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**“Varieties of Pain”: An Exploration of Female Melancholy
in the Victorian Realist Novel**

by

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For Daniel

Abstract

This dissertation is about the work of melancholy in the Victorian realist novel, particularly those texts written in the late 1840s. The representation of melancholy affords an examination of a wide scope of issues that relate to the family, generally, and to the role of the middle-class women in the family in this particular historical moment, specifically. Because of the close association between the strategies of psychiatric treatment in the period and ideologies of the “proper” organization of the bourgeois family, writing or thinking about mental illness or theories of the mind necessarily calls up theories of the domestic and vice versa. Because early Victorian psychiatrists or alienists, as they were called, predicated sound mental health on the ability of an individual to maintain self-control, exhibit “proper” gendered behavior, and in a sense, cooperate with his or her male guardians within a pseudo-domestic structure, notions of the “ideal” family scene invariably arise in all discussions of the treatment of the mentally ill. The three texts discussed in this thesis reveal a female protagonist who is more or less melancholic but importantly, each text attributes the arrival of its protagonist’s melancholic suffering and the exacerbation of this suffering to debilitating domestic circumstances. Each of these melancholic female characters becomes acutely aware of her failures and her missteps through a protracted engagement with melancholic introspection. Importantly, her desire to conform and, in some sense, re-commit herself to the cult of the domestic arises in the moment of her most intense melancholic suffering. In the isolation and solitude that melancholy affords, each of these protagonists connects to a mode of self-

reflection and introspection that allows them to see not only the ways they have diverged from the “ideal” of “proper” womanhood, but importantly, to recognize that the mitigation of this divergence necessitates submission to forms of social and familial control that will only further their suffering. Thus, melancholy, in my estimation and in these novels, is very rarely a means by which the female melancholic protagonist rebels or reforms domestic structure. Rather, it is most often the means by which she, and the novel itself, reaffirm the centrality of the “home” within middle-class social structure at mid-century.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1-33
Chapter 2: Victorian Melancholy, the Realist Novel, and “The Woman Question”	34-72
Chapter 3: “The freedom of the mo[u]rning”: Melancholy and the daughter in <i>Dombey and Son</i>	73-119
Chapter 4: “Varieties of pain”: Melancholy and the Redundant Woman in <i>Shirley</i>	120-173
Chapter 5: “Violence to my feelings”: Melancholy and the <i>femme sole</i> in <i>The Tenant of Wildfell Hall</i>	174-229
Chapter 6: Conclusion “Strange Sufferings” and “Airy Forms”	230-236
Endnotes	237-260
Bibliography	261-285

Chapter 1: Introduction

We look before and after/ And pine for what is not--/ Our sincerest
laughter/ With some pain is fraught--/ Our sweetest songs are those that
tell of saddest thought. (Percy Bysshe Shelley "To a Skylark," ll. 86-90,
(1820))

Melancholy has played, and continues to play, a central role in the social and cultural thinking of the Western world. Acknowledged in Aristotelian and Hippocratic writings, Greek humoral lore identifies several diseases of the black bile including the eponymous disorder of melancholy, a condition whose symptoms include apprehensive affective states that were without apparent cause. Moods of fear and sadness "without cause" became the hallmarks of melancholic subjectivity, finding their first statement in Galen in the second century C.E. and reaffirmed in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). The classical canon of writing about melancholy culminates in the late nineteenth century, when especially influential works such as Emil Kraepelin's *Textbook* (1887) anticipate today's psychiatric work on depression and anxiety. Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1965) and Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989) have extended thinking on melancholy in our modern era.¹ Melancholy subjects are plentiful throughout the Victorian era. Particularly at the conclusion of the nineteenth century, Platonic ideas about the inspired nature of madness

attributed to melancholic men brilliance and creativity, a conception of melancholy that continues to have valence in our own era (Radden 5).

Throughout this study of the female melancholic in three Victorian realist novels of the late 1840s, I employ a conception of *melancholy* as a general notion of scientific and narrative interest. My intent throughout this work will be to argue that the female melancholic character of the late 1840s novel brings forward contradictions within theories of mental illness, femininity, and the construction of the bourgeois, middle-class family. This exploration is taken up in later Victorian novels such as those of Hardy, Gissing, Eliot, and to some extent, appears in Modernist works by Virginia Woolf, Conrad, and Katherine Mansfield amongst others. While numerous “mad” bodies emerge in Victorian fiction of this period, alongside other aberrant individuals such as spinsters, governesses, invalids and the like, I aim to suggest that critical attention to the representation of melancholy *in particular* can further highlight the work of the realist novel in the late 1840s and its attempt to represent the social, political, and technological fluidity of this moment in time. Through its depiction of the melancholic’s somewhat bifurcated public and private self, the realist novel of the late 1840s begins a consideration of the subject that remains central to the work of realism throughout nineteenth century fiction and anticipates Modernist modes of representation.

My project intervenes into on-going considerations about Victorian melancholy by taking up literary depictions of the female melancholic character in novels of the late 1840s. In particular, current critical work on gender and

Victorian domestic ideology does not consider satisfactorily the centrality of female melancholy to the literary representation of the condition of women in novels of the late 1840s,² for when we think of female “madness” at mid-century we may not think of the melancholic at all. Rather, Bertha Mason Rochester, “the madwoman in the attic” railing against the unjust actions of her captors, comes immediately to mind. Though manic characters such as Bertha foreground the significance of women’s oppression and voicelessness in dramatic and irrefutable ways, melancholic characters draw forth similar considerations because of the close relationship between the cult of Victorian domesticity and mid-century theories of melancholy. With that said, very little work has been done on melancholic female figures at mid-century beyond their significance to poetry which suggests that an investigation of the literary representation of the female melancholic in the mid-century novel is long overdue.

In what follows, I will map out the relationship between the domestic ideal and melancholy by focusing on three texts representative of this engagement—*Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation* (1848), *Shirley* (1849), and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Through their depiction of female melancholy, these novels take up early to mid-century Victorian rhetoric about the condition of women and the nature of Victorian private life. Their consideration of the condition-of-women question reflects the vexed and fluid nature of the debates about Victorian domestic ideology in the period and serves as a counterpoint to the aspirations of mid-century Victorian liberalism. They highlight also the period’s on-going concern

with the regulation and treatment of the mentally ill. In these texts, the cult of Victorian domesticity and the moral management of the mentally ill emerge as mutually influential concerns. In other words, novels about female melancholy provide a device by which Victorians explored aspects of the crisis in families.

In selecting texts for this study, I considered particular aspects of melancholy in order to choose those novels which contained characters that best exemplified the type of melancholy that would further an analytical and critical engagement with the rhetoric of mid-Victorian family life. To begin, I chose female melancholic characters over male melancholics and particularly, narratives which engage in extended introspection and consideration of the female melancholic's experience. In short, the female melancholic is the central character in the novels of my study and her suffering and her self-awareness the driving narrative interest. This is particularly true in *Dombey and Son*: though the title of the novel suggests it will be masculine characters and concerns that anchor the text, in fact, it is the suffering of the *Dombey daughter* that serves as its driving narrative dilemma. The melancholics of my study engage in extended periods of self-analysis and reflection upon the exigencies of their physical and emotional lives. Additionally, they attempt to make sense of their suffering, querying their choices and those of others, often ending in angst or anxiety over the limitations of their prospects. In many ways, the experience of melancholy affords the sufferer with a kind of clairvoyance about the Real of their experience, and as such, melancholy serves as a very productive psychological experience *in addition* to being a state of crippling, emotional suffering. As such, the texts of

my study posit melancholy as a kind of strategy, in addition to an affliction, by which the sufferer might experience moments of clarity about their own life, what Charlotte Brontë describes in *Shirley* as “the fleeting and glittering ripples [that vary] the flow of a rivulet” (*Shirley* 89).

Moreover, the novels of my study reveal what we might call a dual narrative in that the introspection and self-analysis of the female melancholic can be mostly juxtaposed against the over-arching “external” narrative that appears to be driven by questions and issues that are quite separate and apart from those of the female melancholic. This is to say that other characters in the text often appear to be, at best, oblivious or ignorant, and at worst, utterly dismissive of the plight of the melancholic, the depth and breadth of her suffering, and in many cases, their own culpability in her suffering. This is especially true in *Shirley*, where the narrative’s concerns with frame-breaking, industrial strife and inter-class tensions time and again direct the narrative’s attention away from the suffering of Caroline, the melancholic protagonist, and towards that of the upper-class characters in the novel which include Shirley herself. However, as I will argue in my chapter on *Shirley*, the female melancholic’s plight anchors the text and its politics.

Thirdly, I suggest that the consideration of female melancholy promotes a sharp critique of Victorian family life and the cult of the domestic. In fact, melancholy emerges in these texts early in their narratives, suggesting that melancholy is the result of a character’s recognition of the inequities of Victorian middle-class life, but the narrative does not conclude on this point but rather,

takes it up as the launching point for a protracted consideration, often throughout the rest of the narrative, of the particularities of these inequities. In other words, these texts engage, in exacting detail, with the quotidian of middle-class life, lingering on the fetters experienced by the melancholic protagonist as a result of this life. This is particularly true in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* where the female protagonist is already melancholic in the novel's opening pages and the *entire* narrative considers her journey into melancholy and her experiences living as a melancholic. All of these novels hold society culpable for the suffering of the melancholic, positing the exigencies of living in community as the source of the individual's suffering. Though a text such as *Vanity Fair* concludes with an undeniably melancholic scene, it is an insufficient example of the kind of critique that melancholic characters bring forward because *Vanity Fair* does just that: it concludes without ever bringing forward the critique in the sustained and complicated ways that the texts of my study do. As Nancy Armstrong suggests, Jane Austen novels conclude once the female protagonists have identified the object of their desire and are joined with that object. My texts begin with the identification of the incommensurability between desire and lived experience, their narratives exploring this incommensurability as the driving force of their narrative itself. A central feature of the melancholy in these texts is the sufferer's pursuit, through the narrative of a desire and fulfillment of satisfaction that eludes them.

Ultimately, my project suggests that the fictional representation of melancholy produces a "dazzling and fascinating experience of the fantasmatic

object” (Zizek 46) or, in other words, an encounter with the subject who truly *sees* her ideological positioning (if only for a moment) and queries the qualities of the ideology to which she is subject. In this moment, melancholy ceases to be the loss of something and instead, becomes the opening of a space for the *appearance* of subjectivity. Zizek writes that this is the “loss of the loss,” an experience that is indeed a “productive” condition (47-48). This is my notion of melancholy, that in the loss of “happiness” or satisfaction, and in the experience of profound disappointment and regret, the narrative opens a space for the appearance of introspection, of knowing, of clairvoyant *seeing*. Through its depiction of melancholy, the realist novel of the late 1840s initiates a recognition that our most important understandings about our present existence are manifestations of “the melancholy that has permeated the modern world” (Dumm x). This dissertation therefore concerns itself not only with the emergence of a modern form of melancholy, which I locate in these three novels of the late 1840s, but with its presence as *the* ongoing experience of our own time. Taking melancholy as a serious concern in the realist novel allows us to see “the rich interplay between growth and decay, ecstasy and agony” (Wilson 18) that characterizes Victorian fiction.

The legacy of post-structuralism dictates we resist the notion of subjectivity as coherent and bounded. It goes without saying that literary criticism now takes up, with vigour, the concept of the self as fractured, fragmented, and utterly unknowable. This is, in some sense, the legacy of the realist novel and its interest in detailing the subject’s tremulous negotiation of the “borderlands”

between sanity and madness.³ With respect to gender studies particularly, critical work insists that it is “ideological mirage” to attribute any sense of cohesion to the notional concepts such as “wife,” “mother,” and “woman” that we might locate in Victorian literature (Langland *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* 18). Though it would be difficult to argue against the symbolic significance of “the angel in the house” within Victorian private life, critical work has convincingly demonstrated that her actual presence at the scene of the family hearth is much less certain and that women’s lived experience diverged widely and markedly from the “angelic” archetype so lauded by Victorians in poetry and conduct manuals.

However, as Andrew H. Miller asserts, this emphasis on the fragmented self in nineteenth-century literature has resulted in a loss of “the concepts needed to recognize and assess much of what sets it [nineteenth century literature] apart from other sorts of cultural achievement” (xi). Particularly, Miller suggests that the period’s literature was “inescapably ethical in orientation” and that it was ethical in “ways that remain to be adequately addressed” (xi). The exploration of melancholy in the realist novel is one means by which we might address this ethical orientation because, as I see it, melancholy promoted not the disintegration of self and a turn away from concern with the ethical, but the subject’s *heightened* engagement with what it meant “to have a life: this one rather than that, only one, not at all” (2). Though the ethical, in Miller’s use, is the “desire to improve” (2), we might characterize its *melancholic* valence as the desire to express particular qualities identified as valuable within Victorian private life and attached to

gender. Though Miller suggests that the ethical need not reflect the “hectoring moralism” (xi) with which it is often conflated, the novels of my study depict melancholics if not hectored then certainly guided by the moral investments of “family,” “home,” heterosexual marriage, “motherhood,” and “propriety.”

The female melancholic does not, therefore, develop a vision of herself through “the ideal sympathy” with “the great characters of history” (“Inaugural Address” qtd. in Miller 7), John Stuart Mill’s path to moral perfectionism, but in the contemplation of the ordinary. Melancholy is not, as Harriet Martineau would suggest of invalidism, the “abolition [of concern about] the future” (197) or the “extinction of concern” about the “ordinary objects of pursuit” (“Life in the Sickroom” 203) but a more dramatic engagement with the qualities of “ordinary” life. Nor is it a refuge from the “stir and glare of the world” (*Janet’s Repentance* 24) as George Eliot remarked but a persistent querying of the exigencies of living in community. Most clearly, melancholy is a vehicle by which the subject may probe complex propositions of the “relations between the individual and the social order” (Adams *History* 16). Miller asserts that the question of “How should one live?” and “What was it to live well?” fall to literature and sage-writing in the nineteenth century. Thus, we interrogate the representation of melancholy in the realist novel not to uncover yet another example of the known disintegrating before our eyes, but to confront one avenue by which the qualities of Victorian life were made even more apparent. The novel is the literary form most suited to take up such questions and its examination of melancholy is one mode by which it brings forward insights about middle-class life (Miller 2).⁴

As much as the Victorian novel lingers on and attempts to capture the qualities of the ethical, it is equally driven by the doubts of the era it portrays. Thus, this project asserts that the era's consideration of melancholy is a realm where the *uncertainties* about Victorian private life were played out, alongside struggles to reify the qualities of the "home," the "family," and women's roles therein. Debates about the nature of womanhood generally coalesce in the figure of the female melancholic specifically. Discussions about melancholy, then, are yet another expression of the "internal tensions, self-contradictions, and new contingencies" emerging from the era's debate about the domestic ideal (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 6). I am asserting, in a critical intervention that has until now received little attention, that the area of mental science (a burgeoning field in the late 1840s) is one site of "uneven development" within the era's consideration of Victorian private life and the parameters of the Victorian ideal of domesticity.⁵ In the novels of this study, we can locate the intersection between these two fields and the exchange between them.

My project will argue that the 1840s continues the early nineteenth century's profound queries as to the nature of institution, authority, and other cornerstones of cultural capital. James Eli Adams asserts that two broad, "outwardly antithetical" developments of late eighteenth century thought, Benthamism and Evangelicalism, furthered the "corrosively skeptical analysis of established legal, political, and social orders" (Adams *History* 4-5) throughout the nineteenth century. Both Benthamism and Evangelicalism served to further middle-class attacks on an aristocracy deemed unworthy of its power, but in so

doing, each inculcated its own moral investments. Political agitation throughout the 1840s and into the 1850s further directed the reformist impulses of Victorian England and propelled forward debates about the condition of workers, women and other marginalized groups as well as the treatment of the poor and the mentally ill. By examining the novel, we can see how reactions to specific historical contingencies—the response to the hardening of the “separate spheres” doctrine, the rise of asylums and institutional care of the mentally ill, the changes in technology and commerce, and the thrust of reforms circulating around the condition of women at mid-century—made Victorians in the late 1840s and 1850s particularly sensitive to the domestic ideal and theories of the mind during this time of radical change. The late 1840s (and the period shortly thereafter) mark a turning point in how Victorians envisioned the organization and control of private, domestic life. Victorians circulated ideas about self-control, self-renunciation, and deference to patriarchal governance using the “Family” and the “Mind” as the scenes where the nuances of these concepts could be explored and critiqued. I suggest that melancholy, and its representation in the realist novel, serves as a flashpoint for nineteenth-century anxieties about the “the Woman Question.”

I have chosen the three texts on which I concentrate because I believe them to hold particularly revealing stances on the broader cultural considerations of the nature of Victorian private life, the role of women within this life, and the issues circling around the treatment and regulation of the mentally ill. But they are also representative and there are many more texts that have been left out of this

study that could have been included. Pip's time in the graveyard in *Great Expectations* (1861), Charlotte Brontë's depiction of the terrible shipwreck at the conclusion of *Villette* (1853) and the terrifically visceral scenes of domestic violence that mark *Wuthering Heights* (1847) each serve as rich examples of melancholic staging that also comment upon the nature of Victorian life. Otherwise, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), and *North and South* (1854) all depict the plight of middle-class woman in an ever increasingly industrial England and would seem equally suitable texts through which to investigate the "condition-of-England" question at mid-century. I assert that this abundance of examples only strengthens my sense of the usefulness of melancholy as a category through which to approach the issue of social reform at mid-century, but I take up Charles Dickens and the Brontës specifically because their novels most explicitly depict melancholy and thus drive forward my arguments in the most dramatic and evident ways.

As will be evident in my work, these novels share a representational commonality with other texts of the era in that they function as ideological standard-bearers for a wide range of Victorian works of fiction that take up questions of femininity and melancholy. I have chosen to examine in detail these three novels because their representation of melancholy and the domestic ideal allows for a sustained and nuanced consideration of the role of the daughter, the spinster and the wife at mid-century. They remain, however, only examples of the broader cultural debate on-going as opposed to idiosyncratic catalysts of that debate. They are not divergent literary species that exemplify something about the

debates that other texts (and the debate itself) cannot or do not. Rather, they are participants, alongside many other fictional and non-fictional texts, of the era's concern with how to think about women and the mentally ill. Throughout this project I will reference other works that foreground similar themes and engagements. Many of the arguments featured in *Shirley* I will locate also in Charlotte Brontë's non-literary correspondence on the condition-of-women debates. By arguing that her novel is "historical in part by being biographical" (Markovits 8), I will demonstrate that melancholic contemplation in fiction might in some measure reflect the actual experience of Victorians at mid-century. I will make this same claim, though on a much more limited scale, in my discussion of the origins of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

All in all, I suggest that these novels typify the English "spirit" at mid-century, particularly its sensitivity to broad transformations across Victorian culture.⁶ The representation of female melancholy, then, is not idiosyncratic, eccentric or merely convenient in such a way that limits its relevance within scholarship on the Victorian novel in general, for it will continue to be present in the work of Thomas Hardy and George Gissing later in the century as well as in much of the New Woman fiction written at the turn of the twentieth. Though born out of the particular social and political conditions of the 1840s, this literary rendering of female subjectivity remains relevant to the nineteenth-century novel as a whole.

While this project focuses on the Victorian novel, melancholy is, of course, a central concern in the era's poetry as well. Most readers will assume that

the melancholic figure of the nineteenth century is male and a character of poetry. Tillotson remarks that prior to the late 1840s, fiction had not yet “penetrated the unlit gulf of the self—that solitary self hitherto the preserve of the poets” (260-261). The speaker of Tennyson’s *Maud* (1855) and *In Memoriam* (1850), as well as Robert Browning’s Childe Roland come easily to mind as examples of that male, poetic “preserve.” It goes without saying that the Victorian consideration of melancholy in poetry draws heavily upon Romantic works such as Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798) and his seminal work *The Prelude* (published posthumously in 1850). The early poetry of Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning so closely approximates the Romantic poets that “this first generation of Victorian poets, who began to publish well before Victoria’s ascension, can reasonably be regarded as a third generation of Romantics” (Riede 1). Victorian poetry, like the Romantic works that precede it, considers the life of the mind not only as politically responsive but as attuned to theological and metaphysical debates in ways not unlike what I have asserted marks the work of melancholy in realist novels. In works such as Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850) and in Arnold’s “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” (1850) and “Dover Beach” (1867) we find evidence of Victorians in contemplation of the indeterminacy of their age and anticipating a modernity that promised not a resolution to this instability but only further transformation. This, I would argue, is a well-trodden critical consideration.⁷

Current critical work on Victorian poetry asserts for that genre a similar attentiveness to the productive qualities of melancholy that I have suggested exists in the realist novel. While I have not considered poetic representations of melancholy to any great extent in this current project, this is not necessarily because I see melancholy working in vastly different ways in that genre as opposed to in the realist novel. As in prose, considerations of melancholy within poetry re-cast that sense of fragmented or fractured consciousness almost endemic within Victorian writing as indicative of a different analytical structuring of the relationship between self and other, not merely as disabling pathology (Riede 204). Rather, I have suggested throughout this work that we can, and should, reconsider the Victorian characterization of melancholy as a debilitating state of mind and linger instead on how Dickens and the Brontës suggest the condition as a means to a more pronounced understanding of the qualities of middle-class life. As in realism, poetic explorations of melancholy suggest a psychological and cultural discourse that enables us to see how the loss of unity, what Victorians referred to as “anomie” can be seen as a source of poetic meaning.⁸ This is particularly so in the work of Browning and Tennyson (Riede 204).

However, one point of distinction between poetry and realism that I locate in my analysis is the realist novel’s insistence upon the modernity of melancholy. While it is true that Arnold identifies “the dialogue of the mind with itself” as indicative of modern forms of melancholy in his 1853 Preface, he also considered it an obstacle (Riede 10). The realist novel, by contrast, revels in the depiction of individuals in constant struggle with the social, political and cultural demands of

their age. Otherwise, the Victorian poetic tradition represents melancholic men searching for transcendent meaning in an ever-industrializing and overly-secular world—this, in part, explains the cultural deference to Wordsworth and other Romantics. Rather than subscribe to the idea that poetry should form part of an “objective amelioration,” Hallam contends that the genre must resist the “continual absorption of the higher feelings into the palpable interests of ordinary life” (“Extract” 303).⁹ Hallam’s view, as Joseph Bristow notes, suggests that if and when poetry becomes a mere instrument of social improvement, then its power will be inevitably diminished—the great virtue of Tennyson in particular lies in his refusal to succumb to the “prevalence of social activity” (Bristow 9). Victorian poetry thus embraces a *rejection* of modern concerns that is simply not present in the realist novel of the 1840s, a genre that takes up the transformations across Victorian culture with vigour. This contrast is particularly apparent in *Dombey and Son* which can be distinguished from such poems as *The Lady of Shallot* (1833) in which Tennyson frames his critique of Victorian society through the tropes of Arthurian legend. Mill expresses some misgivings about the poet who “luxuriate[s] in sensual imagery,” desiring Tennyson, in particular, “to strengthen his intellect for the discrimination” of “truths” (“Tennyson’s Poems”). In this, Mill expresses his developing ideas about the role that poets should adopt in the contemporary age and extends, although somewhat contradictorily, his writing in “What Is Poetry?” and “The Two Kinds of Poetry” published in 1833 (Bristow 12).

While the male melancholic figure in Victorian poetry remains a potent force in the century's cultural politics and aesthetics, I would argue that the realist novel of the late 1840s introduces into literary consciousness the modernity of female melancholy. The novel imparts to the narrativization of female melancholic interiority those same qualities of division, productivity, and clarity attributed to the male subject of poetry but emphasizes also Carlyle's diagnosis of the division of wholeness of mind into self-contemplation in which one part of the mind chastises another (Adams *History* 28). As I have argued, the representation of female melancholy draws upon this same sense of the mind "chastising" itself, foregrounding the importance Victorians placed on self-control over emotional and physical excess. The attention to self-mastery emerges both in Victorian poetic and prose considerations of melancholy. In this sense, the melancholic female character of prose writing might be *just as* similar to the male melancholic figure of *The Prelude* or the speaker of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as she is to the figure of the "repressed" female in the rest of Victorian fiction. For these reasons, one can reconsider the privileging of poetry as the pre-eminent site of Victorian melancholic exploration and contemplation in order to argue for the realist novel as an emergent genre where Arnold's concerns about the mind in dialogue with itself, Hallam's interest in "the return of the mind upon itself" ("Extract" 302) and Tennyson's notion of the "Second-rate Sensitive Mind not in Unity with Itself" in his poem "Supposed Confessions" (1830) find profound resonance.

For example, Arthur Henry Hallam's 1831 review of Tennyson's poetry typifies contemporary critical thought on the significance of melancholy within

this genre. Hallam, for one, identifies the “melancholy . . . [that] so evidently characterizes the spirit of modern poetry” (“Extract” 302) as “the return of the mind upon itself” (302). Otherwise, Matthew Arnold in 1853 found the melancholic state of Victorian poetry alarming, rejecting melancholy as a “continuous state of mental distress [that] is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance in which everything is to be endured, nothing to be done” (Arnold 410). Arnold’s identification of the prolonged “distress” of melancholy is thus in keeping with mid-century Victorian notions of melancholy’s debilitating qualities (Riede 5). Like Arnold, Thomas Carlyle laments the “diseased self-conscious state of Literature” (“Characteristics” 303) in the 1820s and 1830s, stating that “literature has become one boundless self-devouring review” (303). Like Arnold, he writes in favor of the robustness of Goethe and lauds the “joy” to be found in Schiller. Warnings against melancholy figure prominently in Victorian critical work on poetry even as this attention to melancholy continued to keep the literary and philosophic discourse of melancholy at the center of poetic work.¹⁰ I take up melancholy in the realist novel, therefore, not because it is more important or significant there than in poetry, but because I feel that its significance to poetic work has been fully discussed both in contemporary Victorian criticism (such as that of Carlyle, Arnold, Hallam and others) and in current critical work.¹¹ Scholarly engagement with melancholy in poetry is much more pronounced than with respect to the realist novel and there is critical work still left to be done on the significance of melancholy within prose genres.

Of central importance to my project, then, is the intersection between the novel's representation of melancholy and its consideration of the complex social and political landscape facing mid-century Victorians. The work of melancholy is to make explicit the implicit contradictions of arguments *for* a woman's heightened political participation and legal autonomy. To date, this connection between the condition-of-women question and theories of mental illness at mid-century remains mostly unexamined. To rectify that oversight, the chapters that follow will bring into visibility the following claims. Firstly, I contend that realist novels of the late 1840s use melancholy as the lens through which to interrogate the condition-of-women question. Secondly, this interrogation produces a set of realizations about women's lives at mid-century that foreground the restrictiveness of Victorian middle-class life and particularly, the dearth of opportunities for women outside of the roles of wife and mother. As I will suggest throughout this study, the melancholic female character emerges as a condensed symbol of women's oppression. This realization is not revelatory in and of itself, for the strictures of the cult of domesticity are well documented. Thirdly, the novels of my study depict how melancholy emerges as a *strategy* by which middle-class female characters could negotiate Victorian private life, using their condition both to enhance their identification with proper modes of femininity but also to reject, even for a fleeting moment, the authority of their fathers and husbands.

Because of the particular qualities of melancholy, the way it differs from mania or hysteria, the condition promotes in the sufferer a capacity for self-

control and self-reflection that mirrors proper expressions of Victorian femininity at mid-century. As a result, melancholic “madness” is indistinguishable from sanity, and this fact divests melancholy (in contrast to mania or hysteria) of its extra-normative qualities. Melancholic characters keep private their personal torment. Each is, *for a time*, a profoundly proper daughter, lover, wife or mother seeking value within her family, wishing to be sexually attractive to the men of her community and overall, shunning the margins in favor of the family hearth. Yet each knows, all the while, the forms of submission and degradation that accompany social inclusion -- this fact produces the profound feelings of sadness and frustration that accompany melancholy and each narrative makes clear this recognition through a variety of plot points. For one, this recognition arises in private, even secretive, acts of intellectual and emotional individualization that further the female melancholic’s insularity and, despite outwardly “normal” appearances, eventually aggrandizes her difference from those around her. For example, many critics consider this capacity for self-control in Florence Dombey as indicative of her selfless, passionless, angelic, and ultimately non-sexual nature. However, like Caroline Helstone and Helen Huntingdon, Florence’s melancholy affords her the opportunity to develop a rich, private life of the mind that, ultimately, provides the means for her to eclipse her father’s discipline. She thus enjoys some of the intellectual “freedom” (Taylor “Enfranchisement of Women” 57) for which mid-century liberal social critics advocated, even if it is achieved through an experience of burgeoning pathology and even if it is

considerably delimited. We will observe the same trend in the Brontës' characterizations of Caroline Helstone and Helen Huntingdon.

Particularly in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the female melancholic character is possessed of a more profound understanding of the intolerability of her husband's abusive and unfaithful ways than she possessed prior to "succumbing" to melancholy. This provokes her desire to carve out some measure of independence from her husband, the one who would enforce those limits and then discipline her deviation. By self-isolating, Anne Brontë's melancholic protagonist fortifies her sense of independence from her husband and this independence eventually enables her escape from their abusive home. Likewise, Florence Dombey is finally able to eschew her father's control when, in her moment of most profound melancholic clarity, she recognizes her family's dramatic and irresolvable failure. These novels make explicit the notion that if women were to achieve any autonomy or "freedom" from the patriarchal control of husbands and fathers (for which many involved in the condition of women advocated) the actual expression of this "freedom" was possible only through what might be considered pathological or improper social behavior (such as that exhibited by the melancholic). The novels represent melancholics testing the waters of a middle-class woman's capacity to reject domineering and abusive treatment by men who, under Victorian law, enjoyed the right of commanding that "sharp, well-defined circle round his family and hearth" (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 5) that was the Victorian private sphere.

However, we are left with the fact that this autonomy or “freedom” is forged out of a condition of pathology, for Victorians at mid-century considered, without equivocation, melancholy as a form of mental illness.¹² Each novel depicts what might be termed “stages” of melancholy wherein the melancholic character is able, *at first*, to disguise her suffering such that she appears sane but ultimately, cannot fully hide the agony of her suffering. Ultimately, melancholy in each novel is an expression of female subjectivity mostly unsustainable within middle-class life, not only because it engenders a measure of defiance that will not be tolerated but also because in its most chronic expression, it was considered a form of illness or pathology. In other words, the “freedom” made available to the middle-class woman through an experience of melancholy cannot be sustained, and certainly not celebrated, for Victorian domestic life at mid-century could not yet accommodate the *femme sole* and nor could it accommodate the mentally-ill woman.

Furthermore, the melancholic expresses a negative liberalism built upon solitude, privacy and self-determination, but at mid-century this is an entirely untenable subject position for women within Victorian social life. Each work narrativizes a drive to cure, or in other words, discipline the melancholic subject, foregrounding the era’s preoccupation with the moral management of the mentally ill, a scheme of treatment predicated on the inculcation of proper domestic behaviors. This fact is made clear in each of the novels of my study, but most dramatically so in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* where the melancholic female attempts and fails to live as a legally autonomous middle-class woman, and in

Shirley, where the melancholic contemplates “occupation” but is mocked for her aspirations. In other words, moral management becomes a doctrine designed not only to control the mentally ill, but the deviant (or non-compliant) middle-class woman as well. This speaks to the dovetailing between theories of domesticity and mental illness.

Overall, the novels make explicit how autonomy is mostly unattainable for the middle-class woman with no other options but to subject herself to the authority of patriarchal forms of social and family organization in order to avoid social and economic distress. *Shirley* makes this point glaringly clear. Though melancholy provides some means for heightened action (as explored in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Dombey and Son*) and enhanced intellectual and emotional autonomy (as expressed in *Dombey and Son* and *Shirley*) it can only ever be a pathological condition. The novels open the door to a mode of agency available to women even as they close off the possibility for more sustained forms of change that could enlarge women’s sphere of opportunity (Markovits 6). This is the overarching insight of this project and reflects my critical intervention into current work on the gender politics at mid-century.

Melancholy thus engenders in its sufferer a measure of defiance, but also augments her desire to conform. As we shall see, while Victorian alienists loathed the seeming chaos of mental illness, and the rebellious qualities attributed to the mentally ill, the novels of my study represent the melancholic female overall as compliant and willing to placate and satisfy those in authority. The agency these characters express is quickly subsumed by a desire to be included in social ritual

and be valued within domestic life. This is particularly so in *Dombey and Son*. In this, these works share a concern, found throughout texts of this era, that the condition-of-women debates were somewhat if not entirely limited in their actualization. Each novel depicts the re-constitution of the family at the text's conclusion, with the melancholic (now cured) at the center of a newly-forged family circle.

And so, while the texts with which I engage tend to err on the side of the impossibility of any radical change for women at mid-century, they have been selected also in part for the ambivalence of their allegiances. These works depict women undermining themselves, re-victimizing themselves in other words. For instance, despite the ways each female melancholic chafes against social expectations and expresses a desire to reform their place within the family (and in some instances actually achieves a measure of autonomy), each remains drawn to forms of womanly submissiveness that deify their fathers and locate all forms of personal satisfaction in the fulfillment of romantic desire. Moreover, viewed through the lens of melancholy, these realist novels work out not only how a more profound consideration of one's social positioning is debilitating and discouraging but also that once one grasps that positioning one must necessarily subordinate that understanding, rigorously repress it in fact, in order to withstand middle-class life. Each text, *Shirley* in particular, adopts a somewhat cynical approach to the condition-of-women question, showing that middle-class women who contemplate their "lot" (Brontë *Shirley* 411) and attempt to mitigate their oppression experience a heightened sense of female powerlessness within

Victorian middle-class society as opposed to any feelings of liberation or agency. This contributes to the realist novel's recognition, through its representation of female melancholy, of the unalleviated dissatisfaction and alienation present in modern life.

One might argue that recent scholarship has explored in depth the representation of abject or "deviant" subject positions such as the orphan, the governess, the invalid and the spinster whose suffering is not unlike that experienced by the melancholic and query the need for yet another study of yet another version of female marginalization.¹³ Notably, each of the protagonists (and many of the minor characters) I examine is an orphan in experience if not in fact and spinsters and governesses feature prominently in these texts, for the melancholic often finds companionship in the company of these marginalized women. Likewise, the novels of this study foreground invalidism alongside melancholy. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's compelling analysis of *Shirley*, for example, recognizes the power of the invalid in this text and attributes Caroline Helstone's suffering not to melancholy but to anorexia, demonstrating the close relationship in the symptom clusters associated with each disease.¹⁴ Current critical work asserts that diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis influenced the construction of the nineteenth-century social body through the pathologising of the gender, class, and economic and aesthetic status of the individual body.¹⁵ Melancholy works similarly. The presence of melancholy, like any disease, causes fractures in society's view of itself as a robust and judiciously functioning whole and foregrounds differences between the healthy and the ill that necessitate

diagnosis and cure. These claims have been well-established and I will take them up in detail in Chapter Two.

Katherine Byrne asserts in her study on nineteenth-century constructions of tuberculosis that disease “disrupts social functioning by negatively intervening in the lives of the people” (1). My consideration of melancholy, in contrast, focuses on the ways that diseases of the mind, and particularly female melancholy, in fact *preserve* social order through a reification of the domestic and provide the affected individual a strategy by which she might navigate difficult social and domestic scenes. This synthesis of disease and femininity is not new in academic terms, but I would suggest that the majority of this criticism focuses on the diseases most commonly attributed to the feminine body, including tuberculosis, anorexia, and religious mania to the exclusion of melancholy, an oversight I will rectify in this project.¹⁶ My point in suggesting that we consider melancholy as distinct from other forms of invalidism is not simply to provide an alternate label, but to suggest that a different structure attends to melancholy’s representation of the negotiation between the individual and the social body.

Female melancholics inhabit a “difference” that is much less pronounced than that of these other figures. Melancholics become insular and individuated in ways that differ from “typical” representations of alterity. Other characters in the novel remain somewhat oblivious both to the melancholic’s condition and to the critical eye she has turned on middle-class life. In other words, the female melancholic is sick, but not *apparently* so. Consumptives and syphilitics cough, bleed, and otherwise display physical manifestations of the bacilli infecting their

bodies; melancholy has no particular physiological indicators though it seems “like” many other illnesses. Hence, the melancholic’s suffering is disguised both through the lack of conclusive physical evidence of the disease, but also because what evidence exists conforms, in fact, to proper notions of femininity at mid-century. While the connotations of purity do not attend the figure of the melancholic, other qualities of propriety do, namely demureness, crying (only) at socially appropriate moments, and deference to male authority. Melancholy is thus a rather ambiguous disease, one that enables the melancholic to contemplate the hard road that is middle-class life and the strategy by which she might mitigate her lot, all the while exhibiting “good” behavior. Paradoxically, the qualities of a melancholic’s suffering in fact *disguise* that suffering in the first place.

Furthermore, though both tuberculosis and melancholy draw upon and contribute to ideologies of womanhood, female sexuality, female health, and domestic propriety, melancholy lacks what Byrne describes as the “metaphysical element” that enhances the “symbolic potential” of tuberculosis (3). As I will suggest, the “mystery” of melancholy is somewhat resolved in the novels of this project, for Dickens and Charlotte and Anne Brontë see melancholy arising from very real, very potent forms of suffering and degradation present in Victorian private life. Though the microscopic origins of cholera, tuberculosis, or syphilis remained elusive at mid-century, the novels of the late 1840s shine direct and unrelenting light on the contagions present in middle-class family homes, namely parental neglect, the lack of educational opportunities for women, and violence

between intimates. In this sense, melancholy does not have mysterious origins, but rather, distinct and extant causes. Moreover, in Dickens and in the Brontës, melancholy does not result from some vague confluence of action, hereditary predisposition and gender, nor from an individual's failings, but from measurable and articulated social failure. This divests the individual of culpability for her own illness and places blame on the broader social systems to which an individual is subject. As such, an investigation into female melancholy specifically has much to offer the critical discourse on Victorian female alterity for the way it foregrounds, yet again, the connection between the individual and the social body.

Additionally, third-person omniscient narration in both *Dombey and Son* and in *Shirley* enables seamless transitions between the melancholic's interactions with the external world and her private contemplation of those experiences, a feature of the realist narrative I will discuss in the following chapter. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the first person narrative structure of Helen's journal allows for the same kind of exposition of melancholic suffering that remains, at least for a time, secreted away from other characters' awareness. The realist novel works out how the narration of a character's interiority can remain separate from, and often in contrast to, the narrative's overarching thematic concerns thus creating, in fact, two separate realms of experience. Through realism's interest in narrating interiority, the reader is privy to the melancholic's acts of individuation that aggrandize her insularity and separateness but do not otherwise feature in the story world of the narrative. In other words, the formal properties of the realist

novel enable Dickens and the Brontës to foreground melancholy as feminine “difference without difference,” one to which only the reader is privy.

In the four chapters that follow, I will consider the work of melancholy in the realist novel, and particularly, the ways that melancholy in its literary representation is an apt lens by which to view the uncertainties and contradictions within the condition-of-women question. The melancholics of my study meld two visions of the female melancholic, first the beautiful, pining girl who can blame her mental and emotional decline on a broken heart, and secondly, the melancholic who shuns society, finding solace and individuality in a profound state of introversion. For Florence Dombey, the death of her mother in the novel’s opening chapter brings into sharp focus the estrangement between Florence and her father and the pretense of her respectably bourgeois “family” life. Caroline’s realization in *Shirley* that she would rather endure Moore’s fickle and inconstant affection than live as an unclaimed spinster engenders a deep sadness about her willingness to submit to patriarchal family relations. For Helen Huntingdon, the realization of her husband’s purposeful and pointed cruelty towards her debases her belief in the divine sacrament of marriage and fosters a desire to resist his abuses in favor of her own self-preservation. While invigorating and revelatory, each of these familial and psychological dilemmas brings forward a tragic, melancholic acknowledgement of the exigencies of “modern” life and the tension between individual fulfillment and socio-familial expectation, and produces a new, if desperately complicated, sensibility with which to understand the world and its demands. Melancholy is thus attributed to specific and distinguishable

strife within Victorian private life. The representation of melancholy in these works engages these texts with wider cultural and social associations of disease and importantly, of femininity.

Chapter 2 sets out this study's medical framework and interrogates the theories of moral management by which Victorian alienists attempted to manage melancholy and other mental illnesses. At the same time, I will discuss ideologies of Victorian private life in an effort to demonstrate the profound connections and interactions among both theories of the mind and the domestic. I establish a paradigm which is central to my argument, namely that there exists a "complex and symbiotic" relationship (Byrne 4) between notions of femininity and melancholy that is explored in realist novels of the late 1840s particularly.

Though my concern remains with the English experience of melancholy, I have used medical sources from the continent, especially those familiar to Victorian alienists at mid-century in order to demonstrate the wide-ranging influence of and interest in mental theory. However, I do not consider the American context of melancholy or neurasthenia, for no reason other than I have chosen to confine my work to an examination of British texts and resist the assumption that there exists a continuity of meanings between the English and American experience.¹⁷

Chapter 3 initiates my exploration of the Victorian novel. I am particularly interested in the late 1840s because realist novels of this era are the first body of Victorian literature in which we can locate the confluence of melancholy and theories of femininity as a recurrent theme. Both *Dombey and Son* and *Shirley* reveal a preoccupation with public concerns such as class, the effects of

industrialization, and the state of the social body, but importantly, they gesture also towards melancholy's association with the qualities of the Victorian *private* sphere. I argue that melancholy both disrupts the Victorian private sphere and simultaneously furthers its primacy within the Victorian cultural imagination. The representation of melancholy in *Dombey and Son* exemplifies what I see as the primary focus of the "Woman Question" and the debates about mental illness in this era, namely that domestic propriety is an index of (and the path towards) sanity. However, the novel's protagonist *disguises* her pathology with propriety, thereby complicating the relationship between "good" mental health and "proper" domestic life. The text gestures, therefore, to melancholy as a complex signifier both of femininity and of defiance.¹⁸ The novel suggests that melancholy affords the melancholic some measure of autonomy, however circumscribed and ultimately unsustainable it might prove to be.

In chapter 4, I take up Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley*. This text suggests the consequences endured by women with the "freedom" to contemplate, in profound ways, the exigencies of middle-class life. *Shirley's* protagonist, Caroline, is a sadder but wiser version of Florence Dombey and in this, Brontë extends the commentary on "the condition of women" that Dickens inaugurates in his text. Caroline recognizes melancholy as a reasonable and predictable response to the harshness of her middle-class life and *not* as an affliction sprung from an indeterminate source borne within the uncharted depths of her female body. Whereas Florence does not recognize this fact until the final scenes of the novel, Caroline is aware of her "lot" (*Shirley* 411) from its opening pages. Though

Caroline's melancholy results from her experience upon the "hard shores of Reality" (*Shirley* 94) wherein she contemplates the qualities of her marginalized existence, her *release* from this suffering results, paradoxically, from her most profound moments of melancholic suffering which also enables a reconciliation between her long-lost mother and herself. In other words, she is most proper when she is most pathological and I will linger on this particular valence of melancholy so as to demonstrate its significance to domestic theory. Finally, I will discuss how Caroline's "cure" at the novel's conclusion alludes to moral management theories of female propriety which deemed melancholy as a condition in need of moral as well as physical cure through a return to "proper" domestic life.

And finally, pressuring the notion of a woman's exalted status in middle-class domestic ideology, Chapter 5 examines Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. This text foregrounds melancholy as an unsustainable subject position for the middle-class Victorian woman not because melancholy is a sickness but because the individuation that emerges from melancholy can never be anything other than an aberration in Victorian middle-class society. This novel, like *Dombey and Son*, characterizes melancholy as a subject position with the potential to catalyze a woman's release from debilitating and abusive domestic conditions. However, Brontë's melancholic is gathered back into the folds of proper domestic participation at the conclusion of the narrative, demonstrating both the actual and the symbolic power of the cult of domesticity. Ultimately, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* represents most explicitly the implicit contradictions

present in the actual expression of enhanced legal and political standing for women, using melancholy as the lens by which it examines this issue.

Female melancholy provides the framework in which Dickens and the Brontës link the condition-of-women question to overarching concerns about the experience of *all* Victorians, both men and women alike. Reading the melancholic female character in this way has much to offer to the field of Victorian studies, for it offers yet another avenue by which we might understand how Victorians considered their mutable and unstable social and political networks. In my estimation, melancholic female characters are “evidence of the deadlocks and unsolved problems of [Victorian] society” (Williams *The Long Revolution* 86). Above all, Dickens and the Brontës “admit to consciousness” (86) the modernity of melancholy in much the same way as Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850) albeit through prose rather than through poetry and through an examination of medical rather than evolutionary theory. Ultimately, these texts are profound contributions to a textual field consumed by the transformations present in Victorian society, prescient of the ways that mid-century Victorian England was an emerging, and very modern, culture.

Chapter 2:

Victorian Melancholy, the Realist Novel, and “The Woman Question”

In an essay written in January, 1852, Dickens recounts his visit to a London asylum and his observations of a Christmas ball held for the institution’s inhabitants. Entitled “A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree,” the essay describes the asylum’s practice of “usual fortnightly dancing” (320) amongst other details of its Christmas festivities which include the opening of Christmas presents and visiting. It might seem odd that the mentally ill would be expected to dance as part of their treatment, but in fact this rehabilitative measure reflects Victorian faith in the doctrine of moral management, a system of treatment promoted throughout the 1830s and 1840s as *the* method for the cure of those afflicted with mental illness. Moral management emphasized that a patient suffering from mental illness could be cured if “re-educated” into proper domestic and social behaviors and dancing, sewing, playing music and participating in holiday activities exemplified these acts of social propriety.

On this night, Dickens notes the festive décor that greets him as he enters the asylum’s doors. At first, he contrasts the relative civility and comfort of the scene set before him with the asylums of the past where “the most violent and certain means of driving a man mad were the only hopeful means of restoring him to reason” (319), but his remaining description queries the purpose behind the activities performed by the patients in the pursuit of this civility. Despite the fact that the hall is adorned with holly in preparation for the festivities, Dickens notes

its “brown, somber” (321) atmosphere and a sense of pervasive gloom flooding the room. Dickens finds “a pianoforte, with a few ragged music-leaves upon the desk” but he notes immediately that “of course, the music was turned upside down” (321). The dancers, patients of the asylum, do not dance unless they are prodded, choosing instead to stand in small groups, looking about the illuminated hall. Dickens describes them as “suspicious” individuals with “countenances of gloom” (321). Amongst them, he encounters an “old-young woman, with the disheveled long light hair, spare figure, and weird gentility” and in a rather lonesome image, a “vacantly-laughing girl, requiring now and then a warning finger to admonish her” (323). Elsewhere in the asylum, Dickens observes a woman feverishly works on “a mad sort of seam” whilst “scolding some imaginary person” (321).

Dickens comes away from the asylum “mournfully” affected, noting the “childish and so dreadfully un-childlike” demeanor of its inhabitants (325) and imploring his readers to do “a little in any good direction” (326) for the asylum. While Sander Gilman suggests that Dickens deemphasizes the more grotesque or horrifying images of insanity in his essay to focus on the comical (Gilman 150), I suggest that the “weird gentility” and “vacant” laughter of these caricatures suggests tragedy rather than comedy. Dickens prefaces his 1836 essay “A Visit to Newgate” with the words “we do not intend to fatigue the reader with any statistical accounts of the prison ... We saw the prison, and saw the prisoners; and what we did see, and what we thought, we will tell at once in our own way” (“A Visit to Newgate” 98). “A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree” similarly resists

the universalizing thrust of sociological reports of the asylum so as to draw a more intimate portrait of its inhabitants, allowing readers “to see” the particular sorrows of Victorian asylum life. This is a feature of narrative he will of course extend in *Dombey and Son*, taking off the “housetops” to expose the familial discontent that lies underneath (*Dombey and Son* 231).

I begin this project with Dickens’s observation of the “madhouse” for the ways domestic propriety emerges as an index of sanity in Dickens’s portrait of the asylum. His essay is revealing in its own terms—how odd that mentally ill people would be expected to dance—but it also highlights the “social wound” that brings this project into being (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 5), namely that the asylum features as a public example of what Victorians figured as normative domesticity and depicts how they disciplined, or regulated, those who diverged from this norm. Secondly, though Dickens endorses the asylum’s therapeutic environment in general, he simultaneously characterizes the patients’ purportedly “sane” and proper behavior as a smoke-and-mirrors trick that ineffectually masks their deep unhappiness and the persistence of their suffering. I will take up a similar argument in each of my chapters as well, suggesting that the depictions of family life in *Dombey and Son*, *Shirley* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* expose a woman’s “lot” as marked by the same false happiness and pretense present in the asylum.

Most importantly, I begin with Dickens’s portrait of the asylum because it signals the centrality of mental illness within Victorian social discourse generally. It is no surprise that many of the figures upon whom Dickens’s description lingers

are women who require, now and then, a “warning finger.”¹⁹ In my opinion, the century’s debates about the condition of women coalesce in the figure of the female melancholic in its prose literature, a feature of the realist novel that has gone unnoticed in critical work to date. Dickens, in particular, takes up mental illness and melancholy in both his literary and non-literary endeavors in an effort to examine changes within Victorian private life, and the consequences and the meaning of this transformation within Victorian culture. *Dombey and Son* is representative of this engagement, as is Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The Brontës are joined, therefore, with Dickens in their efforts to explore social problems through literary device. Kathleen Tillotson writes that the 1840s are marked by a sense that “less and less could be supposed unchanging” (111) and the female melancholic in the novel draws to the foreground two important spheres of transformation: Victorian domestic life and the regulation and treatment of the mentally ill.

In this chapter I will characterize the 1840s as a moment of significant transformation politically, culturally, and scientifically. I will begin with a discussion of the broad changes occurring across Victorian society at mid-century and then turn to a discussion of the significance of the realist novel in the representation of these changes, particularly in terms of its consideration of the condition-of-women debates. I will then discuss the medical conception of melancholy in this moment and its proposed treatments. Overall, the purpose of this chapter is to foreground the broader cultural and political trends at mid-century in order to better situate the relevance of the novel’s representation of

female melancholy to our understanding of gender politics in this moment. Of central importance to my work is the intersection between the novel's representation of melancholy and its concomitant consideration of the complex social and political landscape facing mid-century Victorians, and particularly, questions about the condition of women. My dissertation is concerned with how "the relations between the individual and the social body are negotiated" (Vrettos 13) and I argue that the novel's representation of female melancholy is an example of this negotiation. Contradictions within the ideologies governing the expansion of industrial capitalism were played out in the sphere of sexual difference and my work suggests that melancholy provides a further layer of complication within this realm of "uneven development."²⁰ Rather than present the textual field beyond the novel as oppressive, patriarchal, and conservative, I will focus instead on the novels as exemplary of a textual field where progressive trends sit alongside more conservative values.

Victorians were cognizant of changes throughout the political and social fabric of their era. William Thackeray remarks in a 1860 lecture on George the Fourth that "In this quarter of a century, what a silent revolution has been working! How it has separated us from the old time and manners!" (111). However, the novels of the late 1840s speak less to a "silent" revolution working to effect an ever-widening gap between Victorian culture and that of Georgian and Regency England and more so to the *upheavals* occurring across society. As Adams asserts, beginning with the development of steam power in the latter half of the eighteenth century, forms of mechanized production continued to transform

the rhythms of Victorian daily life (*History* 6). Much of the literature at mid-century emphasizes these rapid advances in technologies of transportation and manufacturing and the vigor of the commercialism and consumerism marking Victorian England at this time. As Tillotson notes, the 1840s are marked by a superimposition of the new on the old, as the years of “railway mania” saw hundreds of new lines of track opened every month.²¹ The Great Exhibition of 1851 featured advances in modern Victorian industrial technology, all proudly displayed as evidence of England’s ascendance on the world-stage.

Transformation was evident in literary production as well. For one, the novel was emerging as a central genre within Victorian reading circles. Of 1848, Raymond Williams asserts that “There ha[d] been no higher point in the whole history of English fiction” (“Introduction to Charles Dickens” 11). Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*, Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, and Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast* were all appearing in parts. Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* was soon to be published. The Brontë sisters had already composed *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* prior to 1848 and in this year, Charlotte Brontë was writing *Shirley*. As T. H. E. Horne put it in 1844, “Prose fiction has acquired a more respectable status within the last half century ... the novel itself has undergone a complete revolution. It is no longer a mere fantasy of the imagination ... but a sensible book” (qtd. in Adams *History* 52). Horne notes particularly the “great deal of useful knowledge, historical, social and moral” emerging from the novel genre. This assessment of the novel’s place within Victorian culture occurs alongside a general sense, across Victorian society, of a new era. In the “The Spirit of the

Age,” Mill writes “the conviction is already not far from universal, that the times are pregnant with change; and that the nineteenth century will be known to posterity as the era of one of the greatest revolutions of which history has preserved the remembrance, in the human mind, and in the whole constitution of human society” (“The Spirit of the Age”).

This revolution, however, was not necessarily smooth, nor welcomed by all. While the excitement of transformation cannot be overlooked, there is also a concomitant emphasis in much of the writing at mid-century on the destruction wrought by rapid change. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson suggest that throughout the late 1840s there emerges a climatic account of “the incoherence of modernization” (“Green Dickens” 134). *Dombey and Son* explores, perhaps most fully, the violence of technological and commercial expansion within both the physical and social landscapes of mid-century Victorian England. Dickens’s work complements that of Benjamin Disraeli whose novels are representative of the political transformations occurring in the mid 1840s. Evolving social habits and abrupt changes in the organization of towns and counties were seen, by some, as abrupt, unrelenting, and perhaps even aggressive. Many of the novels of the late 1840s bear this sense of the “past under the assaults of the present” (Tillotson 108).

The transformation against which many Victorians chafed in fact secured the centrality of debates about how Victorian society might negotiate this transformation. For example, the social consequences of transformation serve as the inspiration for the “Condition-of-England” novel. In this genre, we may locate

the literary recognition of disparity between the rising middle class and the laboring poor. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South* are examples of novels designed to engage the consciousness of the reading middle class with respect to the plight of lower-class, working Victorians. The literary consideration of the condition of women emerges from a similar sphere of social critique, namely the disparity between the legal rights and educational opportunities afforded to men and denied to women. The novels of my study, though not condition-of-England novels, consider how Victorian society might enhance the legal and political status of Victorian middle-class women and are therefore infused with much of the same energy driving forward novels of social critique.

For Victorians, "the condition-of-women" question was an ideological space intersected by a multiplicity of debates, dialogues, and interactions (Leaver 228). The extremely fluid nature of these debates suggests that there was no one fixed perception of the position of women in nineteenth-century England, a feature of the issue that my study takes up. Literary discussions of the expanding potential for women in mid-century English society date back to the early nineteenth century in such texts as Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria: Or, the Wrongs of Women* (1798). Novels at mid-century draw upon and expand the gender politics of these earlier works. On the one hand, we can locate myriad writings at mid-century that emphasize home as the site where tension is reduced, balance is achieved, and protection is afforded. As Adams notes, throughout the century we see a persistent expansion of middle-class political power alongside a "corresponding ascendancy of a distinctly

middle-class ethos which was built around self-discipline, earnest struggle, and the hallowing of domestic life” (*History 2*). In novels such as *Home is Home: A Domestic Tale* (1855) and *David Copperfield* (1850) and in Coventry Patmore’s iconic long poem *The Angel in the House* (1854), we encounter repeated scenes that might serve as the paradigm for the fantasy of household peace.²² Sarah Lewis’s *Women’s Mission* (1839) and Sarah Stickney Ellis’s myriad texts about Victorian domestic life exemplify the exploration, if not inculcation, of these values in non-literary texts.²³ As an outgrowth of Victorian Evangelicalism, this “cult of domesticity” enshrined the decorous, loving home as the emblem of a pious and well-ordered life.²⁴ Seemingly counter-narrativizing the celebration of transformation evident in the Great Exhibition, such texts emphasize so as to laud stability, particularly domestic stability.

On the other hand, the “enchantment” of this vision (Dickens *David Copperfield* 28) recurs almost neurotically, against other visions, equally persuasive, of home as a site of strife, inequity, and even violent physical and mental abuse. While the 1851 Exhibition drove forward English pride in the nation’s “domestic achievement” and emphasized the compatibility between the virtues of the English home and national character, there remained an “intractable diversity” in the actual quality and construction of Victorian family life (*Spectacle 5*). The novels of my study represent the Victorian textual field at mid-century in contemplation of this “trouble” with families. In fact, the pronounced degree of family unhappiness, particularly female unhappiness, represented in Dickens and the Brontës counter-narrativizes the rhetoric of conduct book authors such as

Lewis and Ellis who figured mother- and wifedom as a woman's most fulfilling and "exalted" (Lewis 21) duty.²⁵ In each of these novels, the female melancholic chafes against what appear to be overarching demands for proper social and familial participation. These texts are aligned, therefore, with many others at mid-century concerned about the circumscribed nature of women's lives. For example, *Home Truths for Home Peace, or "Muddle" Defeated* (1851) by M. B. H. depicts Victorian private life as scene where "nothing was clean, nothing was mended, nothing was made, nothing was ready; but everything was left in more dirt and disorder" (5). Gaskell's *North and South* portrays protagonist Margaret Hale in desperation over the decline of her family's fortunes and the disintegration of her father's mental health. In poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) explores the incommensurability between conventional marriage and a woman's pursuit of an autonomous existence as an artist. Over all, these texts suggest explicitly that the relationship between home and happiness was entirely over-determined.

Fictional accounts of the suffering present in middle-class life mirror broader discursive considerations of the place of women in Victorian bourgeois society in non-fictional work, particularly the status of "superfluous" women. Although it was not until *The Census of Great Britain 1851* that it was publicly, and socio-scientifically, revealed that there existed roughly a three per cent demographic imbalance in favor of women, Victorians had long suspected that there were many more women than men.²⁶ Unmarried women came to be referred to as "superfluous" or "redundant women" and many social critics engaged in

dialogue as to what, precisely, ought to be done with them. Many novels of the 1840s take up this question of “redundant” women but in keeping with much of the textual field at this moment, refuse resolutions to this “problem” that are entirely satisfying or conclusive. *Dombey and Son*, *Shirley* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reflect the culture’s concern with the “daughter (instead of the son) as heir of the family home,” the “redundant woman,” and importantly, the “estranged wife,” all visions of a middle-class womanhood “gone wrong” that figure centrally in the debates about the role of women in bourgeois culture. These novels’ publication, and their popularity, signals the importance of issues such as amendments to divorce and other forms of domestic law in the late 1840s but also, the significance of this particular moment within nineteenth-century social and legal history.

By the mid-century, the condition-of-women question sought to address such specific issues as suffrage, women’s working conditions and educational rights for women and girls. In *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England, 1850–1895*, Mary Lyndon Shanley explains that “although the term feminist was not used until the late nineteenth century, it makes sense to apply it to the mid-century activists . . . who urged the liberation of women from restrictive social custom and law alike” (3). Many mid-century nineteenth century feminists reacted not only to the injustices that flowed from the limited political and legal standing of Victorian women, but also against the increasingly suffocating Victorian image of the role of women in their “proper sphere” of private and domestic life (Taylor “Enfranchisement of Women” 57). Martineau,

for one, rejected with contempt those who resisted civil rights for women on the grounds that women should have recourse only to “*virtual influence*” [my italics] through their ability to “sway the judgment and will of man through the heart” rather than through the intellect (“Political Non-Existence of Women” 105). From the 1840s on, an increasingly vocal and diverse feminism would join Martineau in testing and contesting these limits (Adams *History* 9). Frances Power Cobbe was but one of many women to call for the reform of women’s education.²⁷

Throughout the latter half of the century, the condition-of-women question encompassed a broad range of issues, including the expansion of women’s marital property rights and the amendments of laws concerning domestic violence. Later writers would draw upon the work of those before them. Mill’s publication of *The Subjection of Women* (1869), for example, was informed by his wife Harriet Taylor’s “Enfranchisement of Women” first published in the *Westminster Review* nearly twenty years earlier. The passage of the *Married Women’s Property Act* in 1882 and the campaigns to repeal the *Contagious Diseases Acts* of 1864, 1866 and 1869 are examples of later achievements galvanized by the condition-of-women debates at mid-century.

In sum, women’s groups, fiction and non-fiction writers, and utilitarian liberals all worked together throughout the nineteenth century to advance a cultural and political consideration of the condition of women but like all political movements, the debates were informed by different ideological theories and opinions. Of course, the varied treatment of these debates in literary forms such as the novel reflects the multiplicity of views present in non-literary circles. As

Elizabeth Helsinger et al. have shown in *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837–1883*, the chorus of dissenting voices that informed Victorian thinking on women suggests that “the traditional model of ‘a’ Victorian attitude — patriarchal domination, expressed publicly as ‘woman worship’ — is inadequate” (xi). Helsinger states conclusively that “The predominant form of Victorian writing about women is not pronouncement but debate. ... For Victorians ... the Woman Question ... really was a question” (xi). In this vein, Linda C. Hunt asserts that although the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries exhibit “remarkable unanimity” as to what was “natural to the female character,” there remained throughout the Victorian era “heated debate on women’s position in society” (1). Thus, scholarship on the condition-of-women debates must focus less on the supposed progressiveness of its results and more so on the ways it marks another sphere of uneven development.

Though the role and proper place of women was a subject of cultural, political and legal contestation throughout the nineteenth century, assumptions that there did exist a difference between men and women “permeated mid-Victorian culture in sermons, conduct manuals, and popular literature with such power and in such a way as to produce the norm” (Poovey 6). For one, the Victorian understanding of ideal femininity emphasized selflessness and allotted to women far-reaching forms of influence, all dependent upon cultivated practices of moral discernment and self-renunciation that men, because they were men, could not hope to replicate. As Jenny Bourne Taylor notes, in the development of the medical and psychiatric professions, the figure of middle class feminine

domestic virtue becomes the epitome of rationality and self-management (37).²⁸ *Shirley's* narrator, speaking in the persona of a “proper” young woman, comments upon this haughty sense of propriety that “English country ladies” seem to carry into their social circle:

‘I know – I do not boast of it – but I *know* that I am the standard of what is proper; let every one therefore whom I approach, or who approaches me; keep a sharp look-out, for wherein they differ from me – be the same in dress, manner, opinion, principle or practice – therein they are wrong.’

(106)

The narrator’s assured sense of right and “wrong” suggests that “proper” womanhood is a measure of the degree to which an individual conforms to the “me,” a universal standard for behavior, dress, and decorum governing this social community.

At the same time, mid-nineteenth century England was a site of both social and cultural paradox. Despite the circulating rhetoric that figured England as a family-centered, church-going nation, it was also a country in which one third of the all girls and women had jobs outside the home at mid-century and one half of the population did not go to church (Mitchell xiii). Despite the existence of an apparent moral consensus as to the expected standards of both male and female conduct, the lived experience of many Victorians differed quite markedly from the “ideal” standards of behavior.²⁹

The novels of this project exemplify this unevenness within the culture’s understanding of “woman” in a number of ways. Firstly, although the female

melancholics of these texts do in fact contest the rather over-determined paradigm of harmonious, sanctified middle-class domesticity in circulation during this period, there remains within these narratives a complicity with that rhetoric because of their depiction of the desperate sadness experienced by women excluded from the “domestic sanctum” (Brontë *Shirley* 142). Though female melancholic characters often query the dicta of conduct book culture expressed by texts such as Anna Jameson’s *Characteristics of Women Moral, Poetical and Historical* (1833), the anonymously written *The English Maiden: Her Moral and Domestic Duties* (1841) and Mathilda Pullan’s *Maternal Counsels to a Daughter* (1855), they remain drawn to archetypes of womanly submissiveness that exalt a woman’s place in the home, but only to an extent that does not compete with male authority. Dickens and the Brontës each resist the notion that female autonomy could result in anything other than isolation and impending poverty. Each affirms that a woman’s defiance of the male authority figures who govern their family constellation is a recipe for terrible sorrow.

This vision of woman in submission carries forward throughout the century, as versions of the domestic ideal, of women as the guidance and balm acting against and in mitigation of the world “out there” continues to hold ground with women as well as men and they do so within these novels. As Adams suggests, such visions of sanctified femininity offered women a dignity that challenged the notion of women as the daughters of Eve, as “creatures of undisciplined desire who lured men into temptation” (*History* 9). As a paragon of restraint and purity, a woman who assumed this role offered a source of value

outside the world of exchange, one rife with corruption and disappointment. Both Florence Dombey and Caroline Helstone in particular aspire to this kind of value throughout their narratives; Helen Huntingdon arms herself with an almost intractable moral virtue in an effort to juxtapose herself with her husband's degradations.

Additionally, these novels reveal the contradictions present in an emerging liberal culture at mid-century and, particularly, the ways in which the condition-of-women debates brought these contradictions into visibility. Victorian liberalism in this period valued autonomy, individuality of thought, self-consciousness, self-control and the judicious use of physical, sexual and emotional energies. Liberal political philosophers premised their anti-slavery campaigns, demands for factory reform, and debates in favor of women's suffrage and enhanced political and legal standing on these very facets of proper subjecthood. Advocates for enhanced women's education, for example, argued that a woman's limited prospects on the marriage market made it a necessity that girls be trained in some sort of employment in order for them to be self-sufficient and self-reliant.³⁰ Only through education could women develop the "faculties" of contemplation and powers of comparison deemed to be essential for the proper functioning of the Victorian subject (Taylor "Enfranchisement of Women" 60).

The texts of my study make clear, however, that education has the potential to produce an acutely crippling sense of one's own subordination alongside education's more favorable attributes such as self-sufficiency. For example, as each female melancholic character pursues protracted contemplations

about her “lot,” she emerges defiant of the strategies of patriarchal control to which she is subject, but most importantly, desperately sad at their seeming immutability. “Education”, or its corollaries introspection and contemplation, can produce crippling melancholy, not invigorating emancipation. In this sense, “education” is productive of suffering rather than sustenance. Moreover, the self-reliance espoused by Samuel Smiles and others as central to the Victorian definition of success was only available to a middle-class woman if she was unfortunate enough to experience a form of mental illness.³¹ In other words, it is pathology that produces “enlightenment.” Caroline Helstone suggests, in fact, that melancholy’s *cure* is the turn *away* from a contemplation of the “reality” (Brontë *Shirley* 121) of her middle-class existence. The melancholic thus offers a dissenting voice in a discourse that encouraged middle-class individuals to contemplate the conditions of their lives as means to self-improvement. Though Smiles will argue that it is a “strong individualism which makes and keeps the Englishman really free” (20), the novels of my study, and their commentary on the condition-of-women question, make it clear that this “freedom” remains fettered and productive of even greater forms of suffering.

Therefore, I would suggest that the realist novel is one site where Victorians considered and re-considered broader social change so as to highlight not the idiosyncratic quality of the novel, but the cultural force of the debates with which it engages. In particular, because of the realist novel’s ethical imperative, its concern with detailism, and ultimately, its complicity in the production and reproduction of proper middle-class Victorian gender and social norms, it remains

a significant cultural device by which mid-Victorians investigated the meaning of Victorian liberalism, the place of women in society, and the construction and in some instances, the disintegration, of the Victorian “family.” Realism emerges in the nineteenth century as the narrative form most concerned with the pursuit of knowledge and its representation through objective rendering. As George Levine suggests, realism values the “ordinary as the touchstone of human experience” (Levine *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* 22) and endeavors to demonstrate the complexity of human interactions through an exploration of the particular, quotidian experiences of individuals. At the same time, the realist novel asks its readers to consider what they will do with the knowledge acquired through their reading experience (Levine *How to Read the Victorian Novel* 28) and in this, we can locate realism’s ethical imperative.³² Eliot’s narrator in *Adam Bede* (1859) speaks to both of these elements in realism by insisting upon the importance of representing things as they are, even if unpleasant or ordinary, on the moral grounds that “things may be lovable that are not altogether handsome.” Such representation, in Eliot’s estimation, unlocks “the secret of deep human sympathy” (Eliot 241). Sympathy becomes a key word in criticism of the novel in this era and intimates the possibility that social tensions might be disarmed, if not overcome, through a realistic rendering of Victorian social life (Adams *History* 10).³³ Melancholic narratives somewhat frustrate this aspect of realism, for the presence of melancholy seems more to exacerbate than alleviate tensions, particularly those present in Victorian private life.

With that said, realist fiction is not didactic *per se* and does not operate in some sort of morally prescriptive sermonizing tone. Although the novel does “tell at once” (“A Visit to Newgate” 235) of the quotidian experiences of Victorians in the hope that this telling will inspire an ethical response, it seeks also to demonstrate the complex social relationships that exist beyond the reader’s immediate experience so as to demand the reader’s attention and consideration. In *Oliver Twist*, the narrative expresses “passion for hunting something deeply implanted in the human breast” (62; emphasis in the original). The drive towards sympathy and ethical response requires, therefore, an *uncovering* of private life.

Thus, the narration of interiority (anatomical, architectural, bureaucratic, and of course psychological) remains a central fascination of Victorian realism, contributing to realism’s drive to render, objectively, the quotidian experiences of Victorian social life. This preoccupation with interiority is often termed as realism’s interest in detailism (Tillotson 122), which suggests its “intense registration of the particulars of the material world that [its] protagonists inhabit” (Levine *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* 191).³⁴ Realism’s emphasis on the particular foregrounds a “peering into” the human lives behind systems, into the ways which the Victorian subject negotiates increasingly (and harrowingly) complex and fractured public and private landscapes. The Brontës’ engagement with realism, for example, demands not only the reader consider the private, intimate sphere of the family but also, that he or she contemplate desires that unsettle that otherwise ideal space. “Material” particulars impact dynamically and profoundly on the individual’s psychological experience and in so doing link the

external with the internal in ways unique and revelatory. Through detailed depictions of physiological responses such as nervous ticks, blushing, fevers, insomnia, and weeping, realist novels explore the external expressions of the soma that exposes the internal, private landscape of the mind. In the novels of the 1840s, we encounter the first interrogations of the private self and the first consideration, in prose form, of the mutable boundary between the overt and covert.

John Kucich, among others, has thoroughly demonstrated that we can locate within realism a dynamic parallelism between literary and scientific modes of observation, particularly those of medical doctors.³⁵ The Victorian alienist, with his privileged access to the intimate revelations and bodily exposure of the sickroom and his interest in the hidden causalities of disease, provides an “apt analogue for the realist author as diagnostician of social ills and scrutinizer of the minds and hearts of his or her characters” (Bailin 258).³⁶ Moreover, the drive in realism to represent “things as they are” without manipulation and without fancy replicates scientific methods of inquiry and empirical observation that endeavor to do the same. By the late 1840s, armed with the vocabulary and nomenclature of medical discourse, the realist novel could begin to explore an individual’s private, psychological life and do so using the nomenclature of scientific authority.³⁷

Through this slippage between the public and the private, and as human interactions come to be marked, increasingly, by the strictures of bureaucratic demands, the realist novel of the 1840s and 1850s draws attention to the interactions between individuals and institution. Levine mentions among the

“primary conventions of realism” its tendency “to see all people and things within large containing social organizations” (*The Realistic Imagination* 15). Literary realism, therefore, “is not an innocent practice but is tied in to structures of surveillance which . . . dominated the internal workings of both personal and institutional life in Victorian England” (Shuttleworth *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* 17). D.A. Miller, Elizabeth Langland, and Nancy Armstrong suggest that the realist novel works as a surveillance discourse, one that produced and reproduced middle-class behaviors such that they became “norms” of gender, class, and sexuality.³⁸ Armstrong in particular suggests that the realist novel is complicit in constructing a specific notion of femininity as a “form” of desire, one that underpinned the emergence and authority of the bourgeois industrial middle-class in mid-Victorian England.³⁹ Instead of a benign or disinterested mode of observation, the Victorian novel must be then characterized as an ideological discourse engaged in the production of the proper Victorian social being, a contention that drives forward my interest in the “work” of melancholy in realist fiction.

If the realist novel considers the production of the proper Victorian subject, it does so in all the valences associated with Victorian “propriety.” The qualities of proper womanhood and proper mental functioning are therefore co-determinate in this work. The realist novel and the era’s medical writing act as *interacting* texts “through which culture represents itself and the shared and conflicting ideological economies that inform these discursive formations” (Langland *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in*

Victorian Culture 3). My consideration of the representation of mid-century Victorian melancholy in the novel is one that sees narratives as “discursive practices bound up in and implicated in other discursive practices” (3). Prior to 1850, literature as we think of it today remained an indeterminate category, difficult to entangle from journalism and in which not only political writing but also history, science, and religion figured prominently (Adams *History* 13). Just as the era’s medical and sociological writing about the condition of women frames the novel’s depiction of melancholy, so too must the voluminous medical literature on melancholic life inform our understanding of proper modes of womanhood. Although I will somewhat artificially separate the realm of the psychological from the sphere of social, economic, and political life in this next section in order to emphasize the former, I hope ultimately to demonstrate the ways in which these realms are fused within the literary representation of melancholy.

In some sense, the development of sympathy, practiced through reading and writing, is of the same cultural thrust as the ethical drive for a more altruistic and benevolent treatment of the mentally ill. Voracious readers that they were, Dickens and the Brontës could not have missed the centrality of mental illness within political and social discourse of the late 1840s. Their decision to include melancholics (and other psychiatric types) in their fiction serves to foreground the cultural significance of mental illness generally and particularly, the era’s increasingly dogged determination to alleviate (or at least contain) mental suffering.⁴⁰ However, in this historical moment, “mental science” was an

emerging medical discipline, struggling for authority and credibility and under intense scrutiny by scientists, essayists, politicians, and novelists alike. It has been well-established that many factors in the mid-century Victorian period, including the trend toward psychiatric reform, the widespread use of institutionalization, and the increasing use of insanity as a legal defense, all combined to thrust the “problem” of madness into the forefront of the public agenda. The nineteenth century saw a proliferation of discussion about mental illness, whether in popular fiction, mainstream periodicals such as Dickens’s *Household Words* (where we encounter “A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree” or in newly specialized medical journals such as *The Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*.⁴¹ I have suggested that the novels of my project consider, and somewhat contest, mid-century Victorian assumptions about melancholy, but they do so only to reflect the ways that Victorian medical science was, in this moment, very much uncertain as to how to diagnose and treat mental disease. The very proliferation of somewhat contradictory theories of the mind suggests that nineteenth-century mental science was an ever expanding field and a highly inconclusive course of study, what Ekbert Faas describes as a “a record of perennial problems” (12). Theories of mental science (and melancholy) are reminiscent of theories of the domestic: they are attempts at a stable orthodoxy that in fact overlay a moving ground (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 6).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, we find a range of meanings and indicators attached to the term “melancholy,” revealing a profound degree of uncertainty and variability in the medical understanding of the condition. In their

very attempts to stabilize the meaning of the human nervous condition, many Victorian accounts of nervous sensitivity (both medical and literary) reveal “a fundamentally unstable conceptual framework” (Vrettos 12). Janet Oppenheim suggests that the instability of nineteenth-century nomenclature for doctors specializing in mental pathology reflects ongoing uncertainty about the specific nature of diseases of the mind (27). Maudsley will write in 1867 that the classification of conduct as either maniacal or melancholic “is very much a matter of caprice or accident” (320). However, this definitional indeterminacy is productive, rather than limiting, for the disagreement about the nature of melancholy further highlights the era’s rather vexed consideration of the nature of “woman”: in attempting to stabilize categories of character, and failing, Victorians inevitably reaffirmed the complexity of human experience.

The understanding of melancholy or melancholia in our own century has been most profoundly influenced by Freud who himself continued this long-standing fascination with melancholy in Western thought. Building on Burton’s earlier notions of melancholia as the experience of sadness and sorrow out of proportion to the triggering event, Freud suggests in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) that melancholy is that state of remaining “endlessly mired” in desire for the lost object. Freud states that the melancholic displays “an inability to see clearly what it is that has been lost” (Freud 245). In contrast to the normative function of mourning, melancholy is a “pathological disposition” (243), for the melancholic never successfully mourns his or her lost object of desire. Frozen in a previous time, unable to forget, the melancholic knows “*whom* he has lost but not

what he has lost in him” (245).⁴² This concept has been profoundly influential for literary and social theorists with interests in the intersection between psychoanalysis and the representation of modern life. Walter Benjamin, Judith Butler, and Slavoj Žižek among others have embraced Freud’s notion of melancholy, exploring how its expression marks the experience of modernity.⁴³

The Victorians were intrigued by the melancholic who suffered from “shattered nerves” or “sprained brain,” as it was popularly termed.⁴⁴ Although the definition of melancholia, or the state of being melancholic, had changed little since Burton wrote about the condition in 1621, the variance within the condition’s symptoms continued to perplex and fascinate mid-century Victorian medical doctors. In the Victorian period, as in Burton’s time, melancholy was characterized as an experience of fear and sorrow that seemed out of proportion to the precipitating cause or in certain instances, without cause at all. In his 1830 text *An Inquiry concerning the indications of insanity*, John Conolly describes melancholy as a “state in which nothing in the prospects of the world gives pleasure or affords hope” (248). Melancholy produced persistent and seemingly unalleviated emotional suffering most often expressed as despondency, disinterest in friends and family, and lethargy. *Why* the brain exhibited such symptoms and *how* they could be permanently alleviated remained a subject of much debate, however, as mid-century Victorian alienists struggled with a limited knowledge of brain chemistry and physiology. Compelled by what they saw as the crippling, “turned-inward, self-preoccupied tendencies” of the melancholic (Griesinger 273), alienists remained convinced that this condition of extreme introversion

could and should be treated.⁴⁵ Otherwise, melancholy would devolve into the much more serious condition of *melancholia*, a disease marked by delusions and raving, and even suicidal impulses.⁴⁶ Because melancholy could precede other more serious mental illnesses, it was not *merely* sadness, then, but a precursor to chronic madness and therefore belonged to a cluster of syndromes that included hypochondria, anorexia, puerperal mania (what we might now call post-partum depression), and hysteria.

Though physiological explanations for melancholy become increasingly important throughout this period, John Barlow suggests in 1849 that insanity could strike anyone who for a moment lessened his or her grip on their self-control. To that end, Victorians were encouraged to be forever *en garde* against the surging of passion. Of this, Barlow writes “it would be well for the world if the *soi disant* sane were sometimes to ask themselves how far their sanity would bear” (35). Victorians predicated psychological normalcy, then, on the individual’s ability to engage in deliberate acts of self-restraint that promoted their projection of a socially-acceptable public self (Shuttleworth *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* 38). Dickens and the Brontës take up a paradoxical notion of self-restraint, emphasizing that the melancholic is capable of self-control that is not unlike that expected from the sane. In fact, it is through the melancholic’s profound self-control that she expresses proper feminine behaviors in public despite her private torment. To that end, she disguises the depths of her suffering through pathology. Melancholics, then, transform pathology into a strategy of normal social participation.

In some sense, Victorians themselves were aware of this slippage between sanity and illness. Wilhelm Griesinger, for one, notes in 1867 that the conditions of mental disorder that preceded pathological melancholy, such as hypochondriasis, are essentially emotional disorders which leave the intellect *unaffected*. He writes “in spite of this emotional disorder and of the false conceptions, the association of ideas is usually unimpaired; the abnormal sensations and ideas are logically connected throughout, justified by reasons which are still within the bounds of possibility” (Griesinger 210). In other words, “the powers of comparison” (Conolly 227) that typify sanity remain unimpaired in melancholy, such that the lingering grief, disappointment and feelings of worthlessness and rejection that flow from melancholy find their origin in reasons “within the bounds of possibility” (Griesinger 210). The novels of my study take up this paradox, as each protagonist comes to locate the genesis of her melancholy in her protracted, but *accurate*, assessment of the limitations of her lot. Thus, recognizing the profundity and veracity of the insights they gain about middle-class life, which they share in only limited ways with those around them, each melancholic develops a measure of emotional and intellectual autonomy. Each of these texts suggests melancholy as a reasonable response to oppression, thus querying its characterization as pathological. It is this, perhaps paradoxical, relationship between melancholy and insight that exemplifies the Victorian understanding that selfhood was situated neither in inner impulse nor in outer social behavior but in the self-conscious awareness of the disjunction between the two. Though melancholy was considered pathological in medical work of the era,

the novels of my study do suggest it as a reasonable and rational private response to the impositions and strictures of public life, and draw this conclusion from the contemporary medical understanding of melancholy in their moment of writing.

Melancholy in these novels therefore contrasts sharply with Martineau's characterization of the Victorian invalid. Though she suggests in *Life in the Sick-room: Essays by an Invalid* (1844) that among the "gains and sweets of invalidism" (197) we find the "extinction of concern" about "the ordinary objects of pursuits" (203) and the "abolition of . . . our own future in this life" (Martineau 203), the melancholic characters I will explore remain extraordinarily focused on the exigencies of their lives. They understand they must placate their father figures, pacify their mother figures, please their lovers, sew, play, and worship. In more pessimistic terms, their "gains and sweets" include a profound introspectiveness and a terrifying clarity about the circumscribed and isolating conditions of their domestic lives. As a result, they emerge as bifurcated characters, as social beings performing the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, all the while privately railing against the doubts and fears brought about by the revelation of the hopelessness of their prospects. Melancholy brings forth this fissure between social and private states of being.

Moreover, as Kucich has shown, repression, in a Victorian sense, augmented and vitalized emotional autonomy, rather than threatening or suppressing it (*Repression in Victorian Fiction* 3). Although I resist the terminology of "repression" in my analysis, for I believe it draws upon psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious which do not yet figure in

Victorian theories of the mind, I do argue that melancholy fostered an augmented, private life of the mind that served to individuate the melancholic from those around her. Melancholic female characters possess a private, autonomous self that separates them from their family and community. Though they continue to suffer emotional isolation, varying degrees of estrangement from their families, and faithlessness in their prospects in the world, melancholics experience intensely profound moments of clarity and self-introspection in their melancholy which they most often choose to keep private. These novels thus illuminate the ways the melancholic employs introversion as a strategy of self-definition to produce a *heightened* sense of self-awareness. Because they are repressed, even made secret, the melancholic's private and exclusive emotional experiences are rendered more intense and more central to self-definition than any form of inter-personal experience (Kucich *Repression in Victorian Fiction* 2). If we consider melancholy in these particular novels as a valuing of "silenced feeling over affirmed feeling" (3), as a refusal not of emotional awareness but of emotional expression, then melancholy becomes a technique for enhanced individuality.⁴⁷ Above all, my work pressures the characterization of melancholy, within medical science of this era, as a *singularly* debilitating condition in need of cure.

And yet, Victorian alienists felt cure was a necessity and so, to treat melancholy, they prescribed regimes of cold baths and long walks and insisted upon the importance of congenial social participation. Termed "moral management," this method of treatment relied upon the patient's inculcation into proper forms of social behavior. Moral management emerged as a benevolent

alternative to the “whips and chains” of former times and Victorian alienists lauded its efficacy and its humanity. Barlow, in particular, recounts cases of “maniacs . . . roused to a certain degree of self-control by a system of kind and rational treatment” delivered by “wise and good men” (Barlow 1).⁴⁸ In other words, within the stable and highly regulated pseudo-family structure of the asylum, one governed by a paternalistic guardian, those suffering from mental illness would first imitate and then spontaneously express socially appropriate behaviors of restraint and moral rectitude (Showalter 17-18). In this, they would be cured or, as in Dickens’s observation of the London asylum, learn at least to stifle their weird “vacant” laughter.⁴⁹

The reform of asylums and the inculcation of moral management theory arose in the mid-century nineteenth century through the work of Evangelical reformers such as William Wilberforce. Evangelical values determined the kinds of behaviors deemed proper within asylum life. Early Evangelicals sought to reinvigorate Christian piety, envisioning human life as “an arena of constant moral struggle, resisting temptation, and mastering desire” (Adams *History* 6). These values reappear within moral management as the indices of sanity for they were, concomitantly, the features of a proper Christian domestic life. In his 1843 text *On Man's Power over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity*, Barlow writes of individuals “cured” through the acquisition of a self-control that mirrors those values of resistance and mastery so important to Evangelicals. Barlow notes a patient seemingly able to control the progression of her disease through modifications to her behavior, stating “for I have an instance where the patient,

feeling that the brain was escaping from her control ... maintained an obstinate silence, that no irrational word might pass her lips. None could doubt this patient was sane, and exercised a complete self-control in the midst of structural disease” (Barlow 36). Moreover, Barlow states that a patient’s restoration results from “habits of punctuality, order, and decorum” that produce in the patient a feeling that they “act as other folks do” (86). The distinction between sanity and mental derangement, therefore, rested entirely on the individual’s ability to maintain surface control and to direct his or her emotional energy into acceptable social channels. The primary goal of this rehabilitative system remained the control of anti-social behavior (Gilman 84), which emphasizes the interaction between notions of mental and domestic propriety.

In his 1817 text *Considerations on the Moral Management of Insane Persons*, John Haslam suggests that female insanity could *only* be treated with true propriety by the medical profession within this moral management scenario (Shuttleworth *Charlotte Bronte and Victorian Psychology* 43).⁵⁰ Haslam envisages a state of female dependency where medical science and the “decorous manners” of its practitioners would engender confidence in female patients such that the doctor would become “the friend of the afflicted and the depository of their secrets” (5).⁵¹ Taking over the role of the priest, the medical man’s physiological training and educated eye and ear would give him access to the depths of the female patient’s mind. In this, female submission becomes a means to sanity, linking once more the notions of a proper domesticity and a robust mental state. This sense of scientific (and therapeutic) omniscience is of course

picked up in the psychoanalytic practice of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, proponents of moral management endorsed standards of conduct that demanded docility, submission to authority, and the performance of gender-specific tasks.⁵² Elaine Showalter notes that “the ladylike values of silence, decorum, taste, service, piety, and gratitude, which Conolly successfully imposed on even the wildest and most recalcitrant female maniacs, were made an integral part of the program of moral management of women in Victorian asylums” (Showalter 79). If thrift, sobriety, and piety were the prescribed virtues of this period, and the family was their central institution, moral management reasserted the primacy of these virtues within medical science (Williams *The Long Revolution* 78-80). Moral management methods directed towards the mentally ill reflect an overarching concern in the mid-Victorian period with how to construct the “family” as a site of cure for what ailed the individual. In other words, the consideration of how to regulate the mentally ill invariably provoked questions about how to regulate the family.

Victorian alienists at mid-century worked with theories of womanhood drawn from a multitude of textual references and used these to inform their consideration of the mentally ill woman. Certain predominant characteristics of women’s “nature” do emerge in the work of prominent Victorian alienists such as Conolly (1830), Barlow (1843) and James Cowles Prichard (1837).⁵³ Each emphasizes the inextricable link between psychology and physiology, often suggesting that it is her reproductive energies that most directly influence a woman’s mental stability.⁵⁴ Here, the characteristics of the “angel in the home”

become synonymous with female sanity. The sane Victorian woman expressed emotional self-restraint and passivity, a demeanor that reflected her purity and, most importantly, the asexual nature of her maternal instinct. The determining factor in the success of the family was the mother's proper moral and spiritual rearing of children.⁵⁵ On that note, Lewis suggests that "the most powerful of all moral influence is the maternal" for on "the maternal character, depends the mind, the prejudices, the virtues of nations; in other words, the regeneration of mankind" (21). Although Conolly states that the great majority of women recovered from mental illness, it was unlikely if the patient had "inherited a predisposition to the malady" (425). Thus, those individuals rendered "slaves" rather than "masters" of their animal nature had their "uncultivated childhood," and their mothers' failures, to thank (Barlow 13).

Thus, in the 1830s and 1840s, we find significant moral considerations flowing from the figure of the female melancholic whose suffering foregrounds Victorian anxieties about the stability of hearth and home. Notably, nineteenth-century medical literature often suggests that female melancholy can be conclusively explained as the consequence of specific, external causes such as love sickness, religious fanaticism, pregnancy, and excessive or diminished menstruation, all attributable to disturbed elements of home life, be they romantic or maternal in nature.⁵⁶ Mental illness, criminal vice, and alcoholism destabilized the family in troubling ways, and a mother with mental illness undermined catastrophically the propriety of the bourgeois Victorian family for she embodied not the emblematic virtues of moral righteousness but the degenerative symptoms

of mental imbalance.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the melancholic woman, with her secretive and highly introspective life of the mind, complicates an understanding of the “knowable” community of wives, mothers, and daughters not only because she deviates from what is expected of the Victorian woman, but also because she embodies the community’s most fearful belief about the nature of women, namely that they are driven by volatile, passionate excesses that forever threaten to surface. The realist novels of the 1840s tap into a sense that female melancholics have the capacity to *use* their illness as a means for resistance in ways that male melancholics will not. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a powerful narrativization of this point, bringing forward concerns about how women at mid-century might actualize their demands for heightened political and legal standing. Implicitly, there exists concern that mental illness suggests a defiance of normative domestic behavior that in some measure reflects the consequences of women’s emancipation.

When men and women had similar symptoms of mental disorder, medical science differentiated between “the English malady” (associated with the intellectual and economic pressures endured by highly civilized men) and women’s “insanity” (the result of excessive and volatile female energies and sexuality) (Showalter 7).⁵⁸ Armstrong suggests that the novel itself played a role in transforming political differences first into gender differences and then into differences of personality and from this, we can determine how madness came to be gendered. Armstrong writes:

As gender came to mark the most important difference among individuals,

men were still men and women were still women, of course, but the difference between male and female was understood in terms of their respective qualities of the mind. (*Desire and Domestic Fiction 2*)

We encounter a desire to elevate male melancholy to refinement and debase female melancholy as pathological. These attributions of cause raise questions about the presence, in mid-century Victorian medical literature, of an institutional desire to discipline or contain radical female bodies and an implicit assumption that women's bodies are somehow more easily read than male bodies.⁵⁹

Current critical work on Victorian melancholy that takes up this gendering of the disease ignores the uncertainties present within Victorian mental science and underestimates the significance of female melancholy within Victorian debates about the nature of middle-class life.⁶⁰ Furthermore, whether diagnosed as “melancholic” or not, women were the subject of an intense medical and scientific scrutiny. Female bodies “stock the annals of medicine” with data and case histories that determine pathology and degeneracy (Bernstein 18), although male sexuality (and therefore the male body in general) seems to supply the tacit, normative, and implicit standard within medical literature. My dissertation, however, does not attempt to reclaim melancholy or melancholia as a women's disease. Rather, my interest lies in an exploration of how these particular works of realist fiction, in ways exemplary of other contemporary realist fiction, explore the introspection and self-awareness that this experience engenders so as to illuminate the era's debates about the “condition” of middle-class life.

Dickens's essay on the London asylum gestures towards the *limits* of moral management and pressures the confidence with which mid-century Victorians approached this strategy as the preferred treatment for mental illness by focusing on the performance, rather than the actual embodiment, of these behaviors. By the 1840s, although attitudes of punitive rehabilitation had been somewhat tempered by a spirit of altruism, the treatment of a variety of mental illnesses still demanded that patients conform to rather ill-fitting modes of social behavior to affect their "cure."⁶¹ Dickens's account suggests that while mentally ill Victorians no longer endured the carceral treatment of eras past, they continued to suffer disciplinary methods that policed their bodies and controlled their behaviors in rigid (if less physically abusive) ways.⁶² This disciplining was not unlike that endured by children, servants, governesses and young boys at boarding school, as Charlotte Brontë makes clear in *Jane Eyre* (1847), Anne Brontë foregrounds in *Agnes Grey* (1847) and Dickens asserts in *Hard Times for These Times* (1854).

After the 1850s, we encounter a shift away from a consideration of madness as the failure of self-control. From the 1860s onwards, Maudsley and others considered madness unavoidable due to its hereditary quality and almost plague-like presence amongst the lower, vice-ridden classes. Theories of degeneracy, alongside a slippery blurring of the lines previously drawn between mental illness, criminal vice, and social ills, figured those with mental illness as a reprobate class, unable to be cured and more than likely destined to enact their illness in criminal behaviors that would be inherited by their progeny. This notion

of hereditary “taint” is prevalent in the sensation novels of the 1860s, where characters such as Lady Audley identify themselves as afflicted by the inherited madness of their mothers. Conolly’s theories of moral management begin to lose favor, as overcrowded asylums, economic crisis, and increasingly destabilized social institutions come to exemplify the rather more pessimistic as opposed to hopeful philosophies of treatment (Shuttleworth *Charlotte Bronte and Victorian Psychology* 37; Showalter 18).

In conclusion, texts of melancholy work through many of the traumatic epistemological questions raised in Romantic-era poetry, where “the struggle to locate the subject in the world ... is also an epistemological problem ... of not knowing or being able to comprehend [the subject’s] position” (Faflak 4). In some sense, melancholic characters comprehend all too well their subject position. Florence Dombey, Caroline Helstone, and Helen Huntingdon, are not merely accidents of the social system, and by this I mean that they are not simply characters who through misfortune and misadventure find themselves isolated and alone. Melancholy in these novels does not emerge spontaneously or for an indeterminate reason, like a disease or a contagion might. Rather, it is the result of cruel, violent, and emotionally volatile domestic circumstances and the unkindness and inconstancy of family members. The “work” of melancholy in these novels is indebted to a burgeoning sense, at mid-century, of the tenuousness of the “Elysium of liberalism” upon which the sanctity of the domestic hearth was based (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 9).

Questions about the idealization of the domestic sphere and the figure of “woman” foreground a sense of uneasiness and unevenness within the development of Victorian middle-class society. Melancholics emerge as “lonely exposed figures” (Williams *The Long Revolution* 85) who signal the presence of weakness within an overarching structure of social progress based upon the authority of science and the benefits of industrial and technological change guiding the ascendancy of the middle-class at mid-century. The female melancholics of these narratives carry “an irresistible authenticity” (85) as a result of their melancholy, because their sense of profound suffering “remains immanent within the text as a part of a nature that will not go away” (Faflak 3). While many critics explore the representations of fractured modern life in later Victorian novels, such as the imprisoning biological cycles of Hardy’s fiction and the undercurrent of social anarchy present in Joseph Conrad, there is much to be said about the female melancholic character as a figure of modern alienation in *mid-Victorian* texts. In her estrangement from the social that emerges alongside her profound reckoning of the conditions of middle-class life, the melancholic speaks the language of “lonesomeness and longing” that will come to define “the isolated self of the modern era” (15). Williams suggests that “man, alone, afraid, a victim” is the enduring experience of the Victorian era; I suggest the melancholic female character is one of the sites where this anxiety coalesces.

All in all, these novels acknowledge what late Victorians would come to know about the 1840s. J.A. Froude, in 1882, would capture a sense of the mutable

social and intellectual landscape that marked the period depicted by *Dombey and Son* in particular:

It was an era of new ideas, of swift if silent spiritual revolution ... All were agreed to have done with compromise and conventionalities... All round us, the intellectual lightships had broken from their moorings.... The present generation which has grown up in the open spiritual ocean and has learnt to swim for itself will never know what it was to find the lights all drifting, the compasses all awry, and nothing left to steer by but the stars (Froude *Carlyle's Life in London*, qtd. in Tillotson 125).

The melancholic represents that past generation of the 1840s, inundated with transformation, drawn to modes of productive instability, but as of yet unable to resolve the quandaries produced by “swift” revolution. She is a figure “broken from [her] moorings” who, like many of Dickens’s and Brontë’s readers, must begin to swim for herself in a world where the compasses (like those of *Dombey and Son*’s Captain Cuttle) are not merely awry but irrelevant. Condemned to a form of non-liberating self-consciousness, the female melancholic chooses to reify the codes of the known to alleviate her agony, but in so doing, signals their tenuousness.⁶³

Chapter 3: “The freedom of the mo[u]rning”:

Melancholy and the Daughter in *Dombey and Son*

The one quality on which woman’s value and influence depend is the renunciation of self ... women are to live for others. (Lewis *Woman’s Mission* 50)

In a letter dated July 27, 1848, Dickens writes to one of his most intimate female friends about the melancholic quality of “remembrance”:

I don’t know how it is, but the ideal world in which my lot is cast has an odd effect on the real one, and makes it chiefly precious for such remembrances. I get quite melancholy over them sometimes, especially when, as now, those great piled-up semicircles of bright faces, at which I have lately been looking—all laughing, earnest and intent—have faded away like dead people. They seem a ghostly moral of everything in life to me. (*Letters of Charles Dickens* 5: 378).

For Dickens, there existed an “ideal” world separate from that of material, real things but, as he suggests in this letter, this “ideal” casts an “odd effect” on the “real” rendering it somewhat inseparable from that of the imagined or the dreamed (Bowen 4). In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens works out one version of this “odd effect” by contrasting family ideality with very real family disintegration. His female protagonist, Florence, engages so intensely with the world of family ideality that it becomes more “real” to her than her lived experience but even

more importantly, over the course of the novel she comes to appreciate how far her “real” life diverges from the “ideal.” Particularly, she becomes acutely aware of how much she has disappointed her father because she is a girl child rather than a boy, and a fretful, shy, rather meek girl at that. She emerges “quite melancholy over” (Dickens *Letters* 5: 378) this state of affairs and the estrangement between herself and her father. Desperate to mitigate this familial alienation, Florence develops a profound measure of self-control that enables her to hide the depths of her despair and the magnitude of her discontent from him. She submits to her father’s demands in an effort to produce a very proper Victorian subject-hood that she hopes will appease him. This drive to understand and display the qualities of propriety becomes the “moral of everything in life” to her. Thus, Dickens’s narrative becomes an engagement with the Victorian cult of domesticity that comes into being through his female protagonist’s melancholic state.

The novel’s dramatic action circles around Florence Dombey’s desire to be the beloved daughter of the family home, after both her mother’s and her brother’s tragic and untimely demises leave her the sole feminine influence in her family home. Florence wants nothing more than to deify her father as the Master of her home and in exchange, bask in his fatherly benevolence and affection but she is unsuccessful at creating this tranquil scene of loving and reciprocated relations in her home because her father has no intention of bestowing love or affection upon her. She is a daughter, rather than a son, and therefore has no value to him. She is worthless, “a piece of base coin that couldn’t be invested” (*Dombey and Son* 13). As a result, when she seeks her father’s attention and affection, the

“swelling” of her “overcharged” heart (42-43) seems to overwhelm him, confuse him, and even disgust him. But when she moves noiselessly and breathlessly through the halls of the family home at night, disturbing nothing and speaking to no one, or trembles and weeps while her father and step-mother Edith argue, Florence seems in some measure to satisfy her father’s expectations. In these moments, Florence mimics the demeanor of the proper Victorian daughter, relishing her performance for the stoic approval it seems to bring forth from her father. Importantly, she comes to understand “propriety” through her experiences of melancholy, for in her melancholy she learns to suppress the excesses of her emotion, that seeking and beseeching that Dombey finds so abhorrent, to project instead a proper vision of “the daughter of the house.” In some sense, she is most proper when she is most melancholic.

However, melancholy also affords Florence an arresting vision of her middle-class woman’s lot, namely, that her value within her family is utterly dependent upon her father’s whims and predilections. As she realizes her devalued state, Florence is consumed with a sense of her failure as a daughter, one that seems to flow from the failures of her mother. Though Florence attempts reconciliation between herself and her father, and works to mitigate their estrangement through an imagined life where father and daughter express love and affection for each other, Florence eventually realizes her commitment to this “ideal world” has obscured her recognition of her father’s callousness. As a result of the isolation and seclusion of melancholy, Florence comes to realize that she will *never* be that proper daughter of the house and eventually, acknowledges that

she does not want to be. The cost of propriety is too great an investment, for it demands that she accept and submit to physical violence at her father's hands. Melancholy affords Florence a vision of her father's "cruelty, neglect and hatred" (721) and the ways she has been "orphaned" (721) by his persistent disregard. In this realization, Florence becomes capable of rejecting her father's authority and fleeing his home after he attempts to beat her into submission. In other words, it is her melancholic pathology that enables her most significant act of autonomy and self-determination. Melancholy in *Dombey and Son* reveals, therefore, Dickens's complex exploration of how a Victorian woman might conform to, in order to escape from, a family home marked by violence and cruelty. Here, melancholy provides a release from the cult of domesticity and dispels its hypnotic quality in order to reveal the "real" of middle-class life. *Dombey and Son* evokes private psychology, framing it through a condition of melancholy, so as to demonstrate one instance of the weakening of seemingly intractable social and moral bonds governing Victorian family life. This aspect of Victorian private life is one that Dickens will take up again in *Bleak House* (1853) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).

Dickens's concern with the "the daughter within the patriarchal house" (Schor 49) draws upon the discourse of domestic ideology circulating in this era. While he does not detail these ideologies specifically, through the lens of melancholy Dickens launches his own inquiry into the character of Victorian private life. Dickens uses melancholy as a means to clarify the structures governing Victorian private life, not so much to critique them but to expose their contradictions. The novel takes up the realist project of assessing interiority, in

this case both of the mind and of the home, so as to draw conclusions about the social systems that governed middle-class life. In this, the reader will discover the home in shambles, but importantly, a mind that is anything *but* disordered. Steven Marcus suggests that the past, as a burden, is the crucial source of the sense of “crisis and division” that Dickens reaches in *Dombey and Son* (356-357) and though it has become a classic statement on the novel, I would suggest that it is in fact the burdens of the *present* that determine much of the strife in this text.

The novel considers the changing social character of the 1840s but also changes in the individual and the ways in which these two realms are co-determinant. *Dombey and Son* thus foregrounds Dickens’s conflation of the social and the psychological (Epstein Nord 284), an engagement he will continue to explore in all of his later novels, most notably *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* (1853), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). *Dombey and Son* displays a concern with psychology missing from Dickens’s earlier texts such as *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844). Psychology, as Adams suggests, is associated with the forms of interiority that are characteristic of high Victorian realism (“Reading with Buzfuz” 237). *Dombey and Son* is the first of Dickens’s novels to foreground social criticism through an exploration of the psychological.

Though critical work on the novel often insists upon Florence’s angelic and submissive qualities in contrast to the energy of the novel’s masculine figures, I contend that Dickens’s representation of melancholy dispels the notion “of Florence as a passive [and] victimized sexual object” (Aikens 77). Rather, as Florence engages in purposeful retreats from reality, submitting to “psychic forces

that overwhelm waking rationality” (Adams *History* 60) and “cast an odd effect on the real” (Dickens *Letters* 5: 378), she experiences a psychological alienation akin to that found in melodrama’s depiction of criminals and other personas who threaten the moral order. But if Florence, a supremely sympathetic (and moral) protagonist, bears this same sense of psychological depth, we then can locate the transformation of Dickens’s narrative project from the melodrama of the 1830s novels to the realism that will mark the rest of his literary career when he focalizes his narrative through her. This is to say that when Florence holds “free communication with her sorrows” (*Dombey and Son* 283), Dickens’s representation of melancholy suggests a connection between the psychological and the ethical that will emerge as the “aesthetic touchstone” of the realist novel (New 33).

Florence Dombey experiences a condition of persistent and unalleviated sadness that reflects both a popular notion of melancholy and medical conceptions of the disease current in the 1840s. No medical doctor attends to her, and she is never institutionalized, but she clearly exhibits symptoms of some kind of depressive disease. Throughout the text, Florence yearns for emotional intimacy with her father (and eventually a husband, Walter), longs for spiritual guidance from her long-dead mother and then a mother surrogate, and aches for a communion of souls with her lost, beloved brother, but *never* experiences any satisfaction of these desires and this disappointment leaves her utterly subdued and isolated. Importantly, Florence is unable to express her longings in any meaningful way and they remain a function of her private, solitary musings. As a

result, Florence's melancholy arises in her unwavering pursuit of ideal relations that are continually thwarted, continually shown to be impossible. Moreover, Florence is invisible *and* dramatically present in her father's house, spending countless evenings fixated on the ways in which her father neglects her and wandering and weeping in solitude throughout her father's house. At first, she envisions a life where affection between a father and daughter might flow without condition, but as she comes to realize that her father will never love her and importantly, does not *want* to love her, Florence holds "free communication with her sorrows" (*Dombey and Son* 283). This signals her turn to melancholy.

Florence's state of abjection arises in her recognition of the fracture in the bonds between father and daughter that she feels *should* be whole and loving. Her melancholy is thus an affective response to her father's neglect. Dickens describes Dombey as a man without "one touch of tenderness or pity" or "one gleam of interest, parental recognition, or relenting" (284). Dombey does not, therefore, take up the notion that his daughter's depth of emotion flows from heightened sensitivity or refinement, but instead, rejects the "swelling" (283) emotions of her melancholic state. Florence experiences a deep sadness as she contemplates the incommensurability between her ideal of family life, one in which her father would recognize and cherish her love for him, and her lived experience, a life where her father can barely conceal his disdain towards her. She immerses herself in melancholy, as "the void in [her] own heart began again, indeed, to make a solitude around her" (706). Melancholic introversion fascinated Victorian alienists of the 1840s who regarded an individual's desire for protracted solitude

as a pre-condition of the disorder. Etienne Esquirol, in 1845, characterizes melancholy as a mental disease of turning inward, a psychological state wherein the suffering individual experiences a shift into introversion so profound that they come to live “*within [them]self*” (*Mental Maladies; a treatise on insanity* 320). In my estimation, Florence epitomizes that state of living “within”—in fact, it is how she withstands and negotiates, initially, her father’s abuses.

Dickens’s depiction of Florence’s melancholic state is therefore particular to the ideological work of gender in the 1830s and 1840s. For one, the novel engages with Victorian theories of the maternal, demonstrating how mothers (and then their daughters) are lauded or chastised depending on their capacity for emotional restraint and self-control. Then, it considers the qualities of proper daughterhood and the ways melancholics might, in fact, mimic that propriety through their introversion. In this, Dickens’s depiction of melancholy is one that diverges somewhat from medical conceptions of the period that characterized melancholy as a wholly destructive, debilitating and isolating condition.⁶⁴ Rather, the novel explores the melancholic’s ability to repress the depth of her emotional experience so as to project a proper vision of themselves in public that enables some form of social participation. Moreover, Dickens relies on certain tropes of womanhood to construct his tale, but his exploration of melancholy foregrounds the tenuous cultural “norms” of femininity and femaleness. *Dombey and Son* makes clear how the domestic ideal teetered on the verge of disintegration because of the very ubiquity and over-determined quality of its ideological investments. Melancholy is the lens through Dickens views this erosion of the

ideal, for Florence only grasps the cruel and brutal quality of her family life once she is most fully melancholic. Only through the rejection of the ideal is she able to pursue the “freedom” (*Dombey and Son* 721) beyond the locked doors of the family home and experience, for a moment, some measure of autonomy.

Throughout the text, the profundity of Florence’s emotional life remains transparent to the reader through omniscient third-person narration. In this, Dickens captures the moral and ethical investments of his protagonist’s inner life. In *Dombey and Son* there is no separation between the private conflicts within the family and the deeply personal psychological suffering borne by the individual. Though Dickens takes up the cult of domesticity, in some ways further promulgating its defining qualities, he also stages the daughter of the house in the throes of emotional agony *because of her family*. In this dovetailing, Dickens gestures towards a complex and tangled relationship between the institution of family and the private experience of self-hood. *Dombey and Son* explores the fraught, often fractured relationships between fathers and their children, exposing how the private domestic sphere serves not as the cure that mitigates the ills and instabilities of the public commercial world but rather, as a source of unending grief and anxiety. The depiction of Florence’s melancholy represents the “profound complexity of Dickens’s project” (Walder xxii), namely that one could reify the centrality of the domestic sphere through an insistent and unabated depiction of its inadequacies. *Dombey and Son* is a text that exalts the family while it drips with criticism as to the family’s innate limitations. In this way, Dickens’s critique of family draws forth contradictions in the condition-of-women

debates as well: one could be most supportive of enhanced political and legal standing for women, yet at the same time, note with resignation the very difficulty of achieving that freedom on behalf of middle-class women.

Thus, as James Kilroy notes, it is in *Dombey and Son* that Dickens most fully foregrounds so as to interrogate the ideology of the family.⁶⁵ Dickens pressures, even if implicitly, any emphasis on the family's purely recuperative qualities (Kilroy 84) and in this, launches the same type of social critique present in his 1852 asylum essay. Though we do have positive representations of family life in *Dombey and Son*, particularly in Dickens's characterization of the Toodles and the relationship between Uncle Sol, Captain Cuttle and Walter, these seem, as John Lucas suggests, scenes of family life very much under threat by a new world order marked by commercial and technological expansion (Lucas 149). Though one of the determining characteristics of the realist novel is its overarching interest in searching out "What connexion can there be?" (*Bleak House* 256), in *Dombey and Son* the realist novel in fact exposes the "illusion" of connectedness within the family, despite Florence's never-ending attempts to solidify these connections.⁶⁶

Though Dickens's narrative focus rests squarely on the representation of Florence's melancholic suffering, she is only one melancholic in a story world abounding with sad, alienated characters. *Dombey and Son* begins, as do many Victorian novels, with the death of a mother and much of the melancholic tone in this text is first established through the pathos of this scene. Mrs. Dombey's introduction (and immediate elision from the narrative) pulls readers into a world

of regret and loss and initiates the “momentum of sadness” that will carry his protagonists through the novel’s hundreds of pages (Tillotson 36-37).⁶⁷ Depicting Florence as the living heir of her mother’s emotional and physical failures, Dickens draws upon ideologies of mothering and the “ideal” of maternal virtue central to the cult of domesticity at mid-century and insists upon the primacy of the mother within the sanctified sphere of family relations.

Dombey Senior perceives a fault line of womanly weakness running through the family line, from mother to daughter particularly, and it is one that threatens the tenuous stability of the family home and its fortunes. The opening chapters detail the Victorian family home bereft of its wife-mother, without the figure capable of calming the stormy waters of the family hearth. Paradoxically, her absence foregrounds her centrality within the home fetish of this historical moment, for though Florence and Dombey Senior are a family, they are only a fragment of that household idyll without the mother’s presence. But it is not only her absence that is troubling, for Dickens explores the ways the maternal could be *other* than a virtuous influence in the home when she was in fact present. In other words, Florence’s melancholy is forged out of the mental weakness bestowed upon her by her mother, one that exacerbates the terrible relationship that exists between daughter and father. The shared intimacy that exists between mother and daughter at the start of the novel, which excludes Dombey Senior, will serve to augment Florence’s sense of difference from him once she is fully melancholic. Though Mrs. Dombey disappears from the text in its opening chapter, her legacy

(and its potentially destructive qualities) remains central to the narrative as a whole.

In *Dombey and Son*, the condition of women is less about their access to labor or educational opportunities (as it will be in *Shirley*), and less about the augmentation of their legal rights (as it will be in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*), and more so a consideration of a woman's role within the *emotional* economy that governed the Victorian private sphere, one particularly focused on the role of the mother. Florence threatens her family's stability with her potential for excessive emotion, a feature she inherits from her mother. Throughout the text, she is an "informant, or public statement, of [her mother's] guilt" (Shuttleworth "Demonic Mothers" 37). For Victorians of the 1830s and 1840s, theories of melancholy do not yet fully reflect the anxieties about hereditary predisposition, hereditary taint, and degenerate madness that will emerge in the later Victorian period. As such, readers of the novel would not have expected a pronounced consideration of this aspect of the story as they might have in the sensation novels of the 1860s and it remains a feature of the narrative that Dickens does not work out fully. However, the novel toys with the notion of hereditary taint transmitted through the mother, thereby problematizing how we might read the tableau of family happiness at the novel's conclusion. This consideration of the maternal is therefore important not only in terms of plot, but because through it Dickens dovetails the condition-of-women question with theories of mental regulation.

Dickens's notion of the maternal speaks to a specific vision of the proper middle-class mother and successful middle-class home disseminated in advice

manual literature at mid-century. Sarah Lewis, for one, argues that “the most powerful *moral* influence in the family is that of the mother” (21) and she is particularly emphatic about the importance of a mother’s moral influence on her sons, merely expecting that mothers “engrave” upon their sons’ hearts “such an image of feminine virtue and loveliness as to make it sufficient for him to turn his eyes inward in order to combat evil” (6). Stickney Ellis, in *The Mothers of England*, suggests that “If ever, then, the care of a judicious mother is wanted, it is in the opening feelings of a young girl, when branches of the tenderest growth have to be cherished and directed” (343). Thus, the instructionist ideal of conduct book writing, growing out of the Evangelical movement of the early nineteenth century, places the responsibility for domestic harmony and success squarely on the mother’s shoulders. Through this rhetoric women are called into being, both subjects of and subjected to a discourse that renders them not merely “good” or “bad” mothers, but also “good” or “bad” women.⁶⁸ Caroline Norton writes in 1833 that “the character of the mother of a family is about as safe as the life of a brooding dove from a hungry hawk” (243). In this, she taps into a cultural compulsion to vilify mothers as culpable for any divergence from domestic ideality.⁶⁹

Though her narrative time is brief, Mrs. Dombey serves as *the* source of psychological weakness in the text. Her fragility is juxtaposed against the robust fertility of Polly Toodles, who acts as Paul Dombey Junior’s wet nurse after Mrs. Dombey’s demise. Her death recalls nineteenth-century concerns that physical and mental “degeneracy” within the middle class would impede industrial

progress (Shuttleworth “Demonic Mothers” 33).⁷⁰ Medical texts in the early nineteenth century suggested that “the increasing prevalence of nervous disorders” had the potential to “sap our physical strength of constitution ... and ultimately convert us into a nation of slaves and idiots” (Trotter xi). William Buchan, in 1809, argues that a mother who allows her feelings for her offspring to run to excess might produce an undesirable “relaxing effeminacy” in her offspring (qtd. in Shuttleworth “Demonic Mothers” 43). Chase and Levenson assert that during the mid-century “a vast machinery” of household behaviors became “proud weapons of the middle-classes in their struggle against those on either social flank” (*Spectacle* 12). By the 1840s, the value of work and an insistence upon a relationship between individual effort and success had become central to the English middle-class character (Williams *The Long Revolution* 77). Mental fortitude emerges in the 1840s as the index of an individual’s commitment to bourgeois ideologies, which included one’s commitment to the success of the family.⁷¹ As the century progresses, middle-class women, with their languid airs and nervous ailments, are “increasingly singled out as the prime culprits of this feared decline” (Shuttleworth “Demonic Mothers” 34). All of this suggests that mid-century Victorian demands on maternal conduct required a woman to regulate her emotions and protect herself from mental disturbance throughout her everyday life and *especially* during pregnancy in order to produce those captains of industry so central to England’s economic ascendancy.⁷²

In the novel’s opening chapter, Mrs. Dombey does not put forth the “effort” (*Dombey and Son* 22) her family circle deems necessary—in other words,

she dies. In this scene, *Dombey and Son* speaks to the emphasis in medical literature of the 1830s and 1840s on the importance of restraint and the inextricable link between a woman's psychological and physical well-being.⁷³ Because Victorians predicated the proper functioning of the subject on the judicious use of energies, sanity was linked to the control of one's sexual urges, physical appetites, and importantly, emotional expression. This system of physical and psychological discipline found its origins in economic theory of the period. As Sally Shuttleworth notes, Victorians increasingly figured their systems of commercial and economic exchange in terms of energy (Shuttleworth *Charlotte Bronte and Victorian Psychology* 36). Wastefulness, a lack of restraint, excess, and erratic expenditures were deemed harmful to the political and commercial economies, and thus, the body (as a pseudo-economic engine) had also to conserve and put to "proper use" its own energies. The human body and mind were seen to benefit or operate most optimally through conservative, and therefore stable, expenditures of energy. Men were encouraged to exercise self control such that they would conserve their energy and thus uphold and promote the healthier functions of the male body and by extension, the healthy functioning of the nation's economic body as well. Women were expected to express an emotional restraint that reflected the pureness, and most importantly, asexual nature of their maternal instinct. Though Mrs. Dombey's death does not reflect a failure of emotional restraint, it does suggest an inability to properly direct physical energy, namely towards taking up the role for which women are destined: motherhood.

Arguably, Mrs. Dombey's death, albeit not necessarily as a result of mental illness, gestures towards a certain weakness of character present in the family which will become central to Dickens's consideration of Florence's melancholy. Mrs. Chick, Dombey's sister, laments Mrs. Dombey's failure in this regard, noting Mrs. Dombey lacks the "effort" (*Dombey and Son* 21) required to survive the fatal complications of Paul Junior's difficult birth. She states "I hope this heart-rending occurrence will be a warning to all of us, to accustom ourselves to rouse ourselves and to make efforts in time where they're required of us" (22). Effort is not merely necessary, then, but a "duty" required for family success (22). Though her statements are ridiculous, Mrs. Chick articulates the "great and painful ... world of effort" (22) required for women to fulfill their maternal roles properly.

Though middle-class women were for the most part shut out of the commercial or political economies of the era, they were central to the *home* economy in which emotion was the currency. As will come to see, Florence therefore has value when her emotion is kept in check, when she does not overspend that currency. Eventually, Florence will recognize that her value is determined by the ways she spends or misspends her affection, by the ways her emotional transactions deviate or replicate those of her mother. As she is dying, Mrs. Dombey cradles Florence in her arms, and upon the child crying "Mama," Dickens writes the "little voice [Florence's], familiar and early loved, awakened some show of consciousness" (21). The bond between them is clear, but there is also a sense that Mrs. Dombey's love is ill-spent for she is "roused" (22) or

“awakened” (21) by the sound of her daughter’s voice, but then cannot be roused to fulfill her duty to her new baby son, the heir to the family line. This suggests a faulty expenditure of maternal energy on Florence, a misdirection of emotional funds of which Florence will be similarly guilty later in the text in the ways she expresses an excessive (and undesired) level of affection for her father. Dombey punishes Florence for her mother’s mistake in this regard, correcting his wife’s excesses by offering nothing but coldness to his little girl. This strategy to re-balance emotion within the home produces a deep and seemingly incurable psychological rift between father and children. Florence’s melancholy results, to a certain extent, from her recognition of the ways her father deliberately withholds his affection, a feature of their relationship that is juxtaposed implicitly with what Florence experienced, if only for a time, with her mother. The lonesomeness that marks Florence’s experience of adolescent melancholy arises out of the ways she is alienated from her father’s affection while still a child and the juxtaposition between her loving relationship with her mother and the estranged relationship that exists between Florence and her father.

These considerations of emotion, restraint, and a mother’s duty reflect how an early to mid-Victorian women’s most important social act was to learn how to tame and then suppress the volatile, passionate qualities of her sexual, uterine self in order to be a good mother. Early to mid-Victorian medical writing therefore emphasizes that women must steadfastly exert self-control over their emotional lives because they are plagued by an almost maniacally willful sexual drive. Subject to the inconstancy of their uterus, women were thought to tremble,

continually, on the brink of an excessive flood of affect, one that was linked metaphorically to the cyclic flood of their menstruation (Poovey 7). As a result, women were believed to be more vulnerable to insanity than men (Showalter 7) and to express insanity in particularly feminine ways. In one illustration of this commonly held medical attitude, J.C. Bucknill and Daniel Tuke note in their text *A Manual of Psychological Medicine* (1874) that uterine disorders, and suppressed or irregular menstruation, accounted for ten percent of all female admissions to asylums (104), suggesting explicitly that a woman's poor reproductive health had dire consequences for her mental stability.

A woman's tenuous hold on her sanity was thus dangerously indebted to the proper functioning of her sexual organs. To have one's menstrual energies interrupted, blocked, stalled, or absent threatened a woman's already precarious mental health, even though the very presence of these energies determined her susceptibility to mental unevenness. While self-control and the retention of energies (namely a prohibition against masturbation) marked a man's *good* health, the absence of excess (however problematic excess might be) marked a woman's *ill* health (Shuttleworth "Medical Discourse and Popular Advertising in the mid-Victorian Era" 60). In this we can locate the paradox of Victorian femininity or, put less elegantly, the inherent contradictions present in Victorian theories of women's mental health. If women could become mentally unstable through the expression of their reproductive selves, they could be rendered similarly emotionally, mentally, and affectively unstable if they did *not* menstruate, did not produce children, or did not perform sexually in their marriages. Thus, in medical

and psychological texts from the 1830s onwards, the proper expression of affect is both linked to the excesses *and* the suppression of a woman's sexual self. There remained latent anxiety over the seeming conflict between a sort of necessary excess *and* its harmful effects. Self control was figured then as the curative to the necessary excessiveness of the uterine economy, but only in so far as women did not repress these urges and duties entirely. *Shirley* addresses this contradiction and its protagonist's melancholy emerges from her recognition of this paradoxical quality of femininity. In *Dombey and Son*, Florence's negotiation of excess and restraint reflects both her refinement but also her highly over-developed nervous system.

Additionally, a feminine woman was not, therefore, defined as the subject of a man's desire, but rather seen as having a supportive function in establishing *his* identity as the subject of desire and as Father. Power Cobbe calls it "The types of Woman, considered as an Adjective" ("The Final Cause of Woman" 6) and in *Dombey and Son*, we explore the fractiousness that flows from a daughter's inability to provide that adjectival support for her Master. Though it is a fleeting portrait, Dickens depicts Mrs. Dombey's relationship with Florence as loving, and through this, positions Dombey outside this sphere of intimacy. He is a mere spectator, excluded from their shared familiarity and depth of feeling. Their embrace suggests an intimate relationship between women that exists beyond his control or comprehension. Later in the narrative, Dombey will ruminate upon that sad embrace between mother and child, one that he "could not forget that he had had no part in" (42). In some sense, Florence's intimacy with her mother is her

first act of individuation from her father, although she could not intend it to be so in the moment. In other words, the intimacy between mother and daughter catalyzes Dombey Senior's suspicion of Florence and his mistrust of her motives, thereby emphasizing his sense of her difference from him. Florence's identification with Edith, Dombey Senior's second wife, serves as yet another reminder to Dombey of female relations in which he can take no part. That intimacy bears a value of which he can take no measure. Of course, Florence resists Dombey Senior's control in ways even more explicit once she is fully melancholic, but this later estrangement find its genesis in the original, intimate act between mother and daughter from which Dombey is excluded.

Dombey Senior's suspicion of Florence, his distrust of intimacy between women, and the death of Mrs. Dombey so early in the narrative cast a dark light upon what is, seemingly, the indomitable Dombey family home. Though the text describes her as her mother's "spar" (*Dombey and Son* 21), Florence is also her father's "spar", aggravating and prodding him forward with her demands for an affection that comes with specific terms. He is thus troubled not only by the fact that Florence desires his love and attention, but also for the particular way that desire must be met. In other words, though Dombey Senior suggests "The whole house is yours above there ... You are its mistress now" (285), Florence wants only to be its daughter, rejecting the role her father feels she must assume in favor of the role she *wants* to perform. Absent a mother who would cleanse the male (and his hearth) from the contamination of the brutal masculine public world, it is Florence who should take up this role but it is one she resists, not in defiance of

her father but in an effort to inject the “daughter of the house” with a different kind of value.

Unlike Jane Eyre, who yearns for occupation and purpose and even adventure, Florence laments her failure to secure value and significance within the circumscribed parameters of her family home. Like Caroline Helstone in *Shirley*, Florence mourns failed family ideality. This is to say that Florence does not lament her inability to augment the sphere of her public influence or extend the reach of her citizenship. Rather, she mourns her inability to render her hearth a “snug equilibrium” where parents and children experience reciprocity, trust, and civility (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 9). An orphan in experience if not in fact, Florence emerges as a radically placeless figure, a motherless and “fatherless” child who nevertheless, and persistently, seeks to be the cherished daughter of the house.

Dombey views Florence as a wasted child, “a piece of base coin that couldn’t be invested” (*Dombey and Son* 13) and he rarely wavers from that pejorative characterization. Their relationship is torturously awkward, marked by half-spoken conversations and nervous glances across empty rooms. But despite her father’s neglect, Florence continually reaches out to her father, longing to infuse their brief interactions with some fondness and care. However, Florence only seems to further aggravate her father through her continuous pursuit of more affectionate and intimate relationship with him. Dombey reflects “She had been unwelcome to him from the first; she was an aggravation of his bitterness now” (312). In a way, Florence further diminishes the Dickensian household idyll

through her pursuit of its conditions. Her almost devotionally “pure” (274) love for her father mimics the ideal of father-daughter relations, but Dombey’s “indifference and cold constraint ... casts a shadow on her head” (284-285) that dispels any potential reflection of the ideal. As she comes to realize that daughters (and women, for that matter) hold no significance within the Dombey home, Florence becomes increasingly despairing and disheartened. Her melancholy emerges in the recognition that she is place-less within her home, but importantly that that she was always and already without value in the Dombey family exchange, that significance never did adhere to the role of the daughter.

To mitigate, Florence Dombey delves into a contemplation of the “ideal” that comes to cast, as Dickens writes, “an odd effect on the real” (Dickens *Letters* 5: 378). Though Florence knows she is rendered rather powerless by the masculine authority that governs her family structure, the recognition of this fact becomes obscured in the ways that “ideal” family relations become more real to her than the actual interactions between herself and her father. Dickens’s narrative suggests, therefore, that the melancholic contemplation of one’s lot produces clarity about middle-class life that must be repressed in order for the melancholic to survive this fraught domestic scene. This is captured in Florence’s turn away from the real into a world of fantasy and imagining, a shift into psychological insularity that augments Florence’s life of the mind as opposed to diminishing it. Importantly, her world of fantasy is kept secret from her father, thus solidifying that measure of autonomy and individuality that marks the melancholic state. Otherwise, Florence exhibits a profound measure of self-control as she disguises

her pain and her despair and submits to her father's demands in ways that deify his presence within the home. Thus, melancholy produces a very proper Victorian subject-hood, for Florence remains the subservient daughter subject to her father's control, while at the same time enjoying a measure of intellectual autonomy as she develops a rich, private life of the mind.

Thus, Florence's melancholy emerges in the realization that her father will *never* love her as she desires, but also in the knowledge that their relationship was ever *only* failed with respect to this ideal. In other words, Florence's protracted, melancholic grief flows from her troubled relationship with her father, but the reader must note that it is a relationship that was *only* ever marked by estrangement and a lack of affection. While it may seem Florence has *lost* her father's love, and that this is the cause of her melancholy, in fact, her relationship with her father is marked by the *absence* of love. Florence feels this absence as loss, but in truth the emotion governing their relationship is constant and immutable estrangement, not the shift from loving relations to distant ones. Florence's melancholy is therefore experienced not in contrast to a previous satisfaction or fulfillment but rather as the persistent and ceaseless reminder in the present of a fullness that never was. Florence longs not for some *lost* past, for some formerly satisfying time of harmony and security with her father that she hopes to re-create, but rather, she longs for a father-daughter relationship that has never been and never seems even on the cusp of being. In other words, Florence's melancholy results from her willfully giving over to a phantasmatic primal scene

even as she continually recognizes the impossibility of returning to that scene. Melancholy is Florence's response to impossibility, not to loss.⁷⁴

In that sense, Dickens anticipates Freud's "scene of psychoanalysis built around a past trauma necessitating a cure" (Faflak 4) but transforms the scene, uncannily, such that it represents a trauma *that never was*. The cure for Florence's melancholy will not arrive through reconciliation between Florence and her father, for their relationship is not one that has gone through traumatic upheaval. Rather, Florence is "cured" when she realizes that estrangement and alienation form the abiding conditions of her relationship with her father. Melancholy thus affords Florence the recognition that middle-class life, and the life of the "daughter of the house" will be (and for her, must be) *otherwise* than the "ideal." This seems obvious, for Florence should realize the impossibility of the ideal in each fraught and disappointing interaction between Dombey and herself. However, it is through melancholy that Florence realizes family failure *not* as an aberration but as omnipresent, *not* as a deviation from the norm but as *the* norm of family relations however hard it may be to endure.

Melancholy thus makes family suffering "immanent within the text as a part of a nature that will not go away" (Faflak 3), "nature" referring in this instance to the "nature" of family life. This is Florence's melancholic revelation and it is a "secret which she [keeps] within her own young breast" (*Dombey and Son* 276) over the course of the narrative. In other words, through her melancholy, Florence becomes acutely aware that her desire for paternal (and sadly, maternal) love will never be fulfilled because the terms that govern her lived experience

prohibit the satisfaction of her desire. Thus, Florence's clarity about the actual (and fraught) structure of families is made possible through her experience of melancholy and importantly, it allows her to eschew her father's control and escape from his abuse at the conclusion of the text.

To mitigate the tragedy of this clairvoyant vision, however, Florence engages in protracted explorations of the ideality of family life built upon her observations of "families in their sacred separate spaces" (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 8). Chase and Levenson write that "One of the abiding activities of mid-century life was the production of family tableaux" (7), a notion which informs their consideration of the "spectacle of intimacy," and Florence is similarly invested in the production of family ideality as spectacle:

Why did the dark eyes turn so often from this work to where the rosy children
 lived? They were not immediately suggestive of her loss; for they were all girls:
 four little sisters. But they were motherless like her – and had a father. ...
 When he had dined, she could see them ... cluster around the table: and in the still summer weather, the sound of their childish voices and clear laughter would come ringing across the street, into the drooping air of the room in which she sat. ... The elder child remained with her father when the rest had gone away, and made his tea for him – happy little housekeeper she was then! ... he made her his companion. (*Dombey and Son* 276)

Dickens writes “[Florence] would turn, again and again, before going to bed herself ... back to that house” (376), finding profound significance in its spectacle of wholeness and companionship. That she “turns so often” (276) to this tableau of family suggests her obsession with private life, an obsession shared by many Victorians who pursued, at mid-century, that cliché of domestic delight. This observing, as Dickens suggests, “[becomes] the purpose of her life” (354), for it enables Florence to inject the “real” qualities of the “tableau” family’s intimacy into the *imaginary* relations that govern *her* family home. Her father’s “hard, unresponsive regard” (286) is exchanged, imaginatively, for one of affection and consolation; she becomes his “companion,” his “happy little housekeeper” (276) in the same ways as the daughter across the street.

Florence experiences this imaginary world as vibrantly real and provocative and perhaps even *more* spectacular and dramatic than the tableau of family ideality she has observed:

Yes, she thought if she were dying he would relent. She thought that if she lay serene and not unwilling to depart, upon the bed that was curtained round with recollections of their darling boy, he would be touched and would say ‘Dear Florence, live for me, and we will love each other as we might have done, and be as happy as we might have been these many years!’ She thought that if she heard such words from him, and had her arms clasped round him, she could answer with a smile, ‘It is too late for anything but this; I never could be happier, dear father!’ and so leave him, with a blessing on her lips. (384)

Her melancholic imaginings seem delusional in some sense, for they suggest a connection between Dombey and Florence that in no part reflects the actual terms of their relationship but at the same time, they are the means by which Florence can possess her father, even if only in an imagined sense.⁷⁵ This fantasy restages the terms of her mother's death, with Florence substituted for her mother and, unlike her mother, "unwilling to depart." Anne Cheng asserts that "the melancholic must deny loss as loss in order to sustain the fiction of possession" (9) and in some sense, Florence's imagination *is* the denial of loss for through it she imagines that she will one day re-emerge as her father's preferred and beloved daughter despite the fact that she *never* held this value for him.

Though the death-bed scene is a fantasy, for it asserts a connection between Dombey and Florence that in no part reflects the actual terms of their relationship, it serves a very productive end. It is more than a mere "coping" strategy for a daughter experiencing profound feelings of estrangement.⁷⁶ Rather, through Florence's recurrent contemplation of the substance of family ideality she is able to construct some semblance of a proper relationship between herself and her father, namely, one that exalts her father's place in the home and demotes her own. Dickens describes Florence's "one absorbing wish to be allowed to show [her father] some affection, to be a consolation to him, to win him over to the endurance of some tenderness from her, his solitary child" (*Dombey and Son* 276) and how, to that end, "she would have knelt down at his feet" (276). In these almost ritual-like encounters, Florence explores the limits of her desire for her father's love which she expresses in terms that deify him. Through this fantasy,

Florence is able to sustain momentarily the fiction of her proper Victorian daughterhood and family life through this imaginary drama.⁷⁷ In other words, Florence explores what it means to be a daughter through the emergence of *imaginary* exchanges between herself and her father that in some ways replicate the interactions of the family across the street but are, ironically, much less harmonious and much more archetypal than the family tableau that serves as her instruction.

Though Florence's experience of the melancholic realm of "airy forms" (706) is overwhelmingly sorrowful, the dutiful daughterhood she constructs for herself within these imaginings remains her most significant vision of herself as a woman. Though marked by an insistence on the primacy of the father's place within the home, this vision of proper womanhood becomes, for a time, the lodestar of all of Florence's hopes. Dickens's representation of melancholy therefore suggests a quality of propriety in the condition that contests Victorian notions of melancholy's aberrance. Florence, like Agnes Wickfield in *David Copperfield*, Lizzie Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend* and Amy Dorrit of *Little Dorrit* (1857), is a faithful, Victorian daughter *throughout* her experience of melancholy and it is the nature of Florence's melancholic imaginings that allows Dickens to characterize her as such. What Florence seeks is a "way out of her family's drama of counterfeit love" (Dumm 14), first with her brother, then with Edith, and throughout the text, in ultimately dissatisfying forms with her father and *not* some kind of rebellious form of defiance. In other words, melancholy serves as the

driving force behind Florence's desire to *fix* her family, to repair the destruction wrought by her mother and brother's deaths.

Florence's love, though undesired and unreciprocated, never wavers and in this, the novel asserts her devotion to the dominant, and domineering, patriarchal figure ruling her home. Writing that "nothing wandered in her thoughts but love – a wandering love, indeed, and castaway – but turning always to her father" (*Dombey and Son* 283), Dickens suggests that Florence's steadfast devotion to her father is made possible *only* through her entrance into a melancholic state, one which allows her to hold in her mind both the pain of rejection and the yearning towards resolution. Arguably, melancholy in this instance seems to *preserve* some semblance of a relationship between father and daughter in contrast to a state of cynicism that would destroy the family. It is one vision of the way melancholy could render women ever more capable of managing the domestic sphere. At the same time, the narrative suggests that the devotion required of proper women requires their pathologization, a troubling characterization of the consequences of patriarchal governance.

Florence expresses a profound measure of self-control throughout her melancholy, one that allows her to conform to behaviors that exemplify proper Victorian womanhood. Recognizing that her only hope for value in the home is to please her father, Florence adopts a demure and fawning demeanor when in his presence. Her first experiences of melancholy, therefore, catalyze a determined imagining of daughterly devotion, and not rebellion or resistance (as they will at the novel's conclusion). Dickens therefore represents Florence as a character

seemingly aware of the obsessive nature of her need to commune with her father and step mother, almost ashamed of the intensity of her desires, but except for very fleeting moments, able to repress the secret of her longings. Preferring to bear her sadness in private, Florence's domestic performance conforms to the expectations of daughterly restraint that Dombey holds so crucial to preserving the structure of their home. In this, *Dombey and Son* constructs a vision of daughterly submission and compliance that, seemingly, conforms to every stricture of domestic conduct book ideology:

Thus living, in a dream wherein the overflowing love of her young heart expended itself on airy forms, and in a real world where she had experienced little but the rolling back of that strong tide upon itself, Florence grew to be seventeen. Timid and retiring as her solitary life had made her, it had not embittered her sweet temper, or her earnest nature. A child in innocent simplicity; a woman in her modest self-reliance, and her deep intensity of feeling; both child and woman seemed at once expressed in her fair face and fragile delicacy of shape. (706-07)

In every sense, Florence is a proper girl, for she expresses the “modest self-reliance,” “sweet temper,” and “earnest nature” so indicative of desirable femininity. She possesses a “deep intensity of feeling” indicative of her heightened moral capacity, but her “overflowing love” is “rolled back” upon itself (or hidden) in the “real world.”

But with that said, Florence's profound capacity for self-control does not negate her emotion, but in fact, allows her to *conceal* a “deep intensity of

feeling.”⁷⁸ Lewis writes in 1839 that “the one quality on which woman’s value and influence depend is the renunciation of self” (50) and in some measure, melancholy affords a profound experience of just this kind of renunciation. Mid-century Victorians conceived of the proper feminine in relation to a woman’s ability to deny the excesses to which she was prone. Victorian women were encouraged to self-regulate in such a way as to minimize their emotional response, drawing attention to their affective responses only in the most socially appropriate moments. Victorian constructions of femininity tended to cast women in supporting roles: “women—seen primarily as sensitive, emotional, passive, intuitive and imitative—were believed capable only of transmitting or nurturing ... as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters” (Battersby qtd. in Casteras 11). Florence seems profoundly aware of this connection between passivity and propriety. Her awareness flows from her melancholic recognition of the parameters of the daughter’s proper domestic role. In this sense, her successful self-renunciation and denial of her emotion arises as a strategy to win over her father’s approval. She continues to live “in a dream wherein the overflowing love of her young heart expended itself on airy forms” (*Dombey and Son* 706) but conceals that world from her father so as to be a proper offering to him.

Florence seems aware of the social value of concealment, for in the moment where Edith and Dombey Senior engage in their most horrific argument, Florence remains silent. When Edith suggests Florence leave them, in an effort to protect her from their vitriolic encounter, Dombey insists she stay, stating “she should know what conduct to avoid. At present you [Edith] are a very strong

example to her of this kind, and I hope she may profit” (710). Florence obeys, of course, “hiding her face in her hands, and trembling” (709). When the scene becomes too violently oppositional, Dombey bids her leave, and Florence “with her covered face obeyed, trembling and weeping as she went” (711). In the face of her parents’ violent argument, it must seem reasonable to Dombey Senior, even socially acceptable, that Florence would tremble and cry. One wonders if in fact Florence chooses this behavior as part of her never-ending attempt to please her father. Thus, the narrative makes clear Florence’s ability to restrain her emotion but in ways that her affirm her “sensitive” and “passive” character. That she trembles and weeps demonstrates her knowledge of the particularities of proper gender performance. That she “obeys” her father represents, in my estimation, Florence’s acknowledgement that it is not the *expression* of emotion that is inappropriate but rather, it is the excessive, inappropriate, and arguably *public* expression that is improper.⁷⁹ This realization, on the part of a melancholic female character, arises similarly in Charlotte’s and Anne Brontë’s texts.

Here, Dickens suggests how melancholy in fact enables Florence’s participation in an otherwise un-navigable family scene, recalling my earlier assertion that pathology preserves the family rather than destroys it. Through her experience of melancholy, Florence can both weep unrestrainedly over her failures as a daughter while in private *and* “pursue her strong purpose” (436) of making herself a valued and proper daughter while in her father’s company. Florence’s melancholy allows her to be “no longer divided between her affection and duty” (706). She can both explore the limits of unrequited love in private, but

also exist, publicly, in “modest self-reliance” (707). She thus expresses “difference without difference.” There is, then, both a proper and an improper form of female melancholy.⁸⁰

Florence’s “madness,” arguably, enhances her faculties of “comparison,” a notion of cognitive stability upon which medical authorities of the era founded their theory of sanity. In his *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity* (1830), Conolly suggests that “man is mad” when “the passion so impairs one or more faculties of the mind as to prevent the exercise of comparison” (227). Likewise, Barlow suggests in *On Man’s Power Over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity* that the difference between the sane and those with mental derangement is that the sane “retain the power of comparison” (11). She is aware that there is no “resting place” in this home for her “overcharged” emotion (*Dombey and Son* 42-43) so rarely, if ever, expresses the depth of her feeling whilst in her father’s presence. In other words, she behaves like those who have “sense” rather than like those who are deranged (Barlow 11). Arguably, Dickens charges his protagonist with a psychological insightfulness that serves very productive, psycho-social ends for her melancholy advances her recognition of how “the daughter of the patriarchal home” (Schor 49) might navigate this life. We must note that Florence is mostly unsuccessful, for her father remains chillingly neglectful, but these strategies of compliance render her less abrasive to her father than Edith who rejects self-renunciation in favor of more audacious forms of defiance.

Although Florence's melancholy allows her to pursue those qualities associated with "the angel in the house," she emerges at the same time as a figure who cannot turn away from a recognition of her family's dysfunction, in much the same ways that she could not resist the "spectacle of intimacy" across the street.⁸¹ Contrasting the happiness of the children across the street with her own despair, Florence comes to see family relations, and the love between a father and daughter, as a social phenomenon (Schor 57). Moreover, she realizes that family relations structure social life, but that it is a system from which she is excluded for she is hardly the treasured daughter of the house and more so a valueless "base coin" (*Dombey and Son* 13). Florence's melancholy is thus an ethical drive, for it promotes her willingness and her desire to dwell on the qualities of Victorian private life and the way she is governed by their strictures. Though Maudsley suggests that the melancholic's predilection to isolation produces a "profoundly miserable" sufferer who "shuns society" (374), Florence exists both isolated and deeply engaged in a "study" of social life. She does not, therefore, experience a "vast and formless feeling of profound misery" (374), but rather a sadness that can be attributed to specific causes. Florence comes to realize the immitigable estrangement of her family scene and *this*, not the whimsical nature of her uterus, is the cause of her suffering.

This ability to see her exclusion, to comprehend her difference, brings forward the experience of individuation and autonomy that will eventually support Florence's escape from Dombey Senior's control. Though I have suggested that she expresses a "difference without difference," in that Dombey

Senior has no inkling of the insights Florence draws from her family experience, Florence is markedly *unlike* her father and most of the time, physically separated from him. Dickens introduces this sense of Florence's difference in Dombey's willful ignorance of her distress, one that further promotes his daughter's placeless-ness within the home:

Had [Dombey] looked with heightened interest and with a father's eye, he might have read in her keen glance the impulses and fears that made her waver; the passionate desire to run clinging to him ... the pitiable need in which she stood of some assurance and encouragement; and how her overcharged young heart was wandering to find some natural resting place. (42-43)

Florence's melancholy thus remains a feature of her private, solitary experience, for Dombey regards the sufferings of his only child with very little interest. Despite her attempts to mitigate the effects of her "overcharged young heart" through proper behavior, she is always and already without a "natural" place to "rest" (43). She is always and already different.

Moreover, Florence remains physically separated from her father, barred in fact from his presence by the doors that enclose his private bedroom. She can only express the terms of her affection in the darkness of the night, crouched outside the immovable door that separates father and daughter. Dickens emphasizes her isolation and rather pitifully, the "cold" and "stony" quality of the exchange:

When no one in the house was stirring, and the lights were all extinguished, she would softly leave her own room and with noiseless feet descend the stair-case and approach her father's door. Against it, scarcely breathing, she would rest her face and head, and press her lips, in the yearning of her love. She crouched upon the cold stone floor outside it, every night, to listen even for his breath. (276)

In fact, this over-dramatized affection fact heightens her isolation and solitude within the home for Dombey never does open that door to her. As a result, Florence “lays her head upon her hand, and presses the other over her swelling heart” in such a manner that she holds “free communication with her sorrows” (283) but she does so in isolation, in the dark, without making a sound. This “freedom” lends a sense of *gravitas* to her emotional experience and serves as the fullest expression of her psychological and emotional self but it is one her father neither contemplates nor witnesses and it is one that leaves her even more dramatically alone.

Florence's experience of melancholic fantasy furthers her retreat from the “real” conditions of her family life. “[A]lmost believ[ing]” in the “pensive fiction” of these phantasms, Florence persists in conjuring this “enchanted” vision of reconciliation, rewriting the story of her fractured family into wholeness without regard for the ways her father thwarts this dream. Dickens emphasizes the importance of solitude to this conjuring, one borne out of the conditions of melancholy:

As if her life were an enchanted vision, there arose out of her solitude ministering thoughts that made it fanciful and unreal. She imagined so often what her life would have been if her father could have loved her, and she had been a favorite child, that sometimes, for the moment, she almost believed it was so, and born on by that current of pensive fiction, seemed to remember how they have watched her brother in his grave together.

(353)

Florence's world of imagined relationships comes to "feel" more real to her than her actual lived existence, such that she "almost believes" this vision to be so, almost believes it represents the life she has lived with her father. While her melancholy produces these intense experiences of imagining, it simultaneously creates an "insular dynamics of repression, wherein her private and exclusive emotional experiences are rendered more intense and more central to self-definition than any form of interpersonal experience" (Kucich *Repression 2*). Florence's imagined world proves more complete and ultimately more satisfying, for a time, than her "real" world relationships. In this, the experience of melancholy becomes a means for enhanced individuality and the expression of difference.⁸²

Thus, Florence's experience of autonomy, which is of course forged out of conditions of solitude, loneliness and isolation, *also* enables her to escape her father's brutal control in the novel's concluding chapters, thus re-casting the notion of Victorian introversion as invigorating as opposed to debilitating. This conception of melancholy diverges somewhat from most of the medical

characterizations of melancholy in this period, in the sense that mid-century Victorian medical writing characterizes melancholy as a mostly non-motivating subjectivity.⁸³ In 1847, Ernst von Feuchtersleben described the condition of melancholy as one where “the patient ... no longer pays attention to the world beyond his own idea; hence he is glad to glee society in order to indulge, in undisturbed solitude, the ungenial, irresistible impulse of his delusion” (276-277). It is clear that Florence indulges in the “impulse of her delusion” for a time, imagining herself as her father’s “happy little housekeeper” (*Dombey and Son* 276) and genial little helpmate, eventually, her melancholy *further*s in dramatic ways her recognition of the “world beyond her own idea” (von Feuchtersleben 276). In other words, Florence acknowledges most fully the “real” conditions of her family life in the moment Dombey strikes her:

In his frenzy, [Dombey Senior] lifted up his cruel arm, and struck her, crosswise,

with that heaviness, that she tottered on the marble floor; and as he dealt the blow, he told her what Edith was, and bade her follow her, since they had always been in league. (720)

Here, she grasps the “odd effect” her imagination has had on the “real” (*Letters* 378), that it has made innocuous her father’s neglect and cruelty. In this realization, Florence does not “sink down at [her father’s]’ feet” (721) as she imagined she would have. She does not “shut out the sight of him with her trembling hands” (721) in some attempt to conform to his expectation of proper daughterly behavior. Nor does she weep in this moment, as she does in other

highly charged episodes in the text. Instead, she “look[s] at [Dombey] ... [and sees] him murdering that fond idea to which she had held in spite of him” (*Dombey and Son* 721). She sees his “cruelty, neglect and hatred” and knows “that she had no father upon earth” and truly is “orphaned” (721). Here, Florence casts off her role as that “fond,” loving daughter who has been made a fond *fool* by her father’s disregard, to embrace what Dickens describes as “the freedom of the morning” (721). One wonders if Dickens attended the double entendre in “morning” and “mourning.” Florence thus replaces the “enchanted vision” (353) of her home, that “spectacle of intimacy” that placed her father as her rightful Master, with a new tableau of family estrangement where the imaginative investments of the cult of domesticity cannot figure. Her pathology is alleviated in the moment it produces its most critical insight, at the moment it allows her to grasp “the lock” that has held her, physically *and* ideologically, within the confines of Dombey’s home.

At once, Florence realizes she will never mitigate her devalued position in the family home. Grasping that hers has been a false bargain, that she has been the dutifully subservient daughter without receiving any paternal care or concern in exchange, Florence rejects this vexed family scene and turns in every way towards the “world” out there. In this sense, Dickens promotes melancholy as a productive psychological state for a middle-class woman that, in certain circumstances, enables their release from the brutal strictures of male control. The cure for melancholy, therefore, comes through a turn *away* from the imagined, through a rejection of her “fond” imaginings, and a turn *towards* the real of a

middle-class woman's existence, namely that fathers do *not* necessarily love their daughters and nor should daughters need not utterly devote themselves to fathers who are unworthy. Florence does not, of course, experience any joy in this turn away from her father, but this realization, borne out of her melancholy, does catalyze her escape from his home after their most physically brutal encounter. Her flight would be impossible if not for her melancholy. This feature of melancholy will emerge in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as well.

When she emerges from her father's home, Florence notes people "going to and fro" and the "rising clash and roar of the day's struggles" which contrasts so markedly with the silence of her home (722). Though she is "wild" with "sorrow, shame and terror," thus demonstrating that the "freedom" afforded by melancholy is anything but joyful, she is nevertheless "free." In her flight from Dombey's home, Florence finds "Refuge in the Midshipman's Arms" (723) as the chapter heading entitles it, suggesting implicitly that Florence's "freedom" involves the re-creation of family bonds with another man, or within the home of another man, in this case Captain Cuttle who will become her father-in-law. Thus, a middle-class woman's "freedom" remains rather circumscribed, for it inevitably remains dependent on the "gentleness" of the man in question (724).

Although Florence has found her "freedom," the melancholy out of which she forges this condition remains pathological—this state of radical placelessness and mental "sickness" must be resolved in the text. To that end, the pathologically melancholic daughter must go out into the world to locate another man who will give her value, this time as his wife, and thereby relieve the conditions that have

caused her melancholy in the first place. In other words, her father's "blow" (720) produces in Florence yet another realization, namely that she must abandon her world of imagination, nocturnal fantasizing, and unfulfilled and unrequited desires to embrace that which she has only reluctantly considered: that her only site of familial love will be to pursue Walter, or someone like Walter, in order to become a wife and mother. As such, Florence's cure signals her recognition that the "real" of a middle-class woman's life necessitates that she find a husband and this is exactly what she sets out to do. And expectedly, as Walter "takes" her to be his wife (821), the desires of her heart become a reality. Florence creates around her that tableau of family harmony she viewed across the street, inserting herself into that sphere of intimacy and snug equilibrium. The narrating voice describes her union with Walter in this way:

Blessed Sunday bells ringing so tranquilly in their entranced and happy ears!

Blessed Sunday peace and quiet harmonizing with the calmness in their souls and making holy air! Blessed twilight stealing on, and shading her so soothingly and gravely, as she falls asleep like a hushed child on the bosom she has clung to! (821).

Bearing the tone of an epithalamion, the passage celebrates the harmony created when a "tender" and gentle man" (821) marries and then shelters his infantilized wife, their joy extending beyond them out to the natural world. That Florence finds succor-like satisfaction with Walter is less of a fairy-tale rescue from suffering, and more so a reflection of the ways she is quickly encapsulated back

into forms of social organization governed by and dependent upon the character of men. Luckily for Florence, her marriage is to a loving and honest man. Neither Mrs. Dombey nor Edith Granger had such good fortune.

And so, submitting to the affection she has nurtured with Walter over the course of their adolescence, Florence marries him and has children, producing, *in reality*, the happy family of her imagination. In other words, Florence finds her way to domestic security once she rejects or casts off all of her previous strategies to secure a happy family. As the final scenes demonstrate, value adheres to a daughter only if she becomes a wife and a mother. Though many Victorian women did not marry, and instead had value within their families because they stayed to take care of elderly parents, within the story world of *Dombey and Son*, the production of an heir is the key to accruing value. In this sense, Dickens “cures” Florence not by sending her into the asylum, but by sending her into marriage. Notably, each scene bears similar ideological investments, for Dickens draws an implicit analogy between the dutiful, procreative wife (and daughter) and the pliant, “cured” asylum patient. It is an analogy that will recur in Charlotte’s and Anne Brontë’s texts as well.

Moreover, Dickens asserts that middle-class life at mid-century could not support melancholic (and therefore pathological) subjectivity. In other words, in the moment when Dombey “murders” Florence’s “fond” idea of families (721), Dickens “murders” the most prescient character in his novel: the melancholic. Florence’s “cure” signals the death of the narrative’s deeply feeling guide, one with whom the Victorian reading public would have experienced eighteen months

or more of “long familiar association” (Tillotson 33) but also, the one through whom the narrative focalized its most pointed critiques of middle-class life. The loss of the melancholic daughter and the recovery of the dutiful, cured wife signal that melancholy is useful for a time, but ultimately unsustainable if one desired that “Blessed Sunday Peace” promised to the good Victorian. In this, we encounter a sense that marriage, to a good man, is ultimately preferable to the autonomy of melancholic isolation, a feature of middle-class life that will be taken up in great depth by Charlotte Brontë in *Shirley*.

The conclusion of *Dombey and Son* is similar to *Shirley* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in that all three texts foreground the family’s redemptive quality. It is therefore difficult to reject the notion of the family as the scene of Florence’s restoration, for there is no question that she finds “a calmness in her soul” (*Dombey and Son* 821) both as a wife and then as a mother. Dickens relies also on the “recurrent tropes and formulae” (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 8) of family ideality to divest the narrative of its tensions. The novel’s final scene occurs at the seaside where Dombey Senior fawns lovingly over Florence’s children. The little girl asks “Dear grandpapa, why do you cry when you kiss me?” and to this, Dombey answers “Little Florence! Little Florence! and smoothes away the curls that shade her earnest eyes” (*Dombey and Son* 947). No longer a tyrant, Dombey Senior is now a gentle old man weeping over his foolish mistakes. Dickens goes so far as to describe Dombey as a “white-haired gentleman” (947), no longer the brute who shunned, neglected, and beat Florence, but now, a doddering old man whose only sin is fawning over his grandchildren. Moreover, because she

produces both a son and a daughter, Florence's procreative powers serve as the resolution to the Dombey family's disturbed lineage, one initiated by Mrs. Dombey's failures. Florence's healthy, smiling children (and importantly, her robust son) defeat whatever psychological (and physical) resonance remains of Paul Junior's failure as heir. Florence thus ensures the progression of the Dombey line, thereby easing the psychological strife triggered by Mrs. Dombey's death.

This scene, however, occludes the fact that the novel's most violent and most destructive moment sets the course for Florence's "cure." Though it would appear that Dickens has abandoned the narrativization of Florence's melancholic interiority so as to take up the representation of family harmony, he does so only to foreground the inherent *contradictions* at work at the conclusion of novel. For one, the Dombey family's reconciliation is forged out of Florence's rebellion, out of the "freedom" that Florence enjoys once she embraces her "orphaned" status. But for her rejection of Dombey, we can only wonder how long she would have remained locked within the cavernous halls of their family home, isolated from (and therefore unable to test her worth within) the marriage market. In other words, without her "freedom," Florence might never have produced that male grandchild, that heir who appears to smooth away all fractiousness between father and daughter. Dickens's text seems to suggest, therefore, that one must "break" the family before one can reconstruct it anew.

Moreover, critical interpretations of Florence's character and particularly, her union with Walter, indulge in oversimplification when they assert that their marriage represents nothing more than a mechanical plot element, contrived to

supply a pleasant ending (McDonald 1). Rather, Walter and Florence's union, and the shift from melancholy to marriage that it represents, gesture towards the limits of the realist novel in this moment. Williams suggests that the novels of the late 1840s still require a "magic" to postpone the conflict between "the ethic and the experience" (*The Long Revolution* 82). In other words, *Dombey and Son* can propose the ethical dilemmas at the heart of Victorian private life, and does so through the device of melancholy, but these dilemmas cannot yet be disentangled or resolved within a realist narrative that endeavors to reflect "life as it is." For example, Edith Granger, the text's most overtly rebellious and defiant wife, must "magically" retreat into the shadows. The narrative cannot yet "work out" her significance. Though the disintegration of the Dombey marriage signals omnipresent corruption in Victorian private life, Edith's meaning will not be fully taken up until such texts as *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *East Lynne* (1861) nearly fifteen years later. Similarly, Walter must "magically" re-appear in order to re-structure the text's intensely fraught domestic scene, ensuring that the novel concludes with "Blessed twilight" rather than "the darkness of a winter night" (*Dombey and Son* 821).

Williams notes that this "magic" serves as the simplest way of resolving the conflict between ethics and experience that arises in the realist novel, as opposed to any radical questioning of the system (*The Long Revolution* 84). More importantly, this "magic" gestures also towards the distance between the ethical (in some senses the "ideal") and the actual, lived experience of Victorians. We might characterize the novel's resolution as "consonant with ... the structure of

feeling” in this moment (84), namely, that there could be no resolution to the social problems of this time, even on an individual basis and particularly not for a melancholic female character, despite growing awareness of the *presence* of social problem and strife in private life. For the novel to construct a resolution between Dombey Senior and Florence outside of the workings of fate and “magic” would ring patently false. The narrative’s failure to assimilate both the “darkness” of Edith *and* of Florence indicates, as Kilroy suggests, the limits of familial ideology (and the limits of its recuperative power) in the realist novel of this moment (99). Thus, the conclusion of *Dombey and Son* hearkens back to the melodrama by which *Oliver Twist* is returned to his wealthy uncle unscathed and untainted, but unlike *Oliver Twist*, this text concludes with a scene of facile harmony that demonstrates the very pretense of its tableau. Florence’s protracted contemplation of the relationship between the “ideal” and the “real” engages the novel’s ethical considerations, thus gesturing towards its significance within the emerging realist aesthetic.

Overall, the narrative lingers on the disappointing quality of family life, one that intimates broader cultural and social disintegration as well. Despite its “happy” resolution, then, Dickens’s text is marked by pessimism about the role of wives and daughters within the middle-class Victorian family, most notably because of the text’s emphasis on maternal culpability and the failure of the maternal ideal. It also gestures towards the limited prospects for its daughters who, outside of the marriage market, have no other way to infuse value into their subject position. These are topics that will be taken up in *Shirley* and then, to a

certain extent, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In the next chapter, we will consider another melancholic daughter, one who is despondent not over a failed relationship with her father, but as a result of the realization that she has been rejected by her lover. Like *Dombey and Son*, *Shirley* represents the melancholic female character of the 1840s as a figure bearing an intensely private life of the mind that must be subordinated to a public performance of proper gendered behavior. *Shirley* explores the plight of the melancholic female character desperate to mitigate the incommensurability between her desire and the material conditions of middle-class Victorian life, yearning for love and attention, and crippled by the notion that her “happiness” is dependent upon her conformity.

Chapter 4: “Varieties of pain”:

Melancholy and the Redundant Woman in *Shirley*

The prisoner in solitary confinement, the toad in the block of marble, all in time shape themselves to their lot. (Smith *Letters* 2:232)

Charlotte Brontë’s consideration of melancholy in her novel *Shirley* is profoundly intertwined with concerns about superfluous women and the potential for violence and degradation in heterosexual marriage. In this, it shares the same concerns Dickens raises in *Dombey and Son*, but takes up these questions much more explicitly than does that novel. Over the course of the narrative, *Shirley*’s protagonist Caroline Helstone comes to realize that heterosexual marriage requires of women submission and subjection to the whims and inconstancies of male family members. However, she realizes also that there is no freedom outside of heterosexual marriage, for the autonomy “enjoyed” by the spinster and the governess is accompanied by myriad forms of suffering that include poverty, isolation, and social exclusion. She is devastated by the knowledge that the “life of the counting-house” (*Shirley* 216) and the solitude of spinsterhood are merely different, but equally “drear,” “varieties” of the same “pain” (216) experienced by married women. Over the course of the narrative, Caroline realizes that she is imprisoned by a middle-class life that offers no forms of personal fulfillment unaccompanied by some fetter or disappointment and becomes melancholic as a result. In this, Brontë’s narrative asserts that female melancholy does not arise

from a woman's particular susceptibility to physical and psychological weakness, but is in fact borne out of the restrictive conditions of a woman's middle-class existence.

Caroline becomes melancholic as a result of her extended contemplation of her "lot" (411) but rather than instigating rebellion, melancholy serves as the means by which she re-commits to the strictures of the cult of domesticity at the conclusion of the narrative. This complicated resolution refuses any sort of radical re-envisioning of the condition of women in Victorian England and seems so estranged from the vigour of the era's public debates about middle-class life that one might question the relevance of these debates to the narrative.⁸⁴ However, the work of melancholy is to draw forth this fissure between the private and public and as I will demonstrate, Brontë's depiction of melancholy focalizes her commentary on the "condition of women" despite her narrative's seemingly facile conclusion. Though much critical work on *Shirley* considers the novel's representation of invalidism, the significance of melancholy specifically has been largely ignored, an oversight I hope to rectify in the following pages.

Shirley thus explores what is often considered a central opposition in Brontë's novels, namely the conflict between the desire for romantic fulfillment and the drive for personal autonomy. The novel purports initially to champion an argument for the enhancement of female opportunity outside of marriage, but ultimately foregrounds the immitigable pain that results when a woman's romantic hopes are dashed and she must seek that "opportunity." In other words, though it appears that Caroline's melancholy is produced by her unfulfilled desire

for “occupation” (70), over the course of the novel’s opening episodes we come to see that it is Caroline’s unfulfilled desire for Robert Moore, for his love and affection, that is the central cause of her melancholy.⁸⁵ While Brontë’s melancholic protagonist does express a desire to participate in more public enterprises, such as assisting Robert in his counting-house or becoming a governess, this desire to find fulfillment in the public sphere emerges only when she realizes that loving communion with Robert is impossible. In this way, the novel does not so much affirm Power Cobbe’s assertion that marriage is “manifestly the Creator’s plan for humanity” (“Celibacy v. Marriage” 58) as assert that melancholy is the very earthly response women experience when they fail to achieve this divine state. Furthermore, Brontë’s novel suggests that spinsterhood, the alternative to the “divine” state of marriage, is entirely undesirable. In this sense, the novel narrativizes the question Martineau raises in “Female Industry” (1859): what was the result if women could not become mothers? What might they do? Like much of the writing at mid-century, *Shirley* offers little resolution for the “problem” of superfluous woman and complicates the dilemma by suggesting that industry is an unattractive alternative to marriage. And so, while Florence Dombey escapes from her abusive family scene as a result of her melancholy, Caroline’s condition cripples her. She is most proper, therefore, when she is most melancholic, for in the moment of her greatest psychological and physical suffering she realizes that the pursuit of female autonomy is a fool’s errand. While she might not be “her own mistress” (*Shirley* 259) when she is married, the life of the spinster is, perhaps even more than

marriage, a “deeply dreary ... forlorn... and loveless” (239) alternative unworthy of pursuit.

Whether single or married, every incarnation of female existence in *Shirley* requires a woman’s submission to male authority. Daughter-, wife-, and spinsterhood are merely different “varieties of pain” (216) arising from the same nefarious source: male authority and its cruel exercise. Of course not all Victorian men were nasty, just as not all Victorian women were virtuous, but in the story world of *Shirley*, men are despicable. As we will come to see, they torment their women, are inconstant and belittling. The novel thus affirms the depths of dissatisfaction and unhappiness present in Victorian private life and names the marital bed (either a woman’s presence in or exclusion from) as the source of this suffering. In this, *Shirley* gestures towards the limitations of the “separate spheres” doctrine, for the paradigm of domestic private life cannot accommodate all women in the novel yet all female characters remain subject to its strictures. *Shirley* thus pressures a notion that the political, economic, or even social changes emerging in the 1840s will be in any way liberating with respect to the particular emotional and social needs of afflicted individuals, for the novel offers no avenue for women to experience or achieve any kind of actuated autonomy. That Caroline is rendered mute in her melancholic spinsterhood, and then mute once again as a wife, signals the dearth of opportunities for women in this moment.

Brontë’s novel analogizes the suffering of unmarried middle-class women with no prospects on the marriage market to that of working-class men without options for employment within the labour market.⁸⁶ *Shirley* persistently aligns

middle-class women testing their value on the marriage market with workers facing similar restrictions in the marketplace. Foregrounding each group's dependence on the "benevolence" of the wealthy men in their community, Brontë indicts both industrial and marital relations as systems of social and economic control wherein wealthy men can exercise scandalous abuses of power. In this, Brontë transforms her text from a commentary on female melancholy specifically to an overarching statement on the inequities that plague Victorian life. While this chapter lingers on her representation of melancholy as a reasonable response to women's oppression, it is worthwhile to consider how Brontë's political position on both issues is co-determinate.

Much of the critical work on the novel's political significance typically focuses on its proto-feminist and pro-Chartist sympathies, noting Brontë's sympathetic treatment of each.⁸⁷ In Linda C. Hunt's estimation, *Shirley* expresses a deeply felt, if limited feminism (56) that builds its critique of middle-class culture upon parallels present between the condition-of-women debates and arguments for the enhancement of workers' rights.⁸⁸ I suggest that it is the suffering of women that grounds the narrative's social reform politics. Judith Mitchell notes that feminists frequently claim *Shirley* as an mid-century manifesto (160) and Margaret Blom calls it "the first major novel of the feminist movement ... [and] still one of the best" (160). Hunt asserts that Brontë's status as a superfluous woman herself determined her sympathy with women's restricted social and public position (22), one that finds expression in her attention to spinsters and governesses in all of her novels. I contend that the novel reserves its

most bitter and polemical critique for the cult of domesticity. To further elucidate her fictional work on the topic of superfluous women, this chapter will draw upon Brontë's personal correspondence on the issue, demonstrating that the vexed exploration of the "condition of women" question in her fictional work mirrors its treatment in her personal writing. Without question, Brontë's *oeuvre* as a whole reveals her profound and long-standing political engagement with the issue of "surplus" middle-class women and their meaning with Victorian middle-class society.

With that said, the novel, as well as Brontë's personal writing, reveals a "peculiar, alienating irony" (Glen *The Imagination in History* 145) that complicates any assertion of its wholly progressivist qualities. Mitchell suggests that "The tenor of the novel as a whole ... is sad, stressed and uncertain" (58).⁸⁹ As we will see, that same sense of "stress" emerges in Brontë's letters about superfluous women as well. All in all, this tone does not undercut an assertion of the proto-feminist qualities of either the text or Brontë's letters, for Whiggish sentiments are not a determining feature of feminism at mid-century, but it does emphasize the ways in which each body of writing lingers on a woman's conflicted (and at the novel's conclusion, unresolved) contemplation of romantic love and its consequences. Caroline Helstone, for example, proclaims outwardly the sanctity of marriage and her delight in the opposite sex, but expresses inwardly a distrust of passion and suspicion of marriage. The scene at the novel's conclusion, where Caroline gazes up in mute silence at her newlywed husband, bears a deeply ironic tone. I would suggest that the novel is feminist *because* it

refuses progressivist tendencies, because it rejects the over-simplified liberalism of a Smiles-type notion of English individualism.

The work of Armstrong, Langland, and Gilbert and Gubar draws upon Foucauldian analysis and New Historical models of gender analysis to consider the ways in which the modern subject is discursively produced and disciplined, but struggles to account for how the modern subject might be simultaneously aware and desirous of this containment by juridical discourse. Their analysis is insufficient to account for Brontë's rendering of the middle-class subject for this reason. My analysis, I believe, expands that critical work, for I contend that it is through the experience of melancholy that *Shirley's* female subject comes to realize her desire to submit to a man through a relationship of romantic love all the while recognizing the sacrifice, or cost, of this submission. Caroline Helstone remains simultaneously desirous of and revolted by her attachment to the object of her desire in ways that Florence Dombey is not. *Shirley* therefore figures as a case study, one unique to the late 1840s, of the ways a woman might yearn for the pressure of juridical structures that would determine the "trajectory of [her] desire" (Butler *Psychic Life* 2).⁹⁰ In other words, melancholy is the device by which women discover the benefits of submission and the virtue of conformity, all the while contending with the cost of these behaviors. Again, it goes without saying that many women recognized their culture's full-throttled endorsement of marriage and needed no convincing otherwise. But for those women, like Caroline, who teetered on the edge of desiring autonomy, freedom, or the life of "the counting house," melancholy is the means by which they are brought back

into the fold. Thus, the most heightened experiences of their melancholy, a seemingly pathological state, produce their most profound moments of propriety and this is an alarming, but illuminating, feature of Brontë's narrative. In *Shirley*, melancholy is a means not to rebellion but to normalization.

Observing the lives of the unmarried women who exist on the margins of her social circle, Caroline realizes that although they may not be legally bound to men, they remain subject to patriarchal authority and its potentially subordinating and cruel exercise just the same.⁹¹ In contrast to declarations within the condition-of-women debates that the enhancement of female autonomy, both legally and economically, would be emancipating, *Shirley* argues *against* the supposed liberties of the individuated life. This is not because women should *not* be liberated due to their lack of intellectual or moral capacity, but more so, because the life of the spinster, the governess, the invalid and the writer bring forward their own "varieties of pain" (*Shirley* 216) that are equally oppressive and delimiting. Thus, Brontë's emphasis on melancholy positions the condition as a reasonable reaction to the exigencies of middle-class life.

Melancholic illness does not, therefore, spring from the dark sewer-like recesses of a woman's body, but instead, from very real, material suffering. The condition is, therefore, reasonable and predictable, arising from virulent "contagions" present in the family home such as neglect, male abuse of authority, and a lack of compassion between intimates. *Shirley* affirms medical opinion in the era that women *do* suffer terrible mental angst when they do not fulfill their sexual and procreative roles, but asserts that this is not because their reproductive

energies have been stifled. Rather, women suffer because their avenues for social participation and inclusion have been stymied for the life of the spinster is one accompanied by isolation and poverty. Caroline has only to think of the ways the men in her community mock its old maids to understand the limits of a spinster's social life. Brontë suggests that if medical doctors wished to determine the cause of female melancholy, they ought *not* to look at the ways a woman's body concealed her pathology, but at how the cult of domesticity and its rhetoric concealed a pathology lodged deep within the social body.

Caroline's first experiences of melancholy arise when she realizes that Robert Moore, the man upon whom she has lodged her hopes for "Happiness" (104), has turned his affections elsewhere. At first, Caroline becomes desperately unhappy in the contemplation of her limited prospects outside of marriage. "Weary with listening to nothing, and gazing on vacancy" (117), Caroline wonders how she will "get through" her day (104). She hopes, initially, that sewing and visiting will distract her from the loss of "Happiness and Robert" (104) but this connection between romantic love and emotional satisfaction is too pronounced to be ignored. Caroline finds almost immediately that "every stitch she puts in [is] ennui," that "the occupation [is] insufferably tedious" (104) because neither sewing, nor visiting, nor walking will replace the "undiminished gladness" (97) she felt as a result of Robert's attention.

Caroline's clear-headed assessment of her prospects as an unmarried woman is continually counterbalanced by desperately overwrought, and somewhat conventional, expressions of disappointment and grief. Gazing at

herself in the mirror, Caroline “could see that she was altered within the last month; 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 fresh as she used to be. (171). She is most aware of the diminishing of “freshness” and physical attractiveness that romantic disappointment inflicts. While she is initially “girlish, light and pliant” (73), after Robert’s myriad rejections she is left “wan” and “dejected,” no longer “so pretty as she used to be” (180).

When “long walks in solitary directions” do nothing to alleviate her pain, Caroline determines that she “must seek and find a change somehow” (180). Initially preoccupied with the desire to “discover and know her mother” (180) who abandoned the family when Caroline was an infant, Caroline hopes that a reunion and reconciliation between mother and daughter might effect some kind of absolution of her failure to find a husband. If she can only be a daughter, she will *belong*—like Florence Dombey she will then have value. However, upon hearing that her mother does not want her, and according to her uncle, thinks nothing of her (100), Caroline disappointedly seeks work as a governess, resolving that she can “do nothing else” (180). In her “white-cheeked and miserable-looking” state, she reveals her plan to work to her uncle Reverend Helstone who dismisses this interest as “whim,” querying whether Caroline has been “bewitched” (183). Caroline is “checked” (118) and falls “silent” (184). Anne Longmuir asserts it is Caroline’s “acceptance of feminine roles [such as silence in the face of her uncle’s criticism] that causes [her] to suffer physically

and mentally” (148), but the narrative insists she has no real choice *but* to accept her lot.

Caroline might live through this “passage of misery” produced by Moore’s inconstancy, but she determines that she will “perhaps never again [be] happy” because her life, like a spinster’s, will be devoid of romantic love. She experiences the “heaviness of a broken spirit” (178) so indicative of melancholy and grows “wasted ... joyless and more wan” (178). Brontë characterizes melancholy as a “funereal inward cry” that “haunt[s] and harasse[s]” her protagonist (178) and produces “a sort of intolerable despair” (179). In the absence of romantic love, Caroline perceives herself merely a “dim shadow” on the wall, a “pale phantom” bearing “colourless tresses” (168) and a “sadder tone than ever” (118). In Robert’s rejection, Caroline is rendered spectral, experiencing the death not only of love but of her potential to be fully embodied within her community. These images of Caroline’s emaciated and withered melancholic body recall the novel’s other “beautifully-featured moulds of clay left, cold and white” (205), presumably the characters of Mary Cave and Caroline’s mother, who experienced terrible degradation within their marriages and whose memory now haunts the community and, arguably, the text itself.

Throughout the remainder of the novel, Caroline’s behavior towards Robert, her uncle and the rest of her community is marked by restraint. She exhibits “no vexed flushing of the face, no gathering of tears” at Robert’s mention (166) and can “resolve to subdue and bring under guidance the disturbed realm of her emotions” (103) when in his presence. Brontë’s narrative affirms the

importance of self-control, particularly in the presence of others, and emphasizes Caroline's broader commitment to proper modes of femininity which include the desire for a husband and children. Caroline's practices of self-control "regulate her conduct by ... keeping her pale face and wasted figure as much out of sight as possible" (186). Like Florence, Caroline bears the burden of her romantic disappointment in solitude, disappearing to her "narrow chamber" (168) and "remaining invisible" until she is called down to supper (164) or needed for some errand. Although Elizabeth Foyster deems Caroline's suffering "the fashionable female affliction of nervousness and hysteria" (239), Caroline does not actually portray the more manic and extroverted qualities of hysteria.

In this vision of melancholy, Brontë confirms her skepticism that the "problem" of superfluous women can be solved and focalizes that skepticism through her melancholic protagonist. Thus, melancholy, or mental pathology, is the means to a more profound understanding of the irresolvable contradictions of middle-class life, all borne out of the cult of domesticity which situated men as Masters of the family hearth. I agree with Hunt's suggestion that Brontë had a sincere understanding of the emotional cost of women's emancipation or, in Caroline's case, their "release" from wife- and motherhood, such that the novel re-frames the consequences of this "liberation" as merely another "variet[y] of pain" (*Shirley* 216). The feminist impulses of this text resist a wholehearted embrace of female emancipation in order to linger on its debilitating consequences. My reading insists on the ambivalent tone of Brontë's text, for it is as unwise "to deny Charlotte Brontë's ambivalence in her treatment of female

sexuality in the name of a feminist orthodoxy as it is absurdly ahistorical to brand her works as sexist and regressive” (Nestor 36).

Importantly, Caroline is melancholic because she realizes the inevitability of being so. In other words, she recognizes melancholy as the enduring condition of a woman’s middle-class existence, both for those excluded from the bonds of marriage *and* for those enclosed by its strictures. The novel is peppered with instances of female suffering *within* marriage and Caroline’s mother, a victim of her husband’s violent assaults, serves as Caroline’s constant reminder that all marriages bear the capacity for cruelty. Although Longmuir notes that Caroline’s malaise is associated with the failure of heterosexual relations and further suggests that *Shirley* represents “true emotional closeness” as possible only between women (149), I argue that Brontë *does* see the cure for Caroline’s melancholy in marriage, but acknowledges simultaneously the terrible potential for even greater suffering when this longing for heterosexual love is finally fulfilled. *Shirley* posits this realization, that romantic love is preferable to autonomy but inextricable from submission and subjugation, as the harsh “simple, actual truth” of modern life (*Shirley* 594). In other words, Caroline realizes that her desire for Robert exposes her to cruelty, but that cruelty is preferable to social exclusion. Brontë’s exploration of melancholy, then, foregrounds the ways in which both its cause and its cure are rather misanthropic, for deep sorrow is produced when love fails, but love’s success comes at the price of silence and submission within forms of patriarchal family organization that register only tenuous forms of contentment.

Shirley thus considers the notion that female emancipation, whether it is through “Industry” or “Education” or suffrage, bears the same false promise as marriage: nothing will alleviate the suffering of women, beyond a radical (and seemingly impossible) reconstitution of Victorian public and private life. Like much of the writing at mid-century, *Shirley* offers little resolution for the “problem” of the superfluous woman and simultaneously, offers little resolution for the issue of disenfranchised men. With an entire community at odds, Brontë transforms her text into an overarching statement about the inequities of Victorian life *in toto*.

Thus, Caroline is neither the madwoman in the attic nor the angel in the house, and her character reflects much of the ambivalence present in the ideological construction of “woman” in mid-century writing. She is subject to institutional strictures, and submissive in the face of male power, but she continually articulates a willingness to be submissive. Her characterization reflects the responses of many middle-class women who did of course respond favorably to discourses that lauded demure notions of femininity as opposed to more overt or explicit expressions of female desire and ideologies of motherhood that figured the Victorian mother as the virtuous moral centre of the home. Caroline therefore typifies that middle-class Victorian woman self-subordinated to specific discursive constructions such as the respectable “feminine” woman or the virtuous, self-sacrificing mother.⁹² Though she queries the qualities of feminine virtue, asking “Does virtue lie in abnegation of self--I do not believe it” (*Shirley* 313), Caroline never completely eschews the drive to self-deney.

As such, Charlotte Brontë does not suggest that melancholy enables any form of resistance or rebelliousness and does not advocate for a form of “revolted woman” who might “throw off all womanly charm” (Linton qtd. in Hamilton 51), but the novel does express how melancholy affords women *clairvoyance* about the real conditions of marriage. Further, it suggests that knowledge produces a kind of tension within the domestic scene, one explored particularly in Caroline’s interactions with her uncle. In this, *Shirley* foregrounds the presence of a latent, but yet steadfastly emerging trend towards non-conformity incubating within the bourgeois domestic sphere, one that can be detected in Caroline’s questioning of the contentment of women in her community. However, to describe *Shirley* as either a “condition of women” novel or as a social reform novel does not take into account Brontë’s concerns about writing a work of this nature. In a letter to her publisher William S. Williams on May 12, 1848, composed during the period when she would have been writing the first volume of *Shirley*, Brontë confesses “I often wish to say something about the ‘condition of women’ question—but it is one respecting which so much ‘cant’ has been talked, that one feels a sort of repugnance to approach it” (Smith *Selected Letters of Charlotte Bronte* 108).

Margaret Smith conjectures that Brontë might have been responding to Williams’s suggestion that she write a social reform novel comparable to Disraeli’s *Coningsby* (1844) or *Sybil* (1845), both works designed to arouse public concern for the “Condition-of-England” (*Selected Letters* 103). Later, in another letter to Williams, Brontë writes “Situations which I do not understand, and cannot personally inspect, I would not for the world meddle with, lest I should

make even a more ridiculous mess of the matter than Mrs. Trollope did in her ‘Factory Boy’” (*Selected Letters* 102). Four years later, in 1852, Brontë explains in a letter to her publisher George Smith “You will see that ‘Villette’ touches on no matter of public interest. I *cannot* write books handling the topics of the day; it is no use trying” (Wise 14). Despite her rejection of the social reform genre, however, and though Brontë states explicitly that she does not wish to write about contemporary topics, this is exactly what she does in *Shirley*, a move that reflects her long-standing and profound political engagement with the issue of “surplus” middle-class women and their meaning within Victorian middle-class society. The condition-of-women question is a social issue so inextricably bound up with Brontë’s treatment of melancholy that the two themes cannot be separated.

However, as *Shirley*’s narrator remarks, “People hate to be reminded of ills they are unable or unwilling to remedy” (*Shirley* 369) and without question, the condition of women is an “ill” that neither Victorian society nor Charlotte Brontë can cure. Though Caroline’s melancholy is symptomatic of a broader pathology affecting Victorian private life, her cure, through marriage and reunion with her long-lost mother, rescues the reader from the “actual, simple truth” (594) of this “ill.” But the alleviation of the symptom (melancholy) obscures the chronic nature of the sickness (woman’s oppression) so as to render the novel’s conclusion somewhat divorced from the vigour of the debates that have infused its narrative with political significance. That Caroline is gathered back into the folds of patriarchal social organization, and seems happy to be so gathered, suggests a woman’s liberation from the strictures of the cult of domesticity is at this moment

unachievable, even on an individual basis. I would assert that the novel's ending, marked by "happy love scenes that seem forced and unrealistic" (Mitchell 98), reflects Brontë's politics rather than a failure of the narrative's formal structures or a weakness in her writing. The novel's conclusion is an act both of concession and of defiance and as I will discuss, highlights the irresolvable and vexing nature of the era's debates about the place of superfluous women in Victorian private life.

Specifically, the "reverie" of Caroline's cure (at the conclusion of the novel) can be juxtaposed with the melancholy that has, throughout the narrative, locked Caroline in a suffering "real, cool, and solid" (5). In fact, Brontë reverses the relationship between imagination and reality that Dickens proposes in *Dombey and Son*, for recuperation in *Shirley* is not a return to the "real world" (*Dombey and Son* 706-707) but a *retreat* from the "real world" (*Shirley* 168) and the "actual, simple truth" (594) which festers at the root of Caroline's most acute moments of suffering. Her cure is a turn towards a world of "sentiment and reverie" (5) where miraculous reunions between long-lost family members are possible, a lover's attention is renewed, and domestic harmony is restored. In other words, Brontë "cures" Caroline by disabling her protagonist's earlier sense of self-awareness, and in effect, by sickening what was Caroline's healthy (if emotionally turbulent) intuition and self-awareness. The price, of course, is the loss of Caroline's profoundly intuitive sense, one that she has borne throughout the novel. Arguably, the narrative's retreat from the "harsh" reality of life reflects Brontë's acknowledgement of the vexed quality of "the condition of women"

debates. I will take up this aspect of the novel in greater detail at the conclusion of this chapter.

Shirley reveals Charlotte Brontë's attempt at grander narrative scope, in terms of the novel's historical positioning and its concern with industrial strife, but the text remains focused, nevertheless, upon anxious, hyper-intuitive, and deeply demoralized *individuals*.⁹³ Brontë resists the darkest representation of the psychological and social consequences of melancholic isolation that she will take up in *Villette*, her final novel, but *Shirley* remains focused on dramatic and, importantly, private psychological unrest. If one considers the plethora of "unstable" women in *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and in *Villette*, and the hysterical quality of the male narrator of *The Professor*, mental disturbance remains a central feature of Brontë's literary preoccupations.

Shirley foregrounds the interplay between material and emotional realms of experience so as to demonstrate that cruel and restrictive material circumstances engender not only physical suffering but deep emotional and psychological scarring as well. Despite *Shirley's* narrative digressions that foreground, momentarily, religious dissension and industrial strife, the interests of middle-class women within the middle-class home emerge as the text's central concern. *Shirley* takes up the plight of this woman as a moral inquiry, arguably because of the moral considerations pressed upon the cult of domesticity. With the same forcefulness with which Gaskell takes up this issue in other texts of the late 1840s and early 1850s such as *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), Brontë frames the home, the "proper sphere" for women, as a scene of

dissension and disharmony (Taylor “Enfranchisement of Women” 57). *Shirley* thus bears a nightmarish-like connection to eighteenth-century texts such as *Pamela* (1740), *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748) and *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) which depict heroines captive within a closed-in world or in frantic flight from parental tyranny and male oppression (Showalter 10). Whereas *Dombey and Son* is rather more insular, focusing on a relatively small range of characters than one might otherwise encounter in a Dickens novel, *Shirley* reveals an entire community “radically at odds with itself” (Bailin 256).

Regardless of Brontë’s explicit reticence to consider the condition of women for fear she would “make even a more ridiculous mess of the matter” (*Selected Letters* 102), her text is replete with commentary on domestic life. *Shirley* transforms the exploration of middle-class life found in Brontë’s personal correspondence into the ideological and political investments of her novel. Though *Shirley* is Brontë’s attempt to portray a “wider and more realistic world” than that of *Jane Eyre* or *The Professor* (published posthumously in 1857), Brontë remained very much under the influence of George Henry Lewes and Thackeray, her idol, who urged her to avoid melodrama and stay close to her actual experiences (Hunt 98). Critics agree that Brontë found the plight of unmarried women a topic of personal interest, recognizing her own condition of despondency and frustrated endeavor in the lives of the women around her. To Ellen Nussey she writes of the “melancholy” associated with a life of inaction, stating “I shall soon be thirty, and I have done nothing yet. Sometimes I get

melancholy at the prospect . . . I feel as if we were all buried here” (*Shakespeare Head Brontë* II.54).⁹⁴

However, the “condition of women” (*Selected Letters* 108) was a deeply contentious issue for her. To her publisher Williams she writes on May 12, 1848:

It is true enough that the present market for female labor is quite overstocked—but where or how could another be opened? Many say that the professions now filled only by men should be open to women also—but are not the present occupations and candidates more than numerous enough to answer every demand? . . . One can see where the evil lies—but who can point out the remedy? (*Selected Letters* 108)

This passage reveals Brontë’s cognizance of contemporary debates about women entering the workforce. She acknowledges the fear, voiced in many conservative circles, that an influx of female workers will render redundant the labor of men and seems sympathetic to this line of argument and hesitant about any sort of “remedy” for this state of affairs. But as this particular letter proceeds to speak of the emotional tenor of the debates, we encounter a very nearly hysterical expression of confusion and powerlessness that charges her contemplation of the condition of women with the same urgency marking her novel. Her letter becomes anxious and hesitant as she speaks of the plight of women, such as herself, without “a little family to rear” (108). Much of her uncertainty and depth of emotion can be read in the dashes and breaks in her prose:

When a woman has a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct, her hands are full, her vocation is evident—when her destiny

isolates her—I suppose she must do what she can—complain as little—bear as much—work as well as possible. This is not high theory—but I believe it is sound practice—good to put into execution while philosophers and legislators ponder over the better ordering of the Social system. At the same time, I conceive that when Patience has done its utmost and Industry its best, when in the case of Women or Operatives, and when both are baffled and Pain and Want triumphant, the Sufferer is free—is entitled—at last to send up to Heaven any piercing cry for relief—if by that cry he can hope to obtain succor. (*Selected Letters* 109)

In this analogy between the plight of women and that of Operatives, one can easily exchange the “he” of this final line for “she.” Caroline typifies that female character of Brontë’s letter “baffled” by “Pain and Want.” Thus, what will be narrativized as Caroline’s piercing cry for relief, first considered in Brontë’s personal correspondence, forms the emotional landscape upon which Brontë composes her portrait of female melancholy in her novel.

Brontë letter also reveals the consequences for a woman without family, one whose destiny “isolates” her, namely the “baffling” experience of “Pain and Want.” In some sense, the “free” expression of Pain and Want is the release afforded by melancholy, but as Brontë affirms, this “freedom” is indicative of suffering, not of resolution or restitution. *Shirley* narrativizes this experience of a woman’s isolated suffering, however the text identifies melancholy not *only* as the result of the sufferer’s inability to recover from romantic disappointment, although this might certainly trigger profound sadness, but also as the

consequence of understanding that it is in fact impossible to *avoid* “Pain and Want.” In other words, *Shirley* affirms that melancholy is the “destined” consequence of the poor “ordering” of the “Social system,” not only for those “isolated” women but for *all* women. Thus, Brontë’s fictional writing builds upon the assertions of her personal correspondence, painting in fact a much darker and more misanthropic portrait of Victorian private life.

Shirley, the novel’s titular heroine, eschews these more complex considerations in which Caroline (and Brontë herself) engages and thus avoids melancholy through the expression of a “cheerfulness ... self-control, endurance, fortitude [and] firmness” that, in Brontë’s estimation, seems to mark “successful” womanhood (*Selected Letters* 107). This opposition between cheerful self-control and “baffled” Pain and Want becomes central to Brontë’s discussion of how a woman might navigate Victorian private life. Brontë does not endorse endurance, fortitude, and the like so much as acknowledge that these behaviors promote social inclusion as opposed to others which invite ostracism and as Marjorie Garson notes, she relies on polarity to position her characters against one another in terms of the values they embody (239). In many Brontë novels, heroine pairs express common dualities such as “frankness and secrecy, acquiescence and rebellion, domination and submission, plainness and beauty, English rectitude and foreign vice” (Garson 239).⁹⁵ This is similarly true with respect to her characterizations of Shirley and Caroline which exemplify the terms of social success and failure in Victorian private life that Brontë endorses in her private letters. For example, in advice to her publisher friend Williams about the qualities

his daughters should possess in order that they find success as governesses,

Brontë stresses the importance of self-control and perseverance:

If I might plead with you in behalf of your daughters—I should say—Do not let them waste their young lives in trying to attain manifold accomplishments. Let them try rather to possess thoroughly, fully one or two talents, then let them endeavor to lay in a stock of health, strength, cheerfulness; let them labour to attain self-control, endurance, fortitude, firmness; if possible, let them learn from their mother. (*Selected Letters* 107)⁹⁶

The men of the Fieldhead community desire Shirley, not Caroline, for *her* kind of womanhood expresses the characteristics of preferable bourgeois female behavior in this community. Importantly, it is a womanhood that does not profoundly or radically question the status quo. Shirley's "sauciness" is forgiven because she is "obedient" (*Shirley* 187) to men, recognizing them as the "superior" (187) creatures who will determine her success or failure on the marriage market. Above all, she is deferential to men and particularly, to Robert Moore. She condemns the "masculine, coarse, unwomanly" attributes that arise through a woman's participation in "hard labour and learned professions" (235), though she cheekily refers to herself as Captain Keeldar. As an heiress, it is clear that she will happily transfer her wealth to the man who chooses her in marriage, her security now adding to his. Shirley is thus the text's "successful" woman, economically and therefore socially.

This success is predicated, however, on the fact that she is *not* “baffled by Pain and Want” (*Selected Letters* 109). Shirley is, most definitely, not fated with the same economic constraints and debilitations as Caroline and as Brontë herself might have been. In this same letter to Williams, Brontë goes on to suggest that for women like Williams’s daughters, like herself and her sisters, and like Caroline, success is available only through a form of self-possession that endeavors to render one immune to the Pain and Want of the world:

Where [a girl] is destined to enjoy an independent, easy existence [like Shirley’s] she might respect her natural disposition to seek retirement and even cherish it as a shade-loving virtue—but since that is not her lot; since she [like Caroline] is fated to make her way in the crowd—and to depend on herself, she should say—I will try and learn the art of self-possession—not that I may display my own accomplishments—but that I may have the satisfaction of feeling that I am my own mistress—and can move and speak, undaunted by the fear of man. (108)

A woman might enjoy her “natural disposition” to “seek retirement and even cherish it as a shade-loving virtue” (108), but this avenue is available only to those women who possess “an independent, easy existence” (108) due to their financial independence. In other words, Shirley may be “natural” because her “vocation is evident” (109), namely her path to wifedom and motherhood is clear because she has value on the marriage market, first as a wealthy heiress for whom suitors compete, and eventually, as the wealthy wife of the victor. This is not to suggest that marriage is easy—a fact that *Shirley’s* narrative will make abundantly

clear. But financially secure women, like Shirley, are released from the fear of having “to make [their] way in the crowd” (108) and therefore need not contemplate the quality of their “lot” (*Selected Letters* 108; *Shirley* 411) in the same ways as spinsters and governesses. Shirley need not dwell on her romantic misadventures as Caroline does, for any missteps will be short-lived. Unlike Caroline, Shirley lives in complete ignorance of how social, religious, and economic discourses have, in fact, restricted her freedom but she is *happily* ignorant. This state of mind allows her a guileless relationship with her community and, ultimately, its acceptance.

Caroline, on the other hand, recognizes her depreciated value within the marriage market. Not unlike Jane Eyre, she is a shabbily genteel orphan and mostly undesirable as a result. Caroline’s uncle declares that she lacks Shirley’s “sprightly spirit” (*Shirley* 187) but what does she have to be sprightly about? While her tendency towards “delicate truth” (Ward xxiv) is the source of her full and vibrant characterization in the narrative, this “pensive” quality (*Shirley* 85) is the source of her social undoing. Caroline ruminates on the ways she must submit to male authority, especially that of her uncle which he wields with callousness and anger. Caroline lacks the “moral control” (*Inquiry* 181) that would inhibit her excavating too deeply the conditions of her life. As a result, she ends up in the intellectual and emotional quandaries that further her melancholic condition. In this, Brontë contrasts Shirley’s “natural [and easy] disposition” with the “lot” relegated to women like Caroline who have only themselves on which to “depend” (*Selected Letters* 108).

“Self-possession” might seem in keeping with “retirement” but they are in fact different, for self-possession fits a woman to “make her way in the crowd,” in other words, to learn when she might “move or speak” (108) and when she should not. When her “vocation is evident,” then, a woman, like Shirley, can retreat; when it is not, she must propel herself into the fray armed with a “self-possession” akin to self-censor. Anne Brontë’s protagonist will adopt this same strategy of self-possession, self-control and fortitude to make her way upon leaving her marital home. She enjoys no more success on this path than does Caroline Helstone.

If the spinster can only “complain as little—bear as much—work as well as possible” (*Selected Letters* 108) she will express the qualities of self-possession that hold melancholy at bay and ensure she will not be a “spar” (*Dombey and Son* 21) within her community beyond the ways her unfulfilled procreative energies threaten its delicate balance. Caroline, isolated by her “destiny,” must struggle to be the “mistress” (*Selected Letters* 108) of her emotion because she will be mistress of nothing else. “Self-possession” is her key to social survival, and her means to ward off melancholy, but she has only a tenuous grasp of this form of moral control. As Caroline grapples with the material conditions of her lonely and exposed way, and realizes how tragically daunting “the crowd” and its expectations will be, her self-possession falters. The resulting melancholy is symptomatic, then, of a woman no longer able to “bear” her “destiny.”

With that said, one cannot ignore the similarities between the retiring and “shade-loving virtue” of a woman’s natural disposition and the introversion that

marks the melancholic state. In Caroline's most profound moments of suffering, she does in fact retreat into the "shade," particularly, the confines of the sick-room. Paradoxically, melancholy is a means towards that "natural disposition" enjoyed by women like Shirley for both render a woman innocuous. Though the genesis of each disposition is different, for the "natural" disposition of an heiress is of a different ilk than that of a melancholic, the result is the same: by retreating to the shade, either as a result of a natural disposition or a result of pathology, neither disturbs that scene of family ideality upon which the cult of domesticity depends. As we will see, in Caroline's darkest moments, she is alone. No one hears her "piercing cry for relief." In other words, at the moment of her darkest experience of pathology, she is most proper and therefore most "natural."

In *Shirley*, Brontë focuses much of inquiry on what women must "bear" within the social and legal institution of marriage. The novel is in many ways Caroline's "study" of marriage (*Shirley* 177), just as *Dombey and Son* explicates Florence's "study" of the relationship between fathers and daughters.⁹⁷ Both are "hard" roads (*Dombey and Son* 354). After its opening episodes, *Shirley* redirects almost all of its attention to the plight of unmarried women in rural communities, women with few options for education and employment who derive all of their value from their success or failure on the marriage market. At the same time, Brontë's depiction of the emotional suffering of women who do find "success" in the "dreadful life" of marriage (*Shirley* 100) is ever startling, for the text is rife with representations of violent and abusive marriages. When Caroline asks her

uncle “Are all marriages unhappy?” and he answers “perhaps all are more or less so” (98), Brontë’s position on the quality of married life is clear.

Brontë holds culpable the husbands, fathers, and brothers who behave as “scum” (83), who “ridicule” women and declare them “toys to play with, to amuse a vacant hour and to be thrown away” (112). Their cruelty is almost overdetermined. At the same time, the text is haunted by the specters of female characters, “beautifully-featured moulds of clay left, cold and white, in the conjugal couch” who could not survive the assaults of these despicable men (51). As female “oracles” (205), they reflect a “capacity for feeling and loving” (51) that the male characters in this community deem “a very inferior order of existence” (51). When Mrs. Pryor is finally revealed as Caroline’s mother, she declares “it was my lot to witness a transfiguration on the domestic hearth: to see the white mask lifted, the bright disguise put away, and opposite me sat down—oh God! I *have suffered*” (411; emphasis in the original). Thus, women must have that “capacity for feeling and loving” that makes them vessels of maternal virtue, but it in no way renders them capable of withstanding the hearth’s or their husband’s “transfiguration” into a cruel “opposite.” Likewise, *Shirley*’s “domestic republic” cannot boast of its citizens’ civility or gentility (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 11), for the female characters of the Fieldhead community subject each other to scrutiny and condemnation that rivals the men’s in its vitriol. Fieldhead is most definitely not Cranford, which Brontë makes clear in the ways her protagonist endures the daily assault of this “sisterly” violence.

Shirley is therefore a strongly worded literary warning about the perils of the domestic marriage economy that reflects attitudes expressed in Brontë's personal correspondence. In an 1848 letter to her editor, Brontë suggests that within the middle-class marriage system women are "piteously degraded" and "reared on speculation with a view to their making mercenary marriages" (Smith *The Letters of Charlotte Bronte* 73). Caroline's vision of the ideal marriage, in which "affection is reciprocal and sincere, and minds are harmonious" (*Shirley* 366) is never realized to any significant degree in the text. Imprisonment and deprivation are shown to be the lot of both the novel's unmarried *and* married women (Bailin 262). Lewis's figure of "feminine virtue and loveliness" sits at the hearth in "self-renunciation" (Lewis 21-23), but rather than exaltation she endures "silent" subjection to a "master" (*Shirley* 50). Though *Shirley* affirms marriage as a social ritual that makes women visible and known, the novel simultaneously represents how marriage encloses women within domestic relationships that endorse their submission and promote their suffering. Although the novel concludes with the familiar "fairy tale" of marriage between hero and heroine, the narrative refuses to foreclose on the possibilities that this fairy tale is just as dangerous and unsettling as the spinsterhood that serves as its alternative. All in all, Brontë's text registers the contradictory quality of the bourgeois promise of individual fulfillment for women in the private, domestic sphere.

But the text's engagement with marriage is ever-complicated by the ways Caroline is drawn to married life. In fact, when Caroline and Shirley discuss marriage, Caroline expresses ambivalence about the terms of this social ritual. For

example, Shirley expresses a loathing of the “burden” and “bore” of marriage wherein she “could never be [her] own mistress” (204), presuming erroneously that she ever is her own mistress, but Caroline finds this loss of autonomy both enticing and repulsive. It is a dilemma over which she “pause[s] and muse[s]” both in desire and resistance (204), producing a much more complex consideration of marriage that, in the end, is not very transgressive at all. Kucich suggests that “patterns of confinement and escape stress the authenticity of strategically concealed desires” (*Repression* 37). That Caroline is uncertain whether she should keep private her almost embarrassing desire to submit to Robert Moore, at once mimicking Shirley’s disavowal of marriage and then secretly musing over the benefits of marital confinement, reveals the conflicted desires she bears within.

In another example, though Caroline expresses a profound desire to marry Robert, she simultaneously resists this life for which she appears “destined” (*Shirley* 70). When asked if she is “content” with this life, she replies “I used to be, formerly. Children, you know, have little reflection or rather their reflections run on ideal themes. There are moments *now* when I am not quite satisfied” (68). This sense of dissatisfaction produces Caroline’s first moments of melancholy as she realizes that “housekeeping” will be her life’s only “binding engagement” (71). Caroline determines that “the best means of attaining happiness” might be found in an “occupation” in which she might “make money” of her own (70) but she remains uncertain how to create such an opportunity given her limited experience of the commercial world. At this point, the narrative’s conflict appears

to center upon the limited options for women to secure financial independence should they desire some other “destiny” than housekeeping. Female melancholy is attributed to a woman’s inability to secure opportunities for further education or employment.

However, shortly after Caroline expresses ambivalence about her “lot,” Robert shines his attention upon her. As a result, her desire for autonomy evaporates and her concerns about finding meaningful work outside the home are all but erased. In the light of his attention and affection, Caroline receives “a sense of happiness sufficient to keep her glad for the whole day” (76) and thoughts of the counting-house seem only a passing whim. It becomes clear that Caroline has “pent all her universe” (107) not upon a career or further education, but upon Robert. Her previous thoughts of dissatisfaction dissipate as Caroline muses on the ways she “would be an excellent wife” (96). In the prospect of love and marriage, Caroline feels an “undiminished gladness” (97). Thus, Caroline’s willingness to submit to romantic love, and the ease with which she abandons her concerns about her “destiny,” redirect the narrative’s exploration of the condition-of-women question away from a consideration of a woman’s limited opportunities for education and employment and towards the “undiminished gladness” promised by the cult of domesticity.

Brontë’s “bait and switch” strategy reframes *Shirley* as a narrative more concerned with how a middle-class woman might *resist* the more “progressive” elements of the condition-of-women question in favor of submission to the domestic idyll. In short, as Brontë’s protagonist shifts her interest from the

counting house to the importance of the marriage altar, Brontë's narrative in fact emphasizes that a life lived in pursuit of autonomy is really nothing more than another way of filling time before "the grave" (168) if and when love, that true source of "undiminished" gladness, fails. The narrative will foreground the deep sadness of woman's failure to marry, acknowledging that such romantic failure initiates a woman's exclusion from the security, social legibility and the "undiminished gladness" that marriage offers (97). In this, *Shirley* suggests that Caroline's experience of melancholy, borne out of Robert's rejection of her and the prospects of life as a spinster, is a reasonable and predictable response.

However, Caroline's moments of "keener" vision (Freud 156), particularly as they relate to her contemplation of the tragedy of unhappy marriage, ultimately fail to "liberate" her in any meaningful way. Over time, Caroline recognizes that her longing for Robert can only be fulfilled by her subordination to him, a realization that renders her less intellectually and emotionally "free" than Shirley who has no comprehension of the ways she is subjected to male influence. Caroline's knowledge of her own oppression should be rigorously repressed, as it is for Shirley, but, as a result of her melancholy, she *perceives* this passionate attachment to Robert, the man who is both cruel to her and inconstant. This self-awareness is central to the novel's consideration of melancholy, for it reifies Caroline's desire to submit to Robert rather than stoking the fires of her rebellion.

In this way, melancholy produces a particular iteration of the bourgeois "ideal" of womanhood, for Caroline both understands and *willingly embraces* her subordination to Robert once she perceives that wifely submission is preferable to

the autonomy of spinsterhood.⁹⁸ Though Caroline considers, briefly, that an “occupation” (*Shirley* 70) might in some way relieve the tedium of her life, this yearning is immediately subsumed by her desire for Robert. Spinsterhood means autonomy, but it also means sexual frustration, poverty, and social isolation. As Caroline recognizes that “occupation” is an even more dire “variety of pain” than marriage, she grows increasingly melancholic. Thus, in the moment when she might be most rebellious, seeking out “the counting house” as opposed to the marital bed, she returns to the imaginative investments of the cult of domesticity. Here, melancholy produces propriety and forestalls deviance.

The condition-of-women question therefore remains throughout the text an ideology inextricably interwoven with the bourgeois “ideal” of womanhood. Brontë’s text maintains a certain complicity with the rhetoric of conduct book ideology through its depiction of the desperate sadness experienced by women such as Caroline who are excluded from the “domestic sanctum” (142). While we might expect a more radical rejection of patriarchal and bourgeois norms to emerge from Caroline’s melancholic contemplations, and *Jane Eyre* is more radical in this sense, *Shirley’s* critique of the domestic ideal is much more conflicted. This is to say that Brontë is drawn towards ideology that suggests anything other than wife- and motherhood to be a lesser existence for women.⁹⁹ Just like the workers alienated from their labor, unmarried spinsters too lack “mission” in life and Brontë dramatizes this loss of “mission” as one productive of profound sadness and anxiety (79). Brontë’s exploration of melancholy therefore considers the ways in which an individual responds, psychologically, to

ideology. *Shirley* depicts the melancholic in the throes of “working out” her relationship to social, economic and juridical structures. Melancholy is thus variously experienced as empowering and constricting but in *Shirley*, melancholy is mostly debilitating. Caroline’s suffering figures as her response to the very real material consequences of the “Social system” of Victorian private life that favored heterosexuality and patriarchy and denigrated female autonomy and self-direction.

Though Caroline concludes that the course of her relationship with Robert is inevitable for “[w]hen people love, the next step is they marry” (96), ultimately, she becomes aware of inexplicable inconstancy of Moore’s affection and the seeming tenuousness of his love. She experiences the first stings of rejection and isolation which she describes as “[r]ude disappointment” and “Sharp cross” (101). As Robert withdraws his affection, without explanation, Caroline experiences profound feelings of disappointment and shame. To alleviate her suffering, Caroline constructs an imaginary connection with Robert where she is the object of his loving affections and he is her champion and protector. As with Florence, Caroline’s is a fantasy that in no way reflects the reality of her relationship with Robert. These fleeting illusions of love and communion seem only to exacerbate Caroline’s suffering, however, for they do nothing to mitigate the “real world” sting of Robert’s rejection and inconstancy (168) and provide very little retreat or escape from the “truth” of Robert’s rejection (594), a characterization of the melancholic’s inner life that contrasts markedly with Dickens’s depiction. Only shadows of Robert, seen from afar, provide Caroline with the emotional

sustenance that renders her tears “less scalding” and her pillow a “little softer” (181). A glimpse of him offers a tantalizing tease of the “happiness” (237) she might have encountered in their marital bed.

At this moment, the narrating voice interjects to suggest that a woman rebuffed has no standing to ask explanation from her suitor and faces only “shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery” (101) should she question his behavior. The narrator proclaims that Caroline has “loved without being asked to love,” a mistake “big with misery” that is no fault but her own (103). The proper mode of action in the face of such inconstancy is to “[t]ake the matter as you find it: ask no questions; utter no remonstrances” (101). In other words, she should “retire” (*Selected Letters* 108). Ironically, the narrator’s “advice” mimics that of Brontë to her publisher: a woman’s “natural disposition” should be to seek the shade or, to put it another way, “ask no questions; utter no remonstrances” (*Shirley* 101). Such a conclusion suggests the pointlessness, perhaps even the humiliation, of the “piercing cry for relief” which Brontë, in her letters, seemed to feel that the woman, without “a little family to rear” was due. It also suggests that melancholy is a “natural” response if and when a woman’s romantic aspirations are thwarted.

Shirley suggests, therefore, that masculine forms of social and economic control exert an inescapable and persistent pressure on women. “Romance” is just another arena in which masculine authority is exercised. But the novel foregrounds how Caroline in fact *desires* Robert for the ways that his authority calls her into being. Submission to Robert thus forms “the trajectory of

[Caroline's] desire" (Butler *The Psychic Life of Power* 2). Mill envisions a kind of utopic and equitable state of women's submission in *The Subjection of Women*:

Whether the institution to be defended is slavery, political absolutism, or the absolutism of the head of the family, we are always expected to judge of it from its best instances; and we are presented with pictures of a loving exercise of authority on one's side, loving submission to it on the other—superior wisdom ordering all things for the greatest good of the dependants ...

(Mill 62)

In some sense, this is the kind of family scene that Caroline desires—Robert as the loving head of the family, Caroline as the lovingly enslaved. Because of the dire social and economic consequences faced by women who fail at romance, who are excluded from this “best instance” of family governance, it is reasonable for melancholy to be consequence of this failure. The founding conditions for submission—seen as a “natural” womanly feature—arise not from biology, then, but from environment. It is thus reasonable or “natural” for a woman to be melancholic as a result of romantic failure, but her suffering arises in her exclusion from middle-class life and not as a result of her propensity to illness (due to the volatile quality of their bodily energies). A woman might be very capable of managing a house, calming her husband's existential worries, and raising children, but these result from her keen assessment of the characteristics that constitute propriety in middle-class homes and not because of some innate

quality of virtue. In a sense, then, Victorian private life operated its own form of natural selection: those with the adaptations necessary for survival procreated.

Those without became spinsters.

Caroline's melancholy arises not only in her awareness that autonomy is impossible, but also, that she might not want to be autonomous when submission provides her with social legibility and financial security. Caroline recognizes she has but two options: submit to a husband *or* resign herself to a life lived in sexual and domestic sterility. Myriad religious, economic, social expectations delimit her "destiny." Whether as wife or as spinster, she will always already be subject to the whims and caprices of the "scum" of her community but wifely submission seems eminently preferable to the isolation of spinsterhood. Though wives might suffer, and though men might demean women in myriad ways, marriage "is the trajectory of her desire" because it provides the social inclusion that ensures her survival. Her most profound moments of melancholy produce not only these revelations but also her attempts to mitigate her estrangement from Robert.

Caroline is thus conscious of her social position, and importantly, cognizant of the ways in which her missteps will be judged by her community. Brontë describes these moments where Caroline grasps her "destiny" as "the fleeting and glittering ripples [that vary] the flow of a rivulet" (*Shirley* 89). Here, the novel gestures towards the possibility for the middle-class woman to perceive the ways in which social, legal, political and economic power produces the subject. Caroline tests the waters of her difference in the moments when she debates with Robert the appropriateness of women's employment, or engages

with Shirley in a consideration of the potential for emotional abuse in marriage, but overall she seems uncertain of how to express most fully the understanding of herself as a subject.¹⁰⁰

Brontë subjects her protagonist to “humbling, crushing, grinding” lessons (95) that destroy Caroline’s “spirit of youthful Hope” (96). Caroline comes to recognize the inequities and cruelties of life, and this forms the basis for her sympathetic (and ethical) response to the plight of spinsters. Brontë’s novel is a sad re-visioning of the realist novel’s typical Bildungsroman form, for her protagonist emerges not only wiser but also desperately sad, highly attuned to the “grinding” pressures, disappointments, and falsity of modern life. Though she attempts to learn “severe truths seriously, and to study its knotty problems closely, conscientiously” (103), she emerges pathetically desperate to render innocuous that which she observes, namely “things as they are.” Caroline’s “study” functions as a “check” (184) and it is one that redirects Brontë’s naïve protagonist away from the “elf-land” of romance and towards the shores of “Reality” (94).

Unlike Florence, Caroline does not prolong her engagement with the imaginary realm of pseudo-satisfied desire. Rather, Caroline subjects herself to the hard “shores of Reality” (94) that typify melancholic isolation. Brontë thus figures Caroline’s experience of melancholy as a wallowing in the “real” of her life (245) and less so the pursuit of “airy forms” (*Dombey and Son* 706), for Caroline’s attempt to understand Moore’s rejection reveals her “earnest wish ... to see things as they [are], and not to be romantic” (*Shirley* 167). Her decline into melancholy reveals not a turn towards the “enchanted region” of dreams (168),

but rather a desire to “glimpse” the “light of truth” (167). Thus, as a result of her melancholy, Caroline exchanges the “marvellous fiction” of a romantic, “enchanted” life for the “wasted and frozen face” of Experience (94-95). Brontë’s exploration of melancholy is propelled forward by Caroline’s scathing reflections on the quotidian existence of unmarried middle-class women, a life exposed as tedious and boring. Brontë’s emphasis on the material conditions of an unmarried woman’s life reveals the very real connection between materiality and psychological experience and the ways in which a contemplation of “The Woman Question” can act as the catalyst for even deeper despair.

However, in the moment when she most fully grasps the inequities of a middle-class woman’s life, and teeters on the verge of condemning Robert’s cruel treatment on behalf of all the miserable women in her community, her resolve to critique fails. In these moments of deepest melancholic suffering, Caroline is acquiescent, not rebellious. She emerges melancholically compliant as opposed to defiant. Thus, at the height of her clairvoyance she is most pathetically ordinary. For example, Caroline suffers intensely when Robert flits into her life to privilege her with his attention and after these encounters, she is left almost ravaged, a corpse-like figure, “chilled and dejected” (245). Although troubled and confused by Robert’s coldness and inattentiveness, Caroline submits to his changes of heart without question, his inconstancy “sealing [her] lips, interdicting utterance” and “commanding a placid dissimulation” that “settl[es] down to sorrow and paleness in time” (101). When he redirects his attentions towards her, inexplicably, she meets this renewed affection with “stoicism” and resignation (102). She does not

reject him, but rather submits to his will. Afterwards, she is left as if in “apathetic exhaustion after the rack” (102). The narrative thus figures the moments when Robert turns towards her as emotional rape (245), one that calls to mind Caroline’s father’s most violent abuses towards her mother, but Brontë insists that Caroline welcomes rather than eschews Robert’s attention.

While Robert’s treatment of Caroline reveals him to be no better than “scum” (83), Caroline’s conflation of romantic attention with marital happiness blinds her to the nature of Robert’s character. That he bears “no pretence of comprehending women” (51) seems, to Caroline, a forgivable idiosyncrasy of the male character, one that she must accept if a husband is what she desires. Robert is, however, a much more malignant figure, in fact the attenuated version of Caroline’s own father. Like James Helstone, Robert bears the capacity to “desert cruelly, trifle wantonly, injure basely” (602). Like Helstone, Robert casts Caroline off without thought or care. She remains throughout the text unwilling to see the similarity between their characters, despite Moore’s warning at the start of their flirtation that he bears “no pretension to be better than his fellows” (83).

Insidiously, Robert is completely aware of the effect of his deliberate aloofness, and particularly the “check” his rejection produces in Caroline (118), thus placing into suspicion his assertion that he knows nothing of female experience (51). The calculating self-consciousness with which he withdraws his affection is set in contrast to the open, almost excessive quality of Caroline’s love. This intimates her naiveté with respect to the tenuousness and inconstancy of affection to which she might be subjected as Robert’s wife. Particularly, Caroline

cannot see that Robert's cruelty, his aloofness, and his malevolent inconstancy suggest that he will express a similar "hollowness, mockery, want, craving" (169) within their marriage. Instead, Caroline fixates on the alienation, isolation and mockery experienced by old maids and remains repulsed, as any good middle-class girl should be, by the spinster's life. Because of her unwavering belief in the "undiminished gladness" offered through marriage, she seems unable or perhaps unwilling to consider the possibility that Robert will be cruel to her in their marriage.

In her melancholy, Caroline voices the conduct-book rhetoric that emphasized wife- and motherhood as a woman's only satisfying "mission." If she once contemplated an occupation, noting her sense of dissatisfaction at the limited opportunities available to her, in melancholy she characterizes any life *outside* of the family as merely a stop-gap between a present moment of emptiness and a future moment of death. Anything but the domestic ideal is merely a way to fill that space of time between the present and "the grave" (168):

I have to live, perhaps, till seventy years ... half a century of existence may lie before me. How am I to occupy it? What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave?" (168)

Caroline's persistent questioning is in fact a troubling admission of her previous complacency about the inevitability of her "success" on the marriage market. What were previously uncomplicated and unquestioning notions of a woman's "destiny" are upended by Moore's rejection and Caroline comes to realize that her

earlier troubles were an intellectual luxury for a young woman who at that moment was certain of Robert's love and her place within her community:

Till lately I had reckoned securely on the duties and affections of wife and mother to occupy my existence. I considered, somehow, as a matter of course, that I was growing up to the ordinary destiny, and never troubled myself to seek any other; but now, I perceive plainly, I may have been mistaken. Probably I shall be an old maid. I shall live to see Robert married to some one else, some rich lady: I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world? (169)

Caroline's speech about a woman's "ordinary destiny" recalls Brontë's letter to Williams about the isolating "destiny" of childless women. Thus, latent in Caroline's musings is the recognition that marriage "fills the interval" between girlhood and death. This is a characterization of heterosexual union that is strikingly pessimistic in its matter-of-fact quality. Present also is Caroline's acknowledgement that her consideration of these questions has engendered not clarity and satisfaction, but even deeper feelings of inadequacy and confusion. In this, Brontë suggests the very debilitating psychological consequences of a woman's contemplation of her "lot" but also, that melancholic contemplation has the potential to re-educate with respect to what is possible (or impossible) for middle-class women. Melancholy does not foster rebellion, then, but a tenuous peace with domestic ideology not because its terms are favorable or equitable, but because this ideology is an inescapable "matter of course" (169).

Caroline's melancholy becomes more profound throughout the middle sections of this novel where, at all times, her thoughts fly "directly to the Hollow" to the "spot blessed by the presence of Robert" (117). Again, Caroline does not come to despise Robert as a result of her melancholy, but in fact to desire him even more deeply. Despite her outward displays of control, Caroline remains passionately attached to Moore in secret. Eventually, Caroline cannot push past her mental struggles, as the "sprightly" Shirley might do (187), but rather, resigns herself to a fuller and ever more solitary exploration of the entanglements and frustrations that compose the "truth" of her life (594). Immobilized and alienated, she must consider Robert's loss for what it is: the dissatisfaction of her desire and the erasure of all her hope for fulfillment and satisfaction in her life. As the promise of this life of social inclusion and legibility fades, which occurs as Robert's love for her dwindles and appears to be transferred to Shirley, Caroline's melancholy grows ever more profound and debilitating. Brontë must very nearly destroy Caroline in order to make apparent the alienation and estrangement that flows from her protagonist's romantic failures and so that she might foreground women's dependence upon the "masters" (526) with whom they make "love" matches. In fact, Caroline's suffering serves as a warning of what befalls a woman for whom the conditions of her subject formation and subjugation become apparent.¹⁰¹ It is in this transformation from dissatisfaction to profound melancholia that Brontë drives home the very real psychological consequences of a life lived in subjection to the inescapable demands of the marriage market and the cult of domesticity.

However, as mentioned, at the moment when she is most in the “shade,” Caroline becomes most proper. In this, Brontë affirms that the experience of melancholy gathers women back into the fold. Brontë’s depiction of melancholy suggests a paradox, then, as pathology becomes a means to normalization. Of course this resolution requires a little “magic,” not unlike that found at the conclusion of *Dombey and Son*, but the result is the same: Caroline’s recovery and return to normalcy is borne out of the conditions of her most profound moments of pathology. As she retreats to the sickroom to suffer in silence, she loses the “self-possession” that has kept melancholia at bay. In some sense she no longer needs to be the “mistress” of her emotion, for she is no longer making “her way in the crowd.” Though Victorians would have resisted a characterization of the melancholic as a proper expression of femininity, in the way that Caroline retires to the isolation of the sickroom to silently endure, asking no questions and uttering no remonstrances, she is *remarkably* proper.

Simply put, Caroline is cured by the return of her long-lost mother who just happens to have been Shirley’s governess all along. In this conclusion, foundlings are renamed as daughters and shabbily genteel governesses are renamed as mothers. The “body” of the Helstone family re-emerges through the disintegration of Caroline’s pathological body. Ironically, Caroline’s recuperation ignites the novel’s most vexed contemplations of a woman’s “lot” (411), *even as* Caroline turns away from a consideration of this issue and *even as* her melancholic insightfulness dulls. Although *Shirley’s* narrator states the novel ignore “sentiment, and poetry, and reverie” in the pursuit of “Truth” (39), it is the

sentiment of the sickroom that provides the text's sharpest and most profound moments of social critique.

Brontë's emphasis on the relationship between Caroline and her mother shifts attention away from the dissension and violence present within the public, masculine community in order to refocus narrative attention upon the "private, dreamlike intensities" of the hearth (Bailin 256).¹⁰² For a moment, the domestic scene is characterized by the communion between intimates and the satisfaction of fulfilled desires. In the sickroom, Caroline and her mother finally coalesce "in [a] wondrous union" (*Shirley* 394) that dispels Caroline's "starved, ghostly longing for appreciation and affection" (175). Though the narrative has traced the family's dysfunction in the suffering of both Caroline and her mother, it in fact reifies the centrality of the family scene in the moment of Caroline's deepest malaise. Arguably, Brontë creates her own vision of the "Dickensian domestic idyll" (9), its qualities forged out of the melancholy of its protagonist.

Caroline is not only "cured" through her mother's affection but also through the ways her mother's presence brings into harmony the "vulgarizing" effects of "family jarring" (423). The formerly "unnatural" (413) relationship between a shabbily genteel governess (Mrs. Pryor) and a "disappointed" soon-to-be spinster (Caroline) is recast in the sickroom as the reunion between a loving mother and a profoundly lovable daughter. It is therefore naturalized as proper (106), as each character "names" the other within the domestic order. Mrs. Helstone, in the guise of Mrs. Pryor, is the narrative's prodigal mother. When Caroline declares "My own mamma ... who belongs to me, and to whom I

belong” (401), she affirms that “belonging” is *the* index of social legibility for this community. It is also the source of value for Caroline—because she has “something [she] can love well, and not be afraid of losing” she is “a rich girl now” (423). Their reunion makes familial solidarity “the sole source of a true, sustainable intersubjectivity” (Corbett 114). Their intimacy invokes “the embrace of sameness and the refusal of division” that makes evident “an idealization” of family bonds (114).

Caroline’s initially fearful image of her parents’ marriage is transformed into a benign memory through Mrs. Pryor’s forgiveness of Caroline’s abusive (and deceased) father. Similarly, Robert Moore’s betrayal and inconstancy is all but forgotten as well, despite the fact that his cruelty initiated Caroline’s suffering. Ward writes that in the sickroom scenes Robert “seems to dissolve and break up, to be no longer a man and an entity” (Ward xx). His lack of concern for Caroline’s suffering does not affirm for her his inconsiderate and malevolent nature but rather, as the narrative shifts away from Robert to focus on Caroline’s reconciliation with her mother, it renders somewhat innocuous that terrible, earlier pain of Robert’s neglect and inconstancy. In short, the sting of Robert’s rejection subsides as the love between Caroline and her mother grows. Caroline’s “failure” on the marriage market becomes a distant memory, just like that image of her parents’ violent marriage. The material conditions of the marriage market and the suffering they have imposed upon Caroline seem conquerable. Though she is still a soon-to-be spinster when she emerges from the sick-room, she seems not to care. Freed of that anxiety, Caroline may re-direct all of her energy into securing

her mother's affection as opposed to Robert's. Their "turn away" from memories of a father's harsh rule and a lover's inconstant affection reinstates the conditions of their subservience in ways that seem impossible for either character to eclipse (Bernstein 1).

Caroline's reunion with her mother in the sickroom therefore frees her, momentarily, from the structured network of power relations that have otherwise determined social relations in the novel, particularly those governing male-female relationships. Here, the terror of non-conforming is, for a moment, suspended. Though she had previously run adrift on the "hard shores of Reality," the sickroom guides her back to a "continuous social zone" (Chase and Levenson *Spectacle* 9) of reconciliation and wish-fulfillment. In the sickroom, Caroline and her mother can shrug off the condemnation they might otherwise experience in this community of nasty characters and find solace in each other. In this Brontë foregrounds so as to affirm the comfort women might provide for one another within a feminized domestic space.

Though I have argued that the sickroom space shuts out the "stir and glare of the world" (*Janet's Repentance* 24), it does so only momentarily. Systems of social discipline remain intact within the sick-room even if their sting is temporarily eased.¹⁰³ Caroline's recovery from melancholy is thus forged out of the same conditions that produced her suffering. For example, in order for Caroline to recover, Mrs. Pryor must confess that she is in fact Mrs. Helstone, Caroline's mother. She must therefore account and, importantly, *atone* for her transgressions which include disobeying her husband and rejecting her child. Mrs.

Helstone remains somewhat culpable for Caroline's distress, for her daughter's melancholy has arisen in the recognition that her mother "[thought] nothing of her" (*Shirley* 100). When Mrs. Helstone reappears to reclaim Caroline, and when Caroline's melancholy is alleviated as a result, the narrative affirms the ameliorative and restorative effects of a maternal love, simultaneously denouncing Mrs. Pryor's turn away from her maternal responsibilities. Moreover, this revelation necessitates Mrs. Pryor forfeit her privacy and anonymity so as to re-embed herself within the matrix of social discipline and male authority from which she sought escape.

Caroline falls into the happy security of female companionship, but in so doing she simultaneously turns away from her intuitive (although crippling) understanding that the world is, for most unmarried or abused women, an undoubtedly tragic place. Caroline's cure is the death of her "keener eye for the truth" (Freud 156) and the loss of her "deeper power of thought" (*Shirley* 177). Her recovery signals a "wanton forgetting" (Wilson 6) not only of the depths of suffering that have marked her life, but also the degradation that has marked her mother's. In every sense, her release from melancholy subdues her contemplation of the myriad inequities that determined her suffering in the first place. The satisfaction she experiences in reunion with her mother elides Caroline's recognition of the potential for inequity, neglect, and abuse within the family. Caroline abandons the insights about the nature of middle-class life, "the ills" that cannot be "remedied" (603), to focus exclusively on the rekindling of her mother's affection.

Though it might appear that Brontë stalls the critique of domesticity that has driven forward the novel's ethical concern, in fact the opposite is true. As I have mentioned, the novel does examine Victorian private life with a "peculiar, alienating irony" (Glen *The Imagination in History* 145) and Robert Moore's marriage proposal receives just this treatment. That Caroline "smiles up in [Moore's] face" and "mutely offers him a kiss" (*Shirley* 606) by way of acceptance cannot be extricated from the image of her "apathetic exhaustion" (102) after their previous encounters. She is "mute" in the moment of her betrothal, a silence that contrasts sharply with the "teeming" emotion (177) she experiences in the early stages of her melancholy. All in all, that Caroline abandons every insight she derives about the quality of middle-class life serves as the final stroke in Brontë's assertion that the domestic scene is an "ill that cannot be remedied" (603). Brontë's critique of "the Social system" is thus radical in the same ways that it is highly conservative. It suggests not the *failure* of revolution but the complete absence of these energies. Brontë's conclusion thus gestures towards the distance between philosophical and theoretical arguments about female emancipation (in some sense, the ideal and the ethical) and the actual, lived experience of Victorian women.

The novel's conclusion, therefore, does not resolve but instead exacerbates a sense of the shared powerlessness of women and workers (Shuttleworth *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* 185), these subjugated figures who must submit in mute docility to the whims and caprices of "captains of industry" such as Robert. Marianne Thormahlen suggests that Robert bows down to

Caroline's "superior moral worth" at the novel's conclusion (*Shirley* 142) but if this is true, Caroline's worth is dependent upon the qualities of feminine virtue that Moore invests into her, not those which she might actually or already hold. For example, Robert demands that Caroline, as his happy help-mate, show him the "good" he might do with his money so as to calm the fractious relations between himself and his workers (604). Industrial peace shall be forged out of the domestic harmony that marriage to an angelic woman provides (Ingham 49), but only insofar as Robert figures his wife this domestic angel. Like Florence Dombey, Caroline only has value to the extent that a man invests it into her.

Until the sickroom scene and then the epithalamion with which the novel concludes, Robert Moore, Shirley, and Mrs. Pryor (Caroline's mother, unbeknownst to her) continuously circle around Caroline engaging her emotions without ever naming her as "wife" or "sister" or "daughter." She is only ever a conversation partner, a walking companion, or a doting listener. Caroline experiences a repetitive and debilitating cycle of recognition and rejection in each of these relationships as the possibility for Caroline's inclusion within family is raised and then insistently destroyed. She is left to drift through her community and through the text, without family, without mooring (one wonders about the double entendre of Robert's surname "Moore") but at the conclusion of the novel, all is healed. She is named, first as daughter and then as wife and then, because Shirley marries Robert's brother, as a sister.

Brontë depicts Caroline's rapt attention and, importantly, her *silence* as she listens to Robert wax philosophically on the "[e]xtravagant day-dreams" (606)

he envisions for their life, images of domestic and industrial harmony that figure him as the benevolent factory owner. The novel's lingering image is Caroline's silent acceptance of Moore's proposal. Their "love" will always and already be marred with the fraught relations that marked its genesis and forever threatened by the viciousness of which Robert seems imminently capable. Brontë thus demonstrates the seductive quality of the cult of domesticity and affirms the power of its strictures, for though Caroline has contemplated an image of wifedom in which a woman "fluttered through the honeymoon a bright, admired butterfly, and crawled the rest of her days a sordid, trampled woman" (113), she accepts Robert nonetheless. She is, one might assume, *delighted* to accept him because of the social legibility and financial security that marriage provides. This demonstrates the power of the domestic ideal and in some sense, the inability for women to escape its imaginative investments, even if they wanted to do so. Of Robert and Caroline's marriage, the narrating voice states only that "[t]he story is told" (608). The moral, I would suggest, is that the inescapability of submission, the "actual, simple truth" (594) of a middle-class woman's life, is one that requires no further explication.

The final scenes of the novel sew up the lives of its characters in conventional ways and exemplify Brontë's relentless characterization of modern life as a series of submissions. The novel's conclusion suggests that the recovery from melancholy is possible, but only through the structures (and strictures) of bourgeois family governance. In *Shirley*, the cure is always and already the disease. Brontë's conclusion therefore puts in issue, even implicitly, the moral

management doctrines of the 1830s and 1840s that figured submissiveness and obedience as the appropriate standards for social and familial behavior. If the goal of moral management was the re-creation of a proper domestic scene, we find this tableau of domestic happiness re-created at *Shirley*'s conclusion.

Once Caroline is re-gathered into a normative domestic scene, no longer an orphan but now a daughter, she is released from the agony of melancholy. Her cure is sealed when Robert's attentions are re-focused upon her as his love-object—in this her hope for heterosexual union is renewed. With the community's rather miraculous forgiveness of Mrs. Pryor and Caroline's abrupt and dramatic recovery from the brink of death, the narrative turns from the insistent and complex representation of the fractious nature of social life to a rather underdeveloped tableau of simplistic reconciliation that does not explore in any meaningful way the future costs of Caroline's submission to Moore.

While there is no evidence that Brontë intended *Shirley* to be a critique of moral management doctrines *per se*, the novel's conclusion certainly pressures the sense of robust hopefulness and optimism found in the sociological and medical doctrines of this period. In the links she draws between silence and cure, Brontë complicates the characterization of moral management as a benign practice. While Brontë's narrator explicitly resists any gesture that might "offer directions" as to the "moral" of this tale (608), the narrative's conclusion foregrounds a rather misanthropic quality present in Caroline's "cure." It is the analogy Brontë draws between the asylum and the home that produces the ambivalent tone of the

novel's conclusion and furthers Brontë's assertion of the vexed nature of the condition-of-women question.

Above all, *Shirley's* complicated resolution suggests a manifest unwillingness to radically recast or re-envision the condition of women in mid-century Victorian England. Melancholy is a means not to rebellion but to normalization. Moreover, melancholy is a predictable response if and when one's access to the cult of domesticity is barred. The melancholic, in so many ways, mimics the notions of Victorian propriety in the ways she retires, seeks isolation, and utters no remonstrances. While Brontë's exploration of the limitations and cruelties of the domestic economy of marriage gestures towards the need for new forms of social organization, ones that might accommodate figures such as Caroline and other surplus spinsters such as Hortense, Miss Mann, and even Mrs. Pryor, no such transformation occurs within Brontë's narrative. This is to say that *Shirley* gestures towards the limitations of the "separate spheres" doctrine, querying its viability and its promise of happiness and contentment, but Brontë's characters remain ever subject to the material conditions of this doctrine. Thus, *Shirley* contains any possible re-definition or re-configuration of things as they are. Brontë's novel thus persistently pressures a notion that the political, economic, or even social changes emerging in the 1840s will be in any way liberating with respect to the particular emotional and social needs of afflicted individuals and thus anticipates her sister's concerns in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Though readers have struggled with the lack of unity in the novel, beginning with Lewes who suggested that Brontë's narrative had no "artistic fusion" (164) to link the disparate parts, *Shirley* stages competing narrative interests in a way that prefigures later Victorian novels such as *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*. In this, it anticipates the grand considerations of social and political life found in the high realist fiction of Eliot. In the next chapter we will consider the ways Charlotte Brontë's sister Anne represented melancholy in epistolary form in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Her novel, like Charlotte's, shares her sister's heteroglossic tone and stages "the family's" private tragedy as a public concern, revealing a darkness within the Victorian family life in ways hitherto unexplored in the realist novel of the 1840s.

Chapter 5: “Violence to my feelings”:

Melancholy and the *femme sole* in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

In lypemania [melancholy], the sensibility is painfully excited or disturbed; the sorrowful and depressing passions modify the intelligence and the will. The lypemaniac fastens upon himself all his thoughts, all his affections; is egotistical and lives within himself. (Esquirol, *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity* (1845))

I can crush [Mrs. Graham’s] bold spirit . . . But while I secretly exulted in my power, I felt disposed to dally with my victim like a cat. (Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848))

A woman who makes her mind public, or exhibits herself in any way, no matter how it may be dignified by the title of art, seems to me little better than a woman of a nameless class. (Geraldine Jewsbury, *The Half Sisters* (1848))

The previous chapter suggested Charlotte Brontë’s representation of melancholy in *Shirley* as the lens through which she complements and extends her comments on the condition of women in her personal writing. This chapter considers her sister Anne’s novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a miserably dark tale that analogizes violence towards the female melancholic with wife abuse. Anne Brontë’s novel suggests a profound similarity between the treatment of the female

melancholic in early to mid-Victorian middle-class society and the circumscribed and vulnerable legal status of middle-class wives. Helen, Brontë's melancholic protagonist, is a particularly condensed and potent symbol of women's oppression because her melancholy arises as the result of the harrowing experiences of her married life.

Melancholy in this novel is not merely an affective condition but an identity, one that Brontë's protagonist develops so that she may withstand both her husband's assaults and the violence inflicted upon her by the men of her community. In her melancholy, Helen expresses her moral, spiritual, and physical difference from her husband and as a result, experiences a measure of autonomy within her marriage that affords her the strength to leave him at the height of their marriage's violence.¹⁰⁴ However, the narrative retains a sense of cynicism and circumspection about a woman's actual expression of legal and political autonomy because of the violence Helen experiences while she attempts to live as a *femme sole* in the middle-class community of Linden-Car. At the novel's conclusion, she marries Gilbert, the man who has most deliberately and cruelly spoiled her "plain, quiet" (*Wildfell Hall* 15) melancholic existence. In this, the novel suggests that melancholic autonomy is mostly unsustainable within middle-class life.

Melancholy affords Helen's rejection of spousal and male authority. Brontë juxtaposes Helen's self-control and religious piety with her husband's rash and intemperate behavior in order to demonstrate not only their difference in character, but also Helen's *own* sense that she is separate from him morally and

spiritually. In other words, Helen's melancholic assertiveness emerges from the self-control and strategies of isolation that she fosters during her marriage. Her assertions of independence and difference while in her marriage are thus similar to the melancholy she expresses once she leaves Arthur, demonstrating melancholy as a choice rather than an affliction. Though *Wildfell Hall* is a "reasoned, ironic, cautionary, sceptical" novel about "keeping faith while living with error and mistakes" (Matus 99), more importantly, it is about the ability to bear, in private and without histrionics, the pain, regret, and disappointment of marital failure and transform that suffering into an identity. In short, it foregrounds melancholy as a measured and appropriate response to suffering and abuse.

The novel dovetails its consideration of female melancholy with the condition-of-women question. *Wildfell Hall* troubles in the most cynical fashion the qualities of individualism and self-sufficiency which informed much of the political, economic and scientific theory of the era, demonstrating that the middle-class woman must inevitably subject herself to the authority of patriarchal forms of social and family organization in order to avoid social and economic distress. As such, sustained forms of independence and autonomy are unavailable to the middle-class woman beyond those which she enjoys as a result of mental pathology. I offer this new critical consideration of this particular novel, suggesting that previous critical work focuses mostly on Brontë's depiction of wife abuse as emblematic of women's suffering within middle-class society with

little attention paid to the way her representation of melancholy further illuminates this issue.

This chapter will first consider *Wildfell Hall* as an impassioned contribution to a burgeoning social, political, and literary awareness of the violence experienced by middle-class women. I will then examine the ways in which Brontë's protagonist develops a measure of moral, physical, and spiritual autonomy from her abusive husband through her experience of melancholy. I will conclude with a discussion of the incommensurability between Helen's sense of independence, forged out of the conditions of her melancholy, and the demands made by the Victorian community for her proper social participation.

Brontë's tale is, *prima facie*, a sternly worded warning against the evils of alcohol abuse and the terrible pain such vice inflicts on the family. Suggesting the source for her sister's novel, Charlotte Brontë writes in her "Biographical Notice" that "[Anne] had, in the course of her life, been called on to contemplate, near at hand and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused" (Allott 274). In this, Charlotte suggests implicitly that their brother Branwell's addictions to alcohol and opium inspired Anne's misanthropic tale. Brontë's contemporaries also read her novel as a critique of alcohol abuse, as a review from *Sharpe's London Magazine*, written in August 1848, makes clear. Declaring that "the scenes which occur after the drinking bouts of these choice spirits are described with a disgustingly truthful minuteness," the review suggests the novel's "writer to be only too well acquainted with the revolting details of such evil revelry" ("From an unsigned review" 182). In this vein, Marianne

Thormahlen argues that Arthur Huntingdon's alcoholic decline is a "textbook case" most likely drawn from John Graham's *Modern Domestic Medicine* which served as the Brontë family's medical authority (838). As Jill Matus observes, the novel does function as a form of medico/religious gothic through its description of the symptoms of dissolution and decay that flow from intemperance (102).

However, critical interest in the novel's depiction of alcoholism has, in my opinion, obscured its representation of female melancholy. Like most of the Brontë canon, *Wildfell Hall* is a novel deeply concerned with the individual's psychological response to material experience. The novel demonstrates an astute understanding of the physical and psychological violence present in the Victorian middle-class home but this critique emerges not only through Brontë's depiction of alcoholism but also her representation of melancholy. Through a depiction of female melancholic suffering particularly, Brontë illuminates the circumscribed position of middle-class women generally. To that end, *Wildfell Hall* is a bold exploration of physical and emotional abuse between intimates. Men in this novel are violent not only towards their wives but to other women as well, most notably, the female melancholic to whom they are *not* married. Thus, we can investigate the circumscribed position of the Victorian woman not only through Brontë's depiction of wife abuse, but through her depiction of the abuse of the female melancholic. Very little critical work in the Victorian period or in our own takes up the violence Helen Huntingdon endures as a melancholic *over and above* that which she experiences as a wife, an oversight I will rectify in this chapter.

Noting that the novel persistently aligns upper-class women of the Regency with hunted or wounded animals, Smith observes that Helen's diary is rife with images of "the predator, intent on wounding and capture and the antagonist, seeking to outmanoeuvre and outwit by skill and subterfuge" (Smith "Introduction" xx). However, once Helen leaves her Regency milieu for a Victorian domestic scene, this violence continues as this new community attempts to control and cure Helen's melancholy. The Victorian community is not a preferable alternative to Regency vice, but rather an equally violent and oppressive social scene. As a result, Brontë's novel resists naming Victorian bourgeois life as in any way progressive as compared to Regency excess. As Josephine McDonagh argues, the novel's power "lies in its frank depictions of states of subjection and powerlessness. It shows us how it feels to be thwarted, betrayed, dominated, and trapped in situations from which we cannot escape" (x) and both Regency *and* Victorian England are held culpable in this regard because of Brontë's depiction of violence towards the melancholic.

The differences between Regency and Victorian England are important, however, with respect to the ways in which Helen develops her melancholic identity. Helen recognizes her spiritual and moral difference from her husband and his dissolute companions but importantly, her Regency milieu enables the *expression* of this difference mostly because it goes unnoticed by those around her. Her melancholy is tolerated because it is not recognized as difference, thus rendering her subjectivity as one of "difference without difference." In other words, female melancholy in *Wildfell Hall* is an expression of negative liberalism

that would be impossible but for the solitude and privacy this Regency social scene affords the melancholic. Thus, *Wildfell Hall* takes up a consideration of how the middle-class wife might reframe her “self” as separate from her husband, suggesting melancholy as one means by which this measure of independence might be achieved.¹⁰⁵ Brontë condemns the idealization of submissive wife- and motherhood, lauding instead female characters like the melancholic who insist that their sense of “self” is separate from, and not subject to, their husband’s authority. For example, while Helen’s friend Millicent Hattersley attempts to withstand her husband’s violence through unqualified submission to his will, Helen Huntingdon is, for a while, able to endure the abuses of her marriage through the expression of melancholy. As we will see, Helen defies Arthur’s demands for sex, contests his authority over their son, separates herself from him physically, questions his moral worth, and lectures him on his lack of piety and propriety. Brontë thus proposes the ways that melancholy can function as an alternative and preferable form of self-protection within marriage, declaring that submission is in fact productive of further degradation.

When the melancholic protagonist attempts to express this difference within a middle-class Victorian community, however, demanding the privacy and solitude she enjoyed within a Regency milieu, the conditions of melancholy are revealed to be incommensurate with middle-class life. In this, the novel forecloses upon the fullest expression of the “rebellious” quality of melancholy, but Brontë’s text certainly tests the waters of a kind of proto-feminist politics by demonstrating the ways that melancholy offers to women an alternative, albeit unsustainable,

form of self-protection and individuality. Legal reforms later in the century would further define this emerging sense of a woman's legal and political separateness from her husband, but in this mid-century moment, Brontë envisions melancholy as a means to female autonomy, however limited. This project concludes with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* because this novel demonstrates the most pronounced expression of melancholic difference, despite its conclusion that this "difference without difference" cannot be sustained.

We can therefore situate *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a participant within the textual field at mid-century advocating for a reconsideration of the "condition of women." Although Brontë was not a public advocate for the prevention of any particular cruelty or abuse within Victorian society, she seems most decidedly *aware* of the vast culture of oppression which marked her historical and political moment. Her depiction of the violence suffered by the female melancholic in *Wildfell Hall* charges her novel with a political significance that cannot be understated. It is, in fact, one of many works in the late 1840s and mid-century 1850s responding to and critiquing prevailing legal, political, and social attitudes about the position of women in Victorian society. Linda M. Shires argues that we need to place Anne Brontë into a historical continuum of feminist thinking: somewhere after Wollstonecraft, whose works there is no evidence that she read, but before the "revitalized English feminism" of the 1850s, which Shires describes as "just around the corner" (162). Lisa SurrIDGE suggests that Brontë's novel spans two decades of what can be considered critical cultural shifts in the consideration of wife assault, both in terms of its carriage before the courts, but

also in terms of its appearance in Victorian print culture (8). The novel draws also upon amendments in laws concerning the custody of children and divorce, although many of the most progressive amendments to these statutes would occur decades after the novel's conception and publication (Berry 33).

With respect to laws governing the family sphere, Brontë's narrative does not "varnish, soften or conceal" (Allott 274) the enormous potential for abuse and suffering within the home. Marriage was "the most important social institution for the great majority of women in Victorian and Edwardian England" (Jalland 45) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* depicts in unflinching detail the failure of this most important of Victorian social institutions. As Kingsley noted, the novel foregrounds "the dark side of every body and every thing" (429).¹⁰⁶ Brontë's portrait explicitly troubles John Ruskin's famous statement that "the true nature of home" is its prominence as "a place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division" ("Of Queen's Gardens"). Instead, *Wildfell Hall* gestures towards the over-determined equation between home and happiness in the Victorian era, suggesting the limits of this paradigm and the damage caused by steadfast adherence to models of submissive wifedom.

Whereas Dickens's narrative suggests some measure of happiness for his melancholic protagonist through marriage and Charlotte Brontë raises the issues of spousal abuse without detailing it specifically, Anne Brontë's narrative details explicitly the degradation possible in marriage and characterizes melancholy as a reasonable response. Brontë writes in the preface to the second edition "Oh, reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts – this whispering,

‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery” (*Wildfell Hall* 4). *Wildfell Hall* thus takes to its dysfunctional limits the scene of marital bliss marking the conclusions of both *Dombey and Son* and *Shirley*. Brontë’s novel speaks to the critiques, often launched at Jane Austen’s narratives, which query the fate of Regency heroines after the conclusion of their matrimonial tales. In Brontë’s work, we see past the bliss of engagement to the reality of marriage in the narrative’s unflinching examination of what results when naïve young women rush to marry rash and arrogant men with the law (and peerage entitlement) in their favor. At the same time, Victorian marriage is not lauded as preferable to Regency matches, for Gilbert does not figure as Mrs. Graham’s loving, protective companion in contrast to Arthur. Rather, *Wildfell Hall* represents what might be Caroline Helstone’s experience of marriage, one which Charlotte Brontë explores only to the proposal stage.¹⁰⁷ The novel thus attends to the limits not only of aristocratic life but of all married life.

Particularly powerful is Brontë’s assertion that one’s family members can emerge as violent, abusive predators in ways seemingly reserved for strangers and criminals. As in *Dombey and Son* and *Shirley*, the family sphere in *Wildfell Hall* is not that safe haven that stands in stark contrast to the violence of the world “out there” but is in fact the source of deep emotional, spiritual, and mental suffering. Brontë’s writing therefore emerges as a powerful counter-voice within broader discursive considerations of domestic ideology launched by conduct book authors querying the nature of women’s “happiness” and “contentment,” only to locate it within dutiful commitment to the middle-class home. As Alexander and Smith

observe in *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, “Conceived under a powerful sense of duty, [*Wildfell Hall*] is an unsentimental depiction of individual excess and its contagion for family, friends, and society, and a plea for the independence of women and equal education for the sexes” (495).

To that end, Brontë draws attention to the precarious legal and political status of the Victorian wife and the circumscribed nature of a woman’s legal rights within middle-class marriage. Victorian debates on wife abuse and coverture, and especially those launched by Victorian feminists who wished to reform marriage law in the late 1840s and 1850s, illuminate Brontë’s consideration of violence against the female melancholic in *Wildfell Hall*. As I have mentioned, the profound suffering endured by Brontë’s melancholic, which the author cites as a direct consequence of her marital disharmony, allows for a clear and sustainable conflation between the melancholic and the oppressed wife in this text. The manner in which the female melancholic is investigated and reproached by the novel’s community reflects her lack of rights, both as a wife and as a woman, under marriage law of the late 1820s and 1830s. An exploration of female melancholy must therefore consider the state of married women’s legal and political rights within marriage in this mid-century Victorian moment as well as the debates surrounding wife abuse, for both reveal the conflicted and tenuous position of women under the law and within the domestic sphere.

While the novel is set in 1821, its narrative reflects a deep philosophical commitment to progressive trends of thought in the 1840s agitating for the amendments of marriage laws and the criminalization of wife abuse. Throughout

the 1840s, the growing moral authority and autonomy of women in the private sphere, and the public attention given to husbands who exploited and abused their power over women and children in their legal care all gave impetus to reform movements on both public and political levels (Lee 20). *Wildfell Hall* considers not only the nature of Victorian middle-class marriage, but explores the corollary issues of spousal separation, divorce, the care and custody of children, property division, and work opportunities for middle-class women (Leaver 228). The novel demonstrates, with unflinching directness, that a married woman's position under the law was extremely limited, whether she was middle- or upper-middle class. Brontë draws an explicit connection between wife abuse and the abuse of the melancholic, for it is Arthur's abusive treatment towards Helen that causes, and in fact necessitates, the melancholy she experiences while in the marriage and after, and it is her melancholic nature while in Linden-Car that invites the most predatory and aggressive invasions by its community.

Brontë explores the inequities of the common-law doctrine of coverture, a legal principle which stated that when a woman married, her legal personality was subsumed within that of her husband (Shanley 8-9). By definition, "coverture" means "the condition or state of a married woman . . . whereby the wife could not own property free from the husband's claim or control" (*Black's Law Dictionary* 336).¹⁰⁸ Derived from the feudal doctrine of coverture, this principle, also called the unities theory, held that "[b]y marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated [into her husband]"

(Blackstone 442). Lord William Blackstone, in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* [1765–1769], states the rationale of the law succinctly: if a husband and wife were “one body” before God, they were “one person” in the law, and that person was represented by the husband (442). Coverture dictated further that a married woman could not own property or money, could not sign contracts, and could not keep her wages nor ever contradict her husband in financial matters even if they involved the property or assets she brought to the marriage (Abrams 250; Lee 3; M. Anderson 147). Under British Common Law, a wife was in many ways a commodity, the property of her husband (Leaver 231), and the unities theory served to legitimate this propertization of women through marriage (Schelong 86). Rape laws, therefore, were developed to protect the property interests men had in their women, not to protect the women themselves (87).

In practice, the laws of coverture were not always followed, for middle and upper-class women could occasionally control property through the use of settlements whereby a male relative would own the property or money that his married female relative could use at his discretion (Abrams 251; Lee 3). But when Helen accepts, willingly, that the doctrine of coverture will govern her marriage to Arthur and rejects her uncle’s good advice that she should protect herself against its strictures, *Wildfell Hall* foregrounds the restrictiveness of middle-class marriage and the ways its patriarchal structure negates a woman’s right to self-determined existence. Helen’s refusal of her uncle’s advice also signals the ways she will, in the future, act autonomously even if her choices ultimately cripple whatever agency she has.

The novel troubles the possibility for any equality in marriage, even beyond that of property concerns, for the legal conditions of marriage nonetheless affirmed a husband's dictatorial authority: he decided the family domicile, he had the right to correct his wife physically, and he determined how and where children would be raised (Shanley 8–9). Paternal custody right was maintained by a reluctance to interfere with the private matters of the family, which were thought best governed by the father (Berry 33). This bears direct consequences for Helen's desire to flee from her husband's immoral influence. Constance Harsh argues that "paternalist ideology held that English society operated most efficiently and justly when those who held power in its hierarchical structure responsibly ruled . . . for its operative social metaphor of governance was the benevolent yet controlling relationship of a father to his wife and children" (41). As Lush and Griffith would write in 1896, "so long as the marriage relation continues, the law allows . . . but one will between them, which is placed in the husband as the fittest and ablest to provide and govern the family" (3). Without question, *Wildfell Hall* upends this notion of the benevolent paternal ruler, exposing instead the capacity for violence and abuse possessed by those whose authority operated unchecked in the domestic sphere.

Although English courts recognized as early as 1721 that a wife could be legally separated from her husband (M. Anderson 15), until 1857, the only way to end marriage was by ecclesiastical annulment or private Act of Parliament (Matus 108). Because the Huntingdon's marriage is situated in the 1820s, Helen has no legal redress to end the relationship, even though Arthur is violent towards her

and unfaithful. Even under the 1857 Act, adultery was not sufficient cause for a woman to sue; she could only do so if her husband was physically cruel, incestuous, or bestial *as well* (108). If she left him without first obtaining a divorce she was guilty of desertion (as Helen would be in this novel) and would forfeit all her claim to a share of the marital property, even that which should have brought into the marriage (the legacy of the doctrine of coverture) and to custody of her children (108).

To Victorian feminists, as Shanley writes, “there was no more wrenching proof of the evils of men’s monopoly of domestic and political power than a father’s nearly absolute right to the custody of his children” (131). This legal “monopoly” determines Helen’s assertion of custodial rights over her son as an illegal act. Before the passage of the *Custody of Infants Act* in 1839, when parents separated or, much more rarely, divorced, the father’s right to custody of his progeny was largely unquestioned and legally absolute (Berry 33). During the 1830s, agitation for reform was met with some success in the *Custody of Infants Act*, which was passed in 1839 (Matus 109). This act provided that a mother could petition the equity court for custody of her children up to the age of seven and for periodic access to children older than seven (109). She could not, however, avail herself of these limited rights if she had been found guilty of adultery. Of course, as Matus notes, a woman had to be wealthy enough to enter a suit in Chancery (109). By setting her novel prior to 1839, Brontë ensures that the first minimal reforms in custody would not be available to her protagonist (108). Therefore, in *Wildfell Hall*, Helen has no custodial right to her son and this is why she must

hide in the Hall in secrecy, giving few if any details as to the circumstances of their arrival.

In bolstering domesticity as a category both spatially and ideologically separate from the world of politics and labour, as Laura C. Berry argues, “the custody debates exchanged a ‘legal’ and implicitly male model for selfhood for a ‘feeling’ child whose significance lies in the fact that he or she is not fully independent of the social structures that surround him or her” (Berry 33). In ways much more explicit than either Dickens’s Florence or Charlotte Brontë’s Caroline, both Helen Huntingdon and her son are subjected to and governed by the legal-political strictures of marriage and custody law. As Berry argues, the custody debates are not about women, then, or even about motherhood as a principle. Instead they serve to define “self” in relation to social structures (33), as do mid-century Victorian considerations of the melancholic “self” and its susceptibility to curative schemes such as moral management and investigation and categorization by the medical community.

Apart from its concerns about custody and property rights, *Wildfell Hall* contends also with the issue of wife assault. Victorian readers of *Wildfell Hall* would have found extremely disturbing its excruciatingly vivid scenes of wife assault and strife within marriage, but more importantly, these scenes would have been highly contentious, both politically and as literature, for as Surridge notes, wife beating stood at the “vortex” of some of the most urgent legal, social and political issues of the period (6). In the mid-eighteenth century, Lord Blackstone would decree that a husband was allowed to beat his wife. The basis for this “right

of chastisement” lay, again, in the doctrine of coverture which imputed a wife’s misbehavior to her husband (Blackstone 444). As Katherine Schelong notes, chastisement was justified as a means of maintaining family discipline and order (87). The dates of 1828 for working-class women and 1858 for middle-class women mark crucial turning points in the public visibility of spousal assault, however, for the drive to reform laws concerning wife assault found its first major victory in 1828 in the *Offenses Against the Person Act* (SurrIDGE 8). Under this new act, abusive husbands could be tried and sentenced without the need for a lengthy jury trial (6). Although the maximum sentence for assault under the Act was relatively low (a fine of £5 or two months in prison), as SurrIDGE notes, the remedy was quick and accessible (6). As a result of the 1828 Act, abused wives now came forward in much heightened numbers to allege abuse by their husbands, and common assault and battery in a familial context assumed unprecedented visibility in the public press (8). Harriet Taylor writes in 1851 that the “truly horrible effects of the present state of the law amongst the lowest of the working population, is exhibited in those cases of hideous maltreatment of their wives by working men, with which every newspaper . . . teems” (“The Enfranchisement of Women” 61). However, as with the *Custody of Infants Act* which had been passed in 1839 and allowed for non-adulterous women to ask for the custody of their children under the age of seven, this 1828 Act concerning wife assault would also not have applied to Helen’s upper-middle class domestic circumstances or to women like her (Lamonica 144). It was not until the 1857 *Divorce Act* that middle-class assaults received the same level of publicity, and

the same options for redress, as those of working-class women. By setting her novel prior to 1839, Brontë ensures that the first minimal reforms in custody, property, and assault laws would not be available to her protagonist (Matus 108).

The 1828 Act had a significant effect on the middle class as readers (Surrige 8). Between the 1820s and the 1840s, Victorians' daily exposure to newspaper accounts of marital violence changed radically, a shift propelled forward by the 1828 Act (10). Because of its close ties to other, related Victorian debates about issues such as divorce, the custody of children, and a married woman's lack of standing before the law, the depiction of wife abuse in the non-fiction press thus forced into consideration, as Surrige claims, an entire constellation of topics related to a woman's experience in the domestic sphere.

Without referencing the debates explicitly, *Wildfell Hall* certainly constitutes a passionate defense of a woman's legal rights, not yet achieved at its time of writing. Lee notes that Brontë's text effects "a quieter sort of revolution by challenging the very foundations of upper-class society through a scathing critique of laws and ideologies governing the family, marriage and mothering" (1). Significantly, the work anticipates the crucial reforms in marriage legislation that were to be partially achieved in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s by feminist groups such as the Kensington Society and the Langham Place Circle (Leaver 228) and does so because the novel seems aware of and contributes to the public debates about reform that were so widespread in its moment of writing. The novel also clearly anticipates reforms to the laws of marital property and child custody, given force of law in the *Married Women's Property Acts* (1870, 1882) and

Custody of Infants Act (1886) (Lamonica 31). The *Married Women's Property Acts* in particular recognized the right of working women to keep the money they earned at their jobs (M. Anderson 149). Lush and Griffith asserted, in 1896, that these laws "protected . . . whatever the wife . . . earned, separately from her husband, by her own independent skill and labor" (111).

The nineteenth-century domestic novel, with its scrutiny of intimate behavior and spaces (SurrIDGE 10), functions as just the site in which these negotiations about a woman's role in the home and the re-imagining of the "self" could occur. In composing this "domestic" work, Brontë fashions a heroine whose self-claimed power over the private sphere is, as Harsh writes, "no trivial one . . . since the private sphere provides the fundamental reality of these fictional worlds" (Harsh 45). Without question, *Wildfell Hall*, with its middle-class readership and authorship, is well positioned to consider how and under what circumstances a middle or upper-middle class woman might express both her melancholic condition and the psychological agency and autonomy which it enables. In short, *Wildfell Hall* re-imagines a particularly middle-class vision of melancholy, alongside the ideological restrictions by which it is governed.

Though, as Leaver suggests, there is no documented evidence in letters, diaries or elsewhere that Brontë held strong views about, or was even aware of, these public debates concerning the law, gender theory or domestic ideology (232), Langland notes that "a full awareness of [the] inequities in British Law informs Anne Brontë's novel" (*Anne Brontë* 24-25). Without question there exists a direct, if not explicitly articulated, connection between the swirling legal and

political controversies of the era and Brontë's exploration of them in fiction. While Leaver argues that Brontë's contribution to such debates is an essentially private one, conveyed by means of her fictional portrayal of troubled women caught up in unhappy marriages or markedly unpleasant situations as governesses (232), I would argue that the choice of form for her expression, the novel, foregrounds a deliberateness to make public the very private sufferings within the home, marriage, and family. In a certain sense, Brontë exposes the melancholic in ways she implicitly critiques in her text. Only by foregrounding the depth of suffering experienced in the private, domestic sphere can Brontë pressure the need for the broader community to comprehend with compassion the "difference" expressed by those who are, politically and legally, weaker in society.¹⁰⁹

Arthur does not evolve over the novel's course but Helen certainly does, from a rather naïve young girl to a married woman intent on carving out a separate moral and physical existence for herself despite her husband's resistance. Initially, she expresses a sense of independence even before she is actually married by defying her uncle's attempts to control the terms of her engagement. Although it is imprudent to do so, Helen rejects a property settlement, one that her uncle suggests she should undertake, because she has faith in her future husband's fidelity and honesty. Rather than protect her interests, Helen submits to the doctrine of marital coverture which directs that all of her property will be Arthur's once they are married. She begs "pray don't trouble your [her uncle's] head – or his, or mine about that; for all I have will be his, and all he has will be mine; and what more could either of us require" (*Wildfell Hall* 169). Without question, this

expression of submissiveness suggests Helen's faith in the benevolent paternalism of her future husband, a form of domestic governance that Victorian domestic ideology promoted as crucial to the success of the middle-class home. At the same time, as a result of her choice to submit, Helen destroys any options she later has for economic self-sufficiency, thereby necessitating her "outlaw" status in the novel. In other words, her choice to be a "dutiful" fiancée determines the necessity of rebellion later in the narrative.

Her rejection of her uncle's advice, "pray don't trouble your head," suggests not only her youthful idealism about marriage but also her insistence that she need not listen to anyone else, that she is (however erroneously) capable of determining her own stance within her affairs. In short, she is dutiful but also willful and it is this sense of willfulness that becomes so destructive within her marriage. Eventually, Helen is educated as to the foolishness of willfulness once she learns of Arthur's infidelity and cruelty, but she, ironically, remains undeterred in her insistence that she should remain in control of her own affairs. Thus, her rejection of the marriage settlement remains a crucially important early example of Helen's insistence that she be the mistress of her own fate.

Once she is aware that Arthur is seriously flawed, she attempts, as a good middle-class Victorian woman, to remain focused on her duty to God, to keep pure her moral and sexual actions, and to perform the tasks of a proper wife and devoted mother. Her maternal and spousal love is heavily mediated and strengthened by rational principles, and this combination of discipline and devotion distinguishes Helen both from her husband and his dissolute companions

who could care less about the moral and spiritual values Helen holds most dear. In other words, she is a “good” Victorian middle-class wife, adhering to the model of middle-class self control advocated by medical doctors, mental alienists, obstetricians, and social theorists of the era. In other words, Helen’s religious piety, her devoted mothering, her sexual chastity and her fidelity to her reprehensible husband confirms her as a very proper Victorian woman, even as she grows evermore defiant of her husband’s attempts to control the domestic scene and increasingly melancholic in the realization that she is subjugated to a patriarchal authority underwritten by force of law.

This is to say that Helen embodies dueling impetuses: one, the desire to perform the duties of a proper wife and two, a desire to preserve that willfulness she perceives as essential to her being. And so, though she professes she wants nothing more than domestic harmony, she sequesters herself and her son away from Arthur’s deleterious influence and refuses to defer to her husband on matters concerning their child. Arthur in turn protests her “unnatural, unwomanly conduct” (273). Their sexual relationship is also fraught, as Helen declares “I could do with less caressing and more rationality. I should like to be less a pet and more of a friend” (171). Arthur, however, wants more “wicked passion” (173) and less formality. He begs also for less religion in his home demanding that Helen should not “lessen her devotion to her *earthly* lord” (173) expecting her to show submissiveness and compliance to him. To this, Helen responds “I will give my whole heart and soul to my Maker if I can . . . and not one atom more of it to you”

(173). Arthur, sensing her resolution and defiance, pleads “Don’t be so hard upon me, Helen; and don’t pinch my arm so” (173).

Most importantly, Helen does not hide her reproof of Arthur’s conduct, but instead reproaches his bad choices and disreputable behavior at every turn. After a particularly vexing fight over one of his previous love affairs, Helen subjects Arthur to nearly two days of stony silence, determined to show him that her “heart [is] not his slave” (177). Her emotional self-control is profound, for despite his attempts to make amends, she rebuffs his every gesture:

I managed to preserve an undisturbed, though grave serenity throughout the day. I was not really angry: I felt for him all the time and longed to be reconciled; but I determined he should make the first advances, or at least show some signs of an humble or contrite spirit, for, I began, it would only minister to his self-conceit, increase his arrogance, and quite destroy the lesson I wanted to give him. (179)

And it is this emphasis on the “lesson” she wishes to impart that becomes the sticking point between them, as Helen insistently catalogues Arthur’s faults and he continually fails to evolve into the man she wishes him to be. These strategies of differentiation promote Helen’s estrangement from her husband, contributing to the isolation and loneliness that will eventually provide the conditions for her melancholy.

Thus, Helen constantly seeks to distance herself from Arthur’s immoral behavior but also, to entreat him to transform into someone *she* finds morally

upright and acceptable. Although we may be staunchly on her side, there is a sense that Helen is rather judgmental of Arthur, perhaps even sanctimonious, in those moments when Arthur demonstrates his excesses. As Juliet McMaster writes, “Just as Arthur’s cheerful irresponsibility can be finally damnable, so Helen’s moral earnestness can be crippling, morally debilitating” (362). Thus, it is Helen’s capacity to meet her husband with “botheration” (*Wildfell Hall* 218) as opposed to submission that provides the fertile ground for their continuing marital discord but also, for her later, more defiant assertions of independence. Her rejection of Arthur’s authority within their marriage anticipates her rejection of and coldness towards Gilbert and others once she removes to Linden-Car.

As her husband’s behavior becomes increasingly depraved and cantankerous, Helen steadfastly and unflinchingly condemns not only his behavior but his friends’ behavior as well. In this, Helen differentiates herself against Arthur’s social circle, who she characterizes as dissolute and indulged.¹¹⁰ And though Arthur’s friends do not seem to care about Helen’s isolation, nor wish for her presence at their parties, she does endure constant threats to her personal integrity and sexual chastity from the powerful men within her husband’s social milieu. In particular, she suffers repeated and unwanted advances by Hargrave, a man on the edge of Arthur’s circle who has to some degree become infatuated with Helen in the hopes of “saving” her from (and capitalizing upon) Arthur’s neglect:

For seven or eight months [Hargrave] behaved so remarkably well . . . that I was almost completely off my guard and was really beginning to look

upon his as a friend . . . when, presuming upon my unsuspecting kindness, he thought he might venture to overstep the bounds of decent moderation and propriety that had so long restrained him. (278)

Hargrave's predatory and relentless advances figure as persistent attempts to weaken and penetrate the safeguard of chasteness and propriety Helen has built around her. They thus anticipate her experience of Gilbert's unwanted advances in Linden-Car. Helen responds to Hargrave's "most unequivocal expressions of earnest and passionate love" by "cut[ting] short his appeal" and "repulse[ing] him so determinedly, so decidedly, and with such a mixture of scornful indignation tempered with cool, dispassionate sorrow" that he withdraws "mortified, and discomfited" (278), not unlike the ways that Gilbert is rebuffed by her aloofness. In these moments, Hargrave, like Gilbert, approaches Helen as her friend, and then "electrifies" the relationship with sexual motives against which her only recourse is defiant and "scornful" rejection. Thus, Helen is continually called upon to assert her independence of character and her moral rectitude in order to reject the sordid pursuits of men. Helen perceives this constant battling against men as "hard lessons" (291) to which she is repeatedly and relentlessly subject. Sadly, she will be forced to endure similar assaults once she encounters Gilbert Markham.

By refusing Hargrave's persistent and unwelcome advances, Helen forges her identity as a strong-willed and sexually chaste woman, proclaiming herself morally superior to her husband and many others in the Grassdale circle. But it is this hovering on the verge of the improper, plagued by Hargrave's advances and

the temptation they represent, that drives Helen's almost over-determined commitment to God, her son, and the preservation of her sinless self. In this sense, Helen's early experiences of melancholy and her re-commitment to propriety that they signal, mirror Caroline Helstone's flight back to the cult of domesticity in *Shirley*. Helen's self-control is thus an anticipatory response to charges that she is in fact a rebellious, improper woman thwarting her husband's proper, and legal, authority despite the abusive nature of his power. That she rejects her husband, then Hargrave, and then finally Gilbert demonstrates both Helen's drive towards a transgressive and defiant autonomy and also, the ways her chaste and very proper femininity sustain her transgressions.

Helen's domestic situation worsens dramatically throughout the novel's second volume as Arthur and his lover Annabella exhibit ever more egregious behavior in front of her. Pushed to her limit of toleration, Helen finally declares her most strident (and problematic) assertions of moral, legal, and physical autonomy. Particularly, she refuses Arthur's conjugal rights. After a quarrel about one of Arthur's previous lovers, Helen is so shocked and disgusted by Arthur's conversation that she shuts her bedroom door in her husband's face, exclaiming that she does not want "to see [Arthur's] face or hear [his] voice again till the morning" (177). As Surridge notes, this shut door "asserts a right that Helen has no legal grounds to claim" (91) due to the notion of "implied consent," and particularly, the laws of coverture.

Under these rules, a woman was considered to consent to sexual intercourse with her husband at the time of marriage and could not withdraw that

consent (M. Anderson 148). The rationale for the marital rape exemption originated in the seventeenth century with Lord Hale's declaration that "the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself on his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract" (Hale 629). Hale's statement led to the belief that because a woman gave her consent to sexual relations with her husband at the time they were married, he could forever assume that the original consent still applied (M. Anderson 148). As Schelong notes, Hale cited no legal authority for this proposition, but the contract theory of "implied consent" has been the most commonly invoked justification for the marital rape exemption (88). Through centuries of judicial repetition, the quotation became the common law of England and by adoption, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, and the United States (150).

In this moment, therefore, when Helen denies Arthur her body, stating "I will exact no more heartless caresses from you – nor offer – nor endure them either," (*Wildfell Hall* 261) it is a defiant expression of self-definition. Helen expresses dominion over her own body, an autonomy to which she is not entitled under British common law. Helen declares "I am your child's mother, and *your* housekeeper – nothing more" (261). It is this insistence that she can eclipse the bonds of marriage out of sheer force of will that foregrounds Helen's assertions of independence as a melancholic. Although Lee suggests that the words chosen are hardly emancipating, since Helen makes no claims other than rejecting the duties of the marriage bed (4), the proto-feminist tone is unmistakable. Moreover, when

she discovers that Arthur has in fact been carrying on sexual liaisons with Annabella, she announces her desire to be separate from him by refusing to fulfill her “duties” as his wife. She exclaims “[We] are husband and wife only in the name . . . I will not be mocked with the empty husk of conjugal endearments, when you have given the substance to another” (*Wildfell Hall* 261). She denies to Arthur (yet again) the conjugal rights to which he is legally entitled under Victorian matrimonial law and through the use of “husk” and “substance,” intimates the difference between the letter and the spirit of law.

Therefore, though Helen’s defiance is destructive to marital harmony, it is in fact preferable to submission—it affords Helen the self-possession to reject Arthur’s control over her, at least within their home, physically, spiritually and mentally. Brontë’s narrative thus endorses the assertiveness by which Helen distinguishes herself from her husband, declaring it the preferable means by which a woman might contend with violent and abusive domestic situations. Moreover, Brontë foregrounds the deleterious quality of women’s passivity as Hattersley, Millicent’s abusive husband, exclaims “How can I help playing the deuce when . . . [Millicent] lies down like a spaniel at my feet and never so much as squeaks to tell me that’s enough” (246). Frighteningly, Hattersley’s admission insinuates that Millicent’s passiveness eggs him on. Of course, arguments such as these come very close to a “blame the victim” mentality that many proponents of enhanced women’s protection under the law would have found offensive. However, in *Wildfell Hall* Brontë suggests that feminine passivity in fact promotes inequality between the sexes and appears to conclude that passivity is a

central culprit of domestic disharmony. Brontë thus “thwart[s] ideologies of female subservience within patriarchal marriage” (Lee 1) and in her depiction of Helen’s defiance, forges a break in the “pattern to her sex” (*Wildfell Hall* 218). The novel asserts a productive quality in melancholy that contrasts with the “idealized, poetic forms of pure femininity” (Showalter 17) marking the characterization of the nineteenth-century angel in the house.

With that said, Brontë does *not* suggest that Helen’s assertiveness provides her with any contentment or satisfaction. Like *Shirley*, *Wildfell Hall* affirms that a woman’s contemplation of her lot produces an even more debilitating sense of her own subjugation, an experience that results in melancholy. To that end, Brontë infuses Helen’s drive for moral autonomy and separateness from her husband with her recognition that she in fact remains “a slave, a prisoner” (*Wildfell Hall* 352) within her marriage, a person against whom violence is not only permissible but expected. This contradiction between the self-determination Helen wishes to express and the very real, material circumstances of her life transforms her sadness into melancholy, her regret into bitterness. It also provokes Helen’s acknowledgement of the strictures of her domestic life and the ways she will be forever subject to patriarchal control. In this, Brontë acknowledges that the condition of women involves a mostly irreconcilable contradiction, for women can eschew passive demeanors in their marriages, contradict their husbands’ views, and insist upon their physical separateness, but the law remains the law: women are subservient. As Helen realizes this distressing fact she, like Caroline Helstone, simultaneously recognizes the dismal quality of middle-class women’s

lives, an existence to which she will be forever subjected despite every attempt to reject patriarchal forms of control.

However, when Helen determines that Arthur poses a serious threat to their son's moral education, she decides to flee their marital home and make some attempt to evade the very laws which bind her so resolutely. When Helen takes little Arthur from the family home to Linden-Car, she commits an act of property alienation because, like all the property in their marriage, a child of the marriage belongs to its father (Berry 34; Lee 8). It is her most dramatic assertion of autonomy, not only because it is illegal, but because it sets the stage for her claim to other custodial, separation, and proprietary rights to which she has no actual legal recourse (Surrige 92). She wields this defiant stance yet again once she settles in Linden-Car beyond her husband's direct control, demanding solitude, independence, and privacy in the face of the community's expectations. Arguably, Helen is able to commit this illegal act, and construct an independent life in its aftermath, only because her melancholy has rendered her so firmly isolated, defiant, despairing, and physically and morally separated from her husband and her family (who would never condone such behavior) that she no longer considers herself subject to proper modes of wifely behavior. She is not ignorant of the law, nor deluded into a belief that she can evade punishment for her crime, but her melancholy enables a resistance to male authority that seems utterly unavailable to women such as Millicent.

Additionally, Helen resists the dominant Victorian ideology of "separate spheres" and embraces the prospects of employment and paid labour, considering

any wages she will earn from her painting legitimately hers even though, under British common law, they are not (Lee 6). Although a lady of the gentry, she envisions that “I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own” (*Wildfell Hall* 377). Importantly, Brontë foregrounds Helen’s *pleasure* in the notion that she will be able to determine the course of her life once she eclipses her marital bonds and in this, Brontë depicts her protagonist’s attempt to reclaim the legal status of the single woman (SurrIDGE 92). All of this is possible *only* because she is melancholic and once she leaves Arthur and goes to live in Linden-Car, she doggedly pursues this status, employing a melancholic demeanor in order to enforce and promote this sense of autonomy. In fact, Helen’s choice to flee the family home with little Arthur further solidifies her melancholy for she must remain isolated in order to protect herself from discovery by her husband or his friends. This isolation promotes Helen’s sense of self-determination and independence, qualities she develops through the course of her abusive marriage. In other words, it is her extra-legal status, the fact that she is an outlaw that confirms her melancholic condition for *both* require solitude and privacy for their fullest expression.

In the identity Helen fashions for herself, we encounter a new kind of Victorian subject-hood, a woman who combines the best qualities of self-control with the most cherished “feminine” qualities of moral rectitude and maternal virtue. She employs this demeanor, however, not to further her husband’s interests

nor to foster the archetypal bourgeois family hearth, but to defiantly abandon her husband, protect her son, and pursue a life of her own in the face of demands by her community. She is thus radical in her propriety. She expresses “difference without difference.” In this, Brontë suggests melancholic isolation in fact promotes proto-feminist modes of being for women in the face of overarching legal and political strictures that denied them any sort of autonomy or independence.

Mrs. Graham’s isolation is not, therefore, the *cause* of her melancholy, as it is for Florence and Caroline, but the condition *for* a melancholic existence, the condition that enables and promotes melancholy. In fact, when Mrs. Graham first arrives at Wildfell Hall she is joyous at the prospect of being alone, stating “I could hardly refrain from praising God aloud for my deliverance or astonishing my fellow passengers [on the coach] by some surprising outburst of hilarity” (374). In many ways, we might conclude that she is not necessarily profoundly “melancholic” at all, if melancholy means the experience of disconsolation, depressed spirits, and wasting. While her community deems her sick, she is more correctly a woman seeking a solitary space in which she might consider thoughtfully her sadness, regret, and disappointment.

Upon fleeing Arthur’s home, Helen, now “Mrs. Graham,” creates around her a melancholic solitude, scaffolding emotional and spiritual isolation on to what had been, with Arthur, a forging of physical, moral, and pseudo-legal difference. In other words, Helen’s assertion of legal independence from her husband, and her refusal of his conjugal, proprietary, and legal right over her as

his wife, embolden her assertion of this same independence while she is in Linden-Car, however difficult it is to sustain. In rejecting Arthur, the individual to whom she owes most duty both legally and morally, Helen initiates a pattern of refusal against all male authority and affirms her attempts to carve out an autonomous existence for herself as a melancholic. Her decision to change her name does not only further her attempts at anonymity, but also suggests her assertions of *difference* from that married body named “Helen Huntingdon.” “Mrs. Graham” believes she is entitled to this autonomy, regardless of the social opposition she faces within Linden-Car society. She is defiant and proud, stating “I have no cause to fear; and if *they* scorn me as the victim of their guilt, I can pity their folly and despise their scorn” (296).¹¹¹ She acts with a self-conscious and aggrandized agency to attempt to thwart the authority of men and women in her community who demand that she confess herself and her secrets, just as she acted in defiance of her husband and his social circle. Simply stated, assertions of independence earlier in the novel support and promote her identity as a melancholic later in the text.

Helen’s ability to maintain a sense of security and integrity as a *femme sole* once she leaves Arthur is dependent upon the distance she creates between herself and her new community and importantly, upon her ability to keep private her sufferings and fears. But her difference does not arise in the fact that she acts with reserve, checks overtures at familiarity, guards the details of her personal history, and preserves a stoic, aloof demeanor whilst in the presence of others, for these are behaviors that might be expected of her as proper middle-class women.

Rather, Helen's melancholy emerges in her refusal to socialize, to placate Gilbert, and to attend church and tea parties and walks to the seaside. In other words, Helen's assertion of moral autonomy and self-determination while in her marriage continue to provide the conditions for her autonomy later in the text when she is not *legally* subject to any of her community's demands.

At the same time, although Mrs. Graham desires seclusion in a ruinous, isolated pile, she does not make of herself a melancholic hermit *in the extreme*. When she does decide to visit, Mrs. Graham projects her melancholy into every social encounter in which she is involved. As Gilbert notes, her melancholy is a taint that marks social gatherings with "less cordiality, freedom and frolic" (32) and he describes her reserve in this way:

I cannot say that I like her much. She is handsome – or rather I should distinguished and interesting – in her appearance, but by no means amiable – a woman liable to take strong prejudices, I should fancy, and stick to them through thick and thin, twisting everything into conformity with her own preconceived opinions – too hard, too sharp, too bitter for my taste. (38)

In these moments, unlike in *Dombey and Son* and *Shirley*, the reader encounters Mrs. Graham's angry confidence, a demeanor that contrasts with Dickens's portrait of Florence who wants nothing more than to wipe away her sorrow through familial reconciliation. Mrs. Graham's "dour" demeanor, described by McMaster as "hard and easily offended" (363) contrasts with the placating, beseeching affect embodied by Florence Dombey and Caroline Helstone who just

want acceptance, compassion, and attention. In short, Anne Brontë creates in Mrs. Graham a much more self-assured melancholic than does either Dickens or Charlotte Brontë. As Mrs. Graham turns the “unquiet aspect of her eye” (*Wildfell Hall* 26) upon those around her, she marks her difference from them, drawing their unwanted attention upon her. It is, eventually, her undoing.

Brontë’s characterization of the melancholic therefore emphasizes the defiant nature exhibited by certain female melancholic sufferers. Unlike Florence Dombey, Brontë’s melancholic does not pace in torment around a solitary chamber like Florence, nor take to her sickbed in the belief that no one will even notice, as does Caroline in *Shirley*. In fact, both Florence’s and Caroline’s melancholic invisibility reinforce an image of female vulnerability that Anne Brontë’s protagonist will eschew, however ineffectually. Instead, Anne Brontë registers her protagonist’s melancholic suffering through an emphasis on Mrs. Graham’s “proud, chilly look” (*Wildfell Hall* 23). Brontë’s melancholic, to a certain extent, enjoys the respite and calm of a life lived “fasten[ed] upon herself” (Esquirol 320). Unlike Charlotte Brontë’s and Dickens’s protagonists who express a very feminine, respectable and non-threatening image of “madness,” Anne Brontë’s melancholic employs her sense of difference and independence to resist the advice and interference of her community in ways that confound and perplex its men, particularly. Female melancholy in this sense is an identity, one that enables if only for a moment a woman’s more autonomous participation in Victorian social life, not because she can do *more*, but because in her melancholy, she is charged with the ability to do *less*, to demure, to resist.

The Linden-Car community characterizes her confident reserve as “an uncompromising boldness in the avowal or defense of [her] difference” (*Wildfell Hall* 56). “Provoking” and “rousing,” Mrs. Graham’s melancholic demeanour invites the invasive and predatory behavior that she experiences throughout the remainder of the novel. Gilbert in particular experiences Mrs. Graham’s melancholic affect as “inexpressibly provoking” (16) because although Mrs. Graham is reserved and self-controlled, she is also “inaccessible” to those around her (62) in ways that she should not be. Like the dilapidated Hall in which she lives, Mrs. Graham is “stern and gloomy,” her affections and intellect “enclosed” by “stone walls” (20) of grim silence. In a sense, Mrs. Graham’s melancholy is a “stern exaggeration” of female endurance and piety (McMaster 363). Like Eliza Millward, the “old maid” who is her only truly welcomed companion, Mrs. Graham meets those in her community with a “proud, chilly look” (*Wildfell Hall* 23), one that further alienates her from their confidences. Unlike Florence Dombey or Caroline Helstone, Mrs. Graham is not consumed by attempts to mitigate her own suffering through “good” works or the performance of proper duties. The reader, and Gilbert, will come to learn that like the ruinous Hall she inhabits, Mrs. Graham is also “too lonely, too unsheltered” (20), but the knowledge of this vulnerability is delayed, allowing a prejudice against her character to grow within the Linden-Car community.

This prejudice is exacerbated by her reluctance to conform to her community’s expectations, in a word, to please them. Mrs. Graham’s reclusiveness, characterized as evasiveness, produces great uneasiness in the

community. In conversations with Gilbert and his mother, Mrs. Graham is fiercely self-assured, responding to one of Gilbert's myriad troubles by retorting "I should have less remorse in telling you, at the end of the discourse, that I preserve my own opinion precisely the same as at the beginning" (31). This commitment to independence of thought is intensely provoking to Gilbert and other members of this community who characterize her assertiveness as an intellectual and moral arrogance. Condemned by her community as "misguided" and "obstinate" (50), she is the object of scorn, her desire for "asylum" (47) persistently critiqued and disregarded. Labeled by her community as too "self-opinionated" (14), Mrs. Graham's self-awareness and intellectual assertiveness invite not only recrimination but myriad attempts to re-educate her into proper gender behavior (13).

In one particularly harrowing instance, Mrs. Graham's argumentative assertiveness (borne out of the experience of continually battling with her abusive husband) is met with criticism and disdain when she rejects Reverend Millward's "pastoral advice" (13):

'Hardened, I fear – hardened!' he replied, with a despondent shake of the head; 'and at the same time, there was a strong display of unchastened, misdirected passions. She turned white in the face, and drew her breath through her teeth in a savage sort of way; -- but she offered no extenuation or defence; and with a kind of shameless calmness – shocking indeed to witness, in one so young – as good as told me that my remonstrance was unavailing and my pastoral advice quite thrown away upon her.' (84)

Mrs. Graham's melancholy is here described as "unchastened, misdirected passion," thus linking her expression of emotion to sexual licentiousness. Of note is the Reverend's assessment of Mrs. Graham as "savage," as if there is a connection between her expression of anger and more primal, passionately willful behavior. Notable also is his description of her "shameless calmness," the sense that her self-control reflects not an elevated spirit but a rebellious one. In this instance, the "living in" of melancholy is interpreted by her community as an abhorrent immoral display. As Poovey writes, "social roles permeated mid-Victorian culture in sermons, conduct manuals, and popular literature with such power and in such a way as to produce the norm . . . and to define whatever did not conform to that paradigm as an 'anomaly' and therefore a 'problem'" (6). Arguably, Mrs. Graham, as a melancholic, is a defiant, problematic anomaly in this Linden-Car community.

Though she escapes Arthur's upper hand, Helen unwittingly removes herself to a social milieu intent on diagnosing, condemning, and "curing" her desire for isolation and it does so through myriad assaults upon her solitude and privacy. In this, she encounters merely another type of abuse, another "variet[y] of pain" (*Shirley* 216) inflicted upon the middle-class woman. The dissolution of Helen's melancholic solitude is thus inevitable because her melancholic identity, developed initially in Regency life, is ultimately unsustainable in this thoroughly Victorian community. In other words, although Arthur's aristocratic and excessive life is torturous for Helen, the "freedom" of this life allows for her initial success at self-determination. Once she removes to Linden-Car, these

conditions of “freedom,” however demoralizing, evaporate and alongside them so does Helen’s ability to be truly melancholic. In certain ways, Helen’s melancholic isolation is in fact *more* appropriate to her life with Arthur, a life where individuals do what they want and with whomever they choose (Hyman 459). In other words, Helen’s sense that she can assert some level of independence is drastically incompatible with Victorian domestic ideology.

Those aspects of Mrs. Graham’s character that conform to Victorian domestic ideology are ignored by her community and emphasis is placed instead on the secret she is deemed to bear. Though she acts lovingly towards her son, is sexually chaste in her interactions with men, and remains intent on pursuing some form of industry by which she might support their little family, the community will not be persuaded by this propriety. The Linden-Car community eventually vilifies Mrs. Graham’s desire for privacy and solitude, determining it a reflection of her immorality and rampant sexuality. In other words, Mrs. Graham’s proper feminine behavior is overlooked and her “proud, chilly look” (*Wildfell Hall* 23) and her “desperate frankness” (41) emerge as the central characteristics that mark her presence in Linden-Car. Although melancholy promotes her independence while she is a wife, and supports this assertion of difference in the early stages of her life in Linden-Car, ultimately, melancholy is unsustainable in the thoroughly Victorian social community of Linden-Car.

Though Mrs. Graham desires a deep and private solitude, it is a self-determined existence to which she, yet again, has no right. Like the act of shutting the bedroom door in Arthur’s face, taking her son from his home, and going to

live as a single woman earning her own money, Mrs. Graham's demands for an independent melancholic space are untenable. And so, both as a wife and as a melancholic Helen is met with violence, not only from Arthur and the members of his aristocratic circle whose abusive behavior can be attributed to addictive and excessive behaviors, but from the Linden-Car community and by Gilbert, individuals who purportedly express the "best" of Victorian self-control and self-discipline. Reverend Millward, Mrs. Markham, and Gilbert each attempt in their own ways to control or subdue Mrs. Graham, unravel the secret of her solitude against her wishes, and then cure her melancholic state despite her requests to be left alone. In this, *Wildfell Hall* explores the ways in which the melancholic's expression of individuality endures a constant threat of disintegration in the face of social pressure.

The brutality of Gilbert's interactions with Mrs. Graham and the critique she must endure from the Linden-Car community are particularly disheartening if the reader considers that she is *not* an insolent and wicked woman, but rather, a figure desperate to find peace, quiet, and privacy after many years of degradation and abuse in her marital home. Each attempt by the "sane" to thwart this pursuit of solitude is an act, I argue, of violence towards the melancholic, but it is a violence that is socially acceptable. Each attempt to puncture and penetrate that bubble of isolation she creates around herself is an act of social disciplining, but tragically, it is a disciplining Victorian society deems that she deserves. Arguably, wife assault and the abuse of the melancholic emerge in *Wildfell Hall* as analogous situations, the female melancholic a potent symbol of the ubiquity of

female oppression in middle-class Victorian society. As we will see, Brontë's depiction of the violence endured by the female melancholic suggests that it not only the force of black letter law that condemns the middle-class woman to subjugation and control by men, but the force of social codes as well. That Mrs. Graham is unable to sustain her independence whilst in the Linden-Car community suggests that the expression of "difference without difference," and an identity built upon this type of subjectivity, is not sustainable in Victorian social life due to the ways that Victorians regulated and disciplined each other through social surveillance. The violence Mrs. Graham experiences as a melancholic is one instance of this social regulation, thus mental illness is the lens by which Anne Brontë focalizes the "conditioning" of middle-class women.

While critics often read Mrs. Graham's experience in Linden-Car as the scene of her reconstitution back into proper, domestic life, a time of reconciliation spoiled only by sad memories of a bad husband, I read Mrs. Graham's interactions with her community and with Gilbert Markham as examples of the violence perpetrated against the female melancholic. Gilbert is as predatory and aggressive as Arthur and Hargrave for he continually invades Mrs. Graham's physical space, persistently attempts to converse with her, and is most arrogantly petulant when she demurs. Essentially, Gilbert's treatment of Mrs. Graham is an extension of the violence she endures within her marriage and suggests not only his blatant disregard of Mrs. Graham's wishes but also his belief that she deserves this unwelcome attention, that she in fact *invites* this interference into her solitary life. Mrs. Graham describes his invasiveness, and the community's demand that

she participate socially, as “violence to [her] feelings” (288). In this statement, she characterizes the attack on her melancholic solitude as an act of hostility and aggression.

Wildfell Hall depicts the melancholic woman as prey and those who pursue her as predators “exulting in [their] power” and “dallying with their victims like cats” (260). Just as Helen’s insistent refusal of Arthur’s authority fueled his most violent assaults upon her, Mrs. Graham’s rejection of her community’s authority invites their most predatory assaults. For one, it is assumed that the cause of Mrs. Graham’s mysterious appearance within the Linden-Car community must be scandalous in nature for, as Lee suggests, it was “simply assumed by most people that a secretive single mother must be licentious” (11). As Lynn Abrams suggests, single mothers were also considered *defiant*:

In nineteenth-century religious, moral and legal discourse, the single mother was represented as deviant, irresponsible and dangerous. Envisaged as either a fallen woman or a prostitute, the unmarried mother was held up as the archetype of the sexual woman; a woman who was not subject to a man within marriage. (118)

Gilbert, like the rest of his community, assumes that Mrs. Graham is this archetypal “fallen woman,” that she is likely carrying on a sexual relationship with her landlord Frederick Lawrence and that, most probably, she has scandalously abandoned her husband. When she refuses to reveal her secret, the suspicion sexual immodesty justifies Gilbert’s predatory advances. In other

words, if she is already “fallen,” certainly she can endure his rather forward and aggressive behavior. Of course, there is no truth to the rumors about her “fallen” nature and in fact, as Lee argues, Mrs. Graham is “the antithesis of the social reputation foisted on her by a judgmental society” (Lee 11). Nonetheless, it is her fate to be considered sexually impure by all those around her.

Mrs. Graham’s violent treatment begins with the community’s relentless demands for information about her personal history, described by her as “pertinacious and impertinent home thrusts” (*Wildfell Hall* 13). While Mrs. Graham professes a desire to be alone, stating “I like to be quiet” (53), she is repeatedly expected to account for her life, her history, and her character. Gilbert’s brother Fergus demands Mrs. Graham reveal her place of birth, employing extraordinarily adversarial and inquisitorial language. He declares “the questions you are requested to solve are these” (54) and when Mrs. Graham demurs, seeking “refuge” at the window in a “desperate” attempt to “escape” his “persecutions” (54), Fergus’s troubles become even more pointed. The narrative describes her “very desperation” and “disquietude” as she attempts to evade Fergus’s aggressive questioning. Mrs. Graham describes his invasiveness, and the demand that she participate socially, as “violence to my feelings,” noting the pain present in the “goading” by others she experiences (288).

While Gilbert must publicly condemn Mrs. Graham’s supposedly licentious sexual history, her “secret” is nonetheless incredibly provocative to him privately, more tantalizing than any of the extroverted, unreserved pleasantries of Eliza Millward, the woman with whom he is supposed to be infatuated. Again,

this contrasts sharply with Florence's profound experience of isolation in *Dombey and Son* and the ways Charlotte Brontë insistently aligns Caroline with neglected and undesirable female characters. In *Wildfell Hall*, the dark broodiness of Mrs. Graham's melancholy is sexually enticing to the men in her social milieu. The more Mrs. Graham withdraws, the more Gilbert advances and despite Mrs. Graham's every attempt to keep private the conditions of her suffering, Gilbert becomes ever more intent on gaining access not only to her mysterious history, but to her physical person. With every evasive maneuver, Mrs. Graham excites Gilbert's desire for control over her. It is Mrs. Graham's "proud, chilly look" that so provokes him, leaving Gilbert "angry and dissatisfied" (23), intent on knowing the reason for her reserve and aloofness. We might linger on Brontë's use of "dissatisfied" to suggest the sexual connotations of Gilbert's frustration.

Early in the novel, Gilbert vaults over Mrs. Graham's garden fence, after she has explicitly asked him to leave. Gilbert remarks, "I had not thus looked, and wished, and wondered long, before I vaulted over the barrier, unable to resist the temptation of taking one glance through the window, just to see if she were more composed than when we parted" (90). This "taking" of a glance exemplifies the ways that Gilbert, like many of the characters in this text both male *and* female, expect the melancholic to grant them access to the private space she has created for herself in the ways that Arthur expected Helen to grant him access to her physical body. Though it is a seemingly innocuous act, Gilbert's audacity in jumping the "barrier" into Mrs. Graham's garden after she begs him to leave reveals the broader community's intention to thwart and reject the melancholic's

desire for privacy. In this aggressive act towards Mrs. Graham, Gilbert asserts a similar “right” to that of an abusive husband, namely the “right” to transgress the melancholic’s physical and psychological barriers as an expression of the law of coverture. Gilbert’s act suggests also his “right” to correct the melancholic with physical (and psychological) punishments when she fails to behave as he wishes, even though Gilbert acts merely as her suitor and with no actual force of law to support his behavior. Insidiously, Gilbert seems cognizant of the ways his unwelcome advances upset her, stating “She seemed agitated, and even dismayed at my arrival, as if she thought, I too was coming to accuse her” (85). Yet he continues in his pursuit, in other words, in his abuse of her.

Although he is only Mrs. Graham’s suitor, Gilbert belittles Helen in the same dismissive and callous ways that Arthur did. After one extended episode of conversation in which Mrs. Graham has disagreed vehemently with Gilbert, he dismisses her expression of opinion in an entirely condescending tone, despite the verbal acumen she has displayed. Responding to her impassioned speech about “men of the world” (an opinion gathered through the torment she suffers with Arthur, a suffering Gilbert about which he knows nothing at this point), Gilbert characterizes her style of discourse as one designed to keep “the mental organs resolutely closed against the strongest reasoning” (31). Stating “you ladies must always have the last word,” he gives her hand a “spiteful squeeze” (31), an act which suggests Gilbert’s malicious, insidious desire to inflict pain when it appears he will not be able to dominate Mrs. Graham intellectually. This is the “spiteful squeeze” of a man refused, and his behavior, while minor in relation to the other

instances of abuse in the novel, suggests the ways in which Mrs. Graham's attempts to withstand or counter Gilbert's assertions of control expose her to physical violence.

While Hattersley suggests that his attacks on Millicent are provoked by her submissiveness as a wife, Gilbert's dogged pursuit of Mrs. Graham (and his anger when she contradicts him in conversation) foregrounds how the assertion of any form of difference by women invites the potential for violence and reprimand. After one particularly antagonistic encounter between the two, Gilbert's explanation of his behavior is profoundly disconcerting and chilling. He asserts "I can crush [Mrs. Graham's] bold spirit . . . But while I secretly exulted in my power, I felt disposed to dally with my victim like a cat" (107). This kind of manliness is frightening, and reveals a capacity for self-control developed not to rational and thoughtful ends, but to its aggressive and domineering limits. While the novel does contrast Gilbert with Arthur, it nevertheless suggests that Gilbert too has, at the very least, a callous disregard for women, and at the very worst, excessive and violent urges he must learn to restrain.

This propensity towards violence is exemplified in his vicious attack on Frederick Lawrence, whom he sees as a rival for Mrs. Graham's attention. When he determines, however erroneously, that Frederick and Mrs. Graham are romantically involved, Gilbert's sexual jealousy erupts in physical aggression. His assault upon Frederick is as vicious as Hattersley's on Millicent, if perhaps more so for the physical injuries he causes to Frederick. And his pleasure in this violent act is explicit, for Gilbert remarks "It was not without a feeling of savage

satisfaction that I beheld the instant, deadly pallor that overspread his face, and the few red drops that trickled down his forehead” (98). Importantly, Gilbert is sober in this moment unlike Arthur and Hattersley who are in various states of drunkenness during most of their most violent outbursts. While Gilbert’s conscience forces him to return to the scene of the crime to determine that his victim is not bleeding to death, he is neither repentant of nor agonized by his violent act. When Lawrence refuses his help, Gilbert blasphemes “You may go to the d – l if you choose – and say I sent you” (100).¹¹²

While Herbert Sussman suggests that Gilbert’s attempts to control his bitter jealousy and frustration make him an exemplar of Victorian domestic manhood’s struggle with self-discipline (Sussman xx), Gilbert remains a man possessed throughout the novel by excessive and violent urges that he barely overcomes—the struggle is, at times, futile. As Rachel Carnell suggests, he is consistently aligned with the other men of the text who attempt to profit from Helen’s vulnerable position (16). One should pressure a characterization of Gilbert as Arthur’s essentially benign foil for, arguably, there are more similarities between the two men than there are differences. While he is meant to represent Victorian “manhood” in evolution, Gilbert cannot be aligned with the gentle Walter of *Dombey and Son* or the self-reflective and intuitive David of *David Copperfield*, for Gilbert’s antagonistic, petulant, domineering character mirrors Arthur’s demeanor more so than these characterizations of masculine self-control. Gilbert’s propensity towards violence is singularly important therefore in Brontë’s discussion of melancholy, for his presence in the Linden-Car circle, and

his relentless pursuit of Mrs. Graham, perpetuates the sense of predation and violence that plagues this text and renders so debilitating the conditions of a middle-class woman's life. In this, Brontë demonstrates the omnipresent violence experienced by Victorian women whether married or single, "happy" or melancholic.

In an 1848 review from the *North American Review*, the reviewer E.P. Whipple is quick to condemn Gilbert, who although the romantic hero, displays a nature "fierce, proud, moody, jealous, revengeful and sometimes brutal. We can see nothing good in him except a certain rude honesty; and that quality is seen chiefly in his bursts of hatred and his insults to women" (369). Similarly, in his 1849 review, Kingsley indicts Gilbert's latent *and* manifest brutality, offering this assessment:

all the characteristics we do find, beyond the general dashing, manful spirit of a young farmer, is a very passionate and somewhat brutal temper, and, to say the least, a wanton rejection of a girl [Eliza Millward] to whom he has been giving most palpable and somewhat rough proofs of affection, and whom he afterwards hates bitterly, simply because she rallies him on having jilted her for a woman against whose character there was very possible ground for suspicion. (430)

While he is not plagued by the abuse of alcohol and philandering excesses that destroy Arthur, with respect to Mrs. Graham, Gilbert is still a dominating male, intent on penetrating the barrier of her solitude with his forceful demands for her time and attention. Gilbert's attempts to woo Mrs. Graham reveal not the

expression of genuine love, but rather a quest to access those parts of her life which she insists must be kept private. Gilbert himself notes this lack of self-control, stating that in his youth, namely the period of time in which he first encounters Mrs. Graham, he “had not acquired half the rule over my own spirit” (*Wildfell Hall* 11) that he feels he possesses later in his life. While Matus suggests that Gilbert only looks foolish with his “puffed-up sense of power and his conception of relationship as antagonism and power struggle” (107), I conclude that the novel’s emphasis on his petulant and adversarial behavior reveals Gilbert’s potential to overwhelm Mrs. Graham, to dominate her, to expose her to the same kinds of violence she experienced with Arthur. He is not unlike Charlotte Brontë’s Robert Moore in this regard.

Rather than exalting his character as Victorian “manliness” in evolution, then, we might linger on its potentially sinister features, what Surridge calls a capacity for “an innate violence of temper and turbulence of emotion” (82). Although Matus suggests that apart from his attack on Frederick Lawrence, Markham’s passionate outbursts are “occasions for a genial mockery of arrogant immaturity or romantic lovesickness” (107), I argue they display a much more shocking and predatory aspect in Gilbert who, while not a drunken rake like Arthur, still retains the capacity to hurt Mrs. Graham both emotionally and physically. Furthermore, while Matus argues that Gilbert’s “turbulent passions and excesses are at times made to seem slightly ridiculous” (108), I suggest that they colour the text with an emphasis not on the differences between Arthur and Gilbert, but to use Charlotte Brontë’s words, merely different “varieties of pain”

(*Shirley* 216) that have masculine entitlement as their singular source. In the ways Mrs. Graham becomes the focus of Gilbert's violent need to control and subdue, *Wildfell Hall* foregrounds not only the weakened and fragile position of women within this community but the unchecked power and authority of its men.

Moreover, that Helen moves from one scene of violence to another, from abuse at the hands of Regency excess to the aggression of a sexually frustrated Victorian manliness, suggests the omnipresence of male violence across society, regardless of class or historical period. In this, Brontë suggests that abuse within the middle-class home might not merely be possible but in fact prevalent, not an aberration but common place. This is not necessarily a revelation within writing about the condition of women in this period, but that it comes through the destruction of the only vision of female autonomy offered by the narrative, female melancholy, suggests the impossibility of any true form of female emancipation. This is a cynical and disheartening pronouncement about the status of women in mid-century England, particularly, and Victorian culture generally.

Gilbert's actions speed on the disintegration of Mrs. Graham's cloak of privacy and independence, hurrying forward the evaporation of her melancholic solitude. In many ways, Gilbert's exposure of the diary, and importantly, his revelation of her writing to Halford, reveals the ways her story is "narratively enclosed" (Carnell 5) within Gilbert's attempts to reach a harmonious relationship with the other proper, Victorian men of the text. Although Mrs. Graham gives Gilbert the diary, in an effort to explain to him her behavior, Gilbert's *disclosure* of the diary (after Mrs. Graham has explicitly asked him to keep it secret) signals

the impossibility that the melancholic can survive in this community of meddling, self-righteous, middle-class Victorians. In the face of Gilbert's repeated and insistent invasion, it is inevitable that Mrs. Graham's solitude and privacy crumbles. Her attempt to secure for herself an independent existence separate from Arthur has failed, for it is clear that no one in Linden-Car will afford her this solitary space. Moreover, her attempt to justify her desire for privacy fails, for when she shares her diary with Gilbert he casually disregards her request the diary remain private and responds to her painful tale with a rather pathetic proposal of marriage. Mrs. Graham's fear that Huntingdon will discover her location and take back their son, as well as the torment of living as the target of social scorn and discipline, cast a pallor on what might otherwise have been a viable existence for her as a melancholic. Once Arthur is dead, and she is outside a charge of desertion, what next, but to join the ranks of "normal" middle-class domestic wives? What is left for her but an attempt to mitigate the social price she has paid for leaving her husband? At least in this go-round she has at her side not a Regency scoundrel intent on pursuing every avenue of vice in his purview, but ostensibly, a "normal" Victorian man, a man who will "refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach [him] the evil of transgression" (*Wildfell Hall* 30).

Helen's marriage to Gilbert should represent her introduction to a public *and* private sphere possessed of rational and equitable social relations (McMaster 363) and "productive activity" (Hyman 465), an evolution from the excessive Regency past to the proper Victorian future. However, *Wildfell Hall*, like *Dombey*

and Son and *Shirley*, ends with a blunting of the female melancholic's sensitivity and self-awareness as she is re-gathered into the folds of patriarchal domestic organization that differ only slightly from the excesses of the Regency era. In *Wildfell Hall*, a woman's reintegration back into proper married life is simply her recapture and most definitely her re-exposure to the social and domestic conditions that furthered her abuse in the first place and may very well continue to do so. Upon accepting Gilbert's proposal, Mrs. Graham's melancholic identity is subsumed into that of "proper," Victorian wife, her difference normalized by her participation in proper forms of social organization not unlike those experienced by Dickens's and Charlotte's protagonists.

At the novel's conclusion, Gilbert has been somewhat transformed from an immature fop to a self-disciplined middle-class Victorian man, but this evolution is marred by his previously overwrought and physically threatening behavior towards Mrs. Graham. The myriad instances of Gilbert's violent and impetuous behavior throughout the novel prejudice all of his subsequent interactions with Mrs. Graham such that the reader cannot trust that Gilbert will not be abusive towards her in marriage as he has been throughout their courtship. Thus, in *Wildfell Hall* and *Shirley*, unlike in *Dombey and Son*, love is not the expression of souls in communion. Nor can it be characterized as a relationship between men and women governed by reasoned, genteel, middle-class codes of behavior. Brontë thus foregrounds not the rational or thoughtful expression of love between the sexes, but love's capacity to injure and harm.

As Matus astutely observes, Gilbert is never the idealized antidote to Arthur's abusive behavior, but rather, he is the means by which Brontë considers the "question of masculine adequacy – what makes a worthwhile, redeemable, 'good enough' man" (108). Arguably, Gilbert never is quite "good enough" for Mrs. Graham, nor will their life together ever be quite "good enough," but their marriage at the novel's conclusion suggests the limited options available to women seeking a life outside of conventional gender and marital roles. While *Jane Eyre* can decide *not* to marry St. Jean at the conclusion of that text, Mrs. Graham really has no other avenue available to her except to join with Gilbert in an attempt to make whole her fractured domestic life. In this, Brontë offers her readership a much more disheartening and cynical view of the material circumstances of middle-class life, eschewing the fairy-tale like quality of *Jane Eyre* in favor of a darker, more misanthropic comment on the condition of middle-class marriage. *Wildfell Hall* concludes by demonstrating the impossibility that a Victorian woman such as Mrs. Graham might continue to live without a husband, and importantly, the unlikelihood that the melancholic subject can ever maintain the sphere of privacy in which she can enact her solitude and difference. At the same time, Brontë concludes the novel through a turn towards the humanizing ideal of a woman's influence on men as well as the ideal of the benevolent, rational landlord (exemplified in the newly-reformed Gilbert), all crucial to the stability of the bourgeois public sphere (Carnell 18). This is not unlike the conclusion of *Shirley*, demonstrating Anne Brontë's sympathetic, but

still very vexed, consideration of the capacity for women to “soothe” disharmony in the home as well as the public sphere.

Contemporary critics noted the problematic nature of the novel’s conclusion, denigrating its awkward tableau of domestic harmony. As an 1848 review from the *Rambler* suggests “the hero and heroine marry, after a courtship conducted with [a] peculiar bluntness and roughness of conduct and language” (“From an unsigned review” 66). Though critics attributed the novel’s dissatisfying conclusion to Brontë’s inexperience as a writer, and Charlotte was of this group, the novel’s alarming sense of irresolution at its conclusion should be more properly located in Anne Brontë’s persistent attention to the “roughness” of life, to her commitment to exploring the private sphere as a place of sadness and disruption. Brontë does not redeem her characters’ blots and much to her critics’ dismay, rejects the impulse to “refine and elevate her general notions of all human and divine things” (66). Her novel maintains what Kingsley termed “a melancholy” quality, one that is very rarely relieved or off-set by “harmony and melody” (432). It is in this thwarting of redemption that Brontë takes up, in order to complicate, both the notion that marriage provides security and protection for women but also the belief that the “cure” for female melancholic suffering might be found in her adoption of proper gendered behavior. It is in the awkwardness of her conclusion, like that of her sister’s in *Shirley*, that we may locate Brontë’s proto-feminist critique.

While Drew Lamonica comments that all Brontë novels ultimately redeem the family unit, adopting a pattern of movement from “a family that cannot

accommodate the self to one that can” (7), we must consider the extent to which this aspect of accommodation holds true in *Wildfell Hall*. As I have endeavored to show, the recreated family at the novel’s conclusion, while certainly less overtly violent and abusive than Helen’s first, is nonetheless marked not only by a disregard for the privacy demanded by the female melancholic but also the potential, however latent, for continued violence towards women. *Wildfell Hall* thus foregrounds the ways in which Victorian laws prevented redress for women trapped in the dissolution of the marital ideal. The novel demonstrates that while moral autonomy is intrinsic to a woman’s ability to withstand abuse, there existed numerous and impenetrable barriers to the actual exercise of such independence (SurrIDGE 96). *Wildfell Hall* suggests similarly that a certain degree of autonomy is necessary for one to truly inhabit or “live within” one’s melancholy, but that there will always be those determined to “cure” the melancholic even when she explicitly professes a preference for the anonymity, solitude, and privacy that accompanies and in fact provides the conditions for this suffering.

Although initially successful, at least in terms of sales, *Wildfell Hall* was quite quickly relegated to the margins of the Brontë canon after Anne’s death and until recently, was most often considered a lesser Brontë work. Its marginal status can be attributed both to its poor critical reception at its time of publishing, but also, to Charlotte’s public condemnation of the novel’s subject matter. Writing in the “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” in September of 1850, Charlotte Brontë states that it was an “entire mistake” for “gentle Anne” to have tackled such themes as she did and that she could “not wonder” at the unfavorable

reviews (Smith *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë* ii: 742-747). Carnell suggests further that even as Anne Brontë was participating in a tradition of rational debate about the larger public good, her position as female novelist was diminishing in cultural authority as compared to more scientifically trained writers such as Eliot (22). However, the narrative's lack of "gentleness" and its emphasis on the particularities of emotional experience in fact reflect Anne Brontë's steadfast commitment to exposing the discord in Victorian family life, one that perhaps Charlotte was not yet willing (or able) to explore in *Shirley* to its fullest and most dramatic extent. Anne's commitment to the darkness of life, and her particularly brilliant discussion of the vexed nature of marital relations, posits melancholy as *the* psychological experience of modern life and ensures the centrality of *Wildfell Hall* within the Victorian canon.

Chapter 6:

Conclusion: “Strange Sufferings” and “Airy Forms”

The moralists reflecting on the melancholy fate of the poet [William] Collins, all talk of the uncertainty of fortune, and the transitoriness of beauty: but it is yet more dreadful to consider that the powers of the mind are equally liable to change; that understanding may make its appearance and depart, that it may blaze and expire. (Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* 131 (1791))

I would not go so far as to say that poetry is a “male medium” for the expression or representation of melancholy, for we can certainly identify these same kinds of explorations in the work of late Romantic poets Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon and Victorian poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti.¹¹³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning in particular contested Carlyle’s assertion that “poetic genius” was a male preserve. Her long poem *Aurora Leigh* stands among her most important efforts to represent “poetic eminence in an unapologetic female form” (Bristow 17). At the same time, I would not suggest that the realist novel is a “female medium” where male melancholy is less aptly represented. Dickens’s representation of Paul Dombey Junior’s melancholic death suggests the significance of melancholic representation within the realist novel in ways that mirror his representation of Florence’s suffering. What I would argue, however, is that the realist novel, in this regard, represents female melancholy in such a way that suggests a non-gender specific trace of melancholy present throughout

Victorian private and public life. Although it has not been a central feature of my project, my work has sought to demonstrate that the figure of the female melancholic in the realist novel is as much a harbinger of the Victorian era's modernity as is the figure of the male melancholic in poetry. The work of female melancholy in the realist novel is to interrogate middle-class experience overall. In so doing, melancholy in the realist novel offers insights about the Victorians at mid-century that further enrich and, importantly, *extend* poetic notions of the exigencies and vexations of Victorian life.

I have framed this work through an interrogation of theories of the domestic, but this is merely a sub-sphere of the era's overarching concern with the regulation of the individual, one present in poetry *and* in the novel. As Butler points out, "the account of melancholy is an account of how psychic and social domains are produced in relation to one another" (*Psychic Life of Power* 167-68) and the representation of female melancholy in the realist novel speaks to the way in which *all* Victorians negotiated this boundary between desire and one's conscience, what would come to be known in Freud as ego and superego. The presence of female melancholy, therefore, speaks to overarching concerns in the age about the moral order to which Victorians were subject and subjected themselves. I began this project by stating that melancholy affords us the opportunity, in our post-structuralist moment of fragmented selves and anti-essentialism, to consider the individual in negotiation with and sustaining an identifiable moral order in ever more pronounced ways. My invocation of theories of the domestic exemplifies one version of the moral order socially constructed in

this moment but there are many others. The purchase of melancholy, therefore, is its engagement with an essentialism that allows us to view myriad social and political constructs within a particular age, not so much to assert their unalterable or immutable qualities, but to consider their expression and reification in the era's literary artifacts.

What emerges from a study of the literary representation of melancholy in prose is a sense of melancholy as a device by which writers at mid-century examined many of the politically charged and unresolved socio-political issues confronting Victorians in their private lives. Divorce, the custody of children outside of marriage, the plight of disadvantaged workers in an increasingly industrialized manufacturing culture, wife assault, the fate of middle-class spinsters, and the disintegration of rural modes of life as a result of technological expansion are central considerations in these three novels and melancholy touches each in turn. My analysis of melancholy attempts to account for the ways melancholy illuminates broader political and social concerns in the realist novel so as to recast these novels as participants within the conversations about social reform current in this late 1840s moment. Though *Shirley* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* achieve this social commentary in ways more explicit than does *Dombey and Son*, all three novels certainly resonate with the spirit of social transformation plaguing but also invigorating their moment of publication.

Moreover, each text gestures towards the fractures and betrayals present in the private life of the Victorian family and all implicitly query the authority of middle-class ideologies that govern its rituals and organization. Although one can

fairly accurately identify a “dominant social character” within this period of the late 1840s, such a character was, as Raymond Williams suggests, the “subject of many personal variations” which he describes as “alternatives” (*The Long Revolution* 78). I argue that the melancholic woman is one example of Williams’ “alternative social characters” querying, if not necessarily rebelling against, the dominant social character of her age. As Carolyn Steedman notes, the difficulty of a project which charts psychological transformation and engagement lies in the relationship between the pages of the novel or the medical textbook and the social world in which women and men come to know themselves in a lived experience where they have not read the novels or the “science” in which we, as contemporary scholars, locate the “origins” of their psychological experience (13). This concern about the fissure between the actual and the projected affirms Mary Jacobus’s very apt inquiry into “the question of how things get ... from the outside to the inside. ... What does it mean to call this ‘interiority’ ... and by what process does this come into being” (18)? My project, therefore, has sought a means of describing developments in the history of psychology as they relate to material experience, all the while acknowledging the tentativeness of the project. Realist novels of melancholy typify how fiction turns “the materials of history into a representation of consciousness” (*Desire and Domestic Fiction* 2). The Victorian realist novel, through its consideration of contemporary medical theory, the history of domestic organization, and trends in historical and political considerations of the “subject” thus produces a vision of what David Newsome calls the Victorian world picture.

Like the history of mental illness in the nineteenth century, this dissertation is the result of a sometimes convoluted and sometimes frustrating intellectual journey. However, the core intuition that has persistently informed my thinking and the writing about melancholy is that many of our most important understandings about our “modern” existence are manifestations of what Thomas Dumm calls “the melancholy that has permeated the modern world” (x). This dissertation, therefore, concerns itself not only with the emergence of a Victorian understanding of melancholy, but with melancholy’s ongoing presence as the common experience of our time (x), borne out of rampant transformations and uncertainties present in the Victorian era. We twenty-first century beings have inherited the Victorian preoccupation with melancholy. An acknowledgement of melancholy’s omnipresence is a key to understanding our modernity and the political, technological, and economic mutability of our own moment.

Our culture, however, is as concerned with melancholy’s inverse as we are with melancholy itself. We see this obsession with happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment expressed in our myriad attempts to understand how to be happy or, in other words, how to stave off unhappiness. Though Samuel Johnson identified the mid-eighteenth century’s uneasiness with unhappiness, his assessment rings true today. As a culture, we are unflaggingly concerned with the notion that the “powers of the mind are ... liable to change” and “that understanding may make its appearance and depart, and that it may blaze and expire” (Boswell 131) leaving us forlorn and suffering. We seem most uncomfortable with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s willingness to “accept the clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies”

(480). And so, from non-fiction best-sellers such as Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project* (2009) to pseudo-self-help "chick lit" texts like Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) to Elizabeth Dunn's recent University of British Columbia study on the relationship between pro-social spending and happiness (2008), our culture is pre-occupied not with how one lives *with* melancholy but importantly, with how one *avoids* and *alleviates* melancholy when the disappointments and dissatisfactions of life begin to intrude.

By contrast, my dissertation remains focused upon the representation, in Victorian fiction, of the living *with* melancholy and what emerges from such an experience. I find myself drawn to Dumm's *Loneliness as a Way of Life* (2008) and Eric Wilson's *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy* (2008) for the emphasis each places on the productivity of dissatisfaction but also the attention to the "peculiar music, wild, melancholy" that emerges when an individual sits in contemplation of herself (Charlotte Brontë "Biographical Notice"). The Victorians knew that we pine, despair, and fret with much more frequency and with much more purchase than we eat, pray, and love. Overall, it is a profoundly productive moment when we commune with our interiority, in part or *in toto*, and it is a moment that is productive of a new way if not of being but of understanding our world. It is the moment when melancholy is produced and the Subject emerges. While we might be fools to seek out sorrow, and while melancholy is not necessarily an experience that we can share in tandem, I find that unavoidable (and immitigable) suffering is an integral part of modern life and replicated across individual experience. Perhaps "the deepest and most ancient truth of modern

life” (Dumm 15) is the ubiquity and necessary persistence of the “strange sufferings” and “airy forms” (*Dombey and Son* 706) of melancholic madness.

Endnotes

¹ For more extended discussion, see Jennifer Radden's Moody Minds Distempered: Essays on Melancholy and Depression (2009) and Stanley Jackson's Melancholia and Depression (1986).

² In my discussion of this literature, I will employ broad terms such as “women,” the “middle class,” and the “family.” While these are useful terms to use as starting points, I acknowledge the error in assuming that one can universalize or essentialize a shared consciousness across classes and gender. Rather, I intend to demonstrate that the social attitudes that shape behavior grow from a whole complex of influences that make up the culture in which one lives (Mitchell xiii).

³ See Andrew Wynter's The Borderlands of Insanity (1875).

⁴ Despite her pathology, the female melancholic emerges as a reader of her *culture* in ways analogous to the middle-class reader of the novel for each is a sympathetic engagement with “life as it is” and in this, produces an ethical response. See John Guillory's “Ethical Practice” for a more extended argument.

⁵ For more, see Mary Poovey Uneven Developments—the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Century England (1988).

⁶ I use this term to invoke the same sense of “spirit” John Stuart Mill identifies in his “The Spirit of the Age” (1831).

⁷ For more, see Riede's Allegories of One's Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian Poetry (2005).

⁸ For more, see Christopher Herbert's Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century (1991).

⁹ Hallam's view that "modern poetry in proportion to its depth and truth is likely to have little immediate authority over public opinion" (303) contrasts markedly with Horne's view of the emerging role of the novel in mid-century Victorian culture.

¹⁰ For more on the reaction *against* melancholy in the Victorian era, please see Riede's Allegories of One's Own Mind (2005).

¹¹ For more see, Matthew Rowlinson's Tennyson's Fixations: Psychoanalysis and the Topics of the Early Poetry (1994), Riede's Allegories of One's Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian Poetry (2005), and Ekbert Faas's Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry (1988). There are, of course, numerous other studies.

¹² Please see my discussion of Victorian medical theory in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

¹³ George Drinka sees the iconic "Angelic Invalid" (33) as central to nineteenth-century discussions of the birth of neurosis, Patricia Jalland notes the popularity of diarized deathbed memorials that sanctified the suffering of the invalid as a form of religious conversion, Miriam Bailin discusses how the sickroom in Victorian fiction represents a social order more amenable to female desires even as it confirmed women in their isolation, and Gilbert and Gubar note that the "female diseases" from which Victorian women suffered were not always by-

products, but rather the goals, of their training in femininity. I will draw upon each of these central considerations of invalidism in my work on melancholy.

¹⁴ See Gilbert and Gubar's chapter "The Genesis of Hunger: Shirley" in The Madwoman in the Attic (1979) at 373-398.

¹⁵ For more, see Katherine Byrne's Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination (2011) and Pamela Gilbert's Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels (1997).

¹⁶ See for example Frank Mort's Dangerous Sexualities (2000), Joan Lane's A Social History of Medicine (2001), Bailin's The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction (1994), Anne Krugovoy Silver's Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body (2002), Helen Small's Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity (1996), Byrne's Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination (2011), and Kate Flint's The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change (1987).

¹⁷ In the American context, neurasthenia related most closely to hysteria. For more reading on American theories of neurasthenia, or "brain drain" as it was commonly called, see Silas Weir Mitchell's Doctor and Patient (1888). Weir Mitchell, a significant authority of the "rest cure" as the treatment for female physical and psychological problems of all varieties, wrote numerous texts on female neurasthenia. See also George Miller Beard's voluminous work on neurasthenia including A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (1880) and American Nervousness: its causes and consequences (1881).

¹⁸ Byrne locates this same duality in the signification of tuberculosis, although she delineates it as the binary of purity and spirituality on one hand, and sexual deviance on the other (6).

¹⁹ Likewise, Dickens's essay "A Visit to Newgate" begins its exploration of the prison with sympathetic depictions of female prisoners such as a "yellow, haggard, decrepit old woman" and a "good looking robust young female with a profusion of hair streaming about in the wind . . . hardened beyond all hope of redemption" ("A Visit to Newgate" 189).

²⁰ Across both literary and non-literary texts, a definitive notion of sexual difference emerges as a contested construction, with various stakeholders struggling for authority over its definition. "Sexual difference" can therefore be seen as an ideology "unevenly" constructed across the Victorian period (Poovey 4).

²¹ For more on railway time and space, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch's The Railway Journey: the industrialization of time and space in the 19th century (1987).

²² In Chapter 33 of *David Copperfield*, David describes his wife Dora in this way: "her idea was my refuge in disappointment and distress, and made some amends to me, even for the loss of my friend . . . the greater the accumulation of deceit and trouble in the world, the brighter and purer shone the star of Dora above the world."

²³ Sarah Stickney Ellis wrote four texts on English womanhood entitled The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits (1839), The Daughters of England (1842), The Wives of England (1843) and The Mothers of England (1844). She wrote also The Young Ladies' Reader (1845) and The Mothers of Great Men (1859).

²⁴ For further reading on the “separate spheres” doctrine, see Davidoff and Hall’s Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle-Class, 1780-1850 (1987), especially the introductory chapter and Catherine Hall’s “The Mid-century Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology” in White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History (1992).

²⁵ See particularly the chapters in Lewis’s Woman’s Mission entitled “Maternal Influence” and “Proper Sphere for the Influence of Women.”

²⁶ In his 1869 text Why are Women Redundant, William Rathbone Greg addresses the results of the 1851 Census and concludes that the disproportion between the male and female population can be attributed to a variety of causes including, but not limited to, emigration, domestic service and male profligacy.

²⁷ See for example Cobbe’s 1862 essay “Celibacy v. Marriage” as well as her 1868 essay “Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors.”

²⁸ For more, see “The Psychic and the Social: Boundaries of Identity in 19th century psychology” in Jenny Bourne Taylor’s In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and Nineteenth-Century Psychology (1988). Lyn Pykett notes how this rhetoric of dual womanhood, improper/proper,

sexual/asexual, immoral/moral, is put to work particularly within the genre of the sensation novel of the 1860s. Pykett foregrounds the contradictory discourse between what she terms proper (asexual and maternal) femininity and “improper” (emotional, sexual and unrestrained) femininity. See particularly Pykett’s The “Improper” Feminine: The woman’s sensation novel and the New Woman writing (1992). See also Harriet Taylor’s discussion of “unfeminine” pursuits for women in her “Enfranchisement of Women” at 57.

²⁹ For more, see Elizabeth Langland Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture (1995), especially the introductory chapter, and Karen Chase and Michael Levenson’s The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family (2000), especially the introductory chapter.

³⁰ One can locate arguments for the advancement of women’s education in almost all of the writing at mid-century. The difference lies in the extent to which the authors felt education could free women from the restrictions of domestic life. Anne Jameson, for instance, suggests that education would raise the stature of governesses, but only so far as it does not render them “hard, clever, sophisticated girls ... with whom vanity and expediency take place of conscience and affection” (xxxix).

³¹ For more on this topic, see the introduction and opening chapters of Samuel Smiles’s 1859 text Self-Help, with Illustrations of Characters, Conduct, and Perseverance.

³² For further reading, see George Levine's The Realistic Imagination (1981), especially chapter one, and Michael McKeon's The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740 (2002), especially the introductory chapter.

³³ Levine calls this sympathetic anthropology (How to Read the Victorian Novel 32).

³⁴ For further reading, see David Newsome's The Victorian World Picture (1997).

³⁵ For further reading, see John Kucich's "Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel: Religion, Science, and the Professional" in The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel at 212-32. Gillian Beer also illuminates the close connection between the realist aesthetic and the discourses of medicine, psychiatry, and evolutionary biology, contending that it is the realist novel, and its re-conception of a morality based on the recognition of human connectedness and the significance of human relationship, that destabilizes previous certainties in traditional religious authority. For further reading, see Beer's Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter (1996).

³⁶ In mid-century nineteenth century science, the doctor as "the omniscient, detached observer reveals an immanent power to penetrate and know the embodied self [he] treats" (Shuttleworth Victorian Psychology 17)

³⁷ Realist novels of this era depict characters whose traits are drawn from "the classificatory schemes" of nineteenth century medicine (Kucich "Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel: Religion, Science, and the Professional" 218).

³⁸ For more see D.A. Miller's The Novel and the Police (1988), Langland's Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture, and Nancy Armstrong's Desire and Domestic Fiction (1987).

³⁹ For further reading, see Armstrong's Desire and Domestic Fiction, especially the introductory chapter, and Armstrong's How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900 (2005), especially chapter one.

⁴⁰ For more detailed descriptions of the rise in psychiatry and psychology in the Victorian period, see Faas, especially chapters two and three, Janet Oppenheim's 'Shattered Nerves': Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England, (1991) especially chapter two, and Elaine Showalter's The Female Malady (1985), especially chapters one and two, Susan David Bernstein's Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature and Culture (1997), Chris Wieszthal's Figuring Madness in Nineteenth-Century Fiction (1997) and Small's Love's Madness: medicine, the novel and female insanity, 1800-1865.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the proliferation of psychiatric medical journals in the 1840s, see Bourne Taylor's In the Secret Theatre of Home, chapter one.

⁴² Judith Butler states "[w]hereas introjection [the work of mourning] founds the possibility of metaphorical signification, incorporation [the work of melancholy] is anti-metaphorical precisely because it maintains the loss as radically unnameable; in other words, incorporation is not only a failure to name or avow

the loss, [it] erodes the conditions of metaphorical signification itself” (Psychic Life of Power 68).

⁴³ For further reading, see Max Pensky’s Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning (2001), Butler’s The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection (1997) and Slavoj Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (2005).

⁴⁴ For further reading, see Oppenheim, especially the introductory chapter.

⁴⁵ In contrast to the monomaniac who “lives without himself and diffuses among others the excess of his emotion,” the melancholic “fastens upon himself all his thoughts, all his affections; is egotistical and lives *within* himself” (Esquirol 320). Such a description of a perverse or morbid world “within” the melancholic anticipates later Freudian understandings of melancholy as a process of encryption or incorporation, wherein the melancholic obsesses over her lost object of desire. See Abraham and Torok’s “‘The Lost Object—Me’: Notes on Endocryptic Identification” in The Shell and the Kernel at 139-156, Carolyn Dever’s Death and the Mother from Dickens and Freud: Victorian Fiction and the anxiety about origins (1998), especially chapter one, and Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990), especially chapter two.

⁴⁶ For more on the distinction between melancholy and melancholia see Jackson’s Melancholy and depression: from Hippocratic times to modern times and Oppenheim’s, Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England.

⁴⁷ See Nina Auerbach, "Charlotte Brontë: The Two Countries," University of Toronto Quarterly Review 42 (1973). Auerbach finds Brontë's oppositions to be "unresolved and infinitely dynamic" (21) and thus, a metaphor for the modern psyche.

⁴⁸ For further reading, see John Conolly's "Modifications of Intellectual Activity and Power By Various Stimuli" in An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity at 178-233 and John Barlow's On Man's Power Over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity at 1-48.

⁴⁹ As Bourne Taylor notes, "moral management was first and foremost a method of treating insanity, but it gained its enormous authority and appeal from the precision with which it at once absorbed and expressed the aspirations of mid-century Victorian liberalism" (30).

⁵⁰ For further reading on the "ideal" relationship between women and their medical doctors, see Thomas Bull's "Section IX—Mental Influence" in Hints to Mothers, for the Management of Health During the Period of Pregnancy, and in the Lying-In Room; with an Exposure of Popular Errors in Connexion with those Subjects (1842) especially at 36-48.

⁵¹ Haslam writes "the most virtuous women unreservedly communicate to their doctor their feelings and complaints, when they would shudder at imparting their disorders to a male of any other profession; or even to their own husbands" (qtd. in Shuttleworth Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology 43-44).

⁵² For more, see Bourne Taylor's In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and Nineteenth-Century Psychology and Michael Donnelly's "The Psychology of Social Class," Managing the Mind: A Study of Medical Psychology in Mid-century Nineteenth Century Britain (1983).

⁵³ For more on Cowles Prichard, see A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind (1837).

⁵⁴ Wastefulness, a lack of restraint, and excess were deemed harmful to the political and commercial economies, and thus, the body (as a kind of economic engine) had also to conserve and put to "proper use" its own energies. The human body and mind were seen to benefit or operate most optimally in states of stable, judicious, and conservative expenditures of energy (Shuttleworth Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology 36). In one illustration of this commonly held medical attitude, J.C. Bucknill and Daniel Tuke note in their text A Manual of Psychological Medicine (1874) that uterine disorders, and suppressed or irregular menstruation, accounted for ten percent of all female admissions to asylums (Bucknill 104).

⁵⁵ For the contemporary Victorian understanding of the role of the maternal, see Helsing, Sheets, and Veeder, especially "Sarah Lewis and the Woman's Mission" in "Defining Voices" (volume 1) of The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883 (1993). For nineteenth-century writing on this subject, see Isabella Beeton's "The Rearing and Management of Children" in The Book of Household Management (1863).

⁵⁶ See Bucknill and Tuke, “Melancholy” in A Manual of Psychological Medicine at 215-233.

⁵⁷ For more on hereditary and mental illness in women, see Linda Shires, “Of maenads, mothers, and feminized males: Victorian readings of the French Revolution” at 147-165, Poovey, especially at chapter two, Showalter, especially chapters two and three, and Shuttleworth’s “Demonic Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era” in Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender (1992).

⁵⁸ For more on the subject of sensitivity and susceptibility, see George Cheyne’s The English Malady (1733) and Drinka’s “Founding Nervous Fathers” in The Birth of Neurosis: Myth, Malady, and the Victorians (1984), and Showalter, especially chapter one.

⁵⁹ See Ann Cvetkovich, “Introduction: The Politics of Affect” in Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism (1992).

⁶⁰ Janice Carlisle and Jennifer Radden argue that melancholy and melancholia was a disease to which men, rather than women, were traditionally judged most susceptible. Carlisle suggests a middle-class man or gentleman, alienated from the sphere of actual, physical, embodied production, expresses unrecognized but almost palpable nostalgia alongside an unidentified sense of incompleteness and loss, an experience to which women could not attest (51). Radden notes an apparent alignment between men and melancholy beginning in medieval writing and still present in eighteenth century medical and non-medical writing (39). I

argue that it is limiting to suggest that the complex experience of melancholy, which includes a broad and still uncertain scope of affective representations and symptoms, was so strictly demarcated as “male” in Victorian medical understanding. For further remarks on the gendered aspect of melancholy, see Jane Wood’s Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction (2001), especially chapter one.

⁶¹ Bourne Taylor suggests that the rise of psychological medicine and the development of the county asylum system in the 1830s and 1840s operated as a means of social control through the early part of the nineteenth century, contributing to the construction of utilitarian models of containment and regulation (30). See also Donnelly’s Managing the Mind: A Study of Medical Psychology in Mid-century Nineteenth Century Britain, especially chapter six, and Roy Porter’s Madness: A Brief History (2002, especially at chapter three.

⁶² For a fascinating discussion of the contempt Maudsley held for moral management methods, and particularly those of his father-in-law John Conolly, see Showalter, especially chapter four.

⁶³ For more, particularly on this concept of non-liberating self-consciousness, see Amanda Anderson’s Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture (1993).

⁶⁴ See for example, John Barlow, “I”. On Man’s Power Over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity (1843) and Cowles Prichard, “Introductory Chapter 1: Preliminary Remarks on the Definition of Insanity: Nosography of the Disease

and of its Various Forms” in A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind (1837) and Bucknill and Tuke’s “Diagnosis of Melancholy” in A Manual of Psychological Medicine (1874). This work is reviewed in greater detail in the Introduction to this project.

⁶⁵ For a historical consideration of Victorian families, see Davidoff and Hall’s Family Fortunes: men and women of the English middle-class, 1780 to 1850.

⁶⁶ The full quotation reads “What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step?” (Dickens Bleak House 156)

⁶⁷ In the notes for the section of text following Paul’s death, Charles Dickens writes “Great point of the No. to throw the interest of Paul, AT ONCE ON FLORENCE” (qtd. in Tillotson 41).

⁶⁸ Standards of femininity and domesticity could be invoked not only into discussions of gender, but also into considerations of class. Dickens thus juxtaposes Mrs. Dombey’s death drive with the effusive life force of Polly, the working class woman who nurses Paul and who produces a seemingly endless numbers of healthy and robust children. For extended discussions on this literature, see Poovey, especially at chapter two, and Shuttleworth’s “Female Circulation: Medical Discourse and Popular Advertising in the Mid-Victorian Era” in Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science (1990).

⁶⁹ The legal struggles of Caroline Norton's life reflect many of the concerns of this project. Upon entering into an abusive marriage, and deciding to leave this marriage, Norton was confronted with the circumscribed nature of her rights under British Common Law. Norton's protracted divorce during the late 1830s, and her pleas to Queen Victoria on behalf of women who stood before the divorce courts with no right to custody of their children or to the marital property, galvanized mid-century debates about the position of women within British Common Law, a central feature of the condition-of-women question. I will consider these points in greater detail in my chapter on The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.

⁷⁰ Fears about femininity, hereditary transmission, degeneration, national efficiency and deficiency and sexual transmission are also epitomized in the era's consideration of tuberculosis. For more, see Byrne's Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination (2011) and Susan Sontag's Illness as Metaphor (1977).

⁷¹ As Davidoff and Hall acknowledge, this period marks a dearth of economic and financial infrastructures where the public integrity of the firm was built on the public integrity of the family (xxxv). That Mrs. Dombey fails to provide an heir who will solidify the public integrity of the family is not only a domestic failure, but assumes a sense of public failure as well.

⁷² Early Victorians held strong beliefs about the polluting influence of a mother's distress both while pregnant and at the time of birth. The obstetrician Bull writes

in 1847 that “any serious mental disturbance to which the mother may be exposed during the pregnant state will tell upon the future constitutional vigour and mental health of her offspring” (Bull 36-37). Andrew Combe declares in 1854 that both the temperament and physical constitution of a child is “a legible transcript of the mother’s condition and feelings during pregnancy” (26).

⁷³ For extended discussions on this literature, see Poovey at chapter two.

⁷⁴ For more on the psychoanalytic understanding of phantasm and wholeness, see Jacques Lacan “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (2006).

⁷⁵ Unable to release the object of her desire, the object is “devoured”, metaphorically taken into the body, and as Dever writes, “suspended, protected, abstracted, idealized, and *potentially* mastered [my emphasis]” (5). For more, see Dever’s *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud*. For more on the “turning inwardness” of melancholy described in Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholy,” see Abraham and Torok, “‘The Lost Object—Me’: Notes on Endocryptic Identification” in *The Shell and the Kernel*.

⁷⁶ Butler states that the “I” of subject-hood is “grounded in and by that firmly imagined possibility” and “remains condemned to reenact that love unconsciously, repeatedly reliving and displacing that scandal, that impossibility.” Butler characterizes this neurotic repetition of imagined relations as the foundation for subject-hood (*The Psychic Life of Power* 8).

⁷⁷ Cheng asserts that in melancholy “the ego is formed and fortified by a spectral drama, whereby the subject sustains itself through the ghostly emptiness of the lost other” (10).

⁷⁸ This rhetoric of proper affective expression emerges in a variety of print culture forms in the mid-century Victorian period, but perhaps most notably and eloquently in Lewis’s 1839 text Woman’s Mission. See particularly the chapters “Maternal Influence” and “Maternal Love.”

⁷⁹ For more, see Pykett’s The Improper Feminine: The Woman’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman.

⁸⁰ While Cvetkovich notes the linking of femininity with affect in the sensation novels of Ellen Wood and Wilkie Collins (105), Dickens represents an earlier vision of this type of femininity, one that seems prescient of the sensation novels of the 1860s. For more, see Cvetkovich’s Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture and Victorian Sensationalism.

⁸¹ Florence does not simply exemplify, then, the narrow romantic aspirations allotted to women, or the constraining sequence of roles that typically mark the life of the middle-class wife and daughter. Rather, she appropriates quite powerful forms of surveillance. For more, see Anderson’s Powers of Distance, particularly at 48.

⁸² Kucich notes that Michel Foucault’s more dynamic conception of repression’s role in the formation of subjectivity is “extraordinarily useful” (14). Kucich states further that by “positing the necessity of repression ... as the producer of a

modern subjectivity that is centered on internal rather than external definition, Foucault undermines our culture's fixation on desire as the central measure of social and psychological freedom" (Repression 14).

⁸³ The mid-century Victorian alienist Wilhelm Griesinger characterized the inward-turning, self-preoccupied tendencies of the melancholic as debilitating and profoundly harmful state of solitude (Mental Pathology and Therapeutics, qtd. in Jackson 163).

⁸⁴ I say this with the caveat that Shirley takes place during the Napoleonic wars and therefore is not set in its contemporaneous moment of writing. However, given Brontë's emphasis in Shirley on the issue of superfluous women, a feature of mid-century life that served as a lightning rod of political and social commentary, the novel's consideration of the condition-of-women question is not ahistorical.

⁸⁵ Caroline Helstone is thus a figure of dissent in debates, such as those launched by Harriet Taylor, that affording women "freedom of occupation" (Taylor "Enfranchisement of Women" 61) would not be anything other than injurious.

⁸⁶ For more on the connection Brontë draws between the Luddite Rebellions and the Chartism movement of the 1830s and 1840s, see Terry Eagleton's "Shirley" in Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontes (2005). Eagleton asserts that "Chartism is the unspoken subject of *Shirley*" (45), however Ken Hiltner contends we must also consider the novel's focus on Luddism and the "extraordinary

backdrop of emergent industrialism” in the early nineteenth century which informs the novel’s politics (149).

⁸⁷ Harriet Taylor notes “the claim to women to civil and political equality makes an irresistible appeal . . . also to those Radicals and Chartists in the British islands” (“Enfranchisement of Women” 54). On the issue of Chartism and women’s right to vote, Taylor writes “The Chartist who denies the suffrage to women, is a Chartist only because he is not a lord” (“Enfranchisement of Women” 54).

⁸⁸ For more, see Patricia Ingham’s comments on class and industrial relations in *Shirley* in The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel (1996) at 54.

⁸⁹ Mrs. Humphrey Ward, writing in 1899, suggested that Brontë’s novel lacks the “humour or the charm that other English hands might have been able to give it” (xviii).

⁹⁰ Because the feminist subject is discursively constituted, feminist critique must recognize the ways in which the category of “woman,” as the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought. For more, see Amanda Anderson, The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Distance (2001).

⁹¹ Contemporary gender theory insists on the unacknowledged centrality of gender to the rise of modern bourgeois and disciplinary institutions. Langland asserts that domestic ideology is an unstable amalgam of at least two other major

ideologies: a patriarchal ideology regulating interactions between men and women *and* a bourgeois ideology justifying the class system and supporting the status quo. For more, see Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*.

⁹² See Armstrong, "Introduction: The Politics of Domesticating Culture, Then and Now" in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*.

⁹³ *Shirley* is set, like *Vanity Fair*, at the time of the Napoleonic Wars.

⁹⁴ Juliet Barker suggests that *Shirley's* spinster figures Miss Mann and Miss Ainley represent Brontë's projection of the fate she envisioned for herself and Ellen Nussey, who were both in their thirties and unmarried at the time *Shirley* was written. For more, see Barker's *The Brontës* (1994) at 602.

⁹⁵ Gilbert and Gubar note the psychic doubling between the two characters, suggesting that Shirley is a projection of Caroline's repressed desire (382).

⁹⁶ Brontë's words echo Lewis's estimation of girls' accomplishments, as Lewis writes in *Woman's Mission* that young women spend too much time cultivating accomplishments that "make them ornaments of society" (44). Stickney Ellis talks about this same issue in *Daughters of England*, encouraging women to cultivate respectable, pious, and honorable pursuits instead of silly ones (29).

⁹⁷ For more, see Ruth Perry's comprehensive study of the importance of marriage in the nineteenth century in *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748-1818* (2004).

⁹⁸ Armstrong argues that the Victorian novel produces subjectivity in ways that respond to, reproduce, and reify dominant cultural and political constructions of identity and gender. For more see Armstrong, "The Rise of the Novel," Desire and Domestic Fiction.

⁹⁹ Shirley dovetails with non-literary discourses popular in the 1830s and 1840s, such as those written by Stickney Ellis which figure the middle-class married woman's life as the most edifying, most satisfying, and most important existence for women. See Ellis, "Chapter 2: Influence of the Women of England" in The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits.

¹⁰⁰ Kucich suggests that in much of the Brontë oeuvre, the "rebellious and the passionate reemerge as powerful subversive forces warring against the novels' official surface of acquiescence" (Repression in Victorian Fiction 37)

¹⁰¹ The profundity of suffering explored in Shirley reflects, although indirectly, Brontë's distaste for what she perceived as the emotional vapidness of Jane Austen. For further discussion, see Kucich's Repression in Victorian Fiction at 38.

¹⁰² In Life in the Sickroom: Essays by an Invalid, Martineau suggests that "we sufferers inhabit a separate region of human experience" (125).

¹⁰³ Shirley's conclusion is not the typical Brontëan "fairy tale foundling plot of familial reunion" (Corbett 103). I would argue that while many of her novels reveal the orphan reunited with her family, none of these can be characterized as "fairy-tale" like.

¹⁰⁴ I will refer to Brontë's protagonist as "Mrs. Graham" when discussing her interactions with the Linden-Car community and with Gilbert Markham, and as "Helen" when discussing her marriage to Arthur.

¹⁰⁵ For more, see Judith Walkowitz's City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (1992).

¹⁰⁶ A review of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall in The Manchester Examiner suggests that "the hand that penned [Gilbert's horsewhipping of Frederick] was accustomed to the savage luxury of chastising an insolent foe" (4). Although this comment is a bit far-fetched, for it is doubtful Brontë ever physically chastised even those she deemed most insolent, it signals her contemporary's appreciation of the violence present throughout the novel.

¹⁰⁷ Brontë's depiction of "Mrs. Graham" also gestures towards the appearance of "Mrs. Pryor" in Shirley, a woman who, as a result of her husband's abuse, abandons her home, her child, and her identity. However, because Mrs. Pryor's reunion with Caroline is so joyous, the abuse present in Mrs. Pryor's marriage does not receive sufficient narrative time and is ultimately overshadowed by the novel's happy conclusion. I acknowledge Lisa SurrIDGE's arguments in Bleak Houses as the origin of this point of analysis.

¹⁰⁸ For contemporary writing on the doctrine of coverture, see Francis Power Cobbe's "Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors" (1868).

¹⁰⁹ Kingsley remarks in his April 1849 review of the text that Wildfell Hall is not "a pleasant book to read, nor, as we fancy, has it been a pleasant book to write"

(419). Kingsley notes further that the novel has an exceedingly “melancholy” quality, one that is very rarely relieved or off-set by “harmony and melody” (422).

¹¹⁰ An unsigned review from Literary World, dated 12 August 1848, noted Anne Brontë’s anachronistic characterizations of the Grassdale circle that contrasted with rather more contemporary depiction of gender. The reviewer writes “Mr. Huntingdon, belongs to the squirearchy period of Smollett and Fielding’s novels – the wife of the profligate to the sentimental, progress women of the present era” (29).

¹¹¹ Lee states that Helen’s ensuing act of rebellion, namely her rejection of Arthur is, in a nineteenth-century context, both heroic and radical; her attitude imitates the Romantic and Promethean rhetoric of many nineteenth-century heroines (5).

¹¹² Jill Matus argues that there is a generic as well as a psychological reason for Gilbert’s violence, namely that his “spite and diabolical coolness may be in important ways a continuation of the Gondal world which Anne and Emily shared,” a world of passionate and violent romance that is manifest in both Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre (107).

¹¹³ Hemans in particular links both the physical and psychic qualities of home (Adams History 34). See for example her poem “The forsaken Hearth” (1829) where she writes “The Hearth, the heart is desolate, the first is quench’d and gone/ That into happy children’s eyes once brightly laughing shone” (ll. 1-2). For another example of the poetic rendering of thwarted affection, see L.E.L.’s 1837 poem “Memory” where she writes “Oh! Give me back the past that took no part/

In the existence it was but surveying/ That knew not then of the awaken'd
heart/Amid the life of other lives delaying" (ll. 21-25). For more on biography
and domestic writing in Hemans and Landon, see Julian North's "The Female
Poet: The After*Lives* of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon." For more on the
significance of poetry within Victorian Women's Magazines, see Kathryn
Ledbetter's British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization, and
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