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FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND
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GRADE / DEGREE

Department of English

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The Old Maid in the Garret

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**The Old Maid in the Garret:
Representations of the Spinster in Victorian Culture**

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Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the PhD degree in English Literature

Department of English
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

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Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-32409-7
Our file *Notre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-32409-7

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Abstract

Investigating the often paradoxical ramifications of the spinster's insistent embodiment in Victorian representations, "The Old Maid in the Garret: Representations of the Spinster in Victorian Culture" traces the ubiquitous but overlooked trope of the "old maid" in a set of discourses and fictions from the mid to late Victorian period. It explores the negative terms in which the spinster was figured (either as a grotesque body or as a homeless wanderer to be feared, ridiculed, and banished from sight) but it also asks how the figure nonetheless became a powerful force in the cultural imagination. The thesis argues that because the Victorian understanding of "woman" was so strongly associated with the qualities of fertility and domesticity, the celibate and "homeless" spinster absorbed such characteristics to become in effect a more powerful (if frightening) version of womanhood. Beginning with an analysis of Victorian culture's representation of the spinster as a grotesque body to be hidden from sight, the thesis shows, in a discussion of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, H. Rider Haggard's *She*, and George Gissing's *New Grub Street*, how fiction troubles this notion of banishment. It then considers the anxieties raised in the public imagination by the spectre of multiplying spinsters, looking at the motif of self-replication in Margaret Oliphant's *Hester*, George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, and Israel Zangwill's *The Old Maids' Club*. Turning to how the spinster unsettled established notions of domestic space by seeming to be "at home" anywhere, the thesis studies the spinster's ability to infiltrate home spaces in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. Finally, it considers how the spinster's unease within the traditional Victorian marriage plot prompted authors to imagine forms of escape in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, Henry James's "The Third Person," and Charlotte O'Connor

Eccles's *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore*. What emerges is a portrait of a compelling but contradictory figure whose textual presence in the period threatened to undermine some of the basic codes through which Victorian culture oriented and defined itself.

Acknowledgements

No dissertation is written alone. I am extremely grateful for the emotional and intellectual support I have received throughout this project. This thesis could never have been written without the diligence and encouragement of my supervisor, Dr. Ina Ferris, whose careful editing and inspired comments have helped me to discover new avenues of thought and to deepen my arguments about the spinster. I am grateful to the staff and faculty of the Department of English at the University of Ottawa, who have provided a friendly and stimulating environment in which to spend four years. A particular thanks must go to Dr. David Rampton, who convinced me to choose the University of Ottawa in the first place, and whose interest in my progress has provided quiet reassurance. To the members of my examination committee, Dr. Ian Dennis, Dr. April London, Dr. Keith Wilson, and Dr. Jill Matus, many thanks for your questions and insights. Thanks to my family and especially my parents, Mary Ellen O'Neil and Philip Lepine, for your deep respect for education and for your unwavering love. My long lunches with Jenn Beauvais and Stephanie King have always been more motivation than distraction, providing me not only with relief from writing but also with a chance to gossip about the Victorians. Thanks also to Chiara Messineo, who read my proposal and confirmed my belief that nineteenth-century spinsters were sexy. I am grateful to all the teachers who encouraged me to pursue an often precarious career in English Literature, most notably Ruby Spence, who taught me to write my first essay, and who told me it was good. A final thank you to Duncan Cowie, whose kindness, humour, and lychee martinis have kept me sane (and happy) throughout the writing process.

**The Old Maid in the Garret:
Representations of the Spinster in Victorian Culture**

Introduction

According to her own notions, she resembles that Anchusa Plant which the gardener has left standing between a glowing Marvel of Peru and a spiked band of red Zinnias; which, having long done its regular blossoming, now and then opens a few blue stars on cool mornings, but which is for the most part dull-looking and unsightly, stretching its prickly shoots on all sides with dim and shapeless luxuriance; leaning on nothing, attaching itself to nothing, with little lovely color, and no sweet scent.

—Anne Judith Brown Penny, *The Afternoon of Unmarried Life* (1859)

Painted and wrinkled, padded and bedizened, with her coarse thoughts, bold words, and leering eyes, she has in herself all the disgust which lies around a Bacchante and a Hecate in one. . . . Perhaps—most probably—she adds to this a love of eating and drinking which trenches on intemperance. . . . Such an old maid as this stands as a warning to men and women alike of what and whom to avoid.

—Eliza Lynn Linton, “Old Maids,” *Belgravia* (1876)

The spinster is always a body, and that body always discomfits and disturbs the “natural” order. Investigating the often paradoxical ramifications of the spinster’s insistent embodiment in Victorian representations, this thesis traces the ubiquitous but overlooked trope of the “old maid” in a set of discourses and fictions from the mid to the late Victorian

period. The venerable trope proves oddly persistent in this period even when writers seek to undermine it. Both of the passages cited above, for example, appear in women's texts that intend in some way to dislodge the entrenched stereotype, but they cannot do without it. Anne Judith Brown Penny sets out to shake women out of their self-pity and inaction, but her opening "portrait" of a woman "who has reached the age of thirty, perhaps some years ago," offers a compelling reiteration of the old trope of the spinster.¹ It describes a woman seated at a recessed window watching her sister's children play in the autumnal garden, too ashamed of her own sunken features to visit her sister's family next door. Comparing herself to an *Anchusa* Plant that is "prickly," "unsightly," and past its time for "regular blossoming," she feels alone and overshadowed as though by prettier flowers (18). At the same time, Penny's portrait of this imaginary spinster also hints at the strange fertility attached to this figure in the Victorian imagination. Although the *Anchusa* Plant is past the age of "regular blossoming" it has not stopped blooming, for it "now and then opens a few blue stars on cool mornings" (18). More crucially, however, even when the plant is not flowering, it stretches out "on all sides" in a "shapeless luxuriance" that confounds the garden's order and threatens to overtake it (18).

A similar if more grotesque excess of embodiment defines the old maid in Eliza Lynn Linton's article in *Belgravia*, which, more directly and forcefully than Penny's advice book, condemns the "petty" and "shallow-minded" members of society who "from time immemorial" have satirised and attacked old maids.² While she acknowledges that England contains a scarcity of "Jacks" and a superfluity of "Jills," she mocks the prevailing view that single women cannot live productive lives without husbands. Linton's initial promise to debunk the popular myths and stereotypes surrounding spinsters soon dissolves, however,

¹ Anne Judith Brown Penny, *The Afternoon of Unmarried Life* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1859) 24.

² Eliza Lynn Linton, "Old Maids," *Belgravia* 29 (June 1876): 473.

as she produces a catalogue of the various types of old maids — masculine, coquettish, prudish, motherly, and nun-like — thereby expanding rather than rewriting or eliminating the standard trope. Underlying these categories is a condemnation of any unmarried woman who calls attention to her appearance or shows herself in public. Significantly, Linton commends or at least accepts spinsters who dress modestly and sequester themselves inside the home, concluding her discussion with a telling comment: “we have such beautiful types of old maids as to make us forgive the disagreeable or unwomanly; and when we have two things to look at, is it not the wisest plan to shut our eyes to the unpleasing, and to see only the more desirable?” (486). What Linton in effect advocates is the complete invisibility of spinsters, for those who are pleasing are already invisible.

These texts by Penny and Linton highlight both a cluster of Victorian attitudes towards the spinster and an anxiety about the middle-class code of womanhood this figure threatened to undermine. The ideal domestic woman was married, had children, and presided over a home provided by her husband. By contrast, the unmarried, celibate spinster, who lived either in her own house or on the margins of someone else’s, was more difficult to define and, as a result, more difficult to contain. Although she seemed to lean on nothing and attach herself to nothing, her presence, like that of the *Anchusa Plant*, seemed to be spreading, as census results reported women outnumbering men by hundreds of thousands and as women increasingly worked outside the home.³ Hence by categorising the spinster as a grotesque anomaly, articles like Linton’s frequently attempted to banish from public notice any single woman who did not follow the “natural” female path of domesticity. But,

³ The census results of 1851 and 1861 showed that there were significantly more unmarried women in England than there were unmarried men. These results prompted social commentators such as W. R. Greg, Frances Power Cobbe and Jessie Boucherett (among others) to address the issue of “Why are Women Redundant?” as Greg so famously put it. The 1851 census was the first to ask respondents their marital status, which may account for the increased focus on unmarried women from this time. For a compilation of these census results, see Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985).

ironically, the attempt to solve the “problem” that the spinster represented by advocating her banishment from the public eye ironically increased the figure’s social visibility through the sheer quantity of such writing about unmarried women. Linton’s article is a case in point: it enacts through language the very proliferation of spinsters to which it was opposed, casting the single woman as a paradoxically fertile figure whose body seemed to reproduce itself in print if not through heterosexual reproduction.

This thesis concerns itself with the manifestations of a trope, a persuasive cultural fiction that bore little or no resemblance to the actual single women who lived their lives in Victorian England in the face of such negative stereotypes. It is not concerned with the extraordinary achievements of real nineteenth-century spinsters such as Florence Nightingale, Christina Rossetti, and Frances Power Cobbe, whose lives have received much recent attention. Its interest lies in the power of representations and in the way that novels at once contributed to and challenged the social anxieties underlying the remarkably consistent view of spinsters. Even as the trope of the old maid was inflected by the late century advances in women’s rights, it was not, somewhat surprisingly, dramatically altered.⁴ Even as late as 1895, Lilian Bell, in her novel *The Love Affairs of an Old Maid*, admits that the language with which to speak of unmarried women has been tainted by stereotype until the words themselves conjure up a familiar picture of the spinster’s body:

It is a pity that there is no prettier term to bestow upon a girl bachelor of any age than Old Maid. “Spinster” is equally uncomfortable, suggesting, as it does, corkscrew curls and immoderate attenuation of frame; while “maiden lady,” which the ultra-punctilious substitute, is entirely too mincing for sensible, whole-souled

⁴ I differ on this point from Julia Swan, who argues that the “potential mutability . . . energy and power, independence and strength” of the spinster’s body “anticipates the shift from faded old maid to vibrant New Woman” (vi). Instead, I argue, the old maid and the New Woman are very different figures who coexist in the late nineteenth century. See “Single Blessedness: Representations of the Spinster in Charlotte Brontë, Wilkie Collins and Selected Periodical Essays” (Diss. Dalhousie U, 2001).

people to countenance.⁵

While Bell acknowledges that more women might “have the courage” to remain single if the title awaiting them were the “euphonious” title of “bachelor” (which, she notes, “simply means unmarried”), she nevertheless calls her unmarried protagonist Ruth an Old Maid rather than using the “euphonious” “lady bachelor” she had herself proposed. Moreover, Ruth derives from the stereotypical motherly spinster (celebrated by writers like Linton), a woman who is a help to her community and remains almost exclusively within the domestic sphere. Ruth becomes an Old Maid at midnight on her thirtieth birthday, but her good behaviour thereafter enables her at the end of her life to say proudly: “I keep up with the fashions; my clothes fit me; my fingers still come to the ends of my gloves” (189). She has not, in other words, undergone the bodily shrinking and decaying typically associated with celibacy, her proper behaviour presumably serving as protection. But she clearly measures herself in terms of the stereotype. So too does her author, who invokes (if not entirely seriously) the conventional spinster-and-cat complex to joke about why she allowed Ruth to “live” in her text: “The existence of the Old Maid has been a precarious one; she has been surrounded by danger, once narrowly escaping cremation. But my humanity toward dumb brutes saved her. I might have sacrificed a woman, but I could not kill a cat” (x).

Despite the high profile of the spinster as a problem during the second half of the century, nineteenth-century cultural history in general and feminist literary history in particular have paid surprisingly little attention to this figure and its failure to “fit”

⁵ Lilian Bell, *The Love Affairs of an Old Maid* (London: Sampson and Low, 1895) vii.

conventional homes or bodies.⁶ Most critical studies of the female body in the period have focused on the sexualised body of the virgin, the fallen woman, or the mother. Helena Michie's *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (1987), for example, persuasively describes the conventions employed for depictions of virginal heroines and fallen women in art and literature, but her study does not discuss the spinster, who could be at once virginal and grotesque, and whose body was described according to a distinct code of sexuality. Amanda Anderson's *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (1993) draws important attention to the "aesthetic register" of the representation of the fallen woman, but does not discuss the appearance of the *unfallen*.⁷ Insofar as critics and historians have addressed the spinster, it is primarily as a specific socio-political problem. In *The Spinster and her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (1985), for example, Sheila Jeffreys argues that the increasing social acceptance of unmarried women, beginning with the "social purity" movement in the 1880s, was quashed by a strict enforcement of heterosexuality following World War I. Studying a slightly longer historical period in *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (1985), Martha Vicinus focuses on how single women fought for the right to a productive existence outside marriage but, like Jeffreys, she concentrates on actual single women and not their fictional representation in Victorian culture. Closer to my concerns are those of Rita

⁶ Because the words used to denote unmarried women of a certain age have not entirely lost their venom, I have chosen whenever possible the more neutral terms "single" or "unmarried" when referring to a woman's civil state and have reserved the more negatively inflected "old maid" for discussing the Victorian trope. The word "spinster," denoting both the state of being unmarried and the stereotypical associations of "old maid," is used with both meanings in mind. Because the "natural" destiny of both Victorian women and novel heroines was to become a wife and because so many nineteenth-century novels end in marriage, this dissertation defines as spinster characters who, by the narrative's end, are neither married nor seem to have any intentions of marrying. On how the neutral word "spinster" merged with the negative "old maid" in the eighteenth century as women's roles became understood according to a triangulated set of archetypes: mother, whore, and asexual celibate, see Naomi Braun Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities* (Albany, NY: State of New York P, 2002) 10.

⁷ Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993) 9.

Kranidis, who considers the shifting cultural meaning of the single woman. Combining social and literary criticism in *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration* (1999), she discusses in particular how the debate over emigration caused the single middle-class woman to shift from “cherished object to cultural and ideological ‘excess.’”⁸ While Kranidis usefully describes how novels addressed the issues of emigration, travel, and the notion of the “superfluous” woman, however, her analysis focuses primarily on the zone of transition between Britain and its colonies, and not on the spinster as she was seen within England. My own focus is more homebound, looking at how novels set in the domestic nation responded to the socio-political pressures discussed by analysts like Jeffreys, Vicinus, and Kranidis.

In looking at the body of the spinster, my study builds upon the perception informing Jill Matus’s *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (1995), that the female form was seen in the period as mutable. Despite attempts to preserve strict gender distinctions in Victorian biomedical narratives, Matus argues, “Womanness,” emerged in such discourse as “a category that accommodates change and produces politically consequential conceptions of difference.”⁹ Approaching the spinster as an “unstable body,” this thesis explores how this figure, whose odd fertility combined celibacy and maternity, operated in novelistic fictions to expand the category of “Womanness” in the period. My thinking about the role of fiction has been influenced in particular by Nina Auerbach’s argument in *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982) for the subversive potential within the tropes of Victorian femininity. In a chapter devoted to the spinster figure, Auerbach acknowledges the diminishment of the old maid from a figure of fear to a figure of fun in the period, but at the same time she detects a certain power in what she calls

⁸ Rita Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1999) 4.

⁹ Jill Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995) 22.

the “heroic exile” of the spinster.¹⁰ Where Auerbach herself focuses on the promise held out by travel and on real life Victorian spinsters, this analysis concentrates on the implications of the spinster’s “domestic exile,” tracing these primarily but not exclusively in fictional representations. The title of the thesis, “The Old Maid in the Garret” (from a traditional ballad), invokes not only the standard trope of the spinster and her peripheral relationship to the home but also highlights a debt to Sandra Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s pioneering discussion of women writers and marginal spaces in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (1979). Their work makes suggestive connections between narrative and physical space, and it has been extended and complicated in interesting ways in recent years by critics like Suzanne Keen, who develops a notion of narrative annexes in *Victorian Renovations of the Novel* (1998), and Liana Pichler, whose *Spatial Dynamics and Female Development in Victorian Art and Novels* (2003) probes similarities between architectural and narrative spaces. These studies, together with Gaston Bachelard’s classic work *The Poetics of Space* (1958), inform my analysis of the spinster and peripheral spaces whether literal (as in cellars and garrets) or narrative (as in proleptic moments).

To structure the analysis, I have divided the thesis into four chapters, which roughly fall into two groups: the first group focuses on the body, the second on the question of domestic spaces. Chapters 1 and 2 look at how the spinster’s body was understood in the period, arguing that this understanding destabilised standard notions of Victorian femininity. As Mary Poovey has noted, over the course of the nineteenth century male and female bodies were increasingly subsumed into a binary code of gender until “whatever did not

¹⁰ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982): 124.

conform to that paradigm was an ‘anomaly’ and therefore a ‘problem.’”¹¹ The female body in particular was defined by its role in physical reproduction but at the same time, as Nancy Armstrong points out, this body had to be overlooked as body, its physicality transformed into moral “depth”: “the female had depths far more valuable than the surface.”¹² The domestic Victorian woman’s body was thus, paradoxically, the invisible locus for reproduction. Strangely, when the spinster made herself “invisible” by retiring into domestic space, her body assumed oddly reproductive powers.

Chapter 1, “‘Going In’: The Vanishing Spinster,” draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s well-known definition of the grotesque to argue that although the spinster’s chastity should have aligned her within the containment of the “classical” body, period representation, both visual and discursive, stressed overflow and transgression. Beginning with a discussion of conduct books, periodical articles, and caricatures, the chapter shows how mainstream Victorian culture attempted to contain the spinster’s transgressive sexuality by casting her body as a grotesque and unsightly object that should be removed from public view. Having come out on the marriage market in her teens, the ageing spinster was now encouraged to go back “in.”¹³ Victorian novels, while they may enact a similar banishment of the spinster figure by repressing her rebellious energies by the novel’s end, nevertheless hint at the anxieties caused by a spinster who has “gone in.” The novels can never entirely subdue this figure. In Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861) for example, Miss Havisham seems to play the role of an ideal spinster by almost completely removing her withered virginal body into the domestic sphere of Satis House. Within her womb-like rooms, however, her overflowing

¹¹ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 6.

¹² Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 76.

¹³ The concept of “going in,” a phrase coined by Charlotte Yonge, is discussed at length in chapter 1; see her *Womankind* (London: Mozley and Smith, 1877) 312.

sexuality and deviant maternity blight the growth of both Estella and Pip. Moreover, even once her body has been literally consumed in flames, her death seems uncertain and her presence continues to haunt her “children.” H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887) displaces the figure of the spinster into Africa, where a 2000-year-old virgin has been waiting in an extinct volcano for her lover to be reincarnated. Surrounded by a landscape reflecting her grotesque sexuality, Ayesha also uses her environment as a crucible for the formation of a blighted race, and she is so powerful that the very idea of her coming out of retirement leads the narrator, L. Horace Holly, to “shudder” at the thought of her arrival in England.¹⁴ While her rebellious energies are violently repressed at the end of *She*, Ayesha herself proved one of Haggard’s most popular characters and she was resurrected for a sequel and two prequels. Linked more explicitly to contemporary debates, the motif of the vanishing spinster recurs in George Gissing’s realist *New Grub Street* (1891), which demonstrates how quickly a marriageable young woman could be recast as a grotesque old maid. Importantly, this novel (written at the time of the New Woman controversy) underlines the degree to which the spinster was banished because she represented a desiring, independent, and potentially uncontrollable single woman.

Chapter 2 moves to a consideration of how the grotesque body of the spinster seemed to possess a powerful capacity for self-replication. “‘Children of the Barren’: The Lateral Reproduction of Spinsters” describes how, in the context of discourse surrounding the growing “problem” of single women, the language used to describe spinsters relied heavily on figures of multiplication. Clearly, spinsters did not engage in biological reproduction, but their growing numbers and increasing presence in print media suggested a kind of lateral reproduction, in particular the possibility that they were recruiting more single women to their ranks. After looking at a number of periodical texts detailing the growing

¹⁴ H. Rider Haggard, *She*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 256.

presence of spinsters, the chapter moves on to an analysis of the single woman's "lateral" spread in three novels. It begins with Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883), where the eponymous heroine must choose between a life of marriage (symbolically tied to speculation, gambling, and loss in the novel) and celibacy (associated with steady growth as well as moral and financial stability). In the end, Hester chooses to follow in the footsteps of her great-aunt Catherine, a spinster who has successfully increased the family fortune by rescuing and managing a large bank and whose independence attracts the passionate, uncontrollable young woman. George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) further develops the idea of lateral reproduction in its presentation of a clerking school run by Miss Barfoot as a "factory" for old maids. At the novel's end, a single woman holds an orphaned baby girl (raised by her aunts) in a suggestive reconfiguration of maternity. In a more comic turn, humourist Israel Zangwill taps into the anxiety over the increasing numbers of single women in *The Old Maids' Club* (1892), which posits a club of young women who swear to be single because it is a current "fashion." Even as it propels most of the "old maids" into wedlock, however, it legitimises a woman's right to work and allows a genuine spinster, the ghostly Little Dolly, to upstage the silly protagonists, who do not understand what being an "old maid" really means.

The final two chapters turn to the spinster's peripheral relationship to domestic space, first in a literal sense by tracing the figure's position within home space and then more metaphorically by looking at her relationship to narrative spaces. Because they did not marry, single women could not oversee their husbands' houses nor could they be the heroines of marriage plots. From the margins of domestic spaces and domestic plots, however, they could raise questions about the potential restrictiveness of domestic structures, just as their rebellious sexual energies could cast doubt on a female body's

classical containment. Chapter 3, ““Strange and Rare Visitants’: Victorian Spinsters and Domestic Space,” examines the spinster’s paradoxical relationship to physical domestic space whereby, as an unmarried woman, she was an exile in relation to the idea of home but, as a woman, she possessed innate homemaking abilities. Consequently, she was able to infiltrate areas of the home inaccessible even to the ideal domestic woman; moreover, she seemed able to take her home with her. Focusing on the spinster’s curious mobility, the chapter explores the ways she exploited, redefined, and extended domestic space, in the process infiltrating and expanding narrative spaces as well. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853) is a key text. The elderly spinsters and childless widows of Cranford have recast their entire town as one giant domestic sphere into which they have happily “gone in.” The novel not only showcases the ladies’ remarkable ability to shift the definitions of public and private space when the need arises but it features a narrator, herself a spinster, who quietly writes an episodic text in which her “marginal” characters turn out to be of central importance. Similarly, Lucy Snowe, the first-person narrator of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) begins on the margins of her own text but gradually emerges as the novel’s heroine. Growing in visibility and appropriating more space as the novel progresses, Lucy finally owns her own house and school in a novel that is less a quest for love than a quest for space. The chapter concludes with Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860). While Marian Halcombe and Anne Catherick share with Lucy the ability to infiltrate domestic space, this novel’s structure of enclosure eventually shuts them both up. Before they are silenced, however, their presence in the text serves to raise important questions about the constraints of wedlock, domestic space, and the marriage plot itself.

Turning more fully to the question of narrative, Chapter 4 (“Liberties Taken with Time and Space”: Imagining Escape from Domestic Nation and Narrative”) considers how

writers might question or evade the marriage plot to imagine alternative happy endings for spinsters. Taking three very different narratives as examples, the chapter analyses how they deploy the spinster figure to stretch the limits of conventional fiction through devices such as proleptic moments and the supernatural or magical. A suggestive prolepsis in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), for example, projects a minor character into a future beyond the novel's restrictive marriage ending, transporting her to a lush and fertile "virgin solitude" where she escapes the confines of marriage and the marriage plot. Henry James's "The Third Person" (1900) introduces a ghost as the means of confining and liberating his two spinster heroines. They find themselves being thrust into the corners of their recently inherited home by a ghostly ancestor (with whom the omniscient narrator in some sense colludes), but in the end one of the spinsters takes matters into her own hands, exorcising her intrusive male ancestor with the aid of a different kind of narration. The chapter concludes with the little-known but delightful *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore* (1897) by Charlotte O'Connor Eccles, in which an ageing spinster drinks an elixir in an attempt to get a second chance at life (and possibly marriage). When she is transformed into an eight-day-old baby, however, Miss Semaphore tries desperately to return to the spinster's body she has abandoned. Restored to her former shape, she realises that to be herself is the only happy ending she desires.

In both playful and serious ways, then, the fictions examined in this thesis point to ways that the Victorian spinster, as a marginal and provocative figure, troubled normative models of femininity. Her repeated escape from the boundaries of the corseted and contained body, along with her appropriation of liminal home spaces, expressed female energies that orthodox thought sought to contain through ridicule, abjection, erasure, or outright condemnation. But at the same time, writers — notably novelists — were attracted to those energies with their potential capacity to expand not just the dimensions of femininity but the

limitations of domestic realist fiction. A vivid albeit little-noticed undercurrent in Victorian fiction, the figure of the spinster points to the culture's struggle to assimilate a category that, like the relentlessly spreading *Anchusa* plant, exerted pressure on its cherished spaces, placing in question the codes through which it oriented and defined itself.

Chapter 1

“Going In”: The Vanishing Spinster

Banishing the Grotesque Body: Illustrations, Periodicals, and Conduct Books

Why appear dressed — *undressed*, cynics would say — after the pattern of her niece, the belle of the ball; annoying the eye with beauty either half-withered or long-overblown?

— Dinah Mulock Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (1858)

In her popular 1842 conduct book *The Daughters of England*, Sarah Stickney Ellis states that it is the role of woman “to occupy a sphere in which the elements of discord cannot with propriety be admitted – [and] in which beauty and order are expected to denote her presence.”¹ In conduct manuals, periodical articles and illustrations, one figure who frequently violates the domestic model of beautiful and orderly femininity is the spinster. Whether she is fading, withering, or “annoying the eye,” the spinster of the visual and literary media of the period is constructed as a grotesque body that must be exorcised. A visibly decaying figure, the old maid’s withering form strangely allows its femininity to seep out in ways denied to the “bodiless” domestic ideal, and the relentless focus on the spinster’s physicality in the period exposes the degree to which her unproductive sexuality was perceived as a threat to Victorian society. A figure of discord, the spinster dramatically violated the ideal sphere celebrated by writers like Ellis.

This energy of discordance may usefully be glossed by reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s well-known distinction between the classic and the grotesque body. Significantly, the characteristics of the grotesque body, while they denote rebellion, also convey qualities

¹ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England* (London: Charles Griffin and Co., n.d.) 20.

of fertility and sexuality, which, although implicitly associated with the maternal, were rarely attached to married women in polite Victorian society. Instead, the fertile characteristics of the grotesque seem to have been displaced onto the body of the spinster, who paradoxically emerges as more essentially “female” than the domestic ideal. Bakhtin describes the classic body, which converges with the domestic body, as “isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies. All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated; its protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities . . . smoothed out, its apertures closed.”² Although the domestic woman’s maternal role was stressed by society, her body was carefully corseted to control any signs of “growth and proliferation” and then isolated inside the home. Depictions of the celibate spinster, however, frequently convey the unmistakably fertile qualities of Bakhtin’s grotesque. As a transgression of classic aesthetics, he explains, “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). Qualities such as “copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, [and] disintegration” combine in Bakhtin’s “typical” grotesque example of senile pregnant laughing hags (25). This image paradoxically conjures up a woman past the age of reproduction who is nevertheless pregnant. As the next chapter will show, although the presumably celibate spinster would not be depicted as pregnant, she did embody a concern about female overpopulation prompted by the results of the 1851 and 1861 censuses which listed women outnumbering men by hundreds of thousands. In a chapter entitled “Old Maids and the Wish for Wings” in *Woman and the Demon*, Nina Auerbach suggestively refers to a perverse fecundity in these “ominously swelling percentage charts indicating [the spinster’s] inexorable proliferation.”³

Although the single woman’s body could not create more spinsters via conventional

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iwolsky (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1968) 29.

³ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 113.

reproduction, these charts seemed “pregnant” with single women who threatened to be similarly fertile in their infertility.

More immediately, behind the paradoxical fecundity of the figure of the spinster may lie the medical discourse of the period. As Sally Shuttleworth has observed, the Victorian medical community was extremely concerned with the proper functioning of the uterus, particularly as it related to menstrual flow. Quack practitioners and serious doctors alike stressed the need to monitor menstrual flow at every stage of life: “The obstruction of menstruation, viewed as the outward sign of sexual heat, represented the damming up of sexuality, causing pollution and implosion throughout the entire mental, emotional, and physiological economy.”⁴ The menopausal virginal body, besides seeming unnatural, was thus also potentially a sick body. As many commentators have stressed, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the healthy domestic middle-class woman constituted the social and biological norm. Other forms of femininity were typically regarded as inferior deviations, moral and physical.⁵

A striking example of the perceived deviance of the spinster’s body is found in Richard Carlile’s 1838 treatise advocating birth control, *Every Woman’s Book; or What is Love?* Carlile reveals his belief in the biological determination of gender in an erroneous but telling mistake: he states that the Saxon root of the word “woman” was “womb-man.”⁶ Although the OED points to a combination of wife and man as the root of the word, stressing woman’s companionate rather than reproductive role, Carlile’s mistake points to

⁴ Sally Shuttleworth, “Female Circulation: Medical Discourse and Popular Advertising in the Mid-Victorian Era,” *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990) 60.

⁵ See Sondra M. Archimedes, *Gendered Pathologies: The Female Body and Biomedical Discourse in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2005) for a detailed discussion of the evolution of biomedical discourse surrounding female bodies and how these discourses reflected and reinforced social ills.

⁶ Richard Carlile, *Every Woman’s Book; or, What is Love?* (London: Robert Forder, 1892) 7.

the growing nineteenth-century fixation on woman as womb. To Carlile, sex is a physical need analogous to food and drink, leading unfortunate bachelors and spinsters to be described as “a sort of sub-animal class” (6). He pathologises virginity, stating that “[i]n an old maid, the passion of love, like an overflowing gall-bladder, for want of due absorption, tinges every other sensation with bitterness” (5). Like the damming up of menstrual blood, unused “love” seems also to have a deforming, sickening effect. Carlile describes “the passion of love” as something that seems to be a liquid — it can “overflow” and it needs to be “absorbed” lest it poison the entire being.

This problem emerges as only a female problem since, as Carlile asserts, “[t]he excited single man gratifies himself among prostitutes” (11). Although he believes that in order to promote birth control he must also promote sexual intercourse as a natural part of life, his statements about spinsters go further than his rhetorical purpose requires. He continues his argument about the negative effects of female celibacy, for example, by describing the particular effects of female “ripeness”:

In animation, as well as vegetation, ripeness is a point of health to be gained and enjoyed; and, as the animal so far differs from the vegetable, as to be a self-renovating and self-preserving machine, to make ripeness wholesome it *must* be duly enjoyed. If the proper excretions be not prompted, ripeness is either never accomplished, or if accomplished hastens to decay. They, therefore, who abstain from sexual intercourse, are generally useless for the purposes of civil life. They seldom possess either the common cheerfulness, or the gaiety of well-supported animal life. (Carlile 5-6)

Carlile seems to be saying that if the female body reaches sexual “ripeness” and is not “consumed,” then its very womanhood will either cease to develop or quickly become

overripe and “decay.” It is unclear what “proper excretions” must be released, but Carlile’s metaphor supports Victorian concerns about fluid build-up in women and the need for proper “drains” for the “polluting and disruptive forces of sexual energy” they were believed to contain (Shuttleworth 64). What is perhaps even more surprising in Carlile’s statement is that the old maid, by failing to develop her sexuality, becomes “useless” for “civil life.” Only a properly sexualised body will allow her admission into general society.

Although the domestic body was the norm against which all other bodies were negatively compared, sexual activity in the female body was believed paradoxically to deplete it of desire. In his 1857 treatise *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, William Acton wrote that the blood required for maternity and breast-feeding sapped a woman’s “vital force” so that “sexual desire is almost annihilated.”⁷ Later in the century, the social scientist Herbert Spencer built on earlier theories such as Acton’s, theorising that women were smaller physically and fell short in intellectual and emotional faculties because their “individual evolution” had been arrested in order to reserve enough “vital power” for their reproductive functions.⁸ Although he does not mention spinsters, his theory implies that since unmarried women did not engage in reproduction, their bodies were not impeded and their evolution could, theoretically, continue. Implicit in Acton’s claim and Spencer’s theory is a corroboration of Carlile’s ideas about desire: if marriage and motherhood function to control the female body and “annihilate” sexual desire and “individual evolution,” then, by contrast, celibacy might very well enhance the powers of the body and desire, contributing to the fear of overflow expressed by the Victorian medical community. What may have seemed so alarming about the ageing spinster was that because

⁷ William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 5th ed. (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1871) 96.

⁸ Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (1873), rpt in *Herbert Spencer: Collected Writing*, ed. Michael Taylor, vol. 4 (London: Routledge, 1996) 373-4.

there were no demands on her sexual organs, she was a subject whose desires could not be appeased.

Nineteenth-century illustrations of the spinster reflect this grotesque overflow, depicting old maids as though their bodies could not contain their pent-up sexuality. The contrast between a woman who married and one who did not is best expressed by a two-page spread in a *Make-Up Book for Professionals* (c. 1900) (see fig. 1). Although the book is American, its depiction of the old maid is virtually identical to representations in Britain throughout the nineteenth century. The rosy-cheeked grandmotherly “Old Lady” modestly covers her shoulders with a shawl, and she wears, on her refined features, an expression of dignified concern. The “Old Maid,” by contrast, exposes her neck and offers a hint of décolletage. A telltale sign of spinsterhood is the hair unfashionably curled at the temples, which denotes at once vanity and age; her facial expression recalls caricatures of witches and bespeaks an inappropriate amusement with life. The contrast between the two women of a similar age is striking, and suggests that the difference in their marital status has contributed to their different physiognomies.

Another illustration and its accompanying anonymous article, “Single Life Versus Married Life,” which appeared in the *Penny Illustrated Paper* in October of 1866, focuses on the physical transformation experienced by the celibate body. It appeared at the height of a debate, prompted by the census results, about what to do about the numerical surplus of spinsters. One of the most famous solutions to this “problem,” proposed by social reformer W. R. Greg in his 1862 article “Why Are Women Redundant?”, was that single women should be shipped to the colonies where, as he showed with statistical tables, there was a numerical deficiency of females.⁹ The author of “Single Life Versus Married Life” also

⁹ W. R. Greg “Why Are Women Redundant?” rpt in *Literary and Social Judgments* (London: N. Trübner and Co., 1869).



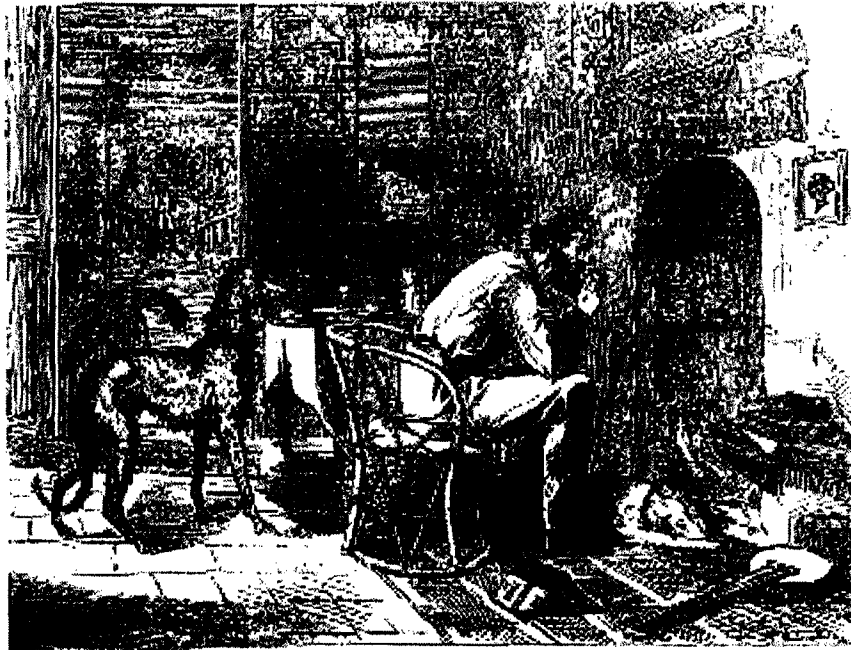
Fig. 1. F. W. Nack, "Old Lady, Old Maid," *Make Up Book for Professionals* (Chicago, 1900) 4-5; *Costumer's Manifesto*, ed. Tara Maginnis, 28 Aug 2006 <<http://www.costumes.org/history/makeupbook/pgs4and5.jpg>>

locates the solution to the spinster “problem” in Australia. Implicitly alluding to the law of supply and demand, the author claims that because the men of England know that women are plentiful, they do not value them sufficiently, an argument that echoes Greg’s.¹⁰ The author concludes his article with “a simple story” of love gone wrong, the protagonists of which are depicted in the illustration (see fig. 2). William, who studies agricultural chemistry, woos and wins the affections of Louisa, the heiress of a wealthy aunt who will not consent to the match. William then goes off to Australia, and although his estate is replete with sheep and oxen, it is deprived of Louisa and children. In the illustration, he seems to be “recalling the features of his Louisa in the far-back days when her eyes were bright and her cheeks were rosy” (246). The author proceeds to describe Louisa’s decline, a decay reminiscent of Carlile’s overripe virgins. Louisa “sits before a tidy hearth, nursing in her lap a cat—a cat where her dear William should be!” (246). The author’s odd choice of words highlights a stereotype that has survived to this day, as Louisa unleashes her affections onto her pet instead of a suitor. Louisa’s body suffers from her deprivation and, as in Carlile’s ripening fruit metaphor, her sexuality “hastens to decay”: “Poor Louisa! She is an old maid. The full grape has shrunk into the withered raisin — just as sweet, but not so tempting” (246). The spinster’s explicit comparison with fruit labels her as a perishable object, something to be used before its expiry date. Louisa’s body has begun to exhibit the distinctive features of the old maid visible in fig. 1: “She is neat and prim as ever, but thinner by many an inch around the shoulders, and sharp in the nose” (246). These signs of spinsterhood recur with surprising regularity throughout the nineteenth century as telltale signs of decaying sexuality. Spinsters are virtually always emaciated creatures, as the fertile flesh melts off them, throwing all their features into sharper relief. Furthermore, Louisa’s “full hair has withered into one scanty ringlet — the last leaf in the tree before winter sets in” (246); “horror-

¹⁰ “Single Life versus Married Life,” *The Penny Illustrated Paper* 20 Oct. 1866: 243.



A PERSON IS SOLID.



A BACHELOR IN ALYDIA—THE FATHER'S FINE.

Fig. 2. "Single Life Versus Married Life," *The Penny Illustrated Paper* 20 Oct. 1866: 244; "Collect Britain," British Library, 28 Aug 2006 <<http://www.collectbritain.co.uk/system/paper/index.cfm?fuseaction=paper.page&refId=PEN/1866/10/20/4/PG004.xml&collection=PEN>> British Library shelfmark: PAPER 20/10/1866 pg 244. © The British Library. All Rights Reserved.

stricken” by the “widening parting” on her head, she fears taking to “caps or a front” (246). Hair was a prominent sexual symbol to the Victorians. As Elisabeth Gitter points out, “the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by the display, for folk, literary, and psychoanalytic traditions agree that the luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness.”¹¹ Louisa’s thinning hair is thus not simply a sign of her age but specifically an emblem of her body’s decline and its encroaching barrenness. Not surprisingly, William is still described as “handsome.” Women like Louisa are urged to consult the illustration almost as they would a personal advertisement, as the author asserts that there are “thousands of men quite as handsome as William Hodkin” ready to worship them and their “one lovely tress” (246).

Despite the verbal description which casts Louisa as a visibly decaying figure who should be removed to the colonies, however, the illustration reassures the observer by demonstrating the containment of this social problem. Although William’s door is open to the countryside, Louisa seems to possess no exit but through her fireplace, the portal connecting the lovers’ images. A heart-shaped bellows which hangs prominently on the wall points to the fireplace as a symbol of the fading flames of Louisa’s sexuality. The only way out of the image is a pathway to William and marriage. Should Louisa elect to stay unmarried, the author’s textual description of her body’s decay indicates its future.

The generic characteristics of the old maid and their quasi-scientific underpinnings are nicely conveyed in a print titled “Rare specimens of comparative craniology: An old maid’s skull phrenologised” (see fig 3). The print shows a doctor of phrenology, Dr. S., measuring the bumps on the head of an ageing spinster, Miss Strangeways. The doctor could well represent J. G. Spurzheim, who brought the study of phrenology to England from the

¹¹ Elisabeth G. Gitter, “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination,” *PMLA* 99 (1984): 938.



Fig. 3. E. F. Lambert and F. C. Hunt, "Rare Specimens of Comparative Craniology: An Old Maid's Skull Phrenologised" (London, c. 1830); "Talking Heads: Phrenology at the Countway Library of Medicine," Harvard Medical Library Collection in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, 28 Aug, 2006 <http://www.countway.harvard.edu/rarebooks/exhibits/talking_heads/heads2.html>

continent, though it bears more resemblance to the study's founder, F. J. Gall.¹² A founding science which contained a grain of truth, phrenology was based on the assumption that the shape of the skull reflected the shape of the brain beneath, and that reading the skull's bumps could therefore indicate a person's psychological and intellectual faculties. Much farther gone than the unfortunate Louisa, this old maid not only has a pointy nose, but she has lost all her hair, revealing an interestingly shaped head, the focus of this picture. Her wig, a sign of her lost sexuality, sits atop her lapdog, and the dialogue that accompanies the print confirms the dog's odd sexual bond with this spinster:

Old Maid—Doctor S. when you have examined all my bumps, I'll trouble you to explain the *faculties, sympathies & propensities* of my dear *Poodle Pompey*.

Doctor S—Miss Strangeways! I can distinctly enumerate thro' the aid of my *Patent Skullometer*, that your cranium contains 16342 1/2 *Mental faculties* which I shall by my Scale of individuality describe on a future occasion. As for your *Poodle Pompey* his prominent bumps are *Uxoriousness* and *Philoprogenitiveness!!!* (qtd. in Bynum 387).

Although uxoriousness (excessive love of one's spouse) is not a faculty according to Spurzheim's system, philoprogenitiveness (love of offspring) is. My own amateurish reading of the spinster's skull according to Spurzheim's system reveals that she lacks development in the areas I and II of the brain denoting amativeness (physical love) and philoprogenitiveness,¹³ and has heightened brain activity in area X, representing self-love (Spurzheim 332). If we compare the two "rare specimens" of the spinster and her dog, we realise that the spinster lacks the faculties that her dog possesses. Perhaps, as in Carlile's

¹² This print and the accompanying text is reproduced in William F Bynum, "An Old Maid's Skull Phrenologised," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 23 (1968): 386-7.

¹³ I perform these readings according to J. G. Spurzheim, *The Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim*, 2nd ed. (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1815).

analogy, her sexual energies have “overflowed” onto her dog, a reading that seems supported by the fact that the old maid’s wig, a symbol of her former sexuality, has been set down on top of Pompey. Importantly, the faculties that this old maid lacks are those she would need to be a wife and mother. Like other spinsters, her celibacy has deformed her, leaving its distinctive sign written (or drawn) on her body.

Like nineteenth-century caricatures and illustrations which depict spinsters according to a common visual code, periodical articles concerning the social position of old maids typically share a common rhetorical strategy. As in Eliza Lynn Linton’s 1876 *Belgravia* article “Old Maids,” mentioned in the introduction, many opinion pieces begin with a disclaimer of the negative view of spinsters in the past and then move on to discuss some examples of positive, selfless spinsters who are useful to society and so should not be condemned. This strategy, although it appears on the surface to be reversing stereotypes about the grotesque spinster, in effect works to reinforce the stereotype. The description of what spinsters no longer are frequently occupies half of the article. Furthermore, the denial is performed in such dramatic, visual language, that the image of the stereotypical old maid remains most prominent. In order to maintain their high moral ground and to spread their message of what spinsters should be (retiring, invisible, selfless, and helpful), these articles are examples of apophasis, a form of irony which affirms the stereotypes of spinsters by denying them.

Eliza Lynn Linton employs this strategy in both of her articles entitled “Old Maids.” In an 1876 article that appeared in *Belgravia*, she claims to be overturning stereotypes, but spends eight pages condemning “disagreeable” types of old maids before arriving at the type she tolerates. Linton states that any woman who professes a desire to be single or “Jackless” commits “an offence to truth and high treason against nature”¹⁴ Although she admits that not

¹⁴ Eliza Lynn Linton, “Old Maids,” *Belgravia* 29 (June 1876): 473.

all spinsters fit the model of the stereotype, she laments that “the starched and sour Miss Prue is a fact—more’s the pity!” (474) and provides all the details of the stereotype she had begun the article by rejecting:

Slander and spite, narrowness of view and poverty of soul, meanness and prying, hatred of youth, selfishness as ingrained as her sourness, affections rusted by disuse and unable now to be stirred, the natural sweetness of her womanhood turned to gall by disappointment—and with some, the perpetual curiosity on the life that has been denied them—and we have the typical old maid of popular acceptance. To call a woman an old maid with a sniff, is to call her all these things in a breath. (473-4)

By placing spinsters into categories of lesser and greater evil, Linton allows herself the freedom to debase what she does not like about single women without having to criticise women for not finding their admittedly scarce “Jacks.” Her tiny portion of approval is given to the selfless, invisible spinster, “the dear old maid of large heart,” who “goes to the house where she is the most uncomfortable” and to whom “sacrifice [comes] as a matter of course” (481-2). To Linton, only single women who squeeze themselves into uncomfortably small spaces are acceptable; the rest, who exceed the “natural” boundaries of their gender, are grotesque specimens pointedly to be ignored.

Linton uses the same rhetorical strategy in a later article, also entitled “Old Maids,” published in *Chambers’s Journal* in March 1892. About half of this article is dedicated to the stereotypes that have haunted the spinster. Linton, a “smart wit” herself, is presumably aware that she is doing exactly what she condemns, stating: “Until quite lately old maids were the recognised butt for all those smart wits who can say a sharp thing on a well-worn theme and send an arrow through a space already cleared.”¹⁵ Quite comfortable in this cleared space, Linton writes of the typical spinster as “A nuisance to her family, whose children she

¹⁵ Eliza Lynn Linton, “Old Maids,” *Chambers’s Journal* 26 March 1892: 193-5.

frightened by her severity, whose young wives she bullied and at whose young men she sniffed, with her nose in the air and her eyelids over her eyes” (193). Linton describes the spinster’s body according to popular stereotype, and again seems to delight in the details: the old maid is described “[n]ursing her cat, over whose sleeping back she every now and then caressingly bends her lean form and lank ringlets—knitting some gray or mustard-coloured abomination which would make the artist despair of her salvation” (193-4). Linton spends the latter half of her article praising the “unmarried woman,” whose role, she claims, has altered. However, the woman she describes is, again, “the dear old maid of large heart” she praises in her earlier article, who assists the clergyman in his charity work, prevents inadvisable marriages, chaperones the young, nurses the sick, and watches the children. The positive spinster Linton describes never seems to have a thought for her own comfort. In order to secure society’s approval, the unmarried woman must attempt to fit herself into the domestic mould. If she cannot, she becomes grotesque, abominable, disgraceful.

An anonymous “Lady” who wrote her “Ideas About Old Maids” for *Chambers’s Journal* in April of 1879 is more generous in her assessment of the roles appropriate to single women, even acknowledging that they should be applauded for earning money and making “honourable careers for themselves.”¹⁶ However, she, too, begins her article with an account of the “vulgar idea of an old maid” and counters the stereotypical view with a portrait of the “indefatigable good angel of the family” (225). This author further undermines her positive portrayal of the good spinster with her account of the “sweet humility” of the “genuine old maid,” who “has accepted her position as definite and absolute” and who “knows herself to be in a certain sense of less account than wives and mothers” (225). Such grudging approval even of the selfless “good angel” spinster showcases the degree to which articles claiming to reverse stereotypes attempted to contain the ever more prominent figure

¹⁶ A Lady, “Ideas About Old Maids,” *Chambers’s Journal* 12 April 1879: 226.

of the spinster. To claim that spinsters were valuable members of society but of less account than wives and mothers fulfilling their “natural” role focused attention back on the abnormality of the unmarried woman’s condition.

Another anonymous article, “What an Old Maid Should Be” also from *Chambers’s Journal*, begins, as expected, with a description of the “lean, meagre face” conjured up by the term “old maid.”¹⁷ The author reluctantly admits that many women still do conform to the stereotype, but hopes that “the number of these unhappy females is daily decreasing” (493). Like the previous article, this one focuses on unmarried women’s ability to work, and actually allies spinsters with their married counterparts, stating that the ideal in both cases is “a sensible woman who is able to fill her place, and do her duty, be she married or unmarried” (493). Despite this praise, however, the spinster described here is again expected to make herself inconspicuous. When she is invited over by friends, for example, we are told, “Sometimes she accepts, more often she refuses, knowing full well the truth of the proverb: ‘If you wish to get always a warm welcome, don’t visit your friends too often’” (493). Thus the spinster of this article finds herself banished to the sidelines, tacitly counselled to remove herself from the public eye in order to gain society’s grudging acceptance. Although this author admits that the public may be at fault if “the poor, dependent old maid did not become the hearty old lady” (a distinction that recalls the illustrations in the costumer’s manual shown earlier in fig. 1), the article contributes to the hierarchical division between married and unmarried women.

A similar model of spinsters as grotesque unless they make themselves invisible informs a number of Victorian conduct books. This section looks at three prominent examples: Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *The Daughters of England* (1842), Dinah Mulock Craik’s *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women* (1858) and Charlotte Yonge’s *Womankind* (1877). What

¹⁷ “What an Old Maid Should Be” *Chambers’s Journal* August 1871: 493.

is most interesting about the spinster's position in this genre is that conduct books were the province of the domestic woman who, according to Nancy Armstrong in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, was a figure created and maintained by them.¹⁸ The spinster's presence in these conduct books, however, interrogates and threatens the normative model the genre sought to uphold because, while the idealised domestic woman was physically subsumed within the home and socially contained by the subservient and selfless roles of wife and mother, the spinster had no obvious restraints upon her person.

The genre that became the Victorian conduct book originated in the courtesy books of the Renaissance. These, as the editor of a recent collection on conduct books points out, "essentially aimed at creating harmony between the outward behaviour of men and women and the fundamental moral and social values of the time, [fusing] beauty with goodness."¹⁹ Such harmony was difficult to create, for inner could not be defined in the same way as outward behaviour. As the courtesy book evolved into the conduct book, it began to concentrate on the regulation of the outward manners: as long as behaviour was enclosed within prescribed boundaries, it promised access to desired social spaces.²⁰ Conduct books for women, as Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse note in their collection on *The Ideology of Conduct*, have focused even more specifically on the manners required for attracting and keeping a potential partner:

Through all their historical permutations, books telling women how to become desirable have held to the single objective of specifying what a woman should desire to be if she wishes to attract a socially approved male and keep him happy. Conduct

¹⁸ See Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).

¹⁹ Jacques Carré, "Introduction," *The Crisis of Courtesy: Studies in the Conduct-Book in Britain, 1600-1900* (New York: Leiden, 1994) 2.

²⁰ Gwendolen Foster notes that the root of "courtesy" comes from the Latin *cohors*, or enclosure; see *Troping the Body: Gender, Etiquette and Performance* (Carbondale IL: Southern UP, 2000) 4.

books for women may seem to strive simply for a more desirable woman. But in determining what kind of woman a woman should desire to be, these books also determine what kind of woman men should find desirable.²¹

The spinster's presence in Victorian conduct books, then, despite authorial attempts to render her status acceptable, is always tinged with her failure to confine her manners to a model likely to attract or keep a "socially-approved male."

At the same time, Ellis, Craik and Yonge address the necessity of redefining female roles in an era which could no longer promise husbands for every woman. Ellis divides the life of a woman into three "eras in woman's personal experience," the daughters, wives, and mothers of England (*Daughters* 4). Because women who never marry by default remain in Ellis's first category of "daughters," she spends a fair amount of her time on spinsters. Craik states more categorically that the thoughts in her book "do not concern married women," who, she believes, "have realised in greater or less degree the natural destiny of our sex."²² Her concern had doubtless been increased by the 1851 census, as she states: "[i]t is single women, belonging to those supernumerary ranks, which political economists tell us, are yearly increasing, who most need thinking about" (9). Yonge's Tractarian beliefs provide grounds for her defence of England's "secular sisters." She states that the Virgin Mary gave dignity to the roles of both motherhood *and* celibacy.²³ All three authors conjure up images of purposeful membership in a sisterhood or body of women whereby, in Yonge's words, "the single woman ceases to be *manquée*, and enjoys honour and happiness" (6). In real life, all three women, married or not, lived purposeful, independent lives. Before Ellis married and became the paragon of Victorian domesticity, she was an ambitious writer of fiction, and

²¹ Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, eds, *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 5.

²² Dinah Mulock Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1861) 9.

²³ Charlotte Yonge, *Womankind* (London: Mozley and Smith, 1877) 5.

once wrote to her husband-to-be that he must be aware of the consequences of marrying a “middle-aged independent woman.”²⁴ Craik, an incredibly prolific writer of essays, poetry and prose, was still unmarried when she wrote *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women*. After she did marry at the age of 39, she sought motherhood through the unusual practice of adopting an infant from the parish workhouse.²⁵ Yonge remained unmarried all her life, writing reams of fiction, history, and children’s books. Shy and retiring, she nonetheless regularly taught Sunday school and was a mentor to many young women.²⁶ Notwithstanding their own unusual success as authors and despite their good intentions to prescribe solutions to the problem of the single woman, however, each ends by banishing the spinster from public view.

What causes the conduct books’ initial project of redefining female roles to fail is an implicit belief that single women are somehow to blame for their fate through lack of control. Thus Sarah Stickney Ellis criticises women who do not properly contain the particularly female trait of loving: “To love, is woman’s nature—to be beloved, is the consequence of her having properly exercised and controlled that nature” (*Daughters* 21). Describing the effect of emotions on a woman’s character (a word that denotes both personality and face), Ellis uses the metaphor of a channel which every year grows deeper and more difficult to divert, asserting that the human frame can be irreversibly marked by inappropriate emotions:

As the country over whose surface an impetuous river has poured its waters . . . , the sterile track they once pursued, marring the picture as with a scar—a seamy track of barrenness and drought; so the course of misplaced affection leaves its indelible trace upon the character, breaking the harmony of what might otherwise have been most

²⁴ Quoted in Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2000) 65.

²⁵ See Mabel L. Colbeck and Tirthankar Bose, “Dinah Maria Craik,” *Dictionary of Litarary Biography* 35: 42.

²⁶ See Barbara J. Dunlop, “Charlotte Mary Yonge,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 18: 312.

attractive in its beauty and repose. (23)

Ellis's description indicates a preoccupation with consequences quite apart from a mind and complexion ravaged by the effects of a "misplaced affection." Her choice of the words "sterile" and "barrenness" implies that a woman is not only responsible for the destruction of her face through improper control of her emotions but also that she is likely to be rendered barren (or at least celibate) as a result. The features of the spinster are shown to be the result of an improper exercise of control, a disregard for the boundaries of feminine modesty.

In order to avoid the dangers of "misplaced affection" on the features, Ellis advocates retirement from the public scene of the marriage market, banishing the un-beautiful, disorderly woman inside the home. Describing a scene in which a "plain woman first mixes in society," Ellis contrasts such a woman's "neglect" in public to her kind reception at home (184). In society, Ellis prophesies that this woman will begin "in time to suspect she is personally repulsive," and will begin to feel "a strange sense of loneliness and destitution, as if excluded from the fellowship of social kindness — shut out from the pale of the lovely, and the beloved" (185). According to Ellis, only the lovely, who have exercised control over their emotions, have any right to be beloved. At this point in the narration, a man approaches the hypothetical plain woman and flatters her. Ellis "affectionately" remarks:

Beware! Beware of the unquiet thoughts, the disappointment, the rivalry, the vain competition, [and] the fruitless decoration. . . . Go home, then, and consult your mirror [—] no falsehood will be there, Go home, and find, as you have often done before, that even without beauty, you can make the fireside circle happy there. (185-86)

Although Ellis does not utterly deny the possibility that this "plain woman" will ever marry, her concern with removing her from society is directly linked to her unattractive appearance,

and Ellis again uses the language of celibacy when she refers to this woman's "fruitless" attempts at decoration.

Ellis's writing is concerned with establishing boundaries for women's bodies as well as for the sphere in which they move. A woman who does not present a flawless façade to the world must withdraw herself entirely behind the domestic sphere's "boundary-line of safety."²⁷ Any chinks in a woman's perfect exterior are, to Ellis, windows into a woman's sexuality, and examples of the grotesque lurking beneath the performed classical exterior.²⁸ In her 1839 *The Women of England*, Ellis provides a warning to all women that the lines of a domestic woman's very body are subject to scrutiny:

Let her appear in company with what accomplishments she may, let her charm by her musical talents, attract by her beauty, or enliven by her wit, if there steal from underneath her graceful drapery, the soiled hem, the tattered frill, or even the coarse garment out of keeping with her external finery, imagination naturally carries the observer into the dressing-room, her private habits, and even her inner mind, where, it is almost impossible to believe that the same want of order and purity does not prevail. (96)

There is an interesting contrast between this description, in which a charming woman who does not present a flawless exterior allows implicit access to her undressed body and impure mind, and the description of the plain woman, for whom no exterior perfection of attire can camouflage her plainness and for whom complete retirement is necessary. It would seem that the woman's plainness acts as a permanently "tattered frill," a continual reminder that not all women are beautiful and orderly.

²⁷ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England*, 3rd ed. (London: Fisher, Son, & Co., n.d.) 34.

²⁸ Gwendolen Foster comments that conduct books chronically deny the grotesque body in favour of the classical body (2) but that this denial leads to fears of exposure because "the classical body is constantly in fear that the mask of social performance will inadvertently drop to reveal the grotesque features of the performing body" (18).

Dinah Mulock Craik spends the majority of her conduct book, *A Woman's Thoughts About Women*, discussing ways in which women may make themselves useful in the world, stating that “in the present day, whether voluntarily or not, one-half of our women are *obliged* to take care of themselves” (29). Although Craik argues that there is no old maid of “vinegar aspect” who would not have been as unpleasant as a wife (250), she, too, banishes spinsters from sight in a final chapter entitled “Growing Old.” Spinsterhood, according to Craik, is “an unnatural condition of being” (10), and once a woman is no longer of marriageable age, her anomalous position in relation to the domestic ideal becomes most prominent. Craik notes that there comes a trying time in a spinster’s life when shopkeepers begin to write “Mrs.” on her bills and force her to look at toys and perambulators. Craik unabashedly refers to the ghosts of non-existent husbands and children before causing the image of the woman herself eerily to vanish. Looking at your face in the mirror, Craik notes, you suddenly notice that it is not a young face. “[I]t will gradually alter and alter, until the known face of your girlhood . . . will have altogether vanished— nay is vanished: look as you will, you will never see it more” (283-4). The spinster of a certain age becomes a ghostly presence haunting normative femininity. If she does not vanish, taking herself and her unproductive sexuality out of sight, the alternative seems to be to become ridiculous and grotesque. Craik chastises those spinsters who parade about at forty as though they were young. She asks: “why appear dressed—*undressed*, cynics would say—after the pattern of her niece, the belle of the ball; annoying the eye with beauty either half withered or long overblown?” (286). The unmarriageable spinster is told to make herself as “little uncomely as she can” (289), repressing her rebelliously physical body. Selfless usefulness is Craik’s solution to the problem of spinsters’ lack of a proper place in Victorian society, yet the moment a single woman ceases to be useful she risks “being drifted away, like most old

maids, down the current of the new generation, even as dead may-flies down a stream” (24). So tenuous is a spinster’s acceptable place in society that if she lets go for a moment, she will be transformed into something dead and grotesque, a reminder of the long-gone spring of youth, best disposed of as swiftly as possible.

For Charlotte Yonge, like Ellis and Craik, the grotesque spinster lurks beneath the ideal exterior. In *Womankind*, she writes that when a young woman tries independence (an almost necessary characteristic of spinsterhood), “she strips herself of all grace and softness, she becomes ridiculous and absurd” (7). Again and again, the “ridiculous and absurd” old maid lies beneath the “grace and softness” of every woman, undermining the integrity of the ideal. Although Yonge is pleased to allow a woman to remain desirable until age thirty or thirty-five, after that time, she advocates the retirement of the spinster deeply into the domestic sphere (284). Describing the opposite of a woman’s “coming out” on the marriage market, Yonge writes, “We don’t quite so well know when we fall into that state which some people call ‘gone in.’ Nay, there is generally no going in for a happy wife, so long as her husband lives and holds his place, nor for the mother of daughters who is needed to be their chaperon” (312). Conceding that some tactful, agreeable women may remain “out” even without these social props of husband and daughters, Yonge at the same time warns these women of the dangers of affecting youth eternally (321). Like Craik, Yonge advocates usefulness and connection with young people as stays against encroaching old maidishness: “Open air, cold water, active usefulness and habits of locomotion have pretty well destroyed the danger of falling into the stuffy spinster, the scandal-monger of the country town” (321). Yet Yonge’s stuffy spinster is characterised almost as a preventable disease, something to be kept back or kept in. So instilled into Victorian culture and the culture of the conduct book was the spinster stereotype that even Yonge, an unmarried woman herself, felt obliged to

banish the spinster from public view.

Since the spinster's grotesque body continually escapes from the classical confines encouraged by conduct manuals, it must be pushed back, closed up, covered over. Craik's conclusion to *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* underscores its banishment: "it will be strangers only who come about the dying bed, close the eyes that no man has ever kissed, and draw the shroud kindly over the poor withered breast where no child's head has ever lain" (308). Craik's attention to *closing* the eyes, symbolic of a unique outlook on the world, and *covering* her "withered breast," the sign of failed motherhood, suggests that, even in death, the spinster's body must be brought under control.

In the Victorian novel, the spinster's grotesque body often figures as a source of overflowing sexuality that must be reined in before the narrative ends; nevertheless, the spinster's powerful energies can never be fully obliterated. Periodicals, illustrations, and conduct books suggest the spinster's latent strength by mocking, debasing, or banishing her; fictional representations of old maids, enacting the same banishment, cannot contain the power of the grotesque figure that continually escapes narrative control. In *Great Expectations*, (1861), Charles Dickens conveys the anxieties inherent in a spinster's utter repression. Miss Havisham has "gone in" to Satis House, yet her sexuality overflows from her emaciated form and decaying house, blighting her attempts to mother Pip and Estella. While her violent banishment at the novel's end is an attempt to contain her power, Miss Havisham's influence continues to haunt her "children." H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) channels the mythic qualities of the spinster into the character of Ayesha, a 2000-year-old virgin who has been awaiting her reincarnated lover amidst an African landscape reflecting her overflowing sexuality. Ayesha's ability to create life from death, her uncanny intelligence, and her undeniable sex-appeal are temporarily quelled by her graphic disintegration at the

novel's end; however, this memorable spinster was resurrected to appear in three more novels by Haggard. In George Gissing's realist novel, *New Grub Street* (1891), Marian Yule is transformed from a vibrant New Woman into a retiring spinster. Her banishment from the narrative and from her former suitor's memory attests to the continuing social anxiety elicited by single women and their uncontained desire.

“A Skeleton in the Ashes of a Rich Dress”: Miss Havisham's Decayed Virginity.

“Don't be ridiculous, boy; I am not going in.”

—Estella, in Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861)

With his portrait of Miss Havisham, Charles Dickens created what is likely Victorian literature's most memorable spinster. Not only does she haunt the pages of *Great Expectations* through the tortured consciousness of Pip and the emotional maiming of Estella, but she is a figure who seems also to have haunted Dickens. Miss Havisham is a composite of Dickens's childhood memory of the “White Woman” of Berners Street (who also appears in the 1853 *Household Words* article “Where we Stopped Growing”), and inspiration from a cluster of articles appearing in the *Household Narrative* for January 1850, which included reports on the death of the recluse Martha Joachim, emigrant life in Australia, and a woman saved by a man when her gauze dress caught fire. Additional sources of inspiration include a murdered French duchess, Wilkie Collins's woman in white, Anne Catherick, and Dickens's visit to St Luke's Hospital for the insane.²⁹ As a composite of imagination, childhood

²⁹ For more details about sources for Miss Havisham, see Harry Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World: Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and Novel-Making* (Bloomington IN: Indiana UP, 1979) 280-2 and David Paroissen, *The Companion to Great Expectations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000) 81-5.

memory and contemporary news, Miss Havisham emerges as a combination of fact and fancy, a repository for Victorian anxieties about spinsters, whose “unnatural” celibacy posed a threat to normative domestic models of womanhood.

Miss Havisham’s celibacy defines her and deforms her. Her halted progress as a virgin and her consequent inability to proceed into wifhood and motherhood are inscribed onto her white wedding dress, its decay corresponding to the decline in her fertility. Suggestively, Dickens casts ambiguity on Miss Havisham’s gender from her first introduction into the narrative. Hearing that he is to be “grateful” to someone who is referred to mysteriously as “she” by Mr Pumblechook, Pip seeks clarification:

She? I looked at Joe, making the motion with my lips and eyebrows, “She?”

Joe looked at me, making the motion with *his* lips and eyebrows, “She?” My sister catching him in the act, he drew the back of his hand across his nose with his usual conciliatory air on such occasions, and looked at her.

“Well?” said my sister, in her snappish way. “What are you staring at? Is the house a-fire?”

“– Which some individual,” Joe politely hinted, “mentioned – she.”

“And she is a she, I suppose?” said my sister. “Unless you call Miss Havisham a he. And I doubt if even you’ll go so far as that.”³⁰

The repetition of the pronoun “she” in this passage amplifies Miss Havisham to the status of myth, denoting a person of such importance that she does not even need to be named. Although “she” would seem to be emblematic of womanhood, the term is also ambiguous, causing Pip and Joe to flounder as they toss the term back and forth without succeeding in decoding it. As I will discuss in the next section, “she” can be a vast, incomprehensible term, as H. Rider Haggard understood when he created the ageless “*She-who-must-be-obeyed*.”

³⁰ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Margaret Caldwell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 50.

Despite Miss Havisham's aggrandisement as a larger-than-life female, however, Mrs. Joe's comment at the end of the section brings into question her status as a woman by suggesting that there is something unwomanly about her, something that if pushed "so far as that" would remove her from the category of "she" altogether.

In an early article, "Rights and Wrongs of Women," published in *Household Words* in April of 1854, Eliza Lynn Linton exemplifies her usual decisiveness in discussing those who deserve membership in the category of womanhood and those whose status (like Miss Havisham's) is ambiguous. Linton defends the domestic "angel of the house," who follows "the middle path of a noble, unpretending, redeeming, domestic, usefulness," against those who threaten mid-Victorian gender roles: the "teaching, preaching, voting, judging, commanding at a man-of-war" women, who are dismissed as "amorphous monster[s]."³¹ Linton gives an example of "unsexed" womanhood in her description of "a certain Miss Betsy Millar," who commands a Scotch brig. Not only is her body described in masculine terms but her male characteristics are associated with a stereotypical sailor's "virile energy," so she seems to be an "unsexed" sexual predator, "with [her] horny hands covered with fiery red scars, and blackened with tar, her voice hoarse and cracked, her skin tanned and hardened, her language seasoned with nautical allusions and quarter-deck imagery, and her gait and step the rollicking roll of a bluff Jack-tar" (158). Interestingly, it is by being "unsexed" as a woman that Betsy Millar takes on the vitality and sexuality usually associated with men. Although Linton admits that this person "might be very estimable as a human being," she cannot allow her into the category of woman: "she would not fulfill one condition of womanhood, and therefore she would be unfit and imperfect, unsuited to her place and unequal to her functions" (158). Drawing upon contemporary medical discourse, which diagnosed all women as physically weak, making domestic life the only advisable option,

³¹ Eliza Lynn Linton, "Rights and Wrongs of Women," *Household Words* 1 April 1854: 158.

Linton states that woman's "flaccid muscles, tender skin, highly nervous organisation, and aptitude for internal injury" unsuit her for physical labour. Woman's "functions," according to her, "are those of wife and mother" (159). Although Linton's examples of false women are extreme portraits of sea-captains and preachers, her description of a "true woman" recalls Sarah Stickney Ellis's *Women of England* series. A "true woman," to Linton, is someone "who does not think it a weakness to attend to her toilette and who does not disdain to be beautiful; who believes in glossy hair and well-fitting gowns, and who eschews rents and ravelled edges, slipshod shoes, and audacious make-ups" (160). At the end of the article, Linton rather ominously states: "The shadow of man darkens the path of woman, and while walking by his side, she yet walks not in the same light with him. Her home is in the shade, and her duties are still and noiseless" (160). Although it uses rather conventional imagery to defend the role and place of the domestic woman, Linton's article highlights some important tensions in the characterisation of Miss Havisham, tensions that place her very much on the border of the category of womanhood where being "unsexed" paradoxically increases one's sexual energies.

In many ways, Miss Havisham's domestic arrangements conform to what Linton advocates for the "true woman" and to Victorian conduct books' prescriptions for ageing spinsters. At the eerie extreme of domesticity, Miss Havisham has certainly made her home in the shade, literally shutting out all light from her domestic sanctum. She has, in Charlotte Yonge's terms, "gone in," retiring from the social world which no longer gives her pleasure and to which she cannot contribute. Satis House lives up to its name and is "enough" for Miss Havisham, as she never leaves its inner sanctum. She has adopted a child, Estella, into her darkened world, and has raised her to be a model of exterior decorum.³² Miss Havisham's

³² Robert R. Garnett places Estella in "a well-established line of Dickensian women of 'cold' passion — Edith Dombey, Lady Dedlock, Louisa Gradgrind — silent, self-contained, self-possessed figures who suggest a fascination with the mysteries of eros," "The Good and the Unruly in *Great Expectations* — and Estella," *Dickens Quarterly* 16:1 (March 1999): 36.

seclusion within the domestic sanctum, however, is, of course, unnatural—no author of conduct literature meant for women always to stay inside—and her violation of normative female behaviour within her home spreads its influence throughout the narrative. Just as the grotesque body makes its presence felt from behind decorous exteriors, so Miss Havisham's frustrated sexuality blights her body and her home, and extends its influence throughout the entire narrative.

The contrast between the sexuality of an old maid versus that of an old bachelor is rendered symbolically when Mr Pumblechook brings Pip to the gates of Satis House. Mr Pumblechook is a purveyor of fertility, a "corn-chandler and seedsman," whose "little drawers" store latent life (52). Pip wonders "whether the flower-seeds and bulbs ever wanted of a fine day to break out of those little jails, and bloom" (52), suggesting that the old bachelor Mr Pumblechook, according to the Victorian double-standard, may be sexually active and thus successful at spreading his "seeds." Indeed, Pumblechook's delight in the multiplication table alludes to his success in reproduction. When he and Pip arrive at Miss Havisham's house, however, not only does Pip pretend not to hear Pumblechook's latest multiplication question "and fourteen?" but the old bachelor is denied entry to Miss Havisham's inner sanctum as Estella stops him "with the gate" (54). Symbolically associated with Miss Havisham's unused womb, Satis House is a place in which "normal" production has stopped, yet it retains a paradoxical fertility particular to spinsters—one that does not require men. The gate admits only young Pip, whose name means "seed," but Pip's own ability to have a family is about to be blighted by his visit to Satis House.

As a symbol of Miss Havisham's empty womb, the disused brewery fuses the concepts of production and reproduction, concepts which, as Shuttleworth has noted, were linked with the understanding of the female body in the medical rhetoric of the mid-Victorian

era. Citing obstetrician Tyler Smith's comment in an article in *The Lancet*, in which he states that the uterus was the "organ of circulation of the species," Shuttleworth observes: "The cycle of reproduction had to be policed and controlled to ensure the quality and continuity of social production. A woman's womb was figured both as a sacred font originating life, and as a crucial stage in the machinery of material social manufacture" (58).³³ But the Satis House brewery and Miss Havisham's womb have been empty so long that they are incapable of normal production. In the by-yard is a "wilderness of empty casks" (62) and Pip notes the brewery-yard's stillness: "there were no pigeons in the dovecot, no horses in the stable, no pigs in the the sty, no malt in the storehouse, no smells of grains and beer in the copper or the vat" (62). Dickens's insistence on the absence of the natural life that should be present reinforces the idea of Miss Havisham's inactive, festering womb. What the garden is able to produce is akin to the paradoxical fertility of spinsters. On his second visit to Miss Havisham's, Pip's stroll through the garden uncovers a different kind of growth: "It was quite a wilderness, and there were old melon-frames and cucumber-frames in it, which seemed in their decline to have produced a spontaneous growth of weak attempts at pieces of old hats and boots, with now and then a weedy offshoot into the likeness of a battered saucepan" (88). Just as the cucumber and watermelon-frames cannot produce the fruit they are supposed to and instead yield maimed household goods, so Miss Havisham's womb, unable to produce her own children, produces damaged human beings in the likes of Estella and, to a lesser degree, Pip. Estella seems to understand the effects of her upbringing, as she speaks to Pip about Miss Havisham's unused brewery: "Better not try brew beer there now, or it would turn out sour, boy; don't you think so?" (55). Her statement resounds on several levels: the literal unfitness of the brewery for making beer, the symbolic reference to Miss

³³ Susan Walsh also connects the ideas of the female body and production, specifically in *Great Expectations*; see "Bodies of Capital: *Great Expectation* and the Climacteric Economy," *Victorian Studies* 37:1 (1993): 70-93.

Havisham's unused womb, and the ironic implication that Estella herself is a product of the spinster's deformed maternal skills, soured by her upbringing.

Everything in Satis House, including Miss Havisham, "had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago" (59), and Miss Havisham's mental instability seems to date from the moment she was halted in her "natural" progress from maiden to mother. Miss Havisham's pent-up passions and eccentricity can be read as "symptoms" of what mid-Victorian medical practitioners would have diagnosed as a disruption of the menstrual flow.³⁴ Shuttleworth notes that one brand of pill claiming to cure female ills, "Widow Welch's Female Pills," was marketed at "the maiden, the mother and the middle aged" (qtd in Shuttleworth 51). She remarks that "Under the mellifluous three *m*'s lie the three biological stages of womanhood: puberty, pregnancy, and what was termed the 'climacteric,' or menopause" (51). Miss Havisham seems to have skipped the middle stage altogether, passing directly from maiden to middle aged, a transformation acknowledged by the term "old maid," which paradoxically pairs age with virginity.

Clothed in a dress evoking her ageing virginity, Miss Havisham's body represents, in Richard Carlile's terms, ripeness that has turned to decay. The white garments seem a part of her body, and both have yellowed together: "the bride within the bridal dress has withered like the dress, and like the flowers" (57). Her bride's body, which was supposed to perform the female work of fertility, has been denied its "natural" role; like Carlile, Dickens compares Miss Havisham to vegetation which, having bloomed, is left to wither. For Pip, Miss Havisham's body reminds him of "a ghastly wax-work at the fair" or "a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress" (57). She is something representing life or something which was once alive, but her decay points to death more than life. Dickens highlights the transformation from fertility to infertility: "the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young

³⁴ See Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) ch. 6.

woman, and that figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone” (57). The curves, representing motherhood and new life, have melted away, leaving only the bones which denote the death of her fertility and herself. Her femininity is further reduced by the lowered timbre of her voice: “Her chest had dropped, so that she stooped; and her voice had dropped, so that she spoke low, and with a dead lull upon her” (60). The forces of age and disappointment have not only robbed her body of its curves but have also given her a low, masculine voice, enhancing her ambiguous female status.

By making Miss Havisham invisible to most characters in the novel, Dickens channels some of the social anxiety provoked by the increasingly ubiquitous Victorian spinster. Pip’s relatives will believe any story he tells about her because she is unknown. To them, as to the novel’s readers, Miss Havisham exists in narrative form, because her retirement provokes questions about what exactly she is or does inside. Upon Pip’s return from his initial visit to Satis House, Mr. Pumblechook and Mrs. Joe are intensely curious about the details of Miss Havisham’s living arrangements. Pip feels, however, that to tell the truth about Miss Havisham would be a betrayal of her cloistered life:

I felt convinced that if I described Miss Havisham as my eyes had seen it, I should not be understood; and although she was perfectly incomprehensible to me, I entertained an impression that there would be something coarse and treacherous in my dragging her as she really was (too say nothing of Miss Estella) before the contemplation of Mrs. Joe. (64-5)

Miss Havisham has become visible to Pip. Although he claims not to understand what he has seen, on some level he realises that like the convicts who are transported to the colonies, Miss Havisham is an unwanted member of society, who is best kept invisible for her own

protection.³⁵ He therefore creates a false narrative of his visit, protecting her dismal truth with his absurd story. The details Pip gives of Miss Havisham's rooms place her within the realm of fairy tales, from the four "[i]mmense" dogs, to the "black velvet coach," to the food served on "gold plates" and in "silver baskets," to waving swords out the coach window (66-7). In a fairy tale, Miss Havisham's character would almost certainly be that of the witch figure (or at the very least the wicked stepmother), and although Pip does not demonise Miss Havisham with his mostly eccentric portrait, he places her in a context in which he knows she will be understood. Although he does not yet know it himself, Miss Havisham acts very much like a witch in a fairy tale by blighting the heroine's chances of finding love through emotional rather than physical restraint.

Despite Dickens's largely sympathetic portrayal of Miss Havisham, he nevertheless depicts her as a deadly symbol of a sickly femininity that must be exorcised from the text before the novel's end. Recalling Sarah Stickney Ellis's proclamation that a woman's frayed hem carries the observer into "the dressing-room, her private habits, and even her inner mind" (*Women* 96), Miss Havisham's decaying dress and mouldering rooms provide a dismal picture of the spinster's psychological state. To Ellis, spinsters are also to blame for their condition because they have not controlled their loving to a sufficient degree. Miss Havisham's love for her fiancé Compeyson is described by Herbert Pocket as excessive: "she was too haughty and too much in love" to listen to reason (179). When her love is not returned, she deliberately, after her illness, "laid the whole place waste" (180); and when she tells Pip that her heart is broken, it is "with a weird smile that had kind of a boast in it" (57). Not only has Miss Havisham not controlled her love, but she has deliberately allowed it to run wild.

³⁵ Many scholars have observed parallels between Magwitch and Miss Havisham, but the most sustained comparison of their similar roles in the novel may be found in Rita Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration* (New York: Methuen, 1999) ch. 3.

In addition to functioning as a symbol of her diseased inner mind, Miss Havisham's rooms, like the brewery yard, also reflect her deliberately unused and blighted womb, which was prepared for marriage but which has instead been allowed to rot. Miss Havisham takes great delight in pointing out the "bride-cake" in the centre of the table (83), evoking a gruesome communion in which the bride herself is the food offered for consumption on her wedding day.³⁶ Miss Havisham associates herself with the "heap of decay" on the table: "It and I have worn away together. The mice have gnawed at it, and sharper teeth than teeth of mice have gnawed at me" (87). When she dies, she means to be placed "in my bride's dress on the bride's table" (87), completing the offering of her unused sexuality. Despite its appearance of rot and decay, the bride-cake is, of course, crawling with life — fungus, spiders, black beetles and mice. And in these rotting womb-like rooms, Miss Havisham has shaped the lives of Estella and, to a lesser degree, Pip. Miss Havisham's rooms are thus figured as a perverse womb, the crucible into which she welcomes (and blights) children.

After his initial descriptions of his visits to Miss Havisham's, Pip "sum[s] up a period of at least eight or ten months" (93) from the time he fights with Herbert to the moment of his being apprenticed to Joe. It is during Pip's metaphorical gestation within the spinster's womb-like rooms that Pip is born as a different self. He grows "ashamed of home" (104), and falls hopelessly in love with Estella, two conditions which will haunt him throughout the rest of the novel. When Pip returns to Satis House, ostensibly to thank Miss Havisham for his apprenticeship (in reality, of course, to see Estella), the spinster tells him to "come on your birthday" (114), as if to commemorate his second birth as an aspiring gentleman. By asking to see Pip on his birthday, Miss Havisham seems to be acknowledging her role in his development. Birthdays, of course, take on a special significance to Miss

³⁶ On the eucharist motif, see John Cunningham, "The Figure of the Wedding Feast in *Great Expectations*," *Dickens Quarterly* 10:2 (June 1993): 87-91.

Havisham, as it was on the day she calls her “birthday” that she had the “heap of decay” that is the cobwebbed cake brought into her chambers (87). In Herbert Pocket’s narrative of the events following Miss Havisham’s jilting, he explains that only after recovering from “a bad illness” did she lay “the whole place waste” (180). Herbert’s narrative calls into question whether Miss Havisham was to be married on her birthday, whether the day on which she recovered was her birthday, or whether Miss Havisham simply dates her birth from the day on which all clocks stopped. In any case, Miss Havisham associates her “birthday” more with the beginning of her living death than with the beginning of life. It is the day the cake is brought into her chambers to rot and the day she places herself in the dark. Miss Havisham’s request that Pip visit her on his birthday functions as a sinister reference to his rebirth in her womb-like rooms.

The person who suffers the most from Miss Havisham’s attempts at motherhood is, of course, Estella. Miss Havisham’s own words convey the destructiveness of her infertile frame’s attempts to nourish Estella: “Look at her, so hard and thankless, on the hearth where she was reared! Where I took her to this wretched breast when it was first bleeding from its stabs, and where I have lavished years of tenderness upon her!” (300). Instead of a mother’s milk, Miss Havisham, clutching Estella to a breast wounded by love, can metaphorically only feed the child blood. William Acton, citing evidence from Dr. Carter’s *Treatise on Hysteria*, writes about the possibility of “emotional congestion of the organs,” whereby maternal emotions could cause blood to rush to the mammae (41). In Miss Havisham’s body, however, the instinct of motherhood is blended with unvented rage and passion, and Estella metaphorically drinks of her adoptive mother’s “emotional congestion.” Aware that she has inherited Miss Havisham’s inability to love, Estella tries to explain her emotional barrenness: “If you had brought up your adopted daughter wholly in the dark of these rooms, and had

never let her know that there was such a thing as the daylight by which she has never once seen your face—if you had done that, and then, for a purpose had wanted her to understand daylight and know all about it, you would have been disappointed and angry?” (301-2). In addition to her inability to love, Estella may also have inherited Miss Havisham’s physical barrenness. Though she has been married to Bentley Drummle, no mention is made of children.³⁷

What is perhaps most disturbing about Estella’s upbringing is how Miss Havisham has bred her to be a model of what conduct books claimed was desirable in a woman. Although Miss Havisham herself embodies the grotesque disorder of personal appearance and the unfettered emotion that conduct books disdained, she has also “gone in,” thereby hiding the threat she poses to society, and doing exactly what conduct books advocated for old maids of a certain age. Estella, raised to enact Miss Havisham’s revenge upon men, is the very opposite of Miss Havisham. For Estella, there is no need to “go in” as she is a perfect conduct-book model. Excessive emotions cannot mar her perfect surface because she has no emotions at all. Miss Havisham has, in her own words, “stole[n] her heart away and put ice in its place” (395). As a result, Estella is a creation as perfect—and as disturbing—as a model woman who has absolute control of her inner and outer person. Love cannot blight Estella’s perfect exterior because it remains only a word to her. As she explains to Pip: “When you say you love me, I know what you mean, as a form of words; but nothing more. You address nothing in my breast, you touch nothing here” (358). Love, in Estella, is utterly divorced from the dual symbol of womanhood, the breast that feels and the breast that feeds. Although Miss Havisham’s methods contribute to her self-punishment when Estella cannot return her own diseased love, they are extraordinarily effective in moulding Estella’s ability

³⁷ For a Darwinian reading of Miss Havisham’s negative effect on the next generation, see Goldie Morgentaler, “Meditating on the Low: A Darwinian Reading of *Great Expectations*,” *SEL* 38 (1998): 707-21.

to attract “admirers without end” (296).

Despite her seeming retirement behind domestic borders, therefore, Miss Havisham is shown to infect and blight the lives of those around her. Her containment inside Satis House is not sufficient because, like a ghost, she cannot be contained by walls. She must, therefore, be exorcised from the text because her very existence threatens domesticity. She even seems to be reproducing herself, evoking the anxiety of lateral reproduction (the subject of the next chapter). The first night Pip stays at Satis House, for example, he is haunted by her multiplying image: “A thousand Miss Havishams haunted me. She was on this side of my pillow, on that, at the head of the bed, at the foot, behind the half-opened door of the dressing-room, in the dressing-room, in the room overhead, in the room beneath— everywhere” (303). Thinking to escape her image, he leaves his room, only to be confronted with “Miss Havisham going along [the passage] in a ghostly manner, making a low cry” (303). Embodying a nineteenth-century anxiety about the excessive numbers of old maids, Miss Havisham’s reproduction in this scene foregrounds the notion that although the spinster’s body was itself infertile, she was recruiting numbers to her ranks and spreading uncontrollably.

Having smouldered with frustrated desire for years, Miss Havisham literally goes up in flames.³⁸ The age and state of decay of her bridal dress, symbol of her decayed virginal body, make it extremely flammable, and it disintegrates. In his attempt to put out the fire, Pip dislodges the bridal cake, another symbol of her virginity. At last, the maidenhood that was never consumed is eaten up by flames, and Pip indeed worries “that if [he] let her go, the fire would break out again and consume her” (398). Yet the figure of Miss Havisham cannot truly be removed from the narrative. Even after catching fire, she is restored to her

³⁸ That Miss Havisham’s desire is the metaphorical cause of her immolation is addressed by a number of scholars, among them Robert R. Garnett and Rita Kranidis.

“ghastly bridal appearance” and lain, as desired, “upon the great table” (398). The accident makes literal what was symbolic. By placing the bridal body of the spinster on a bed in the place where the bridal cake once was, it signals that despite her partial consumption by fire, her virginity remains. More insistent than her transformation is an unchanging “something” that persists: “they had covered her to the throat with white cotton-wool, and as she lay with a white sheet loosely overlying that, the phantom air of something that had been and was changed, was still upon her” (398). It seems that Miss Havisham, although still exhibiting her virginity on her body, has somehow had it renewed. After all, the bandages and sheet really are white, unlike her yellowed dress. As though to acknowledge Miss Havisham’s renewed maidenhood, Pip kisses her on the lips the last time he sees her.

The characters negatively affected by Miss Havisham seem to recover by the end of the novel. Although no mention is made of Estella having had children with Bentley Drummle, she does tell Pip that the garden, a symbol of Miss Havisham’s decaying fertility throughout, is to be built on and Pip observes that “the old ivy had struck root anew, and was growing green on the low quiet mounds of ruin” (476). As they leave the garden holding hands, Pip sees “the shadow of no parting from her” (479); the shadow shows their bodies joined, implying their potential union. Yet Miss Havisham leaves the novel in much the same way as she entered it—in shades of ambiguity. Pip, after recovering from a long illness, hears of her death from Joe, who, characteristically, speaks the truth:

“Is she dead, Joe?”

“Why you see, old chap,” said Joe, in a tone of remonstrance, and by way of getting at it by degrees, “I wouldn’t go so far as to say that, for that’s a deal to say; but she ain’t—”

“Living, Joe?”

“That’s nigher where it is,” said Joe; “she ain’t living.” (459)

Although she is no longer “living,” her influence continues to haunt the characters she helped to form in her grotesque womb-like rooms. A ghost in life, and an embodiment of Victorian anxieties about the negative effects of celibacy, Miss Havisham cannot really die.

“Tortured Day and Night with Unfulfilled Desire”:

The Physical Consequences of Virginity in H. Rider Haggard’s *She*

[S]wept back with shame and hideous mockery!

— H. Rider Haggard, *She* (1887)

H. Rider Haggard’s immensely popular imperial romance *She* (1887) is not generally read as a spinster narrative. An amalgam of desire and fear, the haunting *She* (based to some degree on Haggard’s memories of a rag doll with which Haggard’s childhood nurse used to threaten him)³⁹ has assumed iconic cultural status, and the figure has been read from the start in terms of myth and dream. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were both fascinated with the book’s extraordinary psychic depths, seeing in Haggard’s dream landscapes “a means to understanding not only the man but his age,”⁴⁰ and many literary scholars have tapped into

³⁹ H. Rider Haggard, *The Days of My Life: An Autobiography*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926) vol. 2, 248.

⁴⁰ As Lindy Stiebel notes, Freud described *She* as “A *strange* book, but full of hidden meaning” and Jung considered the novel a fascinating example of a dream-text demonstrating the anima. *Imagining Africa: Landscape in H. Rider Haggard’s African Romances* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 49, 74.

the novel's reflection of late nineteenth-century social anxieties.⁴¹ A two-thousand-year-old virgin, She has confined herself and her powers for millenia in an extinct volcano, but by the end of the novel, she exhibits the telltale symptoms of spinsterhood established in Victorian discourse.⁴² She has "gone in" with a vengeance, and her emergence gives even more dramatic expression than does Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* to the anxieties around the invisibility of spinsters and the influence they might exert when out of the public eye. To be alert to these anxieties is to uncover at the heart of this tale of African adventure the contours of an English spinster.

Because spinsters were widely perceived as vessels full of repressed passion, their socially-sanctioned invisibility, away from the supervision of men, bred anxieties about forms of sexuality and power threatening to overflow into the mainstream. As Haggard himself put it in his autobiography, the central idea of the novel "was a woman who had acquired practical immortality, but who found that her passions remained immortal too" (*Days* 93). She has been out of sight for thousands of years, but she has certainly not been out of mind, as her legend has been passed down on the sherd of Amenartas to generations of Vinceys and their ancestors. A "virgin goddess" who is "only a woman, although she might be a very old one," She embodies both the power and the revulsion inspired by the

⁴¹ See, for example, Lindy Stiebel's *Imagining Africa* for an exploration of Haggard's ideas and anxieties about colonialism; Lisa Hopkins, *Giants of the Past: Popular Fictions and the Idea of Evolution* (Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses, 2004) for how evolutionary discourse influenced the novel; and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2 *Sexchanges* (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1989) for an exploration of Haggard's anxieties about women, particularly the figure of the femme fatale.

⁴² Ayesha has more generally been seen as a representation of the New Woman. A figure that entered the Victorian consciousness in the 1880s (although the term itself did not enter the English lexicon until the mid-1890s), the New Woman figure was typically younger, louder, and more active in women's rights debates than the old maid. Whereas the New Woman was perceived as rejecting or reforming the idea of marriage, the old maid was perceived as having been rejected. The New Woman was a progressive figure of change; the old maid was a regressive figure of stagnation. On Ayesha as a New Woman figure, see Patricia Murphy, "The Gendering of *She*" *SEL* 39.4 (Autumn 1999): 747-772; Patricia Murphy, *Time is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender, and the New Woman* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001); and Sandra Gilbert, "Rider Haggard's Heart of Darkness," *Reading Fin-de-Siècle Fictions*, ed. Lyn Pykett (London: Longman, 1996).

ubiquitous nineteenth-century spinster.⁴³ Her violent banishment from the novel when the hitherto-withheld effects of time and repressed passion are unleashed upon her body expresses Victorian fears about the dangerous power of leaving women to their own devices.

Like Pip's initial understanding of Miss Havisham as a vague and mysterious feminine pronoun, the male explorers in Haggard's novel first encounter not She herself but her godlike and legendary evocation from the Amahagger. The tale's narrator, L. Horace Holly, awakens from a particularly disturbing dream of death and disintegration to hear his would-be captors repeating cryptic orders from their queen, whom they call *She-who-must-be-obeyed*. Despite the aura of doom the Amahagger attempt to convey by using the long and suggestive name, they, like Mr Pumblechook and Mrs Joe, know the spinster only by reputation; their own uncertainty about her identity adds humour to an otherwise ominous name. Yet beyond both the reverence and the ridicule which surround the initial evocations of She and her powers, there is something fascinating and unfathomable about her physical body. When Holly finally asks "Who is '*She-who-must-be-obeyed*'?" Billali's reply makes cryptic and ambiguous reference to "flesh":

The old man glanced at the bearers, and then answered, with a little smile that somehow sent my blood to my heart—

"Surely, my stranger son, thou wilt learn soon enough, if it be her pleasure to see thee at all in the flesh."

"In the flesh? I answered. "What may my father wish to convey?"

But the old man only laughed a dreadful laugh, and made no reply. (78)

It is difficult to know whether Billali is referring to the flesh as repository for sexuality or mortality, erotics or hotpotting. Furthermore, Billali could mean Holly's flesh or Ayesha's, or both, or he could be referring evasively to the fact that Holly will never know She because

⁴³ H. Rider Haggard, *She*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 156-7.

she is always veiled, so her “flesh” is never seen. Before Ayesha is introduced as a character, therefore, she is presented as a limitless figure, one who transcends the boundaries of her name, her body, and her womb-like home. Indeed, Ayesha is both body and bodiless, as her veiled form both hides and reveals the “flesh” which is at once proof of her womanhood and the source of her eventual destruction.

Holly immediately senses the power She exudes through her disciples, who believe she is all-powerful: “And now it appeared that there was a mysterious Queen clothed by rumour with dread and wonderful attributes, and commonly known by the impersonal but, to my mind, rather awesome title of *She*” (91). Not only is her name vast and incomprehensible, conjuring up images of every woman, but as in the case of Miss Havisham, She’s aura is largely created by the narrative told by others. The flesh of She, which betrays her as “only a woman” is “clothed by rumour”; her “dread and wonderful attributes,” as they are reported by her subjects, create the first layer of invulnerability beneath which She hides. Like the veils and shrouds beneath which She cloaks her womanly form, the clothing of narrative, even as it shrouds her in mystery and adds to her power, also foreshadows her ultimate revelation as a creation who, under her protective cloak of rumour, is “only a woman.” Even if spinsters like Ayesha followed conduct book recommendations and “went in,” their independent existence was still a source of anxiety for the patriarchal culture. Thus, She, like Miss Havisham, must be banished from the narrative and exposed for the spinster she has been all along.

Just as the disused brewery symbolically figures Miss Havisham’s disused womb, so the landscape leading to She’s home represents the age and disuse of her reproductive system. As numerous scholars have observed, Haggard’s landscapes may be read as subconscious journeys into the female body. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example,

write that “[a]s the men make their way inland, through vapourous marshes and stagnant canals, the landscape across which they journey seems increasingly like a Freudianly female *paysage moralisé*. . . . [I]n a symbolic return to the womb, they are carried up ancient swampy birth canals through rocky defile into a vast cup of earth” (13). Because She is not only a woman but a very old virgin, the landscape represents more than any woman’s womb; it is, specifically, one that has long been in disuse and that conveys her infertility. Sondra M. Archimedes notes that as quest narratives, Haggard’s novels are particularly concerned with the exploration of “virgin” territory, and the landscape in *She* is an evocation of an abnormal female body.⁴⁴ Holly and Leo Vincey journey into the African continent, which on one level represents a body into which no (white) man has gone before. After the storm that leads the men to the river into She’s domain, the sea exhibits signs of desire: the men find themselves “floating on the waters, now heaving like some troubled woman’s breast” (56). The sky is described like a shy bride: “The moon went slowly down in chastened loveliness, she departed like some sweet bride into her chamber, and long, veil-like shadows crept up the sky through which the stars peeped slowly out” (56). As the sea grows calmer, its “bosom” is covered up as if by sleep “brood[ing] upon a pain-racked mind, causing it to forget its sorrow” (56). The personification of the troubled landscape allies it with the body and mind of the troubled and virginal She, who is also “veiled” and “racked with sorrows.” As the travellers coast toward the mouth of the river leading to She’s domain, they cross a sand bank like a hymen (“a considerable bar at the mouth”), which would be “impassable” in other tidal and wind conditions (60). The landscape around them is “marshy” and “uncomfortably hot” (60) composed of “endless desolate swamps, that stretched as far as the eye could reach” (61). Furthermore, the sun “drew thin sickly looking clouds of poisonous vapour

⁴⁴ Archimedes also argues that She’s body is abnormal not only because it is unmaternal but also because it represents racial degeneration: “*She*’s circulating racial and sexual metaphors connect the female body to the African body and African landscape, demonstrating late-Victorian assumptions about gender, sexuality, and racial difference.” (91).

from the surface of the marsh and from the scummy pools of stagnant water” (61). Reflecting the Victorian medical community’s concern with the build-up of menstrual blood and desire, She’s body, as represented by this swampy, overgrown landscape, exhibits signs of diseased femininity.⁴⁵ The river, once large enough to accommodate large vessels, is now clogged with weeds and earth: “Current there was little or none, and, as a consequence, the surface of the canal was choked with vegetable growth” (72). Like an unused birth canal leading to She’s womb-like caverns in an extinct volcano, the passage to She’s domain is clogged with centuries of accumulated refuse, providing some foreshadowing of the state of the grotesque body She is later revealed to be.

The rock Ayesha inhabits is a “honeycomb of sepulchres” (214), liminal spaces functioning as tombs for the dead as well as She’s breeding ground for mute servants. They evoke Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque because they blur the boundaries between death and life, burial and birth. Eating is done in rooms which once functioned as embalming chambers, so that putting food into one’s organs to sustain the body is explicitly associated with the removal of these organs after death. The curiously lifelike embalmed bodies provide a macabre source of heat and light for the Amahagger. During the feast Ayesha throws for the travellers, Leo is the first to discover that the “flaming burdens” carried by the Amahagger, who look “like so many devils from Hell” are actually “corpses on fire” (217). Nor is the integrity of these bodies sacred; to light more human torches, “one great fellow [seizes] a flaming human arm that had fallen from its parent frame” (217). In the perversely fertile world of Kôr, the dismembered “parent” body can only produce its own decayed limbs as offspring. These bodies, uncannily preserved in death just as Ayesha appears to be in life, foreshadow how close Ayesha’s body is to decay even before her ultimate disintegration.

⁴⁵ The description of the canals leading to Kôr are also reminiscent of William Acton’s account of the causes of female infertility: he states that problems occur even when the generative canal is “partially blocked up, from the canal being so devious that, though the menstrual secretion may be able to pass out, the semen cannot find admittance—at least, in time to impregnate” (191).

Furthermore, as She and Holly tour the caves of the dead, most of the bodies they encounter are “as perfect as on the day of death thousands of years before. . . . Here and there, however, we saw an exception, and in these cases, although the flesh looked sound enough externally, if one touched it it fell in, and revealed the fact that the figure was but a pile of dust” (184). Because Ayesha’s age is so great and her preservation is so remarkable, she is inevitably compared with the embalmed dead, and their occasional collapse and corruption foreshadow her own grotesque spinster’s body, which emerges under the Pillar of Life.

In addition to the well-preserved bodies gracing the caves of Kôr, whose occasional disintegration and combustion call attention to the corruptibility of the seemingly perfect body and the irrepressibility of its grotesque elements, one cavern in particular contains evidence of even greater death and destruction. Significantly, Holly describes the entrance to this cave as “a kind of large manhole” (179). Since the journey through the festering swamps and the arrival into limitless caves seem to represent a voyage into the unknown womb of a very old virginal woman, it is logical that her womb would be full of terrors for the travellers. The pile of bodies which lies beneath the “manhole” seems to represent at once the “men” who have been conquered by Ayesha as well as the unborn children her celibacy has “killed.” These bodies are a frightening reminder of human mortality:

Anything more appalling than this jumbled mass of the remains of a departed race I cannot imagine, and what made it even more dreadful was that in this dry air a considerable number of bodies had simply become desiccated with the skin still on them, and now, fixed in every conceivable position, stared at us out of the mountain of white bones, grotesquely horrible caricatures of humanity. (183)

Like the perfect bodies susceptible to falling to dust, these strangely lifelike unpreserved bodies seem to exist on the border between life and death, preservation and decay.

Despite the seemingly limitless number of dead inhabiting the caves of Kôr, the cells are also a repository for new life. Here Ayesha has bred her attendants, conducting fertility experiments in her “honeycomb” of womb-like rooms.⁴⁶ Her talent at breeding when she is admittedly a centuries-old virgin is remarkable but, as with Miss Havisham, hers is a perverse and frightening fertility, one which blights her offspring. As Ayesha admits to Holly:

I have bidden my girls to wait upon thee. They are mutes thou knowest, deaf are they and dumb, and therefore the safest of servants, save to those who can read their faces and their signs. I bred them so—it hath taken many centuries and much trouble. But at last I have triumphed. Once I succeeded before, but the race was too ugly, so I let it die away; but now, as thou seest, they are otherwise. (154)

Curiously, just as Miss Havisham has raised Estella to be a model of conduct book behaviour, so Ayesha has bred a race of silent, beautiful helpmates, a race of eerily perfect domestic women whose perfection is also their flaw. This ability to breed life in caves of death appears sinister, unnatural. In the “paean of triumph or epithalamium” She recites for Leo when he pledges his love for her, one passage refers to her paradoxical fertility:

Then in a grave sowed I the seed of patience, and shone upon it with the sun of hope, and watered it with tears of repentance, and breathed on it with the breath of my knowledge. And now, lo! it hath sprung up, and borne fruit. Lo! out of the grave hath it sprung. Yea, from among the dry bones and ashes of the dead. (233, original emphasis)

⁴⁶ That the extinct volcano Ayesha inhabits is called a “honeycomb” connects her with the queen bee, whose reproductive capacity William Acton calls the “utmost limit of efficiency.” Acton quotes from Siebold’s work, “On the True Parthenogenesis in Moths and Bees”: “After this single fecundation a queen bee can for a long time (four or five years) lay male or female eggs *at will*; for by filling her seminal receptacle with male semen she has acquired the power of producing female eggs; whilst before copulation, and with an empty seminal capsule, and therefore in the virgin state, she can only lay male eggs” (99). Ayesha’s breeding experiments in the recesses of the honeycomb-like caves attest to the spinster’s perception as being a paradoxically fertile virginal figure with female powers of reproduction and little need for men.

Although Ayesha here attributes the resurrection or reincarnation of Kallikrates in the form of Leo Vincey to be the result of her own work of watching over her lover's dead body for two thousand years, the novel quite explicitly contradicts her statement by its insistence (by way of the "evidence" presented by the Sherd of Amenartas), that Leo is in fact the descendant of Kallikrates's wife, not of his passion-ridden but celibate lover. Moreover, in Haggard's sequel, *Ayesha: or, The Return of She*, Ayesha actually kills Leo by the force of her pent-up desires.

Like Miss Havisham, She is more dangerous because of her containment; the "unfulfilled desire" with which she has been "tortured day and night" (199) has built up, and Holly worries about its effects if let loose upon the world:

After much thinking I could only conclude that this wonderful creature, whose passion had kept her for so many years chained as it were, and comparatively harmless, was now about to be used by Providence as a means to change the order of the world, and possibly, by the building up of a power that could no more be rebelled against or questioned than the decrees of Fate, to change it materially for the better. (256)

Holly's fears about the results of She's release from the confinement of Kôr recall Victorian anxieties about the ever-increasing numbers of single women in the popular press, census results, and the workforce. Ayesha's passion is dangerous for two reasons: on the one hand, the passion, however destructive to Ayesha's peace of mind, has been the means of her containment; on the other hand, the "torture" of its build up points to its potential to overflow and wreak destruction. If Holly's statement is placed in the context of more general Victorian attitudes about growing female independence, it acknowledges a very real anxiety that women's former containment has bred resentment, which (once it escapes domestic

confines) has the potential to be both powerful and destructive. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ayesha must be banished, rather violently, from the narrative.

Because of Ayesha's acknowledged power, the novel works to foreshadow her ultimate deflation and mockery. Her age and her virginity are the source of both the fear and fun with which she is treated throughout the novel. Although She is certain that she may rely on her beauty to sway men's affections, Haggard undercuts her eerie beauty and seeming classical containment with signs of a pervasive and overflowing grotesque energy. Haggard's attention to veils and curtains throughout the novel consciously hints at the unseen, corrupt body beneath. Holly's initial glimpse of She when she emerges from behind the curtain is complicated by his imagination of her. After a confused impression of feeling someone's eyes through the curtains, curiously described as "his or her gaze" (141), Holly begins to imagine not a genderless being but every woman behind the curtain: "Who could be behind it?—Some naked savage queen, a languishing Oriental beauty, or a nineteenth-century young lady, drinking afternoon tea?" (141). She's name, already described as "impersonal" but "rather awesome," encompasses a variety of possibilities for Holly, and his imagination transforms these possibilities into the multiple female identities lurking behind the curtain. Holly's conflation of these usually disparate types of women highlights an anxiety that the differences between women are superficial and that behind a curtain, there is no difference between a naked savage and a civilised young lady or, for that matter, between a woman who marries and one who does not. Behind the curtain, under the skin, all women are mysterious, frightening, uncontrollable.

After Holly is confronted with Ayesha's "beautiful white hand" and "silvery voice," he becomes enchanted. Yet his first impression of her body is one which focuses on its corporeality and decay: "the curtain was drawn, and a tall figure stood before us. I say a

figure, for not only the body, but also the face was wrapped up in a soft white, gauzy material in such a way as to remind me most forcibly of a corpse in grave clothes” (142). Holly mistrusts his ghastly impression since “the wrappings were so thin that one could distinctly see the gleam of pink flesh beneath them” (142). All the same, both of Holly’s descriptions of the form he sees before him attest to the corruptible human flesh lurking beneath Ayesha’s gauzy coverings, and reduce the “virgin goddess” as did the Amahagger’s smirking comments about her, to “flesh.” Job, unswayed by Ayesha’s charms, is frightened by the “corpse a-coming sliding down the passage” (195). Without knowing in advance that he is looking at a woman, Job refers to the corpse’s unidentifiable gender, and yells “Here it comes!” before “[jamming] his face against the wall.” (195). The most misogynistic of the three travellers, Job sees through Ayesha’s disguise. Ustane, too, who is not blinded by desire, claims that she sees through Ayesha’s veil: “I am not a Queen, nor do I live forever, but a woman’s heart is heavy to sink through waters, however deep, oh Queen! and a woman’s eyes are quick to see, even through thy veil, oh Queen!” (226). Ustane seems to see past Ayesha’s coverings to the decaying body beneath, and like an “inspired prophetess,” foretells She’s continuing singleness, her doom to spinsterhood: “Never in this life shall [Leo] look thee in the eyes and call thee spouse. Thou too art doomed, I see” (227). As the conclusion of *She* and its lesser-read sequel attest, Ustane’s prophecy is true, for what is to be the wedding kiss between Ayesha and Leo kills him.

E. K. Johnson’s illustrations to the original serialised version of *She*, which appeared in the *Graphic* magazine between October 1886 and January 1887, reinforce She’s corpselike qualities and her isolation.⁴⁷ In all five images in which She appears, she is isolated spatially from the other characters, her body rarely even overlapping with another (see fig. 4-8). All the other women who are depicted are shown to be touching other characters or surrounded

⁴⁷ Haggard declined to have these illustrations reproduced in the one-volume edition of *She*.



Fig. 4. E. K. Johnson, "The hand grasped the curtain, and drew it aside," *She* by H. Rider Haggard, *Graphic* 13 Nov 1886: 521.



Fig. 5. E. K. Johnson, "When the lamps were held up I saw that it was nothing but a vast charnel house," *She* by H. Rider Haggard, *Graphic* 20 Nov, 1886: 549.



Fig. 6. E. K. Johnson, "Next second her tall and willowy form was staggering back across the room," *She* by H. Rider Haggard, *Graphic* 27 Nov 1886: 577.

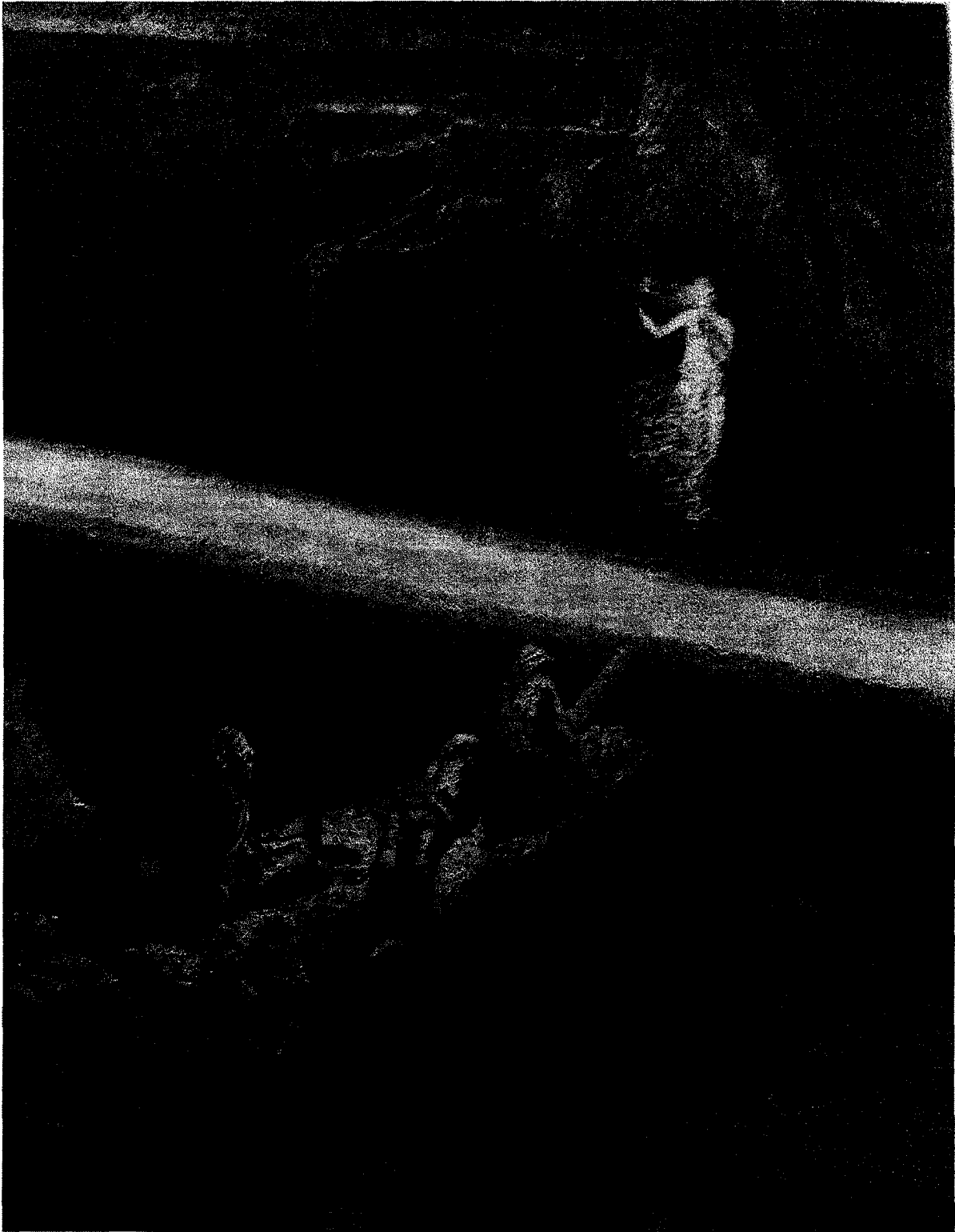


Fig. 7. E. K. Johnson, "‘It is safe,’ she called," *She* by H. Rider Haggard, *Graphic* 18 Dec 1886: 661.

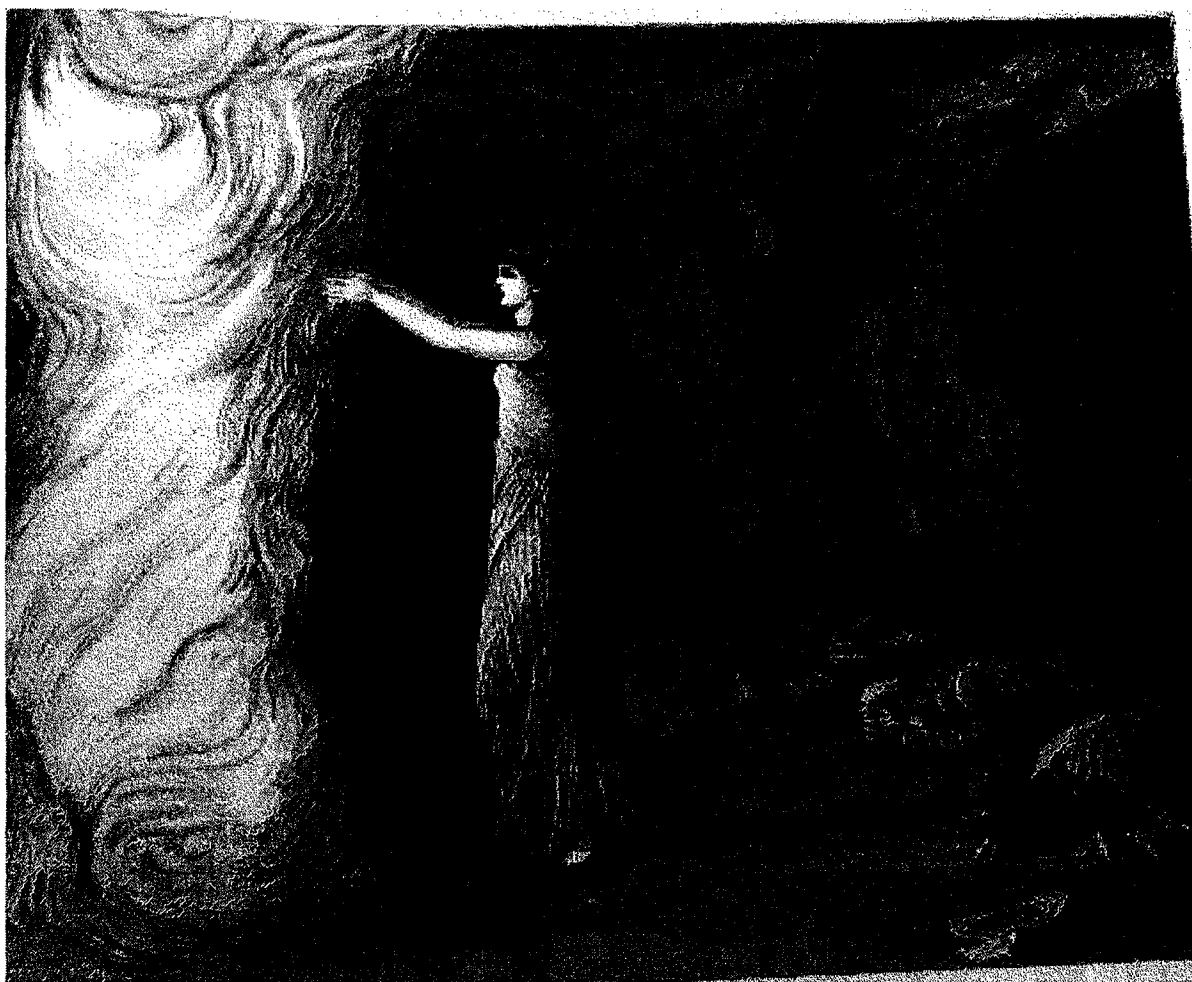


Fig. 8. E. K. Johnson, "Ayesha turned towards it, and stretched her arms to greet it," *She* by H. Rider Haggard, *Graphic* 25 Dec 1886: 685.

by them, and Ustane is depicted as actively clinging to Leo (see fig. 9). In the first four images, She looks like a mummy, entirely veiled in gauzy fabric, although all of the images also suggest what Holly's eyes envision: the contours of She's body (see fig. 4-7). Although Ayesha's white coverings are not decaying and "yellowing" like Miss Havisham's, the fabric used by the Amahagger to clothe themselves is stolen from the tombs of the dead. While it is not stipulated where She's body coverings come from, the absence of manufacture in the caves of Kôr suggests that she too has in fact robbed the bodies of the dead to clothe herself. The final image of Ayesha in the *Graphic's* illustrations shows her about to step into the rolling flames of the Pillar of Life (see fig. 8). Although she seems relatively harmless in the illustration (and less mind-numbingly beautiful than the novel would lead one to expect), she has caused the three men in the room to appear as though dead on the ground, and her ability to fell roomfuls of men has been established by the novel. In the illustration, She is modestly clothed as she prepares to enter the flames with her arms extended (although the text seems to indicate that she has removed *all* her veils as a precaution against their immolation in the flames of life). The moment of her transformation from beautiful woman to ape-like creature is elided by the illustrator, whose next image depicts Leo's rescue of Holly on a rather phallic-looking overhanging rock. As is the case with Louisa, the spinster discussed in "Single Life Versus Married Life,"⁴⁸ Ayesha's transformation occurs in the text only, invisible and thereby more evocative and more frightening.

Not only is Ayesha's corporeality stressed by repeated reference to her "flesh" and her grave-like clothing, but the telltale features of the spinster, which appear so violently at the end of the novel, are foreshadowed. As Gilbert and Gubar assert, "The mosaic reality behind the false commandments of *She-who-must-be-obeyed*, Holly and Leo learn, is and always was a bald, blind, naked, shapeless, infinitely wrinkled female animal" (21).

⁴⁸ Louisa is discussed in the first section of this chapter, pages 22-24.



Fig. 9. E. K. Johnson, "Even now, mayhap, *She* heareth us," *She* by H. Rider Haggard, *Graphic* 4 Dec 1886: 605.

Furthermore, the signs of Ayesha's 2000-year-old virginity are distinguishable at key moments in the text. For example, when She has neglected the dying Leo because she does not know that he is the reincarnation of her former lover Kallikrates, the thought of his death and the extension of her years of celibacy produces a strong emotion visible on her face. The way in which her face is described, however, associates Ayesha's still-beautiful body with the decay associated with the spinster. When Ayesha's head-wrapping slips back, Holly sees the change creep over her countenance:

Five minutes slowly passed and I saw that she was abandoning hope; her lovely oval face seemed to fall in and grow visibly thinner beneath the pressure of mental agony whose pencil drew black lines about the hollows of her eyes. The coral faded even from her lips, till they were as white as Leo's face, and quivered pitifully.

(198)

Like Louisa's face and body, which shrinks from "grape" to "raisin," forcing her nose and shoulders into prominence, Ayesha's face similarly begins to "fall in" as she recognises that she may have destroyed her last chance for marriage and happiness. Not surprisingly, when Leo recovers and Ayesha's chances for matrimony revive, her looks regain their earlier bloom, and she apologises to Holly by affirming "Thou seest after all I am a very woman" (199). It was indeed the "woman" in Ayesha that was beginning to show through her perfect façade; it was her virginity that was asserting itself visually on her frame. As she acknowledges, she has lived in "a Hell" for two thousand years, "tormented by the memory of a crime, tortured day and night with unfulfilled desire—without companionship, without comfort, without death, and led on only down my dreary road by the marsh lights of Hope" (199). It is the "unfulfilled desire" that causes her face to sink in; the same desire leads her to blast Ustane, whose "sin is that she stands between [Ayesha] and her desire" (201).

Although he is largely blinded by Ayesha's beauty, Holly detects the signs of this repressed passion on her face from the first time she unveils it to him: "Though the face before me was that of a young woman of certainly not more than thirty years, in perfect health, and the first flush of ripened beauty, yet it had stamped upon it a look of unutterable experience, and of deep acquaintance with grief and passion" (155). Tellingly, the age given to Ayesha by Holly is "not more than thirty years"; although the age at which a woman crossed the threshold from maid to *old* maid varies slightly, the most common age cited for this transformation was thirty.⁴⁹ Despite an exterior which belies the truth of Ayesha's ageing virginity, the signs of a repressed passion cannot be entirely hidden.

It is not until Holly, Leo, and Job descend into the cave described as "the very womb of the earth" that Ayesha's grotesque sexuality, dangerously repressed for so many centuries, fully manifests itself. The passage toward She's domain through stagnant canals foreshadowed the state of the final womb-like space Haggard presents. Significantly, the "living flames" in which Ayesha bathes possess "virgin strength," so that it is a virgin womb that in the end condemns Ayesha to display what she has been all along. Unaware of the implications of her own statement, She tells the three men that the flame reveals one's true self: "For from the germ of what thou art in that dread moment shall grow the fruit of what thou shalt be for all unreckoned time" (192). Deceived (like so many fictional spinsters) into

⁴⁹ In most Victorian chronologies of spinsterhood, a single woman's charms could decline as early as age twenty-five, and were often believed to expire around age thirty. Occasionally, women are admitted to be attractive as late as thirty-five. Julia Swan points out that in two articles on the spinster from *Eliza Cook's Journal* in 1849 and 1850, the author believes that "the rubicon age was taken to be thirty, after which one becomes an 'old maid,'" "Single Blessedness: Representations of the Spinster in Charlotte Brontë, Wilkie Collins and Selected Periodical Essays." (Diss. Dalhousie U, 2001) 35. Charlotte Yonge is more generous in her 1877 conduct book *Womankind*, stating that it would be "ridiculous" if a woman did not keep to the ranks of youth up to age thirty or thirty-five (284), but she also admits that in "old-fashioned novels," women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty "were absolute old maids" (284). Moreover, her extension of a woman's *young* maidenhood to age thirty-five is meant to be generous. Lilian Bell's novel, discussed in the introduction, opens on the night her spinster protagonist must "bury" her youth—her thirtieth birthday. The woman specifically associates the death of her maidenhood with this threshold: "To-night I am a gay young thing of twenty-nine. To-morrow I shall be an old maid," *The Love Affairs of an Old Maid* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1895) 3.

believing in her eternal youth, Ayesha, by stepping into the “flame of Life,” unwittingly reveals herself as “fruit” that has long been overripe. “[C]lad in nothing but her abundant locks,” She is finally revealed in the flesh, and the absence of veils and coverings signals the focus on her body, no longer covered in a classical (and beautiful) disguise (291). In one moment, She is transformed from maid to old maid, manifesting the telltale features of the spinster:

But suddenly—more suddenly than I can describe—a change came over her face, a change which I could not define or explain on paper, but none the less a change. The smile vanished, and in its place there came a dry, hard look; the rounded face seemed to grow pinched, as though some great anxiety were leaving its impress upon it. The glorious eyes, too, lost their light, and, as I thought, the form its perfect shape and erectness. (292)

Like the spinsters in caricature, Ayesha here begins to lose her fertile flesh, as her face assumes a sour expression. Not only does she lose the “wonderful roundness and beauty” of her arm, but her face ages and her voice cracks. Her hair, a symbol of her powerful sexuality, falls out at once, and She begins to exhibit the baldness often associated with old maids. Job, who as usual is more perceptive than the other two, foams at the lips, yelling “*Look!—look!—look!* she’s shrivelling up! she’s turning into a monkey!” (293). As several scholars suggest, She’s decline suggests a Darwinian devolution, perhaps hinting that her womb does not or cannot foster the development of the species.⁵⁰ Her comparison with apes continues, as she is described as being “no larger than a baboon” or “monkey” (294). Holly states the true source of their horror — that the woman who stands before them, “too hideous for words,” is the “*same* woman” as the one who enraptured them with her beauty

⁵⁰ See, for example, Lisa Hopkins, *Giants of the Past*, and Shawn Malley, “‘Time Hath No Power Against Identity’: Historical Continuity and Archaeological Adventure in H. Rider Haggard’s *She*,” *English Literature in Transition* 40:3 (1997): 275-97.

(294, original emphasis). The horror that Holly, Leo, and Job (and arguably Haggard) feel at this moment is that women, especially single women, can hide their dangerous, grotesque, uncontrolled sexual energies beneath veiled façades and inside domestic interiors, energies that have the potential to destroy when they escape.

Indeed, on several occasions, Holly notes that it is only She's confinement and isolation that have kept her from taking over the world. The potential power represented by Ayesha — and by extension all unmarried women removed from the control of men — is enormous. He reflects upon the effects of She's potential arrival in England:

[I]t made me shudder to think what would be the result of her arrival there. What her powers were, I knew, and I could not doubt but that she would exercise them to the full. It might be possible to control her for a while, but her proud, ambitious spirit would be certain to break loose and avenge itself for the long centuries of her solitude. (256)

Read as a spinster, She becomes an emblem of the hordes of single women actually and fictionally set loose upon the British public. Outside the boundaries of normal control mechanisms, such as marriage and domestic life, spinsters, who increasingly worked outside the home and who had begun to clamour for their rights, were a force to be reckoned with. Holly's acknowledgement of She's power reflects that anxiety. Embedded in this anxiety is a realisation that oppression has fostered the potential for rebellion. She's cloistered existence in the caves of Kôr, her voluntary "going in," has removed her grotesque energies from the public eye, but Haggard, like Dickens, seems to acknowledge the fears elicited by sights unseen. Holly muses upon the effects of She's social take-over:

After much thinking I could only conclude that this wonderful creature, whose passion had kept her for so many centuries chained as it were, and comparatively

harmless, was now about to be used by Providence as a means to change the order of the world, and possibly, by the building up of a power that could no more be rebelled against or questioned than the decrees of Fate, to change it materially for the better. (256)

Holly here entertains the idea that the energies repressed for so long in Ayesha might contain the power to transform society in a positive way. The novel, however, in destroying this woman before she can begin her reign, enacts a banishment that seems designed to quell not only Ayesha but any woman who seeks social control. After She is reduced to “a hideous little monkey frame, covered with crinkled yellow parchment,” Holly reconsiders

Providence’s plan for women like Ayesha:

Ayesha locked up in her living tomb waiting from age to age for the coming of her lover worked by small change in the order of the World. But Ayesha strong and happy in her love, clothed in immortal youth and godlike beauty, and the wisdom of the centuries, would have revolutionised society, and even perchance have changed the destiny of Mankind. Thus she opposed herself against eternal Law, and, strong though she was, by it was swept back to nothingness—swept back with shame and hideous mockery! (295)

Holly’s thoughts on She at this point seem eerily reminiscent of the mainstream, middle-class Victorian attitudes toward the spinster. Her retirement from the public eye was encouraged, even though such invisibility created its own anxieties about the negative energies building up in such repressed spaces. However, what seemed also to be a concern was that such a woman, once married, would refuse to obey ordinary rules of submission because she was used to independence. Many of the caricatures, articles, and (to a certain degree) novels about the Victorian spinster aim to reduce her power in much the same terms

Holly deduces have been used against Ayesha. Like the spinster, She is “swept back with shame and hideous mockery” because of the fear and danger her public existence represents.

Despite Ayesha’s banishment from the novel, however, her death, like Miss Havisham’s, is uncertain. As She herself says to Holly, “I tell thee that naught really dies. There is no such thing as Death, though there be a thing called Change” (149). Even at the moment of her transformation into a “monkey,” she claims that she will return, a statement Haggard turned into fact when he had her reappear in her monkeylike shape on a Himalayan mountain in his sequel *Ayesha, or The Return of She* (1905), as well as in two “prequels,” *She and Allan* (1921), and *Wisdom’s Daughter* (1923).⁵¹ Even in the final episode of her tale, it is not clear She is dead. After she kills Leo with the force of her first kiss on the lips, and disappears into the darkness, Holly still “cannot think her dead”⁵² Ayesha cannot die because she embodies a host of women who, though they are not engaged in the traditional female role of motherhood, seemed in the nineteenth century to possess the power of reproduction if only because their numbers and social presence appeared on the rise. Ayesha’s own two-thousand-year-old frame—grotesque, overflowing, and undying—incarnates popular Victorian anxieties about unmarried women, whose socially sanctioned invisibility bred new fears about what was hidden inside a domestic sphere uncontrolled by men.

⁵¹ Not only did the initial novel *She* spawn three successive novels by Haggard himself but, as Daniel Karlin notes in his introduction to the Oxford edition of the novel, it also inspired eleven film versions and a parody, *He* (1889), by Haggard’s friend Andrew Lang. Furthermore, *She* was a best-seller in its day and has never been out of print, attesting to the truth (on one level) that Ayesha can never die.

⁵² H. Rider Haggard, *Ayesha: The Return of She* (London: Macdonald and Co., 1956) 301.

“Much More in Her than Comes Out”:

Marian’s Coming Out and Going In Again in *New Grub Street*

“Her image is very faint before me.”

— Jasper Milvain, in George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (1891)

Often cited as George Gissing’s greatest novel, *New Grub Street* (1891) possesses a critical popularity that has long rested on its detailed investigation of the vagaries of a literary marketplace its author knew well.⁵³ Amidst the novel’s bleak portrait of the moral, physical, and financial struggles of fledgling writers, however, is the story of the sexual awakening of Marian Yule, a young literary woman whose nascent desire and growing independence become figured as grotesque, so that she may be banished from the novel and from the memory of her former suitor, Jasper Milvain. Marian’s forced “going in” demonstrates how not only romances such as those of Haggard or, arguably Dickens, but even realist texts invoked the trope of the spinster in an attempt to curtail female desire and self-sufficiency.

New Grub Street offers a more sobering portrait of the banishment of the desiring spinster, partly because the woman in question is so young. Introduced as a “good example of the modern literary girl,” Marian Yule is precisely the type of person to shatter conventional notions of femininity.⁵⁴ However, as Pierre Coustillas observes, Gissing was “[a] Victorian in spite of himself,” sensitive to the social currents of his time but “no

⁵³ See, for example James M. Keech, “Gissing’s *New Grub Street* and ‘The Triple-Headed Monster,’” *George Gissing: Critical Essays*, ed. Jean-Pierre Michaux (London: Vision, 1981) 155-61; P. J. Keating, “*New Grub Street* (Introduction),” *George Gissing: Critical Essays*, ed. Jean-Pierre Michaux (London: Vision, 1981) 187-94; Christina Lupman and Tilman Reitz, “*New Grub Street*’s Self-Consciousness,” *George Gissing: Voices of the Unclassed*, ed. Martin Ryle and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Aldershot, Hants.: 2005) 133-44; John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision, 1978).

⁵⁴ George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. Audrey Bilger (New York: Random House, 2002) 14.

theoretician or reformer.”⁵⁵ His novels grapple with several topical women’s rights issues but in equivocal ways, so that he has been seen alternately as a defender of women’s rights and as an anti-feminist. As David Grylls sums it up, succinctly if paradoxically: “Gissing was a woman-worshipping misogynist with an interest in female emancipation.”⁵⁶ Indeed, although Marian initially seems to represent the more progressive, independent figure of the New Woman, Gissing’s portrait reveals her to possess the qualities of the more old-fashioned spinster who, like Miss Havisham and Ayesha, must be exorcised from the tale. Marian begins the novel as a model of self-control, but she imprudently allows her desire to awaken. As Sarah Stickney Ellis had cautioned in *The Daughters of England*, the “misplaced affection” Marian allows herself to feel blights her features and she is banished from the novel, forgotten even by her former suitor.

Although he has seen her in the Museum Reading-room, Jasper Milvain is first captivated by Marian’s unusual appearance when he observes her walking near his mother’s home in Wattleborough parish. Jasper’s changing impression of Marian becomes the perspective through which the reader must judge her appearance, yet Jasper’s opinion of Marian is unstable and he constantly seeks the affirmation of others. Attracted almost against his will by her interesting and unusual head, neck and grace of movement, he asks her cousin, Amy Reardon, to confirm his impression of her. Instead of giving an affirmative response to Jasper’s question about Marian’s “promise of good looks,” Amy replies: “I’m afraid I can’t say that she did. She has a good face, but—rather plain” (67). Reaching back into his memory, Jasper begins to confirm Amy’s impression of her cousin, but finds that he

⁵⁵ Pierre Coustillas, “George Gissing’s Female Portraiture,” *George Gissing: Critical Essays*, ed. Jean-Pierre Michaux (London: Vision, 1981) 99.

⁵⁶ David Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986). For more perspectives on Gissing’s attitudes toward women, see also Pierre Coustillas, “Gissing’s Female Portraiture”; Lloyd Fernando, “Gissing’s Studies in ‘Vulgarism’: Aspects of his Anti-Feminism,” *George Gissing: Critical Essays*, 108-120; and Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1963).

cannot. Something about Marian's appearance confuses him and causes him uncharacteristic hesitation: "Well, I shouldn't wonder if most people called her a trifle plain even now; and yet—no, that's hardly possible, after all. She has no colour. Wears her hair short" (67). Attempting to confirm Amy's (and presumably society's) estimation of her appearance, Jasper finds that he cannot quite agree that she is plain. He is captivated by her "capital head" and accounts for his admiration of her by admitting: "She's the kind of girl that gets into one's head, you know—suggestive; much more in her than comes out until one knows her very well" (67). What Jasper seems to be grappling with is Marian's barely contained passions and desires at the beginning of the novel. Marian's contributions to the family income, by researching and writing articles to be published under her father's name, are performed at a serious cost to her own personal desire. Although Marian performs literary work which might appear progressive for women, such writing does not provide Marian with a sense of independence and liberty; instead, she struggles with her subjection to filial duty. Jasper is intrigued by her containment and seems to recognise the unfulfilled passion in her character when he acknowledges that there is "much more in her" than he has yet seen.

Jasper's attraction seems largely to be based upon Marian's "capital head." The shape of her head and neck captivate him, but the nature of this shape is never described in the novel. Although she is first seen wearing "a yellow straw hat of the shape originally appropriated to males [and] her dark hair was cut short" (12), she is never masculine to Jasper, who seems to see only the female charms of Marian's unadorned curls. Jasper enjoys watching Marian move, admiring "[t]he beautiful outline of her bent head" (40) and thinking that "her head and neck were admirably formed" (24). Marian is her father's daughter, and of Alfred Yule's head the reader is given a fuller, more phrenological description: "his head seemed a disproportionate culmination to his meagre body, it was so large and massively

featured. Intellect and uncertainty of temper were equally marked upon his visage; his brows were knitted in a permanent expression of severity” (19). Alfred Yule has suffered many disappointments in his life of literary labour, and both his frustration and his intellect are marked on his head and features. Although Marian is a model of containment early on in the novel, her head is still attractive and unmarked by the hardships of life; however, the continual references to her “capital head,” combined with the description of her father’s marked skull, seem to point to the possibility that fluctuations in Marian’s character too may alter and mark her body. Her cousin Amy, who later usurps Jasper’s affections, notably possesses a more classical countenance:

In harmony with the broad shoulders, she had a strong neck; as she bore the lamp into the room a slight turn of her head showed splendid muscles from the ear downward. It was a magnificently clear-cut bust; one thought, in looking at her, of the newly-finished head which some honest sculptor has wrought with his own hand from the marble block; there was a suggestion of “planes” and of the chisel. The atmosphere was cold; ruddiness would have been quite out of place on her cheeks, and a flush must have been the rarest thing there. (44-5)

Unlike Marian, whose body seems always to be barely containing her passion, Amy, made of “marble,” seems incapable of passion at all. Her emotions are correct rather than effusive, and her chiselled and perfect exterior allows not even a flush to escape her control. Marian’s frame is mutable and will exhibit signs of the grotesque as she lets down her guard.

Even in his initial phase of attraction to Marian, Jasper acknowledges that he is “afraid of that girl” (38) and promises himself to stay away from her for a long time as “she’s dangerous” (41). Like Ayesha, Marian represses her desires, rendering her frighteningly attractive to Jasper. Marian speaks “in rather slow tones, thoughtfully, gently”

(18), but even her voice harbours passion beneath the surface: “Marian’s voice lent itself very naturally and sweetly to the expression of warm feeling. Emphasis was not her habit; it only needed that she should put off her ordinary reserve, utter quietly the emotional thought which so seldom might declare itself and her tones had an exquisite womanliness” (109). As the conduct books describe, Marian’s reserve is akin to a garment that, when “put off,” allows her “exquisite womanliness” to show through. Because Marian is in the company of Jasper at this moment, her “exquisite womanliness” is akin to her desire, which she reveals to him. Sarah Stickney Ellis warns against such rents in the fabric of decorum, and it seems as though Marian, who is after all a plain girl, is wrong to reveal so much of her inner self to Jasper.

Marian’s growing attraction toward Jasper causes her to begin to resent her father’s control over her. Alfred Yule seems not fully to realise that he is forcing his daughter into an existence she abhors and one that might cause her to remain unmarried: “It would not have been pleasant for him to foresee a life of spinsterhood for his daughter, but she was young, and—she was a valuable assistant” (93). Marian’s youth, obedience, and reserve allow her to appear reasonably attractive at the beginning of the novel, but her new feelings of love cause her to give vent to her frustration at the life she leads. Her mother “has never dreamt that Marian, the still, gentle Marian, could be driven to revolt” (166), but Mrs. Yule watches the transformation with fear and interest. Marian’s “submissive and timid nature” prevents her from complete rebellion, but she disregards her father’s opinion of Jasper and begins to complain about her work. Marian’s “youth of monastic seclusion” precludes her finding an “[i]deal personage,” and her attraction to Jasper is compared to the situation of a starving person presented with food (181). As Marian allows herself to feel her hunger for the first time in her life, however, her escaping desire becomes figured as abnormal and grotesque.

Indeed, when Jasper proposes to Marian, her emotional awakening is, interestingly, compared to a disrobing, as she fully allows her inner emotions to be felt and seen.⁵⁷ When she enters the room, Jasper is drawn to her head and its unveiling: “He had always admired the shape of Marian’s head, and the beauty of her soft, curly hair. As he watched her uncovering it, he was pleased with the grace of her arms and the pliancy of her slight figure” (312). Still, this disrobing is not enough for Jasper, who wishes to “receive assurance of Marian’s devotion” (315) and who notices that Marian “did not seem to treat him with the same deference, the same subdual of her own personality” (314). Partly due to a new-found self-confidence resulting from her inheritance, Marian has begun to revel in her power over Jasper, and she begins to let go of her former restraints of personality. It is when the two lovers touch hands that Marian’s attempts at containment are finally abandoned:

She was nervous, painfully self-conscious, touched with maidenly shame, but could not abandon herself to that delicious emotion which ought to have been the fulfilment of all her secret imaginings. Now at length there began a throbbing in her bosom. Keeping her face averted, her eyes cast down, she waited for a repetition of the note that was in that last “I love you.” She felt a change in the hands that held hers—a warmth, a moist softness; it caused a shock through her veins. (320)

The awakening of Marian’s throbbing heart seems to dissolve her last attempts at reserve. Jasper notices that “her face and neck were warmer-hued” and she becomes “more desirable to him than ever yet” (320). As her blood courses through her veins and flushes her face, her awakening passion is described as the shedding of a garment:

Marian closed her eyes and abandoned herself to the luxury of the dream. It was her first complete escape from the world of intellectual routine, her first taste of

⁵⁷ As a working woman without a chaperone, Marian places herself in a new position of sexual danger. On Gissing’s treatment of the sexual vulnerability of the working woman, see Emma Liggins, “Her Appearance in Public: Sexual Danger, Urban Space and the Working Woman,” *George Gissing: Voices of the Unclassed*, 29-45.

life. All the pedantry of her daily toil slipped from her like a cumbrous garment; she was clad only in her womanhood. Once or twice a shudder of self-consciousness went through her, and she felt guilty, immodest; but upon that sensation followed a surge of passionate joy, obliterating memory and afterthought. (320-1)

The mask of reserve Marian has been wearing up until now has been removed, revealing the desires underneath her hitherto controlled exterior. Despite the increase of Jasper's affections for her at this moment, Marian's disrobing proves the turning point in their relationship. After this, Jasper grows colder and more reserved, while Marian, feeling her desire freely for the first time, feels herself "new-born" and "strange to [her]self" (323).

The results of Marian's release from her former reserve are noted by her father, who sees a "change" in her: "Her health seemed to have improved; . . . She was more womanly in her bearing and speech, and exercised an independence, appropriate indeed to her years, but such as had not formerly declared itself" (388). Alfred Yule correctly suspects that the cause is not simply her inheritance but also her love for Jasper. Interestingly, he pathologises his daughter's affections, thinking that an "alarming symptom" is "the increased attention she paid to her personal appearance" (388). In taking off the "cumbrous garment" of her everyday reserve in front of Jasper, Marian seems to have released something that can no longer be contained. Indeed, when her father claims that he will not see her if she marries Jasper, her passions, formerly so controlled, are wildly apparent: "Her face, outlined to express a gentle gravity, was now haughtily passionate; nostrils and lips thrilled with wrath, and her eyes were magnificent in their dark fierceness" (392). Her mother, "terrified by a transformation she would have thought was impossible" exclaims "don't look like that" (393), attempting to change the young woman's frightening, uncontrolled appearance.

Although the transformation of Marian's features is less extreme than Ayesha's or Miss Havisham's, her failure to continue to repress her desires spells the beginning of her progress toward the grotesque.

Marian's loss of fortune decreases her value in her mercenary suitor's eyes, but in their last meeting, it is her loss of reserve and containment that actually disgusts Jasper. Marian arrives late, "panting from a hurried walk, and this affect[s] Jasper disagreeably" (485). He compares her to Amy, whom he has recently seen again, and thinks "how impossible it would be for that refined person to fall into such disorder" (485). Jasper's comparison of the cousins recalls Ellis's comment that a woman should "occupy a sphere in which the elements of discord cannot with propriety be admitted – [and] in which beauty and order are expected to denote her presence" (*Daughters* 20). When Marian first allowed herself to feel passion, Jasper was affected by her emotive human soul and body; however, he has too much regard for the dictates of the society into which he wants so desperately to climb. As John Goode notes, Marian becomes desexualised "from the overlapping of social and sexual selection" as Jasper moves toward a choice of wife with more money and more ladylike attributes (134-5).⁵⁸ The womanliness that once attracted him he now sees as discordant and grotesque: "He observed, too, with more disgust than usual, the signs in Marian's attire of encroaching poverty—her unsatisfactory gloves, her mantle out of fashion" (485). By exhibiting signs of disorder in both her body and her attire, Marian seems to have fallen into the trap cautioned against by the writers of conduct books. Her "misplaced affection" has altered her appearance and, like so many spinsters in conduct books and periodical articles, she will quickly sink into obscurity. Recognising that her love is no longer returned, Marian successfully struggles to recontain her passion. Her frame is

⁵⁸ Goode reads *New Grub Street* as reflecting a Darwinian need for survival and adaptation on the literary scene. Marian is implicitly declared unfit by the novel; Gissing not only questions her suitability as a wife and mother but also removes her from the chain of literary production.

“shaken with soundless sobbing” and, at length, she “overcome[s] her excess of emotion” (488, 489). Marian seems unconsciously to know that it is time for her to “go in,” and go in she does. Without further complaint, she resumes her filial duty and accepts a job as an assistant in a public library outside London.

Marian ceases to be objectionable to anyone, but she also ceases to be visible. Her banishment from the novel is more dismal than those of Miss Havisham or Ayesha because the novel as a whole is so much darker. As Angus Wilson observes, the characters who eke out their starved existences in “barely furnished attics choked by London fog . . . do so amid the ugly surroundings of Gissing’s clumsy prose and in the cold light of his intellect which denied them all the shadows, fascinating, Gothic and poetic, that the wild imaginations of Dickens or Dostoyevsky lend to poverty, and without which there seems to be no distance put between us, the readers, and human misery.”⁵⁹ Indeed, Marian’s departure from the novel lacks any drama at all. Speaking to his now wife Amy, Jasper heightens the difference between the two cousins, one married and one unmarried, by stating that Amy is “a perfect woman” whereas “poor Marian was only a clever school-girl” (500). Although Marian is still under twenty-five and is thus quite young to be called an old maid, Jasper’s comment defines the difference in their natures. Tellingly, the younger Amy, twice married, assumes a social position of maturity and consequence while Marian is still referred to as a “girl.” Moreover, not only is Marian physically removed from London but she vanishes even from the memory of her former suitor, who claims “Her image is very faint before me . . . and soon I shall scarcely be able to recall it” (500). In Gissing’s realist fiction, the characters who forget Marian are less likeable than she, but her punishment for exhibiting her desire reflects the opinion of countless social commentators in the Victorian age.

Even as Gissing’s pointed mention of Marian’s new career as a library assistant

⁵⁹ Angus Wilson, “Lower Depths of Literature,” *George Gissing: Critical Essays*, 123.

reinforces her banishment, it also provides some insight into the nature of the threat single women posed. Her earlier (albeit reluctant) labour at the British Museum was to read and criticise existing literary material, which she saw as a form of dubious reproduction: "About her, what aim had they save to make new books out of those already existing, that yet newer books might in turn be made out of theirs?" (100). At the same time, Marian's successful production of new texts out of old texts, a form of reproduction quite outside conventional forms of female biological duties, lies outside standard "feminine" reproduction; it does not involve the uterus, nor does it use up female desire in the way that maternity was believed to do. Pierre Coustillas writes that "Gissing has no sympathy for blue stockings or radical-minded women. There appears his conservatism, along with one of his many paradoxes: he wishes for woman's emancipation, but as he realises that it will be achieved at the expense of her femininity, Gissing stands abashed at the consequences of his own suggestions" (104). When Marian is banished from the novel, her literary activities are hence curtailed: she moves from a role of literary reproduction to literary circulation. Like the maiden aunt who was loved and accepted because she looked after her sister's children, Marian is relegated to looking after other authors' books, doubly invisible because she is no longer seen and no longer writes. However, like so many literary spinsters banished from the texts in which they appear, Marian lives on. Bearing her father's name and not her own, her existing literary works still circulate, and "newer books" may yet be made from these. Although Gissing attempts to quell Marian's literary fertility by removing her from the work of textual reproduction, neither he nor the Victorian culture from which he sprang could limit the paradoxical fertility of spinsters. As the next chapter will show, the lateral reproduction of old maids, in a variety of dimensions, continued to proliferate.

Chapter 2

“Children of the Barren”: The Lateral Reproduction of Spinsters

If the surplus female population with which we are overrun increases much more, we shall be eaten up with women.

— “Our Female Supernumeraries. In a Series of Views: The Alarmist View.”

Punch (1850)

In *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Charles Dickens devotes one of seven sketches to four “peculiar” spinsters, the Miss Willises, who reside within “the circumscribed limits” of the parish he describes.¹ When they moved to the parish thirteen years before, these sisters were “far from juvenile” and “the authorities in matrimonial cases” regarded the youngest as “in a very precarious state, while the eldest sister was positively given over, as being far beyond all human hope” (30). Since that time the Miss Willises have become carbon copies of one another: “They seemed to have no separate existence, but to have made up their minds just to winter through life together. They were three long graces in drapery, with the addition, like a school dinner, of another long grace afterwards—the three fates with another sister—the Siamese twins multiplied by two” (30).² Not only do their own bodies seem to be reproductions of each other but the Miss Willises soon begin to “show symptoms of summer” as one of them becomes engaged. The incredulous narrator and his neighbours watch the house, “frantic in their anxiety” to see which of the sisters is “the fortunate fair” (31). They are thwarted by the fact that “*all* the Miss Willises” squeeze into the glass-coach

¹ Dickens, Charles, *Sketches by Boz*, ed. Dennis Walder (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1995) 29. This particular sketch was originally published on June 18, 1835 in *The Evening Chronicle*.

² As Dennis Walder points out in his note to this passage, Dickens’s reference to “Siamese twins” is a contemporary one. It alludes to the twins joined at the breastbone born in Thailand in 1811 who were exhibited in London in 1829 (587n).

to go to the church; “*all* the Miss Willises” kneel down at the communion table to repeat “the marriage service in an audible voice;” and “*all* the Miss Willises” go “into hysterics at the conclusion of the ceremony” (32-3, original emphasis). The neighbours, indeed, would never have discovered which of the Miss Willises was now Mrs Robinson had it not been for “a circumstance of the most gratifying description, which *will* happen occasionally in the best-regulated families”: the youngest Miss Willis betrays her identity as Mrs Robinson through pregnancy, and is delivered of a baby girl (33). In the narrator’s confused description of events, however, it seems as though “*all* the Miss Willises” have produced this female child, so that what lingers in the mind at the conclusion of the comic story is the spinster’s bizarre power of self-replication.

Giving this trope of self-replication a more sinister if still comic twist is the illustration that accompanies a retelling of “The Fox Without a Tail” in the 1883 volume of Aesop’s fables translated and adapted by Alfred Caldecott and illustrated by Randolph Caldecott.³ “The Fox without a Tail” concerns a fox who, having lost his tail in a trap, thinks his life no longer worth living. Realising that the best way to “conceal his own deficiency” is to convince the other foxes to cut off their tails as well, he tells them “that a tail was an ungraceful thing; and, further, was a heavy appendage, and quite superfluous” (66-7). Fortunately, one of the foxes realises that cutting off their tails will benefit only the maimed fox, and the foxes are saved. The contemporary illustration accompanying this fable shows a spinster narrating a similar story to three young women (see fig. 10) with a caption that reads, “Nonsense, my dears! Husbands are ridiculous things & are quite unnecessary!” (Caldecott 67). Like the sly fox, the “maimed” spinster attempts to convince her companions to maim themselves by refusing the “completeness” of marriage, so that the Caldecott

³ Alfred Caldecott, trans. *Some of Aesop's Fables with Modern Instances*, illust. Randolph Caldecott (London: Macmillan and Co., 1883) 66-7.



*"Nonsense, my dears! Husbands are
ridiculous things & are quite unnecessary!"*

Fig. 10. Randolph Caldecott, "Nonsense, my dears! Husbands are ridiculous things & are quite unnecessary!" *Some of Aesop's Fables with Modern Instances*, trans. Alfred Caldecott (London: Macmillan and Co., 1883) 67.

illustration nicely encapsulates a widespread Victorian perception that spinsters — themselves incomplete — might try to blight other lives as well.

Together with Dickens's sketch, this retelling of the classical fable foregrounds the paradoxical “fertility” of the spinster and her uncanny ability to reproduce herself. Spinsters seemed to proliferate through what we might call lateral (as opposed to biological) reproduction, as their very representation in print media (e.g. census charts, periodical articles, and novels) was typically governed by figures of multiplication. This chapter focuses on such lateral reproduction, looking first at how nonfictional genres defined the problem of the “surplus” woman before turning to fiction to examine the novel's preoccupation with the spinster's contagious presence: her ability to persuade other women to follow the single life.

As Nina Auerbach points out in *Woman and the Demon*, one of the “most powerful” challenges offered by the spinster to domestic order was signalled by her incarnation in statistics: “Studies of the Victorian spinster abound in stark statistical tables or ominously swelling percentage charts indicating her inexorable proliferation, a creature born less of feminist ideology than of the Malthusian march of numbers.”⁴ Such “impersonal, irrefutable tabulations,” Auerbach suggests, raised the spectre of a mutation: a “new race of old maids” who would assume “power over the future” (114). As Chapter 1 has shown, the spinster's body was often characterised by overflow and unrepressed desire, so that the unmarried woman was paradoxically constructed as more “female” than her married counterpart (whose desire and sexuality were believed to be consumed by maternity). Translated into the textual form of statistics and tables, the sexual body now began to overflow and overpopulate the nation with more old maids. As in Dickens's sketch, in which the Miss Willises appear to be

⁴ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 113.

the product of cloning or spontaneous reproduction (“Siamese twins multiplied by two”) the sheer numbers of unmarried women sent a wave of panic through Victorian society, generating a search for a solution to this disturbance in the “natural” pattern of life and human reproduction. However, although the censuses of 1851 and 1861 notoriously showed a shocked Britain that the number and percentage of unmarried women were on the rise, the “problem” of the unmarried woman had less to do with actual numbers than with the severe limitations on middle-class women’s roles. As Martha Vicinus observes in *Independent Women*: “[a]ll available historical evidence points to a large number of unmarried women and men throughout European history. Like so many other social causes discovered by the Victorians to be problems—sanitation, slums, and slavery come to mind—single women of the middle-class had survived for centuries unnoticed.”⁵ What accounts for the new prominence of such women, she argues, was the restriction of female activities advocated by the doctrine of the separate spheres, along with a widespread belief that providing any kind of employment for women would prevent them from marrying. Despite the increasing numbers of working single women, both in fiction and in reality, commentators regularly attempted to force them back into the domestic spaces they were presumed to have vacated.

Emigration schemes represent one such attempt, seeking to redress the imbalance of the sexes by providing wives for unmarried bachelors living in British colonies overseas. The problem of “surplus” women could then be resolved by finding domestic roles for them outside England’s borders but inside British rule. As Sally Shuttleworth notes: “The schemes for female emigration in the late 40s and 50s were clothed in pious rhetoric about woman’s civilizing mission but were primarily schemes for disposing of unwanted spinsters.”⁶ An

1850 *Punch* article, “Our Female Supernumeraries. In a Series of Views,” confirms her point

⁵ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) 12.

⁶ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 195.

in its satiric account of fears of female overpopulation. Of the series of “views” defined by *Punch*, the “alarmist view” is, predictably, the most exaggerated:

If the surplus female population with which we are overrun increases much more, we shall be eaten up with women. What used to be our better half will soon become our worst nine-tenths; a numerical majority which it will be vain to contend with, and which will reduce our free and glorious constitution to that most degrading of all despotisms, a petticoat government.⁷

The more the female population increases, the more females it seems to produce, leading to a cannibalistic mass of women eating up both men and their institutions. The “cynical view” is hardly less alarmist: “All our difficulties arise from a superabundance of females. The only remedy for this evil is to pack up bag and baggage, and start them away” (1). The “domestic view” proposes a similar remedy: “The daughters of England are too numerous, and if their Mother cannot otherwise get them off her hands, she must send them abroad into the world” (1). Cast as a parent, Mother England must control the overpopulation of her female children. The “naturalist’s view” helpfully cites the example of the chaffinch: “in Sweden and other countries, in winter, the females migrate, and leave the males bachelors. It is to be wished that our own redundant females were far enough north to take wing, like the hen-chaffinch” (1). The article then concludes with *Punch*’s own “view,” which seems to agree that the only solution to the problem of “female supernumeraries” is to send them off to Australia, where “stalwart mates and solid meals might be found for all” if the Government could only “find them wings” (1). Like the naturalist, *Punch* too advocates a metamorphosis whereby unmarried women would sprout “wings,” taking themselves off to the colonies,

⁷ “Our Female Supernumeraries. In a Series of Views,” *Punch* XVIII (Jan-June 1850):1.

where they could settle comfortably into their “natural” role as angels in the house.⁸

The solution half-jokingly proposed by *Punch* was notoriously taken up very seriously by William Rathbone Greg, whose much-noted article “Why are Women Redundant?” (1862) aimed to “restore by an emigration of women that natural proportion between the sexes in the old country and the new ones.”⁹ Applying the law of supply and demand to tables of census results, Greg compares the state to a diseased body from which the “source of the disorder” needs to be “cut off” or, at least in the interim, bled: “A removal of superfluous numbers, in whatever rank, cannot fail gradually and indirectly to afford relief to the whole body corporate, — just as bleeding in the foot will relieve the head or the heart from distressing and perilous congestion” (285, 295).¹⁰ Not only does he characterise the number of unmarried women as symptomatic of a social disease but his language betrays itself (like the spinsters overpopulating his census charts), overcrowded by multiplying adjectives, verbs, and adverbs:

[T]here is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong. There are hundreds of thousands of women—not to speak more largely still—scattered through all ranks, but proportionally the most numerous in the middle and upper classes,—who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who,

⁸ Although Coventry Patmore did not publish his famous poem *The Angel in the House* until 1854, the metaphor was embedded prior to this date. Leigh Hunt wrote a poem called “An Angel in the House” in 1834, while Dickens’s Christmas book *Chimes* (1844) specifically calls a domestic woman figure an “Angel in his house.” *Charles Dickens: Christmas Books*, ed. Ruth Glancy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 179.

⁹ William Rathbone Greg, “Why are Women Redundant?” rpt in *Literary and Social Judgments*, 2nd ed. (London: Trübner and Co., 1869) 292.

¹⁰ Julia Swan provides an interesting discussion of Greg, spinsters, and the metaphor of disease in her dissertation “Single Blessedness: Representations of the Spinster in Charlotte Brontë, Wilkie Collins and Selected Periodical Essays,” (Diss. Dalhousie U, 2001).

not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves; who, in the place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own. (282)

For Greg, the “number” of single women is so alarming that he repeats the word three times in a single sentence, modifying it as “enormous *and* increasing,” “positively *and* relatively,” as well as “productive *and* prognostic” of “wretchedness *and* wrong” (my emphasis). His own language seems infected with the proliferation he is trying to curtail; though he insists upon the necessity of “cut[ting] off” the source of the spreading numbers of surplus women, his anxiety about them makes them appear to be on the increase. His fear is not only that the number of unmarried women is on the rise, however, but also that the independence and freedom they possess will spread to more traditional women: “Not only do the mischiefs, anomalies, and falsities in [the condition of women] unveil themselves more and more as we study the subject, but they are, we believe, every day actually on the increase” (282). Greg suggests that the rise in the numbers of single women infects the social body of woman, as “mischiefs, anomalies, and falsities” creep from beneath the veil of female modesty, just as the qualities of the grotesque emerge from beneath the classical body.

Guiding himself by the unerring laws of “Nature,” which “has no redundancies,” Greg states that although marriage is the “rule,” there is generally an “excess” of women “varying from two to five per cent” (290, 285). Using the census results of 1851, Greg establishes that although the proportion of women above twenty years of age should be six percent, it is in fact thirty percent.¹¹ His alarmed language attests to his belief that the proportion of unmarried women will continue to increase; indeed, so serious is this problem that “like the

¹¹ Although the increasing number of unmarried women was considered a social problem prior to 1851, the census of that year was the first to establish actual numbers of unmarried women because it was the first to ask about the respondent’s marital status.

sphinx's, society must solve [it] or die" (289, 284). Hence, Greg dispatches women into their "natural" place in men's homes by advocating emigration; marriage beneath their social status; or domestic service. Greg admits that men are partly to blame for the problem of female overpopulation because they live a life of "nominal" and not "real" celibacy, but he claims that once "female emigration has done its work, and drained away the excess and the special *obviousness* of the redundancy, . . . men will have to bid higher for the possession of [women]" (315, 305). This will then enhance women's value in the marriage market, especially if they increase their desirability by "imitat[ing]" the "charms" of their less virtuous sisters (306). Like the conduct books that banished the grotesque sexual body of the desiring spinster into the home, Greg attempts to treat the composite social "body" of single women by alleviating its grotesque symptoms, syphoning women off into appropriately domestic pursuits. If his suggestions are adopted, he asserts, "the apparent redundancy of women complained of now will vanish as by magic" (315). Still, as Greg's verbal anxiety over the "enormous and increasing" numbers of unmarried women demonstrates, such a problem was not about to vanish, for every article that publicised the increase of spinsters spread the word about singleness as a possibility.

The public perception that the numbers of spinsters were on the rise was triggered not only by census reports but also by the proliferation of discussions in print about the position of the unmarried woman. In 1844, Tabitha Glum (a pseudonym for Mrs Catherine Gore) could lament the fact that despite the "sudden inundation of tabby-bound volumes" detailing the morals and manners of the wives of England, "not a word is addressed, either in the way of exhortation, remonstrance, or applause, to the highly respectable order of the female community whose cause I have taken on myself to advocate," that is, the

“unfortunate females who lack the consolations of matronhood.”¹² By 1858, however, Margaret Oliphant could declare: “even novels—those arbitrary matchmakers—begin to see the propriety of recognising the condition of old maid; and even though they may ultimately marry their heroine, suffer her first to come to years of extreme discretion, and to settle on her own mode of life.”¹³ Although Oliphant believes that the actual number of unmarried women is exaggerated, she has noticed their preponderance in print and her perception is confirmed a few years later by Dora Greenwell: “If in the multitude of counsellors there is safety, how blest must be the security of single women! Every one who has a little spare wisdom at command, seems just now inclined to lay it out for their benefit.”¹⁴

Greenwell’s remarks appear in a review of six books treating the state of singleness, including *My Life, and What shall I do with it?*; *The Afternoon of Single Life*; *Hospitals and Sisterhoods*; and *Thoughts on some Questions relating to Women*. While Greenwell is suspicious of the motives inspiring the increase of advice literature preaching conformity and invisibility, she herself is disconcerted by the statistics that have fuelled its popularity:

Even statistics have their pathetic side; and without entering into them very deeply, it is evident that every successive year adds its visible reinforcement to the already settled battalions of our single women: old maids, in growing graceful and useful, blessing and blest, have grown, at the same time, more numerous than they used to be. Of what is this fact significant? Is it a forced growth, the result of a highly artificial civilisation, chiefly showing us how far we have by this time got from Eden? (34)

¹² Tabitha Glum (Mrs. Catherine Gore), “A Bemoaning from Bath; Or, poor Old Maids,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 55 (Jan-June 1844): 199-200. Glum alludes to Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *Women of England* series but seems to ignore her *Daughters of England* (1842), which does address the fate of single women.

¹³ Margaret Oliphant, “The Condition of Women,” rpt in *Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors: Victorian Writing on Women by Women*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1995): 212.

¹⁴ Dora Greenwell, “Our Single Women,” *North British Review* LXXI (Feb 1862): 33-4.

Greenwell's article is conflicted. Despite her kind treatment of women who find themselves single, she deplores the ever-increasing "visible reinforcements" of the "battalions" of old maids already existing. On the one hand, she praises women who do valuable work both inside and outside the home; on the other, she declares that no matter what "spheres or missions [woman] may find or have found for her, there is at least one to which she will never attain through virtue of any principle of Natural Selection. No woman, we venture to say, *is single from choice*" (34, original emphasis). Invoking Darwinian language to show that the urge to marry and procreate is inborn, she obviously worries that the increasing number of single women is a mutation, a "forced growth" to be explained only by positing "a highly artificial civilisation." As in Greg, Greenwell reads the overpopulation of spinsters as a sign of an unhealthy social state.

By contrast, Anne Thackeray Ritchie refuses to cast the increasing numbers of single women in fearful terms. Writing in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1861, she takes as her particular target the literature that transforms unmarried women into objects of pity. Confessing herself to have "very little sympathy for those unmarried ladies whose wail has of late been dinning in the ears of the public,"¹⁵ she separates herself from "Sunsets of spinster life, Moans of old maids, Words to the wasted, Lives for the lonely, without number, all sympathizing with these fancied griefs, urging the despondents to hide them away in their own hearts, to show no sign, to gulp their bitter draught, to cheer, tend, console others in their need, although unspeakably gloomy themselves" (318). Instead, her article foregrounds the activity and mobility available to spinsters, asking a series of questions that dislodges the conventional pathos of the solitary woman:

What possible reason can there be to prevent unmarried, any more than married, people from being happy (or unhappy), according to their circumstances — from

¹⁵ Anne Thackeray Ritchie, "Toilers and Spinsters," *Cornhill Magazine* 3 (1861): 318.

enjoying other pleasures more lively than the griefs and sufferings of their neighbours? Are unmarried people shut out from all theatres, concerts, picture-galleries, parks, and gardens? May they not walk out every day of the week? Are they locked up all the summer time, and only let out when an east wind is blowing? Are they forced to live in one particular quarter of the town? Does Mudie refuse their subscriptions? Are they prevented from taking *The Times*, from going out to dinner, from match-making, visiting, gossiping, drinking tea, talking, and playing the piano? (319).

By producing a catalogue of the things unmarried women can do—and the list goes on—Ritchie in effect allows the single woman’s invasion of every sector of English society. Like Greg, she mentions the statistical distribution of the sexes but, unlike him, she downplays its significance:

Statistics are very much the fashion now-a-days, and we cannot take up a newspaper or a pamphlet without seeing in round numbers that so many people will do so and so in the course of the years; so many commit murder, so many will be taken up for drunkenness, so many subscribe to the *London Journal*, so many die, so many marry, so many quarrel after, so many remain single to the end of their lives, of whom so many will be old maids in the course of time. (321-2)

Deflating it as an issue of national importance, Ritchie worries not so much that the “alarming” number of old maids heralds the downfall of society as making sure that some, at least, have a nice place for lunch or tea (322). More concerned with women’s opportunities to find money rather than husbands, she describes a number of progressive places of employment for the “alphabets and alphabets of poor souls” looking for work (323). Suggestively, most of the work Ritchie discovers on her tour of female employment involves

the printing and copying trades, women engaged in textual rather than sexual reproduction. Describing one “busy, silent colony” at the Victoria Press, for instance, she presents the female workers as weavers, underlining a modern transformation of a traditional female employment:

All the tongues are silent, but the hands go waving, crossing, recrossing. What enchantresses, I wonder, weaving mystic signs in the air, ever worked to such good purpose! Backwards, forwards, up and down, there goes a word for a thousand people to read; hi, presto! and the GUINEA BASSINET is announced in letters of iron. (324)

In exchanging their plying of thread in the domestic sphere for letters of iron in the public sphere, these new “toilers and spinsters” not only reach a wider public but, in printing an advertisement for a crib, demonstrate their control of the new world into which babies were born. While spinsters may not have been able to have babies of their own, they increasingly controlled the dissemination of language and ideas, and the more they succeeded, the more likely it was that other “alphabets” of women would follow in their footsteps.

It was in the genres of fiction that the more positive possibilities of the single life, generally derided in periodicals and pamphlets, were typically traced. As W. G. Hamley remarked when observing the growing trend of representing spinsters in imaginative literature: “Everything can be proved in fiction, and we admit it one of the missions of imagination to accustom society to the idea of social changes.”¹⁶ Hamley warns that actual experience will often contradict the ideas promulgated in imaginative literature, but he also acknowledges that fiction can act as a crucible in which solutions to social difficulties may be tested. The novels discussed in this chapter make central the question of the reproduction of spinsterhood, responding to the issue in different ways but converging in deploying the

¹⁶ W. G. Hamley, “Old Maids,” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 112 (July 1872): 97.

motif of lateral reproduction to throw into relief the degree to which the standard model of marriage was coming under scrutiny as the century drew to a close. Oliphant's *Hester* (1883) explicitly links marriage to financial speculation, and concludes that the stability of spinsterhood is preferable to the vagaries of the stock or marriage markets. Its analysis centres on the mentor role of the spinster Catherine Vernon in the life of the unmarried heroine. Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) goes even further in drawing attention to the reproducing ranks of spinsters, depicting Miss Barfoot's school (which trains young women in clerking skills) as a factory for old maids. The novel closes with a single woman "nursing" another woman's female child, leaving little doubt that this child too will join the ranks of single women. A more obscure — and comic — novel by Israel Zangwill titled *The Old Maids' Club* (1892) also responds to the proliferation of spinsters but shifts the focus. Mocking Victorian society's reliance on statistics and the popular press, Zangwill populates his novel with women who want to be Old Maids because it is the latest trend, but he ends virtually every chapter with the engagement of one of the pledging members. At the end of the novel a genuine spinster appears, whose ghostly presence (a contrast to the glamorous portrayal of spinsters the Club had attempted to popularise) frightens the flirting protagonists into marriage. Reversing the lines of influence traced in the earlier novels, a spinster propels women into marriage rather than away from it.

“An Involuntary Rebel”: The Attraction of Spinsterhood in *Hester*

I would rather not marry—any one. I don't see the need for it.

— Hester, in Margaret Oliphant, *Hester* (1883)

In *Hester* (1883), Margaret Oliphant examines the situation of single women with a characteristically clear eye and open mind. A novel largely overlooked by scholars, it traces the fates of two single female characters, the elderly Catherine Vernon, who heads Vernon's bank (“second only to the bank of England in stability and strength”¹⁷) and her much younger relative Hester, whose father almost ruined the bank before she was born. The two women spend much of the novel resenting each other, but their similarity is constantly underlined: not only are both marked by intelligence and restless energy but each feels stifled by the circumscribed spaces and roles conventionally allotted to middle-class women. As Jennifer Uglow notes in her introduction to the Virago Modern classics edition: “The book's real romance, although Hester has a succession of suitors, is between these two women, a version of *Pride and Prejudice* in which misunderstanding, resentment, and jealous independence mask similarity and attraction.”¹⁸ Although Hester is initially more attracted to the excitement and risk represented by an elopement with her distant cousin Edward Vernon, she ends by choosing the stability of a single life, telling Catherine that “I will never marry” (454). In a novel in which the men are weak, unstable and destructive, Oliphant casts the single life as a problematic yet hopeful alternative by linking the stability of Vernon's bank

¹⁷ Margaret Oliphant, *Hester*, ed. Philip Davis and Brian Nellist (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 5.

¹⁸ Jennifer Uglow, “Introduction,” *Hester*, by Margaret Oliphant (London: Virago, 1984) ix.

with Catherine Vernon's single state.¹⁹

The men closest to both Hester and Catherine are the ones who threaten the stability of Vernon's bank through uncontrolled spending and speculation, whereas Catherine is associated with saving and the steady multiplication of wealth. John Vernon, Hester's father and Catherine's former suitor, is the first to bring the bank to the brink of ruin; only Catherine's strength of mind and ample savings enable the bank to survive. Under Catherine's long leadership the bank again prospers, but when she retires, leaving it in charge of the steady Harry and the more unstable Edward, Vernon's flounders once again. Edward, the young relative Catherine has chosen as a quasi-son and Hester's would-be suitor, rashly uses the bank's money to play the stock market, placing at risk not only the financial resources under his care but also the hearts of those who love him. The marriage market and the stock market are intimately connected in the novel, but Oliphant activates the well-established Victorian trope of love and money to underline not so much the materialist concerns as the risk of the marriage game. To marry is to gamble and risk losing all; to remain single, on the other hand, is to ensure a stable life that brings with it multiplied wealth and even (for Catherine) surrogate children. Oliphant thus problematises the standard connection between marriage and socio-economic stability, experimenting in her presentation of Catherine with an alternative domesticity.

In Catherine Vernon's youth, her engagement to her cousin John seemed to be desirable because such a union would "unite once more all the money and prestige of the house" (6) but, in fact, it was this union's failure that guaranteed the endurance of the "house." Remaining single, Catherine used her slowly accumulated wealth to save Vernon's when threatened by John's profligacy and irresponsibility. Her reign at Vernon's bank has

¹⁹ As Merryn Williams points out, although Oliphant's earlier novels had shown that marriage could present problems for women, *Hester* is the first of three novels to focus on the merits of celibacy. Oliphant also looks at the plight of the single woman in *Joyce* (1888) and *Kirsteen* (1890). See *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1986) 158-60.

proved benevolent if autocratic, a quasi-maternal rule. The bank's wealth steadily grows and she employs it to roll her kindred together, using the bank's profits to set up her poorer relations in the Vernonry, an old red brick house she has divided into apartments for their lodging. "[M]ore than the Queen" in the provincial town of Redborough, Catherine Vernon is "almost like God" (42, 50). Indeed, we are told, "[t]he people spoke of her, as they sometimes do of a popular man, by her Christian name. Catherine Vernon did this and that, they said" (23). Suggestively, the name of this spinster literally multiplies all over the town: "Her name was put to everything. Catherine Street, Catherine Square, Catherine places without number. The people who built little houses on the outskirts exhausted their invention in varying the uses of it. Catherine Villas, Catherine cottage, Catherine Mansion, were on all sides" (23). As in the cases of Miss Havisham and Ayesha discussed in the previous chapter, Catherine Vernon's name possesses an awesome power, and she herself possesses a magnetic force, especially in relation to young women: "She was an old maid, to be sure, but an old maid who was never alone. . . . She had been the first love of more girls than she could count" (24). Although she is celibate, "[t]he children of the barren in her case were more than those of any wife" (25).

Attracting the young as Vernon's bank attracts profits, Catherine and the bank are both characterised by a steady multiplication intimately tied to the stability and security of her spinsterhood. Her successful life recalls W. R. Greg's acknowledgement that for "a few women" for whom "God designed single life" (old maids "*ab ovo*"), spinsterhood can be a fruitful alternative to marriage: "In our day, if a lady is possessed of a very moderate competence, and a well-stored and well-regulated mind, she may have infinitely less care and infinitely more enjoyment than if she had drawn any of the numerous blanks which beset the lottery of marriage" (Greg 286, 306n, original emphasis). Such cases are, of course, rare but it

is telling that Greg, like Oliphant, sees marriage as a “lottery.” A “moderate competence,” along with a “well-regulated mind,” can ensure a single woman a happier life than that of an unlucky married woman. Catherine’s wealth is crucial to her status, and it allows her to escape many of the physical stereotypes associated with spinsters (Catherine has an “ample” and “graceful” figure [25]). However, although wealth alone was sometimes enough to remove the stigma of celibacy, even wealthy spinsters needed to possess certain qualities in order to escape ridicule:

No woman without a certain independence and force of character is fit to be an old maid. There are feeble women who might make passable wives, but who make deplorable old maids: they are wretched single, and impart some of their wretchedness to all who have to do with them: they trail for want of a prop, and lie huddled like some unlucky creeper, an unshapely heap, for want of the vigorous stem that should hold it up. Such women cannot believe they are not to be married some day. (Hamley 101)²⁰

Catherine is herself a “vigorous stem,” a woman of character who does not need a man to support her. At the same time, Hamley’s garden metaphor also hints at the unstoppable fertility of all spinsters, for even a creeper huddled in “an unshapely heap” may bear fruit of a kind, as my discussion of Miss Havisham’s brewery garden has suggested.

As a contrast to Catherine’s celibate strength, Oliphant includes two stereotypical spinsters in the novel. Dependents of Catherine, Martha and Matilda Vernon-Ridgway live in the marginal space of the Vernonry, squeezed between a bachelor on one side and a widow on the other, and they have narrow minds and narrow bodies. Their bodies exhibit the characteristic signs of spinsterhood noted in Chapter 1—attenuated frames and prominent

²⁰ Hamley also notes the importance of wealth in removing a woman from the stigmatised category of old maid: “Of course, in talking of old maids, we do not include women of large fortune, who may be anything they please. No woman with a few thousands a year will have to complain of want of opportunities of changing her condition, want of position, or want of respect” (100).

noses—but more to the point, they also appear as replicas of one another, drawing attention to the spinster’s propensity for multiplication: “They were tall women with pronounced features and a continual smile—in dresses which had a way of looking scanty, and were exactly the same. Their necks were long and their noses large, both which characteristics they held to be evidences of family and condition” (54). Ironically, the physical signs that the Misses Vernon-Ridgway take to be indications of their ancestral pedigree instead establish their kinship with the despised spinster. Like the Misses Vernon-Ridgway, Hester lives in the small rooms of the Vernonry for most of the novel; unlike them, she never fits within its narrow confines. Introduced into the novel as a tall girl of fourteen, Hester possesses Catherine’s “buoyant impatience” (20); she is “growing out of all her frocks, and all her previous knowledge, and thirsting to understand everything” (30). Never having been “little since I can remember,” Hester is a large person trapped in a small world (35).

Uglow points out that neither Hester nor Catherine “can be contained in the inner world appropriate to their sex. All the emotional crises take place outside, on the porch, at the gate, beneath the trees, and above all on the road that links their two houses and which gives a kind of symbolic axis to the novel” (Uglow xx). At the same time, however, Hester’s overwhelming love for her foolish mother causes her frequently to cramp herself into domestic corners. Her bedroom is a “small room within her mother’s, the door of which always stood open” (101), symbolising the womb that bore her and the closeness of the mother-daughter bond. Although she may escape some of the claustrophobia she feels by taking frequent walks with Captain Morgan, whose stories open up for her the “whole world” (78), Hester is simply too bright, curious and dynamic to inhabit the limited space for women that middle-class Victorian society affords. Even Catherine is responsible for “hemming in [Hester’s] steps and lessening her freedom” (70). At Catherine’s parties,

neglected by the more prominent and moneyed citizens of the town, Hester and her mother are literally pushed into the corners of the room. Significantly, when Hester finds herself in “the corner of the Grange drawing room,” her “pride, her scornful indignation and high contempt of society grew and increased” (109). Although she voluntarily inhabits a womb-like room within her mother’s space, then, her marginalisation in Catherine’s drawing room makes her, in her growing anger, ever less containable.

For Hester, even more than for Catherine, marriage is associated with speculation. Each of her suitors presents a different risk in the “lottery of marriage.” When Harry proposes, the problem is not the stability of the marriage itself (for Harry is nothing if not steady) but the risks posed to her own soul and intellect if she were to wed one she knows to be her mental inferior. In her relationship with Edward, Hester initially finds appealing his suggestion that they elope because it promises escape from routine; yet, his proposal is contingent upon his own ruin and the bank’s, brought on by his rash speculation on the stock market. Her only other suitor, Roland Ashton, makes his living by advising others on their stock market investments. A union with any of these men would be a rash gamble. Like the stock market, the marriage market is an uncertain venture; it may be exciting to have the prospect to make large gains, but the probabilities of losing are still greater. Unlike Emma Ashton, for whom marriage is the only answer, Hester perceives that getting her “chance” as Emma calls it, is taking a chance.

Hester views marriage differently than do other girls in the novel because she has grown up outside many social conventions: “Hester had been, during the most important years of her life, a sort of outlaw from life. She had been unacquainted altogether with its course and natural order” (108). However, although she might not see herself within the “natural order” of the world, Hester is acutely aware of how women are viewed in her

society. When her mother tries to convince her to consider Harry Vernon's marriage proposal, she recognises that in general "people consider a girl a piece of goods to be disposed of" (101). Still, she is outraged that her mother would think of her in such terms, asking whether it is "possible that you could ever think of scheming—of matchmaking—for ME?" (107). As the narrator quickly observes, "No capitals could express the fervour of her indignation" (107). Whenever Hester feels as though she is being hemmed in, she grows larger, more rebellious. Even her hair symbolises her uncontrollable energy: her locks are "full of curl and ready to break the smoothness of outline when thought necessary, on the slightest provocation" (90). Significantly, when Harry enters her home to propose to her, she is "trying to coax it back into legitimate bondage" (134), much in the way she has been trying to convince herself to marry him for the sake of her mother's comfort. The shock of his entrance, however, brings her back to herself and she cries out, "her rebellious locks escaping from her hands" (135). She knows she cannot marry Harry because, despite the financial security of such a union, she would risk emotional ruin.

Hester's relationship with Edward Vernon is at once more passionate and more fraught with risk, emotional and financial, than her relationship with Harry. Confused and eventually betrayed by Edward's erratic behaviour, Hester mistakes for love the signs of his excitement over gains and losses on the stock market. Although Hester and Edward have had a connection of sorts ever since she moved to Redborough at the age of fourteen, it is not until Edward begins surreptitiously to use the bank's money to play the stock market that he begins overtly to express his love for her. Edward's "gambling" and his passionate love for Hester both take place in relative secret, and both are activities unsanctioned by family members. He uses the unchaperoned *Thés Dansantes* to court Hester out of the eye of both her mother and his benefactress, Catherine; at the same time, he is also investing other

people's money in rash financial schemes without the knowledge of his business partner, Harry, and the bank's head, once again Catherine. Furthermore, Edward's agitation and excitement over "risking other people's money," as well as his "departure from habit," are mistaken by Catherine and the citizens of the town as a sign of love (266). Hester, as the object of his affection, is less certain about his behaviour's implications: "Was he in love? The appearances which had made the lookers-on say so were not altogether attributed to this, Hester knew. His paleness, his excitement, his absence of mind, had all been from another cause" (270). Oliphant's characterisation of Edward recalls Andrew Steinmetz's observation in his nineteenth-century study of gambling, *The Gaming Table* (1870), that England had the reputation of being "most speculative nation on earth."²¹ Although Edward denies that his activities are "gambling," his own behaviour and Steinmetz's classification tell otherwise. Steinmetz warns in particular that a gambler often loses sight of his family responsibilities: "All rays of a gamester's existence terminate in play; it is on this centre that his very existence depends. He enjoys not an hour of calm or serenity. . . . Being always pre-occupied, gamesters are subject to a ridiculous absence of mind. . . . Many gamesters have forgotten that they were husbands and fathers" (Steinmetz 2:49). He suggests that in effect all gambling men revert to a bachelor's lifestyle, one characterised by fickleness and irresponsibility. As Stephanie King has observed in her study of "fallen men," the influence of gambling on men in the period was often parallel to the effects of sexual passion in women: "For Victorian men, financial speculation, irresponsibility, or inadvertent loss is commensurate with a fallen woman's actual or perceived promiscuity. Men who are 'loose' with their finances threaten their social status and limit their marriage prospects."²² Indeed,

²¹ Andrew Steinmetz, *The Gaming Table: Its votaries and victims*, 2 vols (1870, rpt Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1969) 1:129.

²² Stephanie King, "Financial Promiscuity: Speculation, Gambling, and Fallen Men in Victorian Fiction," Gambling Theory Convention, University of Western Ontario, 13-16 Oct., 2004.

Edward's "financial promiscuity," to borrow King's phrase, leads inexorably to his fickleness in relationships, and he proposes to Emma just hours after he is supposed to elope with Hester.

Because Edward treats his relationship with Hester like a risky speculation, knowing that he will run away with her only if he has lost the bank's money, Hester again feels like a pawn in the marriage game. She thinks that "it neither consisted with the girl's dignity to give her love unsought, nor thus to wait as if ready to deliver up her affections to the first bidder" (270). Hester's use of financial language with reference to her own marriage prospects underscores her concern that she is gambling with her own soul and body. Women who gamble place themselves in a position of greater risk than men because, as Steinmetz points out, quoting the *Guardian*, "All play-debts must be paid in specie or by equivalent. The 'man' that plays beyond his income pawns his estate; the 'woman' must find out something else to mortgage when her pin-money is gone. The husband has his lands to dispose of; the wife her person" (Steinmetz 1:264). If a woman essentially uses her body as collateral when she gambles for money, how much more does she risk when she enters into the "lottery of marriage"? Indeed, after Edward finally declares his love for Hester (and he only does so after signing a deal with an unscrupulous broker), she begins to realise that Edward does not value her for herself but only as an uncomprehending companion to lean on in times of trouble. She is agonised by this discovery, and begs Edward to explain to her the nature of the risk he has taken. Although Hester's mother had been content to know nothing of how her husband spiralled into financial ruin and left her nearly destitute, Hester is appalled that Edward would ask her to share in the risk of a union without understanding the nature of that risk. When she asks him to share the burden of knowledge with her, he expresses his disregard for her active mind: "My only love! understanding is nothing, it matters nothing; another man, a

clerk in the office, would understand. I want your sympathy. I want—you” (371).

The idea that all Edward wants from her is “silly sympathy” is intolerable to Hester, who finds the assumption that “blind adherence was all that was to be looked for in a woman . . . more irritating and offensive than can be described”: “Was it possible that he thought so? that this was what she would have to encounter in the life she would spend with him? Her advice, her intelligent help, her understanding, all ignored and nothing wanted but a kind of doggish fidelity, an unreasoning belief?” (371-2). Hester’s complacent mother is amused that Hester should care to be let into a man’s troubles: “Do you think a man *ever* talks to a woman about these things? Oh, perhaps to a woman like Catherine that is the same as a man” (374). Hester wonders whether she alone is “an involuntary rebel,” and further how other women accept the “yoke” of blind fidelity as “a simple matter, and their natural law” (375). A recurring theme in Oliphant’s fiction, as Jenni Calder observes, is “the complete inability of the male characters to ‘see’ the women in their lives. They see only ciphers, representing wives and daughters, money and property, not individuals with needs and identities.”²³ Edward, unwilling or unable to “see” Hester, has pulled her into his web of financial deception against her will. Hester’s growing discomfort culminates with a visit from Harry which causes her to “see” not only the extent of Edward’s betrayal of the bank but also her own complicity in his wrongdoing: “her eyes stared out at [Harry] as out of two deep, wide caves. It was a look of wonder, of dismay, of guilt” (391). She had not understood “that she was helping in a fatal deceit against her will, contrary to her every desire” (393), and she feels that her unwitting deceit has made her monstrous.

Tellingly, she immediately thinks of Medusa: “What was it that turned Medusa into that mask of horror and gave her head its fatal force? Was it the appalling vision of some unsuspected abyss of falsehood and treachery suddenly opening at her feet, over which she

²³ Jenni Calder, “Through Mrs Oliphant’s Library Window” *Women’s Writing* 10:3 (2003): 486.

stood arrested, turned into an image of death, blinding and slaying every spectator who could look and see?" (392). It is because she understands the depth of her treachery that Hester feels herself becoming transformed. Her thinking, feeling, intelligent self is capable of full vision, but such depth of perception in a woman is construed as monstrous. As she understands the extent of Edward's (and thus her own) betrayal of the family and the bank, "all the air seemed to grow alive and be filled with darting tongues and voices and hissings of reply. And then it was that Hester felt as if her very hair began to writhe and twist about her shoulders, and that her eyes, wide with fright and terror, were like Medusa's, things that might turn all that was living to stone" (397). Hester's hair, previously associated with her rebellion from convention and restraint, symbolically attests to her inability to love, honour, and obey a man whose motives she does not know. Not only can Hester not be blind to Edward's actions but she begins to possess a terrible and terrifying vision, which she feels separates her from the rest of humankind. She is called back from this terror by the most mundane of domestic details when her mother comments that the strawberries will soon be cheap enough to make jam. Hester realises that if she elopes with Edward, she removes herself from what Uglow calls the "almost invisible chains woven of family duty" (ix). Edward's love eventually proves to be as hollow as his financial gains; appropriately, he elopes with Emma Ashton, the woman who throughout the novel had been hoping to get her "chance." It is fitting that in a text equating the uncertainties of the marriage market with the vagaries of stock fluctuations, Emma and Edward should live together on Edward's ill-gotten gains.

At the end of the novel, Catherine suggests that Hester's best choice for a husband would be Roland Ashton. However, he too is cast as a fickle, flirtatious man, and his employment as a stock market advisor points to his instability as a potential partner.

Moreover, Hester's conversations typically hint at her desire for freedom not marriage. At one point, for example, she tells him she desires a role more like Catherine's: "I should like to do as she did. Something of one's own free will—something that no one can tell you or require you to do—which is not even your duty bound down upon you. Something voluntary, even dangerous" (307). Roland replies condescendingly that she can "inspire" and make others do things for her, but Hester rejects the passive feminine model: "Do you really think . . . that the charm of inspiring, as you call it, is what any reasonable creature would prefer to doing? To make somebody else's hero rather than to be a hero yourself?" (307). Roland attempts to convince Hester that she is better to remain conventional:

"These women, who step out of their sphere, they may do much to be respected, they may be of great use; but——"

"You mean men don't like them," said Hester with a smile; "but then women do; and, after all, we are the half of creation—or more." (307-8)

Hester's rejoinder shows not only that she is unconcerned about the effect of her unconventional beliefs and behaviour on her marriage prospects but that she is well aware of the numerical power of women that was increasingly worrying late-Victorian culture.

Despite Hester's admiration of Catherine and her desire to "do as she did," it is not until the end of the novel that Edward's desertion and the ensuing financial crisis at Vernon's bank bring the two women together. Hester and Catherine find stability and strength in each other in part because of the similarity of their betrayals: Catherine was deserted by Hester's father, John, while Hester is deserted by Catherine's "son" Edward. Both men also nearly ruin the family bank. Only after these men flee can the bank be saved by the compounded energy of the single women. Nor is it until Edward betrays both Catherine and Hester that they fully exhibit their physical and mental kinship. Hester sets out to meet Edward under

the holly tree at the gate of Catherine's house wearing a dark dress and going along "as swift as a shadow, like a ghost, her veil over her face" (402). Catherine, suspicious of this evening meeting, sets out in similar attire; she wears a black dress and throws a black shawl over her head, making herself "almost invisible" (400). Thus, ghostlike and blending into the night, the two women approach the crisis that will bring them together. As Edward leaves, exasperated that Hester will not elope with him as planned, he flings her hand away from him with such force that she falls "across the gateway of the Grange" at the feet of the eavesdropping Catherine. Once they are inside the house, their resemblance is even more marked: "They were both very pale, with eyes that shone with excitement and passion. The likeness between them came out in the strangest way as they stood thus, intent upon each other. They were like mother and daughter standing opposed in civil war" (409). Although they still stand opposed, as Catherine believes Hester is complicit in Edward's defection, the narrator makes explicit the new relationship between the two women. Catherine has lost a "son" in Edward, but she has gained a "daughter," one who will be a stronger ally. Hester clings to Catherine and sobs "as on her mother's breast" (412), finally claiming the kinship the older woman has denied. Allied in energy and pain, Catherine and Hester stand at the train station waiting for Edward, both subduing "the heart-throbs that took away their breath" (416). At different moments, they both let out low cries, and although it is Catherine who reflects that Edward "had stabbed her and stabbed her, till the blood of these wounds seemed to fill every crevice of her being" (408), it is Hester who wakes up the next morning with wounds beginning "to bleed anew" (426). From the time of Edward's betrayal, the two women's identities blend together. When Hester discovers that Edward has married Emma Ashton, she blurts out "Married her!" and then laughs: "The sound terrified herself when she heard it. It was Catherine's laugh made terrible with a sort of tragic wonder. Married her!

Had there been no place for Hester at all, nothing but delusion from beginning to end?" (445-6). Significantly, it is once Hester's laugh merges with the elderly spinster's that she begins to sense the displacement of single women in middle-class Victorian society.

Hester has entered Catherine's house many times; however, on the night of Edward's betrayal, when she is thrown through the gate and lands at Catherine's feet, she symbolically enters the world of single women. Unlike the bride who is carried over the threshold by her lover, Hester is thrown over the threshold, and is led inside by Catherine into a space dominated by the elderly woman's strength and ideas. She has left the comfortable and sheltered space of her womb-like room within her mother's, and comes to live, for a time, under Catherine's roof and influence. Once she has spent one night of activity at the Grange, her return to the Vernonry is stifling: "it is impossible to tell how deserted, how silent, how far out of the world and life the little rooms at the Vernonry looked after the agitation of the night. Hester could not rest in them" (430). The larger, albeit unfamiliar world of business and independence that Catherine has opened up for her holds more possibility than the enclosed domestic world she inhabited with her mother.

At the end of the novel, a deflated Catherine acknowledges that although Hester has the ability and the "right" to work at Vernon's bank, she should marry (454); however, Hester refuses to be limited by matrimony, and the novel resists a romantic conclusion. After her acquisition of powerful, even monstrous vision and after having crossed the threshold and entered Catherine's sphere of influence, Hester cannot step back into the world she left behind. Although the narrator proposes that there are two men whom Hester may choose between, the novel concludes enigmatically: "What can a young woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice?" (456). By resisting the closure of the marriage ending, Oliphant allows her heroine the "possibility" to remain single. As Rita Kranidis notes in *The*

Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration, “Outside marriage, woman’s life and her future prospects were nothing short of a gender anomaly. At the same time, she was an open-ended narrative, a story whose ending could neither be predicted nor projected, but whose possibilities had to be predetermined.”²⁴ Though the futures of other characters in the novel are forecasted, Hester’s self and her future remain open in precisely this sense.

“An Old Maid Factory”: Recruiting *The Odd Women*

“When one woman vanishes in matrimony, the reserve offers a substitute for the world’s work.”

— Rhoda Nunn, in George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (1893)

As might be expected from its title, George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893) investigates the perception that a large number of women in England were “odd”: not only solitary but left over when the rest of the population, ideally, had been evenly paired off into matrimony according to the logic of W. R. Greg and others. Moreover, the novel as a whole plays with a full range of connotations of “odd”: uneven, unequal, diverse, different, extraneous, unconnected, eccentric, peculiar, grotesque (OED). At the same time, however, two central female figures, Mary Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn, counter the prevailing view of odd women by fostering a productive and fertile space for the spinsters of the future by maintaining a school that teaches them typing and clerking skills. To Mary, Rhoda, and the women they train, to be “odd” is to belong to an untapped resource: a reserve of women

²⁴ Rita S. Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration: Contested Subjects* (New York: St Martin’s P, 1999) 41.

performing valuable work outside matrimony and, indeed, outside woman's traditional sphere. Like Vernon's bank in Oliphant's text, this school is associated with saving. By rescuing women who are unemployed, Mary and Rhoda enable their pupils to save money and live independent lives outside the unstable lottery of marriage. Indeed, Monica Madden and Bella Royston, the two women who leave this school to pursue sexual relations through marriage or adultery, are dead by the end of the novel. Rhoda Nunn, who must choose between a sterile, unproductive sexual union with Everard Barfoot and a productive celibate life with his cousin Mary, realises in the end that the stability and security of the latter life offer her more scope for her female energies than the alternative Everard offers.

The Odd Women has frequently been classed as an example of New Woman fiction. Certainly, the trajectory of one of its characters, Monica Madden, follows the path of many fictional New Women of the early 1890s, though Gissing places her attempt at feminist escape in a less exotic setting and allows her only a botched attempt at liberty. In *New Women, New Novels*, Ann Ardis calls these fictions "boomerang novels" because, while their protagonists initially seem to be successfully rebelling against social norms, by the end of the novel they are contained by conformity or death.²⁵ If Monica adheres to the ultimately conservative plot structure of New Woman fiction, however, Gissing allows his more feminist protagonist, Rhoda, to reject the unsuccessful form of feminist rebellion characteristic of this genre of fiction. Instead, she remains celibate so she can train the spinsters of the future. As Gerald Schmidt has observed, Gissing was a strong proponent of

²⁵ Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990). 140-56. See also Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978).

cultural and technical education for women.²⁶ He may have despaired of the “crass imbecility” of the “average woman,” but he also believed that emancipation and education greatly improved women.²⁷ He encouraged his own sisters to pursue their “mental & moral training”: “You girls now-a-days have astonishing advantages over your mothers & grandmothers; it is to be hoped you will make use of it for the only real end of education—improvement of character” (*Letters* 2: 72).²⁸

By ending the novel with Rhoda holding the dead Monica’s baby in her arms, Gissing evokes the lateral reproduction of spinsters, who are able to raise self-sufficient women independent of the vagaries of marriage, thereby fulfilling both their affective and professional desires.²⁹ Not all the spinsters may end as successfully, but the education offered by Rhoda and Mary offers a crucial hope for the future. In *The Odd Women*, there prove to be many women to train for this future. Whereas Oliphant shows Hester straining to find room for her unusual selfhood in a society that still expects matrimony to be the fate of most women, Gissing populates his novel with hordes of extraneous, unmarried women for whom marriage is all but impossible. Even the dispatch with which he kills off a large

²⁶ Gerald Schmidt, “George Gissing’s Psychology of ‘Female Imbecility’” *Studies in the Novel* 37:3 (Fall 2005): 329-41. See also Susan Colón, who argues that *The Odd Women* is less about the difference between singleness and marriage than about assessing relationships based on progressivism and traditionalism. “Professionalism and Domesticity in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women*,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 44:4 (2001): 441-58.

²⁷ He wrote to his friend Eduard Bertz in 1893: “Among our English emancipated women there is a majority of admirable persons; they have lost no single good quality of their sex, & they have gained enormously on the intellectual (& even on the moral) side by the process of enlightenment, — that is to say, of brain-development. I am driven frantic by the crass imbecility of the typical woman. That type must disappear, — or at all events become altogether subordinate.” *Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Matthiesen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas, 9 vols (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1990-97) 5:113.

²⁸ The same letter to his sister Ellen (3 Feb., 1882) continues: “If you only could know how much of the wretchedness of humanity is occasioned by the folly, pig-headedness, ignorance, incapacity of women you would rejoice to think of all these new opportunities for mental & moral training” (*Letters* 2:72).

²⁹ For an alternative reading of the celibacy in the novel see Erin Williams, who argues that Gissing’s odd women must sacrifice their roles as desiring subjects in order to fulfill their professional destinies. “Female Celibacy in the Fiction of Gissing and Dixon: The Silent Strike of the Suburbanites,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 45:3 (2002): 259-279.

number of them cannot increase the chances of the remainder, so great are their numbers.

The novel opens in 1872 with a focus on the mostly plain Madden sisters; of the six girls, only two or at most three are deemed destined to marry.³⁰ In an almost Darwinian weeding out, the six Madden sisters are quickly reduced by half: Gertrude dies of consumption; Martha succumbs to “the over-turning of a pleasure boat” (15); and Isabella, institutionalised for melancholia, drowns herself in a bath. Only the youngest, Monica, is married. The four Wheatley sisters are similarly reduced by half, while the one who marries, Fanny, waits seventeen years to marry Mr Micklethwaite, bringing her husband great happiness in an already menopausal body. There is one son to support three Bevis daughters, “invalidish persons . . . with a look of unwilling spinsterhood” (189). There are “fifty” or “five score” women waiting to take Monica’s place at the linen-draper’s, not to mention the “reserve” trained by Rhoda and Mary at their school. All these characters together represent the “half a million” women in England whose numbers exceed those of men (44), drawing critical attention to arguments like those of Greg in relation to “surplus” women. In contrast to Greg’s claim that the fewer marriageable women there were, the greater their value would be, however, the marital prospects of the single women who remain do not improve. But Gissing’s main point is to uncover the starker implications of Greg’s desire to make this social “problem” disappear. When Gissing rapidly fells half of the Madden sisters by describing their depressing and somewhat absurd deaths, he highlights the ultimate thrust of the policies and tropes that sought to render spinsters invisible.

Nor was he unusual in his perception. Tabitha Glum’s “Bewailment from Bath” (1844), for instance, mockingly suggested that the British should take lessons from other

³⁰ In the first chapter, the girls’ father, Dr Madden, surmises that Virginia and “Gertrude also, perhaps” will marry, as well as “little Monica . . . the beauty of the family.” He trusts, however, that his three remaining daughters (who are plain) will remain unmarried and look after him in his old age according to the standard expectations of the nineteenth century. George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, ed. Patricia Ingram (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 9.

countries in reducing their daughters:

In Catholic countries, the superfluous daughters of the family are disposed of in convents and *béguinages*, just as in Turkey and China they are, still more humanely, drowned. In certain provinces of the east, pigs are expressly kept, to be turned into the streets at daybreak, for the purpose of devouring the female infants exposed during the night—thus benevolently securing them from the torments of single “blessedness.” (Glum 200)

Recalling Glum’s modest proposal for coping with excess numbers of unmarried women, Rhoda Nunn proposes (more or less seriously) that the bodies (even dead bodies) of unmarried and unemployed women should be put on display in the hope of effecting change: “I wish girls fell down and died of hunger in the streets, instead of creeping to their garrets and the hospitals. I should like to see their dead bodies collected together in some open place, for the crowd to stare at” (42). As Rhoda bitterly admits, however, such a tactic could well backfire, for observers “might only congratulate each other that a few of the superfluous females had been struck off” (42).

The purpose of Mary Barfoot’s school is as much to save unmarried women from “garrets” and “hospitals” as it is to keep them from dying in “some open place.” She offers them the means to pay for a comfortable room of their own. As the next chapter will show, a key problem for spinsters in this period was that they did not have an assigned space in the patriarchal home, and were thus forced to carve out liminal spaces for themselves in the interstices of the domestic home and even in the public spaces of the street. Gissing dramatises this problem in his focus on the three remaining Madden sisters. The elder sisters have a room of their own only when they are unemployed. This room is so cramped that “the presence of a third person made the air oppressive” (36); nonetheless, Virginia admits to

delaying her search for work because “independence,” even in cramped quarters, is preferable to dependence. For her part, Monica must sleep in a crowded dormitory above the linen-draper’s shop where she initially works, and on Sundays she is forced out of this shelter and into the precarious space of the streets of London.³¹ Here the sisters must meet late at night (after Monica finishes work) whenever they cannot wait until Sunday, as when Monica informs her sisters that she has given notice at her job and will be enrolling in Mary Barfoot’s school:

Both [older sisters] clapped their hands like children. It was an odd little scene on the London pavement at ten o’clock at night; so intimately domestic amid surroundings the very antithesis of domesticity. Only a few yards away, a girl to whom the pavement was a place of commerce stood laughing with two men; the sound of her voice hinted to Monica the advisability of walking as they conversed, and they moved toward Walworth Road Station. (74)

Despite the childish innocence of the two older sisters, which initially seems to protect the three in an invisible cocoon of domesticity, the threat posed to single women on the street at night is made clear. Monica, the most sexually aware of the three, realises that their untainted virginity is threatened even by being on the same street as the prostitute. Standing on the street at night, an unprotected woman came dangerously close to another category of odd women discussed in the novel—the fallen woman.³² By offering women the chance to make a decent wage, Mary Barfoot not only offers them financial independence but she also provides them with the means to pay for a secure and properly domestic space of their own.

³¹ For a detailed discussion of the meaning of public and private space and morality in the novel, see Lise Shapiro Sanders, “The Failures of the Romance: Boredom, Class, and Desire in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* and W. Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 47:1 (Spring 2001): 190-228.

³² The fallen woman is represented in the novel by Bella Royston, who leaves Mary Barfoot’s school for a married man, and by Miss Eades, who leaves the linen draper’s shop for a life of prostitution.

When Monica moves briefly into Mildred Vesper's dwelling, for example, she may share a bedroom, but the two-room apartment allows them to imitate, on a smaller scale, the model of privacy and companionship espoused by Mary and Rhoda. By contrast, Monica's much larger married home is claustrophobic. Lacking even her older sisters' control of their space, Monica becomes a prisoner in a home in which she does not and cannot pay rent.

Gissing's exploration of the single woman and alternative domesticity centres on Mary Barfoot. Like Catherine Vernon in *Hester*, Mary has put her inheritance to good use. Where Catherine Vernon invests the bank's money and uses the profits to support her relatives, Mary Barfoot invests in the resource of middle class women, whom she trains in employable skills such as typewriting and law copying: "Her aim was to draw from the overstocked profession of teaching as many capable young women as she could lay hands on" (63). Interestingly, the inheritance that enables Mary to open and operate her school would have been given to her cousin Everard had he not compromised his reputation by impregnating and abandoning Amy Drake. It is his sexual promiscuity as a bachelor that deprives him of the money he would otherwise have received. When Everard does inherit enough money to live on comfortably, he abandons his engineering career and acknowledges no "duty" to anyone but himself (94). For Mary, to live entirely for oneself is to live at the "expense" of others (95), and she uses her inheritance to invest in the future of women, an investment that expands the capabilities, the roles—and possibly even the numbers—of single women.

An infinitely capable woman, Mary Barfoot would be suited to many roles in life: "According to circumstances, she bore herself as the lady of aristocratic tastes, as a genial woman of the world, or as the fervid prophetess of female emancipation, and each character was supported with a spontaneity, a good-natured confidence, which inspired liking and

respect" (59). In appearance, she is "handsome," and might be mistaken for a "wedded lady of some distinction" (59), thus confounding the widespread notion that all spinsters could be visually identified. Mary differs from Rhoda in believing that women should still marry suitably if they can. As she tells her partner and friend, "My dear, after all we don't desire the end of the race" (60). She believes, however, that women have been unfairly restricted and must be allowed to take their expanded place throughout society, whether married or not. Speaking to her pupils and followers at the school on Great Portland Street (a speech entitled "Woman as an Invader"), Mary responds to the claim of an "out-crowded clerk" that the school was taking jobs away from men. In her response to the common charge that as women flowed into the work world, they crowded out men, she argues for a "new type of woman" who will inhabit both private and public realms in a different way: "There must be a new type of woman, active in every sphere of life: a new worker out in the world, a new ruler of the home. Of the old ideal virtues we can retain many, but we have to add to them those which have been thought appropriate only in men" (153). Dismissing Ruskin's idealisation of the domestic angel, she urges: "If woman is no longer to be womanish, but a human being of powers and responsibilities, she must become militant, defiant. She must push her claims to the extremity" (152). Mary thus rewrites the negative connotations of "invasion" alluded to in the title of the speech as a positive expansion of roles and abilities into "every sphere of life." Rejecting conservative tropes of unmarried women as drooping vines and fading flowers, Mary evokes the possibility of a vigorous new growth on the grounds that "our natural growth has been stunted." (153). The current historical moment, the novel suggests, will foster that new growth because there is so much positive, productive work for women to do. A man like Everard, Rhoda notes, is cut off from ambition in a way that his female equivalent is not: "After all, what ambition should he have? . . . There's one

advantage to being a woman. A woman with brains and will may hope to distinguish herself in the greatest movement of our time—that of emancipating her sex. But what can a man do, unless he's a genius?" (99).

The aptly named Rhoda Nunn is the character in the novel who must choose between a life of sexual fulfilment and a life of celibacy. Unlike the heroines of many New Woman novels, she rejects sexual fulfilment as the ultimate expression of feminism, choosing instead the paradoxically more fertile role of working for female emancipation. For Rhoda, who has declared that her mission in life is "to make women hard-hearted" (44), falling in love contradicts her deeply-held principles. Everard Barfoot, too, at first does not believe in marriage. He struggles against his own attraction to Rhoda, initially suggesting to his friend Micklethwaite that he wishes only to see how she will react to being pursued: "Miss Nunn, I warrant, considers herself proof against any kind of wooing. She is one of the grandly severe women; a terror, I imagine, to any young girl at their place who betrays weak thoughts of marriage. . . . There would be something piquant in making vigorous love to Miss Nunn, just to prove her sincerity" (106-7). What follows is a battle of wills but a poignant one because the two really do begin to love one another. Everard maintains that he will get Rhoda to agree to a "free union" with him, thinking that he will propose marriage once he has conquered her; Rhoda wishes to be properly proposed to. But after Everard proposes free union and agrees to marriage, the next chapter opens: "And neither was content" (297). Everard begins to think of the qualities in Rhoda that he will need to "subdue, reform, if they were really to spend their lives together" (297); Rhoda, on the other hand, begins to repent that she forced Everard to propose conventional marriage. Moreover, she fears that in agreeing to marriage, she has lost her purpose in life:

What was her life to be? At first, they would travel together; but before long it

might be necessary to have a settled home, and what then would be her social position, her duties and pleasures? Housekeeping, mere domesticities, could never occupy her for more than the smallest possible part of each day. Having lost one purpose in life, dignified, absorbing, likely to extend its sphere as time went on, what other could she hope to substitute for it? (298-99)

When Rhoda contemplates the “work” of married life, she thinks only of “mere domesticities” that cannot “occupy” her fully in contrast to her current role, which she characterises in terms of the expansion and extension of her energies.

By the time Mary’s letter arrives implicating Everard in an affair with Monica which he will not explain, Rhoda’s trust in him and in the institution of marriage has been well undermined. Her initial return to Mary Barfoot’s house is nevertheless difficult, for it requires her to confront the virginity that she believed she had left behind forever: “Her first sensation when she looked upon the white bed was one of disgust. . . . In a frenzy of detestation, she cursed the man who had so disturbed and sullied the swift, pure stream of her life” (312). Disgusted with the white bed, a symbol of her celibate body and of the sexual thoughts which had clouded the “swift, pure stream” of her life, she begins (briefly) to exhibit the signs of decay conventionally associated with spinsters: “sunken cheeks,” and a “hard, austere face” (311). Yet in associating her celibate life with this flowing stream, Rhoda reverses the conventional association of spinsterhood with stagnation. Dora Greenwell’s “Of Single Women,” for instance, stresses that married life makes the stream run swift and pure: “Single life is full of limitations, of restrictions; it is in *itself* less free, rich, and happy, than that in which the current of a woman’s heart and life, having found a natural channel, expands in some degree at will, and flows on but the more safely and swiftly for the limits which restrain its course, freed ‘from the weight of too much liberty’” (36). Despite her valorisation

of her celibate life as a fresh stream, however, Rhoda turns on her own body, commencing a “scheme of self subdual” involving studies before breakfast and the rejection of “wine and everything that was most agreeable to her palate” (311-12). Tortured and unhappy, she is brought back to herself only after a visit from the “hopeless” Virginia Madden. Virginia’s apologetic, pathetic appearance makes Rhoda recover her own inner strength:

That poor creature’s unhappiness was doubtless in great measure due to the conviction that in missing love and marriage she had missed everything. So thought the average woman, and in her darkest hours she too had fallen among those poor of spirit, the flesh prevailing. But the soul in her had not, finally, succumbed. Passion had a new significance; her conception of life was larger, more liberal; she made no vows to crush the natural instincts. . . . Wherever destiny might lead, she would still be the same proud and independent woman, responsible only to herself, fulfilling the nobler laws of her existence. (322)

Rejecting the asceticism she had begun to practice, Rhoda remembers what she had known with such conviction before her brief engagement to Everard. She recognises that, for herself at least, the passion she feels for her “mission” of improving the lives and opportunities of women is more meaningful than the sexual passion she would have had in marriage.

Furthermore, Rhoda will have more “daughters” in her role as mentor and teacher than she would have in marriage, and her role can continue long past her reproductive cycle. The novel ends with her paying a visit to Alice Madden, who is looking after the dead Monica’s female child. Rhoda had earlier admonished the listless Monica for not taking better care of herself: “Isn’t it your duty to remember at every moment that your thoughts, your actions, may affect another life—that by heedlessness, by abandoning yourself to despair, you may be the cause of suffering it was in your power to avert?” (348). The narrator notes that a change

comes over Rhoda as she delivers this speech: “Herself strongly moved, Rhoda had never spoken so impressively, had never given counsel of such earnest significance. She felt her power in quite a new way, without a touch of vanity, without posing or any trivial self-consciousness” (348). Although Mary Barfoot had once cautioned Rhoda against losing her “womanhood” in the fight for women’s rights, in this scene with Monica, Rhoda seems finally to acknowledge that she can be a full woman, a working, thinking, feeling, loving, passionate being who does not need to ignore aspects of her selfhood to do her work.

When Rhoda sits in the garden holding Monica’s daughter, she is said to be “nursing” the child, an important choice of word because it implies not only holding but also nurturing, bringing up, cherishing, and feeding (371). She also tells Alice that her work “flourish[es] like the green bay tree” (370). In the Bible, it is the “wicked” who spread like the green bay tree,³³ and in using the phrase Rhoda ironises a widespread assumption among the middle classes that the expansion of women’s work was the spread of evil. Re-inflecting the metaphor, she turns it into a figure of strength and fertility, joining Mary Barfoot in rewriting in positive terms the negative charges routinely laid at the door of feminist efforts.

“Women Who Catch Husbands Rarely Recover”:

The Contagion of Spinsterhood in *The Old Maids’ Club*

Always fondle children and show a marked hostility to the household cat.

—Israel Zangwill, *The Old Maids’ Club* (1892)

In the comic, episodic novel *The Old Maids’ Club*, Israel Zangwill takes the idea of

³³ Psalms 37:35.

lateral reproduction and gives it a new twist. Using light social satire, he pokes fun at the widespread fear that women will never marry by exposing many of the novel's so-called New Women as dilettante feminists posing as old maids so they can benefit from the increased publicity. By closing most of the novel's chapters with the engagement of one of the Club's pledging members, Zangwill exposes the absurdity of reducing human relationships to statistics by demonstrating that no matter what the popular press claims, most women will still choose marriage over celibacy. However, while the structure of Zangwill's text reassures conservative readers by propelling most of the club's pledging members into wedlock, the novel nevertheless acknowledges the numerical imbalance of the sexes by allowing some of the female characters to remain unmarried, especially those who work in print media. Near the end of the novel, Zangwill invokes a real old maid, Little Dolly, whose ghostly presence frightens even the club's founder into her lover's arms, thereby reversing the idea of lateral reproduction by sending women into marriage rather than away from it. Dolly's pathetic presence functions as a critique of those who trivialise spinsterhood by showing how those only playing at being New Women could well become genuine old maids. Yet, by allowing some of the novel's literary working women to remain outside wedlock at the end of the novel, Zangwill legitimises their position and hints at the multiplying powers of the press. Despite its light and comic tone, Zangwill's novel demonstrates a continuing anxiety in the culture over the spinster's power to attract women to the single life.

Zangwill first gained fame through his association with the Jerome K. Jerome's "New Humour" school. In addition to his editorials, columns and fictional contributions to the *Jewish Standard* and *Ariel*, he also wrote *The Bachelors' Club* (1891) and *The Old Maids' Club* (1892) in this style, the two latter then reissued together under the title *The Celibates'*

Club (1898). As Joseph Udelson explains, the “New Humour” movement continued the literary tradition of Dickens by using humour and satire to promote social reform, although in a considerably lighter vein.³⁴ Zangwill’s “New Humour” beginnings have virtually disappeared from critical study, as focus has shifted primarily to Zangwill’s more realistic fiction, much of which deals with the shifting questions of Jewish identity in *fin-de-siècle* London.³⁵ Although *The Old Maids’ Club* has been dismissed as “literary fluff” (Udelson 73), it usefully brings together popular figures of New Woman and Old Maid. In popular culture at the end of the nineteenth century, the New Woman was seen as a liberated, independent, sexualised, sometimes masculine-featured figure, who often worked for a living, smoked, disdained marriage, and threatened male supremacy.³⁶ She is a new inflection of the spinster but, as we have seen, the traditional stereotype of old maid lingered: she haunted not just the domestic woman but the New Woman as well. Zangwill’s text points to the New Woman as a fashion brought about by the increased publicity generated by single women. However, as his introduction of Little Dolly at the end of the novel demonstrates, those women who are playing at spinsterhood merely because it is a fashion will be spooked into conformity by the overtly anachronistic and out-of-fashion old maid.

A mere seventeen years old, Lillie cannot attract any “Old Maids” to her Club. Her project is doomed to failure not least because her club’s conditions of membership actually refuse admission to actual old maids, since they restrict admission to those under twenty-five. The conditions also stipulate that a member “must be beautiful and wealthy,” and have

³⁴ Joseph H. Udelson, *Dreamer of the Ghetto* (Tuscaloosa AL: U of Alabama P, 1990) 35.

³⁵ Zangwill won national fame and gained a prominent voice among Anglo-Jewry’s leaders with his novel *The Children of the Ghetto* (1892). He is also recognised for his novel *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898) and his play *The Melting Pot* (1908), which coined the popular term.

³⁶ Sally Ledger discusses this New Woman figure as a “product of discourse” that propagated and reflected social anxieties. Like the Old Maid, the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman was believed to pose a threat to the institution of marriage and thus to the human race, and the figure was attacked by her critics as “an infanticidal mother” or at the very least “sexually ‘abnormal.’” *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin-deSiècle* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997) 3, 10-11.

refused “at least one advantageous offer of marriage.”³⁷ The “rationale” for these rules is thus explained:

Disappointed, soured failures were not wanted. There was no virtue in being an “Old Maid” when you had passed twenty-five. Such creatures are merely old maids — Old Maids (with capitals) were required to be in the flower of youth and the flush of beauty. Their anti-matrimonial motives must be above suspicion. They must despise and reject the married state, though they would be welcomed therein with open arms (15).

The Old Maids in Lillie’s club are to abjure cats, parrots, Curates, catholicism, ideals, Women’s Rights, and “caps, curls, or similar articles of attire” (15). They are “[n]ot to kiss females” (15), never to “nurse a cold or a relative” (16), and never to “accept bits of wedding cake, lest [they] be suspected of putting them under [their] pillow[s]” (16). The list of prohibitions goes on and on, reminiscent in its mockery of many of the “advice” articles and books addressed to spinsters, which quite seriously prescribed limits to behaviour if the unmarried woman did not want to become a stereotypical figure. Lillie’s advice in her “General Recommendations” to “Avoid eccentricities” (16), for example, recalls W. G. Hamley’s denunciation of eccentricity in his article for *Blackwood’s*: “The woman who calls herself *odd*, as though to be odd and original were the same thing, should hold by her self-estimate, and keep odd in every sense” (102). Despite Lillie’s seemingly generous motive to remove the stigma from the term “Old Maid” by infusing its ranks with members who look and act nothing like the stereotypical figure, her criteria are so strict that no woman actually manages to join. Those who are desirable enough to qualify for admission tend to disqualify themselves by marrying (or by being married already). Because the criteria for admission are essentially criteria for marrying well, Lillie’s Old Maids’ Club necessarily stays empty.

³⁷ Israel Zangwill, *The Old Maids’ Club* (New York: American Publishers Corporation, 1892) 15.

Significantly, however, *The Old Maids' Club* differs in structure from its companion piece, *The Bachelors' Club*, and this difference reflects the numerical imbalance of the sexes.

Whereas each of the twelve chapters of *The Bachelors' Club* ends with the marriage of one of the members, causing the dissolution of the Club by the end of the novel,³⁸ *The Old Maids' Club* contains the tales of countless single women clamouring to qualify as Old Maids. Elsie Bonita Adams states that *The Old Maids' Club* lacks the “formal neatness” and “structural control” of *The Bachelors' Club* (50); however, this very lack of tidiness reflects Zangwill’s awareness of the numerical imbalance of the sexes, as several women evade the chapters’ marriage resolutions.

Like the problem of unmarried women in Victorian England which rose to prominence because of census results and ensuing discussions in the periodical press, Lillie’s Club is initiated because of a statistical problem and popularised by the media. Lillie decides to found her Club based on what she believes to be a statistical improbability. Because she loves Lord Silverdale, she calculates that the probability of his being in love with her is 5999 to 1: “The problem is exactly analogous to one which you will find in any Algebra. Out of a sack containing three thousand coins, what are the odds that a man will draw the one marked coin?” (13). That is, if he decides to draw out a coin at all. Lillie’s millionaire father makes a rather predictable joke about Lillie’s self-comparison to a marked coin, as he thinks of the fortune-hunters who have sought his daughter’s hand in marriage. Ridiculing the obsession with statistics and probability in commentators like W. R. Greg, Zangwill slyly alludes to the population imbalance of the sexes when “[h]eaps and heaps” of candidates “[f]rom all parts of the kingdom” send letters, “anxious to become Old Maids” (43). When Lillie asks Lord Silverdale whether she should entertain the application of a woman from Paris, he

³⁸ The original version of *The Bachelors' Club* has a Prologue and thirteen chapters. Chapter Five, the only one that does not recount of a bachelor and his marriage, was removed when the novel was reissued as part of *The Celibates' Club*. See Elsie Bonita Adams, *Israel Zangwill* (New York: Twayne, 1971) 47-8.

replies “Certainly. Candidates may hail from anywhere—excepting naturally the United States” (43). As Greg had indicated in his famous article, because there was a deficit of single women in America, they would be statistically inadmissible as Old Maids. By rendering singleness the most popular trend and admitting the most desirable Old Maids into her Club, Lillie hopes to shift the perception of excess women. She even paints a “cynical picture” of “Latter Day Love,” representing “the ill-hap of Cupid, neglected and superfluous, his quiver full, his arrows rusty, shivering with the cold, amid contented couples passing him by with never an eye for the lugubrious legend ‘Pity the Poor Blind’” (17-18) (see fig. 11). Instead of the spinster being “neglected and superfluous,” it is now Cupid who has become so; however, the fact that “couples” pass him by (and in the illustration, these couples appear to be heterosexual) provides a telling glimpse into Lillie’s actual orientation: if Cupid really were superfluous, then it would be singles, not couples, who ignored him.

Like the “problem” of unmarried women which filled periodicals and spawned shelves of advice books, Lillie’s Club seems to attract publicity. Margaret Oliphant speculated in “The Condition of Women” (1858) that the recent prominence of the unmarried woman was largely the result of increased publicity: “There were single ladies as there were single gentlemen as long as anybody can remember, yet it is only within a very short time that writers and critics have begun to call the attention of the public to the prevalence and multiplicity of the same” (211-12). In particular, she labels Dinah Mulock Craik’s statement that half the women are unmarried as a “remarkable misrepresentation,” one that can be true only if children are included in the count (212). Publicity and exaggeration are Zangwill’s targets as well. The Old Maids’ Club is swamped with publicity from its inception, as its first candidate (the actress Clorinda Bell) refuses to join the club, but, in order to garner publicity for herself, tells the newspaper *The Moon* that she has



Latter-Day Love.

Fig. 11. F. W. Townsend, "Latter-Day Love," *The Old Maids' Club* by Israel Zangwill (New York: American Publishers Corporation, 1892) 18.

joined. This gesture then prompts a “tide of applications” from those who want to imitate the famous actress. As Lord Silverdale observes, Clorinda “will remain a member long after [the club] has ceased to exist. Once a thing has appeared in print, you cannot destroy it. A published lie is immortal” (47). Lillie’s Club becomes more and more popular as the press latches onto it as the latest trend, and Lillie herself is early associated with print and publicity. Her successful publication of “Woman as a Waste Force” in her fourteenth year prompted publishers to compete for her “early manuscripts,” such as “Ibsen for Infants,” “Carlyle for the Cradle,” and “The Schoolgirl’s Schopenhauer” (11).³⁹

The incompatibility of marriage and such literary sensibility is a reiterated motif in Zangwill’s satire. One prospective candidate, afraid of marrying lest she become a slave to her household servants, relates the situation of a friend of hers from Girton College, who deteriorated “from a maiden to a wife, from a wife to a bondswoman. First she talked Shelley, then Charley, then Mary Ann. Gradually her soul shrank. She lost her character” (134).⁴⁰ Two female characters who decide to remain unmarried also do so because of their literary careers. Interestingly, both women write under male pseudonyms, suggesting, through their dual identities, that they are “married” to their careers. The novelist Ellaline Rand (who writes under the name Andrew Dibdin) refuses an eligible offer of marriage because her suitor, John Beveridge (also an author) might eclipse her. Her ideal is a husband who would efface himself, living “only for the enhancement of my reputation” (121). Instead, when Beveridge discovers she is an author, he feels a jealous desire “to arrest her circulation” and to possess her and all her books for himself. As a result, instead of marrying,

³⁹ Women often wrote educational books for children to support themselves. In *New Grub Street* (1891), for example, Jasper Milvain encourages his sisters to write a “Child’s History of the English Parliament” because it is the type of thing that women can write successfully.

⁴⁰ Mary Ann is Zangwill’s favourite name for a female servant. His 1893 short story “Merely Mary Ann” was turned into one of his most popular theatrical productions which opened at Covent Garden in 1903. See Daniel Walden, “Israel Zangwill” *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 10: 240.

she decides to found a paper called *The Cherub* (based on her best-selling novel *The Cherub That Sits Up Aloft*), suggesting that it might become “the organ of the Old Maids’ Club” (127). Discussing this proposal, Lillie and Lord Silverdale think about her paper as an effective replacement for a husband:

If *The Cherub* is born and lives, it will be a more effectual advertising medium than even a husband, and may replace him. A paper of your own can puff you rather better than a husband of your own, it has the larger circulation and more opportunities. . . . Her correspondents praise her in the gates and her staff shall rise up and call her blessed. It may well be that she will arrive at that stage at which a husband is an incubus and marriage a manacle. In that day the honor of the Club will be safe in her hands. (128)

Lord Silverdale tells Lillie to wait until Ellaline is “delivered of *The Cherub*” before admitting her to the Club. Although no character in this novel escapes Zangwill’s satire, Ellaline’s portrait is less ridiculous than some, and draws attention to a mode of femininity that came to provoke some anxiety at the end of the nineteenth century. Given her public success, she seems not to need a husband. Instead, she turns to the printing press and commercial sphere for benefits and satisfactions not available under the “manacle” of marriage.

Like Ellaline Rand, Laura Spragg is married to her career: she writes art and music reviews under the pen-name Frank Maddox. When Lillie interviews this very desirable candidate for admission to the Club, she asks if Frank Maddox had not better revert to her “maiden name” before joining. Considering this proposal, Frank Maddox agrees that her pen name might sound odd “under the peculiar circumstances”: “On the other hand, to revert to Laura Spragg now might be indiscreet. People would couple my name with Frank Maddox’s—you know the way of the world. The gossips get their facts so distorted, and I

couldn't even deny the connection" (277). Although the reason she gives Lillie for not marrying her lover (the famous composer Paul Horace) is that he will find out that she knows nothing about art and music, the reason she gives him is that in marrying her he will lose his most valuable critic, because "my praises would be discounted by the public if I were his wife" (288). Both statements reveal that Frank Maddox would intend to keep working after her wedding, and that the marriage would negatively impact her career. Zangwill never questions the morality of working within wedlock, but points to Frank Maddox's possible decline as a successful critic as reason enough for remaining single.

As a contrast to Ellaline Rand (Andrew Dibdin) and Laura Spragg (Frank Maddox) stands the travel writer Nelly Nimrod, who published an account of her travels from Charing Cross to China-Tartary under the name Wee Winnie. Nelly has embraced most of the stereotypical characteristics of the New Woman: she has adopted male items of attire; she glories in being an "unconventional female" (229); she helps men to board the train; and she believes that although marriage was once "the key to comparative freedom," it no longer has anything to offer the independent woman (237). Yet despite paying lip service to women's rights, Nelly shows herself to be a slave to the fashion of New Womanhood. Admitting that she knows nothing of the aims of Lillie's Club, she proclaims that wherever "there is a crusade you will always find me in the van" (226). A member of several clubs, from the Lady Travellers' to the Junior Widows', Nelly's membership is based more on their popularity and pleasant smoking rooms than on important causes. Indeed, Nelly's independence seems to be only as deep as her clothing, for her rebellious activities are defined as much by what she wears as what she does. Having "burst" from the "swaddling clothes" of traditional womanhood, Nelly describes her (sartorial) emancipation: "I have not merely played cricket in a white shirt and lawn tennis in a blue serge skirt, I have not only skated in low-heeled

boots and fenced in corduroy knickerbockers, but I have sailed the seas in an oil-skin jacket and a sou'wester and swum them in nothing and walked beneath them in the diver's mail" (229). Seeking notoriety in her outward appearance, and capitalising on her former success as an author, Nelly's fate in the novel, predictably, is to change her clothes and thus change her status. Unlike Ellaline Rand and Laura Spragg, whose male pseudonyms demonstrate that they are wedded to their ongoing careers, Nelly's pen name is feminine and proves to be no obstacle to marriage. Indeed, as Lillie's millionaire father uneasily admits, he fell in love with the independent persona of Wee Winnie, "but now Nelly says she wants to settle down" (328). By discarding her "mannish attire," Nelly shows how conventional she was all along.

Despite his mockery of the attention-seeking Nelly, however, Zangwill also includes in his novel a particular case in which the employment of the wife might not only be possible but also desirable. Near the beginning of the novel, Lord Silverdale chases down Wilkins, a writer for the *Moon*, who has falsely reported the membership of Clorinda Bell. Lamenting his engagement, Wilkins explains that his fiancée, Diana, is always asking questions, and fears that this "thirst for information would only be made more raging by marriage" (92). Comparing her persistent inquiries to "having to fill up a census paper once a week" (92), Wilkins admits that when his work day is over, he "quivers with torture" whenever he hears a question (93). Much later in the novel, Lillie interviews a Miss Diana Wilkins, who, it is later discovered, is in fact a *Moon*-woman who infiltrated the Club to write "Sensational Stories of Skittish Spinsters" (319). Lord Silverdale quickly realises that Lillie met with *Mrs* Diana Wilkins, noting that his former acquaintance "has hit on the brilliant solution of making her into a Lady Interviewer, so that her nerves, too, shall be hypersensitive to interrogatives, and husband and wife shall sit at home in a balsamic restfulness permeated by none but categorical propositions" (320-21). Recasting the domestic sphere as a place that is

peaceful *because* the wife works outside the home, Zangwill pokes fun at the ideal of the angel in the house.

Diana's article finally prompts a real old maid to attempt membership. Miss Dolly Vane, who calls herself "Little Dolly," is the very icon of aged maidenhood. Clinging to the fashions of the 1850s, she is dressed in a "curious skirt" with "huge lace frills on the elbow-sleeves," sports an odd coiffure, and wears a "Leghorn hat" (321). Although the "remains of beauty" may be seen on her "withered face," her voice is cracked and her eyes "wild and wandering" (321). The first spinster to be interviewed who is beyond marriageable age, Little Dolly seems not quite human. Indeed, she is described as a "strange apparition," one whose pathetic and childlike manner frightens the flirting protagonists. The ghost of her former sexual self, this spinster not only exceeds the boundaries of Lillie's Old Maids' Club but, in Townsend's illustration of the scene, she takes over the frame (see fig. 12). Hardly "little," Dolly is depicted as a looming, beckoning figure haunting the terrified-looking soon-to-be-married couple. This "ancient lady quaintly attired" exerts her abilities to make herself at home anywhere, and she takes over the space, forcing the normative pair to cower in the corner of the frame (321). Furthermore, the spinster immediately begins to establish kinship between herself and the Club members. She compares her own diminutive nickname to that of Wee Winnie, who, although not officially a member, had been advertised as one in Diana's article. She also compares herself to Lillie, calling her "Little Lillie Dulcimer," reinforcing their shared status as spinster sisters. Little Dolly's aged maidenhood is made apparent not only through her clothing but also in her outdated impression of herself. In "creaking tones," she says, half to herself: "I shan't have you now, Philip. . . . The rules will not allow it, will they, Miss Dulcimer? It is not enough to be young and beautiful, I must reject somebody—and I have nobody else but you, Philip. You are the only man I ever loved"



The Old Maid arrives.

Fig. 12. F. W. Townsend, "The Old Maid arrives," *The Old Maids' Club* by Israel Zangwill (New York: American Publishers Corporation, 1892) 322.

(323). When Lord Silverdale informs her “in bluff, hearty tones” that they will enroll her in the Club immediately, Little Dolly looks up smiling, saying “Then I’m an old maid already!” before bursting into “uncanny laughter” (323). Dolly’s entrance into the novel changes its tone dramatically. As soon as she realises Dolly is a genuine spinster, Lillie “grows pale” and, as the older woman leaves the room, she “shudder[s] violently” and falls to “weeping half-hysterically” (323). The thought that she really could become “Little Lillie,” a ghostly—and ghastly— anachronistic spectre who does not even realise that she has aged, terrifies the young woman. Dolly is mad and pathetic, but she is oddly powerful. Not only does she take over the space, forge kinship with Lillie and Wee Winnie, and reduce the heroine to hysterics, but she immediately forces the dissolution of a Club whose aim is to obliterate the kind of spinsterhood she represents. The explicitly out-of-fashion Dolly highlights how short-lived the life of Lillie’s Old Maids would be, as their membership would necessarily be forfeited after age twenty-five. Lillie finally sees that her Club was a “hollow mockery,” naturally devoid of members because its applicants were only playing at spinsterhood, trying to capitalise on the latest fashion.

The grim reality of the spinster in the shape of Dolly propels the remaining candidates for the Old Maids’ Club into marriage. As though spinsterhood were a disease they are afraid to catch, Lillie accepts Lord Silverdale’s proposal, while Wee Winnie (changing into women’s clothes and dropping her pen name) becomes engaged, as Nelly Nimrod, to Lillie’s millionaire father. Nelly wishes to “settle down” (328); Lillie immediately “grow[s] rapidly conventional” (329); and the inaugural soirée of the Old Maids’ Club turns into an engagement party. Despite this conservative conclusion, throughout the novel Zangwill taps into social anxieties about the numerical surplus of women, legitimising their right to work. *The Old Maids’ Club*’s primary target proves to be those who, merely playing

at being old maids, are terrified of going through life alone. Using an old stereotype to trump a new one, Zangwill's light fiction demonstrates the persistence of the Old Maid as a disruptive figure in Victorian culture. His novel, which satirises almost every character his pen touches, finally cannot mock Little Dolly, whose looming presence and refusal to respect the boundaries of the Club cause it to implode.

Chapter 3

“Strange and Rare Visitants”: Victorian Spinsters and Domestic Space

Like meteors, they wander free in interfamiliar space, obeying laws and conventions of their own, and entering other systems only as strange and rare visitants.

— “The Glorified Spinster,” *MacMillan’s Magazine* (1888)

In Lillie Hamilton French’s “My Old Maid’s Corner” (1902-3), published serially in *Century Illustrated Magazine*, a first-person narrator looks out of her corner apartment and observes the world outside. She notes that while at one time “the mere suggestion of any place occupied by an old maid conveyed to me only an idea of forlornity,” that was when “I was always looking into every corner.”¹ However, having discovered that “corners worth anything were places to look out of, not into,” the narrator has found that by looking out, she can “command an undreamed-of radius of vision” (401). “[T]wo ways of viewing the world were open to me,” she comments, and few, if any, of her married sisters could “boast so wide an outlook” (401). With its “noisy traffic in truck and trolley” on one side, and “coupés and carriages” on the other, her corner apartment mirrors the middle-class spinster’s social status, slipping between the working-class and the leisure-class, industry and fashion (401). As she looks out, literally and figuratively, on the world she occupies, she notes the self-absorption and limited vision of those living in the centre. At the same time, she also observes spinsters more marginal than herself, who “belong nowhere”:

They belong nowhere, are no man’s possession, like fruit dropped from a sunny garden wall on to the highway beyond. Every passer-by has a right to them, and may devour them as he travels; but they are never reckoned again among the

¹ Lillie Hamilton French, “My Old Maid’s Corner,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* ns43 (1902-3): 401.

proprietor's belongings, nor taken to adorn a table round which his guests are gathered. I never look at a family tree without thinking of just such old maids, wondering who nipped the bud that I see on the end of some ancestral branch with no divergent twigs, and with which a hereditary line is ended. (404)

The narrator's complex metaphor combines the imagery of overripe fruit frequently associated with spinsters with a spatial image of their social exclusion. Unable to find homes for themselves after leaving their fathers' gardens, these old maids have "fallen" from grace and been exiled from their Father's Eden. Ironically blamed for having plucked themselves from the Tree of Knowledge by failing to be picked while they were ripe, their punishment is permanent exile. Although the narrator of "My Old Maid's Corner" has escaped this fate herself, she nevertheless feels like an "alien, an outsider, an anomaly" in the eyes of her married friends, who make her feel the "height and breadth and thickness of the dividing-wall" between them (918). Thus although she believes herself to be in a privileged position to see and understand society, she recognises that she must still remain in her corner or outside the garden wall.

That the Victorian spinster's marginal social position found expression in such spatial terms is hardly surprising, for she stood in paradoxical relation to domestic space: at once alienated from the domestic home and cast as a born homemaker. Finding herself in a social and spatial limbo because she had failed to progress from her father's home to her husband's, she was seen as a perpetual visitor or lodger without a room of her own.² At the same time these "strange and rare visitants" to the conventional home were perceived as

² The fact that the spinster found herself without a room of her own in the Victorian domestic home was exacerbated by the increasing specialisation of room function over the nineteenth century. The "consciously contrived" space of the Victorian home was theoretically divided into front and back, upstairs and downstairs, with children's rooms, sick rooms, servants' rooms, female drawing rooms and male libraries; see Moira Donald, "Tranquil Havens? Critiquing the Idea of Home as the Middle-Class Sanctuary," *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*, ed. Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999) 105-7. See also Clive Aslet and Alan Powers, *The National Trust Book of the English Home* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985).

having remarkable freedom in the “interfamiliar space” (literally space between families) in which they lived. After all, the overripe fruit in the above analogy lands on the “highway,” pointing to the spinster’s ability to travel. Moreover, in both novels and periodicals, old maids also demonstrate an uncanny ability to take possession of the marginal spaces they occupy, and transform them into their own versions of the domestic sphere. Behind this paradoxical relationship to the home lies the much-discussed ideology of the separate spheres. On the one hand, as a woman who did not preside over a domestic space owned by her husband, the spinster was always a displaced person, wandering in search of a home over which to preside; on the other hand, since women were understood as innately domestic, the spinster had an uncanny ability to make herself at home wherever she went.

Encouraged to “go in” and remove her grotesque body from the public eye, as we saw in Chapter 1, the spinster was typically linked to the alleys, garrets, nooks, and crannies of society. Commenting on “Our Single Women” in 1872, Dora Greenwell turned to spatial metaphor to stress the spinster’s marginal position: “in the world—that great and goodly, yet not too well warmed mansion—single women are on the whole provided for, much as single gentlemen are accommodated in country houses,—not in the roomiest and best furnished apartments; and for these, too, they are often expected to pay pretty dearly.”³ Relegated to the spare rooms of the world, the single women of Greenwell’s analogy are homeless, dependent on others for their begrudged shelter. “Single life,” she remarks, “is full of limitations, of restrictions,” which only a few women of “strength and originality of character” can surmount, and she describes the process of a typical spinster’s “going in” as a process of studied obliteration:

[I]t would be curious, if it were not so touching, to watch the woman of ‘no particular age’ fading into a neutral tint long before the setting in of her autumn need

³ Dora Greenwell, “Our Single Women,” *North British Review* 71 (Feb. 1862): 36.

have compelled the change, studiously obliterating herself from the busy foreground of life, taking up less and less room in the world, and seeming to apologize to it for even the little space she occupies (36).

Despite Greenwell's obvious sympathy for the retreating spinsters she describes, her review stresses the inevitability of the typical spinster's "fading" and shrinking, and seems tacitly to approve of the single woman's cramped condition. However, in an odd note to this passage, she evokes the spinster's restlessness in her captivity by quoting from Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*:

Let the eighteenth motion be *that of trepidation*, it is the motion, as it were, *of an external captivity*: when bodies, for instance, not exactly contented with their position, and not exactly ill, constantly tremble, and are restless, not contented with their position, and not daring to advance. This motion necessarily occurs in all bodies which are situated in a mean state, between conveniences and inconveniences, so that, being repulsed from their proper position, they strive to escape, are repulsed, and again continue to make the attempt. (Greenwell 36n)

Suggestively, she locates this recognition of the single woman's entrapment in the margins of her own text, and leaves it without comment or explanation. Although her review points to the spinster's inevitable fading and shrinking, her invocation of Bacon's laws of movement defines her rather as a liminal creature trapped between two worlds, unable to return to her "proper position" but not yet "daring to advance."

As in the narrator's metaphor of the garden wall in "My Old Maid's Corner," the spinster in Greenwell's note seems to have been dropped onto the highway of life, and she cannot decide whether to get back into the garden or travel down the road. In his famous lecture, "Of Queens' Gardens," John Ruskin places women firmly within the garden walls.

In reinscribing the ideology of the separate spheres, however, his lecture throws into relief an important tension in woman's relationship to the home. To speak of the "superiority" of one sex over the other, says Ruskin, is "foolish," for the sexes are "in nothing alike."⁴

Rather, "each one completes the other, and is completed by the other"; while the man is "active, progressive, defensive," the woman is made for "sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" (98). Her role is to make "his house" into a home, "a sacred place, a vestal temple" (98-99). Thus, although the house is a male possession ("his house"), it is curiously also "vestal," a space of impenetrable virginity. Perhaps because it was often feared that husbands, literally and symbolically, brought the worries, sins, and diseases of the outside world into these domestic sanctums, Ruskin casts the home as an impervious, celibate fortress, stressing that creating a home is a woman's innate gift:

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermillion, shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless (99).

Strangely, this description, which encloses the woman's body in the shell of a "home" carried about her, does away with the need for "his house" altogether. Ruskin's idea of a "true wife" presiding over a "vestal temple" seems to apply more readily to a spinster than to a married woman.⁵ Importantly, spinsters maintained the legal right to own property, as

⁴ John Ruskin, "Of Queens' Gardens" (1864), rpt. in *The Works of Ruskin: Sesame and Lilies and The Ethics of the Dust* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1921) 98.

⁵ Ruskin's own recently annulled marriage to Effie Chambers Gray was unconsummated; hence his own "vestal temple" had remained pure.

women who married did not.⁶

In *The Duties of Women* (1881), Frances Power Cobbe insisted that women not only had the ability to work and maintain a home but had the “right” to do so: “The making of a true home is really our peculiar and inalienable right,—a right which no man can take from us; for a man can no more make a home than a drone can make a hive.”⁷ Because a woman’s ability to make a home is an inborn trait, Cobbe claims, she must not accept pressures forcing her into a rootless, nomadic lifestyle: “Make your homes better and happier and freer than they are, but do not even speak of the alternative of forsaking them and turning ourselves into Bedouins of the lodging house” (138). Redirecting Ruskin’s image of the woman surrounded by home, Cobbe gives it a feminist spin: “it is our privilege, our faculty, to turn any four walls, nay even a tent under which we take shelter as we wander about the plains of the East, into a home, if we so please. And shall we relinquish the use of this blessed faculty, and be content henceforth, like *mere men*, to be only quartered here and there, not to be at home anywhere?” (139). Though Cobbe acknowledges that some women may still be forced to “wander” on the highway of life, she rejects the idea that some women are relegated to the spare rooms of society. Exploiting the ideology of the separate spheres, she encourages women to make homes for themselves wherever they happen to be.

Even writers more conservative than Cobbe, intent on persuading single women to “go in,” could not altogether ignore the importance of establishing a place to *go into*. Dinah

⁶ Unmarried women (known under the law as *feme sole*) maintained their right to own property; once they married, they became “covered” by their husbands (legally, *feme covert*). Tim Dolin explains: “In law, women of property included unmarried women and spinsters (the single woman who ‘has the same rights to property as a man’, in Bodichon’s words) who might be possessed of a fortune or existing on the barest income; and separated wives who fought for legal access to their own property and earnings. Until the married women’s property laws were changed – first in 1870, but not with any real success until 1882 – women under common law (that is to say, ninety percent of Victorian women) were legally absorbed upon marriage into the identity of their husbands. Their legal personality was accordingly suspended.” See *Mistress of the House: Women of Property in the Victorian Novel* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 1997) 2-3.

⁷ Frances Power Cobbe, *The Duties of Women: A Course of Lectures*, intro Sheila Rothman (1881, rpt. Farmingdale NY: Dabor Social Science Publications, 1978) 139.

Mulock Craik, for instance, stresses how important it is for single women to maintain “that fixed standing in society” which prevents them from “being drifted away, like most old maids, down the current of a new generation, even as dead may-flies down a stream.”⁸ She notes that “a frivolous young maid sunk into a helpless old one, can no more expect to keep her pristine position than last year’s leaf to flutter upon a spring bough”; but, at the same time, she insists that “an old maid who deserves well of this world, by her ceaseless work therein, having won her position, keeps it to the end” (24). The old maid achieves this stability by making her “solitary” house a “nucleus of cheerfulness and happiness” (25). Basically, however, Craik believes that the majority of spinsters will fail to secure their place in the world. Charlotte Yonge is more optimistic. Like Cobbe, she too echoes Ruskin: “From the palace to the lodging house, the great essential of home which the true woman will create as surely as a bird will build a nest, is a living room that gives a sense of comfort, cheerfulness and pleasantness.”⁹ Yonge’s “true woman” is closer to Ruskin’s ideal “true wife” than to Cobbe’s everywoman “we”; nevertheless, her domesticity is not defined as making a home of “his house.” Rather, she can bring domesticity to any dwelling: “true women will make a home of the rooms they live in—perhaps as a party of sisters, the remnants of a family, who gather round either the eldest or the strongest, and make their abode—albeit smaller and poorer—seem that of childhood still” (271). Even in the absence of men, then, women seem to have an innate ability to make any house into a home. As Jane Ellen Panton (author of over thirty popular advice and decorating books for women) put it: “A woman’s sphere is domestic, more or less, she cannot alter it by stepping out of it.”¹⁰

In his classic *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard studies how humans experience

⁸ Dinah Mulock Craik, *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1861) 24.

⁹ Charlotte Yonge, *Womankind* (London: Mozley and Smith, 1877) 267.

¹⁰ Jane Ellen Panton, *The Way They Should Go: Hints to Young Parents* (London: Ward and Downey, 1896) 165.

intimate spaces at a fundamental level. Drawing on a wealth of literature, he traces the archetypal underpinnings of cellars and attics, nests and shells, drawers, and corners to link architectural and emotional structures. To Bachelard, the house is a maternal, womb-like space, a “large cradle” that “shelters the dreamer” and allows one “to dream in peace.”¹¹ In an argument that bears on the question of the spinster and domesticity I have been tracing, he suggests that although a house’s intimate spaces function as repositories for memory, once the memory is fixed in space, the space itself may be carried about in the mind: “even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic. We return to them in our night dreams. These retreats have the value of a shell” (10). In Bachelard’s terms, then, the spinster, even though relegated to a home’s peripheral spaces, may appropriate them mentally before moving on, carrying her shelter in her mind. Furthermore, creatures inhabiting shells are at once intriguing and frightening because they carry their homes with them, and their homes, growing out of their bodies, seem inseparable from them. Their ability to withdraw into their shells and become invisible, Bachelard remarks, makes them threatening, for any creature that hides seems to be preparing a “way out” (110). His analysis of such creatures provides a useful gloss on the Victorian spinster, whose mobile, self-sufficient body, cloaked in domesticity but appearing and disappearing as she moved from house to house, contradicted the notion that a woman needed to marry in order to procure a home. “Like meteors, they wander free in interfamiliar space, obeying laws and conventions of their own, and entering other systems only as strange and rare visitants.”¹² Existing in the social and spatial margins of society, a perpetual visitor to the paternal home and a wanderer on the highway of life, carrying her domesticity around her like a shell, the Victorian spinster threatened the strict division of the

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), trans. Maria Jolas (rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) 6-7.

¹² “The Glorified Spinster,” *MacMillan’s Magazine* 58 (1888): 372.

separate spheres by ignoring their boundaries and wandering in the interspaces.

This chapter examines three novels in which the Victorian spinster's paradoxical ability to infiltrate and appropriate peripheral spaces becomes a central concern. The elderly spinsters and childless widows inhabiting Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* are at an age when conduct books would advise them to "go in." Instead, the ladies have simply redefined their entire town as domestic space, and they wander about it as freely as they would in their own homes, much of the novel's comedy and power deriving from their ability to rewrite their rules of visibility as the need arises. Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* paints a far darker picture of the spinster's need to appropriate space, yet its heroine moves from invisibility into visibility in large part because of her ability to take possession of marginal areas. Denied the husband of a conventional romantic ending, the heroine nevertheless gets the house and, better still, a school in a blending of private and public space particularly expressive of the liminal social position of the spinster. Like *Villette*, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* showcases the spinster's ability to escape domestic enclosure by exploiting her peripheral social position. Unlike that of Brontë, however, Collins's narrative effectively shuts up his spinster characters (verbally and physically). As it does so, however, his text attests to the spinster's ability to infiltrate and undermine traditional social, architectural, and narrative structures.

“Quite Put in a Corner”: Redefining Domestic Space in *Cranford*

“Marry!” said we. “Marry! Madness!”

— Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford* (1853)

Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853) envisions a village of “Amazons” in which men, not women, are superfluous.¹³ Agreeing that “A man . . . is *so* in the way in the house,” the ladies of this community have literally taken “possession” of the space, redefining and rearranging notions of public and private to suit themselves.¹⁴ In her introduction to the Oxford edition, Charlotte Mitchell observes that Gaskell “seeks to explore in *Cranford* some aspects of female life from an unexpected side, through a comic fantasy of conformity, not a tragic fantasy of rebellion, by caricaturing the doctrine of separate spheres” (x). However, while the exaggerated separation of the public sphere (represented by the manufacturing town of Drumble) and the domestic sphere (represented by Cranford) has generally been taken for granted by scholars, it is important to note that the ladies of Cranford are responsible for having developed the rules and etiquette which make their entire village their exclusive sphere. With the exception of the narrator, Mary Smith, the spinsters and childless widows living in this provincial village are all at an age and in a situation that Charlotte Yonge referred to as “gone in.” Rather than isolating themselves within their individual homes, however, they have created rules of selective visibility whereby the entire village may be treated as domestic space. Nonetheless, the women’s sphere created and maintained by the

¹³ The novel was initially envisioned as a short story. “Our Society at Cranford” (which became chapters 1 and 2) was published in Charles Dickens’s *Household Words* in December 1851. Asked to continue the tales, Gaskell wrote the remaining episodes, which were published serially until May 1853. The first one-volume edition of *Cranford* issued in June 1853. An additional story involving the characters of *Cranford*, “The Cage at Cranford,” was published in Dickens’s *All the Year Round* in November 1863.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, ed. Elizabeth Porges Watson, intro Charlotte Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 1.

ladies of Cranford is precarious, requiring constant vigilance against invasion. Men haunt the town and the houses, appearing and disappearing, unconscious of the Cranfordians' unwritten rules. The houses of the town's spinsters and widows are threatened by a band of robbers, until the real threat is discovered when one of their own is stolen in marriage by one of the town's only resident bachelors. Moreover, throughout the novel, the categories of public and private are reconsidered and redefined as the need arises, so that the genteel Miss Matty Jenkyns may sell tea out of her dining parlour, free from any degrading associations with the shop. What is radical about the ladies' continual reappraisal of the private is that they control the boundaries of their own existence, one that in the end has no real boundary at all.

Lauded for its delightful narrative and eccentric characters since its initial publication, *Cranford* possesses a charm that long kept it critically devalued. As Margaret Case Croskery explains, charm presents "something of a critical challenge to our current understanding of narrative as something that mimics the compulsions of desire."¹⁵ As a result, the recent revival of critical interest has stressed instead the serious aesthetic or political dimensions of the text.¹⁶ But in the charm and whimsy lies the key to Gaskell's experiment with the alternative stories (and ways of telling them) available to the Victorian spinster, for what is ultimately charming is the ease with which the ladies simply appropriate for themselves the standard negative categories and motifs attached to single women.

Thus the ladies of Cranford share with the stereotypical spinster a proclivity for outdated dress. As Miss Havisham demonstrates, this stereotype generally reinforces the

¹⁵ Margaret Case Croskery, "Mothers Without Children, Unity Without Plot: Cranford's Radical Charm," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52:2 (1997): 198.

¹⁶ See, for example Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978). Jeffrey Cass, "'The Scraps, Patches, and Rags of Daily Life': Gaskell's Oriental Other and the Conservation of Cranford," *Papers on Language & Literature* 35:4 (1999): 417-433; Talia Schaffer, "Craft, Authorial Anxiety, and 'The Cranford Papers'," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 38:2 (2001): 221-239; and Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1992).

disparity between the single woman's ageing body and her juvenile social position as unmarried maiden, but in Cranford, it represents a deliberate choice to remain "independent of fashion" (2). "What does it signify how we dress here at Cranford, where everybody knows us?" the Amazons ask (2). "And if they go from home, their reason is equally cogent: 'What does it signify how we dress here, where nobody knows us?'" (2). In Cranford, the ladies share a tacit agreement that dresses are pointedly to be treated as invisible articles of attire, eclipsed by the old brooches that adorn them and the new caps gracing their heads.

Choosing not to see the ageing, menopausal bodies which would define them as "superfluous" in the Victorian public eye,¹⁷ the ladies refresh their wardrobes with a succession of caps. As Mary Smith explains: "The expenditure in dress in Cranford was principally in that one article referred to. If the heads were buried in smart new caps, the ladies were like ostriches, and cared not what became of their bodies" (73-4). In their all-female community, their unproductive bodies count for very little, but their colourfully decorated heads showcase their emphasis on friendship, community, and conversation. By the 1840s, as Anne M. Buck points out, the cap had become synonymous with age, defining the Cranford ladies as belonging to a bygone era.¹⁸ In manipulating the social code of caps, however, they point to a self-perception that tends to confound conventional expectation. So Miss Matty confuses the milliner when, after her former suitor Mr Holbrook dies, she asks the milliner to make her widows' caps like those of Mrs. Jamieson. Later, her hybridised status as a "widowed" spinster is more comically underlined when, unsettled by Miss Pole's impromptu visit, she places her widow's cap on top of her late sister Miss Jenkyns's cap, which she has been "wearing out in private" (60). Miss Matty's simultaneous wearing of

¹⁷ For a fascinating reading of how Gaskell reconfigures menopause as a remedy for Malthusian overpopulation, see Lisa Niles, "Malthusian Menopause: Aging and Sexuality in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33 (2005): 293-310.

¹⁸ Anne M. Buck, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1961): 135-36.

two caps demonstrates her odd social position as somewhere between her sister, a spinster who never married out of principle, and a widow. Spinsters who were loyal to one lover but prevented from marrying him had a special status in Victorian classification of old maids, W. G. Hamley even stating that a woman who had been faithful to a long engagement was not an old maid at all (105). To read Miss Matty's caps is thus to understand the subtle shifts in her social status, as she moves in spirit from spinster to widow, while to the outside world she has done nothing but change her cap.

The Amazons' preference for indoor head-coverings also symbolises their redefinition of the private sphere in Cranford. Other than Miss Deborah Jenkyns, who wears a masculine "little bonnet like a jockey-cap" and dies in the first instalment of the novel (12), none of the ladies in Cranford seems to wear outdoor hats or bonnets, instead maintaining their indoor caps, which they cover with calashes when they venture out of doors. So odd is their wearing of the calash that Mary Smith asks her readers: "Do you know what a calash is? It is a covering worn over caps, not unlike the heads fastened on old-fashioned gigs; but sometimes it is not quite so large. This kind of head-gear always made an awful impression on the children of Cranford" (65). This obsolete fashion item functions not simply to label the Amazons as hopelessly behind the times (the calash was popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries). By wearing a garment that essentially amounts to a roof over their heads—the word is actually derived from *calèche*—the ladies of Cranford demonstrate their expansion of their own boundaries by carrying the private sphere with them wherever they go, rather like a snail carries its shell. It is not that Cranford actually *is* a domestic sphere but that the ladies treat it as one.

As Tim Dolin has suggested, the entire village may be read as "conventional domestic space—a vast middle-class home" (36). Establishing rules of visibility much as they do

visiting hours, the ladies of Cranford have fostered an atmosphere of privacy that enables Miss Pole, for example, to consider herself unseen because she is out before she is supposed to be. Mary Smith reports catching “glimpses of a figure dodging behind the cloaks and mantles” in the Fashion show-room at Mr Johnson’s store, and she recognises Miss Pole, dressed “in her morning costume (the principal feature of which was her being without teeth, and wearing a veil to conceal the deficiency)” (125). By choosing a time of day at which, according to Cranford etiquette, the world will not be looking, Miss Pole goes about Cranford as she would go about her own house. Of course, Miss Pole is not really invisible, but as an unfashionable body in a Fashion showroom, she enacts, on a smaller scale, the invisibility of spinsters in general, but on her own terms. Whereas much advice writing attempted to force the spinster’s unsightly body into the domestic sphere, Gaskell shifts the perspective to show how the spinsters themselves translate their social invisibility to mean actual invisibility, and how they redefine their entire community as domestic space so they cannot be blamed for staying “out” after their marriageable days are past.

As property-holders and the social elite, the Amazons truly are in “possession” of their town. The stereotypical spinster, grudgingly afforded space in the paternal home, haunts its rooms because she is never truly “at home” there; in Cranford, however, it is the men who seem to haunt the town, for they are out of place in the female environment. Frightening away the little boys who look at their carefully tended flowers, the Amazons also frighten away the men who would look at them and destroy their carefully maintained system of etiquette: “If a married couple comes to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears; he is either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the Cranford evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his ship, or closely engaged in business all the week in the great neighbouring commercial town of

Drumble” (1). The invasive Captain Brown, who moves to Cranford with his two daughters, violates several items of Cranfordian etiquette at once when he “openly spoke about his being poor—not in a whisper to an intimate friend, the doors and windows being previously closed; but, in the public street! in a loud military voice!” (4). He also, rather than abiding by the rules of selective visibility observed by Cranford’s ladies, almost runs against Miss Jenkyns, so absorbed is he in the objectionable writings of Mr. Boz. Although Gaskell famously admitted to have “killed Capt Brown very much against my will,”¹⁹ several scholars have noted how the text of *Cranford* seems intent on punishing the Captain for choosing Dickens over Miss Jenkyns’s preferred author, Dr Johnson, as well as for violating Cranford’s notion of domestic space, by having him (and his book) run over by a train.²⁰

Yet, while the ladies of Cranford can sometimes “frighten men to death,” men frighten them too. Although “gentlemen were scarce, and almost unheard of in the ‘genteel society’ of Cranford, they or their lower counterparts—handsome young men—abounded in the lower classes” (24). Like the middle-class home, in which male and female servants could penetrate into every chamber without affecting its privacy, Cranford’s domestic sphere is haunted by the actual bodies of the lower class. Miss Matty’s kitchen proves a particularly “haunted” spot, as her “mysterious dread of men and matrimony” prompts her to deny her servants “followers” (24-5). Despite this prohibition, “a vision of a man seemed to haunt the kitchen” (25). Mary Smith sees “a man’s coat-tails whisk into the scullery” and something that looks like “a young man squeezed up between the clock and the back of the open kitchen door” (25). Invisible because of their class yet visible because of their material bodies, the ghostly working-class men haunting Miss Matty’s kitchen point to her own failed relationship with Mr Holbrook, who was not considered “enough of a gentleman for the Rector, and Miss

¹⁹ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996) 748.

²⁰ See, for example, Nina Auerbach’s discussion of Captain Brown’s death in *Communities of Women* (81).

Jenkyns” because he insisted on being called yeoman instead of Esquire (29). Because of Mr Holbrook’s ambiguous social class, Matty was not permitted to “see” him, and he became the spectre of an alternative life she might have led.

When, after “thirty or forty years’ separation,” Matty is invited, with Mary Smith and Miss Pole, to spend the day at Mr Holbrook’s estate for the first time, she is pleased by her former suitor’s house, his utter disregard for domestic innovations, and his reordering of rooms. The three women spend the afternoon in Mr Holbrook’s counting house, a “pleasant” room blending public and private, outdoor and indoor space: at once an office from which he pays his labourers, a library strewn with books, and a “pretty sitting room” that looks into the orchard (32). In this masculine version of the domestic sphere, however, Miss Matty struggles, feeling conflicted and not at home. Recognising that they and their codes of behaviour are out of place even “four or five miles” from Cranford, Miss Pole and Miss Matty decline to walk outside with Mr Holbrook, since they “had only their unbecoming calashes to put on over their caps” (34). Not only do they seem to recognise that by wearing their calashes they retire into their own domestic sphere, but they also acknowledge that in this masculine space, their rules of “everybody knows us” or “nobody knows us” no longer apply, and they no longer control their own visibility.

At Mr Holbrook’s estate, indeed, Miss Matty is momentarily forced back into the visibility of her coming out period, thereby ironically underlining the actual invisibility of women on which it was posited. As sexual objects on the marriage market, women could not control how they were seen, so they risked misinterpretation. While Mr Holbrook treats Miss Matty with the courtesy of a suitor, allowing her the dubious “compliment” of filling his pipe, his treatment of her reinforces the general invisibility of women in male-controlled spaces. Although he gives them dinner, he does not observe that they have difficulty eating

peas with two-pronged forks. And although he reads them “Locksley Hall,” he does not notice that Miss Matty falls asleep within five minutes of his beginning the poem nor that Miss Pole encourages him in order that she may focus on a difficult part of her crochet.²¹ Significantly, Mr Holbrook fails to see them not because of their age (to which he seems oblivious) but because in his male space they become sexual objects, no longer in control of their own visibility.

If Mr Holbrook does not recognise Miss Matty’s subdued, continued love for him, she quietly restores men to social visibility in her home and her mind by allowing her new maid Martha to have followers. Martha has thought it “hard of missus” not to let her “keep company” with young men, especially because the house would be so good at concealing them: “this is just the house for missus never to be the wiser if they did come: and it’s such a capable kitchen— there’s such good dark corners in it—I’d be bound to hide any one” (38). The house with its dark corners is a reflection of Miss Matty herself, who keeps her secrets in the “dark corners” of her mind. When Mary Smith realises that Miss Matty is pining as a result of Mr Holbrook’s illness, she reflects: “I felt almost guilty of having spied too curiously into that tender heart, and I was not going to speak of its secrets—hidden, Miss Matty believed, from all the world” (38). Like the suitors Fanny stows imperfectly in the kitchen, Matty’s secret love haunts her and cannot entirely be hidden. By restoring men to her kitchen, she begins to accept them again in her mind.

The sympathetic connection between the ladies of Cranford and their houses finds a more comical expression in the great panic over housebreaking following the “foreign” incursion of the conjuror, Signor Brunoni, into the town. After Signor Brunoni’s show in the Assembly Room—a decaying space mirroring the decaying bodies of the ladies—he becomes

²¹ For a compelling analysis of this scene, including the intertextual significance of Mr. Holbrook’s choice of “Locksley Hall,” see Hilary M. Schor’s *Scheherezade in the Marketplace* (102-4).

falsely linked to a “panic” stemming from one or two “real *bonâ fide* robberies” that “seemed to make us all afraid of being robbed” (89). Spawned by the arrival of a strange (and seemingly foreign, oriental) man, the panic over burglaries is really about the ability of strange men to make their way into the carefully guarded “vestal” homes of Cranford’s inhabitants. Strange stories of “men in dark clothes, going round the town, no doubt, in search of some unwatched house or some unfastened door” are collected, primarily by Miss Pole, and rumours surface that in the neighbouring town of Mardon, “houses and shops were entered by holes made in the walls, the bricks being silently carried away in the dead of night” (89, 91). Because there are no men in their houses at night, the ladies conjure up substitutes: Miss Pole begs “one of Mr. Hoggins’s worn-out hats to hang in her lobby,” while Miss Matty plans to call on a fictitious male servant if ever she should find a strange man concealed under her bed, a fear she had had since childhood (89, 98).

Casting the spinsters and childless widows as vulnerable precisely because there are no men in their beds (or under them), Gaskell uses their panic about robbery to foreshadow their alarm at another kind of housebreaking. The only two houses that seem to attract robbers are that of Mrs Jamieson (where Lady Glenmire is staying) and that of the doctor, Mr Hoggins. At Mrs Jamieson’s, men’s footsteps are seen “on the flower borders, under the kitchen windows, ‘where nae man should be,’” and her dog, Carlo, had barked all night long “as though strangers were abroad” (93). Shortly after Carlo’s death, from poison or apoplexy, Mrs Jamieson leaves Lady Glenmire to look after her house, “her ostensible office being to take care that maid servants did not pick up followers” (95). Meanwhile, Miss Pole, who has installed herself as the “heroine” of the ongoing robbery chronicles because she had escaped a “murderous gang” (two strange men and an Irish woman begging food for her children who become more villainous at every telling), hears a report of Mr Hoggins’s having

been robbed by “her men” (95). Although Mr Hoggins denies the rumour, claiming that his only loss was a neck of mutton that had been stolen by a cat, Miss Pole clings to her initial belief. Indeed, Mary Smith admits that “we (at least I) had my doubts as to whether [Miss Pole] really would enjoy the little adventure of having her house broken into, as she protested she should” (89).

Then Miss Pole breaks the shocking news the burglaries had disguised: “What do you think Miss Matty? What *do* you think? Lady Glenmire is to marry—is to be married, I mean—Lady Glenmire—Mr. Hoggins—Mr. Hoggins is going to marry Lady Glenmire!” (113-14). So disruptive is this news to the even tenor of the spinsters’ lives (and to their syntax) that, as with the robberies, they half-fear they will be next. Observing that “It’s coming very near!” Miss Matty reflects: “One does not know whose turn may come next. Here, in Cranford, poor Lady Glenmire might have thought herself safe” (114). Although none of the ladies’ houses were actually robbed, Lady Glenmire’s body has been effectively stolen out from under their noses by Mr. Hoggins. Obligated to look in after a servant who had fallen ill under Lady Glenmire’s watch, he was let into the house: “So the wolf had got into the fold, and now he was carrying off the shepherdess” (115). Miss Matty and Miss Pole are as excited about Lady Glenmire’s upcoming nuptials as they were afraid of the reported burglaries. Mary Smith has noticed that “just after the announcement of an engagement in any set, the unmarried ladies of that set flutter out in an unusual gaiety and newness of dress, as much as to say, in a tacit and unconscious manner, ‘We also are spinsters’” (116). Now Miss Matty and Miss Pole talk more about caps, gowns, and shawls than she has known them to do for years. Revising the rules of visibility in Cranford yet again, the ladies allow themselves, albeit briefly, to consider themselves “out” again, as in their youth.

Significantly, the person with the most power to disrupt the carefully wrought rules

of visibility and social conduct in Cranford is Peter Jenkyns. As the adored brother of Miss Deborah and Miss Matty Jenkyns, he is always welcome, yet because he is the male heir of the family, he displaces them in ways that the suitors and servants cannot. Indeed, Peter is exiled from the town precisely because he toys with rules of female visibility. Dressing up for a joke in Deborah's "old gown, and shawl, and bonnet," he walks "half seen" between the garden rails, cuddling a pillow to represent "a little baby" (52). He wanted simply "to make something to talk about in the town," and "never thought of it affecting Deborah." But Matty notes that the clothes he borrowed were the very clothes she was "known by everywhere" (52). By so exposing her familiar presence to the town, Peter not only labels Deborah with the stain of fallenness but also affects her ability to control her own visibility. His banishment from the town actually allows Deborah to assume a new position of importance in her parental home, as she attempts to be both wife and son to her bereaved father by reading, writing, and copying for him. Yet on the one occasion that Peter returns home, Miss Matty reports that the father-son relationship entirely supplants Deborah's attempts to be useful: "My father took him into every house in the parish, he was so proud of him. He never walked without Peter's arm to lean upon. Deborah used to smile (I don't think we ever laughed again after my mother's death), and say she was quite put in a corner" (59). Spatially and socially supplanted by her brother, Deborah loses her position at her father's side the moment Peter reappears. While his departure and the subsequent death of their father force Deborah and Matty to move to a smaller house, this new space of their own allows them the freedom of determining their own visibility.

As Alyson J. Kiesel notes: "the story of Peter is really one of origin—it's the violent rupture of parting that seals Cranford off from the rest of the world and locks it in a timeless, changeless, Eden of 'Amazons.'"²² If his departure is indeed the origin of the female sphere

²² Alyson J. Kiesel, "Meaning and Misinterpretation in *Cranford*," *ELH* 71 (2004): 1002-3.

that is Cranford, then his return marks its end. As thrilled as Matty is at the return of her long-lost brother, his arrival in Cranford puts her “quite in a corner” just as surely as it had earlier in the case of Deborah. As Tim Dolin has pointed out, it is Peter who utters the only occurrence in the novel of the taboo term “old maid” (Dolin 14), when he tells Miss Matty that when he left England she was well on her way to marriage: “If anybody had told me you would have lived and died an old maid then, I should have laughed in their faces” (155). His return makes her confront the aged body to which he blunderingly calls attention. He “smiles” at the “incongruity” of his gifts of India muslin and pearls, forcing his sister to admit: “I’m afraid I’m too old; but it was very kind of you to think of it. They are just what I should have liked years ago—when I was young!” (151). He also exclaims: “You would not think it now, I dare say, Mary! but this sister of mine was once a very pretty girl” (155). Peter’s comments about Matty’s failure to marry Mr. Holbrook leave her “shivering and shaking” (156), something Peter attributes to the open window. As Dolin remarks, however, “Peter is himself the open window that sends a chill through the air of the ‘old friendly sociability’ of Cranford society’, exposing it for just a moment to a world where genteel ladies are just old maids” (14).

Before Peter’s arrival, not only is Miss Matty unaffected by an open window but she can even, with the quiet help and sanction of the Amazons, transform a window of her dining parlour into a new glass door as she sets out to sell tea on the premises. Matty’s foray into the business world is protected from the “degrading characteristics” of the commercial sphere because it takes place within the protected female environment of Cranford, where competitive commerce is replaced with community. Lisa Niles has stressed that the “flow of neighbors and friends into Miss Matty’s tea shop creates a picture of domestic warmth, and the economic transactions that take place there are done with the least

disruption to maidenly gentility” (306). In a sense, the public commercial arena is absorbed into the private domestic sphere that is Cranford, so that it becomes a different, kinder realm. Miss Pole tells Mary on behalf of all the Amazons that “as long as we have a superfluity, it is not only a duty but a pleasure—a true pleasure, Mary! . . . to give what we can to assist Miss Matilda Jenkyns” (137). Hence it is the “superfluity” of the so-called superfluous members of society that rescues Miss Matty from poverty, as they transact a secretive and tear-filled meeting, writing down their anonymous gifts on the slips of paper provided. In a contrast to the five pound note from the Town and County Bank that becomes valueless paper when the bank fails, the Amazons turn scraps of paper back into money within their private community of Cranford, proving their self-sufficiency. Although Mary’s father is called in from Drumble to help Miss Matty arrange her finances, it is the kindness of Miss Matty’s friends that enables her to continue to live in Cranford without any loss of status. Mary’s father may be deeply affected by their generosity, but he himself never offers financial support.

Furthermore, Mr Smith’s impersonal approach to doing business is subtly critiqued by his daughter’s narrative. When he discovers that Miss Matty has inquired of Mr Johnson whether her tea-selling business will negatively affect his sales, Mr Smith dismisses it as “great nonsense,” yet Mary states that in Cranford, such a method prospered: not only did Mr Johnson allay Miss Matty’s fears but he actually “repeatedly sent customers to her, saying that the teas he kept were of a common kind, but that Miss Jenkyns had all the choice sorts” (144). Mr Smith also grumbles about Miss Matty’s implicit trust in the honesty of tradesmen, remarking that “such simplicity might be very well in Cranford, but would never do in the world” (145). His daughter, however, observes with irony: “And I fancy the world must be very bad, for with all my father’s suspicion of every one with whom he has

dealings, and in spite of his many precautions, he lost upwards of a thousand pounds by roguery only last year” (145). In Cranford, community triumphs over hard commerce, and Miss Matty is able to remain self-sufficient by allowing the public into her private sphere, and gently civilising everyone who enters.

What Miss Matty achieves with her tea-shop, Mary Smith does at the level of narrative, inviting her readers into the private world of Cranford and allowing them gradually to become accustomed to this eccentric but truly sociable community. Mary’s ability to report on the world of Cranford, as many readers have observed, is strengthened by the fact that she has “vibrated” between the public world of Drumble and the private world of Cranford all her life (154). A spinster herself, Mary revels in the privacy of her position as narrator. Although she is quite young when the narrative begins, by the time of Gaskell’s last Cranford story, “The Cage at Cranford,” published in 1863, she is “past thirty” (171). Taking refuge in the first-person narratorial position, Mary neglects to describe her own body just as the older ladies ignore theirs. Like Miss Matty, Mary likes to “see, without being seen,” and she can “talk better in the dark,” recounting her observations of the town’s inhabitants from the relative obscurity of her narrator’s position (36, 57). Like the narrator of “My Old Maid’s Corner” discussed earlier, Mary, as a spinster narrator, shifts the perspective to show how the world looks from the corner, in the process presenting readers with a portrait of a “charming” society in which the margins have been rewritten as central.

“No Bright Lady’s Shadow”: Fighting for a Place in *Villette*

You are one of those beings who must be *kept down*, I know you! Other people in this house see you pass, and think that a colourless shadow has gone by. As for me, I scrutinized your face once, and it sufficed.

—M. Paul, in Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853)

Like Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* is named for the town in which it is set, thereby taking emphasis off its heroine and focusing instead on her relationship to the space in which she finds herself.²³ In *Communities of Women*, Nina Auerbach places *Cranford* and *Villette* side by side, noting that in the genial charm of one and the rage of the other a conjoined battle for women’s rights is being waged.²⁴ Noting in particular the separation of family and “household management” in *Villette*, she praises its “welcome departure from the Victorian cant that justified woman’s work only by making it a natural outgrowth of familial duties” (105). In *Villette*, significantly, a woman does not need a family in order to preside over a home. Indeed, Lucy’s social identity is dependent upon her surroundings—not her family—and the novel tells the story of how she finds her social and spatial place in the world, evolving from a “placeless person” at home in no sphere to the possessor of a house and a school encompassing both public and private spheres.²⁵ Beginning the novel unseen and unnoticed, Lucy gradually takes over more space in the novel

²³ Interestingly, Gaskell’s two previous novels had been named for their heroines (*Mary Barton* and *Ruth*), as had Charlotte Brontë’s (*Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*).

²⁴ Nina Auerbach bases her comparison of the two novels on a *Blackwood’s* article by Margaret Oliphant, “Modern Novelists—Great and Small” (1855), which noted the “battle” waged by Brontë and Gaskell against male oppression (78).

²⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten, intro Tim Dolin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 43.

and grows increasingly visible and embodied not only in the eyes of M. Paul but in her own as well.²⁶ Lucy's story foregrounds the Victorian spinster's paradoxical relationship to space, as it is her very homelessness that enables her to appropriate peripheral spaces and make them her own.

Although initially they seem not to relate to Lucy's main narrative, the two "prologues" that begin *Villette* tell two female stories that help establish the Victorian spinster's socially sanctioned relationship to domestic space, one that Lucy ultimately will reject.²⁷ In the first, little Polly Home, left behind by her father but not yet seen as a potential wife, haunts the corners of the Brettons' home, displaying the plight of the houseless spinster in miniature: she is left Home-less and homeless when her father leaves. By contrast, in the second story, Miss Marchmont, a wealthy and elderly unmarried woman, owns her own home but is forced to live her life in two close rooms where she dies. Both portraits display women who have "gone in" to the domestic sphere and who see no way out but marriage or death.

The unearthly Polly, with her miniature doll-like appearance and adult behaviour, mourns her father's departure by seeking the corners of the Bretton's home, "where the shade was deep" (8). She says her prayers in the corner of the bedroom, and withdraws to the margins of the room whenever she misses her father. Representing a spinster who has left her paternal home but has yet to find her husband's, the six-year-old Polly prematurely grows "old and unearthly" like an "adult exile" longing for home (12). Lucy Snowe recounts

²⁶ In a related reading, Liana Pehler also sees the spaces in *Villette* as providing insight into Lucy's growth as a character; see her *Spatial Dynamics and Female Development in Victorian Art and Novels: Creating a Woman's Space*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

²⁷ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that both Polly and Miss Marchmont function as doubles for Lucy; indeed all the novel's characters represent aspects of the heroine. They argue that Polly haunts Lucy, representing aspects of selfhood the older girl has already repressed, while Miss Marchmont functions as a "monitory image" warning Lucy that "incarceration is potentially every woman's fate." See *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*, (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979) 404-5.

that “whenever, opening a room door, I found her seated in a corner alone, her head on her pigmy hand, that room seemed to me not inhabited, but haunted” (12). Polly’s brief period of “spinsterhood” ends when Mr Home arrives, allowing Polly to demonstrate her domestic graces by handing her father his tea and working “perseveringly with a needle” until her handkerchief is dotted with blood (15). When her father leaves, he is replaced by Graham whom she worships and treats like the husband he will later become. A miniature household “angel,” Polly seems to have “no mind of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another” (25). As long as she can act the part of Graham’s wife, she is comfortable in the Bretton’s home, yet when she learns that she must return to her father, she again haunts the space, gliding “like a small ghost” into Lucy’s bed. Even at a young age, Lucy wonders how Polly Home will “get through this world, or battle with life” (34), for to be homeless renders her spectral, divorced from herself.

While Polly’s position at the Brettons’ house replicates the situation of houseless spinsters who must be continual visitors in others’ homes, Miss Marchmont’s plight, though she has a house of her own, is considerably worse. An eerie foreshadowing of Lucy’s future, Miss Marchmont suffers from being “condemned, after twelve months of bliss, to undergo thirty years of sorrow,” her fiancé having been killed in an accident. Occupying Miss Marchmont’s space and fate while she acts as her companion, Lucy inhabits a confined space cut off from the larger world: “Two hot, close rooms became my world; and a crippled old woman, my mistress, my friend, my all. . . . I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers, seas, an ever-changing sky outside the steam-dimmed lattice of the sick-chamber; I was almost content to forget it” (37). Not only has Miss Marchmont rendered herself invisible by remaining shut up in her rooms, but (like the rooms, which negate the outside world) she has looked inward for thirty years, her sorrows dimming her eyes to the suffering of others.

“Gone in,” physically and mentally, Miss Marchmont endures a fate which recalls that of many of the spinsters depicted in periodicals. Lucy benefits from access to the safe, womb-like “closet” off the spinster’s room to recuperate from a deep and unnamed sorrow, but she rejects this kind of life as an alternative for herself. Where the space Miss Marchmont occupies has shrunk drastically, reflecting her inward turn, Lucy appropriates more and more space as the novel progresses, until her world encompasses a home and a boarding school into which she welcomes the girls of Vilette.

After Miss Marchmont dies, Lucy is forced to “look out for a new place,” social and physical (43). Uprooted and dispossessed, looking like the “placeless person” she is, she feels quite acutely the difficulty of being forced to leave her “present abode, while with another I was not provided” (43). Yet even in her social and spatial limbo, from the moment she leaves Miss Marchmont’s, Lucy’s mind is bent upon expanding her world, and she thinks: “Leave this wilderness . . . and go out hence” (44). Falling outside the protective wall of Miss Marchmont’s home and onto the highway, Lucy will spend the rest of the novel seeking a space to call her own.

Although her instinct is at first to shrink into herself “like a snail into its shell,” she soon expands her world, initially forced by Madame Beck but later out of her own volition. Her move from the “watchtower of the nursery” to the classroom increases both the space she occupies and her social position. Fittingly, it is in the liminal space between the dwelling house and the classroom, the carré, that Lucy must decide if she will go “backward or forward”: backward into her shell and the private sphere or forward, with her protective shell of domesticity, into the public realm. Having chosen forward motion, Lucy is less prone to the decay associated with inactive spinsters: “I felt I was getting on; not lying the stagnant prey of mould and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen edge with

constant use" (82). To prove that she has taken over the classroom, her first act of discipline is to lock a rebellious pupil in the closet.

No longer content to be spatially restricted to a closet or watchtower herself, Lucy begins to broaden her territory at Madame Beck's, adding to the classroom the "allée défendue." Illustrating in spatial terms her exile from the more central garden, Lucy's reclaimed "allée défendue" is the first territory at Madame Beck's she possesses for herself. Forbidden to the girls of the pensionnat, this overgrown alley is, from its first mention in the novel, associated with celibacy, since a nun is reputed to have been buried alive under the pear tree. "Teachers might indeed go there with impunity," Lucy reports, "but as the walk was narrow, and the neglected shrubs were grown very thick and close on each side, weaving overhead a roof of branch and leaf which the sun's rays penetrated but in rare chequers, this alley was seldom entered during the day, and after dusk was carefully shunned" (108). Like Miss Havisham's rank garden, this alley is overgrown with weeds and decaying shrubs, but Lucy, who becomes a "frequenter of this strait and narrow path," begins to clear it out, metaphorically freeing her body from the physical symptoms of spinsterhood: "I cleared away the relics of past autumns, choking up a rustic seat at the far end. Borrowing of Goton, the cuisinière, a pail of water and a scrubbing-brush, I made this seat clean" (108). Taking over this spot—"quiet and shady" as Lucy still seems to the inhabitants of Madame Beck's school—Lucy not only appropriates unwanted marginal space but redeems it from the negative characteristics that made it undesirable in the first place.²⁸ Reclaimed from "fungi and mould" like her own life, this quiet alley also enables Lucy to begin to hear the outside world again. With "the calm desire to look at a new thing," she listens to "what seemed to be the far-off sounds of the city," noting the contrast between the sounds of carriages carrying

²⁸ For a more psychological reading, see Liana Piehler, who reads the garden walk, a space confined by straight and rigid walls but containing organic growth, as "echoing the central tension of [Lucy's] own psyche" (55).

people to balls or to the opera and the tolling of the curfew hour of the school (108-9).

Lucy's "calm desire" to see the outside world is realised when she reconnects with her godmother, Mrs Bretton, and her son, Graham, and finds herself introduced to the world of balls and the theatre. However, her unrequited love for Graham makes this world oppressive to her, and she returns to her spinster's alley to bury his letters under the pear tree. As she mourns for love, buried alive just as the nun had been, Lucy is confronted with an embodied symbol of her own future celibacy when she sees a nun appear in the obscure alley. The nun "haunting" Madame Beck's pensionnat is later revealed to be M. le Comte de Hamal, infiltrating the school on pretexts quite opposed to celibacy, but his appearance in the guise of a nun is strongly linked to a foreshadowing of Lucy's spinsterhood, as when both she and M. Paul see the ghostly spectre:

Instantly into our alley there came, out of the berceau, an apparition, all black and white. With a sort of angry rush—close, close past our faces—swept swiftly the very NUN herself! never had I seen her so clearly. She looked tall of stature, and fierce of gesture. As she went, the wind rose sobbing; the rain poured wild and cold; the whole night seemed to feel her. (368)

Although what Lucy had earlier called "my own alley" (360) has here become "our alley," so inflected is this space by the spectre of Lucy's spinsterhood that it haunts her even when she is attempting to share it with M. Paul. Foreshadowing the storm in which his ship is wrecked, the nun in this scene seems to carry about her the desolation of Lucy's future bereavement.

It is M. Paul who introduces Lucy to a more perilous space, also associated with her celibacy: the garret. Unlike the garden walk, which she could clean out and take possession of, the garret will never be entirely hers. Not only is it inside Madame Beck's house, but it is

already occupied, “tenanted by rats, black beetles, and by cockroaches,” as well as by the mysterious nun (135). Like Miss Havisham’s wedding cake, which is crawling with similar vermin, the garret represents the potential decay threatening Lucy’s celibate body. Indeed, while rehearsing, she is “discomposed” by the sight of many of these lurking creatures, and trembles “lest the black beetles should steal on me a march, mount my throne unseen, and, unsuspected, invade my skirts” (135-6). In the lonely garret, Lucy’s very sexuality seems at stake; as she acts the part of a man to an audience of vermin, the crawling space threatens to steal her femininity out from under her skirts. Despite her fears, and despite the apparent barbarity of being locked in the garret by M. Paul, the lesson he teaches her is to care no more for the opinion of the world than she does for the garret-vermin. When she is about to act her part, he gives her advice that works for both the stage and life: “Imagine yourself in the garret, acting to the rats” (140). Locked in the garret, Lucy is forced to confront her fears of solitude, something she is not yet ready to do.

The garret, like the *allée défendue*, is haunted by the spectre of celibacy. Twice Lucy sees the nun in the garret, both times connected to Graham Bretton. In the first instance, she seeks solitude in the one place she knows she can read her letter unobserved. This letter, which she has been waiting the whole day to read, gratifies Lucy’s longing for affection, yet as she finishes perusing it, she is startled by a strange sound, and sees, “in the middle of that ghostly chamber a figure all black or white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white” (245). Later, as she writes her narrative, she muses: “Are there wicked things, not human, which envy human bliss? Are there evil influences haunting the air, and poisoning it for man?” (244). The spectre of her future celibacy haunts her at the very moment she would like to forget it: Lucy voices her fears to Graham, who suggests that the nun is a “spectral illusion: ““You think then,’ I said with secret horror ‘she came out of

my brain, and is now gone there, and may glide out again at an hour and a day when I look not for her?" (249). Although the nun's appearance is later explained, Lucy's fear that it emerges from her brain is part of an ongoing pattern in the novel linking architectural and mental space.

This metaphor of house as mind becomes conflated with the garret appearances of the nun. After having locked herself in the garret in order to read Graham's first letter, Lucy proceeds to describe how her initial attempts to write back required the banishment of her own reason: "Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors, drew against her bar and bolt, then we sat down, spread our paper, dipped in the ink an eager pen, and, with deep enjoyment, poured out our sincere heart" (253). Yet, after Lucy has written an affectionate letter, Reason reappears: "just at that moment, the doors of my heart would shake, bolt and bar would yield, Reason would leap in, vigorous and revengeful, snatch the full sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear up, re-write, fold, seal, direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page. She did right" (254). Like the nun that Lucy fears will emerge from her brain, her Reason has the power to break down walls, haunting her body much as the nun haunts Madame Beck's pensionnat. Reason, like the nun, inhabits the heights of a house. Bachelard argues that the house is a "vertical being," with the attic housing the most rational and intellectualised thoughts: "Up near the roof all our thoughts are clear. In the attic it is a pleasure to see the bare rafters of the strong framework. Here we participate in the carpenter's solid geometry" (18). At the same time, he sees the attic as also the place where we rationalise our fears. Fearing a destiny of solitude, Lucy allows Reason ironically to ensure it by her "terse, curt" letters that will elicit neither ridicule nor affection from Graham.

Lucy always feels like an interloper around Graham to whom she is usually invisible. Associated with images of the house, Graham offers an inhospitable environment, one in

which Lucy is marginalised and one she ultimately rejects. Before Graham realises that they once knew each other in England, Lucy recounts (with some delight) being caught in the act of looking at him. Graham feels violated by her scrutiny, but Lucy, comparing her act to house-breaking, rather surprisingly posits: “What honest man on being casually taken for a house-breaker, does not feel rather tickled than vexed at the mistake?” (99). Having at this moment cracked the code of who Dr. John is (her childhood friend Graham Bretton) Lucy revels in her discovery and in Graham’s discomfiture. He never notices her. She has been able to see inside him because her peripheral and homeless being is able to make itself at home (and invisible) anywhere: “He laid himself open to my observation, according to my presence in the room just that degree of notice and consequence a person of my exterior habitually expects: that is to say, about what is given to unobtrusive articles of furniture, chairs of ordinary joiner’s work, and carpets of no striking pattern” (98). By comparing herself to furniture, Lucy highlights not only her innocuous appearance and propensity to be imposed upon, but also her portability. In French, furniture is *meuble* (or moveable) and a building is an *immeuble* (or immovable).²⁹ Like the furniture Lucy later recognises when she awakens from an illness at the Brettons’ home, she herself is “spectral” and moveable, recognisable yet forgettable, whereas Graham with his mother, his home, his profession, and his luck is an immovable fortress in which Lucy can only fleetingly take shelter.

Although she always speaks of Graham kindly, his neglect of her is a palpable source of pain and frustration throughout the novel. In one particularly poignant moment, Lucy envisions her marginal position in the “house” of his heart:

I believe in that goodly mansion, his heart, he kept one little place under the skylights where Lucy might have entertainment, if she chose to call. It was not so

²⁹ Judith Flanders refers to this distinction in discussing how prior to the nineteenth century, room function was changed by moving furniture. See *The Victorian Home: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed* (London: Harper Collins, 2003) xxiv.

handsome as the chambers where he lodged his male friends: it was not like the hall where he accommodated his philanthropy, or the library where he treasured his science. Still less did it resemble the pavilion where his marriage feast was splendidly spread; yet, gradually, by long and equal kindness, he proved to me that he kept one little closet, over the door of which was written 'Lucy's Room.'" (457)

Buried beneath Lucy's gratitude for the small space she is allowed in this "goodly mansion" is her disappointment that he can offer her no more. For her part, Lucy keeps for Graham a "place of which [she] never took the measure" but that likely possesses an "innate capacity for expanse" (457). Relegated to a "little place under the skylights," Lucy seems to have been given access to the garret: marginal, vermin-infested, associated with the spectral nun and the maniacal hag, Reason. Though she might occupy this "little closet" if she chose to call, so stifled was Lucy when inhabiting a "closet" at Miss Marchmont's that she seems unlikely to call very often. Dora Greenwell may well have been drawing on *Villette* when she wrote that in the "great and goodly, yet not too well warmed mansion—single women are on the whole provided for," but "not in the roomiest and best furnished apartments" (36). Yet while Greenwell on the whole believes such a fate is inevitable for unmarried women, Brontë envisions a more spacious future for her heroine.

Lucy's progress from a "placeless person" to the mistress of a house and school is reflected in her increasing visibility. Initially, Lucy is content — even proud — to be an overlooked presence. She attributes her ability to get through the world to a "staid manner of my own which ere now had been as good to me as cloak and hood of hodden gray; since under its favour I had been enabled to achieve with impunity, and even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited and unsettled air, would in some minds have stamped me as a dreamer and a zealot" (44). Under her inconspicuous manner, Lucy is able to make her way

in a world hostile to her. Feeling herself to be “a mere shadowy spot” in a “field of light,” Lucy chooses for Madame Beck’s fête a dress the colour of “dun-mist lying on a moor in bloom,” which her dressmaker laments is “si peu voyant” (131), emphasising its diaphanous invisibility. Lucy notes that this “gown of shadow” makes her feel “at home and at ease” (131). Mrs Bretton later dresses her up in a more colourful gown that Lucy resists wearing: “A pink dress! I knew it not. It knew not me” (207). Wearing “a light fabric and bright tint” scares Lucy so much that she does not recognise herself in the mirror. Although Lucy attempts to soften the colour with black lace, M. Paul, who has been able to see through Lucy’s more innocuous dresses from the moment he read her countenance, not only notices the pink colour but names it crimson. For while Lucy is invisible and forgettable to many people in the novel, she appears bright, showy, and flirtatious to M. Paul, who sees beneath her frosty exterior into her luminous soul. Once she is more accustomed to M. Paul’s affection, she chooses a pink dress for herself, initially hiding it from him because she knows she will attract his attention, but revelling in his pleasure that she made herself attractive for his “petite fête” (380).

Although Lucy at first seeks the shadows, she increasingly begins to resent the fact that those near to her cannot really see her. When Graham claims that Lucy is as “inoffensive as a shadow,” she expresses for the first time her weariness at never being more than “furniture” in his eyes: “I smiled; but I also hushed a groan. Oh!—I wished he would just let me alone—cease allusion to me. These epithets—these attributes I put from me. His ‘quiet Lucy Snowe,’ his ‘inoffensive shadow,’ I gave him back; not with scorn, but with extreme weariness” (317). No longer content in the shadows, Lucy now craves notice, and means to go her own way. Lucy even turns down a position as Paulina’s companion, for even though Paulina always sees Lucy, she would eclipse her in society: “I was no bright lady’s shadow”

(298). Lucy learns that while a shadowy guise can help her obtain her independence among strangers, it can also sometimes obliterate her among friends.

Fittingly, it is the man who sees and feeds her who helps Lucy into a space all her own, acknowledging that she has a physical body that needs housing. Taking her outside the walls of Villette—hence outside the social structures that had impeded her movements—M. Paul procures for Lucy a “very tiny” but “very pretty” house filled with diminutive furniture and plants in bloom (485). While M. Paul’s gift to Lucy might be seen as interference, an attempt to write her future for her, his kindness cannot be overlooked.³⁰ He envisions the space as a “nut-shell” that will contain and protect Lucy (485), and this space is almost exactly like the one she had earlier envisioned for herself: “When I shall have one thousand francs, I will take a tenement with one large room, and two or three smaller ones, furnish the rest with a few benches and desks, a black tableau, an estrade for myself; upon it a chair and table, with a sponge and some white chalks; begin with taking day pupils, and so work my way upwards” (361). Not only has M. Paul been attentive to the details of Lucy’s dream but he also ensures she must pay the rent herself, so the gift he gives her is one of independence even from himself.³¹ Despite the subdued anguish with which the novel ends, Lucy notes that the anticipation of solitude was “nearly *all* the torture” (493): “M. Emanuel was away three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life. Do you scout the paradox?” (493). Happy in the space M. Paul had procured for her—*her* house, not his—Lucy acknowledges that she did not need a husband to complete that space. By giving

³⁰ Countless critics have noted M. Paul’s attempts to mould Lucy into a submissive woman from his making her gaze at paintings detailing a very traditional *Vie d’une Femme* to his advising her that she needs to be “kept down.” Yet, as Kathleen Blake observes, “His criticism constitutes a form of engagement, and so Lucy even learns to provoke him on purpose.” In this way, she argues, “he works indirect good to Lucy” by egging her on, forcing her to react and respond to him. Blake concludes that if Lucy continues to do well once M. Paul’s support is withdrawn, it will be because of her ability to “profit by pain.” *Love and the Woman Question in Victorian Literature: The Art of Self-Postponement* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1983) 67-8, 72.

³¹ As Philip Rogers observes, Lucy’s £100 inheritance from Miss Marchmont would have allowed her to establish the school without M. Paul’s help in the not-too-distant future, “Fraudulent Closure in *Villette*’s ‘Faubourg Clotilde,’” *Brontë Studies* 30 (2005): 129n.

her heroine a house before marriage, Brontë recasts the marriage plot as a quest less for love than for space.

**“The Misfortune of Being Shut Up”:
Silencing and Sequestering in *The Woman in White***

“It was easy to escape, or I should never have got away. They never suspected me as they suspected the others. I was so quiet, and so obedient, and so easily frightened.”

—Anne Catherick, in Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860)

Wilkie Collins’s enormously popular *The Woman in White*, initially published serially in Dickens’s *All The Year Round* (November 1859-August 1860), critiques domestic enclosure at every level, yet it ultimately traps its protagonists inside a domestic narrative structure. The characters who initially seem best equipped to escape confinement are spinsters, those who do not have a specific “place” within the domestic home or within the domestic novel, yet they are eventually absorbed into the domestic sphere. Anne Catherick, a faded version of her marriageable half-sister, Laura Fairlie, spends the majority of the novel wandering outside domestic space, for the only places that will accept her are a lunatic asylum and (eventually) a grave. The vibrant, independent, androgynous Marian Halcombe begins the novel as a resourceful opponent to domestic enclosure, eavesdropping from the marginal spaces of the home and recording her experiences in a diary. Yet Marian’s voice is shut up at the centre of the narrative just as surely as her body is shut up in the centre of Sir Percival’s home, after which she is relegated to being a domestic “angel” haunting the margins

of the novel. The violence of these spinsters' entrapment is encapsulated in the person of Count Fosco. Having married the thirty-seven-year old Eleanor Fairlie, a woman who once possessed all the characteristics of a stereotypical old maid, Fosco has absorbed the qualities of the spinster into his corpulent frame, and he uses these skills to outwit the elusive Marian and Anne. Even as it showcases the power and the threat of the Victorian spinster's refusal to respect boundaries, then, *The Woman in White* nevertheless succeeds in shutting them up within the framework of the Victorian marriage plot.

Haunting the novel and the countryside in which it is set, Anne Catherick can be read as a ghostly spinster double of the marriageable Laura. Unlike Laura, for whom the passage from father to husband has been sealed by a deathbed promise, the illegitimate Anne Catherick has never seen her father, and she is introduced into the novel on the lonely high-road to London. Having escaped from the enclosure of the Asylum where she had been kept by Sir Percival Glyde and her mother, Anne Catherick represents a placeless woman on the highway of life, and the ambiguity of her social and spatial position is noted by Walter Hartright: "What sort of a woman she was, and how she came to be out alone in the high-road, an hour after midnight, I altogether failed to guess. The one thing of which I felt certain was, that the grossest of mankind could not have misconstrued her motive in speaking, even at that suspiciously late hour and in that suspiciously lonely place."³² Walter's confusion at finding a woman mid-journey in the middle of the night is compounded by the fact that she seems not to belong on the streets. There is nothing "wild, nothing immodest in her manner" which, although "not exactly the manner of a lady," is nonetheless "not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life" (20-21). Caught between social positions, between homes, between night and day, Anne evokes the marginal position of the spinster, who could

³² Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 21.

not be condemned for illicit sexual behaviour but who was anomalous all the same.³³

Bewildered by Anne's reordering of space and time, Walter asks himself: "Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays? Had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally-domestic atmosphere of my mother's cottage?" (23). Anne's presence on this road has rendered it at once unfamiliar yet familiar. He is indeed Walter Hartright; it is indeed the same road on which people stroll on Sundays; and, although he is not in his mother's "conventionally-domestic" cottage, Walter seems overwhelmed by a familiar feeling in the *unconventional* feminine space Anne has created around her. A "strange and rare visitant" on this road, as in the text, Anne prefers being a spatial outcast to returning to a place where she is a social outcast.

Although she looks uncannily like her half-sister, Laura, Anne's body has begun to exhibit some of the signs of spinsterhood. Her "colourless" face is "meagre and dark to look at, about the cheeks and chin" (20). When Walter first "unwillingly" notes the resemblance, he remarks that to compare Laura to Anne "seems like casting a shadow on the future of the bright creature who stands looking at us now" (61). Like Lucy Snowe, Anne Catherick exists as a "shadow" in relation to a "bright" creature; one possesses a firm place in society, the other is a "placeless person" haunting the margins. When Walter sees Anne again after having met Laura, he notes how profoundly her appearance has been marked by her social position:

Although I hated myself even for thinking such a thing, still, while I looked at the woman before me, the idea would force itself into my mind that one sad change, in the future, was all that was wanting to make the likeness complete, which I now saw

to be so imperfect in detail. If ever sorrow or suffering set their profaning marks on

³³ Robert E. Lougy reads Anne's position on the road differently, arguing that because she is a "woman on the loose" and touches Walter's shoulder and violates a taboo, she is by analogy a "loose" or fallen woman. See *Inaugural Wounds: The Shaping of Desire in Five Nineteenth-Century Narratives* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2004) 120.

the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie's face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be twin-sisters of chance resemblance, the living reflexions of one another. (96-7)

Whereas Laura remains enclosed in the domestic sphere for most of the novel, Anne is seen mostly in public spaces. Having escaped from the institutional Asylum where she was imprisoned by Sir Percival, she attempts to save Laura from a different kind of asylum: Blackwater Park.³⁴ While Anne, as a spinster, can often escape the walls that hold her, Laura, as a wife, cannot.

It is Anne's ghostly presence that enables her to escape from the Asylum. As she states, "They never suspected me as they suspected the others. I was so quiet, and so obedient, and so easily frightened" (99). Like Lucy Snowe, Anne has made a habit of escaping notice, and although her white gown makes her easily visible, it also renders her ethereal, and she is mistaken for a ghost on several occasions. The place she likes most to haunt, Mrs Fairlie's grave, becomes a place she may literally come to haunt, for she is buried there under a false identity. If she cannot be trapped within the walls of a lunatic asylum as a spinster, Anne Catherick is trapped as soon as she is given the identity of a married woman. The text connects Anne's death with Laura's wedding by having the gravestone that covers Anne's body inscribed with a new name that "covers" her identity, the same name Laura receives in marriage, Lady Glyde, and she too is trapped in a restrictive situation from which she cannot escape.³⁵ Like Anne, Marian understands marriage as akin to death, writing of

³⁴ Many scholars have noted Collins's play on the word "asylum" to denote both a place of imprisonment and a place of refuge. See, for example, Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of the Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1988) 112; and Ann Gaylin, *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2002) 117.

³⁵ Significantly, Anne "love[s] the name of Fairlie and hate[s] the name of Glyde," under which she is buried (283). As Lenora Ledwon points out, under the law of coverture, marriage is essentially a "civil death," or "loss of legal existence," "Veiled Women, the Law of Coverture, and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 22 (1994): 2.

Laura's approaching nuptials with fear and dread: "Before another month is over our heads, she will be *his* Laura instead of mine! *His* Laura! I am as little able to realize the idea which those two words convey—my mind feels almost dulled and stunned by it—as if writing of her marriage were like writing of her death" (187). Moreover, she evokes an image of the grave when, before committing her feelings to paper, she speaks of time looming "over our heads."

At the literal and figurative centre of the novel, Marian Halcombe ends up verbally and physically "shut up." When her diary is invaded and signed by Count Fosco, he not only appropriates its authorship and Marian's identity but, by signing his name on her story, mimics the patriarchal power to absorb and overwrite a woman.³⁶ Furthermore, he ensures she is removed and enclosed in an old, mouldering wing of Blackwater Park. Initially trusting nineteenth-century laws to protect women, Marian ends by realising how vulnerable they remain. When she first comes to Blackwater Park, she is relieved at its modernity, declaring it "an inexpressible relief to find that the nineteenth century has invaded this strange future home of mine, and has swept the dirty 'good old times' out of the way of our daily life" (206). Marian, however, places too much confidence in finding herself in "the nineteenth century." As Henry James observed in a much-quoted passage: "To Mr. Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into his fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors. . . . Instead of the terrors of 'Udolpho', we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible."³⁷ When she finds herself enclosed in the centre of the Elizabethan wing of the house, the laws of the nineteenth century can no

³⁶ Susan Balée notes that after Count Fosco reads her diary, Marian "begins to display more classically feminine characteristics," so that it might be said that he "literally makes a woman of her," "Wilkie Collins and Surplus Women: The Case of Marian Halcombe," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 20 (1993): 201.

³⁷ Henry James, "Miss Braddon" (1865), rpt in *Notes and Reviews by Henry James* (Cambridge, MA: Dunster House, 1921) 110.

more help her than the laws of the Renaissance. Worse still, the illusion of civility masks the barbarity of her entrapment. Marian vociferously objects to Laura's imprisonment in her chamber and looks exultingly at the bruises on Laura's arm, noting that they will be a "weapon to strike [Sir Percival] with" (304); she tells Sir Percival that there are "laws in England to protect women from cruelty and outrage" (299). Despite her resistance, however, the novel shows that the laws cannot protect women who cannot escape their domestic enclosures.³⁸

Marian is punished for her unwillingness to be confined within the social and spatial limits imposed on Victorian women. Just as her body is not restrained within a corset and her masculine features do not conform to codes of Victorian female beauty, so too does she (at least initially) wander freely and unobtrusively throughout the male-owned houses she visits. In contrast to Lucy Snowe, however, she gradually "goes in" as the novel progresses. Marian's striking first appearance in the novel, in Walter Hartright's narrative, sets her up as a paradoxical figure at once beautiful and ugly. As an artist, Walter Hartright is accustomed to judging female beauty; as a man, he is accustomed to dominate. His inability to reconcile these two roles underlies the sharp change in his impression of Marian on first meeting her. When he sees her from behind, he is enchanted:

The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays"

(31).

³⁸ Lisa Surridge offers a detailed discussion of *The Woman in White* in relation to contemporary newspaper accounts of spousal abuse and cruelty stemming from the new Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (and the Divorce Courts of 1858), in *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2005).

Walter's sexual attraction to Marian is undeniable while she has her back turned, but his opinion of her looks changes drastically once she confronts him. As an object, her body is beautiful; as a subject, it is threatening. In a "flutter of expectation," Walter sees Marian turn around: "She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!" (31). He describes in detail the facial features that surprise him, from her "swarthy" complexion, to the "dark down on her upper lip [that] was almost a moustache," to the black hair "growing unusually low on her forehead" (32). What is really at stake, however, is her expression, which appeared to be "altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete" (32). What Walter notices when he sees her expression is that he will never be able to possess her. Marian is undeniably sexy, as Walter's first impression proves, but she is unattainable: "While it was impossible to be formal and reserved in her company, it was more than impossible to take the faintest vestige of liberty with her, even in thought" (33). Unlike the childish Laura, the "masculine" Marian looks at Walter the way a man might, unconcerned about her physical impression on him.

Aware that she does not fit within conventional domestic roles and spaces, Marian notes the marked contrast between Laura and herself:

My father was a poor man, and Miss Fairlie's father was a rich man. I have got nothing, and she has a fortune. I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am —— Try some of that marmalade, Mr Hartright, and finish the sentence, in

the name of female propriety, for yourself. (34)

Undefinable and unconfined, even by syntax, Marian is not the “devil” her list of oppositions implies, yet neither is she a domestic “angel,” a word charged with negative connotations as the pet term Count Fosco uses for his frighteningly obedient wife. Although Marian spends much of the first half of the novel speaking for herself, however, once she has been silenced by sickness and Fosco, it is indeed Walter who finishes her sentence (“in the name of female propriety”) for himself. Required to husband the narratives of both Laura and Marian because their words are “interrupted, often inevitably confused,” Walter ends the novel by calling Marian “the good angel of our lives” (422, 643), limiting her to a domestic role that she had rejected for herself.

Just as Marian’s body is progressively defined and controlled, so her person is increasingly contained in domestic space. Unlike Anne Catherick, who haunts the margins of the text and remains in public space, Marian is from the start a visitor within the private realm, first at Limmeridge and then at Blackwater Park. Although her conditional welcome into these spaces requires that she behave according to an established code of domestic femininity, the shut-in hypochondriac Mr Fairlie allows her comparative liberty, knowing that if he does not, she will start “banging doors” (353). Her situation is markedly different when she moves from the open seascapes of Limmeridge to the stagnant, “shut in,” “almost suffocated” atmosphere of Blackwater Park (199). It is when she first arrives at Blackwater Park that Marian mockingly casts herself in a stereotypical guise: in such a place, she is “plain Marian Halcombe, spinster, now settled in a snug little sitting-room, with a cup of tea by her side, and all her earthly possessions ranged round her in three boxes and a bag” (199). Caricatures of travelling spinsters frequently focus on the possessions they carry around with them, nomadic ladies surrounded by all the comforts of home. Standing “on the

threshold of a new life,” Marian has clearly come to stay, willing to play the role of a conventional spinster in order to protect her weak sister. Yet, on the first night of her arrival, she already feels stifled. Although she wishes to ride out and meet her sister, she grudgingly accepts a more conventional fate: “Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats, for life, I must respect the housekeeper’s opinions, and try to compose myself” (200). Although her body is stifled by gender roles and gendered garments, Marian is still in control of her own narrative. Hence, she can literally “compose herself” by writing objections to her social incarceration into her text.

It is fitting that Marian begins her exploration of Blackwater Park “of course, with the house” (204). Her appraisal of its defects foreshadows her later entrapment. She notes that the “main body of the house is of the time of that highly overrated woman, Queen Elizabeth”; expresses her dislike of the “hideous family portraits” (which she would like to burn); and declines a tour of the upper rooms, which the housekeeper fears are “out of order” (204). Observing that a “respect for the integrity of my own petticoats and stockings, infinitely exceeds my respect for all the Elizabethan bedrooms in the kingdom,” she declines “exploring the upper regions of dust and dirt at the risk of soiling [her] nice clean clothes.” She also refuses an offer to visit an even older wing out of respect for the “damp, darkness, and rats” (205). Like Lucy Snowe, who fears her skirts will be invaded by black beetles in Madame Beck’s garret, Marian Halcombe fears for her “petticoats.” Where Lucy occasionally visits the frightening garret of her own free will, however, Marian ends up forced to inhabit the mouldering rooms in the Elizabethan wing of Sir Percival’s house, just as she ends up forced into a more conventional (and voiceless) old maid’s role when she returns to Limmeridge with Laura and Walter.

Marian’s precarious position as a guest of the mistress and not the master of

Blackwater Park means that she is tolerated but not welcome within its walls. Her marginal position, however, allows her to overhear conversations that Laura, enclosed in her domestic role, does not. Like the house's mouldering rooms, overlaid with a veneer of nineteenth-century civility, Sir Percival's brutality begins to show through his polite façade. Marian, whose diary had chronicled her shifting trust and distrust of Sir Percival when at Limmeridge, is deeply suspicious of him at Blackwater Park, and her concern for her sister leads her to attempt to gain access to his character by spying on him from the house's margins. When she accidentally overhears Sir Percival and Mr. Merriman discussing Laura from her position on the stairs, for instance, Marian justifies eavesdropping as a woman's prerogative: "I dare say I was wrong and very discreditable to listen—but where is the woman, in the whole range of our sex, who can regulate her actions by the abstract principles of honour, when those principles point one way, and the interests which grow out of them, point the other?" (228). As conduits between the house's levels used by both the servants and the masters of the house, stairs function as connectors facilitating passage. At the same time they are unregarded spaces, allowing for illicit activities such as eavesdropping, especially on the part of women. Suggestively, Count Fosco declares at one point: "Whenever there are women in the house, they're always sure to be going up and down stairs" (368).

Whether on the house's common staircase or over its eaves, Marian haunts the house's peripheral and marginal spaces in order to discover its secrets. It is her final such act that effectively shuts her up, silencing her voice and enclosing her body. Smelling the Count's and Sir Percival's tobacco smoke, which has wafted up to her darkened chamber, Marian overhears the Count warning Sir Percival that he is "on the edge of [his] domestic precipice" (324). In her attempt to find out about Sir Percival's figurative "domestic precipice," however, Marian herself reaches the edge of a literal one, as she crouches on the

verandah overhanging the ground floor rooms. Removing the trappings of her femininity—her rustling silk dress and her “white and cumbersome” undergarments—and dressing herself in dark flannel petticoat and a black travelling cloak, she observes that a woman dressed differently may appropriate unusual spaces: “In my ordinary evening costume, I took up the room of three men at least. In my present dress, when it was held close about me, no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I” (326). Female garments are elsewhere described as cumbersome and noisy. Madame Fosco’s rustling silk gown betrays her spying outside Laura’s chamber, while Frederick Fairlie hears Fanny’s stays “creak” (313, 351). Although we learn early that Marian’s waist is free from the encumbering (and noisy) corset, her outward attire, at least, must conform to an 1850s female silhouette, including the new and expanding crinoline (or “cage”), so that she will not stand out as unusual in the domestic sphere.³⁹ Taking off her confining and noisy female attire, Marian occupies the liminal territory of the spinster: just outside domestic space, just inside public space — a space in which the Count (for once) does not think to look.

Like Anne in the Asylum, Marian has thus far been well behaved, taking care to converse with the Foscos and careful not to remain too long alone with Laura lest they be suspected of plotting against the house. The attention both Anne and Marian have paid to appearances has allowed them both temporary escape. From her position over the verandah, Marian overhears Sir Percival say that Anne “was the best-behaved patient they had—and, like fools, they trusted her” (337). Ironically, while Sir Percival is criticising the managers of the Asylum for letting Anne outside their doors, another single woman has just escaped from the “asylum” of his home. As Marian observes earlier in the text: “He seemed to accept me as one of the necessary fixtures of Blackwater Park; to be satisfied in finding me established

³⁹ In the concluding story to *Cranford*, “The Cage at Cranford,” the crinoline sent from Paris, referred to as a “cage” in a letter, is mistaken for a birdcage for Miss Pole’s pet parrot. This confusion between a birdcage and an unnecessary article of female attire provides much of the episode’s humour.

in my proper place; and then to pass over me altogether” (217). But now she has moved out of her “proper place” and although Sir Percival does not know it, she is as great a risk to him as Anne, who is “just mad enough to be shut up, and just sane enough to ruin me when she’s at large” (337).

Collins plays on the word “mad” throughout the novel, alluding to the overlap between anger and insanity. Anne Catherick’s face darkens with an “expression of maniacally intense hatred and fear” when Walter Hartright mentions the man who put her in the Asylum (104). With eyes like a “wild animal,” she asks him to change the subject, for the very anger at her forced entrapment will cause her to “lose” herself, and veer into madness. Similarly, Marian associates the domestic “asylum” with entrapment and anger:

Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace—they drag us away from our parents’ love and our sisters’ friendship—they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog in a kennel. And what does the best of them give us in return? Let me go, Laura—I’m mad when I think of it” (183).

Like Anne, whose anger threatens to make her mad, Marian’s frustration at seeing her sister about to be chained like a “dog in a kennel” to domestic duties threatens to drive her insane. In the 1830s, as Elaine Showalter has shown, James Cowles Pritchard introduced the concept of “moral insanity” to the Victorian medical community, whereby a woman was deemed ill if she deviated from conventional social behaviour.⁴⁰ Refusing to be contained within the restricted roles and physical limits imposed upon them by society, both Anne and Marian are vulnerable to such categorisation, as even the conventional Laura proves to be. But it is Marian who primarily threatens to be “mad enough to be shut up.”

⁴⁰ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Penguin, 1985) 29.

And shut up she is. Marian is silenced at the centre of the narrative when her strong body gives way to illness. Although Fosco denies having poisoned Marian, the novel does not exonerate him from this suspicion. In his confession, the Count's self-satisfaction leads to the possibility that he was responsible not only for enclosing Marian's body in the mouldering Elizabethan rooms of the house but also for shutting down her mind:

Mind, they say, rules the world. But what rules the mind? The body. The body (follow me closely here) lies at the mercy of the most omnipotent of potentates—the Chemist. Give me—Fosco—chemistry; and when Shakespeare has conceived Hamlet, and sits down to execute the conception—with a few grains of powder dropped into his daily food, I will reduce his mind, by the action of his body, till his pen pours out the most abject drivel that has ever degraded paper.

(617)

Despite his denial of having drugged Marian, the fact that her pen begins to pour out “abject drivel” just before he takes over her narrative and signs it with his name suggests otherwise. The Count is successful in making and applying a “cooling lotion” to Marian's head, and her fever soon develops into typhus. Significantly, this occurs soon after Fosco enlists the services of the foreigner Mrs Rubelle, whose name is reminiscent of German measles, while Fosco himself is described by Frederick Fairlie as “a walking-West-Indian-epidemic,” who is “big enough to carry typhus by the ton, and to dye the very carpet he walked on with scarlet fever” (358). By rendering Marian, by poison or contagion, too sick to write or reason, Fosco is able to shut her up in the deepest recesses of Blackwater Park, inside one of the very rooms she earlier declined to visit for fear that the rats and beetles would sully her petticoats. From the moment of her illness, Marian is silenced, and even Walter Hartright refuses to let her tell her own story. As Ann Gaylin has remarked, “*The Woman in White*

exposes a collusion of male narrative forces to limit female narrators and characters,” and Walter Hartright is as guilty as Count Fosco of this charge (Gaylin 116-7).

The Count’s ability to entrap Marian inside the archaic wing of Blackwater Park recalls his silencing and absorption of another spinster, his wife. Lenora Ledwon argues that the Count’s fat body has already metonymically absorbed his wife, mimicking the law of coverture’s obliteration of the woman’s identity (14-16). Marian reflects on how Count Fosco seems to have transformed his wife, at least on the surface, into a “civil, silent, unobtrusive woman, who is never in the way” (219). He himself, she notes, has assumed spinsterish traits, having “all the fondness of an old maid for his cockatoo” (223). Before her marriage, Eleanor Fairlie was a thirty-seven-year-old spinster, already exhibiting the signs of old maidism in her exhibition of “the structure of the female skeleton” and “[t]he hideously ridiculous love-locks which used to hang on either side of her face” (218). When Marian witnesses Madame’s outward transformation, however, she mistrusts her calm exterior, drawing attention to an anxiety about female repression that surfaces in many Victorian novels:

How far she [Madame Fosco] is really reformed or deteriorated in her secret self, is another question. I have once or twice seen sudden changes of expression on her pinched lips, and heard sudden inflexions of tone in her calm voice, which has led me to suspect that her present state of suppression may have sealed up something dangerous in her nature, which used to evaporate harmlessly in the freedom of her former life (219).

Marian worries that Madame Fosco may have allowed any negative characteristics she once possessed to fester and build up beneath her calm exterior. Her description of the older woman’s “dangerous” qualities as something “sealed up,” which would once have evaporated

“in the freedom of her former life,” highlights a pervasive concern in the period with blockage and drainage when it came to women’s bodies and, by extension, their psyches. *The Woman in White* returns obsessively to the potential negative effects of female containment, but it does so less out of a sense that women deserved freedom than out of anxiety lest containment become the condition for “dangerous” spillover. Although Fosco is ostensibly killed as a traitor, marked with a “T” that “obliterated the mark of the Brotherhood,” Marian’s earlier assertion that Fosco must rule his wife with “a private rod” suggests that Madame Fosco’s “tigerish” rage may well have had something to do with it (225, 219).

Unlike *Villette*, *The Woman in White* ends not with a house for the spinster but with an estate for a son and heir. As a surrogate mother for her sister’s child, Marian herself is relegated to a socially-sanctioned role for the single woman. Her story appropriated by her sister’s husband and her identity defined as “the good angel of our lives,” she will remain a visitor in a house not her own. At the same time, Collins’s interest in probing “*under* the surface” (452) has opened up the figure of the spinster, giving it a rare depth. Despite being contained by the novel’s ending, Marian has been so firmly established by the narrator that she somehow retains her ability to “wander free in interfamilial space” outside her ostensible confines.

Chapter 4

“Liberties Taken with Time and Space”:

Imagining Escape from Domestic Nation and Narrative

I must express my regret for having doubted what I now perceive to have been a truthful and unvarnished narrative. My excuse must be that your sister’s experience has been so exceptional, that neither I nor anyone who heard it could be expected to believe it without positive confirmation.

—Charlotte O’Conor Eccles, *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore* (1897)

Neither the Victorian spinster’s life nor her narrative can end with a wedding, the “natural” destiny for both the nineteenth-century woman and the novel heroine. Thus, the stories of unmarried women in the period often had to stretch the limits of fiction to find new narrative spaces in which to seek a happy ending for such figures if they wished to imagine one. In an important way, as Rita Kranidis has noted, the Victorian spinster, in fiction as in life, represented an “open-ended narrative.”¹ Building on her idea, this final chapter traces some of the ways in which spinster narratives worked to escape the Victorian marriage plot by imagining alternative destinies for single women, often outside the borders of the domestic nation. It opens with a discussion of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), which, in a minor but critical narrative move early in the novel, envisions a happy ending for the spinster by projecting a fate of “virgin solitude” in the lush setting of the southern hemisphere beyond the confines of England and well beyond the novel’s conventional marriage ending.² Turning to a short story by Henry James, “The Third Person” (1900), it

¹ Rita S. Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration: Contested Subjects* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1999) 41; Kranidis’s full quotation is discussed in Chapter 2, page 114.

² Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 150.

then looks at how its spinsters must seek control of their own space and their own narrative when their home is invaded by a “third person,” the ghost of a dead ancestor, who shares characteristics with an omniscient narrator. They, too, resolve their problem by looking outside England’s domestic borders for an alternate form of narration. Striking a different key, *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore* (1897) by Charlotte O’Conor Eccles (under the pseudonym Hal Godfrey) tells the comic story of the elder Miss Semaphore’s attempts to escape her own spinster narrative by purchasing water from a Fountain of Youth found outside England. When she drinks too much and awakes as an eight-day-old baby, however, she realises that she does not want to relive her youth and pursue a marriage ending, so that when she is restored to her fifty-three-year-old self, she is delighted to live out her days and her narrative as a spinster.

What all three suggest is that just as the spinster often sought her home in the nooks and crannies of domestic space, so too she could appropriate unusual narrative spaces in order to allow for a growth of character. In much Victorian fiction, one must look closely to see spinsters at all, for their stories are easily forgotten once the momentum of a romantic ending takes over. As *Shirley* shows, however, spinster narratives enclosed within the conventional frame of a marriage plot may not only illuminate the limitations of marriage but open up possibilities for fiction itself. Because marriage is not the marker of success in spinster narratives, these stories tend to affirm personal growth, intelligence, independence, and the ability to speak one’s mind. Stories focusing exclusively on spinsters (such as “The Third Person” and *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore*) demonstrate that when the narrative drive toward marriage is removed, the plot can be used to propel single women toward self-affirmation and self-narration. Once a marriage ending is no longer a heroine’s or a novel’s goal, the story opens itself up to alternative female destinies.

Suggestively, all three authors associate the escape from standard narrative plots with the world outside England's borders. Not just the domestic body and the domestic home but the domestic nation itself proves too small to contain the spinster. While these writers validate a single woman's right to stay inside England (countering social commentators like W. R. Greg who declared them superfluous), they also test the potential freedom of Europe and the colonies, where stereotypes might not govern as rigidly and where alternative destinies might be written. For Brontë, for example, the southern hemisphere allows her to envision female personal growth in ways that were still impossible in England; for James, a trip outside England allows a spinster to oust a troublesome and restrictive British ancestor and narrator; and for Eccles, water brought from the continent unleashes the train of events that allows Miss Semaphore briefly to "escape" her life as a spinster. Unwilling to give up on England, however, all three authors bring their stories home again, hinting that the domestic nation will eventually expand its definitions of womanhood to accommodate female energies currently unaccommodated.

**"Virgin Solitude": Envisioning a Textual Space for Spinsters
in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley***

"I wonder we don't all make up our minds to remain single"

— Caroline Helstone, in Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (1849)

The marriages that close Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) provide a disconcerting reminder of how difficult it was for a nineteenth-century woman to aspire to a single life.

Although the novel celebrates female mythology and female independence, it unsettlingly traps its two heroines inside the very romance plot conventions it has been contesting. Like its eponymous heroine, the novel itself seems finally to be “conquered by love, and bound with a vow” (637) in ways that constrain and contain the potential it has evoked. But Brontë inserted another ending in *Shirley*, one that provides a contrast and an alternative to her conventional ending. In chapter 9, the narrator describes the characters and fates of the six Yorke children by reading their physiognomies and predicting their futures. Yet, while the lives of the boys are only vaguely outlined (“the seer is powerless to predict,” for example, whether or not Martin will be a “remarkable man”), the destinies of the two elder girls, Rose and Jessy Yorke, are surprisingly and disconcertingly revealed in the narrator’s “magic mirror” (151-2, 149). In a strange and overlooked prolepsis, the narrator anticipates the fates of these two minor characters two decades into the future, chronologically beyond the confines of the marriage ending.³ After summarily dispensing with the domestic Jessy by describing her early grave, Brontë’s narrator creates a new textual space for the independent Rose, a lush and fertile wooded “virgin solitude” (150). Rose Yorke’s scene of virgin independence operates as an alternate ending, not only providing a hopeful answer to the questions of female independence and spinsterhood raised by the novel but also highlighting how women writers could subvert narrative form by writing outside the lines of the Victorian marriage plot.

Brontë’s narrator hints at her subversion of the romance tradition in the very second paragraph of *Shirley* when she corrects her reader’s potential reverie: “If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more

³ Jessy’s grave appears in the narrator’s “magic mirror” twenty years from a spring evening in 1811 (149); the scene is revisited later in the narrative, when an “autumn evening, wet and wild” reminds the narrator of the night on which Jessy was buried (407). Rose is described in her “virgin solitude” “two years later,” placing it in 1833 (149-50). The marriages of Shirley to Louis and Caroline to Robert occur in August of 1812; the only scene after the marriage is a brief conversation between the narrator and the housekeeper Martha, who are not figured as characters in the rest of the novel (645-46).

mistaken" (5). Because the novel's final pages contain a double wedding, however, many scholars have viewed Brontë's conclusion as a capitulation to nineteenth-century novelistic conventions, a failure to allow her female characters to fulfil their potential. Shirley Foster, for example, observes that although both Victorian authors and characters might challenge the notion of "marriage as the supreme female fulfilment," in the fiction of the period, "sooner or later, romance triumphs."⁴ For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Brontë was caught within the Victorian conventions she deplored, and they argue that despite her arguments for female independence in *Shirley*, the novel is "enmeshed in essentially the same male-dominated structures that imprison the characters in all her books."⁵ The ending of *Shirley*, they claim, is Brontë's attempt to explain "why the only 'happy ending' for women in her society is marriage" (395). The projection of Rose's future beyond the confines of the concluding weddings, however, suggests that Brontë, well aware of the limitations of the genre, sought and developed an alternative "happy ending" for the spinster. Indeed, her repeated allusions to and subversions of romance (not only in the main plot but also in inset stories told by Shirley) suggests that the novel's ending does not function as conventional closure. As Sally Greene importantly notes, "the novel's repeated references to the process of interpretation . . . would have encouraged a nineteenth-century audience to look beyond the novel's ending for its real message."⁶ While *Shirley*'s final chapter may be entitled "The Winding Up," seeming to provide unity and closure by wrapping up loose ends and binding the heroines in wedlock, Brontë's open-ended narration of Rose Yorke represents a loose thread at the

⁴ Shirley Foster, "Female Januses: Ambiguity and Ambivalence Towards Marriage in Mid-Victorian Women's Fiction," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 6:3 (1983): 217.

⁵ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979) 373.

⁶ Sally Greene, "Apocalypse When? Shirley's Vision and the Politics of Reading," *Studies in the Novel* 26 (Winter 1994): 352. On the ending of *Shirley*, see also Janet Freeman, "Unity and Diversity in *Shirley*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 87 (October 1988): 558-75.

centre of the novel, one that may potentially unravel the fabric of the entire romance structure.

Suzanne Keen's important notion of the "narrative annex" in *Victorian Renovations of the Novel* points to one way in which standard narrative forms could be subverted or modified in the period. By this term Keen refers to a technique whereby Victorian novelists extended the borders of representation through shifts in the setting or genre of the narrative's primary world. These shifts introduce, if only briefly, a "zone of difference" that modifies the "story-world."⁷ As a swerve in the narrative, Keen argues, they "provide a space for the accomplishment of an action or event that otherwise could not occur in the novel" (8).

Brontë's swerve functions like Keen's narrative annex in that it involves the crossing of a boundary into an alternate fictional world, but it does not, in contrast to Keen's annex, prove "consequential" for the plot (3). For this reason it comes closer to what Keen calls a "loose end" when she sums up the different ways in which a problem can be resolved:

When a problem cannot be worked on in the textual world from which it springs, there are several possibilities. It could be banished outright, as inappropriate; it could be ignored and then forgotten; it could become a loose end, left to dangle until a reader gives it a tug. Alternatively, the annex provides a textual space sufficiently different for the problem to be worked on. (40)

The alternative ending offered to Rose Yorke does not offer a space for resolution as does an annex, but its very openness makes it suggestive. Keen herself locates an annex in *Shirley*, a scene in which Shirley and Caroline leave the protection of Mr. Helstone's cottage in an attempt to prevent a riot at the mill. Slipping through a narrow aperture in a hedge to get a view of the action, the protagonists grow more courageous once outside the boundaries of their usual female sphere. While Keen acknowledges the power of the women's temporary

⁷ Suzanne Keen, *Victorian Renovations of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 1.

emancipation from gendered definitions in this annex, however, she observes that once Shirley and Caroline return to the main world of the novel, they revert to more conventional feminine behaviour. Thus, the possibilities opened up by the annex are contained by the novel's conclusion: "[A]n emancipatory fiction about the possibility of a woman's agency in the economic, political, and sexual realms loses the contest of outcome to a tidy but disappointing double marriage plot, as the dominant form defeats the possibilities of the emergent form" (110). The "loose end" of Rose Yorke, however, unsettles the "dominant form" of *Shirley* more than readers like Keen acknowledge.

Shirley certainly looks like a romance. Despite the narrator's early disclaimer the novel is deceptively structured like one, and it contains numerous references to romance tropes. The novel's heroines themselves, unlike Rose, are trapped in a romance plot even as they voice their awareness of the limitations of the genre. A telling discussion of Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* between young Rose Yorke and Caroline Helstone forecasts the difference between their narrative destinies. At the time of their discussion, Rose is still in the middle of Radcliffe's gothic romance while Caroline knows the outcome. Not knowing how the book will end, Rose enjoys it primarily as an adventure, valuing it because of its proffered escape from the here and now: "in reading it you feel as if you were far away from England" (399). Caroline acknowledges that the novel "seemed to open with such promise," but she concentrates on the implications of its outcome, implicitly reading her own future into it: "I fear a wanderer's life, for me at least, would end like that tale you are reading,—in disappointment, vanity, and vexation of spirit" (398, 400). Given that *The Italian*, like many romances, ends with a wedding feast, Caroline's language of disappointment and vexation hints at a restiveness with conventional closure. Significantly, Rose remains outside that closure, remaining in the middle of Brontë's narrative, not involved in the "winding up" of

Shirley's final chapter.

Brontë's treatment of the spinster in this text, however, is by no means straightforward. On the one hand, the heroines repeatedly express their desire for positive, productive roles for women outside wedlock, and voice their conviction that (as Shirley puts it at one point) "the acutest men are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in a true light; they misapprehend them, both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend" (352). On the other hand, the figure of the spinster in the main narrative adheres to the standard trope: a loveless creature, largely defined (if often wrongly) by her appearance. Ugliness is the motif defining Miss Ainley, for example: a "very ugly" decayed gentlewoman who is so physically unattractive as to make "all but peculiarly well-disciplined minds . . . turn from her with annoyance; to conceive against her a prejudice, simply on the ground of her unattractive look" (181, original emphasis). Although those who can look past her appearance see her as a saint, Miss Ainley's surface is misread, particularly by "lively young gentlemen, and inconsiderate old ones, who declared her hideous" (181). The narrator's insistence that the "original" for Miss Ainley may be found in "real life" points out that such misreadings are not confined to novelistic fictions (183).

Nor is it only men who respond in this way. When Caroline fears that she may become an old maid, she visits Miss Ainley and Miss Mann to learn what the future holds for single women in England. Caroline's initial sense of the spinster, influenced by Robert Moore's opinion, focuses on Miss Mann's "formidable eye," which is like a "steel ball soldered in her head" (178). Almost immediately acknowledging her error in judging Miss Mann by her unpleasant appearance, however, Caroline reflects: "it was all a figment of fancy, a matter of surface, Miss Mann's goblin-grimness scarcely went deeper than the

angel-sweetness of hundreds of beauties” (178-9). Just as Caroline’s beauty can be misread by men, so can Miss Mann’s ugliness. At the same time, however, Miss Mann’s own censorious going beneath surfaces is cast by Brontë in negative metaphors of surgical incision, as she describes her “flaying alive certain of the families of the neighbourhood. . . . like some surgeon practising with his scalpel on a lifeless subject” (179). The third spinster figure, Robert’s sister Hortense, is less ugly than strange. Dressed in odd, Belgian attire, she is a plain woman, possessing an “appearance one felt inclined to be half-provoked with, and half-amused at” (63). She escapes general ridicule because, by keeping house for Robert, she clings, albeit tenuously, to an acceptable domestic role. That role itself, however, she performs in an exaggerated, almost parodic fashion, her activities consisting largely of “arranging, disarranging, rearranging and counter-arranging” the household drawers (77). For her brother’s sake, she has allowed herself to be “put quite into the background,” marginalised both socially and spatially at social functions, while he himself escapes to his counting house to avoid his sister’s desperate housekeeping (66). The greatest threat of all to Hortense’s position as mistress of her brother’s house is, as Mrs. Yorke astutely observes, Robert’s eventual marriage to the “novel-heroine” Caroline, which promises to put Hortense “quite in the background” at her own fireside (402).

Although *Shirley*’s heroines and its spinsters must live out their narrative destinies in keeping with the romance tradition, the novel feels no such constraints when distributing the destinies of the minor characters of Rose and Jessy Yorke. Indeed, through them, Brontë pointedly undercuts the stereotypical fates of Victorian heroines. The passionate, intelligent Rose is twelve when she is introduced into the novel. Her mother wants to domesticate her and turn her into “a woman of dark and dreary duties” (148), while her eleven-year-old sister Jessy attempts to suppress Rose’s dreams further by confining her to the traditional

spinster role of the maiden aunt: “Jessy had already settled it in her mind that she, when she was old enough, was to be married; Rose, she decided, must be an old maid, to live with her, look after her children, keep her house” (155-56). Jessy is a child who seems destined to marry. Not only does she know that she wants to be a wife but she is “most affectionate if caressed” (149), childishly flirting with Robert Moore and claiming that he has agreed to marry her (154). A domesticated creature, Jessy is “made to be a pet” and is referred to as a “doll” (149). Living for men and their opinions, she also has a “comic” habit of aping her father’s opinions and manner, becoming “as hearty a little Jacobin as ever pent a free mutinous spirit in a muslin frock and sash” (407).

Yet Jessy’s domestic (albeit engaging and adorable) personality is shadowed by the narrator’s mention of her early death, of which the reader is made aware before Jessy herself has spoken a word. Twice the narrator interrupts a description of Jessy with an abrupt account of her grave, a reference to where she sleeps below “green sod and a gray marble headstone” (149). On the second occasion, the narrator not only describes the girl’s grave, “cold, coffined, solitary—[with] only the sod screening her from the storm” (408) but also abruptly ends her story: “But, Jessie [sic], I will write about you no more” (407). These strange moments depicting Jessy’s death pointedly oppose the domestic aspirations of the flirtatious eleven-year-old girl. Buried in a “heretic cemetery” in a foreign country (407), she cannot (unlike Rose) survive outside the protective borders of the domestic nation. Although the reason for the sisters’ travel is never specified, the fact that they are described as “English *girls*” who are “*alone* in a foreign country” suggests that neither has married and that Jessy has failed to fulfil her dream (149; my emphasis). By following the destinies of Rose and Jessy outside the main romance plot, Brontë creates an alternate narrative space in which to trace destinies outside marriage. Denying Jessy’s domestic aspirations and fulfilling

Rose's dream of travel, she hints at a future in which those aspiring to the single life may discover a different kind of "happy ending."⁸

Brontë's vision for Rose is narrated in the present tense, so that although it occurs before the novel was written either by the fictional narrator or actually by Brontë, it takes on a quality of immediacy, reinforcing its status as an alternate ending. Like Jessy's death scenes, it contrasts markedly with the rest of the novel:

Now behold Rose, two years later. [i.e. after the death of Jessy] . . . This, indeed, is far from England; remote must be the shores which wear that wild, luxuriant aspect. This is some virgin solitude: unknown birds flutter round the skirts of that forest; no European river this, on whose banks Rose sits thinking. The little, quiet Yorkshire girl is a lonely emigrant in some region of the southern hemisphere. Will she ever come back? (149-50)

Although Rose is a "lonely emigrant" in her new surroundings, the tone of the passage is hopeful. Unlike Jessy's "cold" and "solitary" grave, the "virgin solitude" in which Rose finds herself is "luxuriant" and full of "wild"—if not human—life. Contrasted with the future that Rose's mother or her sister envisioned for her, not to mention with Hortense Moore's domestic drudgery or with Miss Mann's or Miss Ainley's lonely houses, Rose's future appears open and potentially fruitful. As the referent of the "virgin solitude" hovers ambiguously between the forest and Rose herself, the figure of the single woman begins to take on something of the exotic and active fertility of the trees. Birds flutter around the

⁸ Although Rose's escape to the southern hemisphere represents perhaps the most optimistic future presented in the novel, this proleptic scene has received surprisingly little critical attention. Roslyn Belkin sees the young girl as "the most revolutionary woman in the novel," recalling the prediction that Rose will one day rebel, but she does not address her future, stating that "[n]o mention is made of the fate of the various other women [besides Shirley and Caroline], young and old, who figure largely in the novel." See her "Rejects of the Marketplace: Old Maids in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 4.1 (1981): 63, 65. Judith Williams does make note of Rose's future, but reads it primarily as a sign of her banishment from the world of the novel: she exists "only in the future and on the other side of the world," see *Perception and Expression in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë* (Ann Arbor MI: UMI Press, 1988) 73.

forest's "skirts," suggesting that they surround Rose's as well. Even her name alludes to vegetation, and contributes to the intermingling of forest and woman. Julia Gardner has persuasively argued that much of *Shirley* concerns itself with an "exclusively female world" in which desire can exist between Shirley and Caroline.⁹ Nunnwood and the surrounding landscape are eroticised spaces in which and through which Shirley and Caroline conduct many of their conversations about the possibilities for the fulfilment of female desire (Gardner 413). These sexualised female landscapes are similar to the forest surrounding Rose Yorke in her projected future. In the main plot of the novel, marriage is associated with industrialisation, both of which lead to the destruction of female spaces in England. However, the narrative of Rose's "virgin solitude" suggests that female space continues to grow outside the restrictive borders of Victorian England and the marriage plot. Furthermore, by ending the passage with a question, Brontë leaves open the possibility of Rose's return to England.

That Brontë associates the now thirty-four-year-old Rose with fertility is unusual, as in most Victorian chronologies of spinsterhood, a single woman's charms could decline as early as age twenty-five, and were often believed to expire around age thirty.¹⁰ Although women are occasionally admitted to be attractive as late as thirty-five, the narrator's unambiguous categorisation of the thirty-five year old Hortense Moore as an "old maid" suggests that in general Brontë adhered to the more conventional view (63, 403). By projecting Rose beyond the marriage ending and past the usual limits of young maidenhood, however, she avoids the spinster stereotypes she has been employing herself in the main plot of the novel. Furthermore, in imagining Rose's future, Brontë also opposes the conventional association of spinsterhood with decayed fertility and barrenness. As discussed

⁹ Julia Gardner, "'Neither Monsters Nor Temptresses Nor Terrors': Representing Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26.2 (1998): 414.

¹⁰ See Chapter 1 for the age at which women were believed to be "old maids."

in Chapter 1, the unproductive spinster was perceived as having a deviant (or even sick) body. Rose, in our brief glimpse of her in the future, shows no signs of diseased virginity. She is neither sinking nor fading nor decaying.¹¹ Brontë's association of Rose's body with the fertility of the "virgin" forest is a bold gesture. A virgin forest is old, but its fertility is ongoing, and Brontë creates a spinster whose celibacy does not deform her but adds to her vitality.

In presenting Rose sitting and thinking by a river, Brontë not only links her with an image of fertility but undermines Victorian beliefs equating intellectual pursuits with barrenness. Sally Shuttleworth notes that medical practitioners understood woman's "mission" as dependent on suppressing "all mental life so that the self-regulating processes of her animal economy can proceed in peace."¹² By placing the thoughtful Rose in an unmistakably fertile space, Brontë confirms the compatibility of thought and fertility. She here picks up the emphasis on mind defining Rose's childhood: "Rose has a mind full-set, thick-sown with the germs of ideas her mother never knew. It is agony to her often to have these ideas trampled on and repressed. She has never rebelled yet; but if hard driven, she will rebel one day, and then it will be once and for all" (148-49). Rose's twelve-year-old mind contains seeds of the ideas she is to possess in later life; the fulfilment of these ideas and the rebellion against the domestic model of womanhood are confirmed by her future arrival in a "virgin solitude."

To the young Rose, domesticity represents limitation and unproductivity. Although she is happy to learn traditional female work like sewing, she declares: "I will do that, and then I will do more" (401). Referring to the parable of the ten talents, she implies that if

¹¹ Note Caroline's sinking frame when she believes Robert Moore does not love her: Caroline "could see . . . that the hues of her complexion were paler, her eyes changed—a wan shade seemed to circle them, her countenance was dejected: she was not, in short, so pretty or so fresh as she used to be" (176).

¹² Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 91.

women perform only socially sanctioned domestic duties, they leave their lives a “blank”:

“To do this is to commit the sin of him who buried his talent in a napkin—despicable sluggard!” (401). Rose states that she will make of her God-given talents, “ten talents more,” asserting that she will not bury them in “household drawers” or “a broken-spouted tea-pot” or “a china-closet”; nor will she let them be “smothered in piles of woollen hose” (400). She concludes: “The tea-pot, the old stocking-foot, the linen rag, the willow-pattern tureen will yield up their barren deposit in many a house: suffer your daughters, at least, to put their money to the exchangers, that they may be enabled at the Master’s coming to pay him his own with usury” (400-1). Representing a reversal of the conventional association of the domestic woman with fertility, Rose links household duties to the barrenness usually associated with the spinster. Implicitly critiquing Hortense Moore’s perpetual “arranging, disarranging, rearranging and counter-arranging” of the household drawers in which the older woman has buried her “talents” (77), as well as her mother’s domestic “production” of children, Rose refuses to be confined to domestic duties. In her mind, circulation in the wide world and in the economy of work outside the home is more productive than the paradoxically “barren” reproduction of the traditionally domestic woman.

The destiny Brontë envisions for Rose is, as Kranidis notes of spinster destinies in general, “open-ended” in both time and space. In addition to being narrated in the present tense, the question with which the passage ends, “Will she ever come back?” demonstrates that Rose is still outside England’s borders and — in some sense at least — outside the restrictions English society placed upon women. The physical space in which Brontë chooses to set Rose is characterised by openness. “[W]ild, luxuriant” and undomesticated, it is untrammelled by borders, fences or hedges. This virgin forest contrasts markedly with Rose’s English home at Briarfield, a name that implies a prickly enclosure. Even at twelve,

Rose dreams of travelling beyond the borders of Briarfield and the domestic nation in which she has been raised. She is horrified at the thought of living Caroline's life or, as she calls it, Caroline's "long, slow death," the result of being "for ever shut up" in her uncle's parsonage (399). Determined not to be trapped in the domestic sphere forever, Rose means to "make a way" to travel: "I cannot always live in Briarfield. The whole world is not very large compared with creation: I must see the outside of our own round planet at least" (399). Jessy thinks Rose is "mad" to seek change but, as the reader already knows, it is Rose who will fulfil her dreams, whereas Jessy will meet an untimely death abroad.

Because the young Rose desires to see the world, her move to the southern hemisphere is dissociated from contemporary emigration schemes that sought to remove single women from England.¹³ The emigration motif in Brontë is related more closely to the limitation of women in England than to forced exile. The destinies of Rose and Jessy Yorke are loosely based on Brontë's childhood friends Mary and Martha Taylor. Martha (Jessy) died in Brussels in 1842, and Mary (Rose) emigrated to New Zealand in 1845. Although the Rose and Jessy Yorke episodes are not merely biographical, Brontë's modelling of the irrepressible Rose Yorke after Mary Taylor is significant. In an 1841 letter to Ellen Nussey, Brontë wrote:

Mary alone has more energy and power in her nature than any ten men you can pick out in the united parishes of Birstal and Gomersal It is vain to limit a character like hers within ordinary boundaries—she will overstep them—I am morally certain Mary will establish her own landmarks.¹⁴

Making the point of limitations within English space even more strongly, she writes in

¹³ As Shuttleworth argues, discussions about the merits of female emigration were in full force by 1849, and schemes for the export of women in the late 1840s and 1850s, although "clothed in pious rhetoric about woman's civilizing mission . . . were primarily schemes for disposing of unwanted spinsters" (195).

¹⁴ Charlotte Brontë, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000) 242-3.

another letter: “Mary has made up her mind she can not and will not be a governess, a teacher, a milliner, a bonnet-maker nor housemaid. She sees no means of obtaining employment she would like in England, so she is leaving it” (*Letters* 1:251). Recalling Rose’s list of unproductive household items, this catalogue of female occupations defines Mary’s departure from Britain as rooted in a dissatisfaction with available roles for women.¹⁵

Before Caroline and Shirley are respectively bound in wedlock at the end of the novel, each is associated with the independent and imaginative Rose Yorke. Moreover, the move toward matrimony is connected in both cases with taming and destroying the open nature that the novel has celebrated as female space. When Robert proposes to Caroline, for instance, he pulls her away from her admiring gaze at the landscape. Caroline has been watering her garden; significantly, the last flower she waters is a rose-tree. Climbing up on “a fragment of sculptured stone—a monkish relic; once, perhaps, the base of a cross,” Caroline looks over the garden wall at the surrounding twilight landscape, and this vista is associated with a pleasant solitude: “she gazed over the wall, along some lonely fields; beyond three dusk trees, rising side by side against the sky; beyond a solitary thorn, at the head of a solitary lane far off” (638). Although this view is “solitary” and “lonely,” the narrator reminds the reader that “Caroline was not unhappy that evening” (638). When she hears someone approach, she thinks it is her mother, but she turns and “look[s], not into Mrs. Pryor’s matron face, but up at a dark manly visage. She dropped her watering-pot and stepped down from the pedestal” (639). Even through Caroline has been pining for Robert’s

¹⁵ Shuttleworth also notes the similarities between Rose Yorke and Mary Taylor in terms of their independence and emigration to the southern hemisphere, but she reads Rose Yorke’s fate more negatively than I do, seeing it as an inability on Brontë’s part to fully endorse Mary’s “life of energetic labour . . . in New Zealand, trading cattle and running a clothing store” (193). If Brontë did not endorse the specifics of her friend’s experience, however, it is perhaps because she felt that Mary herself was not fully satisfied with her life abroad. In a letter to Ellen Nussey written on 5 June 1847, Brontë wrote: “I return to you Mary Taylor’s letter—it made me somewhat sad to read it -- for I fear she is no longer quite content with her existence in New Zealand—she finds it too barren” (*Letters* 1:528). Had Brontë narrated the fuller truth of her friend’s emigration experience, she would again have come up against the limitations of a Victorian society with few meaningful roles for women, either inside or outside England’s borders.

love, his arrival in this scene seems intrusive; his “dark” presence ominously supplants her recently rediscovered mother, and he pulls her away not only from her beloved landscape but also from the image of female independence that the rose-tree represents. Furthermore, it is during the conversation immediately following Robert’s proposal that he tells Caroline of his plans to expand his mill: “I can line yonder barren Hollow with lines of cottages and rows of cottage-gardens” (644). Not recognising the value of its natural fertility, Robert sees the Hollow as a “barren” space. He also means to enclose Nunnely Common, which, as often noted, suggests a virgin enclave.¹⁶ In the final paragraphs of the novel, the narrator records the partial fulfilment of Robert’s prophecies. He has transformed the Hollow, “once green, and lone, and wild” into “substantial stone and brick and ashes” (645). Although this landscape, representing a fertile space for independent womanhood, has been largely destroyed in Victorian England, Brontë has retained the possibilities of its existence outside the borders of the domestic nation.

Within those borders, the novel shows, not only women’s lives but women’s writing is confined by masculine regulation. Even so, however, loopholes exist. In a telling scene early in the text, Caroline asks Robert to mend her pens. He happily agrees but stipulates: “First, let me rule your book, for you always contrive to draw the lines aslant” (73). If Caroline is to use her pen, therefore, she must write within the spaces he defines. Where her own hand strays from standard rule, he attempts to forestall her “slant” by ensuring she stays within the lines, much as he plans to rule the Hollow with “lines of cottages.” Shirley, too, has her writing controlled by the man she will later marry, her former tutor Louis Moore. The narrator informs the reader that Shirley has the potential to be a writer but does not know her talent, “and will die without knowing, the full value of that spring whose bright

¹⁶ See, for example, Joseph A. Dupras, “Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* and Interpretive Engendering”; Julia Gardner, “‘Neither Monsters Nor Temptresses Nor Terrors’: Representing Desire in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*”; and Nancy Quick Langer, “‘There Is No Such Ladies Now-a-Days’: Capsizing ‘the Patriarch Bull’ in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*.”

fresh bubbling in her heart keeps it green” (388). The language here recalls the lush language attached to Rose Yorke’s future, and the sense of her potential is confirmed by the fact that Shirley is the most imaginative storyteller in the novel. Among her many stories is a striking version of the creation myth she writes for Louis Moore.¹⁷ In this narrative, the character Eva lives alone in a forest setting, her situation echoing Rose’s “virgin solitude.” Although she is “[f]orsaken, lost and wandering,” the “solitary” Eva “has sprung up tall and graceful,” nurtured by a maternal wilderness. Here Eva asks if her energies will go to waste, “burn out and perish” because “never seen, never needed” (487). Responding to her call for guidance and comfort, a supernatural presence claims her for his own, asserting that she owes him her being (“I can take what is mine” [489]). Such was “the bridal hour,” Shirley explains, of Genius and Humanity (489). The tale of what followed this union — “bliss and bale” — remains untold (489). The tale’s mythic and allegorical trappings do not disguise an uneasiness over both the “bridal-hour” and the “after-union,” anticipating the discomfort many readers feel in the conclusion of the novel as a whole. Significantly, Shirley’s story is titled “The First Bluestocking,” and it is this story that Louis’s “censor-pencil” scores “with condemnatory lines” (490).

The two brothers restrict the heroines’ narratives in different, yet equally oppressive ways: Robert Moore “rule[s]” Caroline’s book before she can begin to write, while Louis Moore imposes his “condemnatory lines” after the story has already been written. In both cases, a female narrative has been “censor[ed]” by male authority. Through another of Shirley’s manipulations of the pen, however, Brontë hints at how male narratives may be modified, embellished and expanded. Shirley has a habit of “drawing little leaves, fragments

¹⁷ For alternative readings of Shirley’s much-discussed story, see Carol A. Bock, “Storytelling and the Multiple Audiences of *Shirley*,” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 18:3 (1988): 226-43; Sally Greene, “Apocalypse When? Shirley’s Vision and the Politics of Reading”; Kate Lawson, “Imagining Eve: Charlotte Brontë, Kate Millett, Hélène Cixous,” *Women’s Studies* 24 (1995): 411-26; and Yolanda Padilla, “Dreaming of Eve, Prometheus, and the Titans: The Romantic Vision of Shirley Keeldar,” *Brontë Society Transactions* 24.1 (1999): 50-54.

of pillars, and broken crosses” in the margins of Louis’s books, with energy so irrepressible that she wears her pencil down to a stump (490). When Louis chastises Shirley for her doodles, she drops “her crayon as if it burned her fingers,” but she has already made her mark on “every page” (490).¹⁸

Shirley thus implies that if women have their writing scored and censored by men, they may also subvert male narratives, as does Brontë’s own speculative extraction of Rose Yorke from the main plot of the novel: Rose is moved away from the traditional fate of maiden aunt her sister Jessy envisions for her; away from the depressing lives of spinsters like Miss Ainley, Miss Mann, and Hortense Moore; away from a society which deems marriage the only “natural” destiny for women. The fertile, hopeful ending offered to Rose is akin to Caroline’s writing aslant or to Shirley’s evocative doodles in the margins of male narratives. Although *Shirley* may look like a romance because it ends in the marriage of its heroines, Brontë remains true to her word and gives the reader a tale “as unromantic as a Monday morning,” a tale which, if read chronologically, has one of its marriageable females projected outside narrative definition and into a fertile space with possibilities for exploration and expansion.

¹⁸ See Nancy Quick Langer for a fuller discussion of the implications of Shirley’s doodles, ““There is No Such Ladies Now-a-Days”: Capsizing ‘The Patriarch Bull’ in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*,” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 27:3 (1997): 76-96.

“A Sense of Added Margin”:

Claiming Narrative Control in “The Third Person”

They roamed about the house themselves at times, fitfully and singly, when each supposed the other out or engaged; they paused and lingered, like soundless apparitions, in corners, doorways, passages, and sometimes suddenly met, in these experiments, with a suppressed start and a mute confession.

—Henry James, “The Third Person” (1900).

In his ghost story, “The Third Person” (1900), Henry James places two very different spinsters, Miss Susan Frush and Miss Amy Frush, in possession of an ancestral house in the coastal town of Marr in southern England. Although they initially enjoy their new home, the ladies soon find themselves haunted by the ghost of a male ancestor, a “third person” who, by watching them, forces them into the margins of their own space and their own narrative. After Miss Susan’s attempt to get rid of their ghost fails, Miss Amy sets out on a mysterious trip to Paris. When she returns several weeks later, she smuggles in a small, undisclosed “forbidden” article that she hides about her person, and her journey beyond England’s shores successfully exorcises the ancestral ghost from their home.¹⁹ On one level, the story may be read as an expression of how spinsters looked outside the borders of the domestic nation to escape observation or possession by their male ancestors. On another level, it points to the spinsters’ resistance to having an omniscient narrator tell their story, since Miss Amy’s refusal to divulge what she has brought back from France at the story’s end places her in control of her own story and shows the limits of third-person narration.

¹⁹ Henry James, “The Third Person,” *Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1963) 389.

Although James never commented on the tale itself, which was published only once in his lifetime in a collection of stories called *The Soft Side* (1900), scholars have agreed that the story's setting, an old mansion in the seaside town of Marr, is based on Lamb House in Rye, Sussex, which James leased in 1898 and bought in 1900.²⁰ The success of the haunting in "The Third Person," as in many of James's ghost stories, relies on an intentional ambiguity. As Leon Edel has observed: "Whether James showed us palpable ghosts or only those of the mind, his mastery of the form lay in his knowledge that man, brave though he is on earth and in space, can still be frightened by his own dreams."²¹ The uncanny feelings evoked by these tales lies in the difficulty of distinguishing between "the haunting ghost" and "the haunted human" ("Introduction" vii). In this story, Edel writes, the haunting is relatively mild: "We accept the mild-mannered gentleman in 'The Third Person,' with his head on one side, because he brings a certain richness to the lives of the spinsters, and affords them a chance of having a man around the house—even if it be a ghostly man" ("Introduction" vi). While Edel is right to pick up on the initial sexual excitement caused by Sir Cuthbert Frush's appearance in the spinsters' house, however, it must also be noted that as the tale progresses, he begins to interfere with their hitherto peaceful existence and must be exorcised from the ancestral house the Misses Frush have rightfully inherited.

In bequeathing this "fine Frush property" to her unmarried relatives, the "old aunt" places the family line in possession of two very different spinsters, who become "lumped together perhaps a little roughly" in her will because of their unmarried state: "she had pitied poor expatriated Susan and had remembered poor unhusbanded Amy" (358). Despite sharing a name and a marital status, however, these ladies could not be less alike. Miss Susan Frush,

²⁰ See, for example Leon Edel's preface to "The Third Person" in *Ghostly Tales of Henry James* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1963) 354, and Peter Haining's preface to "The Third Person" in *The Mammoth Book of Twentieth-Century Ghost Stories*, ed. Peter Haining (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1998) 6.

²¹ Leon Edel, "Introduction," *Ghostly Tales of Henry James*, vi.

“the more mature, had spent much of her life abroad” (356). A “bland, shy, sketching person,” she “would have served with peculiar propriety as a frontispiece to the natural history of the English old maid” (357). Like many stereotypical old maids, her former “prettiness” has become “blanched and bony . . . and its aspect all eyeglass and teeth” (357). Miss Amy Frush, by contrast, is ten years younger: “brown, brisk and expressive” with “an innocent vanity on the subject of her foot,” she quickly dismisses Susan as a “frump” (357). Despite their differences, the second cousins find themselves living together because “the dear old house itself was exactly what she, and exactly what the other, wanted; it met in perfection their longing for a quiet harbour and an assured future; each, in short, was willing to take the other in order to get the house” (358). They both wish to shun the nomadic lifestyle, and long for a house to dream in: “The Misses Frush were not vulgar; they had drunk deep of the cup of singleness and found it prevailingly bitter; they were not unacquainted with solitude and sadness, and they recognized with due humility the supreme opportunity of their lives” (359).

By giving her husband’s unmarried nieces this property, old Mrs Frush has removed it from the male line of inheritance, and the Misses Frush recognise that being placed in charge of their family house is a rare gift. Not only is it the house of their ancestors but it also allows them to “rediscover the country”: while Amy speaks of the house as “primroses and sunsets,” Susan calls it “simply England” (360). Symbolically, therefore, the Misses Frush have inherited the house of England, and their marginal social position as spinsters causes them to revel in the unexpected ownership of something forbidden. Their ancestors are intimately connected with the town (“There was nothing any one had ever done or been at Marr that a Frush hadn’t done it or been it”), but like the family line, which has dwindled down to two remaining spinsters, the town has seen better days, having become “little

melancholy, middling, disinherited Marr” (361). By taking possession of the Frush home, the ladies have merged with the town and the nation. Rather than continue to dig in their “personal soil, not devoid of fragmentary ruins,” they move on to a larger site (359). “The country,” we are told, was “in the house with them”: “It was in the objects and relics that they handled together and wondered over, finding in them a ground for much inferred importance and invoked romance, stuffing large stories into very small openings and pulling every bell-rope that might jingle rustily into the past” (360). Finding that their own histories yielded little excitement, the Misses Frush “desire . . . to discover something,” even “something bad” in their family’s history (361).

What they do unearth comes as much from the recesses of their minds and bodies as from the house. Like the spinsters’ “personal soil,” the town of Marr is “not devoid of fragmentary ruins.” It is “underlaid with great, straddling cellars, sound and dry, that are like the groined crypts of churches and that present themselves to the meagre modern conception as the treasure chambers of stout merchants and bankers in the old bustling days” (362). From a recess in the walls of one of these cellars is found “a collection of rusty superfluities” in a “box of odds and ends, mainly documentary” (362). The most interesting find is “several packets of letters, faded, scarce decipherable, but clearly sorted for preservation and tied, with sprigged ribbon of a far-away fashion, into little groups” (362). The problem, however, is that the letters are not only faded so as to be “rather illegible” but written in the Gothic character, which neither Susan nor Amy can read. Suddenly cut off from their family’s history, they must bring the vicar, Mr. Patten, into their all-female home as an interpreter, and his presence unleashes an even more disruptive presence.

Before the cousins are aware of the contents of the letters, a male figure begins to haunt the house, appearing as much from the box of “rusty superfluities” as from the minds

of the “superfluous” spinsters. Upon hearing a noise “between a gurgle and a shriek,” Amy’s immediate thought is that there is “Some one under [Susan’s] bed” (364). She is partly right: a man is in Susan’s room, standing before the looking glass; to Susan’s consternation, he is there not to look at himself but “To look at *me*” (364). As in Cranford where the ladies half-fear and half-hope there will be a man under (or in) their beds, the Misses Frush are at first somewhat excited at having a man in the house, albeit one “[i]n strange clothes—of another age; with his head on one side” (364). Yet from his first appearance, this male ancestor (who turns out to be the ghost of Sir Cuthbert Frush, hanged for smuggling) takes possession of the space that is rightfully theirs. Thus, they do not chase him out of Susan’s bedroom but vacate it themselves, deciding that it would have been “vain to confront their visitor” because he “was not any one from outside. He was a different thing altogether” (365). Although old Mrs Frush had bequeathed the family property to these women, they are haunted by the ghost of a male ancestor who attempts to drive them out. The Misses Frush recognise immediately that there is no danger that the maids will see him (“he was not a matter for the maids”) because the maids are not family (366). Acknowledging why he has appeared but not quite ready to admit his right to the property, the ladies agree: “Yes; the place was h—, but they stopped at sounding the word” (365). Whether the place is simply “haunted” or whether the place is “his” is a question still to be resolved.

Their single status makes the idea of having a man in the house at first so exciting to the Misses Frush that they exult in the necessity of keeping him “quite to themselves” (366). Accustomed to “thrift,” they decide to save their secret, for “this was not the first time such an influence had determined for them an affirmation of property in objects to which ridicule, suspicion, or some other inconvenience might attach” (373). Aware that the ghost of Sir Cuthbert Frush would be shunned by the rest of the world, the ladies cling to

him as their own possession, acknowledging that he does, to some degree, spring from their desires: “They drew together, old-maidishly, in a suspicious, invidious grasp of the idea that a dread of their very own . . . might, on nearer acquaintance, positively turn into a delight” (373-74). Replacing the documents from which his image appeared in a recess in the walls of their house, the ladies prepare to revel in their new companion, whose existence promises to make them like everyone else: “What really most sustained our friends in all ways was their consciousness of having, after all—and so contrariwise to what appeared—a man in the house. It removed them from the category of manless in which no lady really lapses till every issue is closed” (374).

However, in becoming like everyone else and having “a man in the house,” the ladies find their own power undermined. When the ghost of Sir Cuthbert first appears, he chases Susan from her bedroom; on his second appearance both ladies, “with a quick unanimity,” get themselves “straight out of the house” (369). Furthermore, when he briefly disappears, the ladies themselves begin to haunt the house. This insignificant male ancestor, with his head askew, has the power to convert even “*them* into wandering ghosts”: “They roamed about the house themselves at times, fitfully and singly, when each supposed the other out or engaged; they paused and lingered, like soundless apparitions, in corners, doorways, passages, and sometimes suddenly met, in these experiments, with a suppressed start and a mute confession” (375). Not only does Sir Cuthbert force them to haunt the space they have rightfully inherited, but he separates them from each other, denying them the companionship they had begun to enjoy. Initially jealous of Susan because of her more frequent visits by their ghost, Amy is also the first to realise that by doubting each other, they have let the ghost take control of their formerly quiet but pleasant lives. “[T]hough we’ve kept him in his place,” Amy says to Susan, “he has also kept us in ours” (383). The presence of a man in the

house, even a ghostly, criminal man with his head on one side, is enough to force the spinsters into the corners of their ancestral home. Amy decides: “they were changed—they must change back” (385). Whereas their initial excitement over the discovery of the papers rests on there being a new addition to their life story—a “sense of added margin, of appropriated history, of liberties taken with time and space”—the cousins find that while they may have returned the papers to their recess in the wall, they cannot keep their ancestor in the margins of their lives. He, not they, begins to take “liberties with time and space,” by returning to a century and a house not his own. To “change back” they must not only reclaim possession of their ancestral home but regain control of the narrative.

Sir Cuthbert is characterised by his penetrating gaze. “It makes him awful,” Susan observes, moaning softly. “The way . . . he looks at you!” (369). Because Sir Cuthbert appears to Susan when she is in her bedroom, and partially undressed, his gaze threatens her privacy as well as the room most symbolic of her virginity. While Amy agrees that it is Sir Cuthbert’s constant scrutiny that makes him “awful,” she realises immediately that Sir Cuthbert’s “wonderful eyes . . . mean something” (370). What the eyes “mean” is connected to the title of the story, which casts the ghost not simply as an ancestral member of the Frush family but as an omniscient narrator, whose relentless and unexpected gaze displaces and unsettles the cousins: “The element in question . . . was the third person in their association, a hovering presence for the dark hours, a figure that with its head very much—too much—on one side, could be trusted to look at them out of unnatural places; yet only, it doubtless might be assumed, to look at them” (365). A ghost emerging out of an old text, its unnaturally angled head attests to a third person narrator’s unique ability to see events from a superhuman perspective. Thus, Sir Cuthbert is not merely an ancestral ghost but also an omniscient narrator haunting both the fictional house and the house of fiction

with his ever-present and relentless scrutiny. Julie Rivkin has noted an important overlap between James's ghost tales and his tales of writers and artists, suggesting that both categories of his short fiction could usefully be called "tales of *ghost writers*": "Because writing does not require the living presence of its creator in order to signify, because it can go on producing effects long after the death of a composing consciousness, because its effects cannot be predicted, possessed, or controlled by its apparent originator, it could be called ghostly."²² While the author of the letter in "rather illegible" Gothic script is long dead, his ghostly incarnation displaces the spinsters from their house and their narrative, and he is exorcised from the text so that the spinsters may reclaim what is rightfully theirs. As liminal figures in Victorian culture, spinsters like the Misses Frush might well wish to avoid omniscient narrators (particularly male narrators with old-fashioned ideas) who would relegate them to the margins of conventional plot lines, as Sir Cuthbert's invasion of their story certainly does.

Fittingly, it is Amy, an author herself, who comes up with the plan that successfully forces the ghost to relinquish his haunting of the house and the narrative. Leaving England and its proprieties, she journeys to France, a nation perceived to have looser moral and narrative rules. When she returns, exhausted, she has successfully rid the Frush house of its voyeuristic ancestor. While the nature of what exactly Amy has done in Paris is cloaked in mystery, she tells Susan that she has smuggled an unspecified, forbidden "small" article about her person, which she has "triumphantly" brought across the border, re-enacting the crime for which their ancestor was hanged (389). Susan is convinced she has smuggled a Tauchnitz novel across the Channel, and Amy would certainly not be the first to do so. In 1841, Bernhard Tauchnitz began to print inexpensive editions of British and American

²² Julie Rivkin, *False Positions: The Representational Logics of Henry James's Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996) 13, 15.

books, which were not covered by copyright in Saxony. These editions became so popular that, as an April 1882 article in *The Atlantic Monthly* put it, English travellers “became so attached to the companionable little works that they used more duplicity and ingenuity in smuggling them back to England than in conveying any other class of contraband goods.”²³ If it is a Tauchnitz that Amy has hidden about her person, she has implicitly displaced the author as owner of a text and has claimed it as her own possession. Because a third person narrator and an author may share a quality of omniscience, Amy’s gesture may be interpreted as ousting the “ghost writer,” Sir Cuthbert, from his position of claimed ownership of both the house and the narrative. Even if it is not a Tauchnitz (Amy never admits what exactly she has smuggled into England), the fact that the object she has smuggled across the Channel is small enough to carry close to her body suggests that she has replaced Sir Cuthbert’s invasive and voyeuristic perspective with a more personal style: a first person or limited third person point of view through which she can tell her own story.

Thus “The Third Person” rejects the idea that the cousins need a man to control their space and legitimises their right to possess their ancestral home. While their town (“little melancholy, middling, disinherited Marr”) is certainly on the margins of England, it contains important cultural and historical relics of the past; like the spinsters themselves, the town cannot be dismissed nor can its contents be forgotten. Moreover, by ridding the narrative of its “ghost writer,” Amy moves into a position of narrative control whereby she may add marginal spinsters to the story of England.

²³ “The Tauchnitz Library,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 49:294 (April 1882): 564.

“Something Stirred Vaguely Within Her”:

Regaining One’s Voice in *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore*

“Oh, speak, Augusta, do speak if you can!”

—Charlotte O’Conor Eccles, *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore* (1897)

The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore: A Farcical Novel (1897) is a bizarre combination of realism and science fiction that infuses the rather mundane story of two bored and boring spinster sisters with a physical metamorphosis induced by one sister’s consumption of water from the Fountain of Life. Written by Irish author Charlotte O’Conor Eccles under the pseudonym Hal Godfrey, the novel at once evokes and mocks the anxieties inherent in the bodily transformations in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), as well as the quest for eternal youth in *She* (1887) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Farcical partly because its protagonists are tame London spinsters (to whom nothing is ever supposed to happen) and partly because it pokes fun at the stodgy morality and propriety of respectable Victorians, *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore* nevertheless manages to lift its protagonists out of their dull existence, taking them outside the ordinary plot lines of spinsters’ lives, and allowing them to reclaim their right to a happy ending with or without marriage.

In a *Blackwood’s* article based on her own difficulties while looking for work in London, “The Experiences of a Woman Journalist,” Eccles explains that the main difference between real life and fiction is that in the former, happy endings are not assured:

This uncertainty makes all the difference between one’s own life and the people in books. With you or me, reader, the story may not end happily: no powerful

intervention may put things straight, no timely legacy may place us above want, no fairy prince may arrive to snatch us from the combat that exhausts our youth. We may grow old in the struggle, missing all that life holds of sweet and inspiring—unsuccessful, forgotten.²⁴

In her novel, Eccles hints at the ordinariness of her forgettable spinster protagonists, doomed to live out their petty lives in a snobby, prudish boarding house; however, because she is writing fiction, she can summon a “powerful intervention” so that the lives of these spinsters may be shaken out of their “unsuccessful, forgotten” existence into a surprising—and unexpected—positive resolution. Discovering that youth cannot solve their problems, they learn instead to live as fully and as fearlessly as possible.

The novel opens by emphasising the mundane, prudish, and monotonous lives of Miss Augusta Semaphore, “a tall, thin, and rather sour-looking woman of fifty-three,” and her sister Prudence, “a giddy little thing” who is “ten years younger, and accustomed to be treated as a baby.”²⁵ Residing in an eminently respectable boarding house at 37 Beaconsfield Gardens that houses “chiefly women, the widows and daughters of professional men,” the Misses Semaphore are trapped in a cycle of boredom and propriety (22). Here a chicken breast is hesitatingly referred to as “the—a—chest of the fowl,” while the forty-three-year-

old Prudence is lectured about having ventured into the City unescorted (“It is not *comme il*

²⁴ Charlotte O’Conor Eccles, “The Experiences of a Woman Journalist,” *Blackwood’s Magazine* 153 (June 1893): 831-32. Most of what is known about Eccles comes from this autobiographical article, in which she writes of the trials and tribulations of looking for employment as a journalist in London. She observes that “[o]ne is horribly handicapped in being a woman,” for while a man may be out at all hours and may be assumed to understand a variety of subjects, a woman is presumed ignorant and is expected to be polite rather than insistent (831). Comically narrating her attempts to find work, she explains that she was asked by the editor of a “Society” journal to write “spicy” articles, “the naughtier the better” (832). Unfortunately, she laments, “I couldn’t—and wouldn’t—so that fell through” (832). Later, applying for employment through the Ladies’ Employment Bureau, she finds that her previous book’s title (“Modern Men, by a Modern Maid”) is *too* racy. Told by “an elderly person of highly respectable and severe aspect” that “I would rather have my right hand cut off than publish a book with such a title,” she is dismissed and advised to read Miss Anne Beale and the publications of the Religious Tract Society (832). Eccles wryly comments on her experience: “Strange to be considered in one week neither bad enough nor good enough to secure a post” (832).

²⁵ Hal Godfrey, [Charlotte O’Conor Eccles], *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore: A Farcical Novel* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1899) 10.

faut") (13-14). The ladies generally "passed the monotonous days in shopping, novel-reading, and repose" (25). Newcomers to the house who try "to be conversational" are, for a time, "lively, animated, full of good stories and repartee" but soon find themselves silenced: "Conversation as a fine art was not encouraged. It was sad to notice how in a week or a fortnight the talkers talked themselves out, and subsided into the brief commonplaces of their neighbours" (11-12). In such an atmosphere, new ideas are considered the antithesis of good sense, and silence—the absence of narrative—is a positive achievement: "The boarders, all respectable people who read the *Daily Telegraph*, voted Tory when they had votes, shared the rooted belief of the middle-class Briton that silence shows solidity, sound judgment, and a well-balanced mind. Profound and continued silence they considered an attainment in itself" (12). At the beginning of their story, Miss Augusta Semaphore, one of the most respectable people in the house, "look[s] rigidly after the proprieties" (23), while Miss Prudence is unable to think for herself. In this world of silence and stifled stories, the sisters seem to have no hope but to live "unsuccessful, forgotten" lives.

For the elder Miss Semaphore, age initially seems the greatest problem. Aware herself of every "new wrinkle," she nevertheless denies using "paints and powders" and makes an "effort to seem as if eight-and-twenty, or, at most, two-and-thirty, was still before her" (19-20). Mocked by the residents of 37 Beaconsfield Gardens for her use of hair dye, she is unaware of being the target of their jokes. Furthermore, when her dog Toutou, "old, fat, and scant of breath," trips Miss Belcher with his tail in the boarding-house drawing room, Mrs. Belcher's indignant comments seem directed equally toward the dog and his mistress: "That ridiculous dog is in everyone's way. It should be got rid of" (29). As Mrs. Belcher continues her tirade, the "obnoxious word 'old maid' [is] distinctly audible" (29). As with so many stereotypical spinsters, Miss Semaphore's identity has merged with that of

her pet, the recipient of her untapped desires, and the two have been declared superfluous. Soon after this incident, Prudence spots an advertisement in the *Lady's Pictorial* for "a single bottle of water from the Fountain of Youth" to be sold by Sophia Geldheraus, the "widow of an eminent explorer" (34). As in "The Third Person" and *Shirley*, the catalyst for change comes from outside England, helping the characters to evade the rigid expectations for women inside the domestic nation. Augusta is intrigued, and begins to imagine how her life might change if she were once again young: "Miss Semaphore scarcely allowed her mind to dwell on the ecstatic delight of being once more nineteen—intelligent nineteen this time, nineteen conscious of its powers, knowing the value of youth, enjoying the mere being young as no one could who had not been old" (47).

Mere youth, however, is not the answer. Over the years, Miss Semaphore has gradually become aware that her ill-humour is largely a product of a strict upbringing that has trapped her inside social conventions in which she no longer believes. Her father was so respectable that "he had taught his daughters to be suspicious of everything that looked pleasant," and because "[n]either of the girls had been rebellious nor particularly bright," they had accepted their fate without complaint (48):

The Misses Semaphore had had a life similar to many single women—a grey, colourless life, full of petty cares and petty interests. Born in a country town, where their parents were the magnates of a dull and highly-respectable circle, they had had a martinet father and an invalid mother. Church work occupied the days of their youth. Few visitors called on them except elderly married people that had known them from infancy. The very curates in Pillsborough were married. (48)

Miss Semaphore longs to be young not so much to eliminate her wrinkles or even so that she can marry but to regain control of her own character, lost almost without her knowledge:

“Seeing little of the world, and having no youthful society, they had grown elderly, prim, and formal without knowing it. Dreaming that their lives were all before them, they had waked suddenly to find that life is youth, and that youth was over” (49). While Prudence has remained childish and unaware that her life could have been different, Augusta comes to resent the life that has made her what she is:

Underneath all her severity . . . Miss Semaphore was by no means as rigid as she looked. Since coming to London, she had begun half-consciously to contrast the life she had led with the lives that the young women about her led. Something stirred vaguely within her. She felt she had been defrauded of many things that were bright and pleasant and harmless in themselves. How matters in the past could have been different she did not quite know, but she wished they had been different. All this was food to her desire to be young once more, to have her time over again, to enjoy herself just a little; and many of her disagreeable speeches might have been traced, by a student of human nature, to the bitterness towards others that sometimes wells in the heart of a lonely woman, making her feel, “I have had a bad time, why should not they?” (50-1)

Made old before her time, Miss Semaphore wants a second chance at youth in which she might “try the delights of an impeccable but more frivolous existence,” perhaps even on the stage (59). Her mistake, of course, is to believe that youth alone will alter her character, and her lesson is a hard one.

While Augusta has been soured by age, Prudence for her part has been softened. Kind and generous, if silly and immature, Prudence has failed to grow up largely because her older sister has taken on all of their moral and financial responsibilities. Whereas Augusta eventually concludes that the perfect age would be twenty-eight—an age of sense and

adventure—Prudence wants to be eighteen again, though she is frightened of being left unchaperoned at such a young age. She asks Augusta: “What shall we do alone in London with no one to look after us?” (56). Had Prudence grown younger by drinking water from the Fountain of Youth, she would likely have reinforced her silliness and coquettishness; instead, by being forced to look after the helpless Augusta, she gains in wisdom, confidence, and maturity.

When Augusta sets out to try the water from the Fountain of Youth for the first time, she is thrilled and agitated. Hinting at the desires long-repressed by the spinster, the narrator asks: “Can one fancy the impatience of an old woman who had missed the joys of life, to be young? A woman with the means in her grasp? Miss Semaphore panted with excitement; her heart thumped like a steam-hammer” (79). When, in this nervous state, her sleeve catches the bottle and knocks it onto the floor, her reaction—to drink all the contents of the bottle that she can save—is understandable. Having drunk too much, Augusta is transformed into an eight-day-old baby, a consequence attributable not only to her overconsumption of the water but also to the strength of her desire to be young again. Like Ayesha in *She*, Miss Semaphore learns the consequences of expressing her passions and attempting to be falsely young; their physical transformations are expressed in remarkably similar terms: When Prudence hears a “weird wailing” at three o’clock in the morning, she enters her sister’s room: “Where was Augusta? The bed was empty. The room was empty. Filled with an indefinable terror, Prudence advanced to her sister’s bedside. Oh horror! Augusta was gone, and in her place lay—what? A little, shrivelled, red-faced baby, wailing feebly, a huge night-cap fallen back off its bald head, a woman’s night-dress lying round it in folds a world too wide” (86). By transmogrifying a mature woman into an infant, Eccles creates a new take on the vanishing spinster. As a baby, Augusta has become virtually

unnameable, unrecognisable, and invisible, like a spinster who has “gone in.” Furthermore, she continues to possess the traits of a stereotypical old maid: she is bald, has a shrunken body, and wears clothing inappropriate to her age. Without her independence and powers of speech, she is “strange and absolutely hateful” to her sister Prudence. She is also disposable, as Prudence declares: “I’ll just wrap you in a shawl, and drop you somewhere” (90). Eccles hints at the powerlessness of spinsters who have “gone in” so completely that they make no impact on the world around them, barely existing at all. Like Lewis Carroll’s Alice, whose shrinking makes her fear “going out altogether, like a candle,” Augusta has nearly been “rejuvenated” out of existence.²⁶ Prudence notes: “Her sister had not stopped at eight-and-thirty, nor eight-and-twenty, nor even eighteen, as would have been natural and delightful, but had gone at a bound to about eight days old” (91). “What a mercy,” Prudence thinks, “that there were not a few drops more, or what would have become of her?” (91). Augusta quickly learns that to be younger means to lose the luxury of self-expression, and she must spend the rest of the novel attempting to regain the powers of speech and narration she had taken for granted.

Although the timid Prudence must learn her lesson differently, the end result—increased independence and the ability to narrate one’s own story—is similar for both sisters. After Augusta’s transformation, Prudence quickly discovers that telling the truth in the midst of a society that attempts to limit the experiences of spinsters can be perilous to her reputation and even her life. She chastises her helpless sister: “My good gracious! what on earth shall I do with you? I cannot keep you in this house. How can I explain? They won’t believe me—why, I wouldn’t believe it myself if anyone told me. How shall I account for your disappearance? and you can’t even speak to back me up if I tell the

²⁶ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, ed. Richard Kelly (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2000) 56.

truth. Not you! You'd see me hanged and never say a word" (89). Even if she is not suspected of murder, Prudence, as an unmarried woman, cannot be discovered with an infant without becoming tainted with fallenness. Augusta squirms when she hears that her sister means to give her to another woman to raise, but Prudence is adamant about getting rid of her now infant sister: "of course you must see how impossible it would be for me to go about with a baby of your age" (94). As she tells anyone who will listen, she is "not a married lady"; she knows that she must dispose of the infant "for the sake of [her] reputation" (186, 269). Surprisingly, Prudence's growing resourcefulness does not make her more maternal, as her goal is to rid herself of the baby and not to learn to keep it. "Like a woman with a guilty secret," Prudence walks the streets of London, realising that it "seemed almost as desperate an undertaking to get rid of a baby as to get rid of a corpse" (109). She is also comically inept at looking after her infant sister. When she attempts to feed Augusta, she spills most of the milk on the baby; when she needs to clothe her, she asks for a "complete outfit for an infant" without knowing the articles required or indeed "how and in what order the various articles were to be put on" (108); and when she tries to find someone to look after her sister, she unwittingly hands her over to a baby-farming alcoholic.

While she cannot learn to be motherly, Prudence learns that she can tell stories. Initially shying away from a truth she knows to be incredible, the "habitually truthful" Prudence, ("unaccustomed to all but the shallowest of plots, unused to taking the initiative, and, indeed, preferring to depend on the advice of others") embarks on a "career of falsehood" in an attempt to cover up her sister's transformation (96-7). Unleashing more anger than she has in years, most of it at her helpless sister, Prudence also begins to gain confidence as she is forced to assert herself: "The very weakest woman, when forced into a position of danger and responsibility, will act with a certain energy, and will display a

resourcefulness that surprises no one more than it surprises herself. Necessity is a hard taskmaster, who makes people capable of feats hitherto undreamt of by them” (105). What she does learn is “to lie with an *aplomb* that at once delighted and frightened her” (164). She discovers that because society has decided that spinsters lead dull, monotonous, predictable lives, she must learn to tell stories in order to hide the truth of her decidedly unpredictable existence. However, when she is interviewed by the police about her knowledge of the baby-farming operation to which she unwittingly delivered her sister and when her fellow boarders begin to suspect her of murdering Augusta and carrying her body out in a trunk, Prudence decides that it is time to narrate the truth of her experience: “She had had enough of prevarications. She would tell her story—they might believe it or not as they liked” (244). At the same time as she is ridiculed as being “Mad as a hatter!” and her truthful testimony is discredited, however, her sister is also regaining her voice (268).

If Augusta’s overwhelming desire to be young caused her to shrink into the shape of an eight-day-old baby, her desire to speak allows her to resume her former self. While their individual journeys are very different, both sisters regain the ability to speak the truth at the same moment, and can thus corroborate each other’s narrative. As a baby, Augusta is limited to the language of signs, or semaphore, which can only be interpreted by those who understand the code. Yet, because the signs are coming from an infant, her attempts to communicate are dismissed as weird coincidences, and no one will take Augusta seriously. Inside the courtroom, Augusta’s caretakers discuss the oddness of her attempts to make herself understood. They acknowledge that she is a “singularly unprepossessing baby,” but they are nevertheless intrigued by “something weird about her” and note that she seems to be trying to communicate with them: “Her eyes had an elfish intelligence that was startling. She looked as if at any moment she might speak. . . . At times her efforts to find a voice, to tell

what she knew, could not be mistaken, and inspired as much fright and pity as the inarticulate cries of the deaf and dumb” (259). As she struggles to sit up, “making signs as if she was writing,” Augusta also ages by several months, and her caretakers wonder at the odd effects of the light. Soon, however, her very identity is disputed and, in another echo of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Augusta begins to grow rapidly in the courtroom until with “a sudden sound of rent material, a shower of buttons flew about the heads of the junior counsel, and Augusta’s sloppy workhouse frock and pinafore, that had been gradually tightening to bursting point, split explosively up the back and sleeves” (275). While Prudence begs her to “speak if you can,” Augusta’s body undergoes a startling metamorphosis (275):

Everyone saw that something extraordinary was going on. Augusta choked, whooped, gurgled, turned red and spotty, purple and white, alternately. She seemed to be passing every minute through months of childhood growth, long-past croups, convulsions, measles, and so forth, sweeping over her in flashes, as she began once more her painful, and in this case, rapid, journey towards maturity. (276)

Having “gone in” to the shape of a baby, Augusta’s “coming out” again is a grotesque spectacle, with diseases and convulsions readily visible on a body that has rent its garments. However, unlike Ayesha’s rapid ageing and disintegration, Augusta’s return to her former self is positive, even fertile growth, brought on by a desire to speak and to regain control of her life. Indeed, while the physical rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore occurs when she turns into a baby, her spiritual rejuvenation occurs in the courtroom when she resumes her former shape. As Prudence begs her once again to “speak,” Augusta finally finds her voice, exclaiming: “Don’t you see I’m trying to?” (277), thus corroborating her sister’s incredible story with her own.

Augusta's ever-increasing body, hidden beneath the cloak of one of her former caretakers, is described in terms evoking the paradoxical power and fertility of the spinster: "Beneath the matron's ample cloak the form of Augusta was waxing ever longer and wider, like the melon plant beneath the cloth of an Eastern juggler" (278). One likely source for this reference is *Isis Unveiled* (1877), a key to the mysteries of modern and ancient science and theology by the Theosophical Society founder and mystic Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Blavatsky refers to the extraordinary powers of the *fakir*, who, "through the entire subjugation of the matter of his corporeal system has attained to that state of purification at which the spirit becomes nearly freed from its prison, and can produce wonders. His *will*, nay, a simple desire of his has become creative force, and he can command the elements and powers of nature."²⁷ Through his "powerful will and spirit purified from the contact with matter," the *fakir* can make a seed germinate and a plant grow "in less than two hours' time to a size and height which, perhaps, under ordinary circumstances, would require several days or weeks" (139). Blavatsky then compares the *fakir* to Indian jugglers, who have a similar power to make seeds grow. Although the jugglers "*are generally FEARED and despised by the natives*" (much as the Victorian spinster was feared and hated by her society) Blavatsky confirms that their powers are as remarkable as those of the *fakir* (141). Eccles's intertextual reference to the powers of the Indian juggler to produce the same "wonders" in the growth of seeds as the *fakir* reinforces the idea of a spinster's paradoxical fertility even outside conventional reproduction. Although the effects of the water may by this time have begun to wear off, Augusta's "powerful will" and desire to speak are finally what break the spell, allowing her, in a powerful example of lateral reproduction, to give birth to herself.

Not even the negative publicity that follows Augusta's remarkable metamorphosis

²⁷ H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), rpt. in *Collected Writings 1877*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1972) 139.

can take away from her delight in recovering her voice. The attention the two sisters receive from the public and the press recalls the large output of often derogatory periodical articles about spinsters throughout the nineteenth century: “Never were inoffensive and obscure women dragged more suddenly into notoriety” (284). Required to change lodgings three times “because of the curiosity they excited amongst their neighbours, and the crowds that collected to watch them pass in and out” (283), they also find their stories appropriated by the several newspapers, whose “would-be interviewers made the life of the sisters a misery,” and whose articles are accompanied by “horrible caricatures which their own mother would have failed to recognise” (283). Despite the unwelcome attention and ridicule, Augusta is thrilled to have returned “to the time of life she had temporarily abandoned” (282):

Her experience had been a disappointment, but her intense relief in feeling that she was once more in command of the helm, prevented her from dwelling on that. It was delightful to array herself once more in her own clothes, to be no longer a helpless infant, pinched, tweaked, starved, insulted to her face. The joy of being able to speak was in itself so intense that Miss Semaphore was in a constant flow of good humour, and in all her experience of her sister, Prudence never had so good a time. (282)

So great is Augusta’s joy in being in possession of her self and her voice again that she is in no way “soured” by the failure of her experiment, finding instead “perennial satisfaction in contrasting her present state with that which she had so unwillingly endured” (283). Unlike Marian Halcombe, who is silenced over the course of *The Woman in White*, Augusta ends the novel by speaking out against the injustice she endured. Prudence, too, has learned to speak for herself, and her story ends in her courtship with the now smitten Major Jones.

When Miss Semaphore drinks water from the Fountain of Youth, she voluntarily

attempts to alter not only the shape of her body but also the narrative of her life, hoping to recast herself as the heroine of a marriage plot. Her brief rejuvenation shows her how powerless these heroines can be, as her youthful self loses complete control of actions and communicative abilities, reduced to signs and semaphore understood by few. Like Rose Yorke, who escapes the entrapment of *Shirley's* romantic structure, and like Susan and Amy Frush, who reclaim the right to inhabit their ancestral home and to tell their own story, the elder Miss Semaphore evades the marriage ending. For all these women, the joy of being independent and able to speak for themselves is so great that for them, a single life is indeed a "happily ever after."

Eccles's novel is a sport, playful and speculative, and as such it aptly concludes this thesis, which has argued for fiction's flexibility and openness. This is not to deny the conservative thrust of much Victorian fiction when it came to gender, notably in its major plot lines. But the marginal, minor figure of the spinster presented a paradox that destabilised even as it helped sustain deeply-rooted beliefs about the place of women. Social commentators tried to exile the spinster's celibate and homeless body as an "unnatural" example of womanhood, but she remained a woman nonetheless, forcing an expansion of the category of womanhood to accommodate the alternate versions of femininity the spinster represented. Attracted to the open-endedness of this figure, fiction writers used and manipulated spinster stereotypes to probe anxieties about those "natural" female roles and destinies whose hold on the culture was (slowly) beginning to loosen. Thus, as my analysis has shown, where conduct literature, periodicals, and caricatures advised the spinster to remove her grotesque body out of the public eye, novels often stood in more critical relation to the endorsement of "going in." When the debates over female "superfluity" heated up in the 1850s and 1860s, leading to anxieties that the "naturally" fertile body of the spinster

would begin to self-replicate by recruiting new members to her ranks, fiction exploited the notion of lateral reproduction. Whether the novels deployed the idea of female multiplication to imagine a fruitful alternative to marriage or to mock society's fears that women would cease to participate in biological reproduction, they invoked powerful female figures never quite containable by social restrictions or even by the texts themselves. Operating inside a genre deeply invested in the marriage plot and in the valorisation of middle-class domesticity, the figure of the spinster unsettled the domestic novel. She evaded the attempts to contain and define her, stretching boundaries and spreading "dim[ly]" but luxuriantly through society like Anne Penny's *Anchusa* plant,²⁸ a strangely irrepressible force.

²⁸ Anne Judith Brown Penny, *The Afternoon of Unmarried Life* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1859) 18.

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