, of the force of circumstances, and of the acts of a wicked but accomplished man. Her guilt is as little as ever can exist in such a case. Yet . . . she is never suffered to forget her fall, nor are we ever suffered to forget it either" (Easson 234-235). Ruth's fall, complains the critic, is largely due to the actions of another. The comment underlines Gaskell's point that the cause of fallenness is often due to external manipulation. Nevertheless, she does not leave Ruth without responsibility for her action. Ruth's contemplative inner struggle prior to joining Bellingham in London indicates her responsiveness. But her protests are attenuated and largely internal. Gaskell's characterization of Ruth's contemplation is reminiscent of the way in which she describes the behaviour of her own daughter

Marianne in her diaries (4 October 1835): “She is in general very gentle, rather grave especially with strangers, and remarkably observing, watching actions, things &c with such continued attention. She is very *feminine* I think in her quietness which is as far removed from inactivity of mind as possible. She sits on the ground much more than she did, amusing herself pretty well (this amusing *herself*, has been I fear more my theory than my practice)” (Chapple and Wilson 56). Interestingly, Gaskell notes in her diary papers that she does not equate quietness with inactivity. Though she acknowledges that Marianne struggles to amuse herself, she notes that she is capable of personal action. In the same way, Ruth’s seeming quietness should not denote inaction to the reader. Though she fails fully to appreciate the potential consequences of her initial fall, she actively participates in her restoration.

Ruth was victimised, to be sure, but Gaskell’s characterization of the victimised female was at once an empowering and debilitating representation of the Victorian woman. Ruth was a Magdalene, the focus of a reform movement largely championed by evangelical and Unitarian ministers. Magdalenism’s target, in fact, was the redeemable woman, one who “innocently” fell, and had subsequently faced the ostracism of society. Gaskell’s contemporaries recognized her construction of the Magdalene character in Ruth. The *Spectator*, in an unsigned review (15 January 1853), argued that “[t]he object would seem to be an illustration of the story of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalen; though the Scriptural narrative rather points to the spiritual salvation than worldly restoration” (Easson 212). The reviewer notes the role of the minister in the restoration of Ruth, complaining of his well-intentioned, but manipulative interventions: “The tale of Ruth Hilton, however, involves an extreme and exceptional case; while she is restored to a position by an untruth on the part of a minister and his sister, which breaks down at a certain stage of the story,

only to be set right by a species of self-devoted martyrdom and death" (212-13). Indeed, Ruth's fallenness is redeemed in part by the well-intended Bensons who deem society unable to accept the reality of her fallen and subsequently pregnant state and thus manipulate the truth of Ruth's fallenness. But rescuing the fallen woman from herself as well as from society was a key goal of the Magdalenist movement, and was especially prevalent among the evangelicals.

In his attempt to convince his sister, Faith, of his desire to care for and conceal Ruth in her fallenness, the Reverend —Mr Benson— alludes to the evangelical reform movement that promoted Magedalenism: "I have been thinking of every holy word, every promise to the penitent—of the tenderness which led the Magdalen aright. I have been feeling, severely and reproachfully, the timidity which has hitherto made me blink all encounter with evils of this particular kind. . . . I am trying more than ever I did in my life to act as my blessed Lord would have done" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 97-98). Benson's attempt to act "as his blessed Lord would have done" is remorseful. Significantly, he looks back guiltily on previous reactions to women such as Ruth, reproaching his previous "timidity" of action, suggesting his previous passive response has been transformed into action. Similar transformations occur in Faith, Jemima, and Sally. Mr Bradshaw resists such transformation.

Late in the novel, Mr Benson challenges Mr Bradshaw to acknowledge that Ruth, while fallen, was not depraved at all; rather, she was a victim of her circumstances: "Oh, Mr Bradshaw! Ruth was not depraved, and you know it. You cannot have seen her—have known her daily, all these years, without acknowledging that!" (283). But Mr Bradshaw contends that he was deceived. Of his miscomprehension of Ruth's "character" he fumes, "I saw her daily—I did *not* know her. If I had known her, I should have known she was fallen and

depraved, and consequently not fit to come into my house, nor to associate with my pure children'" (283-84). Mr Bradshaw has the power to punish her. Mr Benson, however, recalls Christ's treatment of the prostitute Mary Magdalene, and encourages Bradshaw to resist punishing Ruth. Benson states, "[N]ot every woman who has fallen is depraved; . . . many—how many the Great Judgment Day will reveal to those who have shaken off the poor, sore, penitent hearts on earth—many, many crave and hunger after a chance for virtue—the help which no man gives to them—help—that gentle, tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen'" (284). Indeed, this passage is suggestive of John 8, where Jesus is confronted with an adulterous woman. The teachers and pharisees exclaimed at her sinfulness, asking him to condemn her. The Mosaic law called for the stoning of such a woman, ". . . But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." (John 8: 6-7, KJV). Bible commentators disagree about what Jesus was writing on the ground, but it is widely suggested that it was the sins of the teachers. Gaskell suggests that Mr Bradshaw is one of the pharisees, ready to cast a stone despite his own sinfulness. He abandons the Magdalene.

Obedience and Contemplation: Introspective Reform

Gaskell was concerned with balancing roles that might entail conflicting requirements of submission and agency, and she gives a similar concern to Ruth. Initially, the heroine is all too eager to allow Bellingham to operate as her agent. Early in the novel, however, Gaskell makes Ruth's contemplative nature clear. In fact, Ruth exemplifies the biblical precept to "[bring] into captivity every thought"

(2 Cor. 10:5, KJV), and this is clear while she resides at Mrs Mason's. On Sundays, Ruth works to control her wayward thoughts. Cold and hungry, "she would sit at the window . . . [where] she caught a view of the grey church-tower, rising hoary and massive into mid-air; she saw one or two figures loiter along on the sunny side of the street, in all the enjoyment of their fine clothes and Sunday leisure; and she imagined histories for them, and tried to picture to herself their homes and their daily doings" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 29-30). Her active mind works tirelessly to counteract the monotony and drudgery of her servitude even as this capacity for imagination ultimately makes her more susceptible to Mr Bellingham's proposals.

Additionally, Gaskell wants us to recognize Ruth's piety during this trial. She attends church, alone, and returning to the same window-seat, "She sat on, hungry and cold, trying to read her Bible, and to think the old holy thoughts which had been her childish meditations at her mother's knee . . ." (30). Interestingly, Ruth's coping mechanisms are intentional, contemplative, and religious. Though bound by external circumstances beyond her limited control, Ruth's mind remains active as she attempts to assuage her physical and emotional emptiness with spiritual fulfilment.

After her dismissal from Mrs Mason's, Bellingham manages to convince Ruth to take tea at a nearby inn, and she consents. But after he leaves her alone, she demonstrates her conscientiousness, attempting to plot a means of escape: "Dear old Thomas! He and Mary would take me in, I think; they would love me all the more if I were cast off . . . Oh, would it not be better to go to them?" (50). Yet this moment of clear-thinking is clouded by Ruth's sympathetic concern for Bellingham's feelings: "I wonder if he would be very sorry! I could not bear to make him sorry, so kind as he has been to me; but I do believe it would be better to

go to them, and ask their advice, at any rate. He would follow me there; and I could talk over what I had better do, with the three best friends I have in the world—the only friends I have'" (50). Ruth's internal dialogue confirms her active mind, as well as the sound decision-making abilities that will gain force when religious zeal eventually undergirds her individual responsibility.⁵

Ruth's clear-thinking is interrupted by her lack of worldly experience and her tendency towards submission and subservience. Her inability to pay for the tea which she has just recently taken seems an insurmountable problem: "she saw the square figure of the landlord standing at the open house-door, smoking his evening pipe, and looming large and distinct against the dark air and landscape beyond. Ruth remembered the cup of tea that she had drunk; it must be paid for, and she had no money with her. She feared that he would not let her quit the house without paying" (50). Ruth's vulnerability and need, however, must not be interpreted as absence of mind. Though she cannot manage to solve the conundrum of escape, her moral compass, and her inner desire to do right, are not absent. It is experience, which Ruth lacks. She persists in her determination to go to trustworthy Thomas, thinking that she could simply leave a note for Mr Bellingham, but "all dilemmas appeared of equal magnitude to her; and the difficulty of passing the landlord while he stood there, and of giving him an explanation of the circumstances (as far as such explanation was due to him), appeared insuperable, and as awkward, and fraught with inconvenience, as far more serious situations" (50). Ruth simply cannot

⁵ Ruth's agency in her transformation is reflective of the evangelical call for the transformation of the heart, but it is also reflective of the secular culture of individualism. Amanda Anderson notes the original religious explanation of the Calvinistic concept of fallenness, which "lays stress on the predetermined nature of our moral condition, and itself seriously challenges vocabularies of moral agency and responsibility . . ." (3), arguing that fallenness, traditionally a religious idea, became a secular construct, but maintained its religious terminology.

conceive of the impending threat that Mr Bellingham poses to her future security. Instead of Ruth innocently stealing tea, Bellingham will soon steal her innocence. She will submit to his will. After finding no means to escape the awkwardness of leaving the inn, “she became stupid and languid, and incapable of spirited exertion; she modified her plan of action, to the determination of asking Mr Bellingham to take her to Milham Grange, to the care of her humble friends, instead of to London. And she thought, in her simplicity, that he would instantly consent when he had heard her reasons” (50-51). The narrator’s description of Ruth as being “stupid,” “languid,” and “simple” is quite telling. A teenage girl, Ruth is naïve, easily manipulated, and trained for submissiveness. She is not, however, without a sense of right.

Gaskell’s interest in the ways in which an individual’s sense of right might be leveraged to offer strength and to make practical choices is well documented throughout her letters. In correspondence to Eliza Fox (?April 1850), she comments upon the difficulty of navigating the many roles which encompass both her private and public lives. She seems to interrogate the evangelical call to “transformation of the heart,” insofar as it is a highly introspective and self-focused activity, feeling instead that one’s efforts should primarily be outwardly focused. She also challenges the investment of resources into domesticity while others are left without: “that it is right to spend so much ourselves on so purely a selfish a thing as a house . . . , while so many are wanting—that’s the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my ‘Mes,’ for I have a great number, and that’s the plague” (Chapple and Pollard 108). This statement is a direct criticism of the conspicuous consumption often associated with the ideology of middle-class womanhood. The home, the place of virtue and

reform, contends Gaskell, is also a place of selfishness when there is so much wanting in society.

Her conflict is apparent: “One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian— (only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother Now that’s my ‘social’ self I suppose. Then again I’ve another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh [sic] is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members?” (108). Gaskell sounds curiously modern in her attempt to reconcile the roles that press upon her, and she seems to settle this conflict in part by chastising her own selfishness.

However, she also evokes the Victorian ideology of the home, and her expected submissiveness to find a way to assuage her sense of her conflicting responsibilities. She says, “I try to drown myself (my *first* self,) by saying it’s [William] who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule, And so it is—only that does not quite do. Well! I must try and make the house give as much pleasure to others as I can and make as little a selfish thing as I can” (108). Interestingly, Gaskell notes “that does not quite do.” Even within the intimacy of the home, Gaskell recognizes that she must take *personal* responsibility for her many selves; she must reconcile the many selves who would overwhelm her, and she rejects the idea that her personal responsibility is negated by obedience to her husband.

Gaskell recognizes that the internal battle she faces is a battle with the emerging freedoms of womanhood against the moral obligations of life: “I long (weakly) for the old times where right and wrong did not seem such complicated matters; and I am sometimes coward enough to wish that we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women. Only even then I don’t

believe William would ever have *commanded me*” (109). Gaskell’s is a spiritual battle between “right and wrong” which nags at her conscience, and she gives this sensitive nature to Ruth.⁶ Gaskell notes the challenge to the wife as an individual who does not wish to be subsumed under the authority of a husband, even a good one.

Ruth’s tendency to be manipulated is in part the consequence of the same obedience that demonstrates womanly submission according to the requirements of the Victorian feminine ideal. Before her fall, Ruth begs Mr Bellingham to take her to Milham Grange. Of course, Bellingham resists and manipulates, instructing Ruth to get into the carriage, where they could talk it over, and the reader learns of her compliant tendencies: “She was little accustomed to oppose the wishes of any one—obedient and docile by nature, and unsuspecting and innocent of any harmful consequences. She entered the carriage, and drove towards London” (51). The scene almost seems like a kidnapping.

Though Bellingham manipulates Ruth, and she complies out of sheer ignorance coupled with desperate need, her later tendency to be submissive towards the Bensons has a significantly different source: it is situated in humility. When Ruth is informed by Miss Benson that she will be introduced as a widow, Ruth consents. But at the same time, her spiritual fortitude is already evident to the point of humiliating the more spiritually haughty Miss Benson. Faith explains the decision to disguise Ruth: “My brother and I think it would be better to call you—as if in

⁶ Gaskell’s diaries, where she carefully documented Marianne’s moral and personal development, show the weight of importance Gaskell assigned to the development of the individual. Gaskell wrote (*December 9th 1837*) of her daughter Marianne who was but three years old, “Her little conscience too is becoming very acute and well-judging. I think most of the faults are of inadvertence (hardly *faults*;) except now and then when she has a fit of obstinacy; but we are very steady in fulfilling our *threat* of punishment, so these little obstinacies are gradually disappearing” (Chapple and Shelston 65). The development of personal conscience, then, was a skill and character trait important to Gaskell, one she attempted to develop in her young daughter, and surely gave her heroine.

fact you were—a widow. It will save much awkwardness, and it will spare your child much—” (105-106). Ruth, however, is appalled by this proposal; not because she is ashamed to comply with Miss Benson’s request, but because the premise of the request is situated in her sinfulness. The narrator tells the reader that at the mention of her pregnancy, “Ruth started and turned ruby-red; as she always did when allusion was made to it” (106). Ruth’s compliance with this request is the result of the humbling effects of her fall, and she feels it most keenly due to her genuine desire for piety. This is evident in Ruth’s immediate request. Feeling that she should be thankful for Miss Benson’s willingness to help, she says, “I don’t know how to thank you for all you are doing; but I do love you, and I will pray for you, if I may” (106). The *request* to pray, the seeking after permission for this action, is significant. It does not connote Ruth’s subservience; rather, it signals her Christian humility. Miss Benson is shocked: “If you may, Ruth!” repeated Miss Benson, in a tone of surprise. “Yes, if I may. If you will let me pray for you” (106). Ruth’s paradoxical spiritual strength is immediately apparent, even as she humbly inquires. She utilizes an awakening faith, re-kindled in her by the kindness of the Bensons, to offer her saviours what little she has to give. She gives them her devotion. This same fortitude, seemingly compliant and manifestly humble, eventually leads to her social redemption. She uses this awakened desire, situated in an awareness of her fallenness, to reform.

By focusing on Ruth’s humility, Gaskell seems to argue that too much attention to self can be idolatrous. Even so, Ruth’s initial propensity was to care too much for others, to the neglect of herself. Therefore, her concern with Bellingham’s feelings as well as her tendency towards obedience, are shown to have proved problematic. Through Ruth, Gaskell demonstrates the balance between the

individual life and social responsibility. Gaskell herself struggled with such concerns. In a letter to Eliza Fox (c. February 1850), she claims, “If Self is to be the end of exertions, those exertions are unholy, there is no doubt of *that*—and that is part of the danger in cultivating the Individual Life” (Chapple and Pollard 107). But Gaskell notes that while there is danger in cultivating the individual life, a focus upon self can be healthy if that focus is for a divine purpose: “I do believe we have some appointed work to do . . . *our* work; what *we* have to do in advancing the Kingdom of God; and that first we must find out what we are sent into the world to do, and define it and make it clear to ourselves (that’s *the* hard part) and then forget ourselves in our work, and our work in the End we ought to strive to bring about” (107). Gaskell’s commentary echoes the evangelical call to the transformation of the heart and the introspective life. While she acknowledges the importance of such private practices, she contends that too much self-focus can derail one’s efforts towards “work,” or to put it another way, towards reform.

Ruth’s humble introspection leads her to a greater awareness of her “sinfulness.” And as her naivety diminishes, her desire for action increases. Even so, the reader of *Ruth* is often placed in a position of complicity with Bellingham who believes Ruth to be a “beautiful ignoramus” (62) in much the same way that the reader of *Mansfield Park* is compelled to agree with the Bertrams’ assessment that Fanny Price as “so odd and so stupid” (Austen 21). Ruth lacks the worldly knowledge necessary to resist Bellingham’s advances, but after her fall, she quickly learns. But just as Fanny observes the rakish Henry Crawford’s behaviour and “stupidly” rejects his advances, Ruth quickly uses her more drastic experiences with Bellingham quickly to be taught. Her initial victimization, significantly more dramatic than that of Fanny Price, nevertheless teaches Ruth proper conduct, and she

uses this knowledge to redeem herself. Ruth is anything but an ignoramus. Ruth, then, the forsaken heroine, takes responsibility for her own actions, even if her actions were inadvertent.

Rejecting Marriage and Embracing Virtue: Ruth's Resistance

Gaskell turns the cultural imperative of redemptive marriage on its head by creating a heroine whose social redemption is found in the rejection of the marital ideal, and this rejection is made possible by Ruth's faith. When she is faced with his marriage proposal after years of abandonment,⁷ she acknowledges the temptation to marry in a prayer, "'Oh, my God! I do believe Leonard's father is a bad man, and yet, oh! pitiful God, I love him; I cannot forget—I cannot!'" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 222). But Ruth's convictions trump her desires, and these principles are squarely situated in her faith. She struggles to resist Donne (Bellingham): "Of a sudden she crept to a chair, and there knelt as in the very presence of God, hiding her face, at first not speaking a word (for did He not know her heart), but by-and-by moaning out, amid her sobs and tears (and now for the first time she wept)" (223), crying out to God, "'Oh, my God, help me, for I am very weak. My God! I pray Thee be my rock and my strong fortress, for I of myself am nothing. If I ask in His name, Thou wilt give it me. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray for strength to do Thy will!'" (223). Ruth's ability to resist the temptation to marry is undergirded by her faith.

When Bellingham accosts Ruth with his proposal, he physically stands between her and the church which she desperately seeks as "that holy place she would find peace" (227). When she finally reaches her destination, a place where

⁷ For an exploration of the economic implications of the marital exchange, see Nataalka Freeland's argument in "*Ruth's Perverse Economies.*" Freeland notes that the longer Ruth rejects the marriage market, the more "valuable" she becomes. By doing so, she increases her "social credit" (205).

she should find solace and security, she is obstructed by her oppressor: “Ruth’s heart sank as she saw him there; just opposite to her; coming between her and the clergyman who was to read out the Word of God” (228). Here, Gaskell’s narrator prompts the reader’s sympathetic identification: “he was between her and all Light and Peace. . . . She could not join in the prayer for the remission of sins while he was there, for his very presence seemed as a sign that their stain would never be washed out of her life” (228). And when the first lesson was read, “She could not listen. The words seemed to be uttered in some world far away, from which she was exiled and cast out; their sound, and yet more their meaning, was dim and distant” (228-229). Ruth is shown to have been humiliated in church by the conspirator and witness of her fall when he gazes upon her as she attempts to seek God’s forgiveness. She is despondent. But Gaskell interestingly sets the date for this confrontation as 25 September, the second lesson being Matthew 26. In this passage, just prior to Jesus Christ’s betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus is described as feasting when a woman comes to him and anoints his head with very expensive oil. The disciples, angry that she has wasted the oil complain:

There came unto him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head, as he sat at meat. But when his disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose is this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor. When Jesus understood it, he said unto them, Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me. For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always. For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this

gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.

Matthew 26:7-13 (KJV)

After hearing this passage, Gaskell tells us that “Ruth’s tongue was unloosed, and she could also pray, in His name, who underwent the agony in the garden” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 229). The significance of the passage may be elusive, but Biblical commentators contend that the woman in it is Mary Magdalene, and Jesus’s chastisement of the disciples signals both their misapplied devotion and the forgiveness that Christ extends to the fallen woman. Ruth, facing her co-conspirator and accuser as the passage was read, then, breaks free from condemnation and instead finds the courage necessary to refuse him.

Donne confronts Ruth after church, and begs for the opportunity to explain himself. When she refuses to listen, he complains: “‘You are unforgiving,’ said he. ‘I only ask you to hear me. I have a right to be heard, Ruth!’” (230). Where Ruth’s original submissive, compliant “yes” had led to her fall, her subsequent silent “no” is a refusal that leads to her redemption. The narrator tells us: “She did not answer this last speech any more than the first. She saw clearly, that, putting aside all thought as to the character of their former relationship, it had been dissolved by his will—his act and deed; and that, therefore, the power to refuse any further intercourse whatsoever remained with her” (230-231). Ruth’s agency, therefore, stripped from her in the original abandonment by Bellingham, is now reclaimed in her dismissal of Donne. Jane Austen similarly empowers Fanny Price when Fanny’s agency is evident in her refusal of Henry Crawford who proposes to give Fanny “himself, hand, fortune, every thing to her acceptance” (*MP* 349). Fanny, however, disengages from Crawford’s advances, articulating a clear “No, no, no” (349); and

Austen tells the reader that Fanny furthermore asserts her refusal in no uncertain terms: “This is all nonsense. Do not distress me. I can hear no more of this” (349). Each heroine leverages the power of refusal to reject marriage, the strength to do so firmly situated in faith.

At the point at which Ruth rejects Donne, she is emancipated from the confines of a marriage plot, the outcome of which conventionally reconciles and redeems the wayward couple. But Ruth is not interested in such reforming schemes and neither she nor Donne would be reformed via marriage. Ruth is set aright as Mary Magdalene is set aright, outside of marriage, and before God alone. Gaskell shows that an acceptance of Donne’s impending offer of marriage would mean spiritual damnation for Ruth, and she challenges the reader who would question Ruth’s decision to remain alone. Though marriage to Donne surely would have saved Ruth physical death, it would have doomed her spiritually.

Instead of embracing the role of redeeming wife, Ruth sets out to live a life of virtue. In this way, she works out her social reform, though Ruth’s spiritual redemption, which saves her from damnation, cannot be conflated with her social redemption. Ruth’s penitence is worked out in the eyes of society when she works as a self-sacrificial nurse, a role she takes to the public sphere.⁸ Ruth’s most important reformation, evidenced by her rejection of Mr Donne, remains private. In this she unequivocally asserts her spiritual agency in personal salvation, squarely rejecting the coverture of marriage and its salvatory implications. Furthermore, Ruth’s spiritual salvation is manifestly evident when she rejects Donne’s offer, a rejection undergirded by the hearing of Matthew 26.

⁸ Scholars such as Yoko Hanato have argued that Ruth’s sexual fall makes it impossible for her to be redeemed within the home (637). Instead, Ruth’s redemption must be worked out in the public sphere (638). However, Hatano does not note that Gaskell eschews the idea that Ruth, redeemed and forgiven, would corrupt herself by entering a marriage with the unrepentant, unchanged Donne.

Ruth is an exemplar of penitence and pious resistance, though she still suffers rejection. Sally, the Benson's beloved servant, represents the practical judgement of the general public, and her initial evaluation of Ruth foretells the severity with which she will be judged by society. Soon after Ruth's arrival, Sally determines that her beauty is a disgrace, and she protectively determines that since she will have to comply with the Bensons in "covering" Ruth's fallenness, Ruth should fully play the part of widow. But the very morning before Sally confronts Ruth, Gaskell importantly reminds her readers that Ruth is already humbled before God. It is not Sally's intervention that prompts Ruth's humility. Sally's actions, in fact, expose her as a potential hypocrite. Ruth's prior penitence is clear: "Ruth went up to her room, and threw herself down on her knees by the bedside, and cried as if her heart would break; and then, as if a light had come down into her soul, she calmed herself and prayed—no words can tell how humbly, and with what earnest feeling" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 117). Though her piety and humility are evidently visible upon her face, Sally nevertheless persists in her attempted humbling of Ruth. Sally, with "a judge-like severity of demeanour" (117), insists that Ruth must cut her locks and wear a widow's cap: "'Widows wears these sort o' caps, and has their hair cut off; . . . I've lived with the family forty-nine year come Michaelmas, and I'll not see it disgraced by any one's fine long curls. . . . Whatten's come over Miss Faith, as used to be as mim a lady as ever was, to be taken by such as you, I dunnot know. Here! sit down with ye, and let me crop you'" (117-118). Sally's judgement of Ruth is harsh, as she fears Ruth will disgrace her master.

Ruth does not resist Sally's correction: "[Sally] expected some remonstrance or some opposition, and had a torrent of words ready to flow forth at the least sign of rebellion; but Ruth was still and silent, with meekly-bowed head, under the strange

hands that were shearing her beautiful hair into the clipped shortness of a boy's" (118). In fact, Ruth's meekness shocks Sally, but she stubbornly refuses to show her softening: "Ruth's soft, yet dignified submission, touched Sally with compunction, though she did not choose to show the change in her feelings" (118). Sally shears Ruth's locks to protect Mr Benson: "'You see, Master Thurstan is no wiser than a babby in some things; and Miss Faith just lets him have his own way; so it's all left to me to keep him out of scrapes. I'll wish you a very good night. I've heard many a one say as long hair was not wholesome. Good night'" (118). Ruth's external beauty, beauty that she did not choose and could not control, was, for her, a curse. Because of her helplessness and lowly social status, her beauty was not a source of empowerment, but of victimization. The hallmark beauty of the "angel in the house"⁹ is scorned by Sally who conflates Ruth's beauty with her fallenness, and the shearing of her locks operates as a metaphorical sexual sterilization.

After Ruth's death, Gaskell places two of her antagonists at her bedside, characters whom Ruth had loved but who did not return her affections: Sally and Mr Donne. Gaskell makes Mr Donne's corruption clear. Upon his entrance to the Bensons', we are told that he "had come on a piece of business which he exceedingly disliked, and about which he felt very awkward" (363). His business, of course, was to offer unwanted financial remuneration for his sins. Sally's initial sin of judgement also becomes apparent as she penitently recalls her behaviour towards Ruth. As they look upon Ruth's dead body, Donne remains astonished by her physical beauty:

⁹ However, where Patmore's influential angel is a catalyst for piety, Ruth holds no sway over Bellingham. In fact, Gaskell unequivocally lays the blame for Ruth's fall squarely at Bellingham's feet, yet still kills her heroine. That authorial action denotes the moral consequences that fallen women must face in Victorian society.

‘How beautiful she is!’ said he, beneath his breath. ‘Do all dead people look so peaceful—so happy?’

‘Not all,’ replied Sally, crying. ‘Few has been as good and as gentle as she was in their lives.’ She quite shook with her sobbing. (364)

But Sally’s emotions cause Mr Donne discomfort, and he attempts to calm her, “‘Come, my good woman! we must all die—’” (364), awkwardly offering her money: “He had pulled out a sovereign, and really had a kindly desire to console her, and reward her, in offering it to her” (364). Sally, no longer indignant with Ruth, but wholly devoted to her memory, is insulted:

‘And who are you, that think to pay for my kindness to her by money? And I was not kind to you, my darling,’ said she, passionately addressing the motionless, serene body—‘I was not kind to you. I frabbed you, and plagued you from the first, my lamb! I came and cut off your pretty locks in this very room—I did—and you said never an angry word to me;—no! not then, nor many a time after, when I was very sharp and cross to you.—No! I never was kind to you, and I dunnot think the world was kind to you, my darling,—but you are gone where the angels are very tender to such as you—you are, my poor wench!’ She bent down and kissed the lips, from whose marble, unyielding touch Mr Donne recoiled, even in thought. (364)

Sally’s remorse is fully realized as she recognizes Ruth’s virtue. But while Sally kisses the lips of her angel, Mr Donne, the one who instigated her fall, is repulsed “even in thought.” Though Ruth certainly has worked out her redemption—her penitence—in the eyes of the world, it is important for the reader to recall that Ruth’s redemption as a representative of Mary Magdalene had long been complete. It is Sally, the observer, who now seeks forgiveness from the dead but angelic Ruth.

Significantly, Mr Donne seeks no such reconciliation. The reader is challenged either to identify with Sally, the repentant judge of Ruth's fallenness, or Donne, the repulsed contributor to her fall.

After Sally's encounter with Mr Donne at Ruth's deathbed, Mr Benson and Mr Donne convene beside the body. Assuming Mr Benson was fully aware of his connection with Ruth, Mr Donne offers money to help compensate for his "youthful folly" (365), explaining, "'Indeed, I offered her money to almost any amount before;—do me justice, sir,' catching the gleam of indignation on Mr Benson's face; 'I offered to marry her, and provide for the boy as if he had been legitimate. It's of no use recurring to that time,' said he, his voice faltering; 'what is done cannot be undone'" (365). Here, Donne explicitly notes Ruth's rejection of the offer of marriage, one where he would "save" her from certain physical destruction. Ruth needed no such redemption, as Mr Benson well knows. Donne further offers to provide Mr Benson with the necessary funds to raise his son, but Benson utterly rejects Donne's offer: "'[Leonard] shall never touch a penny of your money. Every offer of service you have made, I reject in his name,—and in her presence,' said he, bending towards the Dead. 'Men may call such actions as yours, youthful follies! There is another name for them with God. Sir! I will follow you downstairs'" (366). Benson, whose uncommon tenderness and forgiveness towards Ruth exemplified his gentle nature, will not suffer Donne's foolishness.

George Henry Lewes noted in *The Westminster Review* (April 1853) that Mr Benson's clear-sightedness and understanding of Ruth's purity expose Donne's depravity, saying, "Mr Bellingham (Donne), is not punished," yet, "he is so drawn as to suggest all that could be said; the interview between him and Mr Benson, by the side of Ruth's dead body, satisfies the requirements of poetical justice. He is

none the less miserable and contemptible that he does not know himself to be so” (Easson 269). Gaskell withholds the spiritual rescue afforded Ruth from Mr Donne, dooming him to a life of selfish misery. His final words about Mr Benson are indicative: “An ill-bred, puritanical old fellow! He may have the boy, I am sure, for aught I care. I have done my duty, and will get out of this abominable place as soon as I can. I wish my last remembrance of my beautiful Ruth was not mixed up with all these people” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 366). Ruth is an object of admiration. But while Mr Donne admires her physical beauty, Mr Benson admires her spiritual strength. Gaskell suggests that Donne’s punishment lies in Ruth’s vindication. As Lewes notes, this is poetic justice. And while it seems that Donne is left unpunished by the world, in truth, Ruth’s refusal signifies that it is she who is vindicated while he is damned.

Exposing the Pharisee: Revelations of Ruth’s Fall

Gaskell is expressly concerned with the pharisaic behaviour of her readers: members of contemporary society purporting to follow Christ while simultaneously throwing stones at the Magdalenes. In this sense, Sally depicts one such response, and she operates as a working-class representative of the Anglican Church. After hearing Ruth’s full story, Sally consents to stay with the Bensons, but proclaims it will be a burden: “I only hope I shan’t lose my character,—and me a parish clerk’s daughter” (122). Sally’s reference to the church, and her connection, denotes the shame that association with one such as Ruth would bring to the Bensons. Gaskell suggests, here, the broad implications of pharisaic behaviour amongst a broad range of Christian denominations. Even with her judgemental viewpoint, Sally does come to love and respect Ruth, but only after Ruth earns it with steady, penitent behaviour.

But it is Mr Bradshaw who operates as the primary target of Gaskell's ire. Mr Donne, who operates without scruples, is expected to behave in an immoral manner; however, Mr Bradshaw, who purports adherence to Christian principles, in fact plays the primary role of Pharisee. The intended audience of Gaskell's message is the Christian community who, like Mr Bradshaw, would throw stones at the Magdalene of the text. But Mr Bradshaw, the legalistic churchgoer, is changed by Ruth's Christian goodness. Ruth's story, lived-out within the narrative, is shown to be transformative in ways that admonitions and preaching are not. Krueger argues that Mr Bradshaw's concept of repentance is skewed in that he sees himself as a moral authority. This misses the point: "Even though in Benson's mind Ruth's status still depends on repentance, his theology does not ask more of her than it does of all believers, each of whom must repent. Indeed, Bradshaw's rejection of this call to repentance underscores his moral inferiority to Ruth" (201). In fact, Mr Bradshaw sees himself as a keeper of the law; as a Christian legalist, he fails to understand "transformation of the heart." Instead, like Donne who only judges surface beauty, Mr Bradshaw only judges surface action. As Ruth's actions initially please the legalistic Bradshaw, she receives his approbation.

Significantly, Gaskell situates the revelation of Richard Bradshaw's financial scheming just after Mr Bradshaw's discovery of Ruth's "true" character, inviting a comparison between the two different forms of deception and their consequences. Though he has been unknowingly duped by his own son, Mr Bradshaw remains indignant that Ruth has corrupted his family. His anger is visible and palpable: "His face was almost purple with suppressed agitation." (Gaskell, *Ruth* 272). Ruth's sinfulness, it seems, has disrupted Mr Bradshaw's ideal of the perfect domestic sphere, and he moves quickly to remove Ruth from his employ: "choked by his

boiling indignation" (273), he asks his daughters to leave the room. But Jemima refuses to leave Ruth's side: "She maintained her ground, facing round upon her father, and Ruth—Ruth, who had risen, and stood trembling, shaking, a lightning-fear having shown her the precipice on which she stood" (273). The reader sympathises with Ruth as her doom is meted out. Interestingly, Jemima stands as her protector while Mr Bradshaw doles out judgement upon Ruth, saying: "If there be one sin I hate—I utterly loathe—more than all others, it is wantonness. It includes all other sins. It is but of a piece that you should have come with your sickly, hypocritical face, imposing upon us all'" (273). Mr Bradshaw's hatred of Ruth, and his invective against her wantonness give pause. The wantonness, or "unruliness, naughtiness, disobedience (of a child)" (*OED*), of his own son, albeit a different form of fallenness, is yet undiscovered. Mr Bradshaw has been deceived by Ruth but she has only added value to his domestic sphere. He has been deceived by his son, who would drain his father financially. But Mr Bradshaw ultimately deceives himself into believing that his self-righteousness is justified. Instead, it secures his role as resident Pharisee.

In spite of the judgement railed against her, Ruth's fallenness is the very state that has propelled her to angelic goodness. Mr Bradshaw insists that Ruth's supposed innocence made her action that much worse. Though Jemima implores her father to offer Ruth mercy, he is relentless exclaiming, "'look at that woman, I say—corrupt long before she was your age—hypocrite for years! If ever you, or any child of mine, cared for her, shake her off from you, as St Paul shook off the viper—even into the fire'" (274). Mr Bradshaw's words are shockingly hostile, and he alludes to Acts 28, where St Paul is saved from a snake bite by casting off the viper, a representation of evil. In the same way, he compares Ruth to one who brings death,

and must be thrown off. Bradshaw's curse upon Ruth is one of damnation. He further insists that she has schemed to prepare the Bradshaw children for eternal damnation: "She has led you to the brink of the deep pit, ready for the first chance circumstance to push you in. And I trusted her—I trusted her—I welcomed her" (275). Mr Bradshaw not only judges Ruth as fallen, but condemns her as a temptress leading his children towards evil. Rather than the proverbial angel of the house, in Mr Bradshaw's eyes, she has become a resident devil. However, it is not Ruth, but Mr Bradshaw who acts as the viper, driving his children to the pit. In fact, he fails to see that Ruth's fallenness is the very thing that has led to her salvation.

While Ruth listens with deep regret to Mr Bradshaw's chastisement, she braces at the mention of her beloved son, to whom Mr Bradshaw refers with the harshest language: "That very child and heir of shame to associate with my own innocent children! I trust they are not contaminated" (275). As Ruth finally escapes his clamorous chastisement, he reiterates Leonard's worthlessness in his eyes, "If ever you, or your bastard, darken this door again, I will have you both turned out by the police!" (276). One can hardly bear to read the passage. The lack of sympathy and forgiveness exhibited by Mr Bradshaw pains the reader, and it is intended to do so. While Gaskell does ultimately doom Ruth to death, her triumph over this cold-hearted legalist proves remarkable. Actually, Mr Bradshaw's effort to correct Ruth's "corrupting" influence is useless. His legalism, in fact, acts as a catalyst to Jemima's protective impulses towards Ruth, producing directly opposite effects. Krueger similarly argues that Jemima's willingness to defy her father proves a critical turning point for the Bradshaw family: "From the point of her defense of Ruth, Jemima replaces her father as the dominant force in her family. Her act of defiance, itself resulting from a challenge to her identity, fatally cracks the foundation of

Bradshaw's authority" (201). While this moment does mark a significant turning point in the narrative, Jemima's sympathy for Ruth had previously been kindled after learning her true history. Jemima's initial evaluation of Ruth's wrongdoing was of a piece with her father's teaching: "she had never imagined that she should ever come in contact with any one who had committed open sin; she had never shaped her conviction into words and sentences, but still it was *there*, that all the respectable, all the family and religious circumstances of her life, would hedge her in, and guard her from ever encountering the great shock of coming face to face with vice" (262). The shock of Ruth's past, however, was that much greater in that Ruth's behaviour did not confirm Jemima's preconception of fallenness.

Vindicating Ruth: Jemima's Rebellion and Repentance

The disparity between Ruth's goodness and her fallenness jars Jemima. Ruth, who acts as Jemima's mentor, sharply confronts Victorian social norms, and it is this interaction—between Ruth, the unclean fallen Magdalene, and Jemima, the middle-class representative of Victorian virtue—that directly confronts Victorian class ideology. In *Ruth*, instead of the socially superior Jemima saving her fallen sister, it is in fact Ruth who inspires change within Jemima. She is given a rebellious spirit which must be managed and tamed by Ruth's good example.

Jemima's rebellion—her resistance towards her father, and subsequently towards a man she actually loves—is shown to have been perplexing both to her father as well as to Mr Farquhar. Despite their joint interventions, they could not bring her into subjection. The narrator tells us that Mr Farquhar was troubled by his attraction to the high-spirited Jemima as he sought, "a staid, noble-minded wife, grave and sedate, the fit companion in experience of her husband" (175). Jemima,

the young woman who would not be trained under her father's direction, similarly posed a threat to Mr Farquhar's potential authority as her future husband, and the narrator exposes his intimate thoughts: "he hoped—he trusted, that all this time he had not been allowing himself unconsciously to fall in love with a wild-hearted, impetuous girl, who knew nothing of life beyond her father's house, and who chafed under the strict discipline enforced there" (175). He notes the "silent rebellion which continued in Jemima's heart" (175) in spite of "the severe laws and opinions of her father" (175). In order to become the wife he needs, one who would embrace a measure of wifely obedience typical of the Victorian woman, Jemima is shown to require precisely the type of transformation of the heart promoted by the evangelical movement, one which recognized the uselessness of meaningless laws which restrict one's behaviour while leaving the individual internally unchanged. Gaskell leverages this evangelical appeal to shape Jemima into a suitable wife for Mr Farquhar, but provocatively, she utilizes the fallen woman, Ruth, to bring about the needed reform. Ruth embraces the Victorian ideal of middle-class Christian womanhood while bringing about Jemima's reform by uniquely counter-cultural means. She teaches Jemima to utilize her faith in order to choose her actions with integrity. The Unitarian belief in toleration and reform, coupled with the call for transformation, is significantly situated in action taken by the Magdalene.

Though the reader might imagine that marriage to Mr Farquhar would mean liberation from Mr Bradshaw's rule, the narrator, in fact, points out that Mr Farquhar generally shared Mr Bradshaw's opinions, "but in him they were modified, and took a milder form" (175). Mr Farquhar was still concerned with Jemima's rebelliousness and would often "wince" at her stubbornness, dissatisfied "that Jemima could not see how grand a life might be, whose every action was shaped in obedience to some

eternal law; instead of which, he was afraid she rebelled against every law, and was only guided by impulse” (176). Farquhar recognizes that Jemima is “a wilful girl” (176) with whom he could rarely reason. Indeed, Jemima *is* shown to be rebellious to external law, the laws of religion her father had so tirelessly instilled within her. Instead, it is “impulse” which guides her heart. Ironically, the very laws from which she rebelled were based upon the biblical precepts that would eventually lead her towards reconciliation with both Farquhar and Ruth—and her deepest desires, cherished and guarded, are equally shown to be shaped by religious principles. The troubling nature of Jemima’s relationship with Farquhar is situated, in part, in the perplexing nature of her internal dialogue. Even Farquhar notes that she “had some diviner instinct which taught her more truly than they knew” (176). The “diviner instinct” is troubling to Mr Farquhar because her loyalty is not to an earthly authority and could threaten his supremacy in the same way that Helen Huntingdon’s rejection of her “earthly lord” threatened Arthur Huntingdon.

In spite of her attraction to Mr Farquhar, and her desire to marry him, it is her father’s interference and manipulations to bring about the marriage which are shown to spark Jemima’s rebellion. The narrator tells us that Mr Bradshaw “consider[ed] their future marriage as a settled affair” (176). Knowing she would need to be managed, he considered “Mr Farquhar—just the right age to unite the paternal with the conjugal affection, and consequently the very man for Jemima, who had something unruly in her” (176). But Jemima will not be tamed so easily by her father’s desires nor by Farquhar’s more winsome attempts to persuade her: “[S]he tried to defy Mr Farquhar, by doing and saying things that she knew he would disapprove” (177). Mr Bradshaw expresses concern with Jemima’s behaviour, questioning whether or not Mr Farquhar would consent to marry her:

"‘Consent to marry me!’ repeated Jemima, in a low tone of brooding indignation; were those the terms upon which her rich woman's heart was to be given, with a calm consent of acquiescent acceptance, but a little above resignation on the part of the receiver?" (180). It is precisely her “rich woman’s heart” which she will not easily relinquish. Mr Bradshaw bemoans that the “habits of self-examination” *he* “had instilled” (180) had not taken their effect. Indeed, self-examination, as the evangelicals had so clearly articulated, was not something that could be externally applied. Ruth demonstrates such introspection for Jemima.

Since neither he nor Farquhar are able to effect change in Jemima, Mr Bradshaw determines to employ Ruth for this purpose. Speaking to her of additional services, he notes the influence she has upon Jemima, and asks the hesitant Ruth to observe and persuade Jemima into more appropriate manners. But because of her genuine humility, Ruth finds this proposal “undefinably repugnant” (185), “for she could not bring herself to feel that she had any right If she had seen anything wrong in Jemima, Ruth loved her so much that she would have told her of it in private; and with many doubts, how far she was the one to pull out the mote from any one's eye, even in the most tender manner” (185). Ruth’s reflections lead her to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus warns his listeners about the dangers of judgement and subsequent hypocrisy:

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

(Matthew 7:3-5, KJV)

Ruth is reluctant to judge others, given her awareness of her own sinfulness. And since she has masked her identity and is culpable for deceiving the Bradshaws, she feels even less inclined to judge. Indeed, prior to Christ's words regarding hypocrisy, he issues an equally dire warning, saying, "Judge not, that ye not be judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye met, it shall be measured to you again" (Matthew 7:1-2, KJV). Ruth's humility, purchased with her fallenness, is just the sort of Christian goodness explicated in the scriptures. Her piety is not perfect external goodness, earned by compliance with strictures and law, but rather comes from a change of heart, purchased with her humiliation. The reader is to understand that she behaves rightly, whereas Mr Bradshaw's haughty manipulations are wrong. This, in spite of the fact that he believes himself to be one of the chosen ones. She appreciates, in ways that Mr Bradshaw cannot or does not, the "pearl" of redemption as described in the gospel of Matthew just after the analogy of the mote: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Matthew 7:6, KJV). Ruth heeds the import of this passage. She is given what is holy, and she neither tramples it, nor turns her goodness into indignation. She loves and protects. Her fall prompts her inward change, and this has an impact upon those around her. It is Mr Bradshaw who is the "dog", who fails to recognize the pearl before him. Paradoxically, the faith that would threaten to restrict Ruth, instead frees her.

Yet even with her reservations about directing Jemima's behaviour, or perhaps because of the reservations that prompted humility within Ruth's heart, Ruth *does* affect Jemima's behaviour in ways that her father's strictures, and her lover's imploring, cannot. The narrator tells us that "Jemima was ashamed of herself

before Ruth, in a way which she had never been before any one else. She valued Ruth's good opinion so highly, that she dreaded lest her friend should perceive her faults" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 190). Because of Ruth's calming presence, "Before the end of the evening, Jemima had allowed herself to speak to Mr Farquhar in the old way—questioning, differing, disputing" (190).

Even though the class and social disparity between Ruth and Jemima is obvious, it is the way in which Ruth works to prompt change in Jemima that is ironic. The changes that take place in Jemima's heart are due to the solidarity of friendship and fellowship they share, rather than the patriarchal constructs so meticulously formed to protect Jemima. Even her mother, who crumbles under Mr Bradshaw's headship, offers no support for Jemima's burgeoning independence. It is only Ruth, the lowly governess and fallen woman, who is able to prompt change in Jemima's heart. Similarly, Mary Wollstonecraft's Maria is changed and supported by another Jemima, her maid and confidant, whose influence and support undergird Maria as she struggles for agency. In both instances, it is the lower-class, fallen woman whose forthright demeanour and support offer hope and assistance to her social superior. While critics such as Krueger have demonstrated a number of the ways in which Ruth's story prompts a feminist reading of the text,¹⁰ it is also important to acknowledge that the novel's feminism significantly relies upon the leverage afforded by religious faith; for it is Ruth's interventions which prompt change in Jemima. And this change allows for the successful completion of the Victorian marriage narrative for Jemima if not for Ruth. Gaskell argues that Ruth,

¹⁰ Krueger asserts that *Ruth's* controversy lies in the unconventional authority Gaskell grants her heroines, who she "endows . . . with divine authority to reject conventional definitions of feminine virtue" (188). Ruth's silence, argues Krueger, must be interpreted by other female characters such as Jemima Bradshaw, who ultimately reject the patriarchal interpretation of Ruth's fallenness (188), and this interpretation, according to Krueger, is a "feminist reading of Ruth" (188).

the Magdalene of the text, must be forgiven by society for her sins. The same feminist reading which Jemima applies to Ruth's history is the reading which Gaskell asks of her readers.

Ultimately, Ruth is vindicated. Jemima rebels against her father's pharisaic views of Ruth, resisting such interpretations of Ruth's fallenness. It is significant that in charting Jemima's transformation under the influence of Ruth, Gaskell initially compares her to the Pharisee in describing some of the attitudes we know Jemima is to overcome: "Without being pharisaical in her estimation of herself, she had all a Pharisee's dread of publicans and sinners, and all a child's cowardliness—that cowardliness which prompts it to shut its eyes against the object of terror, rather than acknowledge its existence with brave faith" (262). The protection afforded by her childhood home, Gaskell tells the reader, had its effects upon Jemima, and one senses that her religious training was Calvinistic in nature.¹¹ Her father's teaching told her that she was not one of the sinful populace: "He drew a clear line of partition, which separated mankind into two great groups, to one of which, by the grace of God, he and his belonged; while the other was composed of those whom it was his duty to try and reform, and bring the whole force of his morality to bear upon, with lectures, admonitions, and exhortations" (262). Under such tutelage, Jemima is conditioned to believe that she is inherently superior; however, Ruth's consistently virtuous behaviour calls Jemima's understanding of virtue and vice into question.

¹¹ Valentine Cunningham claims that Gaskell's own family was "descended from old Presbyterian, now Unitarian stock" (127). Her familiarity with Presbyterianism, a form of Protestant Calvinism, somewhat clarifies Bradshaw's Calvinism within the text. Cunningham claims that Gaskell was raised to recognize "a complex web of relationships that made up the Unitarian cousinhood" (127). This explains, to a degree, how Unitarian dissent, so wholly at odds with from evangelicalism with Unitarianism's denial of the trinity, nevertheless appropriates evangelical rhetoric in culturally recognizable ways. This is especially apparent in Gaskell's fiction that relies heavily on broadly Christian, but nevertheless evangelical, language.

While Gaskell tells the reader that Jemima sees Ruth as “stained with that evil most repugnant to her womanly modesty” (263), she also explains that Jemima’s reflections lead her to a fuller understanding of Ruth’s nature. For example, Jemima recalls Ruth’s innocence in attracting the attention of Mr Farquhar. Though she had spent months angered by Farquhar’s attraction to Ruth, “[w]ith the thought of him came in her first merciful feeling towards Ruth. This would never have been, had there been the least latent suspicion in Jemima’s jealous mind that Ruth had purposely done aught—looked a look—uttered a word—modulated a tone—for the sake of attracting.” (263). Jemima is forced to acknowledge that Ruth had innocently and inadvertently attracted him with her goodness: “she slowly confessed to herself how pure and simple had been all Ruth’s ways in relation to Mr Farquhar” (263). In fact, upon Ruth’s recognition of Farquhar’s feelings towards her, “there had been a modest, shrinking dignity of manner, not startled, or emotional, or even timid, but pure, grave, and quiet; and this conduct of Ruth’s, Jemima instinctively acknowledged to be of necessity transparent and sincere” (263). Jemima concludes that although deceit had certainly been employed, as Ruth was believed to be a young widow, it did not follow that she was now corrupt: “If her present goodness was real—if, after having striven back thus far on the heights, a fellow-woman was to throw her down into some terrible depth with her unkind, incontinent tongue, that would be too cruel! . . . Whatever Ruth had been, she was good, and to be respected as such, now” (265). Remarkably, Jemima is able to work through this evaluation of Ruth’s character independent of patriarchal influence. Her subsequent ability to confront her father and protect Ruth is an unusual act of female agency, one which rejects the domestic ideal of womanly obedience where a higher truth is involved.

In fact, Jemima's epiphany, her acknowledgement of Ruth as a fallen but virtuous woman, prompts her independence from her father, allowing her to accept autonomously a marital union with Mr Farquhar in spite of her father's approval. Mr Farquhar's concern for Ruth after learning of her fall establishes his superior capacity for fellow-feeling, and he subsequently acts as mediator between Jemima and Ruth. He earns Jemima's devotion when he intercedes with Mr Benson. Indeed, Jemima must rely upon two patriarchal gatekeepers even to receive word of Ruth. But while Gaskell clearly desires the reader to recognise the genuine love and devotion between Farquhar and Jemima, Jemima immediately establishes boundaries of control. She determines that she will not be shackled as an obedient servant, and questions the boundaries that Farquhar may impose: "'You won't forbid my going to see Ruth, will you? because if you do, I give you notice I shall disobey you' The arm around her waist clasped her yet more fondly at the idea, suggested by this speech, of the control which he should have a right to exercise over her actions at some future day" (303). The "right" of control Farquhar might exert at a future point is, however, tenuous, and the relationship Gaskell portrays through Jemima and Farquhar reveals her qualified acceptance of Victorian notions of wifely obedience. She knows she will have more agency as a wife than she has as a daughter. Farquhar at once acknowledges this, commenting, "'Tell me,' said he, 'how much of your goodness to me, this last happy hour, has been owing to the desire of having more freedom as a wife than as a daughter?'" (303).

Jemima even controls the impending communication with her father of her engagement to Farquhar and determines that he should not know of their understanding. When Farquhar asks if he can speak to Mr Bradshaw, she protests, "'No! . . . She dreaded her father's consideration of the whole affair as a satisfactory

disposal of his daughter to a worthy man, who, being his partner, would not require any abstraction of capital from the concern . . .” (304). In fact, Jemima determined that she would control the dissemination of the information: “She imposed very strict regulations on Mr Farquhar's behaviour; and quarrelled and differed from him more than ever, but with a secret joyful understanding with him in her heart, even while they disagreed with each other—for similarity of opinion is not always—I think not often—needed for fulness and perfection of love” (304). Carefully, Jemima considers that she will disagree with Mr Farquhar in the future. She will love him, but she will not be controlled by him.

The realization of Ruth’s fall creates pathways for change. Jemima, unable to consent to a marriage with Farquhar prior to Ruth’s intervention in the narrative, is freed by the revelations of Ruth’s past. Similarly, the people of Ecclestone, those who had freely passed judgement upon Ruth, sympathise with her once they understand her prior victimisation. Her work in the community is a revelation of her goodness, but not a genesis of virtue. Her work in the typhus ward demonstrates Ruth’s character, and the extent to which she trusts in God. Even before Ruth places herself in danger, she assures Mr Benson that she has indeed considered the consequences, but asserts, “I am in God's hands!” (344). Ruth’s selfless and fearless work is heroic in the “palace of Death” (346).

Ruth’s caring for the infirm and risking her life are not forms of penance. Gaskell is quite specific in showing that that Ruth needs no such spiritual redemption; instead, she earns social redemption through this act. When Mr Benson and her son trek to the street just outside the hospital where Ruth labours, Leonard overhears a telling conversation: “They say she has been a great sinner, and that this is her penance,’ quoth one” (346). “They” are the people of Ecclestone, to be sure.

But Gaskell intends this pronoun to represent her readers as well. An elderly man rejects what “they say”: “Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus” (346). Ruth’s spiritual redemption is shown to have been unnecessary, and therefore her work is the outpouring of her Christian piety. The reform that is required lies in the hearts of the people who would stand as judges. The narrator tells us, “Immediately there arose a clamour of tongues, each with some tale of his mother's gentle doings, till Leonard grew dizzy with the beatings of his glad, proud heart” (347). Leonard, proud of her selfless deeds, exclaims “Sir, I am her son!” . . . ‘She is my mother’” (347). There is a clamour of blessings proclaimed upon Ruth’s son and “many arose and called her blessed” (347), recalling the words of Proverbs 31. The scripture Gaskell chooses to describe Ruth vindicates her as the quintessential Christian woman: “Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.” (Proverbs 31: 28-31, KJV). Ruth, who *has* beauty, is noble because of what her “hands have done.” She is, indeed, praised at the city gate. The reader, who would see Ruth as hopelessly fallen, is shamed as the people of Eccleston are properly shamed. Ruth is the exemplar of womanly virtue.

Mr Bradshaw serves as a foil to Ruth. His “perfect” legalistic behaviour attempts to expose Ruth’s fallenness as he rails against her history. But Gaskell argues that it is Mr Bradshaw, not Ruth, who is most in need of reform. He is converted from judgemental observer to engaged and interested friend. The poignant ending which leaves the fallen woman as socially redeemed, and the patriarch as

humbled, is an ending, then, that transcends mere reform. That is to say, Mr Bradshaw has not merely adopted a new set of rules from which better to live his life. His change represents a poignant evangelical redemption. He is redeemed, or “saved” from his own sinfulness. Mr Bradshaw’s change is internal; it represents a transformation of the heart. Because of this change, Mr Benson and Mr Bradshaw, long estranged, reconcile.

Gaskell’s sincere desire was the transformation of the hearts of her readers. She did this by using the novel to reach a large middle-class audience of readers whose perception of fallenness she challenged with the character of Ruth. She interrogated both the contemporary insistence upon womanly obedience and the debilitating effects of lack of worldly wisdom. And one of Ruth’s faults, argued Gaskell, is Ruth’s inability effectively to assert her own will. But Ruth utilizes the very Christian faith that underpinned the cultural myth of fallenness. It was the same faith that undergirded Ruth’s restoration to society. Ruth’s social redemption is worked out through personal acts of service; she reforms herself by reforming those around her. In doing so, she takes responsibility for her spiritual and physical self; and therefore, demonstrates spiritual agency, ultimately avoiding marriage to an unworthy partner.

Finding Leonard at his mother’s grave, Mr Bradshaw’s reaction to the son signals the mother’s vindication: "Leonard raised himself up from the new-stirred turf. His face was swollen with weeping; but when he saw Mr Bradshaw he calmed himself, and checked his sobs, and, as an explanation of being where he was when thus surprised, he could find nothing to say but the simple words: ‘My mother is dead, sir’" (369). Leonard’s desperation is met with sympathy instead of scorn: “His eyes sought those of Mr Bradshaw with a wild look of agony, as if to find comfort

for that great loss in human sympathy; and at the first word—the first touch of Mr Bradshaw's hand on his shoulder—he burst out afresh” (369). Mr Bradshaw led Leonard home: “The first time, for years, that he had entered Mr Benson's house, he came leading and comforting her son—and, for a moment, he could not speak to his old friend, for the sympathy which choked up his voice, and filled his eyes with tears (369). Ruth’s agency transformed those around her paradoxically leveraging the very Christian faith that society would use to cast judgement upon her. Instead, Ruth earns redemption outside of marriage. Gaskell sought the reform of the characters within, and the readers of, *Ruth*.

Epilogue

The epigraph with which I opened this thesis reports that in 1853, the same year Gaskell published *Ruth*, John Malcolm Ludlow viewed “supremacy of woman over the novel” as well established. Indeed, by this time, women were using the novel ubiquitously for “doing God’s work.” I have argued in this thesis that female novelists with particularly close connections to Christianity exploited the novel’s transformative potential to construct heroines who embraced spiritual agency to challenge contemporary gender ideology. Their heroines are shown paradoxically to manipulate Christian practice to confront marriage as a narrative solution.

The heroines constructed by Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell are shown to make resistive choices, choices that on the surface seem to challenge Christian doctrine, but that ultimately demonstrate the importance of personal, informed faith. Far from giving Maria a happy ending, Wollstonecraft makes plain that neither Venables nor Darnford are reformed by their relationships with Maria. Following a common eighteenth-century plot, the heroine is deluded and desperate when she marries Venables. But even the more emotionally available Darnford eventually abandons her. Maria transforms neither man. Maria relies upon her maker, not marriage, to achieve salvation and ultimately to exercise independent intellectual reasoning, based upon religious conviction. Austen’s Fanny is similarly resistant. The entire family at Mansfield Park, including her beloved Edmund, believes that Fanny errs when she rejects Henry Crawford. Fanny’s likely spinsterhood undoubtedly drives their desire to see her married and off their hands, but even Edmund, who seems to understand that Fanny rejects Henry on moral grounds, believes that Fanny’s strong character will influence Henry to such a degree that he will transform due to Fanny’s goodness. The family’s outrage at her

rejection of such a scheme indicates the transformative potential believed to inhere in the marital union. Fanny need not be concerned with Henry's behaviour; her goodness, they seem to argue, would be enough to save him. Brontë, like Wollstonecraft and Austen before her, continued to reject such marriage schemes. Helen's goodness, her evangelical ideology and Wollstonecraftian strength, are incapable of reforming her husband. Ruth, Gaskell's fallen heroine, similarly refuses to resolve her seduction with marriage. Instead, she resists marriage altogether.

The subtlety with which the authors examined in this study leveraged Christianity to confront dominant discourse is profound, and perhaps explains why modern scholarship, while acknowledging Christianity's presence within the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic novel, historically has failed to situate Christian practice within it. The heroines in this study are shown to leverage their faith to embolden their sense of agency. Faith is not constructed as a point of subjugation, but of strength. These authors recognized the paradoxical potential of Christianity—piety, far from prompting feminine compliance, can be shown to undergird feminist strength. They demonstrated such potential using the novel form.

Alluding to the work that he believed the novel capable of doing, Richard Whatley,¹² reviewing the "Modern Novel" in 1821, noted that the novel was rising to a place of influence (352), asserting, "a novel, which makes good its pretensions of giving a perfectly correct picture of common life, . . . guides the judgment, and supplies a kind of artificial experience" (353). I have argued throughout this thesis that Wollstonecraft, Brontë, Austen, and Gaskell used the novel precisely in the way Whatley asserts: to guide judgement. In this way, the novel became capable of evoking empathetic experience.

¹² Richard Whatley would later become Archbishop of Dublin in 1831.

Referring to *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and *Persuasion* (1817) in particular, but Austen's skill as a novelist more generally, Whatley argues that "there is no one superior" to Jane Austen in her ability to use the novel to provide an "abstracted view" (357) of reality. Whatley's commentary on Austen's narrative technique within her novels, draws forth a comparison between the novel and the sermon that, I believe, all of the authors chosen for this study help to illuminate:

Miss Austin [sic] has the merit (in our judgment most essential) of being evidently a Christian Writer: a merit which is much enhanced, both on the score of good taste, and of practical utility, by her religion being not at all obtrusive. She might defy the most fastidious critic to call any of her novels (as *Cælebs* was designated, we will not say altogether without reason,) a 'dramatic sermon.' The subject is rather alluded to, and that incidentally, than studiously brought forward and dwelt upon. . . . [F]or when the purpose of inculcating a religious principle is made too palpably prominent, many readers, if they do not throw aside the book with disgust, are apt to fortify themselves with that respectful kind of apathy with which they undergo a regular sermon, and prepare themselves as they do to swallow a dose of medicine, endeavouring to *get it down* in large gulps, without tasting it more than is necessary. (ART. V 359-360)

Whatley calls Austen's religion "not at all obtrusive." Austen's ability subtly to leverage Christian principles into her novels, he argues, does not diminish the novel's ability to transform. Instead, he contends her quiet moralising gives her work greater weight. Ultimately, the novel's usefulness is measured in its "practical utility." What he means, of course, is that Austen uses the novel form subtly to "do God's work." Referencing Hannah More's more forthrightly religious *Cælebs*,

Whatley explains for us here that when put into the hands of an author such as Jane Austen, the novel form could make religious principle palatable in ways that an unwanted “dose of medicine” could not. I have argued throughout this thesis that other authors have used the novel form in much the same way. The religious subtlety and “practical utility” Whatley recognises in Austen is of a piece with the novels examined in this thesis. Indeed, Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell do not force the reader to taste Christianity “more than is necessary.” Instead, its presence in their novels simply undergirds the resistance shown to embolden their heroines to agency—and subsequently, to resist the diminution of their heroines’ personhood to that of “wife.”

The female authors discussed here interrogated long-standing and pervasive gender norms that restricted female agency, arguing instead that spiritual agency could offer leveraging possibilities for their heroines, specifically within or outside of the marriage union. But many troubling questions remained in mid-nineteenth century contemporary society regarding the role of women, as women were still very much restricted agents in comparison to their male counterparts. In spite of this apparent subjugation, literary scholars would do well to continue to investigate how dominant Christian rhetoric—rhetoric paradoxically embraced and interrogated by women and men alike during the period—was leveraged by authors to confront middle-class gender ideology. That is to say, rather than dismissing the dominant discourse of the period, historical scholars must question the reactionary feminist and Marxist scholarship of the late 20th century that interprets Romantic and Victorian woman as little more than victims oppressed by unwieldy religious dialogue. Instead of seeing the faith that was often manipulated to political ends as wholly oppressive, we must revisit the ways that Christianity offered spiritual

agency to women, ultimately undergirding the physical agency they would quite often assert.

This methodology, a candid historical look at spiritual agency throughout the period, begs further scholarship. While this thesis has focused upon the marriage question, the same methodology could be further applied to questions of female education, or moving past the Romantic and Victorian eras, scholars might explore how spiritual agency broke ground for female professional advancement. For example, in 1852, just one year prior to the publication of *Ruth*, Florence Nightingale—a personal friend of Gaskell—asked in an essay *Cassandra, an angry outcry against the forced idleness of Victorian women*, “Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity—these three—and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?” (25). Further interrogating this lack of “moral activity,” she asserts, “What else is conventional life? *Passivity* when we want to be active” (38). Written 60 years after the publication of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, *Cassandra* is strangely reminiscent of Wollstonecraft’s prophetic outcry.

Scholars who look back upon the position of women in English society may be prone to over-exaggerate the extent to which Victorian women were subjected by Christian practice. But there is no doubt that nineteenth century women such as Nightingale were legally subjugated. In fact, Nightingale strongly alludes to the importance of spiritual agency in breaking through the cultural politics that continued to threaten women’s placement in society, complaining that men were simply “irritated with women for not being happy” (26), arguing that “To God alone may women complain, without insulting Him!” (26). To God alone. She claims here that weak men, unable to withstand the confrontation of women who would assert

their rights, simply turned women towards God, surely a much more powerful source of strength.

Nightingale's essay turns away from the argument for a more egalitarian marriage model explored by earlier authors, instead to insist that women should be freed from the restrictions of marriage altogether. They should be given professional opportunities. Her concern that women continued to be perceived and trained to be passionless, "phantom companion[s]" (26) to men is marked by palpable anger that seemingly evokes Wollstonecraft's prior arguments. Nightingale points to the continued progressivism needed for contemporary women, complaining that even those women wanting professional opportunity were restricted due to lack of training. Instead, she complains that the middle-class woman has "nothing to do" (34) except for pass away the day in social, trivial pursuits.

Her desire for female training and employment is at stark odds with separate spheres ideology. Nightingale confronts the family sphere as an insufficient outlet for female agency, going so far as to claim that "The family" exploits its members "for its own uses. It thinks of them not as what God has made them, but as the something which *it* has arranged that they shall be" (37). Here, Nightingale interrogates the Victorian family ideal, and she references the calling of God to do so, saying that the destruction of the individual is, essentially sinful, asserting, "What is this but throwing the gifts of God aside as worthless, and substituting them for those of the world" (38). This confrontation of Victorian gender ideology, an ideology undergirded with Christian rhetoric by evoking the calling of God, rings clear. Her complaint that women are left out of religious dialogue, even with her husband, echoes contemporary ideas of women's purity, but simultaneous lack of genuine moral agency.

Nightingale saw women as so much more than the equal companions of men. Instead, she insisted that women should break free altogether from the domestic sphere that threatened to confine them during the nineteenth century. Her essay anticipates subsequent feminist movements, but it rests upon Christian rhetoric to justify the need for what she articulated as “moral activity” (25)—or to put it another way, Nightingale saw spiritual agency as a necessary component to the cultural changes she deemed necessary, and indeed the changes she anticipates. “Jesus Christ,” she argues, “raised women above the condition of mere slaves, mere ministers to the passions of the man, raised them by this sympathy, to be ministers of God. He gave them moral activity. But the Age, the World, Humanity, must give them the means to exercise this moral activity, must give them intellectual cultivation, spheres of action” (50).

Nightingale, like Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë and Gaskell before her, manipulates the very Christian rhetoric used to subjugate women, instead to demonstrate Christianity’s leveraging possibilities. Instead of arguing for equal placement within marriage, she argues for professional training. Other female authors in the latter nineteenth century and towards the turn of the century utilized a similar approach, and Nightingale’s essay is but one example of these. Similar methodology, an historical look at how spiritual agency formed the building block for eventual cultural change, could be applied to other female authors and differing genres of this late Victorian period. For example, Christianity in general, and spiritual agency in particular, is evident in the construction of feminine virtue and the confrontation of gender roles in Christiana Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1862), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), or, quite obviously in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72) or *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Literary scholarship,

particularly scholarship interested in an historical approach, has not yet exhausted the ways in which Christianity undergirded positive societal change by confronting and transforming the very rhetoric that threatened to bind women to subjection and arbitrary domesticity.

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