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Oral Women

Orality and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Novels by Women

by

Martin Friedrich

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

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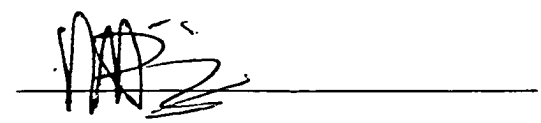

6278-112A Street
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada
T6H 3K3

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University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Oral Women: Orality and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Novels by Women*, submitted by Martin Friedrich in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Juliet McMaster

Isobel Grundy

Bruce Stovel

William Beard

Joseph Wiesenfarth

Date: September 28, 2000

Abstract

Oral Women deals with orality in the broad sense – that is, speaking, eating, drinking, biting, kissing, etc. – in nineteenth-century British novels by women, including *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Middlemarch*. The overarching thesis of this study is that these texts are, to varying degrees, subversive of existing social norms, and that their treatment of orality is an important strategy in this subversion. Moreover, nineteenth-century novels by women reflect the importance of orality in human experience: orality is a central theme in these novels as authors attempt to come to terms with what it means to be an individual, connected with yet separate from the world one inhabits. Orality is an important means to portray gender relations and define characters psychologically and socially; but at a more basic level orality is an acknowledgement of our own incessant needs and desires.

Chapter 1 reviews the literary criticism and theory relating to orality, and argues that a preoccupation with orality in nineteenth-century texts by women is not only illustrative of social injustice or psychological pathology, but on a more basic level, an indication of our complex and contradictory cravings and needs as human beings, apart from issues of gender. Chapter 2 examines the characterization of women in selected works of English literature prior to the nineteenth century, as well as in poetry of the nineteenth century, discussing the tropes that form part of the tradition of the oral woman – the cave, dilation and contraction, and boundaries. Chapter 3 deals with orality and characterization in nineteenth-century novels by women, and argues that characters in these novels are described not only in terms of their speech, but more broadly by what they do with their mouths. Chapter 4 is an examination of food and drink, pointing out that eating and drinking are often the nexus of gender relations and define characters both socially and psychologically. Chapter 5 deals with the orality-literacy-print shift in history, and the influence of this shift on the rise of the novel and women's writing in the nineteenth century.

For Loretta, Emily, and Laura

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Introduction

Orality is integral to the formation of human culture and what it means to be human. What makes the human species different from any other is the oral components of our existence – eating cooked foods, drinking alcohol, laughing, and, of course, speaking. It is not surprising, then, that literature in general, as well as nineteenth-century novels in particular, deal with the function and importance of these oral components of culture. From the joys of the mead-hall in *Beowulf* to the Cratchit Christmas dinner in *A Christmas Carol*, literature has paid tribute to the oral elements which make us human. Surprisingly, however, there have been few studies on, for example, food in the novel, as Margaret Anne Doody notes in *The True Story of the Novel*. There is even less criticism in English literature[1] on orality, in the broad sense in which I am defining it – that is, as the activities the mouth is involved in, such as speaking, eating, drinking, and more particularly, gossiping, biting, kissing, smoking, etc. This omission has prompted one critic to argue that, "As regards literature, we must surely come to terms with the fact that the mouth is the basis for social and intellectual community: beginning with food and drink; going on to talk and laughter; ending in song and story and play" (Watt, "Oral Dickens," 180-81).

The novel is a particularly appropriate place to study orality in literature because, as Doody points out, "the Novel deals consistently in its stories and tropes with the difficulty of being an 'individual' without being detached from others, or ingested by them, or consuming them" (424-25). In other words, the novel as a genre is always in

some way concerned with the relationship between the individual and society, which is reflected in the conflict between the tendency of the group to "consume" the individual and the individual's "impulse to incorporate external reality and get everything inside a single body" (424). In the novel, food plays out the dialectic between self and other, in that eating involves "both the characters' bodies and their relationships. . . Food is social, but always individual. The bread you eat will not nourish me" (430). Just as eating involves an inward movement, the ingestion of food, while speaking includes expelling breath, so orality constantly reminds us of our ambivalent participation in the world by delineating and linking the world without and the place most truly within.

To speak of orality is inevitably to conjure the reductive and pejorative connotations of the word *oral*, which stem primarily from Freud's theories of psychosexual development. According to Freud, indulgence in oral pleasure is a normal activity in infancy but becomes pathological in later life.[2] In Freud the pleasurable activity of the mouth in infancy may be thought of as the prototype for various other potentially pleasurable zones of the body that yield satisfaction to rhythmic stimulation. Food and the breast provide the first experience of pleasure, and the mother becomes the object of the child's constantly developing modes of seeking new pleasures. Furthermore, the term "sexual" cannot be confined to the adult sense in which it is customarily used to indicate genital, procreative activity, because genital sexuality has origins deeply rooted in infantile pleasure-seeking activity. Thus, *libido* must be thought of as a drive for bodily or sensual pleasure, and adult genital sexuality as the final step in a long apprenticeship to pleasure. Despite the continuity of the basic drive for pleasure in each stage of human development, however, Freudian theory also posits that adult oral

pleasure-seeking is an indication of oral "fixation" and "regression," the result of a failure to achieve mature genitality – or what Erik Erikson ironically calls "psychoanalytic utopia" (92), and what Freud himself describes as the "tyranny" of a part over the whole (*General Introduction*, 332).

Although psychoanalytical theorists may disagree with Freud on other points, they have tended to agree with his assessment of the pathological nature of orality in adulthood. In *Passions of the Voice*, for example, Claire Cahane cites several contemporary Freudian theorists to argue that hysteria involves a strong oral component, "the erogenous diffusion of a mode of oral excitation to other parts of the body. . . namely a cathexis of the orifices of the body as erogenous place of passage" (Annie Anzieu, *Psychic Envelopes*, 121; quoted in Cahane 154). However, perhaps the most interesting argument *against* the negative view of orality in Freud comes from one of Freud's own disciples. In "The Influences of Oral Eroticism on Character-formation," Karl Abraham argues that "The libidinal cathexis of the mouth which characterizes infancy can still be employed in later life" and does not need to be repressed in adulthood, as do anal and phallic pleasures (394). Oral pleasure-seeking in later life is *not* as a rule abnormal or detrimental to character formation, according to Abraham; rather, it is generally a normal component of the personality because it does not need to be sublimated to the same extent as other impulses. It is my contention that the prevalence in the literature I will be discussing of oral tropes and images to describe all kinds of characters and behaviours, not just the abnormal or pathological, seems to be a powerful argument in favour of Abraham's view of orality and character formation.

It seems to me that if Freudian theory is useful at all in helping us understand orality in literature, it is in its emphasis on the continuance throughout our lifetime of certain cravings and needs – that is, of our own unending hunger. While the basic human drive for pleasure in all of Freud's stages of maturation suggests a basic connection between orality and genitality, I would argue that his separation of orality and genitality in adulthood is essentially wrong-headed as far as both human experience and literature are concerned. Though human civilization is based to a large extent on genitality – romantic love and the family, for example – it is also based at least as much on the oral components of culture already mentioned. But this is not to say that there is a contradiction between the oral and the genital impulses. The common preludes to sexual activity, such as kissing, intimate conversation, or a sumptuous meal, demonstrate the association between food, drink, speech and Eros. And, as Watt reminds us, "Satire . . . is supposed to have had its origin in the *lanx satura*, the fertility festival of the full bowl; and comedy, derived from the Greek words for song and social merrymaking, commingles all the oral pleasures, without disdaining the support of whatever anal and genital amusements society allows" (81).

I will be arguing that nineteenth-century British novels by women reflect the importance of orality in human experience, and that orality is a central theme in these novels as authors attempt to come to terms with what it means to be an individual, connected with yet separate from the world one inhabits. More particularly, I will argue that for nineteenth-century British women novelists, orality is an important means to portray gender relations and define their characters psychologically and socially. Orality operates both literally and figuratively: literally, it often indicates the social status of

women in the nineteenth-century, as in the alternate stereotypes of the woman who keeps her mouth shut or the woman who cannot keep it shut; and figuratively, orality may function as a metaphor for the psychological state of a heroine, as in the description of Maggie Tulliver's "hungry heart" in *The Mill on the Floss*. It may show the pathological in an individual's personality and in social relationships, but at a more basic level orality is an acknowledgement of our own incessant craving needs.[3]

A brief look at just two chapters of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (vol. 2, chs. 1 and 2) will show the density of her oral references, which is typical of her novel as a whole, and may clarify the themes and methodology to be developed in this study. The following is a passage from Brontë's novel illustrating how orality literally indicates the social status of characters while metaphorically revealing the psychological state of the heroine. Rochester has just returned to Thornfield after a long absence, accompanied by an upper-class entourage, including the beautiful Blanche Ingram. Jane, her young charge, Adèle, and Sophie, the nurse-maid, are consigned to the nursery upstairs, forgotten and hungry, while elaborate culinary preparations for Rochester and his guests continue below. After a long while, Jane realizes that there is "a chance of getting no dinner at all: every one down stairs was too much engaged to think of us." So she ventures forth to the kitchen:

> All in that region was fire and commotion; the soup and fish were in the last stage of projection, and the cook hung over her crucibles in a frame of mind and body threatening spontaneous combustion. In the servants' hall two coachmen and three gentlemen's gentlemen stood or sat round the fire; the Abigails I suppose were up-stairs with their mistresses: the new servants that had been hired from Millcote, were bustling about everywhere. Threading this chaos, I at last reached the larder; there I took possession of a cold chicken, a roll of bread, some tarts, a

> plate or two and a knife and fork: with this booty I made a hasty retreat. I had regained the gallery, and was just shutting the back-door behind me, when an accelerated hum warned me that the ladies were about to issue from their chambers. I could not proceed to the school-room without passing some of their doors, and running the risk of being surprised with my cargo of victuallage; so I stood still at this end, which, being windowless, was dark: quite dark now, for the sun was set and twilight gathering.
>
> Presently the chambers gave up their fair tenants one after another: each came out gaily and airily, with dress that gleamed lustrous through the dusk. For a moment they stood grouped together at the other extremity of the gallery, conversing in a key of sweet subdued vivacity: they then descended the staircase, almost as noiselessly as a bright mist rolls down a hill. Their collective appearance had left on me an impression of high-born elegance, such as I had never before received. (169-70)

This passage is extraordinary not only in its Dickensian description of the kitchen, complete with a cook on the verge of spontaneous combustion, but also in its compact juxtaposition of light and dark, privileged and unprivileged, rich and poor, vivacious ladies and silent heroine. Neglected now by her once solicitous master, Jane is alone, in the dark, silent and unfed. Previously, we are told that when Rochester pays her attention, Jane "gathered flesh and strength" (147), but that after his abrupt departure she loses her appetite (160). Upon his return, in the chapter before the sumptuous dinner for Rochester and his guests, Jane exclaims that she is "too thirsty to eat," and deals with her feelings for her master by forcing herself to acknowledge that she has "rabidly devoured the ideal" and "swallowed poison as if nectar" (162). Her conscription into the kitchen, where, in preparation for her master's return, she learns to make food she will never be allowed to eat – "custards and cheesecakes and French pastry," "truss[ed] game and garnish[ed] dessert dishes" – is thus simply an extension of an array of oral images and metaphors illustrating the psychological condition and social status of the heroine.

Just as the narrator reveals Jane's desire in very oral terms, so also she shows Jane's acute aural sensitivity to her environment. Jane hears the "accelerated hum" of the ladies before they enter the hallway, for example; and once the dinner party begins, she is intensely sensitive to Rochester's "fine bass voice" (161), so that immediately after the longer passage already quoted, while Jane listens to the "joyous conversational murmur" of the dinner party from upstairs, she finds herself irresistibly attracted to Rochester's voice:

> I discovered that my ear was wholly intent on analyzing the mingled sounds, and trying to discriminate amidst the confusion of accents those of Mr. Rochester; and when it caught them, which it soon did, it found a further task in framing the tones, rendered by distance inarticulate, into words. (170)

Jane also defines the characters of Rochester's guests largely in oral/aural terms in the same chapter: the Dowager Lady Ingram has "apparently perfect" teeth, "mouth[s] her words in speaking," and has a "deep," "pompous," and "dogmatical" voice (174); Blanche Ingram "laugh[s] continually" and has an "arched and haughty lip" (174); Lord Ingram has a habit of drawling (179); Amy Eshton has a "soft infantine voice" (180); and so on.

These are only a few examples of the oral images, metaphors, and motifs developed throughout *Jane Eyre*. As some critics have pointed out,[4] speech and voice are extremely important in the novel; but it must be said that speech is always a part of the narrator's larger concern with orality, that what defines characters and social relationships in *Jane Eyre* is not just speech and dialogue, but whatever else characters do or do not do with their mouths. The Christmas dinner at Marsh End later in the novel is therefore an integral part of the story, no less important than a dinner in one of Dickens's

novels, because of the many oral images and motifs which have preceded it and because of the physical and psychological deprivation and abuse suffered earlier by the heroine: the Christmas dinner at Gateshead, with all partaking except Jane; the starvation diet at Lowood; the missed breakfast on the morning of the aborted wedding (missed because of Rochester's impatience); the starvation on the Yorkshire Moors. The males Jane encounters before her independence, before the Christmas dinner at Marsh End, are often characterized in oral terms. We have described for us in some detail the large lips of John Reed, who doles out a good measure of verbal abuse; the large and prominent teeth of Mr Brocklehurst, who starves the children at Lowood; the grim mouth of Rochester (121), who holds Jane in his prison-house of language and indulges his taste for Havannah cigars and sweets (142); the small cherry mouth of Mr Mason, who leaves himself open to the attack of his orally aggressive sister; the compressed mouth of St. John, who puts quite a damper on all meals, including the Christmas dinner at Marsh End.

In the study which follows, I will offer an extended analysis of orality in several nineteenth-century texts by women: *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Middlemarch*. I will also touch on various other novels by major authors, such as Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, with apologies beforehand that I do not have the space to deal with the many other nineteenth-century women novelists whose work has been explored by scholars such as Elaine Showalter.

My overarching thesis is that the texts of the women novelists I am discussing are all, to varying degrees, subversive of existing social norms, and that their treatment of orality is an important strategy in this subversion.

In Chapter 1, I review the literary criticism and theory relating to orality. I attempt to point out some of the common clichés associated with gender studies in literature, such as the angry woman and the concept of a monolithic patriarchy, stressing that a preoccupation with orality in nineteenth-century texts by women is not only illustrative of social injustice or psychological pathology, but, on a more basic level, also an indication of our own craving needs as human beings, apart from issues of gender. Of course, gender relations remain central to my study, and the questions raised in this chapter are meant to examine critically the assumptions made by some critics writing about gender: Is there such a thing as "female speech"? Is patriarchy a homogeneous concept? And is anger the only truly feminist response to patriarchy? As regards my own assumptions about a major aspect of orality – voice – I respond to Derrida's excoriation of the "metaphysics of presence" by arguing that, while Derrida performs a great service by debunking the idea of a one-to-one correspondence between objects in an extramental world and spoken words, his analysis lacks any detailed description of the historical origins of "logocentrism" and oversimplifies the orality-literacy shift (see also Chapter 5).

Chapter 2 is the first of two chapters to discuss orality and characterization. Characterization, I will argue, is ultimately associated with the oral impulse to incorporate, with the desire to "get it all in." This impulse seems to be a fundamental part of human existence, and is displayed at the most basic physical level in mastication and digestion, at the psychological level in the human propensity to incorporate others into the self, and at an artistic level in the desire to be copious and filling. The chapter itself illustrates this latter desire, for it is an examination of the characterization of

women in English literature before the twentieth century. My intention is to look at some of the tropes that form part of the tradition of the oral woman: *the cave*, the matrix of earthly (sometimes dark and primitive) human desires and needs, and a metaphor for the intersection of competing gender- and power-related interests; *dilation and contraction*, as metaphors linking the oral orifice with the vaginal, orality with gender or sexuality; and *boundaries* and transgression of boundaries, as metaphors for the marginalized or ambiguous status of women and the interplay of dichotomies in language and identity.

In Chapter 3, I begin my analysis of orality and characterization in the novels themselves. As we shall see, characters are described not only in terms of their speech, but more broadly by what they do with their mouths. Each novelist's techniques of characterization show that she is sensitive to orality, that she is concerned, for example, not only with what characters say but with how they say it (a sensitivity to orality, then, implies a sensitivity to aurality). The description of the way characters speak is certainly not unique to the novelists in question; however, it is the degree to which these novelists describe their characters' mouths, and what they do with their mouths, which is intriguing. In *North and South*, for example, Margaret Hale's wide mouth, rich red lips, and fine set of teeth are mentioned again and again; and, appropriately enough, what first attracts the heroine to the hero, despite all her efforts to stay cold and aloof, are his "faultless and beautiful" teeth! It is the recurrence and sheer number of details like this, in this text and in the others in question, that first started me thinking about the necessity of an extended study of orality in nineteenth-century novels by women. It is not that Trollope or Thackeray or Dickens do not have the same volume of "oral" references (Trollope seems to be a teeth man, and Thackeray can get quite excited about cigars), but

that social and psychological issues – such as issues regarding gender relations and an individual's self-concept – seem to be inextricably intertwined with orality in nineteenth-century novels by women, to a degree which is not readily apparent in novels by men.

Chapter 4, on food and drink, needs no further rationale, other than to say that Virginia Woolf is simply wrong when, in *A Room of One's Own*, she argues that "it is part of the novelist's convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings" when describing a meal, that novelists "seldom spare a word for what was eaten" (9). Ian Watt has shown that this is certainly not the case in Dickens, and I hope to prove that other nineteenth-century authors are, if not as rich and various in their treatment of food and drink as Dickens, at least much more concerned with the subject than Woolf would have us believe. The function of food and drink is also much more important than some feminist critics would lead us to believe. In Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*, food and drink in literature are simply indicative of diminishing domesticity in women's lives. Doody issues the necessary corrective: "Food is social, but always individual"; the desire for food is "*the* appetite on which all other appetites, even the sexual, are figuratively based" (430, 421). In other words, eating and drinking define characters, and are ways in which the characters may choose to define themselves, both socially and psychologically; and eating and drinking may figuratively ascribe to women in novels something which nineteenth-century society constantly attempted to deny females: desire. In literature in general and in nineteenth-century novels in particular, food and drink are also associated with the garrulous fat woman who speaks "at large," and who may personify the typical fear on the part authors of an inability to get to the point and come to closure.

In Chapter 5, "Orality and Literacy," I deal with my own fear of an inability to come to closure, and attempt again to do justice to another topic which continually threatens to break the bounds of my discussion of orality in nineteenth-century novels. Ever since reading Walter Ong on orality and literacy, I have been intrigued by the question of whether female novelists of the nineteenth century were influenced to the same degree as their male counterparts by what Ong describes as the Latin-based, academic, rhetorical tradition.[5] Ong's answer is in the negative, but he goes on to note that "A great gap in our understanding of the influence of women on literary genre and style could be bridged or closed through attention to the orality-literacy-print shift" (*Orality and Literacy* 159). Although, again, it is possible to write a book-length study of this shift and its influence on women's writing and the rise of the novel, it is my intention only to do the necessary preliminary mapping of a hitherto almost unexplored territory. The novel is the product of both literary and oral traditions – it finds its roots in the rhetorical tradition, the Latinate tradition, and letter writing, and my primary task in this chapter is to describe the confluence of these traditions and the impact they had on Jane Austen and the women writers after her. I also grapple with the question of whether these authors privileged writing over speaking, or vice versa – although it seems that, at least at times, they thought that language itself, both oral and written, is basically inadequate to convey meaning.

Notes

Introduction

1 Doody mentions Gian-Paolo Biasin's *The Flavors of Modernity: Food and the Novel*, which deals primarily with modern Italian works. She might also have mentioned Ian Watt's excellent article, "Oral Dickens," which has to a great extent shaped my thoughts on orality; and Maggie Lane's very interesting book, *Jane Austen and Food*. Louis Marin's *Food for Thought* also provides some interesting thoughts on food, the mouth and the body in history and literature, but it deals primarily with folklore and political philosophy. While there is no criticism that I am aware of that deals broadly with orality in nineteenth-century literature, or any other period for that matter, there are scores of studies on literacy and orality, some of which I have found useful. I am especially indebted to Walter Ong's work on orality and literacy.

2 See "Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis" and "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." It is interesting to note, however, that in Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* orality is as much a part of the treatment as the pathology. For example, Anna O. refuses food, is unable to drink at times, omits words from her speech, slips into complete mutism, and is helped (at least temporarily) by a "talking cure" that involves a kind of verbal catharsis; Emmy von N. has a tendency to stutter and makes a smacking sound when she speaks, and her insistence that Freud let her speak leads to his discovery of the free association

technique; and Elisabeth von R's biting remarks about Freud's inability to alleviate her symptoms forces him to admit she is right and to develop a new treatment based on verbal suggestion. These case studies may remind us of the many women in nineteenth-century fiction who, as we shall see, are also known for their "oral oddities" (a phrase used to describe Bertha Mason's communication in *Jane Eyre*), and who are, in one way or another, "treated" by men.

3 Doody makes the same point about food and drink in the novel.

4 See, for example, Janet H. Freeman, "Speech and Silence in *Jane Eyre*."

5 See *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*; and *Orality and Literacy*, 9-10, 109-112.

Chapter 1

Orality, Criticism, and Theory

In the well-known garden scene in *Jane Eyre*, when Mr Rochester leads the heroine to believe that he is about to marry the beautiful Blanche Ingram, Jane responds by speaking eloquently about her feelings for her master and ends her confession with the bold statement: "I have spoken my mind, and can go anywhere now" (256). Taking her statement at face value, it appears as though Jane has won a victory of sorts, not only for herself but for all women in her century, by simply speaking out and being heard. Indeed, her confession is a kind of catharsis, both for Jane and for the reader who may have been wishing that she would finally tell Rochester how she feels about him and get on with her life. Taken in context, however, Jane's statement is extremely ironic. Rochester has cruelly played on Jane's emotions in order to force her to speak. She is arguably not better off for having spoken, for her confession leads to a disastrous engagement to a married man, and her professed ability to "go anywhere now" leads to near-starvation on the Yorkshire moors. Throughout the garden scene, Rochester remains in control; he is the master, and Jane still his servant.

In this chapter I will examine and compare a few possible theoretical approaches to reading passages such as this one, passages which deal with the heroine's speech or with other aspects of orality. My aim is to orient the reader to some of my own presuppositions with regard to reading nineteenth-century texts by women, and to those of other feminist critics. A feminist linguistic analysis of the passage in *Jane Eyre*, for

example, would likely look at how many and what kinds of verbs, qualifiers, etc. the heroine and hero use, and come up with some evidence of "sexual differences" and sexism in their speech. This approach would not be able to take into account the nuances and irony of the passage because, until recently, linguists (or at least the linguists interested in gender studies) have not found it necessary to go beyond the level of the sentence when analyzing speech. The survey and discussion of gender studies in linguistics below examines this problem, as well as the problem of finding gender differences and sexism in language, and concludes with a brief look at the ground-breaking work of Deborah Tannen, who has succeeded in transcending the sacrosanct sentence barrier in linguistics.

A Derridean interpretation of the passage in *Jane Eyre* – apart from perhaps attempting to deconstruct the text based on the opposition in the heroine between the desire for independence and the desire for love – would provide an interesting counter-argument to critics bent on finding a "feminine voice" in literature, and to the concomitant search for gender differences in speech. The study of "difference" in gender and speech may not only be, in the words of Mary Ellmann, "an intellectual measuring of busts and hips" (29) based on false hermeneutical principles; it is also in the strictest sense, as I will argue from Derrida, a theoretical impossibility. Derrida would also no doubt see the emphasis on the power of speaking in the passage in question – and in Brontë's emphasis on voice in the entire novel, for that matter – as an example of "logocentrism" in Western thought. Of course, this argument may undermine my own emphasis on voice as a part of orality in this study; but Derrida's detractors have shown

that he describes the emphasis on voice in Western culture and the historical orality-literacy shift in fairly monolithic terms.

From Derrida, I turn to a discussion of the classic statements of Anglo-American feminist criticism as it relates to orality. At the risk of sounding reductive, I argue that much of this criticism shows a marked preference for monolithic interpretations of literary texts. In the passage from *Jane Eyre*, for example, Anglo-American feminist criticism may easily find yet more evidence of the seething anger so often attributed to heroines and women writers, and the misogynistic plotting so common to men in novels written by women in the nineteenth century. These observations may be valid as far as they go; but they do not take into account the complexities of the passage, and the fact that patriarchal ideology in the nineteenth century was not monolithic in nature – that, for example, writers such as J.S. Mill (who is only mentioned twice and in passing in Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*) wrote eloquently and convincingly on the need for equality of the sexes. As well, some feminist critics must allow that heroines and writers of nineteenth-century novels are more than just victims of a male conspiracy, and that anger is not the only signal of a truly feminist response to patriarchal power. Again at the risk of overgeneralizing, I think it is fair to say that much feminist criticism has difficulty dealing with the ending of stories such as *Jane Eyre*, interpreting them as a final concession to the supposed all-encompassing patriarchy of the time rather than as the outcome of complex motives and desires in the heroine and in the author. This latter alternative is ultimately based on an approach to literature that does not subscribe to a monolithic conception of sexual ideology and that sees identity as something unfixed and complex. Even the reader who may not have much sympathy for a character like

Rochester nevertheless must grant that he is a complex character acting on both noble and questionable impulses. And even the reader who may be disappointed when Jane announces, "Reader, I married him," must nevertheless concede that her decision is based on a complex combination of motives and needs and personal experiences – that her desire to find happiness in a less than perfect society is, after all, an all too human characteristic.

In their insistence that the concept of an integrated self is really a product of patriarchal ideology, and that the critic must see the nuances, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in texts by women, French feminist theorists seem to account for what is happening in the passage in *Jane Eyre* better than any other approach to literature. Theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva see the author and her characters not as unified selves, but more as the product of complex interactions of sometimes unnamable, sometimes contradictory desires and needs. Thus, Rochester can at the same time love Jane and yet manipulate her, and Jane can at the same time assert her independence and yet submit to her "master."

In the survey and evaluation of literary criticism and theory which follows I would like to keep some questions in the foreground: Is there such a thing as "female speech"? Is patriarchy a homogeneous concept? And is anger the only true signal of feminist consciousness? Always in the background of the discussion is my central argument that a preoccupation with orality in nineteenth-century texts by women is not only illustrative of social injustice or psychological pathology, but, on a more basic level,

is also an indication of our own complex, sometimes contradictory human needs and desires, which are often but not always related to gender.

Also in the following discussion I focus primarily but not exclusively on feminist approaches to gender relations and gender differences in *speech*, since there has been little research done on other aspects of orality (except on orality and literacy, which I discuss in Chapter 5). I have already mentioned the criticism which does examine orality in broader terms, namely the work of Walter Ong, Margaret Ann Doody, and Ian Watt. Their work on orality is central to much of this study, and I discuss it in the chapters which follow, making connections between speech and other aspects of orality as I go. I confine my discussion of theory and criticism in this chapter, then, to speech in the novel, and to approaches to analyzing speech in the novel which follow a linguistic, Derridean, and/or feminist methodology. However, the work of some authors on speech in the novel does not fit neatly into these categories. Such is the work of Norman Page, which examines one of the rationales for studying speech in fiction by asking to what extent characters in novels talk like their real-life contemporaries. And because of the depth and breadth of its analysis of speech in the novel, Page's work fittingly begins this survey of criticism and theory.

Norman Page and speech in the novel

Of the work that has been done on speech in the novel, Norman Page's *Speech in the English Novel* and *The Language of Jane Austen* are certainly two of the most important. In *The Language of Jane Austen*, Page notes several of the traits of Austen's style which, as I will argue, are also characteristic of later women novelists: an

acknowledgment of the intrinsic capacity of words to mislead (16); the aural (and hence oral) quality of her dialogue, which "constantly makes an appeal to the mind's ear" (119); and a concern to reduce loquacity and diffuseness to economy and order (121). Page argues that style is intimately connected with theme in Austen, that we can understand the local meaning of her text and the wider meaning of her novels as statements about human experience "only through an unremitting alertness to her language" (2). I would take this a step further and argue that an alertness to her language includes a recognition of the aural/oral qualities of her style, which Lascelles has argued is "chameleon-like" in its ability to impress the habits of characters' speech on narration (102). Although Page notes that Austen's style defies easy or broad categorization, he also argues convincingly that she was an innovator in prose style, notably in her development of techniques of relaying her characters' speech, and was imitated by later novelists such as the Brontës and George Eliot.

Norman Page's more general work on the novel points out the problem of determining the extent to which texts reflect the way English people actually spoke at the time (and thus the way women's speech differed from men's). In *Speech in the English Novel*, he notes the inevitable gap between real speech as we speak it and the most realistic dialogue, and cites several reasons for this gap. Though the normal characteristics of spoken language (e.g. silence fillers, intimacy signals, grammatical errors) are tolerable in *spoken* form, they would be unacceptable in *written* form. Spoken language also often depends on subtlety, ambiguity, and context to carry meaning, which makes it difficult to convey in writing. Moreover in spoken dialogue, a good deal of information is carried by phonological components (e.g. pause, stress, tempo, volume,

intonation) which written language is very imperfectly equipped to convey. Page examines the conventions which novelists use to overcome these problems, and notes that dialogue in fiction is generally more economical, dense, and exaggerated than real speech. "The need to give an *impression* of realism remains" (3), Page reminds us, and this is likely to be accomplished by the establishment of a delicate balance between features of real speech and stylistic conventions.

Other authors who have written book-length studies on speech in the novel, such as Raymond Chapman in *Forms of Speech in Victorian Fiction*,[1] have also acknowledged the problem of determining to what extent fictional characters' speech correlates with what was heard in contemporary daily conversation (6). In a chapter of his book provocatively entitled "Speech of Women and Children," Chapman notes certain trends in the speech of fictional female characters, such as discursiveness, repetitive and limited vocabulary, and short or incomplete sentences, but his analysis always comes back to the impossibility of reproducing and recovering the actual speech of the period. This conclusion ultimately has implications for literary studies which attempt to determine the ways in which women's speech differed from men's speech in the nineteenth century or any other era before the invention of audio recording, in that we no longer have access to the speech of, say, a nineteenth-century governess and her master.[2] However, the work of literary critics such as Page and Chapman shows that the impossibility of determining to what extent a text reflects the way women and men actually spoke in the past does not prevent us from making interesting observations and generalizations about speech in the text itself.

Breaking the sentence barrier: linguistics and gender

The study of language and gender in linguistics began in earnest in 1975 with Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place*, in which she claims that women have a language all their own, characterized by linguistic markers such as: empty adjectives like "charming" and "cute"; the use of hedges, or statements that avoid direct commitment, such as "it may be true"; and frequent use of tag questions, superpolite diction, and indirect verbal strategies. Although she steers clear of biological essentialism by arguing that these linguistic forms are learned rather than "natural," Lakoff still assumes that men's speech (which is almost exactly the opposite of women's speech) is superior to women's speech, that women's speech which does not conform to her paradigm is simply a "deviation," and that women should abandon "feminine" styles of speaking for the "masculine" norm. This approach to language and gender was soon challenged by a number of other feminist critics,[3] yet her work remained extremely influential for quite some time despite the realization that its methodology yielded "mixed results" in the work of other linguists (Thorne, Kramarae, Henley 160). Critics applying Lakoff's methodology to literary criticism have also come up with fairly questionable results. A case in point would be Penelope and Wolfe's analysis of the work of Gertrude Stein, Tillie Olsen, Toni Morrison, Virginia Woolf, and others, in which they contrast the epistemology of "women's styles" of writing and speaking with that of men. Women, they claim, perceive the world in terms of ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities, and complex relationships, whereas "patriarchal expressive modes" perceive the world through categories, dichotomies, roles, stasis, and causation.[4] I would argue that the literary critic must reject outright this methodology of analyzing language and gender,

not only because it is fundamentally essentialist, but also for reasons that research in linguistics is just now coming to terms with – namely the difficulties inherent in determining "sexual differences" in language use and "sexism in language."

This is exactly what three of the most influential feminist linguists in the past three decades state are two of the main areas of concern to linguistics (Kramer, Thorne, Henley 639). However, they have been quite candid in their admission that "very few expected sex differences have been firmly substantiated" by linguistic studies, and that "Some popular beliefs about differences between the sexes appear to have little basis in fact, and in a few cases research findings actually invert the stereotypes" (Thorne, Kramarae, Henley 13). Despite some unexpected findings in linguistic research, it is clear that at least some studies presupposed their own outcome. Thorne and Henley, for example, commenting on studies which attempt to uncover the ways in which women's speech reflects their inferiority to men, point out that no matter what women said in the studies, their speech was always taken to symbolize inferiority (28). The besetting problem in linguistic research in general, however, has been a too-narrow focus on "isolated variables," on fragments of speech divorced from their contexts – in other words, an inability to transcend the sentence barrier. Again, to their credit, this fundamental problem was recognized early by some linguists, who argued for the necessity of examining the *context* of speech utterances.[5]

Before we pursue the issue of the importance of context in linguistics, or what linguists often refer to as going "beyond the sentence," it is necessary to look at the theoretical underpinnings of linguistic studies on "differences in language use." Taking the work of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida into account, these studies can be

criticized from the theoretical standpoint that they do not define exactly what they mean by "language," and that "difference" is really not something which is measurable. In "The Ethics of Linguistics," Julia Kristeva argues that for linguists "language" is whatever they choose to define as their object of study, and that modern linguistics, in its insistence on structure and systematics, is fundamentally authoritarian and oppressive (23-24). She argues that linguistics must move away from a fascination with language as a monolithic, homogeneous structure and towards an interest in language as a heterogeneous process. This will happen, however, only if the "speaking subject" is seen as the "place, not only of structure . . . but especially, of its loss" (24). Further to Kristeva's argument, if one considers the work of Jacques Derrida it would seem that the pursuit of sex differences in language is a theoretical impossibility. The concept of difference is problematic in that it denotes an absence or gap more than a signifying presence. In fact, as Derrida argues, difference is not really a *concept*, in that differences always involve a never-ending deferral of meaning. To see difference as signifying the gap between two parts of a binary opposition (for example, between masculinity and femininity) is to impose an arbitrary closure on this deferral of meaning.

It may be argued that this is precisely what much of the research on sex differences in language does: masculinity and femininity are posited as stable, unchanging and meaningful essences/presences between which difference is supposed to be located. This does not necessarily mean that researchers subscribe to biological essentialism, for they often focus on *social* experience as the determining factor in language use, as Cheris Kramarae argues in her anthropological study of women as a "muted group" (1-33). This emphasis on socialization does not, however, prevent

theories like Kramarae's from becoming monolithic in nature: once women are seen as always subordinate and men as always powerful, the language of these groups is perceived as rigid and unchanging. Much of the research in this field therefore seems to be an endless search for ways in which women's linguistic ability is inhibited. As we have already seen, such a project has not been very successful.

Kristeva's theory of language as a heterogeneous signifying process provides an alternative to a binary model of difference as an essence or presence between two opposite poles of masculinity and femininity. Such a model is not only theoretically flawed, but in practice blinds us to anything which escapes its rigid formulation, such as the instances where women supposedly "talk like men." Kristeva, on the other hand, suggests the study of specific linguistic strategies in specific situations, of language as specific *discourse* rather than universal *langue*. To focus on discourse means to focus on the context of an utterance – that is, to transcend the seemingly sacrosanct sentence barrier in linguistics.

This is what the linguist Deborah Tannen does in her research, much of which is collected in *Gender and Discourse*.[6] Tannen's work falls into the relatively new category of discourse analysis, which, as she points out, "contrasts with the dominant strains in the discipline" of linguistics by focusing on language "beyond the sentence" (5). Differentiating her method of linguistic analysis from that of Henley and Kramarae, who "use dominance as the starting point of their analysis" (9), Tannen argues that male dominance is not sufficient to account for gender differences in the use of language; and, moreover, she argues that one cannot locate the source of domination in linguistic strategies such as interruption and volubility, nor the source of women's powerlessness in

such linguistic strategies as indirectness, taciturnity and silence (21). Linguistic strategies are ambiguous because "the same linguistic means can be used for different, even opposite, purposes and can have different, even opposite, effects" in different contexts and with different speakers (21). Despite her insistence that "No language has meaning except by reference to how it is 'contextualized'," Tannen still argues that there are "systematic differences" in women's and men's "communicative styles" (5). Nevertheless, her research marks a new departure in linguistics from almost twenty years of studying "difference" in speech. And if we apply Tannen's methodology to the passage from *Jane Eyre* with which this chapter began, we see that her work is able to take into account the irony of Jane's assertion of freedom because of Tannen's insistence that one look closely at the context of every utterance. Also, because of its acknowledgement of the complexities of human communication, Tannen's methodology would go a long way in describing the intricacies of the garden scene, the complex and sometimes conflicting internal motives which both heroine and hero betray in their speech.

If we turn now to the second main concern of feminist linguistic research, the study of sexism in language, it becomes clear that many of the same assumptions about language are made as in the study of sexual differences. Cheris Kramarae defines sexism in language as the way in which the "English lexicon is a structure organized to glorify maleness and ignore, trivialize or derogate femaleness" (42). In *Man Made Language*, Dale Spender asserts that "The English language has been literally man made and . . . is still primarily under male control . . . " (12). These authors are clearly interested in language as a system or structure, and thus their work may be criticized for falling into

what Kristeva calls a potentially authoritarian linguistics. Furthermore, if it is the case, as Thorne and Henley argue, that similar speech by men and women can be interpreted quite differently, then there is evidently nothing inherent in any given word or phrase that can always be constructed as sexist. The theory of language as "man-made," or as a male plot against women, is crudely conspiratorial at best. By positing an *origin* (men's plotting) to language, this kind of theory sets up a kind of transcendental signifier which cannot be substantiated by any amount of theorizing. It also casts women as always innocent, always passive victims of patriarchal power, an idea which many feminists have patently rejected.

Since the question of sexism in language ultimately has to do with power relationships, and since relationships do not occur in a vacuum but always in some context, it is in the context of the sign that we must look for alternative explanations of sexism in language. A non-essentialist feminist analysis of language may posit that we all use the same language but that we have different (power-related) interests which intersect in the sign. There are thus multiple possible meanings of the sign – or, in Kristeva's terms, language is *productive* and not merely reflective of social relations. This view of language and power relations does not discount the existence of sexism in language; rather, it provides an alternative to theories which attempt to explain sexism in language by arguing that language has an inherent structure or that there exists some conscious male plot to exploit women. Although the dominant power group will control the linguistic production of meaning in any culture, this does not mean that the opposition is reduced to total silence. The theory which sees language as a heterogeneous and productive process accounts for feminist discourse itself, which on a strict reading of

authors such as Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender would be an impossibility. That is, if there is an inherent sexist essence in the English language, and if language is not appropriable for feminist purposes, a work such as *Jane Eyre* could never have been written.

Derrida and "phonocentrism"

To say that Jacques Derrida's philosophy has been influential to late twentieth-century thought would be somewhat of an understatement. Donald Wesling and Tadeusz Slawek recently conclude that, "For the present generation of scholarship, Jacques Derrida's is the constitutive philosophy of voice. His critique of two thousand years of privileging speaking over writing . . . of centered selfhood, authorship, originality, and self-presence, all of which had spuriously been connected . . . with speaking alone," amounts to a definitive watershed in philosophy and literary studies and has important implications for all theories of voice (17). Of course, a great deal of this present study of orality is concerned with speech and voice and the particular emphasis which they are given in nineteenth-century novels by women. Jacques Derrida would argue that such an emphasis is evidence of what he calls "logocentrism," that is, the privileging of the *Logos*, the Word, as a metaphysical presence. According to Derrida, logocentrism derives from "phonocentrism," from taking the logos or the sounded word as primary and debasing writing in comparison with oral speech. Derrida offers a critique of the whole of Western philosophical tradition, which he says is based on a "metaphysics of presence" favouring speech over writing because speech presupposes the presence of the speaking subject.[7] Derrida insists that writing is not simply a supplement of the spoken

word, and undercuts the bias which assumes a one-to-one correspondence between spoken words and their referents, and between spoken words and written words. At its worst, this bias leads to a kind of pipeline model of reading, in which the naïve reader presumes the prior presence of a referent which the word somehow captures and passes on to the psyche. Derrida's point is that writing does not simply transmit unchanged whatever it receives from speech, and that language in general does not fit into a neat pipeline model because it is not simply and transparently representational of something outside itself.

While Derrida has performed a welcome service in disabusing us of phonocentric and logocentric thinking, his theorizing has been challenged by writers as diverse as Jonathan Culler, Geoffrey Hartman, and Walter Ong.[8] In *Structuralist Poetics*, Culler slyly points out a fundamental contradiction in the writing of Derrida and other theorists in that, despite their denial that language is representational or referential, they actually use language representationally because they "would not want to claim that their analyses are no better than any other" (252). In *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy*, Hartman has called attention to the absence of any explanation in Derrida of the shift from the oral-based world of "imitation" to the print-based world of "dissemination" (35). Also pointing out the lack of historical analysis in Derrida, Walter Ong goes so far as to say that the work of Derrida and other "textualists," as he styles them, "derives its appeal in part from historically unreflective, uncritical literacy" (*Orality and Literacy* 169). His entire book is indirectly a sustained and substantial critique of Derrida, in that Ong *does* offer a careful analysis of the orality-literacy-print shift. This shift, as Ong shows, was not a uniform or simple one, and he traces its complex path throughout

history, noting, for example, Plato's thoroughly ambiguous relationship to orality (24-28, 79-81). The lack of any description of the historical origin of "logocentrism" in Derrida's work is what makes it, in Ong's mind, "the most text-bound of all ideologies, because it plays with the paradoxes of textuality alone and in historical isolation, as though the text were a closed system" (169). Speaking about the codependency of orality and literacy, Ong concludes:

> *L'écriture* and orality are both 'privileged,' each in its own distinctive way. Without textualism, orality cannot even be identified; without orality, textualism is rather opaque and playing with it can be a form of occultism, elaborate obfuscation – which can be endlessly titillating, even at those times when it is not especially informative. (169-70)

Anglo-American Feminist Criticism

The same questions which apply to an appraisal of feminist linguistics may also be asked in relation to Anglo-American feminist criticism, namely, what is the nature of sexual ideology, and is there such a thing as a distinct "woman's voice"[9] or "woman's style"?

An issue related to these questions is whether or not there is an identifiable tradition of women's writing. Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* was the first attempt to define a unique woman's voice in literature, describing the history of women's writing as an international movement "apart from but hardly subordinate to" men's writing, as a "rapid and powerful undercurrent" in the mainstream of literature (42). Moers's book served as the springboard for other more sophisticated feminist literary criticism, such as

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. In this now classic work, the authors argue that "by the nineteenth century there was a rich and clearly defined female literary subculture" (xii). This "distinctively female literary tradition" (xi) is defined by a coherence of theme and imagery in writing by women – such as enclosure and escape, maddened doubles, physical discomfort and disease – and by a common, "female" impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement and "male" assertion and coercion.

Among the virtues of Gilbert and Gubar's work are its breadth and depth of analysis and its avoidance of theoretical jargon;[10] but the words "male" and "female" in the quotations above (rather than "masculine" and "feminine," which connote that sexuality is a cultural rather than a biological construct) indicate that Gilbert and Gubar's conception of sexual ideology and identity is essentialistic and monolithic in nature. In the now famous opening to their first chapter, Gilbert and Gubar ask the question, "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" (3), and go on to argue that "Male sexuality . . . is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet's pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis" (4). Although this provocative (and evocative) analysis is supported, as always, with incisive arguments, it raises the question of how women could overcome their "anxiety of authorship" and take up the pen at all? Gilbert and Gubar never explicitly answer this question; instead, they phrase the basic questions of feminist literary criticism in terms of the woman writer's problem of finding a "voice": "Since his is the chief voice she hears, does the [woman] try to sound like the [man], imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she 'talk back'

to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint?" Gilbert and Gubar evidently believe there is a distinctive female voice in literature, but they argue that it could be heard only "by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards" (73). Therefore all women's writing is in some sense palimpsestic, its surface concealing or obscuring deeper levels of meaning (73). The implication is that if one probes deeply enough and in the right ways, one will arrive at the real truth of the texts.

The real truth under the surface of texts by women always consists of a more or less equal mixture of the heroine's – and the author's[11] – feminist rebellion and rage, which are ultimately Gilbert and Gubar's implicit answer to the problem of the production of women's writing. By raging and rebelling against patriarchal oppression and coercion, the woman writer was and still is able to overcome all obstacles to authorship: "In projecting their anger and dis-ease into dreadful figures, creating dark doubles for themselves and their heroines, women writers are both identifying with and revising the self-definitions patriarchal society imposed on them" (79). Thus, anger is the primary impetus to female creativity and the only sign of feminist consciousness. The true feminist voice – that is, the voice which does not imitate man but rather "talks back to him," or rails at him, as the case may be, in her own voice – is the essence of all texts written by women. This view of women's writing makes women no more than "exceptionally articulate victims of a patriarchally engendered plot," as Mary Jacobus has pointed out in her review article of Gilbert and Gubar's work (522). And as Cora Kaplan argues in her response to Kate Millett's theory of sexual ideology,[12] the idea of a conscious, well-organized plot against women ignores the fact that a great deal of

misogyny is unconscious, and that women themselves may unconsciously internalize sexist attitudes. It is therefore clear that a monolithic, homogeneous conception of woman's voice in literary history does not account for the contradictions in both patriarchal ideology and women's responses to this ideology, just as it fails to account for the existence of texts by women in an age which was supposedly uniformly misogynistic.

The desire to identify a unique woman's voice in literature is ultimately related to the inclination to describe sexual difference in essentialist terms. If a genuinely "female" tradition in English literature can be identified and described, then it can be proved, or so the theory goes, that women's and men's writing are essentially different. Apropos of our concern with women's speech, the kind of criticism that tends to find sexual differences in writing style attempts to locate some of these differences in the dialogue of female and male authors – that is, in the ways women and men speak in works of literature. Thirty years ago, Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* provided a persuasive rebuttal against this tendency to comprehend all matters relating to gender "in terms of our original and simple sexual differences," and so to "classify all experience by means of sexual analogy" (6). In a chapter entitled "Phallic Criticism," Ellmann's comments on literary criticism by men are just as applicable to the current discussion of feminist literary criticism:

> With a kind of inverted fidelity, the discussion of women's books by men will arrive punctually at the point of preoccupation, which is the fact of femininity. Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips. (29)

She goes on to discuss eleven major stereotypes of femininity and feminine writing: formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy, and finally "the two incorrigible figures" of the Witch and the Shrew.[13] She then demonstrates that these feminine stereotypes are not consistent or unified, that they are self-contradictory and deconstruct themselves (for example, the stereotype of the Mother is both ideal and horror) and that masculinity and femininity are social constructs which refer to no real essence in the world. For Ellmann, sexuality is not visible at the level of the sentence or in rhetorical strategies, simply because "it seems impossible to determine a sexual sentence" (172). She therefore praises Jane Austen's irony for its ability to circumvent sexual analogy, arguing that in Austen's fiction "neither sex appears to be good or bad for much" (212).

Perhaps the most sustained answer to the question of whether there exists a feminine tradition or "voice" in literature is Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*. Showalter's major contribution to feminist criticism is the emphasis she places on the recovery of forgotten or neglected women writers, whose work fills gaps in the literary/historical record and lends further support to the theory of a female "literary subculture . . . unified by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviors impinging on each individual" (11). Contrary to J.S. Mill's comment on the status of women's literature in *The Subjection of Women*, Showalter asserts that "women have had a literature of their own all along" (10). Yet she also argues that, even though the literary critic may have "the indistinct but persistent impression of a unifying voice in women's literature" (5), it is not possible to speak of a woman's "movement" as such in literature. Showalter stresses instead (with Germaine Greer) "the transience of female literary

fame," the fact that a woman's literary prestige, along with her work, seems to vanish without a trace from the records of posterity:

> Thus each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex. Given this perpetual disruption, and also the self-hatred that has alienated women writers from a sense of collective identity, it does not seem possible to speak of a 'movement.' (11-12)

For Showalter, then, sexual difference becomes the ruling factor in literary criticism; for it is in spite of external pressures on women's writing (the self-hatred Showalter mentions in the passage above is the product of societal forces) that women writers experience "intense feelings of solidarity" through a "shared and increasingly secretive and ritualized physical experience" (15).

This emphasis on sexual difference is also prominent in some of Showalter's other work. In "Towards a Feminist Poetic," Showalter distinguishes between two forms of feminist literary criticism: "feminist critique," a "suspicious" approach to the text dealing with woman as reader and with works by male authors; and the privileged "gynocritics," dealing with woman as writer and not, it seems, with the "hermeneutics of suspicion," which assumes that the text is not what it appears to be. Paradoxically, Showalter's emphasis here on sexual difference in the production of texts focuses not on the text itself, but on theories relating to context: "Gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology and sociology, all of which have developed hypotheses of a female subculture" (28). The implication here is that the text as a signifying process is unimportant, that the search to learn "what women have felt and

experienced" (27) is somehow readily apparent or "newly visible" (28) in texts written by women, and that these texts do not, like texts written by men, have puzzling complexities and contradictions.

Showalter develops these same themes in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," which first appeared as the lead essay in an issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to "writing and sexual difference." As in her previous essay, she excoriates "male critical theory" and its "white fathers," such as Lacan,[14] Freud, and Bloom, apparently because theory is a male invention and can only be used on men's texts. Showalter does, however, offer an analysis of what she considers to be the four main theoretical approaches in feminist criticism – biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural criticism – and identifies the central concern of feminist criticism as the analysis of difference. "Gynocritics" is concerned, then, with the questions, "How can we constitute women as a distinct literary group? What is *the difference* of women's writing?" (15; her emphasis). But Showalter must confess to the difficulty of answering such questions, noting that defining difference is "a slippery and demanding task" (16).

Despite the reservations one may have about Showalter's thoughts on sexual difference, her discussion of women and language in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" is intriguing in several respects. First, Showalter insists on the importance of context in feminist literary criticism, even though, as we have seen, this emphasis oddly excludes (in theory, anyway) a close analysis of the complexities and ambiguities of the text itself – that is, an analysis of the immediate context of certain sentences and passages within the text, which theorists such as Deborah Tannen find indispensable when analyzing women's language. This narrower conception of context leads Showalter

to stress the importance of anthropological theories above any others: a hermeneutical methodology which emphasizes "the binding force of women's culture," she argues, is "more complete and satisfying" than any other approach to the text. At the same time, in her use of the metaphor of the wilderness, Showalter seems open to the complexity and ambiguity of women's discourse. The theory is that women's writing takes place in a "no-man's land" or "wild" zone where everything which has been previously repressed may be expressed (31); but Showalter argues that women straddle the border between this wilderness and the "real" world: "women's writing is a 'double-voiced discourse' that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritage of both the muted and the dominant" (31). This concept of women and language problematizes the notion of sexual difference in language in that it allows for the fact that women can use and have used both dominant and muted discourses.

Showalter thus subtly moves away from the concept of difference as essence in language. In a central passage of her essay, she stresses the idea that language is not inherently sexist. At the same time, Showalter synthesizes her emphasis on context and language, summarizing her work in general and the task all critics concerned with gender and language have before them:

> The appropriate task for feminist criticism, I believe, is to concentrate on women's access to language, on the available lexical range from which words can be selected, on the ideological and cultural determinants of expression. The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution. (23)

Is it possible, however, to identify and interpret "women's literature," or any kind of writing, for that matter, on the basis of silence or circumlocution – that is, in terms of blanks and gaps and absence? Showalter's argument that women's writing is a double-voiced discourse seems to entail that meaning lies somewhere between the binary opposites of muted and dominant, female and male, etc.. Women's writing is thus, as Hélène Cixous puts it, "working (in) the in-between." Thus far Showalter's more empirical American approach to literary criticism seems oddly in tune with French feminist literary criticism. But the passage in Showalter's essay continues: "The holes in discourse, the blanks and gaps and silences, are not the spaces where female consciousness reveals itself but the blinds of a 'prison-house of language'" (23). As we shall see, this conception of women's language differs significantly from that of French feminism.

"Working (in) the in-between": French feminist literary theory

Although there are crucial differences among French feminists, they have developed an important theoretical tradition which attends centrally to language. Writers such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva locate women's oppression in the production of discourse and meaning, arguing that language is deeply phallocentric because it constitutes men as subjects and women as "absence" or "other." An important task of feminism is therefore to inscribe women's experiences in language and thought, not through altering specific usages such as sexist pronouns (which has preoccupied some Anglo-American feminists such as Dale Spender), but through "rupturing discourse" – for example, through "writing from the body," as Cixous puts it.

Hélène Cixous

Given her poetic and anti-theoretical style, and her well-known declaration that "I am not a feminist," it seems as though any attempt to evaluate Hélène Cixous's writing in terms of its application to feminist literary theory is doomed to failure; but Cixous's open-ended prose style, her commitment to what she prefers to call the women's movement (as opposed to "feminism"), and her strong and sustained critique of patriarchal modes of thought, have as profound an implication for the way we read texts as the most incisive literary theory. Cixous's anti-theoretical stance can be traced to her adamant opposition to the binary thought found in much literary theorizing, such as the dichotomy between passion and reason in the sexes which we have encountered in the work of some feminist literary critics already discussed in this chapter. Her central concept of *écriture féminine* or feminine writing is closely related to Derrida's analysis of writing as *différance*, which subverts the neat closure of binary oppositions, and to her argument that texts must strive to undermine the masculine obsession with classification, systematization, and hierarchization in order to split open the closure of binary oppositions; yet Cixous insists that the term *écriture féminine* is abhorrent to her, since the term itself implies a binary opposition between "masculine" and "feminine." Indeed, Cixous denies the possibility of ever defining a feminist practice of writing: "For this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which does not mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system . . ." ("Medusa," 253). She does, however, provide a definition of feminine writing that coincides with her belief in the inherently bisexual nature of all human beings: feminine

writing, she says in "The Laugh of the Medusa," "is precisely working (in) the in-between" (254). It seems that for Cixous writing as such is bisexual, and can be "produced by a male or a female" (from an interview, quoted in Conley 129), but that, at least till this point in literary history, women have been much more likely to produce bisexual writing than men.

Cixous's apparent anti-essentialism effectively takes the focus of literary criticism away from the sex of the author or fictional characters and places it upon the articulation of sexuality and desire in the literary text itself. For example, an interesting analysis of the garden scene in *Jane Eyre* can be constructed if we take Cixous's comments on desire and the feminine writer, and apply them to the heroine/narrator's speech and actions. In the garden scene, and, it could be argued, throughout the novel, Jane is truly "generous" in the sense in which Cixous defines *generosity* (which she also calls the "Realm of the Gift"):

> If there is a 'propriety of woman,' it is paradoxically her capacity to depropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principal 'parts'. . . . This doesn't mean that she is undifferentiated magma, but that she doesn't lord it over her body or her desire. . . . Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours. . . . ("Medusa," 259)

Jane's consent to Rochester's proposal in the garden scene can be read as "improper," either because she is surrendering to the desire of a supposedly lecherous and manipulative man and should know better, or because she herself is governed by uncontrollable desire, or both. Yet a reading which takes Cixous's idea of desire and

expression into account acknowledges feminine desire and resists the designations and dichotomies associated with the desiring and/or desirable woman (e.g. the "loose" woman, the whore, the demon, the witch). As we shall see in the chapters to follow, it is the fear of the amorphous, in language or in human desire, which has been so terrifying to some male writers. Some critics argue that Jane's acceptance of Rochester, both in the garden scene and at the end of the novel, is a capitulation to patriarchy; but this view fails to acknowledge the nature of feminine desire (I mean feminine as Hélène Cixous elsewhere defines it, as that which may define both male and female desire). Rochester's manipulation in the garden scene and elsewhere can therefore be read as a failure to recognize, or an inability to come to terms with, the true nature of human desire, the amorphous and never-ending cravings and needs which define our existence.

And, as I have been arguing, the way in which amorphous, undifferentiated, unending human desire is often manifested, is through language – speech and writing – and more specifically through orality: "Her libido . . . is worldwide. . . . Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours." Cixous might just as well have said, her *speech* can only keep going, in keeping with Jane's assertion that "I have spoken my mind, and can go anywhere now," or that she and Rochester talk "all day long" at Ferndean, that ambiguous place which defies categorization; for in Cixous, writing and voice are one and the same, in that writing is an extension of the speech act, and the speaking woman *is* her voice: "She physically materializes what she is thinking; she signifies it with her body" (251).

In the passages from Cixous quoted above, it becomes evident that Cixous's writing is at times at odds with Derrida's anti-essentialism and rejection of the

metaphysics of presence; for it is the female in particular, despite Cixous's comments to the contrary elsewhere, who is capable of feminine writing and "generosity," and it is in her voice that the female is truly present. While Cixous's evocation of feminine libido as an openness to difference can teach us something about the nature of human desire, and about the need to look beyond gender to our shared humanity, her presentation of writing as a female essence seems to contradict much if not all of what she has to say about *écriture féminine*.[15]

Luce Irigaray

In *An Ethic of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray argues that "Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age" (5). Given her argument for the centrality of philosophy to Western culture – it is "the master discourse . . . the discourse of discourses" ("This Sex" 100) – Irigaray's entire work can be seen as an attempt to deconstruct Western philosophical discourse, in order to show that the subject talked about in this discourse is not gender-neutral, as is alleged, but always masculine. In this way, women have been denied full subjectivity and reduced to the status of objects of the male gaze, so that female difference is perceived as an absence or negation of the male norm. As she argues in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, "The feminine has consequently had to be deciphered as forbidden, in between signs, between the realized meanings, between the lines" (20) – that is, woman is the negative required by the male subject's "specularization." Irigaray's central image of the speculum suggests not only that woman is the mirror image of male speculation, but that the male is the only subject capable of self-reflection. The ability to apprehend truth and so be a

philosopher, a rational being, a subject, is thus defined as an exclusively male characteristic. What is female is denied subjectivity and identified with all the forces which seek to prevent rationality and the pursuit of truth – nature, emotion, imagination – so that only abstractions, apprehended by the pure intellect, are really real, and the concrete, bodily, sensuous world is not real at all.

In its emphasis on the body, Irigaray's conception of femininity and feminine language is very close to Cixous's. Whereas male pleasure is monolithic/phallic in nature, Irigaray points out that woman's sex is composed of many different elements, and her pleasure is multiple and endless:

> A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two – but not divisible into ones – who stimulate each other. ("This Sex" 100)

Irigaray's comments here are particularly provocative in the context of a discussion of femininity and orality. Indeed, Irigaray's analysis of feminine sexuality is closely tied to her idea of a specific woman's language, or "womanspeak," which emerges spontaneously when women speak together, but disappears in the presence of men. Another (in)famous passage in "This Sex which is not One" characterizes woman's speech as "contradictory," "going off in all directions," "retouching itself" (103).

It is easy to see how Irigaray's attempt to define "woman" and "woman's" speech or writing drifts into essentialism, as does, one could argue, *any* attempt to define woman. Yet what other course of action is left for women but to develop their own language, if specular logic is so pervasive in Western theoretical discourse? And here we come to the

same problem which is raised by Anglo-American feminist criticism, namely how speaking and writing are at all possible for women if women are always victims of patriarchal discourse. Irigaray spells out fairly clearly what the options are for women if they do not create a language all their own, if they do not "Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front" and "Overthrow syntax" (*Speculum* 142): caught in the specular logic of patriarchy, woman can choose either to remain silent, producing incomprehensible babble (incomprehensible to the male master discourse) or mimic the dominant discourse. The feminine can thus only be read in the blank spaces left between the signs and the lines of her own mimicry.

In their interpretation of what lies "between the lines" of the text, and what occurs in the "space between" binary opposites, the work of Irigaray and Cixous seems to diverge quite drastically. As we have seen, for Cixous feminine writing is working "(in) the in-between" – it takes place in the space between binary opposites and is a positive thing because it works to deconstruct them. For Irigaray, the gaps and silences in texts by women are wholly negative, the product of women's oppression and failure to create their own language, and in this sense are analogous to Showalter's concept of women's language in the wilderness. Yet, as we have seen, the remedy for gaps and silences and mimicry, the idea of creating a unique language for women capable of recognizing and expressing female subjectivity and experience, is a problematic one. Irigaray seems to recognize the essentialist trap when, in "This Sex which is not One," she rejects any attempt to define "woman," and when she acknowledges that Western philosophical discourse allows for more than the negation of the feminine: we need, she says, to

> 'reopen' the figures of philosophical discourse – idea, substance, transcendental

> subjectivity, absolute knowledge – in order to pry out of them what they have borrowed that is feminine, from the feminine, to make them 'render up' and give back what they owe to the feminine. (74)

This operation seems complicated and perhaps unnecessary, if we acknowledge, as the passage above obliquely does, that patriarchy, masculinity and femininity are not homogeneous concepts, and that perhaps there never was and never can be such a thing as either male or female language.

Julia Kristeva

Julia Kristeva's writing is characterized by an uncompromising anti-essentialism which leads her to reject any idea of an *écriture féminine* or a *parler femme* that would be inherently feminine or female. We have already seen how, in "The Ethics of Linguistics," Kristeva argues that there is no inherent sexist essence in the English language, since language is a heterogeneous signifying process appropriable for feminist purposes. Like Cixous and Irigaray, Kristeva points out the problem of defining woman: "I . . . understand by 'woman,' that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside naming and ideologies" ("La femme, ce n'est jamais ça," cited in Moi 21). Unlike Cixous and Irigaray, however, Kristeva's suspicion of terms which describe identity leads her a step further: "Nothing in women's past or present publications seems to allow us to affirm that there is a feminine writing (*écriture féminine*)" ("A partir de *Polylogue*," 97). Kristeva does admit that it is possible to distinguish various recurrent stylistic and thematic peculiarities in writing by women; but she holds that it is not possible to determine whether these characteristics should be

ascribed to a "truly feminine specificity, socio-cultural marginality or more simply to a certain structure (for instance hysteric) which the present market favours and selects among the totality of feminine potentiality" (99).

In other words, language must be seen in terms of its context, and as a signifying process rather than a monolithic system. In practical terms this does not mean that there is no sexism in language, but that the dominant power group controlling discourse does not do so by totally silencing the opposition; and if the balance of power should suddenly shift to favour women, it would not mean that language would cease to be the arena of gender (and other) struggles, but that the context of our discourse would be dramatically different. If, as Cixous and Irigaray have shown, femininity is defined by the dominant symbolic order as negativity, irrationality, and chaos, Kristeva's emphasis on marginality allows us to view women's repression in terms of context, in terms of any given time and of the position they occupy in society. For example, women have variously been portrayed in literature as angels or demons, as Lilith or the Virgin, etc. – that is, they have been seen as neither inside nor outside the frontiers of society. Women can escape and subvert these rigid dichotomies because of the heterogeneous, disruptive nature of language.[16]

It is because of the complex and heterogeneous nature of language that literary criticism must take the whole text as its object, which means studying the text's ideological, political, and psychological articulations, its connections with society, with the psyche, and with other texts. It also means studying the text as poetry, as language "defined by boundaries admitting of upheaval, dissolution and transformation," as Kristeva puts it in "The Ethics of Linguistics." Kristeva goes on to sum up her argument

on linguistics and the reading of texts: "In short, the ethics of a linguistic discovery may be gauged in proportion to the poetry that it presupposes" (25). As I have argued, Kristeva could very well have said this about literary criticism in general.

I have argued that critical approaches to literary texts must account for the contradictions and complexities of the text, must see the text as poetry, in Kristeva's terms, rather than a closed, monolithic system of signs and binary oppositions. I have also argued that the theoretical approach most valuable in a study involving speech in literary texts recognizes that any attempt to find gender differences in language use will yield tentative results at best, and that such results must be based on an analysis of context and so break the linguistic sentence barrier. In broader terms, studying the text in context means bringing to bear psychological, sociological, political and anthropological studies on the text. In a more specific sense, and in the way in which I will generally approach the text in this study of orality, dealing with context means taking the whole of the text (the entire passage, chapter, and novel in question) as one's subject, studying the relation of any character's utterances to those of the same character in other contexts and to other characters in the same context or in different contexts. This contextualization allows us also to make connections between a character's speech and other traits which define her, especially oral traits, in order that we may paint as complete a picture of the character as possible in our criticism. The purpose of this analysis is to determine, not how actual people spoke at the time, nor how women's speech differs from men's, but rather to note the different strategies of speaking and of dealing with the world which different characters deploy in different contexts, and which the same character deploys in

different contexts. The crux of my argument is that such strategies have much to do with orality.

How a character speaks and what she does with her mouth are often determined, I will argue, not so much by considerations of gender, as by the human needs and desires of the character. It is not enough, for example, to call Rochester a typical male and have done with it. In his oral traits he shows himself to be a much more complex character, driven by motives that lead him to trap the woman he loves in a bigamous relationship. And it is not enough to call Jane either a feminist or a traitor to feminism, for in her oral traits she shows that she is a woman capable of both leaving and loving such a man as Rochester. One could object that what Jane and Rochester experience is not really love, but this would be a denial of the portrayal of love as something brutal as well as something beautiful which we see in the work all of the Brontë sisters. At the risk of sounding trite, I would argue that in the Brontës' work love involves complex and sometimes contradictory ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, and exemplifies the complexities and contradictions of human character.

The writing of French feminist critics, despite or even because of its contradictions, seems more satisfying and true to the text than that of other theorists in that it takes the humanity of an individual into account, the complex and sometimes contradictory impulses that stem from our incessant needs and desires. The contradictions in writers such as Hélène Cixous are perhaps inevitable in that they attempt to work (in) the in-between. Just as one cannot define Jane Eyre solely in terms of either her desire or her resistance to desire, or in terms of her "speaking her mind" or her reticence, so we cannot define Cixous's writing in terms of either its deconstructive

openness to difference, or its promotion of voice as presence. In the chapters which follow the implicit assumption is made that identity and speaking are defined as much by absences as by that which is "present," and by the space between opposites which abolishes all difference. This may be construed as a kind of wish on my part to have my cake and eat it too, to side with Derrida and others and yet not; but in a discussion of orality and the speaking subject, it must be recognized that to the extent that fictional characters are realistic – that is, to the extent that they act like real individuals – they behave in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, and that the act of speaking entails a give and take, an opening of oneself to the difference of the other, a willingness to be "traversed by the other," in Cixous's words, as well as an acknowledgement of the presence and boundaries of the speaking subject and the necessity of maintaining difference. Cixous's insistence that the speaking subject be wholly "present" in her speech, that she know herself and know the boundaries between self and other and the possibility of transcending these boundaries, both in her speech and in her writing, seems to me a prerequisite for the give and take of true communication.

Here as elsewhere I insist on the connection between speech and orality because orality grounds the speaking subject in physicality and makes her "present" to us in a significant way, even though the subject's identity remains elusive and language remains imperfect. In its treatment of the function of lips and teeth and tongue, etc., a study of orality thus necessarily involves the recognition of the speaking subject as a physical reality and a presence to be recognized by the other. It is this recognition that leads to an acknowledgment of our common humanity and to the possibility of true communication between speaking subjects.

Since I have dealt almost exclusively with speech in this chapter, the implications for a larger study of gender and orality may not be obvious. I will argue that orality, not just speech, to a large extent defines the "identity"[17] of any given character, but that this identity remains complex and unfixed. An author constructs her character largely through that character's speech and oral strategies of dealing with the world; but rarely is this oral behaviour without contradiction. Since the self is elusive and fragmentary, a product of often contradictory motives and desires, a character's speech and other oral strategies are not necessarily representational or expressive of identity, just as language, as Derrida argues, is not representational or expressive of something outside itself. Yet it does not follow that if language does not work in the mode of a pipeline, as Derrida has shown, it refers to or means nothing. We cannot assume that because it is difficult to define Jane Eyre's character, we must conclude that the "self" does not exist, or that we should throw up our hands and say that one interpretation of what motivates Jane is as good as any. For Jane is like any real human being to the extent that what lies at the core of her character is both present and absent to us: it is present in her actions and most particularly in the things she says and whatever else she does with her mouth; and it is absent to the extent that language and symbolization are incapable of fully conveying meaning. And it is in the gap between presence and absence – in the wilderness between opposites, to adapt a term from Showalter, and in the silence between signs, to use the language of the French feminists – that the elusive self is situated in the novels we will be examining. In this sense, the novelists in question truly write (in) the in-between.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Richard Bailey's *Nineteenth-Century English* is another example. Bailey's book is largely concerned with social class and dialect, and, surprisingly, not at all with gender.

2. In an early review essay, Elaine Showalter makes a similar point about the problem of strictly linguistic analyses of texts, noting the difference between written and spoken language and the tentativeness of conclusions about gender differences in writing style ("Review Essay"). Showalter argues that since written language is more impersonal than speech, the methodology of linguistic analysis may not be adequate for understanding possible differences in the styles of female and male writers.

3. For early challenges to Lakoff, see Virginia Valian's "Linguistics and Feminism"; Dale Spender's *Man Made Language*, 8; and Sally McConnell-Ginet, "Linguistics and the Feminist Challenge." Lakoff's work, however, has only fairly recently been challenged in any sustained way by researchers in the field of linguistics with the work of Deborah Tannen (see below).

4. For another example of the same methodology at work in literary criticism, see Muriel Schultz's "A Style of One's Own," in which she examines how women's discourse differs from men's in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

5. See Kramer, Thorne and Henley's "Review Essay," and Thorne, Kramarae, and

Henley's *Language, Gender, and Society*, 14-16. This recognition of the importance of context in linguistic analysis, however, seems not to have had any appreciable effect on research for the next ten or more years, until the work of linguists such as Tannen, whose research goes "beyond the sentence barrier," as linguists often put it (see below).

6. Other collections of Tannen's research include *Talking from Nine to Five* and *You Just Don't Understand*. Both of these books have been mass-marketed, which is perhaps an indication less of the unquestionable quality of her research than of the relevance of her work.

7. Christopher Norris provides an excellent summary of Derrida's views on this point in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, 28.

8. I realize that Derrida has been quite influential in the work of French feminist authors such as Julia Kristeva, and in the section below on French feminist literary criticism I explain how the critique of Derrida offered here does not necessarily preclude an acceptance of the ideas French feminists.

9. Here the word "voice" is used rather loosely in the broad sense of narrative style and themes, and is, of course, to be distinguished from actual speaking. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I am discussing both literal and figurative meanings of voice, since both are used in some feminist criticism (sometimes without differentiation) to promote a homogeneous conception of sexual ideology and identity. The theorizing behind such criticism may be summed up as follows: since women everywhere and at all times have been oppressed by men, they speak and write the same kind of "language," that is, the language of the angry and the

oppressed.

10. I particularly admire Gilbert and Gubar's close reading of the text and seek to emulate them in this respect. I am also indebted to them for their persuasive arguments regarding several themes in nineteenth-century fiction, such as their identification of the angel-demon dialectic in the portrayal of women in literature, which I touch on in the chapters to follow.

11. Mary Jacobus has criticized Gilbert and Gubar's "unstated complicity with the autobiographical 'phallacy,' whereby male critics hold that women's writing is somehow closer to their experience than men's, that the female text *is* the author, or at any rate a dramatic extension of her unconscious" (520). In the same way, Gilbert and Gubar never seem to be able to separate the author from the heroine, so that the "mad double" of "female schizophrenic authorship" becomes the "avatar of the writer's own self" (79).

12. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* was the first book to establish the credibility of feminist literary criticism. Millett defines the "essence of politics" as power, and defines sexual politics as the process whereby the dominant sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex. Her analysis of sexual power-politics, however, is cast in monolithic terms, and does not take into account the exceptional women (and men) in literary history who have opposed patriarchal power.

13. This list is reminiscent of feminist criticism such as Penelope and Wolfe's (see above), which asserts that women perceive the world in terms of ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities, and complex relationships, whereas

"patriarchal expressive modes" perceive the world through categories, dichotomies, roles, stasis, and causation. Indeed, some feminist critics seem to have mistaken Ellmann's list of stereotypes for essentialist categories, adopting the very categories Ellmann criticizes. Patricia Meyer Spacks does this in *The Female Imagination*, stating at the same time that Ellmann writes "in the distinctive voice of a woman" (23), that is, with "a particularly feminine sort and function of wit" and with "the feminine resource of evasiveness" (24; cf. 23-29).

14. Showalter humourously and neatly sums up the weakness of Lacanian literary theory as it relates to women and language: "Lac(k)anian critics," as she styles them, "extend castration into a total metaphor for feminine disadvantage and lack" (24).

15. I will deal with these contradictions in the conclusion to this chapter.

16. Kristeva argues that the heterogeneous, disruptive nature of language ultimately derives from what she calls the *chora* (from the Greek for womb or enclosed space), the pre-symbolic repository of repressed impulses which manifests itself in language in the form of contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences, and absences.

17. I do not wish to imply here that characters really exist; but I would argue that the sign of a good author is her ability to capture the complex and contradictory nature of real individuals in her fictional characters, and so make these characters "real."

Chapter 2

Orality and Characterization I

Characterization necessarily entails reductiveness. To state what may seem obvious, no matter how good the writer, characters always will be reduced to varying extents to suit the demands of the plot, the author's rhetorical purpose, etc. – reduced because of the impossibility of recreating the life of a human being on paper. E.M. Forster states the obvious in a humorous way when he notes the difference between Homo Sapiens and what he calls "Homo Fictus" in his chapter on characterization in *Aspects of the Novel*, pointing out, for example, that fictional characters "seldom require food physiologically . . . and never digest it unless specially asked to do so" (61). In the previous chapter I argued that the sign of a good author is that her characters capture the complex and contradictory nature of real human beings – that is, whether her characters are "realistic" in the sense of being true to the complexity and contradiction of human nature. Of course, reductiveness in characterization also stems from the fact that an author's intention may not be to represent the life of a human being in her character to this extent. Caricature, while exaggerating one or a few human behaviours or characteristics, is basically reductive in its omission of other aspects of a character's behaviour and personality; but caricature is deliberately reductive in that it is not meant to portray "real" human beings in any comprehensive sense. This is not to say Dickens's caricatures, for example, are any worse than other fictional characters which are more fully "realized," in the sense in which I have just defined "real" and "realistic." In a

sense, Dickens's characters are fully realized in that they exist with great vividness on the page, in voice, vitality, and memorability; and I would argue that we may learn more about ourselves from a Dickens caricature than from many characters in literature. In other words, we can judge the quality of a work of literature by how much it tells us about ourselves as human beings.

This is another way of saying that most writers of fiction worth reading tend to find the middle ground in their characterization between caricature (selecting what is bad or absurd in human nature) or idealization (selecting *out* what is bad or absurd), and that realism is this middle ground. Writers of realistic fiction are concerned with creating characters whom we as readers can at least recognize, if not identify with – that is, who bear at least some resemblance to human beings. Such a task is by no means easy, for it poses the fundamental questions of who we are as humans, what the self is in itself, and in relation to others – answers to which have always been elusive. The problem of representation of character in literature is therefore related both to questions of identity, and to the necessity of reducing human life in the text and at the same time capturing at least some traits of "real" persons through various methods of characterization.

The problem of representation is also ultimately related to incorporation. The artist has a *need* to incorporate onto a canvas, into a text, etc., that which makes us human; but because the subject, the human being, is elusive and resists incorporation, the artist also must deal with the *desire* to reduce the human being in order to "get it all in." This is not only a problem related to representation in art – it is also a fundamental part of human existence, displayed at the most basic physical level in mastication and digestion, and at a more complex psychological level in the human propensity to incorporate others

into the self, which always requires us in some sense to reduce others. Cannibalism is the physical extreme of this propensity; verbal abuse ("biting" others into submission) is the psychological extreme. But it is indicative of the pervasiveness of the human impulse to incorporate that even our most noble emotion, love, is wrapped up with the desire not only to taste but to "eat" the beloved: who of us has not experienced this desire in our most intimate moments with our loved ones? As for the writer, he reveals the human impulse to incorporate in his desire to be copious and filling, to satisfy the scholarly urge to write everything on a given topic, and to provide his readers with good fare at the banquet of his text. Of course, some books are better fare than others: "Some books are meant to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested," as Francis Bacon put it. In his essay "The Appetite of Earth," G.K. Chesterton aptly speaks of the writer's task of translating into metaphor the real, "the solidity of things" (in this case a turnip), in terms of incorporation: "[The] sense of the solidity of things can only be uttered by the metaphor of eating. To express the cubic content of a turnip, you must be all round it at once. The only way to get all round a turnip at once is to eat the turnip."

Issues of representation and incorporation are central to the genre of the novel. Arising in English literature at a time when modern notions of individual identity were forming, the novel typically focuses on the individual in relation to others, on the "difficulty of being an 'individual' without being detached from others, or ingested by them, or consuming them" (Doody 424-25). The novel speaks to the problem of the human "impulse to incorporate external reality and get everything inside a single body" (Doody 424) while at the same time exemplifying this impulse, in its size relative to other genres, in its attempt to "get it all in." One could argue that this propensity was

exacerbated in nineteenth-century novels – "loose, baggy monsters," Henry James called some of them – by the need to fill the growing void being created by the breakdown of religious belief, and by philosophical shifts which left contemporary authors with the task of redefining the individual's place in society – of describing "The Buried Life," in Matthew Arnold's words.[1] Whereas twentieth-century fiction emphasizes emptiness and absence, "opening a space where the subject continually disappears" (Stwertka 179), nineteenth-century novelists attempt to find an antidote for emptiness by being copious and filling, and in so doing to keep the subject present.

Of course, nineteenth-century notions of subjectivity were very different from ours today; however, in the following two-part examination of orality and characterization, I will argue that nineteenth-century novelists, or at least the women novelists on whom I centre my discussion, found the concept of identity an elusive one, and portrayed their female characters with a greater degree of complexity than the authors of other works of literature.

In the present chapter I battle with my own desire to be copious and filling, and examine the characterization of women in English literature before the twentieth century. As we will see, women are often not represented with any degree of complexity – that is, they are not shown as fully human, in that ascribing needs and desires to women does not humanize them as much as categorize them, so that they are portrayed, for example, as either angel or demon. In *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë refers to this kind of categorization of women by male authors: "'[T]he cleverest, the acutest men,'" Shirley complains to Caroline, "'are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in a true light: . . . their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman

almost always a fiend'" (343). Often critics, as well, have paid little attention to how fully some female characters are portrayed in literature, tending also to categorize these characters as "good" or "bad" women. The truth for some of these more fully realized characters, and for real human beings, is somewhere in between; for our quest to fulfill even the most basic of needs is carried out in both selfish and unselfish ways, and often our most noble impulses are enmeshed with the most ignoble. Orality is illustrative not only of the nature of gender relations, but of human relations in general; for the mouth, as one of the primary links between subjective and objective worlds, is the site at which is displayed both our most selfish and our most unselfish ways of dealing with others – our capacity to show love for another with a kiss, our tendency to dehumanize a person with just one word. Thus, the authors I will examine who categorize and classify their female characters, and so reduce them, may have done so not necessarily because of sexist ways of thinking, but also because of the human tendency to reduce and incorporate.

Since identity is an elusive concept, the need to pin it down, dissect it, and incorporate it into a larger system of symbolization (such as a text) is always tempting. As I argued in Chapter 1, the desire to capture the "essence" of the human species, the human being, or man and woman, involves us inevitably in classification and categorization, in difference, and thus in the never-ending deferral of meaning. The nature of language further problematizes the issue of "summing up" a character. In the context of a discussion of orality, characterization and identity, it is important to keep in mind that, to the extent that one sees language (including speech and writing, text and dialogue) as a heterogeneous signifying process and identity as something unfixed, one should resist defining or summing up a character with a few neat descriptors after

examining their oral traits. Like real persons, many of the characters we will discuss, even many of the minor ones, are too complex to be described in any summative manner; and any generalizations about the way characters speak or use their mouths must be qualified by recognizing the importance of the context of these oral traits and of the *strategies* humans employ in relating with the world. This means that the same behaviour can be either subversive or conforming in different contexts, and that one's behaviour is not necessarily reflective so much of gender issues or identity as of a consciously or unconsciously chosen strategy of dealing with all too human needs and desires.

In Chapter 3 I will argue that Jane Austen and later women novelists were writing in a tradition of oral women in English literature, which I describe in the present chapter, and that their work must be seen in the larger context of this literature. I attempt to show that this literature does form a kind of tradition because it uses the same tropes again and again.

In this chapter I offer an all too selective literary history of women and orality, but one which is not too reductive, I hope, to fulfill my intention, which is to examine some of the tropes that form part of the tradition of the oral woman: *the cave*, the matrix of earthly (sometimes dark and primitive) human desires and needs, and a metaphor for the intersection of competing gender- and power-related interests;[2] *dilation and contraction*, as metaphors linking the oral orifice with the vaginal, orality with gender or sexuality; and *boundaries* and transgression of boundaries, as metaphors for the marginalized or ambiguous status of women and the interplay of dichotomies relating to issues of language and identity.

A brief literary history of oral women

Beowulf

In *Beowulf*, the oldest known piece of literature in English, Grendel and his monster mother live in a cave beneath a lake, where they feast on the bodies of their human victims. As outcasts of society, or rather "vague borderers" and "boundary-stalkers" who perhaps never were part of society, they "hug" their "feast joys" to themselves in a gross parody of "man's joys," the feasts of the community from which they are excluded. An important part of the feasts of the mead-hall is long speeches and songs steeped in the oral traditions of the people, which are part of a system of exchange and mediation as men unlock their "word hoards" and share their stories as well as their food. What Grendel and his mother in effect do is inflict damage to this system of mediation and exchange on which the courtly society constructs and codifies itself, literally emptying the halls of Heorot and creating a cavernous emptiness which only Beowulf and a few of his men are brave enough to inhabit when Grendel comes to attack; but in one interpretation of the poem Grendel and his mother are personifications of feud and kinsman-slaughter in society, and externalizations of the darker side of community and human nature. Like the dwellings of dragons and other mythical monsters, their submerged cave may represent the origins of the human species and the dark possibilities of human existence. Thus, as a representation of the tenebrous part of our dual nature, Grendel and his mother are both human and monster, vague borderers and boundary

stalkers, or rather boundary transgressors, neither part of culture nor fully part of the wilderness surrounding Heorot.[3]

Grendel and his mother, however, are more than mere representations of something else; they are, in their ambiguous and uncanny status as both human and monster and their insistent and defiant otherness, beyond the horizon of human knowledge, and in this sense are paradoxically most fully humanized by the poet. They defy easy categorization. It is Grendel's nameless mother, however, who is most elusive. Once Beowulf arrives on the scene, Grendel is dispatched relatively quickly, his amputated arm, which all come to gaze at, an ostensible uncovering of the mystery of the monster; but Grendel's death leads only to Beowulf's more prolonged and dangerous confrontation with his mother, ending in the cave, where she "grabbed him tight" with a "terrible crush."

As in other works of literature, the nexus of gender relations is the cave, and the female is relegated to the periphery of society, someone to be feared because of her otherness and yet strange sameness. The battle in the cave is at least partly about gender relations because we are never allowed to forget that Grendel's mother is female: she is a "monster woman" or a "witch," for example, and is implicitly compared with other females in the poem such as the hospitable queen of the Danes, who serves the warriors at table and acts to reinforce social ties. Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother is much more dangerous than the fight with the son, not only because she is presumably fighting with the instincts of a mother to avenge her son, but because she is far more elusive and cunning, forcing the hero to fight her in the cave. In the poem's courtly system of exchange and mediation, the cave represents not only the site of the abominable

consumption which is antithetical to the feasts of the mead-hall, but a place outside the borders of the master discourse, the storytelling and conversation of the feasts at Heorot. At the same time, however, the cave is a representation of what should be most familiar, of the deepest impulses and desires of the human heart; thus, the mother and the hero becoming one in the terrible hug in the cave is the point at which we are asked to recognize our impulses and desires. With her deadly hug, Grendel's mother obscures the boundaries we establish within ourselves, and between others and ourselves, to differentiate the good and the bad, the hero and the monster. She obliterates all difference. She is the uncanny Other who defies categorization and signification, transgressing the boundaries between self and other by hugging her victims close to her and ingesting them. Thus, the cave in *Beowulf*, and, as we shall see, in other works of literature, is a polysemous symbol of dark earthly impulses, of the clash and connection between self and other, and of the battle between dominant and subordinate systems of signification – all of which are connected by the oral imagery of the poem.

Medieval literature

In the literature of the Middle Ages, much of which comes out of the oral tradition, women are again described in terms of dichotomies and categories. The good woman restrained herself and was demure and silent, whereas the bad woman did not attempt to curb her supposed natural proclivity toward vociferousness and garrulity. This system of classification is assumed in the law which allowed a man to divorce his wife if her voice was loud enough to be heard next door,[4] and in Vives's characterization of women as "shuttle minded" and "babbling out all at large."[5] The latter images are typical

of an age in which, as Danielle Régnier-Bohler notes, men were obsessed with women's supposed excessive talk (457), and where linguistic taboos were closely associated with sexual taboos (460). A woman's vagina, for example, was often referred to as a "gluttonous" and voracious mouth (462); and, as the quote by Vives suggests, the garrulous woman was not only thought to be loose with her mouth, speaking an uncontrollable river of words, but loose in her sexuality, constantly "at large" like a pregnant woman. Thus, Chaucer's Wife of Bath recites the popular saying, "A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl" (a lecherous mouth begets a lecherous tail), yet subversively claims the right for women to be "at oure large," to be free to speak and do as they will (which for Alisoun includes sexual freedom).

The characterization in medieval societies of women as fulsome talkers who needed to learn silence and submission, extended not too surprisingly to women's writing, so that, as Régnier-Bohler points out, women were allowed to write and speak (at length and in public) only by virtue of their learning – which was rare at a time in which education for women was severely restricted – or by virtue of their mystical experiences. Régnier-Bohler goes on to describe the unique language of female mystics in the Middle Ages, a discourse rooted in what she calls "oral piety" (475). For these mystics "The spiritual state was one of insatiable hunger" (469) and the body was a full participant in spiritual experience. Their experience fostered the growth of a vast vocabulary of taste, eating, hunger, and satiety, as in the emphasis on bread and blood as symbols not only of one's relationship with Christ, but of one's relations with others (475). Citing Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Régnier-Bohler concludes that "one of the most original aspects of women's discourse was to take food – and the close connection

between women and eating – not only as a term of comparison or a metaphor but as an important element of women's spirituality" (474).

The Book of Margery Kempe

One of the mystics mentioned by Régnier-Bohler, and one central to the study of orality in literature, is Margery Kempe, who in her cries and sobs, her outspokenness, her recognition of the limitation and power of words, and her acute sense of self and her mission and authorization, exemplified the "new linguistic order" of female mystics (467). *The Book of Margery Kempe* is interesting from the standpoint that it is the product both of an illiterate female mystic's memory and experience, and of a highly literate male scribe's rendering of her story in writing. This raises the question of how much the bookish concerns of the scribe altered Margery's story, and the related question of the nature of the shift from orality to literacy in this work and in history. I will attempt to answer the second of these questions in Chapter 5. For now, it is important to note to what extent Margery's voice and oral memory seem to have impressed themselves on the narration of the book. We know that the priest who acted as scribe for Margery showed deep empathy for her, in that he too would be seized by fits of sobbing and weeping as he listened to her. Also, while her story was rewritten by the priest from an earlier, almost illegible text, as well as dictated to him years after the events recorded in it, "many modern readers, noticing the links between the vigour of the *Book*'s style and the vigour of Margery's character, will sense that in her *Book* we hear recorded, however tidied, much of the accent of an authentic voice . . ." (Windeatte 10). Indeed, orality seems central to the book, not only in the sense of the oral piety of female mystics noted by

Régnier-Bohler, but in Margery's unique and vivid speech, in her ability to remember dialogue accurately,[6] and in the narrative style of the book: in its lack of plot progression or pattern, its long and loosely connected sentences, direct speech exchanges, "earthbound awkwardness," and "unnerving directness and concreteness" (Windeatte 25), as well as in the agonistic disposition of its heroine – all of which, as Walter Ong points out, are characteristics of oral style (*Orality and Literacy* 36-57).

What we get in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is above all a vivid portrayal of the life of a fully realized human being, who defies easy categorization and thwarts the systems of signification in her society which dichotomize women into the types of silent and good or talkative and evil. Whether we can understand Margery's frequent sobbing, loud weeping, and continual talking of heaven, seems beside the point. That she possesses and displays desire (in her case, for her God), speaks strongly, and holds her own against those better educated than herself, is amazing because she is a woman; but what is more amazing is that she is a woman of some complexity, and has both positive and negative characteristics – in short, she is shown in all her humanity.

The Wife of Bath

In Chaucer's Wife of Bath we also have a more complex portrayal of a woman than perhaps we realize upon first reading. Alisoun in many ways typifies all the fears about women characteristic of the Middle Ages (and later). In her long and shamelessly frank account of her five marriages, the gap-toothed and large-lipped Alisoun makes the common connection between the mouth and sexuality, readily admitting that she "bit" her husbands into submission with her words and battered them into exhaustion with her

voracious sexual appetite, while claiming that she was faithful to each husband and kept her "queynte" (pudendum) for her husband's "owene tooth"; and she refers to her gap-teeth as the birthmark of Venus, "As help me God, I was a lusty oon," then speaks immediately about her fine "quoniam" (pudendum) which her husbands all admired, thereby linking again the mouth and the vagina. Alisoun's speech is replete with oral images and metaphors such as these. In the *Prologue*, she compares listening to her story with tasting a brew; uses a cask of ale as a metaphor for marriage; drinks plenty of wine and fondly says that a woman in her cups has no defence against sexual advances; admits that she never used discretion when in love, "But evere folwede myn appetit"; "feyned appetit" in bed with her old husbands, whom she calls "bacon" (old meat); happily talks of oral sex and her fine "quoniam" on more than one occasion; and finally receives from her last husband the "governance of hous and lond,/ And of his tonge."[7]

It is obvious that Chaucer meant to portray Alisoun as a strongly subversive woman; but it is not obvious to what extent he meant to portray her in a negative way. While her tale about the lusty young knight who was forced to marry an old woman (who turns out to be both beautiful *and* chaste!) is a variation on the angel-demon dichotomy which held that the beauty of women was often deceiving and treacherous,[8] Alisoun elsewhere subtly (though still boisterously) subverts classifications of women, as in her own loud claim that swearing and lies are the proper domain of women, and in her gloss of the Latin proverb that "God created women for crying, talking, and weaving," as ". . . deceite, wepyng, and spynnyng." By exaggerating to an absurd extent the way she wants society to perceive and treat women, Alisoun ironically points out the absurd way in which they actually were perceived and treated. Thus, her speech and character are not

unidimensional: she is capable of rancorous disapproval of the male order; but she is also capable of subtly subverting this order through irony and indirection. Alisoun is in a real sense the typical garrulous and sexually "loose" woman of the Middle Ages (and later), yet she is more than this. In her earthiness and contempt for the rules which place her desires in check, in her prolixity and ability to hit home with a verbal thrust, in her directness and her irony, she shows herself to be a complex character, a character which E.M. Forster would call round (no pun intended). And it is in this complexity, and in the unquenchable desire that defines her character, that she is most fully humanized by Chaucer. In short, perhaps Alisoun's continued appeal to readers is due to the fact that in her we see ourselves.

Renaissance literature

Chaucer's Alisoun reminds the reader of the physicality of speaking when she proclaims, "My joly body shall a tale tell." In *Literary Fat Ladies*, Patricia Parker picks up on this link between discourse and bodies in her examination of the supposed copiousness of the female tongue in Renaissance literature. "One of the chief concerns of the tradition that portrays women as unflappable talkers," notes Parker, "is how to master or contain such feminine mouthing. . . . [T]his control of female speech resembles the provision of shaping and closure to the potentially endless" dilation of discourse (26). Parker begins her examination of this will toward ending, mastery, and control by discussing the tradition of the figure of the woman as dilation, expansion, and deferral[9] – as in the Christian Church figured as symbolically female, expanding to take in a multiplicity of members and deferring the apocalypse – and the association of this

dilation with both the mouth and the vagina – as in the figure of the Church propagating the word through her mouth, and "opening" herself, as John Donne writes in Holy Sonnet 179, to Christ her Master (9). Parker goes on to note the link between garrulity and unbridled sexuality in women, expressed perhaps most enduringly by Hamlet in his exclamation, "I must like a whore unpack my heart with words." The necessity of coming to the point and reaching a climax and closure in a text (which is traditionally figured as female), and of placing a curb on women's perceived loquacity and desire for deferral in lovemaking,[10] was linked by the rhetorical tradition of "partition," the division and "opening up" of a difficult text through the multiplication of partitions or rhetorical dividing walls. Oddly, Parker dwells on the use of the rhetorical device of partition or division only as a means of dilation, when surely it was used also as a means of reaching closure, of placing boundaries on the potentially endless dilation of discourse and achieving a sense of propriety in speech and writing. Thus, just as in Renaissance England dilation denoted difference and deferral, an expansion and dispersal in time as well as space (Parker 9), so issues of propriety, of doing what is considered proper in society (and maintaining difference, for example, between social classes and genders) were inextricably linked with issues of property, of the establishment and maintenance of spatial boundaries and borders. The growing strength of this link in English society would be indicated in Adam Smith's argument that property was dependent on social order; and by Samuel Johnson's association between chastity and property rights: "Consider of what importance to society the chastity of women is. Upon that all the property in the world depends. We hang a thief for stealing sheep but the unchastity of woman transfers sheep, and farm and all, from the right owner" (Boswell 251). And by

Jane Austen's time, this link between property and propriety was codified in an elaborate system of social rules and manners, which not too surprisingly often tied rules governing women's use of language to strictures on women's movement (Tanner 32-33), so that women were prevented from "rambling" on with their mouths as well as their bodies.

Shakespeare

Shakespeare of course provides one of the most interesting case studies of oral women in Renaissance literature. Many of Shakespeare's heroines seem to exemplify the contemporary proverb that "silence is the best ornament of a woman" (Rovine 39). By pairing reticent and garrulous women together in his comedies, such as Hero and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* or Bianca and Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare's characterization seems to fall into the same system of dichotomous categorization of women as we find in much of English literature. Just as the placid silence of Hero and Bianca make them more successful in their endeavours (to win the love of a man, in their case) than their more talkative counterparts, in the *Winter's Tale* Hermione's long silence culminates in her appearance as a dumb statue, and in her muted but joyful reconciliation with Leontes. In Shakespeare's tragedies, however, a woman's silence seems to take on other dimensions. In *King Lear*, for example, Cordelia's silence is threatening rather than pleasing. Cordelia's choice to "love and be silent" is monstrous to Lear[11] (just as the silent feasting of Grendel's mother is in *Beowulf*) because she resists and threatens the systems of exchange on which society codifies and constructs itself, namely those of social discourse and property, which come together so forcefully at the beginning of the play: Lear's daughters must speak, and speak well, in order to get their

pieces of the kingdom. If in his characterization of Cordelia Shakespeare may be challenging the validity, or at least the adequacy, of these systems of exchange, *King Lear* nevertheless still dichotomizes women, with Cordelia portrayed as angel and Goneril and Regan as demons: Cordelia after all has a voice "ever so soft,/ Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman"; but Goneril and Regan's "glib and oily" speech eventually cannot keep Lear from concluding that "Down from the waist they are Centaurs,/ Though women all above."

In what is perhaps "the greatest of Shakespeare's female characterizations" (Kermode 1346), Cleopatra defies this kind of categorization. She is neither simply a type of Riot, of sensuous appetite out of control, nor the representative of natural fecundity and beauty, for she "makes hungry/ Where most she satisfies." Her speech shows that she is lubricious and self-regarding; but her language is more attractive than Octavius's clinical and rational speech, and she gets some of the best lines in Shakespeare, as in her lamentation over Antony in Act 4. Yet, as with so many of Shakespeare's outspoken heroines, she meets a less than satisfactory end – even if she is silenced "on her own terms" (Kermode 1346), she is nevertheless silenced.

Although Shakespeare's silenced heroines may be an indirect attack on the status of women in his society, it is easy enough to find examples of sexism in his plays, such as Hamlet's condemnation of women's speech as "lisp[ing] and nicknam[ing] God's creatures," or Rosalind's proclamation in *As You Like It*, "I am a woman . . . I must speak"; but in what is arguably a very oral play, *Much Ado about Nothing*, we see that Shakespeare does not offer an uncomplicated view of gender relations. Indeed, the strength of the subplot in this play and the witty lines he assigns to Beatrice show the

author's love of the loquacious, intelligent woman. Benedick and Beatrice's relationship is defined not only in personal terms – as opposed to the relationship of Claudio and Hero – but also in very oral terms: "how many hath he eaten in these wars?" Beatrice asks about Benedick as the soldiers come back from fighting; and later she says of him, "his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes." One of the phrases which Benedick uses to describe his exchanges with Beatrice, "paper bullets of the brain," is very odd in its comparison of the intangible (speech, the brain/mind) with the tangible (paper bullets); but the image seems fitting, not only because of the combative nature of their relationship, but because the oral imagery used to describe their combat throughout the play sets their (intangible) speech in relation to the larger aspects of orality – to "appetite," or human needs and desires, which are intangible in their origin and yet tangible in their manifestations. In other words, orality links the subjective and objective worlds, firmly situating characters in a (fictional) physical world and in relation to others in this physical world, but portraying the interplay of physical and psychological needs and desires, which for very complex physical and psychological reasons characters attempt either to repress or to satisfy. Examples of physical impediments to the fulfillment of desire, especially between couples, abound in Shakespeare's comedies; but both Beatrice and Benedick attempt to deny their desire for psychological reasons, using wit as a defense against and an outlet for strong emotions, and as a way of keeping the other at a distance and protecting a vulnerable self. This strategy of dealing with one's own desires and emotions, and with those of others, makes Beatrice more complex than most other female Shakespeare characters; [12] and we see that in this strategy orality is the nexus of her complex relationship with Benedick, and of gender relations in general: "O

God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place," exclaims Beatrice (with typical oral imagery) after the shaming of Hero in the aborted wedding. Here the forcefulness of Beatrice's speech is shown without qualification or negative judgment, as she speaks for an indignant audience; and it is because of the forcefulness of her speech, her gibe that "men are only turn'd into tongue," that Benedick is persuaded to challenge his own friend to a duel. But by this point the once avowed eternal bachelor has already let down his verbal defenses and surrendered to his love for Beatrice – for, as he ironically puts it, "doth not the appetite alter?"

Alexander Pope

In the work of Alexander Pope we see the same tropes and themes as in earlier literature – the cave, boundaries, dilation, and the dichotomization of women. The Goddess of Spleen in *The Rape of the Lock* and the Goddess of Dulness in *The Dunciad* both live in caves and are associated with the threat to legitimate discourse in society. The Goddess of Spleen is the type of the hypochondriacal or (as our contemporaries sometimes put it) the "difficult" woman, and is served by her handmaid "Affectation," who, like Hamlet's caricature, practices "to lisp." In keeping with the symbolic significance of the cave in literature, she is the originator of hallucinations associated with the fear of female fecundity, in which there appears "Unnumber'd Throngs . . . Of Bodies chang'd to various Forms," and in which "Men prove with Child." She is "a sort of patroness of the sexual cycle" (Gilbert and Gubar 33), and therefore, of course, of ill humour, in that she rules her sex "to Fifty from Fifteen"; and, as the patron of the fecund and splenetic female, she inspires female writers to fall into a "Hysteric or Poetic Fit" and

"scribble plays." However, she threatens not only the standards of excellence of legitimate written discourse (i.e. discourse by males), but of spoken discourse, imparting oral/verbal power to women and inspiring them to employ "Sighs, Sobs, and Passions" and engage in "the War of Tongues." Although the Goddess of Spleen inspires Belinda to speak "with more than mortal Ire," her speech when all is said and done is ineffective. She is the "fierce Virago" who must be put down in Pope's dichotomous classification of women, with the more angelic Clarissa at the other end of the spectrum; but even though Pope puts "the MORAL of the Poem" in Clarissa's mouth and gives her some of his most quoted lines – beauty is "The Wise Man's Passion, and the vain Man's Toast," and "she who scorns a Man, must die a Maid" – Clarissa's speech also has no effect on her auditors. That Belinda's speech is self-reflexive, eloquent, and ineffective, and Clarissa's speech moralizing, eloquent, and ineffective, is perhaps reflective of Pope's own opinion of the role of the female in social or literary discourse.

As in *The Rape of the Lock*, the cave in *The Dunciad* is a no-man's land beyond the borders of society (i.e. outside of societal norms and rules), a place associated with grotesque dilation which threatens accepted discourse. Although the Goddess of Dulness in *The Dunciad* inspires the overproductivity of hack *writing*, such overproductivity is described in terms of feasting, dilation, and expulsion; thus, "the Great Mother" of Dunces, whose "ample presence fills up all the place (the cave)," "breathes" on the "supperless" Bard and inspires him to "swell" his prose into books of the "amplest size" and to "purge" his classical texts.[13] Images of procreativity abound in the poem, as in words such as "spawn," "embryo," "new-born," "ductile," "wild creation." As Patricia Parker has pointed out, such imagery is indicative of the fear writers have of coming to

closure, and, one could add, of seeing their art degraded by hack writers; but in Pope, as in the other literature we have looked at, such a fear is closely associated with female productivity. Thus, he attacks the writing of the Duchess of Newcastle, who rates as one of the dunces of the poem, not only because of the "ravishing" content of her poetry but because her writing fills up "ample" volumes.

Samuel Johnson

This fear of copious or dilatory language, and the classification of women by their use of language, also show up in Samuel Johnson's writing. Although Johnson is in a way progressive in his thoughts on the status of women,[14] his comments on topics such as a woman preaching are notorious and his thoughts on eloquent women particularly interesting, if not original. In a *Rambler* article of 1751, he gives a fictional account of one man's search for the perfect wife. In his quest, he meets "a lady of great eminence for learning and philosophy" who possesses great conversational skill and power in disputation, but who has the telling name of Misothea and, like so many other eloquent or loquacious females in literature, has rather liberal ideas about sex (or "the calls of appetite," as Johnson delicately puts it) which stem from her practice of making capricious choices.[15] Johnson elsewhere pays particular attention to dilatoriness in speech: "in conversation we naturally diffuse our thoughts, and in writing we contract them," he notes; the ideal man of letters does not neglect conversation, but also realizes the necessity "to fix the thoughts by writing."[16] This idea of fixing one's thoughts, of reaching closure and finality of meaning, became a preoccupation with Johnson, as is seen in the Preface to the *Dictionary*. Here he recounts how he found "speech copious

without order," and how he recoiled at the "arbitrary repetition of sounds" and "the boundless chaos of a living speech." He confesses he wished "that signs might be permanent" and that his dictionary "should fix our language, and put a stop" to any alterations of the English vernacular; for (as with his example of Misothea) "Copiousness of speech will give opportunities to capricious choice." As Maggie Kilgour points out, this desire to complete an ambitious encyclopaedic book which places a kind of closure on discourse (both oral and written) is essentially an oral impulse "to incorporate external reality and get everything inside a single body."[17] What thwarts Johnson's oral desire to incorporate all of the English language in one work is, ironically, an aspect of orality itself, the uncontrollable productivity of speech; thus, Johnson finally concedes in his Preface that "the pen must at length comply with the tongue."

More than a decade before the publication of the *Dictionary*, Johnson shows the same preoccupation with the need to place order upon that which in his mind is overproductive or fecund. In *Rasselas*, the Happy Valley, with its "verdure and fertility" and its houses containing secret subterranean passages and "unsuspected cavities," is a place of both "delight" and "imprisonment." Johnson's heroes break out of its womblike isolation through "a small cavern, concealed by a thicket," and thence through "a fissure in the rock," the only other way out being impassable because it is only a very narrow channel through which a stream flows. After their escape the excitement is basically over and for the rest of the story they engage in controlled and somewhat contrived philosophical discourse with those whom they meet on their journeys; thus, like those who come out of Plato's cave, Johnson's heroes must first escape the metaphoric womb in order to engage in philosophical discourse.[18] However, in *Rasselas* this kind of

discourse leads only to the conclusion that happiness is unattainable through philosophical discourse, or indeed by any other means. Like a baby's birth into the world, Johnson's heroes' escape from the Happy Valley is ultimately an unsatisfactory one culminating in an ambivalent end: ironically, *Rasselas* fails to achieve the sense of closure Johnson so values in his Preface to the *Dictionary*, in that its ending is a "conclusion, in which nothing is concluded."

Romantic and Victorian poetry

As the rest of my work focuses on the nineteenth-century novel, and as I, too, am reaching the dangerous point of attempting to be encyclopaedic in the current discussion of oral women, I have narrowed the remainder of this discussion down to orality in Romantic and Victorian poetry, with the exception of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*.

The image of the cave in association with orality also appears in several Romantic and Victorian works of literature. In Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," the "pleasure dome" of Xanadu is less womb-like than vaginal, with its fertile ground "girdled round" with walls and phallic towers, its gardens with "sinuous rills," its vulvic "green hills athwart a cedern cover," and its river running through caverns. It is a place about which the poet seems ambivalent, a place of pleasure and pain: in it the poet can drink "the milk of paradise" and be inspired; but its caves are made of ice, and are haunted by an inarticulate, wailing woman. Like Coleridge's cave, the "elfin grot" in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is associated with both pleasure and danger, and is a place of oral deprivation. Keats uses oral imagery throughout the poem: the *femme fatale* seduces a knight at arms with "roots of relish sweet," "honey wild," "manna dew," and with her

"language strange," and lures him into her grotto where he dreams of her other victims, with their "starv'd lips" which "gaped wide." And in "The Orchard Pit," Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *femme fatale* holds a tempting bright red apple while singing and luring her victims to their deaths in an orchard, which is situated on either side of "a glen whose sides slope upward from the deep bed of a dried-up stream" (Rossetti's notation).

In each of these poems the cave is a place of oral deprivation: the wailing woman in Coleridge's poem is deprived of speech; and the men in Keats's and Rossetti's poems are fed food which is unnourishing. Women in these poems are also portrayed not as individuals (in Coleridge's poem the woman is not shown at all, and is reduced to her voice), not as human, but as a type of the "unfeminine," unnurturing woman, as opposed to the ideal of the nurturing and self-effacing angel in the house.

The tendency to diminish the human characteristics of females in literature and reduce them to types or objects is also portrayed in Robert Browning's poetry. In many of his poems, the speech of men is portrayed as potentially lethal in its tendency to objectify women. Woman is reduced to food in "A Light Woman," for example, as the speaker, with the pretense of rescuing his friend from becoming a victim of a seductress, diverts her attention to himself and treats her like a "pear," "With no mind to eat it," leaving her to "quench a dozen blue-flies' thirst." In "My Last Duchess," the life of a woman is literally reduced to a painting which, for her husband, is as good "as if she were alive," if not better. It is clear that even when she was still alive, the Duke felt a need to restrict his wife's existence, her "approving speech" and even her wordless blushes. In contrast to his wife's limited speech, the Duke's language is subtly manipulative, and his word literally kills: "I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped

together." Indeed, as Browning says elsewhere, "the power of life and death [is]/ In the tongue" ("A Lover's Quarrel"); and the inability or refusal to speak for one's self is a kind of death, as we see in "A Woman's Last Word." This poem portrays the self-effacement of the ideal woman of the nineteenth century, while at the same time playing on the common conception that a woman always gets the last word. The irony is that she is speaking the last word, and *her* last word, in that she vows to her lover, "I will speak thy speech." The potentially deadly use or misuse of speech is also shown in "Andrea del Sarto," but with a different effect. Andrea calls Lucrezia his "serpentining beauty, rounds on rounds!"; yet the same image could be used of the artist's speech, which continually falls back on itself, reverting to the same themes and images in an attempt to keep Lucrezia as his passive and silent auditor. In much the same way, his painting attempts to confine Lucrezia and reduce her to an object, a "perfect" work of art; but just as his speaking only gives him the illusion of control over her, so Lucrezia's "serpentining" beauty proves too elusive to capture in art, and she slips away from Andrea in the end.

Andrea's desire to confine and reduce his beloved is not only a problem related to representation in art, to the necessity of the artist to "get it down" and the wish to "get it right"; his actions are indicative of the all too human desire to capture the essence of another person, which requires us to reduce that person to some degree, in order that in some sense we may incorporate that person into ourselves. Christina Rossetti describes this tendency in her poem, "In an Artist's Studio," at the same time criticizing the sameness of representations of woman in Pre-Raphaelite art. Rossetti takes aim at art which idealizes a woman as a "saint" or "angel" (and so reduces her) while at the same time stripping her of any sense of individuality, so that she remains "a nameless girl,"

"Not as she is, but as she fills his dream." Rossetti here may very well have had not only her brother's paintings in mind, but his poem, "The Blessed Damozel," which portrays woman as both sensuous and saintly and so plays on the never-ending dialectic between woman as temptress and woman as angel: the woman in the poem is idealized to the point that she is an angelic being in what appears to be an all-female heaven;[19] yet she is a very sensual and tempting being at the same time. As is common in literature, the woman's idealized yet denigrated status is portrayed in her voice, which is "like the voice [of] stars" yet, like the speech of Pope's Belinda and Clarissa, ultimately ineffectual: she yearns to teach her earthly lover to sing the songs she sings, to have his voice "find some knowledge" listening to hers, but this will never be; and she is left speechless at the end of the poem, as only "her eyes prayed" and her only vocalization is crying.

Goblin Market

It is as though Christina Rossetti wrote "Goblin Market" as a corrective to the portrayal of women as orally deprived or depriving. Again, orality is the nexus of female-male relations in the poem: the oral oddities of the goblin men (the purring, whistling, etc.) are described at length; the voices of the goblins, their "sugar-baited words" and not just the sight of the fruit, are tempting; "sweet-toothed Laura" speaks "in haste" and sucks the fruit until her lips are sore, whereupon her mouth "fades," she becomes mute, she "gnashe[s] her teeth for baulked desire," and she self-starves (she "would not eat"); Lizzie sacrificially rescues Laura by enduring the goblin's attack, refusing to "open lip from lip," and telling Laura to "suck my juices. . . . Eat me, drink me, love me . . . make much of me"; Laura's restoration is signaled by her laughing in her

innocent old way, and by her breath, which becomes as "sweet as May." As in the literature in which the cave is an important metaphor for gender relations, the interaction between the goblins and the sisters takes place in a "haunted glen"; but in Rossetti's poem, as in the poems by Robert Browning, the male[20] is the depriver and manipulator (of normal human activities such as eating, and of language, as is shown in Lizzie's silence), and the female is ultimately victorious over his abuse. There are certainly still traditional elements in the poem, such as the dichotomy between the "good" sister and the "bad" sister, and the emphasis on the proper place of the woman in society, as in the portrayal of the domestic work done by "good" women while talking "as modest maidens should." However, most of the domestic functions mentioned are related to orality, such as fetching honey, milking cows, kneading cakes, churning butter, and whipping cream; and thus, I would argue, in the rhetorical and thematic design of the poem (that is, in its attention to orality) this domestic work must be seen in relation to the other oral activities in which the women engage and which challenge and eventually thwart the power of the male goblins.[21] Furthermore, while one of the points of the poem may be that a woman must pay a high price when she enters the male-dominated spheres of society, Lizzie does hold her own against the goblins, and the power of sisterhood is affirmed in her rescue of Laura. The ending of the poem – which many feminist critics would say is the most conservative part of the work, with both sisters marrying, having children, and keeping house – can be seen within the larger design of the poem (that is, in relation to the oral tropes of the poem) as more progressive in that the sisters are still engaged in an oral activity which is directly opposed to, and acts to subvert, the goblins' discourse: they warn their children of the dangers of the goblin men and, more importantly, how to

overcome such dangers through the power of sorority – they pass down, in the same manner as many of their "sisters" for centuries before, the oral tradition of their experience as females.

Shirley

The passing down of oral tradition at the end of "Goblin Market" is an example of the common desire of women writers and in women's writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for a greater sense of connection between women of different generations;[22] and in Rossetti's poem and other literature, both the desire for this inter-generational bond, and the bond itself, are portrayed in oral terms. In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, for example, the mother-daughter bond is associated closely with images of the cave – which, as we have seen, may be symbolic of both the womb and the mouth – and these images form part of the oral motif and the larger theme of the hunger of the exploited in this novel.[23] In the dense landscape imagery of *Shirley* there are two recurring cave-like settings: the once beautiful and fertile Hollow (599) in which Robert Moore's mill thrives at the expense of the landscape surrounding it; and the dell of Nunnwood forest – which one must reach by "penetrat[ing] into Nunnwood," as Caroline puts it (220) – "a deep, hollow cup, lined with turf as green and short as . . . sod," at the bottom of which "lie the ruins of a nunnery" (221). The anatomical imagery connected with these settings is unmistakable, especially in combination with other images which recur throughout the novel, as when Louis Moore rhapsodizes to Shirley that "It is the natural hill, with its mossy breaks and hollows, whose slope invites ascent – whose summit it is a pleasure to gain" (488); or when Caroline and Mrs Pryor walk through the

Hollow and come to a place where "the opposing sides of [a] glen approaching each other, and becoming clothed with brushwood and stunted oaks, formed a wooded ravine, at the bottom of which ran the mill-stream" (360). It is as they reach "the head of the ravine" that the reader is given the strongest indications that Mrs Pryor is Caroline's mother (361). There is another kind of cave in the novel, however: Mary Cave, the maiden name of Caroline's aunt, who silently suffers the verbal abuse of her husband, with his "hollow and cavernous" voice (45). Thus, the image of the cave in *Shirley* conflates the metaphor of the womb and the mouth: in discovering who her mother is (that is, literally, from whose womb she was born), Caroline also is told the story of her mother's verbal abuse at the hands of her father, whose soft speech in public hid private "discords that split the nerves and curdled the blood – sounds to inspire insanity" (413). The cave here is also is a metaphor for female connectedness and bonding: just as Shirley and Caroline dream of an excursion deep into Nunnwood, where they would eat nuts and wild strawberries, and from which even the "right sort" of men would be excluded (221), so Caroline and her mother share the solitude of the Hollow and re-establish the bond between mother and daughter; but the bonds these women share include oral deprivation and suffering, for hollowness and hunger define their relationships with men.[24]

We have seen how orality is tied to several other themes and motifs in English literature – the cave, boundaries, dilation and contraction – and how the perception that feminine mouthing and dilation needed to be contained was associated with the need for

borders and boundaries in texts and in society at large. From the notorious "boundary-stalking" mother in *Beowulf*, to the conduct books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literature shows there has always been a perception that women are somehow outside of the boundaries (linguistic, social, or otherwise) set by society – that they are in the "wilderness," as Showalter puts it in *A Literature of Their Own*. At the same time, women in literature are figuratively placed on the margins of society, categorized and classified by virtue of difference (from men) and according to various dichotomies, for example, between angel and demon, or culture and nature/the wilderness; they are like Lévi-Strauss's "Honey-Mad Woman" in *Mythologiques*, who eats a substance like herself (both predigested and unprocessed, delineating the ambiguous border between culture and nature), thereby breaking the rules of a system meant to contain women's "natural" disorder and fecundity and thwarting society's attempt to consume her.[25]

To be an author residing in the wilderness, or "working (in) the in-between," as Hélène Cixous puts it, is not necessarily a negative thing. That it may indeed be positive is obvious in the work of the female novelists which I examine in Chapter 3, authors who wrote the way they did despite, or perhaps because of, their status as female authors in a society which had a very ambivalent view of their work.

Notes

Chapter 2

1. Victorian prose of thought shows a preoccupation with the necessity of order and the horror of the fragmentary, as is illustrated in Matthew Arnold's concepts of "culture" and "anarchy."

2. Of course, in Western thought the cave is a representative of other things, such as, in the example of Plato's well-known Allegory of the Cave, issues relating to metaphysics and epistemology. Luce Irigaray's psychoanalytic reading of Plato in *Speculum of the Other Woman* sees the cave as an image of the womb, and the ascent from the cave into the sunlight as the (male) child's assumption of an identity by escaping from identification with his mother, and by identifying with the father (the Form of the Good); thus, truth and rationality are to be found only by repudiating the mother, the female, and the ability to be a philosopher, to be a rational being, a subject, is defined by the male as an exclusively male characteristic. My reading of the significance of the cave in literature sees it as a representation of both the womb and the mouth, representative not only of gender relations, but more generally of our dark origins and that which defines our humanity – our incessant cravings and needs.

3. Although Grendel and his mother make their home in the wilderness cave, an essential quality of their existence seems to be its homelessness. The poet of

Beowulf compares them to Cain, the "horrid solitary one" who was forced to wander along the fringes of society.

4. Cited in Janis P. Stout, *Strategies of Reticence*, 10.

5. Cited in Diane Bornstein, "As Meek as a Maid," *Women's Language and Style*, 135. In describing women as shuttle minded, Vives may have been referring both to the instrument used in weaving, and to a flood gate. The latter image is related to the idea of dilation and contraction which is discussed later in this chapter.

6. Barry Windeatte points out "the powers of the unbookish mind to remember scenes in terms of spoken exchanges," as does Walter Ong in his description of the memory of pre-literate peoples (*Orality and Literacy* 57-68). One of the tests of Margery's oral/aural memory was her ability to recall word for word Bible passages which she had heard.

7. All quotations from Chaucer are from the Everyman's edition of *Canterbury Tales*, edited by A.C. Crawley (London: Dent, 1958). Images and descriptors related to orality in the *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and in the *Prologue* are not unique to *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole. For example, Chaucer seems preoccupied with how much and in what way his characters eat and drink: the Prioress is rather fat, the Monk likes to eat well, the Clerk is a thin man, the Cook's taste buds are so refined he can distinguish London ale by flavour, and the Miller is a big, brawny man – and all of them, of course, have made a bet that the person with the best tale will get a free dinner when the group arrives in Southwark.

8. The central question in the tale, "What thing it is that wommen most desiren," *is* subversive, however, in that it focuses the tale on women and assumes that they

can indeed have desire. The answer to the question that Alisoun has the old woman give, "Wommen desire to have sovereinetee/ As well over hir husband as hir love," may be subversive in the direct sense of making a serious claim for women, or, if interpreted ironically, in the indirect sense of challenging what men thought of women, not so much by seriously proposing an alternative, as by making an exaggerated claim for women and thereby pointing out the absurdity of the claims made against women.

9. Parker points out that "dilate" comes from the same Latin root as Derrida's *differance*, and throughout the Renaissance signified both difference and deferral, an expansion and dispersal in space but also a postponement in time (9).

10. Putting off of coitus or consummation was (and still is) seen as a feminine strategy in the art of love.

11. What Lear seems to take exception to, and even to fear, is the "nothingness" which Cordelia's silence makes almost palpable, a reminder to him perhaps of his old age and impending death, which, as P.C. McGuire points out in *Speechless Dialect*, silence often signifies in Shakespeare; but if we take into account Luce Irigaray's comments on men's fear of the nothingness or negativity of the womb or vagina – the "nothing . . . between maid's legs," as Hamlet puts it – we may come up with another reading of the passage.

12. Beatrice and Benedick's oral strategies also certainly make them more complex characters than those of the main plot. While Beatrice and Benedick's verbal battles show their deep and conflicting emotions, Claudio's wooing of Hero is highly conventional and impersonal: the initiation of their courtship seems

simply a matter of course, and their marriage merely like something to do after the excitement and adventure of war has ended. Claudio's use of the Prince as a third party in courtship shows that he sees marriage in social and conventional more than in personal terms, so that the violence of the language with which he shames Hero and casts her off in the aborted wedding, though shocking to the reader/audience, is totally in keeping with the nature of their relationship.

13. Purging may be an alimentary rather than purely an oral metaphor.

14. On misogynist writing, Johnson writes: "as the faculty of writing has been chiefly a masculine endowment, the reproach of making the world miserable has been always thrown upon the women . . ." (*The Rambler*, No. 18, May 19, 1750); and on the lot of women: "whether they embrace marriage, or determine upon a single life, [women] are exposed, in consequence of their choice, to sickness, misery, and death" (*The Rambler*, No. 39, July 31, 1750).

15. *The Rambler*, No. 113, April 16, 1751. We have seen how loquacity in female characters is a signal of "unnatural" sexual aggression and lack of moral soundness in the Wife of Bath, and possibly in Pope's Goddesses. Some other examples are Shakespeare's Mistress Quickly and Fielding's Lady Booby and Lady Bellaston.

16. *The Adventurer*, No. 85, August 28, 1753.

17. *From Communion to Cannibalism*, 16; quoted in Doody, 424.

18. Interestingly, Johnson's mother died around the time that he wrote *Rasselas*, and he used the money from its publication to pay for her funeral expenses. Given Johnson's personal circumstances at the time of writing *Rasselas*, and the imagery

of the womb and release from the womb in the work, it is possible to see his mother's death as a kind of rebirth for him.

19. While both the spiritual and sensual qualities of the damozel are feminine, males are not at all part of the poem's dialectic between the spiritual and the physical; and the nameless souls of the lovers who meet around the damozel in heaven are sexless, while the damozel is unmistakably female. Fittingly, then, the names of the denizens of D.G. Rossetti's heaven which he mentions are all female: Mother Mary, Mary Magdalen, and Margaret.

20. The goblins are repeatedly described as *men*.

21. It is also important to note that, rather than being signs of the diminishment of the role and status of women in society, as Gilbert and Gubar and other critics argue, the orally-related domestic work described in the poem may be seen as central to the formation and survival of culture, as I argued in the Introduction. Related to this domestic work is the oral tradition which the sisters are passing on at the end of the poem, and which, as I argue in Chapter 4, is certainly not a sign of the diminishment of the status of women.

22. Two more examples of this desire to connect with one's female (literary) forebears come to mind: Jane Austen's well-known passage in *Northanger Abbey* about the need to keep alive the work of female novelists who have preceded her, whom she calls an "injured body"; and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous lament that she has no poetic "grandmothers." Elaine Showalter commenting in *A Literature of Their Own* on "the transience of female literary fame" and the breach between succeeding generations of women writers points out the

significance of Lizzie and Laura's oral activity at the end of "Goblin Market," and part of the origin of women's desire to connect with women of other generations. This desire is further evidenced in the mother-daughter plots common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as critics such as Marianne Hirsch have pointed out (*The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

23. For an illustration of the density of the oral references in *Shirley*, see Gilbert and Gubar's chapter, "The Genesis of Hunger: *Shirley*," 372-398. Whereas Gilbert and Gubar argue that "hunger is inextricably linked to rebellion and rage" in the novel's portrayal of women and the working class, I would argue that *starvation* is representative of social injustice, but that ***hunger*** is a more generalized metaphor for basic human cravings and needs in this novel and in literature in general.

24. Caroline's silent hunger for Robert Moore's affection is ironically shown in her day dream of feeding ***him*** nuts and berries in "Hollow's copse," after which she muses on the "hollowness" of living to meet the needs of others (189-90). However, my reading of the many references to hunger and hollowness in the novel – of the "hollow tree and chill cavern" in Shirley's story about the outcast girl who is "fed sometimes," to give another example (456) – is that Charlotte Brontë's intention was not so much to make a point about the status of gender relations as to capture the suffering and hollowness of both men and women in society, and in human relationships in general, in what is after all her most social novel (see Chapter 4).

25. In Patricia Yaeger, "Honey-Mad Women: Charlotte Brontë's Bilingual Heroines." Contrary to the common feminist position that women are powerless in the presence of "masculine" language, Yaeger argues that, like the honey-mad woman, Charlotte Brontë's bilingual heroines consume to excess the languages designed to control them – that they are "mad for the honey of speech" (11).

Chapter 3

Orality and Characterization II

Mrs Jennings and her daughter stuffing themselves with fruit from Colonel Brandon's mulberry tree in *Sense and Sensibility*; Arthur Huntington drinking and swearing in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; Mr Casaubon slurping soup in *Middlemarch* – what all of these very different characters have in common is a propensity to reveal their personalities or moods in oral ways, as indeed do many of their fellow characters. What I will argue in this chapter is that nineteenth-century women novelists are extremely sensitive to speech and aurality and highly descriptive about what their characters do with their mouths, and that orality is the nexus not only of the relations between genders, but between the desires and needs that make us human and the world in which we seek to fulfill or repress our deepest cravings. As I argued in Chapters 1 and 2, in a discussion of characterization it is important to keep in mind that, to the extent that one sees speech as a heterogeneous signifying process and identity as something unfixed, one cannot easily define or sum up characters, for they are often too complex to be described in any comprehensive way; and any generalizations about the way characters speak or use their mouths must be made not with the objective of somehow summing up the essence of a character, but of recognizing the importance of the context of these oral traits and of the *strategies* human beings employ in attempting to manage their needs and desires.

In this chapter I will also argue that Jane Austen and later women novelists were writing in a tradition of oral women in English literature, and that it is useful to see their work in the larger context of this kind of literature. In Chapter 2 I showed that this

literature does form a kind of tradition because it uses the same tropes again and again, such as the metaphors of the cave, boundaries, and dilation and contraction. Although these tropes do not occur in all of the nineteenth-century novels I will be discussing, we can assume that Jane Austen and other women novelists were to some extent aware of their recurrence in literature.[1]

Indeed, other evidence showing the prevalence of orality in their writing supports this assumption and links the work of Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot, and other writers more closely together than is sometimes posited in literary criticism. In Chapter 5 I argue that these writers were part of the historical orality-literacy shift, and that such a shift is exemplified clearly in *Sense and Sensibility*. Suffice it to say here that in *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen rejects the more orally-based epistolary novel form for a style of novel writing emphasizing control and decorum, while at the same time rejecting the more literacy-based style of neo-classical eighteenth-century prose. As Norman Page points out, Austen both invented and perfected indirect speech, that mode of writing dialogue which maintains the oral qualities of speech while retaining narrative control, reducing loquacity and diffuseness to economy and order (*The Language of Jane Austen* 121). Austen's prose is, however, still highly oral in the sense of, as Page puts it, "constantly making an appeal to the mind's ear" (119) and "giving way to speech-derived patterns" (101). In this respect Austen is not very different from most other nineteenth-century writers, whose work was generally written to be read aloud.[2] Yet it is the very oral quality of her prose that was imitated by later novelists, who adopted Austen's innovative methods of writing dialogue; and it is because of the oral quality of Austen's work that it was singled out later in the century as a model of novel writing by George

Henry Lewes, who urged both George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë to read Austen's novels aloud.[3] Even though both authors' attitudes toward Austen were notoriously ambivalent or negative, the effect of this exercise was evidently positive,[4] judging from the criticism which has noted the importance of speech and voice in the work of both George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë: as in Austen's novels, where "Almost exclusively the characters define themselves in their speech" (Tanner 41) and where the habits of characters' speech impress themselves on the narration (Lascelles 102), so "the best way to know anyone in *Jane Eyre* is to pay attention to how he or she speaks" (Freeman 691), and *Middlemarch* "is firmly rooted in the oral tradition" in that its "talk comes as close as print will allow to actual conversation" (Stwertka 1 80). It is the attention to orality, then, that these very different writers share, as well as their inheritance of a literary tradition which has much to say about women and orality.

Orality and characterization in nineteenth-century novels by women

I concluded Chapter 2 with a brief reference to nineteenth-century women novelists writing from their experience of being in the wilderness, to use Showalter's metaphor, or "working (in) the in-between," as Hélène Cixous puts it. Showalter seems to have an ambivalent view of the metaphor of the wilderness in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," stating that "the wilderness of theory" (10), which she equates with "male critical theory" (13), is something feminist criticism has to resist. Showalter then assesses the value of the concept of a "no man's land" and "wild" zone in feminist literary criticism, but oddly dismisses it as "a playful abstraction," countering that "in the

reality to which we must address ourselves as critics, women's writing is a 'double-voiced discourse' that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant" (31). Showalter's dismissal of the concept of the wilderness is odd because she has just finished reviewing French feminist criticism, in particular Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa," but does not seem to realize that Cixous's description of feminist writing as working (in) the in-between fits well with the "reality" which Showalter says feminist criticism must address, that is, the dichotomy between the muted and the dominant – and, Showalter could have added, the dichotomies (discussed in the preceding chapter) between nature and culture, dilation and contraction, female and male.[5] My reading of French feminist authors such as Cixous (despite the essentialism into which their writing often slips) is that they see "the wilderness" as a place where difference disappears, where writing is not so much determined by gender as it is by the desire to subvert dichotomies and categories. Thus, by arguing that nineteenth-century women writers such as Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot were working (in) the in-between, I am positing that they wrote with the recognition that the human being cannot be categorized or dichotomized, and that therefore they strove to portray their characters as having complex and sometimes contradictory impulses and desires. That writing in the wilderness may not be a negative thing, that it may indeed be positive, is obvious in the work of the female novelists I examine below, who wrote the way they did despite, or perhaps because of, their status as female authors in a society which had a very ambivalent view of their work.[6]

Perhaps because their own sense of identity must have been threatened constantly by society's questioning of their rights as women, or even as human beings, nineteenth-

century women novelists created characters who were certainly more complex than the dichotomous representations of women in the art and literature which we have already looked at. And it is perhaps mostly because of the reductive way in which they themselves were seen in their society that these novelists' methods of characterization show a greater unwillingness to deal with just one facet of existence, or just one aspect of identity, such as gender – a greater reluctance to reduce their characters to types, such as feminist or misogynist, rather than woman or man, or, more precisely, human beings with complex and sometimes conflicting motives, needs, and desires. As Ian Watt has pointed out in *The Rise of the Novel*, all novelists strive for individualized characterization, for the novel as a genre stresses the importance of the individual; but nineteenth-century female novelists seem to be especially aware of the need for individualized characters. And it is my contention that, because orality is representative of the matrix of human needs and desires, it will therefore be a common element in the methods of characterization deployed by these women authors.

In order to illustrate this point, I will take a look first at "oral men," then at "oral women," in three novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Middlemarch*. Keeping in mind the preceding caveat on the greater reluctance of women writers to reduce issues of characterization to questions of gender, my central argument is that the characterization of both the men and the women in these novels works against the characterization of women so common in literature, especially the type of the garrulous woman who speaks at large or abuses language, the Mrs Malaprops, Mrs Slipslops, and Tabitha Brambles of literature.

Oral men

When in *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor and Marianne Dashwood enter a small shop in London, service is delayed because a customer "adorned in the first style of fashion" can't stop talking about what variety of a certain seemingly insignificant item should be purchased, and spends "a quarter of an hour" debating the merits of each (228). Despite the customer's garrulity and love of fashion and shopping, he is a man – the irrepressibly bombastic Robert Ferrars. Like all of Austen's characters (Tanner 41), he is defined most fully in his speech, in his self-centered hyperbole and loquacity, which is juxtaposed with the measured speech of the "sensible" heroine: when Elinor meets him again at a dance, the narrator allows Robert to ramble on in direct speech for more than a page (a rare thing in Austen) with only short interjections by his female interlocutor, written in indirect speech; and at the end of his rambling disquisition the narrator, again using indirect speech, reports that "Elinor agreed to it all, for she did not think he deserved the compliment of rational opposition" (255). Whether or not Elinor is being insincere in her speech in this occasion (or others) is a question I will deal with below; the point is that direct and lengthy speech as a method of characterization is rare in Austen's novels, and is usually reserved for garrulous *women* such as Miss Bates in *Emma* and Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*.

In a novel where one of the heroines comes in for a great deal of criticism and censure (from literary critics as well as from the narrator herself) for her inability to stop saying exactly what is on her mind, the method involved in the characterization of Robert Ferrars and other men in the novel forces us to take another look at common interpretations of *Sense and Sensibility* which denigrate Marianne's speaking. And it is

not just the *speech* of the characters we must examine; for if Austen's characters reveal themselves in their speech, they also define themselves by whatever else they do with their mouths. Thus, just as Robert Ferrars at one point shows much about himself simply by the way he bows, which speaks "as plainly as words" (254), so he reveals his character through "immoderate" laughter (295), and through his tendency to view things in relation to the mouth, such as in his condemnation of Edward and his engagement to Lucy Steele: "'He must be starved, you know; - that is certain; absolutely starved'" (297). Thus, especially considering Austen's economic prose and minimalism when it comes to describing her characters' bodies, or what they do physically, it is not insignificant that Robert spends all that time in the London shop discussing, of all things, a toothpick case.

John Dashwood is another verbosely aggravating man in *Sense and Sensibility*. This uxorious husband, who "[hangs] enamoured over [the] accents" of his wife, inverts the sexual stereotypes of the talkative, ineffectual woman and the strong, silent man. The wiles of a woman's speech are plain in the scene where Mrs John Dashwood subtly nibbles away at her husband's intended generosity toward his step-mother and sisters, who have been left homeless, and reduces a gift of three thousand pounds to a few "neighbourly acts" (47); but we hear little else from Fanny Dashwood for the rest of the novel, whereas we hear much more from her husband. Later, Fanny is simply uncivil in her silence, where John is insincere in his effusive speech;[7] and if not as glib as the speech of Robert Ferrars, John's talk is nevertheless just as self-centered in its prolixity, a character trait which is again compared with Elinor's reticence: when Elinor forces herself to visit her step-brother in London, an uncomfortable conversation ensues between her and John, and then her and Robert, in which the men have again by far the

most lines of direct speech, while much of Elinor's speech is reported indirectly,[8] the narrator emphasizing how Elinor "refrain[ed] from observing" (293), "was silent" (294), "said no more" (294), "was . . . spared from the necessity of saying" (295), and "never spoke" (297).

While Jane Austen shows the silliness of men like Robert Ferrars and John Dashwood through excess of talk, she is almost ruthless in her muzzling of the heroes of the novel. The narrator typically does not let Edward Ferrars or Colonel Brandon speak for themselves. Much of their talk is relayed through indirect speech, or what Norman Page calls "submerged speech," a mode of translating characters' speech which Austen developed and perfected, where the narrator's voice takes over and there remains no verbal echo of the character (*Speech in the English Novel* 32). The "quiet and unobtrusive" Edward (50) therefore has only one and a half lines of direct speech in the first hundred pages of the novel, as if his speech would be somehow painful to him or others. Indeed, although Elinor assures her family that Edward never engages in "ill-timed conversation" (50) and shows only "sense" if coaxed into "unreserved conversation" (54), it is painful to hear him when he does attempt intimacy and congeniality, as when he tries to joke with Marianne about Willoughby after the latter's abrupt departure (124-125). At other times, however, Austen makes her normally pensive hero eloquent, in order it seems to serve the larger apparent design of the narrative – that is, the censuring of Marianne's sensibility and the approbation of Elinor's sense. In Chapter 18, the normally reticent Edward is suddenly given a strange satiric facility with words, as if only for the purpose of criticizing Marianne: during Edward and Marianne's conversation about the picturesque in nature, he uses the effusive vocabulary

of the sublime with irony which is lost on Marianne, and with an ease which is belied by his own claim that "I know nothing of the picturesque" (122) – and, one might add, by his stilted language in the rest of the novel.

Although he is of course a sympathetic character,[9] Edward Ferrars is nevertheless one of the strangest heroes in Austen's work (and in nineteenth-century fiction, one could argue) in that he is fond of domestic virtues: "All his wishes centered in domestic comfort," we are told (49). Indeed, one can say that he is domesticized, in that the designation that most fits his character is mama's boy: he is, as they say, tied to the apron strings of either his mother or another equally controlling woman throughout the novel, and finally released through no doing of his own. In this respect, however, he is perhaps not so different from the heroes in Dickens's novels, who, as Ian Watt points out, fit into the oral character type of the "secret sucker," unpracticed with women and passively looking to them for nourishment of some sort, whether they are likely to receive it or not ("Oral Dickens" 178).

Colonel Brandon is as reticent as Edward, if a little more active and present than his counterpart (who disappears for long stretches of the novel). Instead of allowing him to reveal his character through speech, which Austen is elsewhere so good at doing, she has us hear through indirect reportage that he has a "gentle address" and a voice with "no expression" (83). He is hardly the type of man to capture the attention of Marianne, hardly a Darcy, Knightley, or Wentworth. In fact, the reader may be inclined to agree with Willoughby that Brandon is someone "'whom every body speaks well of, and nobody cares about; whom all are delighted to see, and nobody remembers to talk to'" (81). Thus, in analyzing the dialogue in which he participates, we have little to go on.

Like Edward, however, Colonel Brandon does get a scene in which he is rather verbose: his tale of the two Elizas shows him to be "a very awkward narrator" by his own admission (214), as well as a long-winded one given to sentimentality (which the narrator is everywhere else so careful to criticize). Thus the irony of his story is that it works at cross purposes with the narrator's attempt to debunk sentimentality and sensibility, and this discordance in the narrative design of the novel is perhaps another reason why *Sense and Sensibility* is more complex than most critics have thought.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë is more straightforward in her characterization of men: most males in the novel are criticized as much for the way they speak and whatever else they do with their mouths, as for their actions. As in Austen, in Brontë's novel orality, not just speech, is a reliable index of a person's moral character. Arthur and his friends not only use abusive language, but are all gluttons and heavy drinkers;[10] and the fitting image that Mr Hattersley, Arthur Huntingdon's brutish drinking companion, uses to describe his daily verbal abuse of his wife and even his friends, and his otherwise rough and sometimes maniacal way of speaking, is that of "a boy . . . cramming raisins and sugar-plums all day" (298). Hattersley does eventually and miraculously reform with the help of Helen, who urges him to change his behaviour before his wife begins to "loath the very sound of [his] voice" (383); but Wilmot, Arthur's other drinking partner, fares about as well as Arthur and dies with "unspeakable grimaces" (171). Thus, in the rather unremitting moral design of the novel, both the sin and the punishment are described in oral terms: Arthur's wrongdoings are evidenced in part by his "voluptuously full" lips (71) and "bloated" face (330), the consequence of his

immorality by his unslakable thirst (432) and in his lips, which "moved but emitted no sound" (452).

One of the factors which account for the moral design of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is the author's desire to reveal the ways in which males are socialized into bullying and self-indulgent roles. This kind of socialization affects the moral character of *all* the males in the novel, including the seemingly decent men. Mr Hargrave, who seems "the model of decency, sobriety, and gentlemanly manners" (354) and who offers to be Helen's potential saviour, turns out to be just as morally bankrupt as Arthur and his boisterous friends. Although his speech is proper, delicate, and modest, and shows "discursive versatility and eloquence" (307), Hargrave is portrayed as a kind of vampire, looking "as if [he] would drain [Helen's] heart's blood" (310). He is also a crafty tempter, offering Helen again and again a way to escape her wretched life with Arthur, and cunningly comparing his "tastes and occupations" to those of Arthur: "I have but sipped and tasted, he drains the cup to the dregs," he tells Helen (261). In a key scene, after Helen has in effect given up her husband to his mistress and there have been hints that Arthur has an illegitimate child, Hargrave again offers his aid (with all the strings attached, of course), and his sly way of speaking puts the heroine's moral character to the severest test. Although Helen has stalwartly resisted Hargrave's advances until this point and has never had a good feeling about him, we suspect that finally she may be desperate enough to do anything to escape Arthur; but Hargrave's hypocrisy, deceitfulness, and desire are all made clear to her in an instant by "a slight twitching about the muscles of [his] mouth" (357). Hargrave's unintentional revelation is like that of another well-spoken and seemingly ultra-respectable man in the novel, Frederick Lawrence, who

commits the ultimate novelistic sin of attempting to keep the heroine and hero from consummating their love for one another, and who reveals his motives with "a half-smile which he would willingly have suppressed if he could" (458) – the mouth betraying the character once again.

If one of Austen's heroes in *Sense and Sensibility* is a "secret sucker" of the passive kind, Anne Brontë's hero and anti-hero in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are both secret suckers of the more or less aggressive kind who, because of overindulgence early in life, learn to get what they want by "biting" others into submission.[11] The few times Arthur Huntingdon's mother is mentioned, she is described as "foolishly" and "madly indulgent" (191, 238), and it is clear that Arthur wants the same kind of treatment from Helen as he received from his mother. Indeed, Helen often is forced into mothering Arthur, giving him moral "lessons" (224); nursing him "as a child" when he is sick (238); attempting to curb his "natural appetites" as one would "a spoilt child" (238); putting up with his jealousy of the attention she gives her son when he is cutting his teeth (267) and at other times; and allowing him to cling to her in his final illness "with a kind of childish desperation" (450). As if he never could get enough nourishment when he was a child, Arthur has learned to indulge "his appetites, either in the pleasures of the table or anything else," writes Helen in her diary (295). Helen's description of Arthur's "appetites" shows that his relating to the world in orally regressive/aggressive ways extends to his entire personality, so that Arthur's speech is often childishly random, careless, or meaningless,[12] just as his other oral behaviour, such as "suck[ing]" his bottle (207), swearing, and laughing in "cachinnations" (221), is reckless, compulsive, and immature.[13]

Though apparently a sympathetic character and a kind of foil to Arthur, Gilbert Markham is nevertheless also what our culture would call a mama's boy: he is always fed well at his mother's table, and by his own admission is "spoiled by [his] mother and sister, and some other ladies of [his] acquaintance" (58). Like Arthur and his companions, the overindulged Gilbert is also prone to abusive language and physical violence when he thinks he is not getting his way, as when he first savagely whips and almost kills Frederick Lawrence, and then follows this up with a verbal beating which has his auditor pleading, "'Enough, Markham, enough'" (422). And like Walter Hargrave, Gilbert tries to tempt Helen into a relationship she clearly is not prepared for, skulks around her house, feels "selfish gratification" in hearing of Arthur's decline (402), and frequently speaks to Helen in a sententious or manipulative way,[14] so that, as he himself says, he is seen as "another Hargrave" (403). At times the reader is inclined to lose sympathy for Gilbert, as when he cannot decide "the question of what to say" (136) about the beating of Frederick Lawrence, and when he can never find "the courage to tell" (406) anyone that it was he who beat him. If we may lose some of our sympathy for Gilbert because of the cowardice he shows by not speaking, we may lose all sympathy for him when he shows how unfeeling his speech can be, such as when he is "glad to have it in [his] power to torment" Helen (141).

Anne Brontë's characterization of her men is, like Austen's, part of the larger complex of oral tropes in her novel, such as the recurring images of teeth, lips, tongues, involuntary smiles, chewing and biting, and the metaphors of thirst, hunger, drinking, and appetite. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is a fascinating book because, while it has a tendency to portray morality in black and white terms and to characterize men in wholly

negative ways, the metonymic complexity of its oral tropes in turn allows her characters a degree of complexity and credibility. As Brontë's oral tropes show, Arthur and Gilbert are much more than mama's boys; for in their attempt to satisfy their needs and desires, they each to different degrees ironically thwart the fulfillment of these same needs and desires: Arthur's self-destruction and Gilbert's foolish and unsuccessful attempts to secure Helen's love are, after all, all too human failings.

The metonymy of orality in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* also allows Brontë to explore gender relations (including sexuality) in a way perhaps never done in fiction before her novel; and it allowed her to do so in a subtle manner which skirted contemporary notions of propriety as much as possible (though her novel was still thought offensive by many readers), while at the same time seeking to shock her readers into a better understanding of the status of women. Thus, the pleasures of the mouth – in the description of Arthur's "appetites, either in the pleasures of the table or anything else" (295), and in other passages in the novel – are metonymous for the taboo subject of sex in Victorian literature: Arthur's inordinate sexual appetite is shown in his overeating and overdrinking, just as his sexual desire for Annabella is shown in his "hunger and thirst to hear her sing" (181). The scene in which Helen closes the bedroom door against her husband – the sound of which, according to one commentator, reverberated through all England – is therefore an integral part of the overall design of the novel. The act of closing the door blatantly and radically subverts the prescribed status of the married woman, and at the same time subtly reveals one of the metonymic meanings of orality in the novel, linking orality and sexuality: Helen closes the door because, as she delicately puts it, she no longer wanted to hear Arthur's voice (223).

In her characterization of men in *Middlemarch* George Eliot continues in the same vein as Jane Austen and Anne Brontë, working against traditional characterizations of women and acknowledging the importance of orality in characterization. Eliot is often thought to be conservative in her portrayal of women and gender relations; it is argued that she lived what her contemporaries deemed to be a liberal lifestyle, but revealed an internalization of the gender roles and sexual strictures of her time in her writing. However, some critics have problematized this critical view of gender relations in Eliot's work, pointing out, for example, that she did portray the sexual lives of her characters, and that at times she broke the rules of gender-specific characterization. At the same time, these critics also point out the importance of orality in Eliot's characterization: Juliet McMaster argues that Eliot is "one of the more salivatory writers" when it comes to describing the pleasures of the mouth as a metonymic image for sexuality (17); and Sheila Shaw points out that Eliot "broke all the rules" in her description of Janet Dempster's drinking in "Janet's Repentance" (173).[15] Furthermore, critics have argued that *Middlemarch* is firmly grounded in the oral tradition in that its "talk comes as close as print will allow to actual conversation" (Stwertka 180), while others have noted that "the language of animal appetite" is pervasive in Eliot's fiction and is used "to express the relationship between people and the world" in terms of eater and eaten (Mann 12, 34).

The second chapter of *Middlemarch* opens "over the soup" (38), with Mr Brooke babbling on about the dinners he has had with famous men. Like Austen's John Dashwood or Robert Ferrars, or Bartle Massey in *Adam Bede*, Brooke is a garrulous male who subverts the stereotypes of the talkative woman, but without the insincerity,

"puppyism," or misogyny associated with these other characters, and with a surprising degree of depth to his character which we are allowed glimpses of at times. Because of his endless confidentiality and self-explanations, critics have been tempted to write Mr Brooke off as a caricature of the tireless speaker (Stwertka 181) or if nothing worse, the representative of the man of "unexamined privilege" (Kiely 109); but once in a while, Mr Brooke says something which catches us off guard, as when he is attempting to talk Dorothea out of marrying Casaubon. "I cannot imagine myself living without some opinions," he tells Dorothea, and the reader smiles in agreement. "Life isn't cast in a mould – not cut out by rule and line, and that sort of thing" (we nod, still smiling); but then he confesses, "I never loved any one well enough to put myself in a noose for them" (64). This may seem like an admission of self-centeredness, of which his garrulity may be a reflection; but I think it is safe to say that Mr Brooke is too unaware of himself to be much absorbed in himself, that he has only the semblance of a sense of identity apart from his position as a wealthy landowner, and that his endless talking is a cover or consolation for his inability truly to communicate with others (which requires at least some degree of self-knowledge). Thus, when he has to reveal who he is and what he stands for in his candidate's speech, he utterly fails because he doesn't know who he is and what he stands for, and because he has foolishly "fortified" (546) himself for the oral ordeal by indulging in another oral activity and drinking a few glasses of sherry, and is half drunk at the time of his speech. As even a critic who is unsympathetic to Mr Brooke must acknowledge, Dorothea's affable uncle has difficulty locating the word "I," and his relationship with others is "a muddle which plays havoc with his pronouns and predicates" (Kiely 109). If Mr Brooke is selfish, then, it is in the same way as Eliot says

we all of us are selfish, in that we have the propensity to take "the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves" and to ignore "an equivalent center of self" (243).

Sitting at table with Mr Brooke in the second chapter is Casaubon, who, perhaps as a kind of counterpoint to Brooke's loquacity, makes a great deal of noise when eating his soup, as Celia complains later to Dorothea (72). Indeed, the key word is counterpoint: in contrast to "good Mr Brooke's scrappy slovenliness" of speech, Casaubon "talks very little," and when he does talk his speech has a "balanced sing-song neatness" (40) and "measured" (44) quality to it which, far from being pleasant, has a grating contrapuntal edge and always sets his speech at odds with others'. Although the narrator is speaking about all of us when she talks of "feeding our supreme selves," it is to Casaubon in particular that she refers when noting the difficulty of recognizing "an equivalent center of self," or a competing discourse, if you will. It is because Casaubon cannot or will not recognize an equivalent center of self that he is "fastidious in voices" (40), that he talks "of what he was interested in, or else [is] silent" (55), and that he cannot stand music, his "measured speech" being too much a counterpoint to what he calls music's "measured noises" (90). However, unlike music and normal speech, which occur in time and not space, Casaubon's speech is contingent upon and limited by both time and space, in that he cannot meet the requirements of place and adapt his speech to different venues because he has "not two styles of talking at command" (47). He is like the kind of scholar about whom Samuel Johnson writes, who "buries himself in his manuscripts" and is therefore "overloaded with his own notions," lacking verbal "dexterity" and finding he cannot overcome problems with his "elocution."[16]

In the vocabulary of eater and eaten prevalent in *Middlemarch*, Casaubon is portrayed as someone who does not "feed" on others as much as he engages in a form of self-starvation and self-cannibalism. His "hungry shivering self" (312) "feed[s] too much on the inward sources" (40), and he wastes away while sitting hour after hour at his work, "chew[ing] a cud of erudite mistake" and ironically hoping to force his critics to "eat [their] own words with a good deal of indigestion" (457). He does address Dorothea with "biting" speech, but the narrator makes a point of saying that this is "not habitual to him" (409). What seems to sum up Casaubon's character more than the image of feeding, then, is the image of an incessant "pining hunger" (520), which Dorothea almost sacrifices herself to appease. Although Casaubon's all-consuming work almost devours Dorothea in the process of devouring him, George Eliot's characterization of Casaubon does not demonize him as the ultimate misanthropist or misogynist; for in his incessant cravings and needs, Casaubon is "a-hungered like the rest of us" (312).

Other male characters in *Middlemarch* do come in for a great deal of criticism for their inordinate appetites and their propensity to feed on others to appease these cravings. Mr Bulstrode is a prime example of this kind of character. His "subdued tone" when talking (119) only hides his habit of speaking by indirection and equivocation and thereby manipulating others to suit his needs, when "fluent," "copious" (151), "biting" (217), bullying and self-righteous speech has failed to do so. His asceticism is only a cover for his voracious appetite, only the means by which he gains more property and thus more control over others: although "eating and drinking so little," he nevertheless has "a sort of vampire's feast in the sense of mastery" over others (185), and looks at his fellow creatures as "a doomed carcase which is to nourish [him] for heaven" (206).

Bulstrode meets his match, however, in another character who cannot control his appetite and his mouth: Raffles is the kind of man who is capable of eating "all the best victuals away from" his own family (451), a great eater, drinker, and talker with an "unaccountable impulse to tell" (756); and despite his death by means of the overindulgence of Bulstrode, who satisfies Raffles's craving for alcohol and so in effect murders him, Raffles proves to be an "invulnerable man" in his propensity to tell secrets and thus avenge himself on Bulstrode even after his own death (574).[17] Another man who receives ironic retribution for his "biting" talk (340) is the irascible Mr Featherstone, whose stentorian commands and "oracular speech" (135) concerning his relatives cannot prevent these "Christian Carnivora" (365) from planting themselves in his kitchen and consuming conspicuous amounts of food while awaiting his final demise.

Part of Eliot's great achievement in *Middlemarch* is not only that she is able to convey so much about a character in so few lines, but that, if we were honest with ourselves, we would no doubt see some of the same needs and desires in ourselves as we do in the persons who comprise the cross section of provincial society portrayed in the novel. While other characters are described as eaters, the amiable Sir James Chettam is "made of excellent human dough" (43). This is an earthy, agricultural image for a down-to-earth landowner who talks "so agreeably, always about things which had common-sense in them" (99), a man who shows a kind of rootedness in time and place (rather than the inability to come to terms with time and place which characterizes Casaubon) and also a pliability in his relationship with others. The image of dough also aptly describes Sir James's rather amorphous and bland personality. I would argue that such a character is incapable of really loving anyone, not in any passionate sense, and certainly not as Will

loves Dorothea. As his preoccupation with common-sensical things seems to indicate, Sir James's attraction to Dorothea perhaps has more to do with another character flaw of his – acquisitiveness. This trait is revealed in the scene where he hears of Dorothea and Will's engagement and of Mr Brooke's plans to cut Dorothea out of her inheritance, when he begins "to bite the corner" of his handkerchief (875) and finds Mr Cadwallader's and Mr Brooke's hints about his willingness to gain more property "clogging to his tongue" (876). Unlike Sir James's sociability, Mr Vincy's oral behaviour, such as his speaking and social drinking, acts not as a social lubricant in his frequent dinner parties, but as a deterrent to sustained dialogue and a safeguard against personal contact with others; and his relationship with others outside of his social circle is described in no uncertain terms: just as the image of vampirism is used to describe Mr Bulstrode's domination of others, so Mr Vincy's idea of labour management is to "suck the life out of the wretched" workers (361). Fred Vincy's "appetite for the best of everything" (147) stems at least in part from his relationship with his distant and demanding father and over-nurturing mother, and involves him in endless "ruminations" (146) on Peter Featherstone's fortune.[18] Like Edward Ferrars, Fred may be another example of the passive oral character who waits for things to happen to him and engages in endless speculation as to how he will be nourished.

Eliot's unqualifiedly good men are those who, in their talk, show that they know themselves and are able to speak in an open manner. The character who is perhaps least defined by the images of hunger so common in the novel, the morally upright Caleb Garth, is also the most reticent of male characters; but he is quite capable of speaking his mind when he deems it necessary. Often finding himself tongue-tied and speaking at

times through "mute language" (438), he nevertheless is able to separate considerations about the financial need of feeding his family from the moral decision to tell Mr Bulstrode, in no uncertain terms, that he is unable to work for him. The "openness" (202) and "plain, easy eloquence" (536) of Mr Farebrother's talk reveal a sociable personality not prone to deceiving others or himself; but at times it also reveals a cynicism about his fellow humans which makes his conversation "not always enspiriting" (218), and a secret "hunger" for love (728) which ultimately remains unsatisfied. While he is capable of "devour[ing] his wounded feelings" and ensuring the needs of others are met before his own, he seeks a kind of compensation for what he selflessly gives up in his avaricious card playing. Yet the reader never loses sympathy for Farebrother – he remains charmingly human not in spite of, but because of, his failings, and because of his ability to see himself clearly and put his failings into perspective, as in his rationale for smoking: "I feed a weakness or two lest they should get clamorous" (202).[19]

In their thwarted desires and their insatiable and incessant cravings and needs, Eliot's minor characters may seem in many ways as much alive to us, as fully realized, as a character such as Lydgate; and in many ways, they are more fully realized than Eliot's hero, Will Ladislaw.[20] Just as we are told very little about Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, we hear very little about Will for long stretches of the text, so that his personality – his motives, desires, and dreams – remain as mysterious as his origins. It is almost as if Eliot purposely shrouded this character in enigma out of a sense of insecurity,[21] so as to avoid the inevitable disappointment of some readers with her conception of the ideal hero and husband to Dorothea. We do know that Will was hungry as a child, and was rescued from hunger by Casaubon. Like his father, who earns his

"bread" by "speaking many languages" (401), Will intends to "'eat his dinners'" (550) by means of his talent for writing and speaking. His bohemianism is shown in his impulse to "burst" verbally (237, 246) and to laugh aloud at inappropriate times (106), which may be a refreshing change from the "amiability" of Sir James or the aridity of Casaubon; yet Will's temper and his "hyperbolic" (253) and "ready tongue" (415) are as much a liability as an asset, and do not especially endear him to the reader because we are not told the reasons for his behaviour. We are simply informed of his actions and desires, but the motives behind them remain unexamined and unexplained: we are told that he "hungers" for Dorothea (860), for example, but we are not told why – what attracts him to her? what character traits make them a suitable couple? These kinds of questions are never fully answered by an author who is a master at psychological investigation and explication. In comparison with how Will's character is developed (or not developed), we know far more about Lydgate's motives and desires.[22] The story of his unfulfilled aspirations is believable and moving because we know of his love for science and his desire to excel in his field of study. Lydgate therefore has more depth than Will, and certainly more complexity: for example, while Lydgate "talks well" (117) and has a "deep and sonorous" (152) baritone voice (179), his speech can be "thoughtless" (484) and "proud" (152). He generally has difficulty dealing with others – as is illustrated by the general animosity the community bears towards him, and his ignoring the same – and in relating to women, as is shown in his domination by his wife, and alternately, in his tendency to generalize unjustly from a specific woman to "all women" (180; Kiely 120). Allowing himself to be guided by the mean appetites of his wife more than his own more noble desires, his "biting" speech (709) is a futile attempt to salvage what is left of his

dreams; and in the kind of subtle representation of unfulfilled desire which is absent from the descriptions of Will and Dorothea's unfulfilled desire, Lydgate's purchase of a dinner service is a concession to banal appetite and, significantly, the first act leading to his financial ruin. At the end of the novel, readers probably feel more sympathy for Lydgate than we ever do for Will, as Lydgate feels as though, like a bug being devoured by a spider, he is being "enveloped" by Bulstrode (821).

Oral Women

The characterization of women in *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Middlemarch*, like the characterization of men in these novels, works against stereotypical notions of gender relations and what females do, and should do, with their mouths; and like the characterization of men in these novels, orality adds a complexity to women characters which is absent in much of English literature.

Orality also creates a complexity in each of these novels. As Angela Leighton has noted, *Sense and Sensibility* is a "text in difficulty," not only because, as Leighton argues, it "needs to suppress and to protect" Marianne (55),[23] but because Marianne's oral behaviour threatens to disrupt the author's linguistic control over the story. More than most authors, Austen displays in her crisp prose a will to control her subject matter, and she does so mainly by limiting the speech of her characters (by means of indirect and "submerged" speech, for example) and by her famous ironic style, which leaves much unsaid. Perhaps nowhere is the drive for decorum and control in Austen's writing shown more clearly, however, than in her decision to rewrite the epistolary novel, *Elinor and Marianne*, the first version of *Sense and Sensibility*. Since it can be argued that the

epistolary novel, so popular in the eighteenth century, is a more oral form of writing than its novelistic successors, Austen's rejection of the epistolary form in her first published novel is at the same time an acceptance of a more controlled, more literacy-based style of writing.[24] I would argue, then, that *Sense and Sensibility* is a problem text not because, as so many critics have argued, Austen did not skillfully adapt the epistolary prototype of her novel into its final form,[25] but more precisely because she could not find an adequate balance between her artistic concerns with both orality and literacy: she admired the controlled and highly rhetorical neo-classical style of writers such as Samuel Johnson, yet she chose to write in a genre that was essentially inimical to the eighteenth-century ideals of decorum and regulation[26]; she was extremely sensitive to the way people spoke and invented and developed new ways of writing speech, yet she was aware of, as Johnson put it, the tendency of speaking to diffuse our thoughts, and of writing to contract them, and consistently (and sometimes ruthlessly) limited speech in her novels. It is not surprising that writers should be concerned with controlling the potentially endlessly dilating material of their text and thus reaching closure; yet this concern is heightened and problematized in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* by her inheritance of both the neo-classical and the novelistic literary traditions, and by a desire to be true to her experience of women in her time – an experience which included both sense and sensibility.

I would argue that it is primarily because of a concern with the problem of dilation of discourse, and the need for contraction of discourse, that Austen's narrator criticizes and limits Marianne's speech in *Sense and Sensibility*; for Marianne's talk "breaks in" to the narration too much and "puts an end to all regularity" in the dominant discourse of sense in the novel (263). It is not only because Marianne speaks the

language of sensibility, but because her way of speaking proves adverse to Austen's rhetorical purpose in the novel (i.e. control), that she is silenced more and more frequently as the novel progresses, and that Elinor seems more closely aligned with the narrator throughout the novel. However, Marianne is not so far removed from the viewpoint of the narrator as some critics posit: she certainly speaks for the narrator and Jane Austen when, for example, she condemns "worn and hackneyed" language (122) and "common-place phrases" (77). And no matter what the viewpoint of the reader in relation to Marianne's sensibility, we are often made to sympathize with her (despite, or perhaps because of, the narrator's sometimes harsh critique of sensibility), as when she experiences a "spasm in her throat" as she listens to Mrs Jennings's report of Edward's supposed affection for Lucy (266). We also feel some degree of sympathy toward Marianne because she speaks for us at times, as when she offends everyone at Mrs Ferrars's dinner table by proclaiming she has no opinion to give on the relative heights of Lady Middleton's and Fanny Dashwood's sons. Although she is outspoken and at times effusive in her talk, Marianne speaks less often throughout the novel than the reader, and some critics, may at first suppose: despite the animosity of the narrator toward Marianne's talking, the former is careful to have Elinor point out that, though Marianne "sometimes talks a great deal," she is not " a lively girl," but "very earnest" and "not often really merry" (119).

This assessment of Marianne is telling; for the unhappiness which is described as so central to her personality seems to signify that she feels basically "out of place" in society,[27] so that the word which may best describe her relation with society and her state of mind throughout the novel is *homelessness*. Not only are Marianne and her family

dispossessed of house and home in the opening of the novel, but Marianne in particular has problems finding a place in a society, where the rules of discourse are elaborate, complex, and often skewed; and Marianne's linguistic problems grow worse the farther she travels from her mother, the representative of everything homely and safe, and from her new home in Barton Cottage. Perhaps Marianne's greatest fault, if one could call it that, is not her sensibility, but her inability to understand her society's modes of discourse: for example, she is totally unaware of Edward's satire against the picturesque (and indirectly against her) in the scene where they discuss the sublime in nature; and she is oblivious to Lucy's verbal jabs at her. She seems unable to comprehend the subtleties of innuendo and irony,[28] so that her speech is always "open and sincere" (79) and, as she herself points out, at odds with the "deceitful" (79) language of many of her contemporaries. Although Marianne's comment here shows that she is aware of the difference between her talk and that of others, she is never self-aware enough to know the full extent of her dislocation in society, for she is never fully aware of the dangers of language and the pain it can cause. Marianne's speech causes pain to Elinor and to others, but mostly to herself; and if her own talk makes her a victim, she is also a victim of the talk of others – a target of that particular form of orality called gossip.[29] She has no idea that she is "universally talked of" (187), and that her sister must make desperate attempts to prevent her from becoming the subject of further "public conversation" (206). She becomes truly *unheimlich* in the Freudian sense: literally, unhomely, in the sense of someone who through her strangeness reinforces and affirms the established and familiar forms of discourse in society. As Marianne's estrangement from society grows, and as the time she spends in London away from her home increases, her silence is compounded

until the climactic scene in which she is finally convinced of Willoughby's deceitfulness, when she is "almost choked by grief" and "almost screamed with agony" (195). It is this shock of learning just how duplicitously language can be used that contributes to Marianne's protracted and unnamed illness, which is marked by a withdrawal from society, and by "talking wildly of mama" (306). After her recovery, Marianne seems to be as ill at ease in her society as ever, and as helpless to defend herself against its discourse, allowing herself to be married to Colonel Brandon after being unable to fend off the arguments of the "confederacy against her" (366).

If the talk of sensibility finds little room in the society in which the Dashwood sisters live, so too does the discourse of sense. If Marianne suffers the silences imposed by both her society and the narrator, so that her "story is heard, ever more silently, on the other side of what Jane Austen rationally and censoriously chooses to tell" (Leighton 54), so Elinor must experience frequent and painful silences herself, as when she must listen to the ramblings of John Dashwood or Robert Ferrars, or to the barbed speech of her adversary, Lucy Steele. And in an interesting parallel to the passage in which Marianne "almost choked" and "almost screamed," Elinor finds it painful to act "almost easy" and "almost open" (245) in the more than awkward meeting between Lucy, Edward, and herself. Yet Elinor seems much more at home in her society than Marianne, and much more adaptable to its modes of discourse. She is, after all, the one on whom "the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell" (144), and is not above "saying more than [she] knew or believed" (188). Indeed, Elinor shows a certain facility in lying or being insincere, especially when it allows her to "gain her own end" (162). Through politic talk and equivocation, Elinor is thus able to withstand the crafty and

vicious speech of Lucy Steele,[30] and is just as insincere at times as Lucy, claiming, for instance, that she is an "indifferent" auditor to her opponent. Elinor's lies are, of course, necessary for her emotional and psychological survival, a method of defending herself against being abused by the language of others – and this seems to be Jane Austen's point, that language is a suspect social institution, and that in order to survive in society one needs *sense* in more than one sense of the word: the ability not only to be rational, but to be aware of oneself and others, and to be, above all, shrewd in one' s dealings with others. In her speaking, Elinor shows that she possesses all these qualities; yet she is somehow an unsatisfactory heroine, perhaps because, though she is closely aligned with the narrator throughout the novel, she lacks what Jane Austen is most famous for, and what is perhaps most vital to survival in a society in which modes of discourse are often complex and self-serving – Elinor lacks a comic sense of her world. Thus, sensible woman that she is, Elinor is able "to forgive everything" about Charlotte Palmer "but her laugh" (301).

It is interesting to note that the women whose oral behaviour is the most pronounced and whose speech is the most dilated in *Sense and Sensibility* are the ones who provide the most comic relief, and thus, I would argue, ironically save the novel from becoming too pessimistic and cynical about gender relations and language use in Austen's society. The garrulous and heavy Mrs Jennings and her equally loquacious daughter Mrs Palmer, who is large with child for much of the novel, are like the typical women in literature who talk "at large." Like Mrs Poyser in Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Mrs Jennings is a character with a strong physical presence who endears herself to us by her earthiness, which is illustrated not only by her favourite figures of speech, such as "one

shoulder of mutton drives down another" (207), but in her great girth and in the constant association of her with food, as in the reference to her and Charlotte "stuffing" themselves with fruit from Colonel Brandon's mulberry tree at Delaford (207).[31] Although both her and her daughter's speech sometimes causes others a good deal of discomfort and even acute pain – Marianne's stifled scream after finally realizing that her relationship with Willoughby is over comes only after she has heard that Mrs Jennings and her daughter have told "everybody" that Marianne is engaged to him (195) – Mrs Jennings and Charlotte Palmer enjoy a freedom of speaking denied other characters in the novel, and are never censored (and never censured, in the way Marianne is censured) by a narrator otherwise obsessed with decorum and control in language. Indeed, at times Mrs Jennings is allowed to usurp the narration and generate her own alternative narrative, as when she predicts what would happen to Edward and Lucy after they marry if he didn't find a good living (275-76); but she proves a brisk and vivid narrator, even in her long narration of the discovery of Edward and Lucy's engagement (259-61), which is not much longer, much less rambling, and certainly no more gossipy and sentimental, than John Dashwood's account of the same event (266-68). Thus, although she is a "vulgar" (66) and "ever-lasting talker" (85) prone to "common-place raillery" (67), it almost goes without saying that Mrs Jennings is a character much more sympathetic than the garrulous men in the novel, John Dashwood and Robert Ferrars, no doubt because of the "eloquence of her good-will" (278); the "voice of great compassion" she uses without affectation as she tries her best to be a mother to Marianne; and the degree of self-knowledge she reveals when, for example, she speaks of her own "odd ways" (171). It is perhaps her capacity for self-knowledge and her ability to sympathize with others that

make Mrs Jennings a notable exception in Austen's writing – which typically avoids earthy images and characters and makes an attention to the concrete an occasion for irony and criticism – so that she does not receive the kind of censure which is directed at the speech of characters such as Sir John, whose lack of moral sense and preoccupation with trivialities are revealed when he equates a good man with a "decent shot" and a "bold rider" (76).[32]

Like her fat mother, "plump" (130) Charlotte Palmer may also be seen as more than just a harmless or comic character. One could argue that Charlotte's vacuous way of speaking is an ironic comment on the status of her marriage, and on the ubiquity of this kind of women's speaking, not in Austen's society, but in the literary tradition Austen inherited. Charlotte's hyperbolic speech and her "laughter without cause" (179) may be read as psychological mechanisms to cope with her marriage to a misanthropist, stemming from an inability or unwillingness to acknowledge her and her husband's incompatibility. Charlotte's speech of course has its comic dimensions, as we see in her reaction to Willoughby's duplicitous behaviour: ". . . she hated him so much that she was resolved never to mention his name again, and she should tell everybody she saw, how good-for-nothing he was" (223). However, besides making us laugh and showing us the shortcomings of Charlotte's moral sense in the hyperbole of her language, her self-canceling language signifies the effect her marriage has had on her sense of identity, the reduction of herself to a cipher in the face of her husband's "studied indifference, insolence, and discontent" (136).[33] There is therefore a dark side to Charlotte's comical speech, just as there is a dark side to the comic sense of the novel as a whole. Laughter is a way in which Austen diffuses the emphasis on *sense* in the novel; but just as we may

laugh at Mr Palmer's stubborn reticence about his own baby, in that it reveals that he is a man of too much *sense*, we are asked to see the more serious reasons behind Charlotte's uncontrollable laughter.

There always seems to be this flip side to the comic design of Jane Austen's prose; and this more serious side to the small provincial societies she chooses to portray in her novels is represented perhaps most comprehensively in the sense of claustrophobia pervading her work. There is always the feeling in her work of a "confined"[34] environment, the kind of feeling an individual experiences in a society where "every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies," as Henry Tilney puts it in *Northanger Abbey*, and where the world seems at times "a huge whispering gallery," to use George Eliot's words in *Middlemarch* (448). The phrase that best sums up social relationships and language use in Austen's novels, though, is Ruth Borker's anthropological description of gossip: "constant verbal surveillance" (36). In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne suffers the most from this verbal surveillance and from her claustrophobic environment, as when she is in the overcrowded and "insufferably hot" (189) ballroom where she is ruthlessly snubbed by Willoughby and becomes the subject of talk for everyone around her. Since it is this feeling of claustrophobia and this kind of verbal surveillance which Austen in all of her work is at pains not only to describe but to criticize, one may conclude that she is indeed ultimately sympathetic toward Marianne. Critics who are hostile toward the crudity with which the narrator seems to dispatch the sentimental heroine in *Sense and Sensibility* therefore need to see Marianne in the larger context of Austen's work, acknowledging that sympathy for Marianne extends even to

Austen's minor characters, such as Mr Palmer and Mrs Jennings – if not to her own narrator.

Like the women in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, the larger women in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, or the women associated closely with food and drink in the novel, are those who also speak at large. The "plump" Eliza Millward (42), for example, is capable of "chatting" at length (73), whereas her slimmer sister usually "never open[s] her lips, except occasionally to correct some random assertion or exaggerated expression of her sister's" (49). Orality entails physicality: whereas in her dilated and gustatory speaking Mrs Jennings is established as a very physical presence in *Sense and Sensibility*, the meek and almost mute Mary Millward is "little better than a non-entity" (96) in Brontë's novel. Another contrast to Mary is Gilbert's sister, Rose, who has a "dumpy figure" (36) and goes on at length about how she must let her brother have the choicest food at table (77-78). Gilbert's mother, who spoils him and lets him eat the best food, is described as an excellent cook and a "chatty" (59) and "loquacious" (116) talker. Orality is thus again shown to be the nexus of gender relations, as in the preceding examples of the relationship between mother and son, and brother and sister; and in the relationship between Milicent Hattersley and her physically and verbally abusive husband: "she was a plump lassie when [Hattersley] met her," says Milicent's husband, but "now, she's a poor little bit of a creature, fading and melting away," no doubt because of her "silent fretting and constant anxiety" about her husband, adds Helen (384).

As I noted in my discussion of oral men in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the metonymic potential of orality allows writers to explore gender relations, including

sexuality, while skirting censorship as much as possible. Both Austen and Brontë realized the potential of oral tropes to portray sexuality, as is apparent in the connection between physique, speaking, and sexuality in both authors' work.[35] In *Sense and Sensibility*, the passionate and "open" Marianne is "handsomer" and "more striking" than her sister "in having the advantage of height," though her form is "not so correct as her sister's" (that is, she has a fuller figure than Elinor [78]); the loose-lipped Mrs Jennings is prone to speak about taboo subjects, such as Colonel Brandon's supposed "love child" and her daughter's "confinement" (132); and the sexuality of the irrepressibly oral Charlotte Palmer is plain for all to see, in her pregnancy. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the marriageable young ladies, Eliza and Rose, are plump/dumpy and garrulous, whereas reticent and sexually unavailable Mary Millward, who is secretly engaged, is slimmer; the sex life of the silent and thin Milicent Hattersley and her hulking husband is not too difficult to gauge; and Helen's sexuality is revealed in her painting of a "plump" young girl with "lips parted, gazing upward in pleased, yet earnest contemplation" of two "feathered lovers" (175).

As has already been noted, Arthur's "appetites, either in the pleasures of the table or anything else" (295), are metonymous for his inordinate sexual appetite; and just as Arthur's sexuality is shown through oral tropes, so his extra-marital affairs are described in oral terms, and are matters not only of physical but of verbal "dissemination." Arthur is attracted to the "full-toned and powerful" siren's voice (181) of his first mistress, Annabella, who, like morally questionable characters in Austen, speaks with "loquacious vivacity" and "malicious pertinacity" (319); and as Arthur literally "disseminates" with Annabella, or spreads his seed to bear progeny, so he himself disseminates information

about his affair (and no doubt also about his supposed sexual prowess), "blazon[ing] it abroad" for all to hear (360). Like Annabella, Arthur's second mistress, Miss Myers, has "a fine voice" and can "sing like a nightingale" (388), and betrays her moral character in her voice (388); yet it is this relationship that finally makes Helen leave Arthur, something he has feared and tried to prevent all along because it would plant the "seed" of gossip (440) and lead to the dissemination of talk against him, making him "the talk of the country" (315) and of "all the old gossips in the neighbourhood" (329).

Arthur's fear of the dissemination of gossip is basically a fear of woman's talk, as he makes clear in his reference to the "gossips" in the neighbourhood (a term that referred mostly to females in Brontë's day, and, as we shall see, in her novel), and when he accuses Helen of wanting to "go and talk me over to Mrs Hargrave" (316). Although Arthur's fears stem from his own misbehaviour, they are nevertheless justified, not only because gossip is almost an exclusively female activity in the novel, but because Brontë portrays it as a force to be reckoned with. That gossip is a particularly oral activity in *The Tenant* is signified in the descriptions of it as "spicy" (103), as "the poison of detracting tongues" (102), and as that which consumes the "food" of scandal (115); and that it is an activity most often engaged in by women is shown in the number of references in the novel specifically to women acting as "disseminators" (422) of gossip: Mrs Wilson and her daughter (38), unspecified "ladies" (72), Eliza Millward (96ff.), and Gilbert's mother and sister (440), to name a few instances. Whereas men and women share the task of disseminating gossip in *Sense and Sensibility*,[36] Brontë does not diverge at all from the stereotype of the female gossip, as we see also in her characterization of Mrs Wilson, who seems to stop talking only when she is eating or drinking (64), and is

"brilliant" in her recitation of "fresh news and old scandal . . . uttered apparently for the sole purpose of denying a moment's rest to her inexhaustible organs of speech" as her tongue moves "in swift and ceaseless motion" (59). The notable exception to this pattern of gender-specific gossip in *The Tenant* is Mary Millward, whose reticence and lack of the oral qualities which characterize the gossips in the novel is in keeping with her refusal to participate in the "idle slander" directed at Helen (97).[37]

As in *Sense and Sensibility*, however, gossip has a kind of xenophobic quality to it in *The Tenant*, in that it is a social instrument designed to incorporate the "stranger" into a familiar and socially accepted system of symbolization: just as Marianne's community places her under constant verbal surveillance and (re)incorporates her into a familiar system of discourse by means of the "confederacy" of talk against her, so the members of the community around Wildfell Hall immediately react to Helen's arrival in their neighbourhood with a flurry of gossip by which they attempt to define the stranger and so either make her a part of them, or ostracize her from their community. Helen, however, resists and disrupts the systems of exchange upon which her community, both at Grass-dale Manor and at Wildfell Hall, constructs and codifies itself: she is like the "boundary-stalking" females in literature which we examined in Chapter 2, who refuse to be defined and "placed" and thereby threaten social discourse/exchange. At Grass-dale Manor, Helen refuses to be a part of the morally corrupt aristocratic Regency ethos, in which women such as Annabella and Miss Myers are treated as objects in a system of exchange ruled by men. More particularly, she resists the system of exchange proposed by Hargrave, whereby in return for her love he would help her escape Arthur's tyranny: she ignores his "sighs and intimations," telling him that he must "breathe them forth"

elsewhere (273). At Wildfell Hall, Gilbert attempts to involve Helen in a similar kind of exchange when he tries to give her a book, to which Helen responds that she doesn't like to put herself "under obligations that [she] can never repay" (94). That Gilbert is expecting something in return for the book, despite his protestations to the contrary, is signified by his difficulty in refraining from pressing Helen's hand to his lips (95).

Helen resists being "placed," both in a physical and linguistic sense: to be physically placed or found at Wildfell Hall by anyone with connections to her husband would mean the loss of her freedom; and to be placed or named by the community around Wildfell Hall could have the same results. Helen's ideal of talking is an "exchange of ideas or sentiments" where there is "good given and received" (104); but for such an exchange to occur, she must reject society's common modes of discourse – she must conceal her real name and remain in Wildfell Hall, isolated from the surrounding community, and far from the borders of Grass-dale Manor. The irony of Helen's attempt throughout the novel to adopt a way of "plain speaking" (110, 159, 342) is that neither at Wildfell Hall nor at Grass-dale Manor can she tell others who she is or what she is about; for to reveal to anyone in her married home that she is planning to abandon her husband would jeopardize the venture; and to reveal who she is to anyone around Wildfell Hall could mean that she would be stigmatized as a bad wife and eventually be forced to return to her husband or face legal action. Thus, like her husband, Helen fears that she will be the victim of the dissemination of gossip: at Grass-dale she lives under the constant fear that Arthur's male friends, such as Grimsby, will report her sentiments and actions "with such embellishments as [they] think proper" (363); and at Wildfell Hall, she constantly fears that someone will spread her "fame from parish to parish, till it reach . . .

the lord of Grass-dale Manor" (400). Like Elinor Dashwood, Helen must therefore adopt a variety of ways of communicating besides plain speaking: for example, she alternately speaks "eloquently" and forcefully (73), communicates through silence (53), reveals bits of herself in "undertones" (76), and talks "wildly" (121) while showing her teeth "savagely" (117). At times, however, she realizes the shortcomings of speech, as when she glances toward the door to signify that Hargrave must leave the room, after which she notes that "This was better than if I had answered [him] with more words" (327); and Helen also comes to realize that her mouth can betray her, despite all her best efforts to conceal her true self, as when her emotions are revealed by her "quivering lips" (141, 405).[38] Despite the strength she shows in her determination to make her own place apart from society and in her insistence to speak on her own terms, Helen realizes that at times her power "to retain sufficient command of thought and language" is "provokingly small" (342). Thus, forced onto the margins of society and yet threatened by incorporation into that society, Helen lives a precarious existence in the "wilderness," "working (in) the in-between."

In *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot calls gossip "the world's wife" (619), the destroyer of Maggie's social life and (to mix metaphors) the "babbling current" in which Maggie at times wishes to drown herself (552);[39] in *Middlemarch*, however, gossip is not exclusively a female activity or a destructive force. In fact, gossip is portrayed in the latter novel as "socially uniting" (76) because of its ability quickly and efficiently to transmit information important to the community; but in so doing gossip privileges the community over the individual, and the existence and health of the "body politic"

becomes one of the primary reasons for its dissemination.[40] Gossip therefore has its victims in the novel, individuals who are either the targets of gossip, or who are for one reason or another out of the gossip loop, such as Mrs Bulstrode, who "never hears" any gossip concerning her husband (329) and is "kept in ignorance" of information about him when all of Middlemarch knows it (803). As in Austen's and Brontë's novels, gossip is also closely connected with xenophobia in *Middlemarch*, so that a great deal of speculation and talk goes on about the newcomers to the neighbourhood, Ladislaw and Lydgate. Will is "in everybody's mouth in Middlemarch" (414), and reacts to this attention with almost childish bouts of brooding in which he turns away from Dorothea "as if she too had been part of the unfriendly world" (680). The most odd and strangely persistent rumour about Lydgate is that he dissects dead or even living bodies (494, 778). Perhaps the explanation for the existence of this rumour is that it is true to the function of gossip as a method of protecting and uniting the body politic, maintaining its wholeness and health, so to speak, and that therefore dissection is a particularly appropriate image for the projection of a community's xenophobia and intolerance of individualism; and because gossip is a preeminently oral activity, its association with the fear of dissection may be analogous to the dichotomy between the dilation of discourse and rhetorical techniques of division (see Chapter 2). In its propensity to isolate the individual from the community, while at the same time incorporating the individual in a familiar discourse, gossip in Eliot's novel is portrayed in much the same way as in Austen's and Brontë's works; and like Marianne Dashwood and Helen Huntingdon, Dorothea is the only character in *Middlemarch* who actively resists the system of signification of which gossip is a part: whereas the good men in the novel, such as Mr Farebrother and Caleb Garth,

simply refrain from gossiping, Dorothea plays an active role in attempting to stop gossip, as when she disseminates the truth about Lydgate's relationship with Bulstrode.

Although the women in *Middlemarch* excel at gossiping, it is a part of "masculine talk" as well (769). The caveat to this equality of participation, however, is that gossiping seems to be a means of characterization for men whereby each man's idiosyncrasies of speech tell us something of his character, whereas women gossipers are more often treated as part of a group rather than as individuals, and with a degree of sarcasm which is absent from the characterization of men. We see this disparity of characterization, for example, in a comparison of the talk of Drs Minchin and Sprague and a few of their acquaintances in Chapter 18, where their idiosyncrasies of speech are noted, with that of Middlemarch wives in Chapter 74, who are described generically as women whose thoughts are "much at leisure," and ironically as persons who "love truth" (798). Eliot's antipathy toward her own sex is well documented, however, and so it may be surprising that men and women are equal partners in her portrayal of the dissemination of gossip. Thus, Mrs Cadwallader may be the greatest gossip in Middlemarch, reproducing details of others' personal lives with "utmost accuracy" (83) and never shying away from relaying "painfully graphic reports of gossip" (828); but men such as Mr Brooke and Sir James are Mrs Cadwallader's eager auditors, relying on her gossip to frame their own opinions of events and people in Middlemarch. Like a Mrs Jennings or a Mrs Poyser or even a Mrs Garth,[41] Mrs Cadwallader is capable of talking at some length, but is a brisk, lively, and earthy speaker, having at her disposal "the clearest chiselled utterance" (75), "an excellent pickle of epigrams" (83), and the most vivid figures of speech, such as her comparison of Mr Casaubon to "a great bladder for dried peas to

rattle in" (82). Despite Mrs Cadwallader's facility with speech and gossip, however, George Eliot makes it clear that she is just a part (although an important one) of the huge network of gossip in Middlemarch, which Eliot anatomizes in Chapter 71: after the death of Raffles, which Bulstrode hopes has put an end to the "ghost of his (Bulstrode's) earlier life" (771), gossip is spread by both man and woman[42] "like the smell of fire" (772); being inimical to the individual, gossip relies not on the individual but on the social "body" for its survival, outliving Raffles and "gathering round it conjectures and comments which gave it new body and impetus" (773); being "free of expense" it is a great social/economic leveler (770); and being primarily an oral activity, it "require[s] dinners to feed it" (774) and includes a great deal of "biting innuendo" (775).

As we have seen, Dorothea's is the only voice of dissent against the judgments imparted by the social body; but although she speaks "better than most women" (245), her inclination "to speak too strongly" (73) is a sign of her naiveté and inexperience, at least at the beginning of the novel. Because of Dorothea's lack of experience, even her wisest statements are undercut by a certain amount of irony: when, for example, she tells Celia that one tells the quality of people's minds "when they try to talk well" (58), a statement that Jane Austen would heartily agree with, we are at the same time reminded that Dorothea is not a very good judge of Casaubon's speech. Although Dorothea's talk can be "like a fine bit of recitative" (70) and her voice "like music" (596), she does not learn soon enough that her way of speaking is inimical to Casaubon's: significantly, he dislikes the "'measured noises'" of music, as he puts it (90), and the "balanced sing-song neatness of his speech" sets it at odds with others' speech because, being unable to acknowledge "an equivalent center of self" (243), he is also unable to acknowledge an

equivalent way of speaking. Dorothea and Casaubon's marriage is thus defined most clearly in oral terms; and the most appropriate image which sums up their marriage is that of "beautiful lips kissing holy skulls" (399).

The "liquid flexibility" of Dorothea's speech (587), and its propensity to "pour forth" when she feels strongly about anything (424, 819), contrasts not only to Casaubon's "measured" way of talking (44), but to the speech of Celia Brooke and Rosamond Vincy. Celia speaks "always with the same quiet, staccato evenness" (55) and in a "neutral tone" which at times is painful to Dorothea (532); she "always [says] just how things were, and nothing else" (69), and always resorts to "the simplest statement of fact" (79), no matter how painful to her auditor. Celia seems to be the stereotypical female who lives to marry and have children, whose status in society and conformity to social expectations is marked by her "small" voice (71) and by her inability to "put words together out of her own head" (69). Yet Celia's oral traits make her a much more complex character than this. Like Casaubon's speech, her quiet way of "'saying things'" (108) for the good of Dorothea reveals that Celia is mindful of her sister's actions only in so far as they disturb her own placid state of mind; she is able to acknowledge "an equivalent center of self" only in so far as it thrusts itself on her own inert existence. This is not to say that Celia is yet in another way characterized as the stereotypically passive female; for, as Eliot reminds us, we all find it difficult to acknowledge others unless we are forced to, because "We are all of us born in moral stupidity" (243).

Like Celia's neutral tone and quiet staccato voice, Rosamond's voice alternately assumes a "neutral aloofness" (640) and "falls and trickles like cold water" (709). Never "unladylike" (125), Rosamond is characterized by "propriety of speech" (123), by a

heightened sense of class consciousness which shuns "vulgar" speaking (126), and by an "infantine mouth" which reveals a personality used to getting its way (851); and like Blanche Ingram in *Jane Eyre* – who is a good singer and whose voice is defined by imitation and echo, in that she habitually repeats "sounding phrases from books" (188) – Rosamond has a "well-trained voice" (190) and is able to render music "with the precision of an echo" (190). As with Celia, it is tempting to conclude that Rosamond is stereotypically characterized as the female social climber, the spoiled and selfish beautiful girl who gets what she wants in the end. Yet as with Celia, Rosamond's character is an ironic comment on Eliot's society and on humanity in general. After all, as her mastery at echoing implies, Rosamond's role in society is to imitate its discourse, its rules defining the proper, the beautiful, and the good; and the fact that she has "no sharp answers" to justify her actions but nevertheless means "to do as she pleased" (331), is an indication not of her femininity, but of her "moral stupidity" – that is, her humanity. And if her "dumb mastery" (797) over Lydgate is in any way designed to be a comment on "the wiles of a woman" and the female gender, what does it tell us about Lydgate and the male gender?

Of course, the characterization of Eliot's heroine in *Middlemarch* is meant to provide alternate possibilities to characters such as Celia and Rosamond. However, in a novel where orality carries much of the burden of characterization – where even minor characters are described in oral terms, as in, for example, Miss Noble's "beaver-like noises" (199), Mrs Waule's "wooly tones" (367), and Mrs Mawmsey's "loaded pronouns" (485) – we don't seem to hear enough about Dorothea's speech and other oral traits. In fact, she seems more often to be the subject of others' conversation, as we see

in the gossip about her and Will; or in one of the most famous scenes in the novel, where the lonesome Dorothea strikes a "pose" in the Vatican during her trip to Italy with her new husband. As Will and Naumann gaze at her, they argue about whether painting or literature can best capture her beauty. Recognizing that such a thing would be impossible in the first place, Will nevertheless argues that, especially where "representations of women" are concerned, language is a better medium than painting because it "gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague" (222). Will then asks the question, "how would you paint the voice?"

This question can be extended into the further query about how one renders the voice in literature, into the issue of the problem of representation in literature with which this chapter began: how does the voice render the essence of the individual? The impression we may have that Eliot's characterization of Dorothea is somehow incomplete prompts the question, what is "complete" characterization? As the length of this chapter illustrates, the oral drive to "get it all in," to represent and incorporate, is certainly a strong impulse. The portrayal of the oral traits of characters in *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Middlemarch* is a way of acknowledging this impulse, while at the same time making these characters more humanized, in that orality as a mode of characterization always creates a greater degree of complexity and contradiction in characters' motives, needs and desires. It is the complex and contradictory nature of human needs and desires that make it ultimately impossible to fully represent the human being in art. In their resistance to the accepted discourse of society, which tends always to incorporate or subsume the individual in a generally accepted system of signification,

Marianne Dashwood, Helen Huntingdon, and Dorothea Brooke at the same time resist representation. It is in this sense that they are most fully humanized.

Notes

Chapter 3

1. The fact that some of the texts which I discuss in Chapter 2 were written or published after the texts which I discuss in this chapter, would seem to complicate my argument about nineteenth-century women novelists' awareness of a kind of tradition of oral women in literature. *Beowulf*, for example, was not published till 1815, a few years after the publication of *Sense and Sensibility*, and it is not certain whether Austen and later women novelists had read the poem. However, my central contention that nineteenth-century women novelists were indeed aware of a tradition of oral women in literature rests not on a comparison of their novels with any other particular titles, but more generally speaking on the fact of the density of oral tropes in their novels as well as in a broad range of literature.
2. See Chapter 5 for more on the importance of reading aloud in the nineteenth century. Jerome Bump argues that the practice of reading aloud continued throughout the nineteenth century, and that "auditory models of reading were so pervasive, even in the late nineteenth century, that they can be discovered even in texts apparently completely dominated by visual paradigms," such as Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. Bump concludes that "the pervasiveness of auditory imagery" in *Marius the Epicurean* "suggests the importance of sound and voice" (and, I would argue, of orality in general) in other nineteenth-century texts, such as *Middlemarch*.

3. See Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, 48.

4. Despite George Eliot's well-known ambivalence toward Jane Austen, the effect of this exercise on her, after reading all of Austen's novels aloud, four times over, was "increase of admiration" (letter by Lewes cited in Moers 48). Eliot's initial response to Austen may well have been the same as Charlotte Brontë's, who went through the same kind of exercise ten years previous to Eliot, and who wrote the famous criticism of Austen's subjects and settings as too "confined." Although Anne may have shared her sisters' feelings about Austen's work, critics have argued that her prose owes much to Austen (Gérin 18); and we know that the Brontës improved their skill as authors by reading aloud to one another, and thus developed an ear for the sound of their prose. Furthermore, criticism which has noted the importance of speech in both Eliot and Charlotte Brontë (there is very little criticism on Anne Brontë, and the little of what I have found to date does not deal with speech) serves to illustrate the debt that both authors owed to Austen.

5. As I have pointed out in Chapter 1, Showalter's and Cixous's thoughts on feminist writing diverge more completely in their reading of the blanks, gaps, and silences of a text, which are for French feminists part of the wild zone in which women's language, the language of that which is repressed, offers a way out of the confines of patriarchal space. For Showalter, however, the palimpsests of women's texts "are not the spaces where female consciousness reveals itself but the blinds of a 'prison-house of language'" (23). Also, with regard to the role of language in gender relations, Showalter argues against some French feminists who hold that language must be radically transformed: "Turn everything upside

down, inside out, back to front. . . . Overthrow syntax," Luce Irigaray exclaims in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Instead, Showalter dwells (and rightly so, as I argued in Chapter 1) on the importance of context in literary criticism: "The appropriate task for feminist criticism, I believe, is to concentrate on woman's access to language . . . on the ideological and cultural determinants of expression. The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness . . ." ("Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," 23).

6. This ambivalence is seen in Frances Burney's huge popular and commercial success as a writer (a fact that Showalter oddly ignores in *A Literature of Their Own*, when she argues that female novelists did not see themselves as professionals until the 1840s); by modern critics' inability to explain adequately why the literate classes in England at the end of the eighteenth century "suddenly developed an unprecedented taste for [novels] for, about, and by women" (Armstrong 7); and in the fact that, as early as 1770, novel writing was so much seen as a female occupation that literary reviewers began to suspect that some male novelists were adopting female pen names in order to promote their publications (Tompkins 120). However, the novel throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century was still seen (at least by some segments of society) as a suspect genre, so that Sir Walter Scott's successful crossover into novel writing was nevertheless viewed by many as a selling out of the poetic form for less "proper" prose. As well, as early as Jane Austen's use of the epithet "By a Lady," women novelists were writing pseudonymously, probably a signal of the lingering perception of the impropriety of novel writing as much as of the

impropriety of women publishing. Of course, male pseudonyms were commonly used by female novelists later in the nineteenth century.

7. For example, in the scene where Mrs Dashwood announces that she and her daughters are moving to Devonshire, "Mrs John Dashwood said nothing," whereas "Mr John Dashwood told her again and again how exceedingly sorry he was that she had taken an house at such a distance from Norland . . ." (58). It is in this scene that the normally taciturn Edward Ferrars exclaims, "'Devonshire! Are you, indeed, going there? So far from hence! And to what part of it?'" These are the only lines of direct speech assigned to Edward in the first hundred pages of the novel.

8. In my edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, I count 22 lines of direct speech in this scene for Elinor, compared with 76 for John and 44 for Robert. While much of Elinor's speech is relayed indirectly, and while she does have her say about Mrs Ferrars's behaviour toward Edward in a few continuous lines (one of her longest speeches in the novel), her speaking is still by far outdone by the men.

9. I don't mean to sound overly critical of Edward or the novel in general. In fact, I think that this hero is in many ways an extraordinarily progressive creation for Jane Austen's time, and that *Sense and Sensibility* is, unlike the general critical opinion of it, easily as good as her other novels and in a way much more fascinating, for reasons which I will give below.

10. Lord Lowborough, a recovering alcoholic, is not really part of Arthur's circle of friends and is made to feel less a man for refusing to indulge in drink. Although Anne Brontë may be criticizing the way men are taught to think of themselves,

she offers no positive alternative to the characterization of men as brutish and/or morally flawed among Helen and Arthur's acquaintances: Lord Lowborough shows he is capable of "force and brilliance" in his speech (307), but he is basically a weak character, unable to escape the demon of drink, to be anything but the butt of his companions' jokes, or to stop his wife having an affair with Arthur.

11. In his vampirism and manipulative speech, Walter Hargrave is perhaps another aggressive secret sucker; though, because Walter's mother seems to control him to a great extent, as opposed to Arthur's and Gilbert's mothers, Walter's oral needs and impulses may stem from deprivation rather than overindulgence.

12. Besides the orally fixated personality type, another apt comparison for the portrayal of Arthur which comes to mind is Søren Kierkegaard's description in *Fear and Trembling* of Don Juan as a pre-literate, pre-articulate sensualist *par excellence*.

13. The word *suck* is used by Arthur in his narration about another alcoholic in Chapter 22, which is peppered with oral images of drink, poison, laudanum, and hunger. The swearing and drinking and the veiled description of vomiting (291) in the novel are certainly uncommon in Victorian literature, as are the words "slut" (226) and "bitch" (371).

14. For example, his sermonizing about Helen's methods of childrearing in Chapter 3, or his taking Helen's words "in [his] mouth" and making them "ten times worse" (408).

15. In "George Eliot's Language of the Sense," Juliet McMaster argues that the tactual sense is Eliot's "strongest suit" (15), and that taste is part of the sense continuum which also comprehends hearing, sight, touch, and smell (18). In "The Female Alcoholic in Victorian Fiction," Sheila Shaw posits that "Janet's Repentance" is "extraordinary" in its detailed description of alcoholism and the female alcoholic because her heroine is not like the typical drinking females of nineteenth-century novels – poor, depraved, comical, and/or invisible.

16. Samuel Johnson, *The Adventurer*, No. 85, August 28, 1753. In its inability to meet the demands of place and occasion, Casaubon's speech is like that of several other clergymen in nineteenth-century fiction. Jane Austen's Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* speaks to a large extent and to hilarious effect, "as a result of previous study," having at first "amused" himself by writing down his proposed speech, and then giving it "as unstudied an air as possible" (60). The oily Mr Chadband in Dickens's *Bleak House* and the unctuous Mr Slope in Trollope's *Barchester Towers* also speak as they write. It is interesting to note that the latter two are generally successful only in preaching to females, suggesting perhaps a certain lack of discrimination in women.

17. Gossip, and its capacity to outlive the individual body, are topics which unfortunately fall beyond the scope of the present study of orality. See my Conclusion for a brief discussion of gossip as an oral activity.

18. Rumination is a recurring image in *Middlemarch*, as in Casaubon's "chew[ing] a cud of erudite mistake" (360), Lydgate's "chew[ing] a very disagreeable cud"

(730), or the odd description of Lydgate's former inamorata as a "ruminating animal" (182) and a "divine cow" (188).

19. Farebrother's smoking is closely connected with his talk, so that the two are often shown to be occurring at the same time – not particularly an unusual thing, only that in nineteenth-century fiction detailed descriptions of persons smoking are rather rare, not to mention smoking and talking at once. In Farebrother's case – as the quote about "feeding a weakness" to fend off greater hunger illustrates – smoking is a sign of the extent to which his "hunger" and, in turn, the extent to which human needs and desires, are shown through orality. There has been very little criticism written on smoking in the novel, and the topic needs further exploration in terms of what it reveals about characters who engage in it.

20. A critic once pointed out that the criticism by male commentators of the heroes of novels by women may stem from a kind of jealous inability to see any male character as a suitable partner for the beloved heroine. As I have been unable to find many redeeming characteristics about Will Ladislaw, I may have to plead guilty to the preceding charge.

21. Eliot's insecurity about her own writing, and her sensitivity to negative critical reviews of her work, are well documented.

22. Compare, for example, the brief description of Will at the beginning of Chapter 10, with its digressions and abstractions (e.g. "the universe had not yet beckoned" [109]), and the chapter-long description of Lydgate in Chapter 15, with its detailed descriptions of, for example, his relationships with women.

23. In her interesting article, "Sense and Silences," Leighton examines the silence in *Sense and Sensibility* in terms of "something which the text refuses to say openly, but which it allows, as a deliberate alternative to its own words" (53). She points out that to write about silence is "not the same as to *give up* writing," in that silences always "remain in some relation to words, to Sense" (53). Marianne's "story is heard, ever more silently, on the other side of what Austen rationally and censoriously chooses to tell" (54). Marianne's silences are "in opposition to Austen's art" because they lie "on the other side of the control of Austen's language" (56); yet if Marianne is representative of "the place where the familiar dilemma of women . . . is played out" – that is, "to speak or not to speak," "to be silent or to come to their Senses" – then "the Silences of Marianne are those which the author most needs to censor and protect" at the same time (57).

24. As Jane Austen herself said, letter writing is meant to imitate the spoken word , and is basically "talking on paper" (in a letter to Cassandra dated 3 January, 1801; quoted in Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen*, 169, and *Speech in the English Novel*, 46. For a discussion of the relation of the epistolary novel to the familiar letter, see *Speech in the English Novel*, 46-49). Of course, Austen was well aware of the differences between writing and speaking, and I myself am not attempting to gloss over these differences. My argument is a relative one: letter writing approximates the spoken word to a greater extent relative to, say, an expository essay. See Chapter 5 for a discussion of the orality-literacy shift in Austen's time.

25. A. Walton Litz typifies the negative reaction to *Sense and Sensibility*, giving the novel only cursory treatment in his book on Austen and arguing that it is more interesting for its flaws than anything else.

26. See Chapter 5 for a discussion of the historical rise of the novel in England and its relation to neo-classical literary ideals.

27. Marianne's linguistic difficulty and inability to find her place in society is associated with the link between space and women's speaking discussed in Chapter 2, where I argued that limitations on women's speaking seem often to be connected with limitations on their movement.

28. Marianne's inability to understand irony is perhaps the greatest difference between her and her creator and the reason why she is in effect punished by the author's irony so relentlessly. The greatest irony of all with regard to Marianne, of course, is having to marry the man she most dislikes throughout the novel, and having to suffer another displacement into Colonel Brandon's house at Delaford, where she will in all probability feel "quite shut in" (207).

29. In the novels under discussion, gossip is much more than "mere tattle" or "trifling talk" (Johnson's *Dictionary*). In Austen, gossip is a way of incorporating the individual, especially a stranger, into a familiar linguistic system, in effect reducing the individual to a sign, as Mrs Jennings and Sir John Middleton do when they seek out the stranger in their neighbourhood and discover his name begins with the letter "F," a letter to which they subsequently make frequent and gossipy reference, much to Elinor's dismay. However, as Patricia Meyer Spacks points out in her book-length study on the topic, gossip is frequently the means by

which an author chooses to relay information vital to the plot of her story, which seems to be the function of Colonel Brandon's gossipy account of the two Elizas.

30. As the way persons speak is always an index of their moral character in Austen's work, Lucy Steele's laxity of speech – her "loose" attention to commonly accepted grammatical rules, for example – shows her moral waywardness, in a variation of the common character type of the verbose and "loose" (i.e. verbally and sexually dilated or open) woman which we have examined in Chapter 2. Of course, Marianne's "open" way of speaking (79) also places her in moral/sexual danger at the hands of the unscrupulous Willoughby, who exploits her mode of expression in their relationship. The tale of the two Elizas illustrates all too well how this relationship could have ended.

31. Mrs Jennings's association with food and drink will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

32. In Jane Austen's novels, the concrete is usually, but not always, equated with the trivial. Sir John's preoccupation with Folly's puppies in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Mr Woodhouse's with appletarts and gruel in *Emma*, show a certain poverty, not only of language, but of character. The notable exceptions to this rule about the concrete and the trivial are Captain Wentworth's odd monologue on a hazelnut in *Persuasion*, and, I would argue, Mrs Jennings's speech in *Sense and Sensibility* (and the association of her with food and gustatory imagery).

33. Mr Palmer's silences are judged far more harshly in *Sense and Sensibility* than Charlotte's way of talking; and in what is a very rare thing in Austen's work, Austen puts a pun in the mouth of Mr Palmer when he warns Charlotte not to

"palm" her "abuse of language" upon him (137). In Austen's linguistic economy, which depreciates "low" humour (such as punning) and references to the concrete, Mr Palmer's pun places his language on a level with his wife's, and signifies again the author's willingness in *Sense and Sensibility* to break with her usual writing style in order to critique the way men and women relate to each other.

34. Darcy uses the word "confined" in his description of provincial society in *Pride and Prejudice*. It is the sense of claustrophobia in Austen's work which perhaps Charlotte Brontë was reacting to when she used the same word to criticize Austen's writing.

35. See Juliet McMaster, *Jane Austen on Love*, 20. McMaster notes the connection between physique and sexuality in Marianne, as well as in Lydia Bennet and Georgiana Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, and the Bertram sisters in *Mansfield Park*.

36. Although Jane Austen elsewhere slips into the stereotypical portrayal of women as gossips – as in *Pride and Prejudice*, where "the spiteful old ladies in Meryton" are thought to do all the gossiping (273) – in *Sense and Sensibility* gossip is a male as much as a female activity. Examples of men gossiping in *Sense and Sensibility* include: the physician Mr Donovan, who passes on information about the hysterics following the revelation of Edward and Lucy's engagement; Sir John, who constantly "drops hints" (81) about Colonel Brandon's past, and reveals "delicate particulars" (147) about Elinor and Marianne to Lucy and her sister; John Dashwood, whose long and gossipy account of the hysterics about Edward's engagement I have already examined; and Colonel Brandon, whose

"very awkward" (214) and rambling (but very juicy) narration is an example of that kind of gossip which is, as Patricia Meyer Spacks has pointed out, vital to the plot of the novel, in that it finally solves the mystery of Colonel Brandon's "love child" and confirms the nature of Willoughby's moral character.

37. There are other exceptions to gender-specific gossip in *The Tenant*, as when gossip is described as universal and inescapable, for example, in the phrases the "world's din" (101), "the world's aspersions" (403), and "the slights and censures of the world" (477). Also, women's capacity to act as "disseminators" of gossip may be Brontë's ironic comment on their being otherwise linguistically powerless; but, given Arthur's corrupt "dissemination" and the power of gossip over the individual in the novel, Brontë's portrayal of the importance of women in the dissemination of gossip may be ironic only from the standpoint of women's *perceived* powerlessness.

38. Like every other character in *The Tenant*, Helen is characterized to a great extent in oral ways, as in the constant references to her teeth (177, 320, 331) and lips (141, 150, 405), and in figures of speech such as "drinking" her humiliation (280).

39. Gossip is not exclusively a gender-specific activity in *The Mill on the Floss*, however. Aunt Glegg, for example, resists the voice of "the world's wife" and supports Maggie against the onslaught of its scorn by saying "the kindest word" about her (631); and "evil speaking" can be both a "feminine" and a "masculine" activity in the novel (637, 638). In "George Eliot and the Power of Evil-Speaking," Rosemarie Bodenheimer points out various possible biographical sources for Eliot's strong views on gossip in her work.

40. This is another way of saying that the individual gets satisfaction from gossiping because it makes him/her feel more a part of a group.

41. Like Mrs Jennings and Mrs Poyser, who runs a dairy farm and is constantly shown cooking, Mrs Garth is closely associated with food and drink, and epigrammatic in her speaking. The association of these women with food and drink will be discussed in Chapter 4.

42. Despite the collaboration of men and women in the transmission of gossip, however, women still retain a special authority with regard to gossip, as we see when Mrs Dollop shows her male auditors "the scorching power of [her] speech" to impart the correct interpretation of the news on everyone's tongue (777).

Chapter 4

Food and Drink

In *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot describes Maggie and her brother and cousin having a snack of sweet cakes at their Aunt and Uncle Pullet's house. The scene brings together several oral tropes in the novel and is brilliant in its pithy portrayal of character. Before the eating begins it has already become apparent that there is intentional significance in Mr and Mrs Pullet's name. Described like a rooster (or even a young hen), Mr Pullet has thin legs, is "a small man with a high nose, small twinkling eyes and thin lips," and is overshadowed by his large "befeathered" wife (111). Likewise, Eliot goes out of her way to describe the variety of poultry in the Pullet's yard at Garum Firs: there are "bantams, speckled, and topknotted – Friesland hens, with their feathers all turned the wrong way; Guinea-fowls that flew and screamed and dropped their pretty-spotted feathers . . ." (147-48). However, like the mill by which Maggie grows up, which is of course associated with food (flour) and drink (malt liquor), Garum Firs ultimately does not satisfy Maggie's "hungry nature" (494). When the sweet cakes are brought out from behind lock and key, the actions of the characters tell us much about their personalities and the way they relate to the world:

> . . . [T]he three children had no sooner got the tempting delicacy between their fingers, than aunt Pullet desired them to abstain from eating it till the tray and the plates came, since with those crisp cakes they would make the floor 'all over' crumbs. Lucy didn't mind that much, for the cake was so pretty, she thought it was rather a pity to eat it, but Tom, watching his opportunity while the elders were talking, hastily stowed it in his mouth at two bites, and chewed it furtively. As for Maggie, becoming fascinated, as usual, by a print of Ulysses and Nausicaa . . . she presently let fall her cake and in an unlucky movement, crushed it beneath her foot . . . (153-54)

This description of the characters' different actions with regard to food encapsulates each one's personality: shy and careful Mr Pullet, who "when at a loss for conversation . . . fill[s] up the void by proposing a mutual solace" of lozenges and peppermint drops, or in this case of sweet cakes (153); compulsive and hypochondriacal Mrs Pullet, who like a rooster over its coop presides over the "funereal solemnity" (150) of her house, attempts to maintain its sepulchral spotlessness with her injunctions against the children eating without plates; prim and proper Lucy Deane, who doesn't think of opening her "little rosebud mouth" (117) and is able at times to stay "mute, like a kitten" (147), is likewise as passive with regard to eating; orally aggressive yet insecure Tom, who, exemplifying the outcome of the ideology which holds that "boys will be boys," furtively devours his cake; and masochistic and aesthetically sensitive Maggie, whose "palate" is "not at all obtuse" (100) but who is prone to forget "even her hunger" (173), deprives herself of food, as she so often does in the novel.[1]

The passage in *The Mill on the Floss* points out the need to qualify what Virginia Woolf says about food in the novel in *A Room of One's Own*: "it is part of the novelist's convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings" when describing a meal, that novelists "seldom spare a word for what was eaten" (9). In *The Mill on the Floss* we see that Eliot is indeed concerned with describing such things as poultry, lozenges, sweet cakes, plum cake (91-92), and jam puffs (99-100); and I will argue in this chapter that nineteenth-century female novelists such as Jane Austen, Anne and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot were much more concerned with the subject of food and drink than Virginia Woolf would have us believe. Indeed, as Margaret Anne Doody points out, the idea of food and drink is crucial to the novel as a genre, for food and drink

perform a realist function in the text, "persuading us that a character has a solid *physical* life" (421); and as we watch characters eat and drink "we participate in acknowledgment not just of a past oral phase, but of our incessant craving need. The desire for food is *the* appetite on which other appetites, even the sexual, are figuratively based" (421). In other words, in the novelists whom we are examining, the metonymic function of food and drink is to make their characters realistically human: to ascribe to their characters complex, contradictory, and often ambiguous needs and desires; to make characters as fully life-like as possible, even to the point of ascribing to their female characters something which nineteenth-century society constantly attempted to deny females – sexuality. As we have seen in Chapters 2 and 3, in literature in general and in nineteenth-century novels in particular food and drink are associated with the garrulous fat woman, who speaks "at large" and often explicitly or implicitly represents an acknowledgment or fear of female sexuality, or an inability to come to a close. In this chapter I will discuss at greater length the motifs associated with women speaking at large which were touched on in Chapters 2 and 3 – the cave, dilation and contraction, and boundaries – as they apply to food and drink in nineteenth-century novels.

In a larger sense food and drink signify the dialectic between subject and object, the constant interplay between the individual and his environment – between that which is without and that which is within. In her encyclopedic survey of the novel from classical Greek times to the present, Doody argues that this dialectic is a typically novelistic concern in that the novel as a genre consistently deals with the difficulty of being an individual without being detached from others, or ingested by them, or consuming them (424-25). Doody goes on to point out that "Food is social, but always

individual. The bread you eat will not nourish me. That characters eat reinforces the idea of their individuality" (430). Food and drink in literature are therefore not simply indicative of domesticity and diminishment, as critics such as Gilbert and Gubar argue; they are a part a system of social and economic exchange that may indeed diminish the status of women, but in the novels under discussion they are sometimes also representative of economic or social independence. Thus, while relationships in these novels are often described in predatory terms, in terms of eater versus eaten, at times the authors of these texts seek to subvert common systems of exchange which govern social relations. In so doing, they comment not only on gender relations, but more generally on human relations and human nature.

Food, drink, and language

There seems to be a strong Western tradition linking speech and eating, and more particularly women with speech and eating. In previous chapters we have seen this linkage in English literature from Medieval times to the nineteenth century; but the association between women, speaking, and eating is evidenced in texts as early as the Old Testament. In the Genesis story, only the exchange between God and Adam precedes some of the first human words ever spoken, those of Eve, and this importance of place prompted Dante to argue that Eve is the institutor of language (Régnier-Bohler 427). Significantly, in the story of creation and the Fall Eve's speech is part of the dialogue between her and the snake, perhaps pointing out the flawed nature of language, its capacity for deception; but it is also important to note that according to the story sin comes into the world through both speaking and eating, a fact that is acknowledged in

Milton's rendering of the Fall in *Paradise Lost* and in nineteenth-century texts such as "Goblin Market" (see Chapter 2), where the speaking and the eating are equally significant and commingle in the same sinful act.

Theorizing about food and drink as part of a symbolic system similar to language has been common in the twentieth century. In Freud the link between oral pleasure-seeking in infancy is associated with the development of language, in that language is seen as another way of obtaining nourishment from the caregiver. If anything, Freud's theory of childhood development helps us recognize the biological link between oral pleasure-seeking and speech, in that the same organs and reflexes are involved – the lips, the tongue, the teeth. In an anthropological and structuralist approach to food, Lévi-Strauss argues in "Le Triangle Culinaire" that cuisine conveys meaning through universal binary constructs (such as raw/rotten, cooked/rotten, raw/cooked) which help individuals understand their place in their culture. In other words, food is part of a system of signs which expresses a language of symbolic meaning. Likewise, in his essay "Wine and Milk" Roland Barthes describes food in terms of a system of signification. Eating meat, for example, is seen in Western society as part of the mythology whereby it enables one to ingest animal-like attributes. In this way the meal becomes a metaphor for an unconscious connection between food and beliefs about the world.

Reverend Millward's conspicuous consumption of "strong meats" in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is thus a kind of sign in a larger system of signification which forms part of the master discourse of the community. The Reverend is the patriarch of the neighbourhood, prescribing his parishioners food "good and wholesome for everybody," such as "malt liquors, bacon and eggs, ham, hung beef, and other strong meats" (43).

Linguistic power seems concomitant with Reverend Millward's diet, as he is fond of uttering "sententious jokes, pompous anecdotes, and oracular discourses" (59) in his frequent visits to the Markham residence for the purpose of drinking large quantities of Mrs Markham's famous home-brewed ale; and he is never known to preach a sermon with his "powerful voice" without previously swallowing an egg (43). His "ponderous bulk" (115) and fatty diet allow us to surmise, with a greater degree of accuracy than usual without being told directly in the text, exactly how this patriarch comes to be "gathered to his fathers" (441) – heart disease would be a safe guess.

As Reverend Millward's drinking habits and thoughts on the temperance movement suggest (64), the consumption of alcohol is associated with patriarchy and gender/power relations in *The Tenant*. We are told that Helen's father drinks himself to death (279), and that Lord Lowborough is thought effeminate for abstaining from alcohol. Indeed, alcoholism is not only a vice, but *the* vice in the novel, representative of patriarchal abuse of power and the sin passed on from father to son. It is "this very vice" from which Helen "labour[s] long and hard to save" her son (330); and it is this very vice that sets the stage for Arthur and Helen's battle over the kind of man their son will become: both Arthur and Helen force the child to drink alcohol, one to "'make a man of him'" (356), the other to teach him to abstain. Helen and Arthur's is an oral fight as well as, more specifically, a linguistic one. As Arthur is being taught to drink by his father and his father's friends, for example, he learns also to swear and berate his mother (356), so that his lips are "defiled" and his ears "polluted" (392). In the motif of dissemination discussed in the previous chapter, power relations are played out orally; and the same is true with regard to the fight over Helen and Arthur's progeny.

With regard to the relation between orality and language, feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous have linked textuality and literacy with orality and sexuality, comparing the reading process to eating, sucking, licking, and kissing the text. The language of food is also an important concept in writing on eating disorders, as in *Starving in the Silences*, where Matra Robertson argues that "The woman who is diagnosed as anorexic is caught in a chain of signification" whereby she is defined by patriarchal medical discourse, effectively taking away her voice (55-56). In literary criticism, as well, it is common to speak of self-starvation as a "language" or "discourse."[2] Again, modern theorizing about literacy and orality originates much earlier than the past century in, for example, the use of food and feasting as objective correlatives for the writing process. Keats's "The Fall of Hyperion" comes to mind, where the poet who is "nurtured in his mother tongue" is capable of writing good verse, and where the image of a half-eaten feast symbolizes the mother tongue.

Whatever we may make of postulations such as Cixous's about the text as the mother's nipple, modern theorizing about food/drink and language enables us to examine critically the binary oppositions we construct to make sense of ourselves and our world. In his description of the Honey-Mad Woman in *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss notes the way women in mythology subvert these binary constructs. Honey, Lévi-Strauss explains, delineates the ambiguous border between culture and nature, where woman is asked to reside. In consuming a substance which is at once predigested and unprocessed, raw and cooked, the honey-mad woman becomes not only an archetype of sexual and gustatory defiance (Yaeger 11), but of linguistic defiance as well, breaking the rules of a system of signification meant to contain women's supposed natural disorder and fecundity.

I have argued that by examining orality in works of literature it is possible to see how female authors and their characters are "working (in) the in-between." Placed on the periphery of society, or more precisely in that space, that wilderness, in between systems of signification (such as culture and nature), women become marginalized by the binary oppositions upon which society constructs and codifies itself. Yet I have also argued that it is exactly from their position as "boundary stalkers" that women are able to think and write in a way that is subversive of the dominant discourse. In this chapter we shall see how in the work of some female novelists the portrayal of food and drink, as parts of a system of signification, show not only how women are victims of this system, but how they subvert this system by working (in) the in-between.

Food, drink, physicality, and spatiality

As the concepts of boundaries, the wilderness, and working (in) the in-between suggest, a discussion of food/drink and orality necessarily involves us in spatial metaphors and images. Apart from the tendency of theoretical discourse to revert to concrete terms for the sake of clarifying abstract points, the reason for employing spatial figures of speech when theorizing about food and drink and the mouth is that they are of course physical things. As I argued in Chapter 2, orality provides a means of making fictional characters lifelike by grounding them in physicality while creating a degree of ambiguity about who they are, about how to "place" them; orality is a means of showing the complex and contradictory nature of human desires and needs, and the constant interplay between the individual and his environment, represented in what goes in and what comes out of the mouth. Food and drink thus constantly remind us of the dialectic

between subject and object and the constraints of our physical existence: we can never truly be at one with our loved ones, for example, without consuming them or being consumed by them; and we can never eat enough to satisfy our incessant hunger. The portrayal of food and drink which denies our existence in space is a flight from reality, as Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" illustrates. This poem is structured on sound in its emphasis on the aural as opposed to the visual sense. The speaker imagines himself with the bird at night, when all things are "viewless," and he wishes to "fade" and "dissolve" (to disappear, essentially). It is the sound of the "full-throated ease" of the bird's song which makes the speaker want to escape reality by drinking with "purple-stained mouth" a magical vintage.[3] On the other hand, food and drink that become a spectacle, that are meant solely for the eye and simply to exist in space, cannot nourish. Food and drink are meant to be consumed; for eating and drinking play out the dialectic between subject and object, delineating and linking the world without with the place most truly within. The denial of this interplay is the denial of life.

As Lévi-Strauss points out, women and men (but especially women) are "placed" in society by symbolic boundaries, such as those rules created by linguistic and culinary systems of signification. It was common for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conduct books to prescribe what a woman could say, where she could go, and what she could eat, in order to fill the "blank and unoccupied spaces" of her life, as Hannah More put it.[4] According to the ideology promoted by these books, women were to be restricted in their speech and movement, as well as half-starved in their diets. This last prescription is born out by the prevalence, amongst middle and upper-class girls and women in the nineteenth century, of "chlorosis" (anaemia), which was caused by insufficient protein and iron in

diets that were considered acceptable for women at that time (Constantine 119). The connection between speaking, eating, and moving is shown in such passages as Marianne's unhappy reunion with Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, which occurs in the cramped and stifling quarters of an overcrowded ballroom. Marianne's reaction to Willoughby's cold reception – her "incessantly" giving way "in a low voice to the misery of her feelings," and then her "silent agony" (191,192) – is as much determined by Willoughby's villainy and the place she finds herself in, as by her eating habits since the time Willoughby left her (I shall discuss her eating habits at greater length later in this chapter). Elizabeth Bennet is an Austen heroine in many ways the mirror opposite of Marianne Dashwood, in terms of speech, space, and eating. The scandal caused among Elizabeth's detractors by her brown face and wild appearance – that is, not a pale and anaemic looking face, but one showing the "brilliancy of exercise" (*Pride and Prejudice* 28) and exposure to the sun – may have just as much to do with Elizabeth's diet as with her frequent "rambling" out of doors in the sun. One cannot imagine Elizabeth "crossing field after field at a quick pace" (28) on the typical diet of nineteenth-century women. The linguistic/oral boundaries crossed by the outspoken heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* are symbolized perhaps most clearly in her cross-country trip on foot to Netherfield to visit her sick sister, in the "impatient activity" with which she "jumps over stiles" (28), the literal boundary markers of property, or what is "proper." A more gripping comment on the necessity of women to cross the boundaries of what society considers proper is the flood in *The Mill on the Floss*, which leads to the literal dissolution of all boundaries of property. Ironically and tragically, this seems to be the only solution to the problems of

Maggie and her family, which have to do not only with disputes about property, but about what is considered proper for a woman in nineteenth-century society.

Food, drink, property, and economics

We have seen how, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, notions of propriety had been codified in an elaborate system of social rules and manners which often tied constraints governing women's use of language to strictures on women's movement – and, as I have been arguing, to rules about eating and drinking – and how this codification was the result of the increasing link between property and propriety in English society (Tanner 32-33).[5] Of course, economic power allows greater access to food and drink, and therefore food and drink quite naturally become symbolic of economic exploitation, as in P.B. Shelley's poem "A song: 'Men of England'." In this poem, which became the hymn of the British labour movement, the tyranny of masters over workers is described in terms of the control of the production of food (as well as textiles), and in images of vampirism, where masters drink the workers' blood. Shelley's oral imagery follows in a long tradition of English literature protesting economic exploitation by employing the tropes of food and drink, from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," in which the culinary imagery is unforgettable, to Dickens's fiction, in which the Cratchit Christmas dinner only "momentarily restores the principle of reciprocity in social life" (Watt, "Oral Dickens," 167). As Watt has pointed out, Dickens is probably the undisputed master of portraying a corrupt economic and social system through tropes of food and drink; but the female novelists under discussion also use food and drink to much the same effect and in much the same way – that is, as representative of the other

systems of exchange, such as money and language, on which society structures and codifies itself. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, for example, workers live on starvation wages, or ironically in the case of Bessie Higgins, on the airborne "fluff" of the factory which she breathes in and swallows (145-46). Mrs Thornton's attitude towards food and drink exemplifies the inequity within the systems of exchange in her society, and the uncertainty of achieving happiness through even a strict adherence to the rules governing them. At one point in the novel, while factory workers are "clemming," we are told that Mrs Thornton prepares the "feast" for a dinner party. This dinner is "oppressive" because of her adherence to "rigorous laws of hospitality" (213). It is Mrs Thornton's professed duty to invite to these feasts those families to which she "owes dinners" (196), and both she and her son have never known "any kind of society but that which depended on an exchange of superb meals" (213). Thus, while the inequity between the workers' tables and their masters' tables is portrayed quite vividly in *North and South*, the lifestyle of the property owners is by no means shown to be desirable – the result of their work is that they cannot truly enjoy the fruits of their labour.

The tropes of food and drink in novels such as *North and South* are concerned more properly with human relations than just economic or gender relations – with the pain of the master as well as the servant. Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* is another case in point. We have already seen how images of the cave and physical deprivation or exploitation play a large part in such novels as *Shirley*. The association between orality, propriety, and property in this novel is clearly indicated in its related themes of hunger and starvation, the status of women, and the effects of mercantile capitalism; but I would argue that the novel is about more than gender and economic relations. Gilbert and

Gubar contend that in *Shirley* "hunger is inextricably linked" to the "rebellion and rage" of women and the working class (373), whereas I would argue that *starvation* in this novel is representative of social injustice, and that *hunger* is a more generalized metaphor for basic human desires and needs. Although the common images of the cave and hollowness in Brontë's novel and in English literature in general are closely associated with specific kinds of relationships within society, such as gender relations (see Chapter 2), the many references to hollowness and hunger in *Shirley* seem to indicate that Charlotte Brontë's intention was not so much to make a point about the status of gender relations as to capture the suffering and hollowness of human relationships in general, in what is after all her most social novel. The suffering caused by Robert Moore's insatiable drive to have his mill succeed, for example, is shown not only in the starvation rations on which his workers live, but in the master's own "hollow" cheeks (59).

Nevertheless, food and drink in *Shirley* are closely tied to both economics and gender. The eponymous heroine is an attempt to portray a woman with economic freedom and a power to speak which make her "an exception" for women of her day (279): not only does Shirley speak as she wants, but she lays out feasts in her garden and banquets in her dining room, supplies meat and wine for Moore's men, owns dairy cows that supply the cottagers with milk and butter, and pays exorbitant bills for, among other things, bread. Yet Shirley's capitulation to conventionality is indicated in the pleasure she finds in making Louis Moore's "language her own" (463), in reproducing "his manner, his pronunciation, his expression" (463), like the lady in Browning's poem "A Woman's Last Word" who lays her "flesh and spirit" in her lover's hands by promising him that she will "speak thy speech." Shirley's speech lessons eventually lead to

marriage, and to what marriage entailed for women with any money and property of their own in the nineteenth century – the legal transference of all that she owns to her husband.

Brontë makes it clear in *Shirley* that women who do not have economic power, such as Mary Cave and Caroline Helstone, live a hungry and hollow existence. At one point early in the novel Caroline ponders her "place in the world," her willingness to accept the role of the typical nurturing female and the master-servant ideology, whereby "to do good to others" and to give up one's life "to them and their service" is the ultimate good for a woman. She asks herself whether there is not "a terrible hollowness" and "craving" in this kind of existence (190). As Gilbert and Gubar point out, Caroline is as much a commodity on the marriage market as workers on the mercantile market (389); she is like the woman in another of Browning's poems from *Men and Women*, "A Light Woman," who figuratively becomes the food, the object to be exchanged and eventually consumed. Caroline's wish to exchange and not be the object of exchange is echoed in Rose Yorke's interpretation of the parables of the talents, according to which it is one's duty to trade with the talents and not to lock them up with the food in the pantry (389). Here food represents not confining domesticity, but systems of exchange which are corrupted when reciprocity is absent – that is, when food is locked up in the pantry, it no longer performs its physical function of nourishing, its social function of bringing people together at table, and its economic function of furthering labour and/or acting as payment for work.

In *Shirley* and in texts by other female writers, the ideology promoting a confining domesticity and economic marginality for women is both supported and challenged within the text. The conventional ending of *Shirley* tacitly upholds society's gender

roles, while the unconventional behaviour of the heroine throughout the text challenges them. Shirley's continual association with the sharing of food is equally problematic, in that on the one hand it shows her economic power, and on the other her conventional nurturing nature. Indeed, preparing meals seems always the job of the female in nineteenth-century literature, a fact which is not too surprising considering the traditional role of the woman in history. McConnell-Ginet points out the ancient roots of this role in English culture when she traces the etymology of "lady" to the Old English *hlaefdige*, or "bread kneader" (5-6). By the nineteenth century, the association of women with food was part of the ideology that a woman should be a nurturing and self-effacing angel in the house, rather than a participant in the activity of the marketplace. As Sarah Ellis puts it in *The Women of England*, the wife was the "humble monitoress who sat alone, guarding the fireside comforts" of the home (53) and engaging "in the minutiae of domestic comfort" (54), while her husband earned money "in the mart, the exchange, or the public assembly" (53). This dichotomous ideology of a man's and woman's place is arguably evident in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, in which Laura and Lizzie are apparently safe from temptation in the "market" of the goblin "men" as long as they perform their domestic chores, most of which have to do with food preparation.

In nineteenth-century fiction, women such as Bessie Leaven, Mrs Bede, Mrs Markham, Lady Middleton, and Mrs Tulliver are also examples of this domestic ideology. As her last name suggests, Bessie Leaven is associated with procreativity and food, and though she has some rough edges to her personality, she acts as a tempering (leavening) influence on the young heroine in *Jane Eyre*: for example, she brings Jane a pastry to calm the heroine after her shock in the Red Room, and then supper afterwards.

Bessie is a mother-figure to Jane, nurturing the impressionable and growing youth with food and with stories which form an important part of Jane's world view;[6] and after Jane and Bessie part, Bessie nurtures her own growing brood of "thriving" children (223). In *Adam Bede*, Lisbeth is the typical garrulous and domestic mother in nineteenth-century fiction who is marginalized in the text. Her marginal status is shown in the association of her character with food as well as with a "'nattering' habit" of speech (41), as when she speaks importunately of "tater wi' gravy" (36) or uses her "wailing talk" (412). In *Sense and Sensibility* we are told that Lady Middleton is an overly-indulgent (yet passive) mother and "piqued herself upon the elegance of the table and of all her domestic arrangements" (65). While her sociable husband seems always a part of the action of the novel, his wife is neither seen nor heard from often.[7] Mrs Markham is yet another doting mother in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as we see in her meticulous instructions to her daughter as they prepare supper for her sons: "'Make that pie a large one, Rose, I dare say the boys'll be hungry; and don't put so much pepper in, they'll not like it I'm sure . . . Rose, don't put so many spices in the pudding, Gilbert likes it plain . . . Mind you put plenty of currants in the cake, Fergus likes plenty'" (78). Aside from this longer speech, and despite the fact that she is "plain-spoken" (51) and "loquacious" (116), we hear little from or about Mrs Markham other than that she is a good cook and makes good home-brewed ale. Likewise, Mrs Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* is "represented by her brandy cherries and cream cakes" (472). Appropriately, the first time we are introduced to Maggie's mother, she is in the kitchen, preparing plum cakes, jellies, and gravy (Virginia Woolf take note!); and like Lisbeth Bede's marginality, Bessy Tulliver's marginal status is shown both in her association with food and drink, and in her speech,

as when she attempts to curtail the angry outbursts of her husband by "talking o' almonds and raisins" (131).

The financially independent women in the novels we are examining are not necessarily the ones to participate in the marketplace or to have any degree of earning power; and even women in these texts who are rich enough not to have to worry about the "minutiae of domestic comfort" still apparently do so. Shirley Keeldar is financially independent, yet we are told nothing about who manages her business, or whether she embarks on business ventures of her own. As master of the house, Shirley would no doubt employ a housekeeper to look after domestic matters and consult with the cook about meals; yet as we have seen she is continually associated with the sharing of food, and even carries sweet cake in her reticule to throw to the chickens. Like Shirley, "massive" and implacable Mrs Thornton in *North and South* is financially well off, but she is presumably dependent on her son's factory business for this independence, having no fortune of her own. Thus, even this standoffish woman is concerned with catering to others in the "feasts" she puts on, albeit out of a sense of pride and competition.

Domesticity, however, does not necessarily entail diminished status or a lack of economic power. Shirley's economic power and freedom is not compromised by her domestic interests, unless one considers that her domestic interests lead to marriage. And whatever the goblin men's fruit and market may symbolize in *Goblin Market*, the heroines are not dependent on them for their livelihood: the two women seem to be able to live quite independently by means of their domestic work – that is, in producing and managing their own food and drink, such as honey, milk, cream, and butter. Likewise, the indomitable Mrs Poyser in *Adam Bede* is involved in the management of a dairy and

thereby contributes greatly to the economic welfare of her family and to her own personal independence: her dairy gives her not only economic clout, but the right to "have her word about everything" (155). Indeed, food and speech are closely linked in the portrayal of all the female characters we have discussed: with the exception of the nearly invisible Lady Middleton, all are great talkers. And in *Middlemarch*, Mrs Garth's "grammatical fervour" while pastry baking, teaching her children how "to speak and write correctly" (276) while regulating what they eat, indicates not domestic diminishment, but a power and independence at least as great as that of males outside the home.

Cannibalism and self-starvation

Self-starvation seems to be associated with the portrayal in nineteenth-century literature of human relationships in terms of eater versus eaten, a theme we have examined in *Middlemarch*. Illustrations of the alternative of eating or being eaten in nineteenth-century literature no doubt have much to do with the economic and social upheaval of the time which forced individuals to redefine their relationships with other members of society. In Dickens's *Great Expectations*, a novel about a social and economic climber who becomes a "gentleman" using another's resources, the hero is confronted with a grotesque parody of his own means of success when he is captured by Orlick, whose attempt on Pip's life is a kind of oral assault: every drop of alcohol which passes Orlick's deathly "blue lips" (434) during Pip's ordeal is like "a drop of my own life," Pip says (438); the hero feels as though he is being "boiled" by the villain's "hot breath" (434); and Orlick's mouth waters as he contemplates the fate of his victim (436).

Other images of cannibalism or self-cannibalism in nineteenth-century literature may also reflect the life and death struggles of the time. In one of the many horrific scenes of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge implies a link between linguistic deprivation and starvation as the narrator of the tale must bite his arm and suck his own blood to free "his speech from the bonds of thirst." And in William Morris's "Haystack in the Floods," when the heroine is forced to choose between marrying the villain or seeing her lover die a gruesome death, Jehane responds that if she were to marry Godmar she would either "bite through his throat" or refuse to eat and drink and so kill herself, giving the theme of eating or not eating a further twist.

As a kind of self-cannibalism, whereby the body reacts to a lack of nourishment by consuming its own stores of fat, self-starvation is also often a response to the constraints of a social or economic system which limits the chances for an individual to achieve some degree of personal freedom or financial success. Mr and Mrs Thornton's economic success in *North and South* is achieved only after years of eating nothing but "water-porridge" (129), just as Robert Moore's "hollow" cheeks in *Shirley* are a result of his willingness to sacrifice anything for his business. Likewise, in order to pay back his debts, redeem himself in the eyes of his community, and avenge the injustice done to him, Mr Tulliver is "gradually metamorphosed into a keen-eyed grudger of morsels," eating "nothing himself but what was of the coarsest quality" (*Mill on the Floss* 370). Jane Eyre's thoughts sum up the feeling one may have without any real chance of living even a tolerable life: "to achieve escape from insupportable oppression" Jane thinks of "never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die" (15). Of course, Jane's "oppression" turns out not to be insupportable, and her thoughts about self-starvation

may only be a function of the rather sentimentalized account of her life at Gateshead; but the fact that a ten-year-old girl would think of starving herself to death is nevertheless a little jarring.

As Jane's narrative points out, self-starvation may at the very least be a consideration in the minds of young women who are not content with themselves or their place in society. The link between place and oppression in nineteenth-century novels by women is made by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of their Own*, where she argues that feminist writers of the nineteenth century tended to retreat more and more toward a literature of inner space, a separate world which came to symbolize "a flight from men and from adult sexuality," and which was often identified with the womb or enclosed spaces (33). In the difficult task of explaining and dealing with the prevalence of anorexia in our own time, especially among young females, one of the theories of the etiology of this disease is that it stems from an inability on the part of a young person to come to terms with adult sexuality.[8] In *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone shows the classic signs of anorexia: a problematic relationship with the mother; an inability to come to terms with what it means to be an adult; a feeling of a loss of control over one's own life; and a paradoxical acceptance of a prescribed social role. Caroline's literal inability or unwillingness to eat is symbolically portrayed in her ruminations on her unrequited love for Robert Moore. In a chapter where she has remembered vividly her parents' own unhappy marriage and her own literal starving because of it,[9] Caroline also attempts to come to terms with Robert's apparent lack of love for her: "You expected bread," she tells herself, "and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it, and don't shriek because the nerves are martyrized: do not doubt that your mental stomach – if you have such a

thing – is strong as an ostrich's – the stone will digest" (128). And when she apparently comes up against competition for the affections of Robert from her own friend, Shirley, Caroline "suffered, indeed, miserably . . . her famished heart had tasted a drop and crumb of nourishment that, if freely given, would have brought back abundance of life where life was failing; but the generous feast was snatched from her, spread before another, and she remained but a bystander at the banquet" (254). As in her experience with her father earlier in life, Caroline feels "shut up" (126), trapped in a patriarchal society which offers her no chance of living an independent life. Her uncle has forbidden her even the career of governess; her only chance of attaining any degree of financial security and social standing is to marry well. Caroline responds to this lack of choice by searching for feminine places, as the landscape and anatomical imagery of the novel illustrates (see Chapter 2); yet this search – into the "deep, hollow cup" of Nunnwood with Shirley (221), for example – confronts Caroline with the fact of her own femininity, and therefore with her own status as someone who needs to marry to live a tolerable life. It is little wonder that, when the prospects of marrying the man she loves fade, she stops eating, ironically fulfilling her role as a docile, self-denying woman, while at the same time exerting the only control she has over her own body.

Like Caroline Helstone's self-starvation, Marianne Dashwood's refusal to eat in *Sense and Sensibility* is linked to the etiology which defines anorexia. Just as food and drink are part of a system of symbolization, so self-starving is a kind of language; and Marianne's speaking and her other methods of discourse are, as we have already seen, opposed to the dominant discourse of her society and of the narrator of the novel. While Marianne is capable of "severely censur[ing] herself" for her verbal mistakes (123), the

narrator still strongly condemns her for "feed[ing] her own wishes" (192), in part in order to show that Marianne's "diet" is harmful to a young woman in nineteenth-century society. Like Caroline Helstone, Marianne is a young woman who has been jilted by a man and subsequently practises a kind of oral repression: immediately after Willoughby leaves the neighbourhood, Marianne takes her place at the dinner table "without saying a word" and "could neither eat nor speak" throughout the meal (109). As long as Marianne has hope that she will be reunited with Willoughby, her life is characterized not by full-fledged illness but by a generalized anxiety and a kind of oral/aural hypersensitivity, as when she cannot bear eating with Mrs Jennings or Sir John Middleton because of the pain of listening to them talk, or when she "could scarcely eat any dinner" and is shortly thereafter found "anxiously listening to the sound of every carriage" in the hope of Willoughby's arrival (177). It is after she leaves her mother, with whom she oddly shares the "happy ardour of youth" (175), and goes to London to discover the unfaithfulness of her former lover, that Marianne becomes sick and nearly dies. Austen provides a detailed account of the causes and symptomatology of Marianne's illness,[10] not least among which is an unwillingness to eat (193, 197). This reluctance is further associated with orality in that, when Marianne is persuaded to eat before the onset of the illness which almost kills her, "not a syllable escaped her lips" (204). It is almost as if, by agreeing to eat, she must deny herself another oral activity. Marianne's illness, like Caroline Helstone's, is a result of, or protest against, being "placed" by her society; and like the rambling of Austen's more "bright and sparkling" heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, Marianne's use of space is part of this protest, as when she cannot help walking about the room when she is trying to stifle her speech and maintain propriety (269), or when at the Palmers'

house she wanders "from place to place in free and luxurious solitude" (299). Again, the danger of this kind of freedom for women of Marianne's time is impressed upon the reader when she becomes deathly ill after one of these walks.

This last illness is the physical manifestation of linguistic repression and the outcome of "a long want of rest and food" (197). Between the time of her rejection in London by Willoughby and her almost fatal illness, Marianne continues to grow thin (234), to suffer "many weeks" of "indisposition" (309), and to find dinner parties overwhelming (239-242). During this time she also attempts to stifle her speaking more, to the point where she experiences "spasms in her throat" (266); and though during this time Marianne continues occasionally to speak her mind, she never does so out of a selfish disregard for the feelings of others: even though she has been capable of solipsistic speech and actions, her final illness is the result of sustained self-neglect rather than self-indulgence. Significantly, Marianne's cold is "unexpressed by words" until it "force[s] itself . . . on the concern of every body, and the notice of herself" (302); and in Austen's precise diction, it is not a stretch to say that the "spasms" in Marianne's throat occasioned earlier by verbal repression are connected to the sore throat which is one of the chief symptoms of her illness (302).

By the onset of this illness, the etiology of anorexia is quite evident in Marianne's life. Her irrational reluctance to accept the fact that Willoughby no longer has an interest in her may in essence be an inability to come to terms with what it means to be an adult, for Willoughby's rejection entails that, in order to avoid becoming "an old maid," Marianne may have to marry for reasons other than love (as she eventually does). Marianne's paradoxical acceptance of her prescribed social role as docile female is

shown in her abstinence from food and drink and in her strenuous attempts to stop herself from speaking at times: through her illness Marianne becomes, as the doctor describes her when her fever is at its most dangerous, "more quiet – not more herself" (308). Indeed, the reader may very well wish the old Marianne back when she becomes subdued and docile at the end of the novel. A problematic relationship with one's mother, another possible cause of eating disorders, is shown in Marianne's unwillingness to part with her mother, even to go to London to see Willoughby (174), and in her "talking wildly of mama" (306) and "fixing incoherently on her mother" (307) during her illness. And finally, the loss or abnegation of control over one's own life, which is a cause of eating disorders, is shown most clearly in the success of the "confederacy" against Marianne which convinces her to marry Colonel Brandon (366). Toward the end of the novel, after a long recovery from her illness, we are not convinced that the root of Marianne's sickness has been eradicated, as we read that both Dashwood sisters still have "so much reason . . . to be careless of their meals" (345).

Food, drink, and sex

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the narrator waxes eloquent on how the heroine's "plump neck, shoulders, and arms" look luminous and beautiful in the moonshine, and on "the faultless rotundities of a lusty country girl" (57). This implicit link between food and sexuality is made more explicit elsewhere in the novel, as when Alec feeds Tess strawberries during her first visit to Trantridge, holding them by the stem and obliging her to "part her lips and take them in" (34). There are many other oral tropes in the context of this scene, for example when Alec stares at the heroine's "pretty and

unconscious munching" and "fulness of growth" through the "narcotic haze" of the smoke from his cigar (34), which he smokes through his "large white" teeth (43). Later, during the carriage ride to Trantridge and as a further prelude to his rape of Tess, Alec extorts the "kiss of mastery" from the heroine's "holmberry lips" (45) and continues to offend her with his cursing and swearing. And after appeasing the pliable and naïve heroine, Alec teaches her to "pout up that pretty red mouth" to whistle for Mrs d'Urberville's bullfinches (50).

With this succession of oral tropes, Thomas Hardy reminds us of the link between sex and food/drink, as Dickens does in *Hard Times* with his portrayal of Lady Scadgers, that "immensely fat old woman, with an inordinate appetite for butcher's meat," confined to her bed for fourteen years because of a "mysterious leg" (83). Yet the sustained use of oral tropes in texts such as Hardy's also points out the link between food/drink and sex and other aspects of orality, and the connection of these aspects of orality with power relations and with (sometimes corrupt) human needs and desires. As Doody posits, food is not only an essential aspect of eros, but more generally, it is "*the* appetite on which other appetites" are based (421). We have looked at how food and drink are metonymous for sex in such works as *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in the figure of the *femme fatale* in works by such authors as Keats and D.G. Rossetti, and in the association between the mouth and the vagina in English literature. The last point, however, requires further examination.

In Chapter 2 I examined the garrulous and sexually "loose" woman in selected works of literature, the large and/or fecund woman speaking at large and the association of this figure with the fear of an inability to reach climax and closure (in a text or

elsewhere), and with issues of property/propriety in English culture. In the present chapter I have argued that food and drink inevitably involve the reader in physicality and spatiality, just as the dilation of women's discourse in literature is inevitably related to difference and deferral, an expansion and dispersal in time as well as space (Parker 9). Anxiety about the dilation of women and of discourse is therefore linked to the fear of an endless deferral of meaning, of discovering that in the end the meaning of discourse may come to nothing – a fear perhaps shown in Lear's recoiling at the "nothing" in Cordelia's speech, or in Hamlet's ranting about that "nothing" which "lies between maids' legs."

The fear of the fecundity of a woman's womb and of the prolixity of her discourse is thus ultimately and paradoxically related to the fear of a metaphysical void – the nothingness which is silence in time and absence in space; the end of self, reflected in the common equation between orgasm and death, as in Donne's sonnets, or in the common image of the grave and hell as a gaping and hungry mouth, or (more prosaically) in Mr Pullet "filling up the void" in conversations with lozenges and peppermint drops. In *Jane Eyre*, an image of the grave is employed which, along with the cave as a metaphor for both the womb and the mouth, links the theme of woman's status with images of starvation and subtly undermines the theme of the dilated and dangerous woman in literature. The image of the grave is used at least twice in *Jane Eyre* at key moments in the text. The first is when the secret of Thornfield is revealed, and Jane stands "at the mouth of hell" (296) in Bertha's room, looking with terrified eyes at the shut-up madwoman whose "oral oddities" (111) Jane has heard for a long time, who bites her brother and sucks his blood (214-15) and greets her husband by laying "her teeth to his cheek" (296). The second time the image of the grave appears is when Jane makes her

escape from Thornfield, at which time she imagines "the grave gaping" at the end of her journey (325). Jane's dilemma in leaving Thornfield is typical of nineteenth-century heroines whose alternative to marriage is less than desirable: to stay would be to enter into a bigamous relationship, to face the "hell" of Bertha; and to leave is to face poverty and "the gaping grave." Jane's fate were she to stay at Thornfield is foreshadowed in Mr Rochester's banter with Adèle at the beginning of his engagement to Jane, when he says that he will take Jane to a cave in one of the white valleys of the moon, to which Adèle makes the unconsciously prescient reply that Jane will then have "nothing to eat: you will starve her" (269). The prospect of living a "starving" existence with Rochester occurs again after the aborted wedding, when Rochester entreats Jane to join him in "a white-walled villa" in France, reminiscent of the whiteness of the moon in Rochester's quip to Adèle. It is ironically to escape the prospect of starvation that Jane leaves Thornfield and starves on the Yorkshire moors, where during a night of hunger she finds a womb-like natural shelter beside a "crag," and goes to sleep surrounded on all sides by deep heath (328) and nestled "to the breast of the hill" (329).

Charlotte Brontë thus both endorses and undermines the common symbolic meanings associated with images of the womb and the cave in literature. Jane acts in a traditionally female way when she defers lovemaking, putting off Rochester's amorous advances with her "whetted tongue" (275) and refusing to dine with him during the dilated period of their engagement (272, 281). The womb and the cave in *Jane Eyre*, however, are not places of female power and male subordination, but of female powerlessness and deprivation. Even after Jane's arrival at Moor House, she continues to experience oral deprivation at the hands of St John, another man whose proposal she

defers (and ultimately rejects). St John's "nervous language" (356) and "compressed mouth" (368) are the result of his merciless control over his own "insatiate yearnings" (357) as well as those of others; and it is characteristic of this kind of control that he should manipulate Jane into learning Hindostanee, and censure her for "yielding to the cravings of [her] appetite" while eating (350; cf. 395, 400). Unlike her passionate relationship with Rochester, whose "appetite" Jane must continually curb, Jane's sexual relationship with St John would no doubt have been as uncomfortable and repressive as the Hindostanee lessons or the Christmas meal she shares with him.

Thick and thin women

Many of the female characters in the novels under discussion may be classified in either of the two categories of thick or thin: it is the heavy and/or fecund females in these novels who have linguistic control, talk "at large," or are sexually attractive or "loose," while it is the thin or abstemious women who are associated with reticence or silence. This categorization may be a concession to the ideology of dilation discussed above; but in an age of strict if unofficial censorship, it was most certainly also a way that novelists could speak of sexual issues without being explicit enough to incur the moral indignation of the reading public.

In *Jane Eyre*, as we have seen, Bessie Leaven is associated with food and procreativity, and her storytelling has a large and continuing impact on the heroine. There are also three sets of sisters in this novel who illustrate the dichotomy between thick and thin. Blanche Ingram, the potential mate for Rochester described by him as "an extensive armful" (252), never seems to be at a loss for words, while her sister Mary is

"slim" (174) and has "nothing to say" (175). Likewise, Georgiana Reed is described as more sexually eligible than her sister (to which Georgiana's near-elopement attests), is "full blown" (230), "very plump" (230), even "puffy" (238), and "chatters nonsense" non-stop (235); whereas Eliza Reed is "very thin" (230), associated with barrenness (she is "nun-like" [230]), and taciturn in temperament. The sorority that Jane fails to experience among these sets of sisters is found among her other cousins at Marsh End, a fact perhaps reflected in the kind of mirror image that Blanche and Mary make in comparison with Diana and Mary Eyre Rivers: Diana, whose physical attributes if not her personality seem to be prefigured (pardon the pun) in the description of Blanche Ingram as a lady "moulded like a Dian" (174), is predictably more forthright when it comes to speaking and offering Jane food than her "more reserved" sister Mary (348); but both sisters offer the kind of conversation which Jane says "tastes" good (354). Other large ladies in *Jane Eyre* include Mrs Reed, who is described as "stout, not obese" (35), and who mercilessly abuses the young heroine by, for example, harassing her at meals and excluding her from Christmas dinner. And of course, "tall and large" Bertha (286), with her grotesquely "inflated face" (286) and swollen lips (310), is also described as "intemperate and unchaste" (310) in her speech and (by implication) in her sexual life. Grace Poole is a perfect guardian for Bertha in that, just as Grace is frugal when it comes to food, she can be trusted to keep a secret; but Grace has her oral weaknesses, such as smoking and drinking, and it is her overindulgence in alcohol that almost lets the demon loose, so to speak.

Women in *The Mill on the Floss* seem to be categorized in much the same way as in *Jane Eyre*. We are told that Maggie's "palate was not at all obtuse," and that she is

irresistibly attractive to young men like Stephen Guest. Maggie and Stephen's relationship is predictably described in oral terms: for example, he "devours" Maggie with their eyes (559), and she finds his voice "like nectar held close to thirsty lips" (594). We are also told that Mrs Tulliver, who is associated with food, as we have seen, and whose personality is even described in gustatory terms (62),[11] is rather "stout" (78); and although "usually passive" (282) and mindful of her subordinate place in the household, she is capable of uncontrolled verbal outbursts, prolonged and "monotonous pleading" (228), and even prophetic speech, as when she puts to words her fear that her children will be "drownded some day" (166). On the other hand, Mrs Tulliver's slim sister, Mrs Deane, is "a thin-lipped woman who made small and well-considered speeches" (287), and the recurring image used to describe her personality is one of "shutting her lips close" (118) or "closing her lips very tightly" (130). A variation on the pattern of sisterly opposites is Bob Jakin's wife and mother, the former being tiny and shy, the latter being large and outgoing (499). And in "strong contrast to the Dodson sisters" in looks as well as character (297), the rustic Mrs Moss is "a patient, loosely-hung, child producing woman" (139). However, instead of being marginalized in the text, as many such women are in nineteenth-century novels, Mrs Moss gets her say in, as when she is prophetic about her brother "going to law" (228); or when after Mr Tulliver's "downfall" she speaks at length with the Dodson sisters and proves that, in her moral character, her determination to "do as we'd be done by" (302), she is the better of them all (ch. 3).

To prevent this discussion from swelling to enormous proportions, we can briefly note other characters who illustrate the dichotomy of thick and thin. Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* repeats many of the same patterns we have seen thus far, such as the thin

woman of "not many words" (239), Mrs Ferrars, or the pattern of sororal opposites and the type of the full-figured and/or loquacious woman in danger of being seduced by an unscrupulous man: Marianne Dashwood's "form" is "not so correct" as her taller and thinner sister, but "more striking" than Elinor's (78); and the exposure of Marianne's "half-dressed" body in front of the window when she writes to Willoughby (193) is symbolic of her unreserved communication in general, so that time and again Elinor must "screen" Marianne from the eyes of others (113, 191, 240). Other characters like Marianne include Lydia Bennet and Georgiana Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, both of whom are of about equal size – that is, slightly larger than Elizabeth (6, 33, 229) – and both of whom fall prey to the same man; and Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*, whose "round-limbed" body (72) and "pouting mouth" (73) are part of the attraction she holds for Arthur Donnithorne, as are the movements of her body when "making up the butter" (73).

We have looked at a number of themes related to food and drink and examined a rather broad selection of literary works. This kind of analysis I hope served to show how the tropes of food and drink are associated with specific themes and motifs related to orality which I have identified in previous chapters – the cave, the womb, dilation, property/propriety, the large woman talking at large. I would like to turn to one novel now, *Sense and Sensibility*, for a more sustained analysis of how this work employs the tropes of eating and drinking I have been discussing; and of how these tropes are related specifically to gender issues and power politics, and more generally to issues of human relations and human nature. I have chosen *Sense and Sensibility* not because it illustrates

these points more clearly than other novels, but to counter the generally accepted critical opinion that food and drink are not important in Austen's fiction.

Food and drink in Sense and Sensibility

While I have already touched on many aspects of food and drink in *Sense and Sensibility* in this chapter, more can be said on the importance of this topic in Jane Austen's work – certainly more than many critics have acknowledged. Judging by the relative dearth of criticism on food and drink in Jane Austen's work, most critics have not deemed the subject to be of any great importance in her fiction. Maggie Lane's *Jane Austen and Food* is a recent and well-overdue corrective to this critical neglect. In her introduction, Lane provocatively posits that perhaps critics have ignored the subject of food in Austen for so long because they "were mostly men" and thought the subject "too domestic, too mundane" (xv). It is certainly widely thought that despite many references to food and drink in her juvenilia and letters, Austen's mature fiction tends to minimize food and drink along with the other concrete and mundane things of life. The preoccupation of her characters with material objects in general and with food in particular – such as Mr Woodhouse's fixation on gruel and apple tarts in *Emma*, or Mrs Elton's rattling on about strawberry-gathering in the same novel – seems always to point out the flaws in those characters.[12] But as Maggie Lane has pointed out, Austen's characters "are forever eating, for the domestic plot inevitably coheres around the give and take of meals" (xi); and although Austen limits what she tells us about food to a few particulars, these details "are made to do a great deal of work" (xi).

Almost all of the dinner parties that the heroines of *Sense and Sensibility*

participate in show the flaws of the characters sitting at table, and are unsatisfactory in that they involve Elinor and Marianne in painful or inane conversation. Having become acquainted with Mr and Mrs Palmer, we are told that Elinor and Marianne "had no curiosity to see how [they] ate their dinner, and no expectation of pleasure from them in any other way" (132). When the sisters finally do sit down with the Palmers at table, their expectation is not at all disappointed as they witness Mrs Palmer's "abuses of language" (137). And when Elinor and Marianne dine at their brother's house in London, there is "no poverty of any kind, except of conversation" (239). It seems, however, that even when the Dashwoods dine alone as a family, something painful happens, as when Marianne suffers a long decline in health and is unable or unwilling to eat, or when they are eating at Barton Cottage near the end of the novel and hear that Edward has supposedly married Lucy. The allusion to "poverty" in relation to Mr and Mrs John Dashwood's table might explain why dining, especially with other, richer people, is so painful to the Dashwoods, in that the sisters and their mother have been reduced to a relative state of poverty, of which meals may be a painful and constant reminder.

Eating and drinking in *Sense and Sensibility* are always related in some way to language. While at table characters always show their moral fiber through what they say, whether it be the moral vacuity shown in Mrs Palmer's self-canceling speech, or the moral waywardness of Lucy Steele's insincere and insinuating talk. We have already seen how eating and language are related in Marianne's inability either to eat or speak at table, and how her eating disorder is connected with issues of linguistic power: her "breaking in, and putting an end to all regularity of detail" in a narrative (263), for example, cannot be tolerated by a narrator who is concerned above all with decorum and

propriety in her narration; and therefore the narrator rather ruthlessly suppresses Marianne orally, so that she becomes not only more quiet and docile by the end of the novel, but thinner and more sickly in body as well. We are told toward the end of the novel that both Marianne and Elinor have reason "to be careless of their meals"; and though the text does not focus on Elinor's eating habits as much as it does on Marianne's, one can only speculate about whether the thinner and taller sister, who has had to shut her mouth and regulate her speech on so many occasions in the novel, also has an eating disorder.

Besides Marianne, the character most associated with food and drink in *Sense and Sensibility* is Mrs Jennings. We are told about some of her favourite food (sweetmeats and olives [204]) and even her favourite meal (breakfast [194]) – rare details in Austen's fiction. Mrs Jennings is the typical garrulous and heavy woman we have seen again and again in literature, with a tendency to speak in physical terms and use lively images; and while her speech is not as original or witty as some of the other larger-than-life literary women associated with food, such as the Wife of Bath or Mrs Poyser, it still carries a great deal of the weight of the narrative. Mrs Jennings is a fluent and intense narrator, more so, as we have seen in Chapter 3, than any of the men in the novel. Part of her long-winded plan for Marianne's recovery includes her epigram, "One shoulder of mutton, you know, drives another down" (207), which is a kind of narrative on its own in that it works on several levels of signification: it provides comic relief in a potentially tragic situation; it shows Mrs Jennings's genuine concern about Marianne's welfare; and it subtly illustrates the root of Marianne's illness, which as we have seen ultimately has to do with society's strictures about what a woman can and can't do with her body. The

epigram comes just after Mrs Jennings informs us of how she and her "plump" daughter stuffed themselves on the fruit at Delaford: two women, one a widow and the other married, both off the marriage market and therefore careless of their diet. Unmarried women in Austen's time could not afford to be so careless.

While it may be easy to write Mrs Jennings off as just a silly and vulgar character, I do not believe that Austen does so. Although we are told quite bluntly as we are introduced to Mrs Jennings that she is a "rather vulgar" woman (66), and even though the details about her diet are in keeping with Austen's practice of illustrating this kind of flaw in her characters, she is nevertheless an endearing character because Austen's novel is, after all, a comedy; and comedies are associated not only with marriage and fertility, but as Watt reminds us, with social merrymaking and the oral pleasures it entails ("Oral Dickens" 181). The "boisterous mirth" of Mrs Jennings (67) is thus part of the comic design of the novel, and characters such as Lady Middleton, whose "cold insipidity . . . was particularly repulsive," are judged against this mirth (67). Mrs Jennings does inadvertently cause others pain – as when she and Sir John go on at table about who the mysterious "F" in Elinor's life could be, or when she and Charlotte broadcast abroad in London that Marianne is supposedly engaged to Willoughby – but the pain she causes is nothing like that caused by the men in Elinor's and Marianne's life. And while her prescriptions for Marianne's cure – sweetmeats, olives, dried cherries, and old Constantia wine (204, 208) – no doubt reflect her selfishness to the extent that they would be good for *herself*, they also illustrate in essence her moral character, her desire to "do unto others as you would have done to you," which is more than we can say for the morally flawed characters in the novel such as Mr John Dashwood, who only feigns concern for

his sisters, or his wife, who doesn't pretend at all.

Jane Austen's use of food and drink is therefore related not only to her concern with showing how her characters use and abuse language, but to her interest in exploring her characters' psychological and moral makeup; and portraying her characters at table seems to be one of her favourite ways of doing both. The description of the breakfast gathering at Barton Park before the intended excursion to Whitwell (93ff) is typical of Austen in that it tells us next to nothing about the food, and much about how her characters interact at table. The event is also important in that it raises one of the central questions of the novel – what was Colonel Brandon's urgent business in town? This mystery is related to one of the other key questions in the novel, in that its resolution will clarify once and for all the question regarding the nature of Willoughby's moral character. The scene at Barton Park opens with an insight into Elinor's psychology: we are told that she expected to be "wet through, fatigued, and frightened" during the proposed excursion (93). Elinor seems to have learned not to expect much from life, and certainly not to speak about her thoughts – she is silent about her apprehensions. When Colonel Brandon receives the letter and leaves the table, the reserved and indolent Lady Middleton, who we have been told piques herself "upon the elegance of her table" (65), exerts herself enough to say that something extraordinary must have happened in order for the Colonel to leave her table so suddenly. Upon his return Colonel Brandon deflects the inquiries of all by using a strategy frequently employed by Elinor, that of "telling lies when politeness required it" (144), and assures everyone that he has received no bad news, and has only been called away on "business." Sir John and Mrs Jennings are importunate in their requests for Brandon to disclose the contents of the letter, but the

Colonel holds firm in his silence and politeness, shaking his head in response to their questions, bidding everyone farewell, and merely bowing and saying nothing to Marianne.

The breakfast scene is typical of Austen in its compact portrayal of the complex motives for a character's behaviour, and the difficulty of judging their motives, such as the reasons for secrecy or reticence. Willoughby's secrecy, his condemnation of Colonel Brandon spoken in a low voice to Marianne, is a sign of duplicity in his character; and Marianne's simple affirmation of what Willoughby says shows her lack of judgment and her willingness to allow him to speak and judge for her. The narrator's portrayal of Elinor's reticence is not so straightforward. Elinor does not share her anxieties about the excursion, no doubt because they do not conform to the mood of the rest of the group, who are "all in high spirits and good humour, eager to be happy" (93). She does not speak because she does not wish to spoil their fun. Another reason for Elinor's reluctance to speak, however, may be that she is generally fearful of sharing her thoughts on any subject with anyone. She is essentially a lonely person. Certainly she is alone in the breakfast scene, apart from the group, so that when "almost everybody" asks Mrs Jennings about what she thinks is the nature of Colonel Brandon's business, we can take a good guess that Elinor is the exception.

The reasons for Colonel Brandon's reticence and secrecy are equally complex. His reluctance to verbalize his feelings when they are strongly engaged, as when he bows and says nothing to Marianne as he departs, is endorsed throughout the novel in the prudent repression that Elinor practises. Yet had Colonel Brandon been less concerned with propriety and more verbal about the danger his ward was in, both during the

breakfast scene and at a later time, he might have saved Marianne a great deal of heartache by exposing Willoughby's character (just as Darcy and Elizabeth's reticence and concern for propriety regarding Mr Wickham's character is partly to blame for Lydia's elopement in *Pride and Prejudice*). It may be argued that lying for the sake of propriety is called into question in the breakfast scene; but what makes the scene even more interesting is what may occasion the social lies the Colonel tells – that is, the pressure put to bear on the individual by the group. No doubt the strain of maintaining his composure is great when faced with the importunities of Mrs Jennings and Sir John, especially when Mrs Jennings alludes to his ward; but there is little doubt that Colonel Brandon also sees if not hears Willoughby's whispered aside to Marianne, and can sense the extreme disappointment of all, which "burst forth universally" the moment he leaves (96). What the breakfast scene subtly does is reinforce the loneliness and claustrophobia of the individual in nineteenth-century society, in the portrayal of Elinor alone with her thoughts in the midst of a prying group of people at the beginning of the passage, and the Colonel alone with his at the end. It is appropriate that Austen sets the scene during a meal, for at a meal we are more vulnerable to others than at most other occasions: no matter how little we care for our companions or how alienated we feel from them, we acknowledge our common dependency on food and our interdependence on others when we sit down with them at table to share both food and conversation; and there is generally no escaping once we have sat down – without, that is, exciting unwanted curiosity.

The breakfast scene at Barton Park also implicates the reader in the same kind of quenchless desire of Mrs Jennings to be told and to know everything, a character trait which in her case is related to her love of food and drink, and more generally to the

human oral impulses to incorporate and digest. We are being self-righteous if we judge Mrs Jennings too harshly for her garrulity and insatiable appetite for information, even when she speaks of the Colonel's ward and alleges that she is his daughter after he departs; for we, too, want to know why the Colonel must leave so suddenly and whether Miss Williams is indeed his daughter. In her book on gossip, Patricia Meyer Spacks argues convincingly that gossip extends to information of the sort relating to the Colonel and his ward, and that authors engage readers in their narratives by offering them tantalizing morsels of gossipy information. We should therefore also not be too hard on Colonel Brandon when he divulges all in a long, awkward, and gossipy account of the two Elizas.

The depth of insight in Austen's portrayal of eating and drinking is perhaps best shown in Sir John's unending need to have dinner parties, the result no doubt of his "dread of being alone" (174). Ironically, Sir John's inveterate sociability does not make his dinner parties occasions for real conversation, for these events provide "very little leisure . . . for general chat, and none at all for particular discourse" (160). His dinner guests meet "for the sake of eating, drinking, and laughing together, playing at [any] game that was sufficiently noisy" (160). A dinner party without true conversation seems to be the unforgivable sin in Austen; but underlying the criticism of Sir John's meals is the fact that those who eat and drink with him are ultimately alone, like Elinor and Colonel Brandon during the breakfast at Barton Park on the morning of the aborted excursion to Whitwell. We are told that this trip is meant to "do something by way of being happy," and that "happiness could only be enjoyed at Whitwell" (96). This wry comment on the misguided human search for pleasure may explain why what could be

the happiest of occasions, the sharing of a meal with neighbours and friends, is portrayed in *Sense and Sensibility* time and again as the cause of pain and isolation.

Notes

Chapter 4

1. In "The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver," Nina Auerbach argues that Maggie's love consumes rather than nourishes its objects, and that she is vampire-like in her hunger for love. While it may be the case that Maggie has, as Auerbach argues, an unnatural inability to nurture (unnatural according to the conventions of Maggie's time), it is clear in the passage about the sweet cakes and in many other passages that this inability applies also and especially to herself. For example, after Maggie thoughtlessly eats a jam puff as Tom looks hungrily on, she subjects herself to Tom's verbal abuse and suffers for her thoughtlessness far more than her brother (99-100); and in the same scene we are told that she would willingly go without food to make Tom happy (100). Likewise, she thinks of starving herself when, at another time, Tom rejects her plea for forgiveness and love (89). There are many other times when Maggie is left hungry, either literally or figuratively, as when she cuts her hair and misses dinner because of it, or when she subjects herself to a "starving" asceticism (427).
2. See, for example, Donalee Frega's *Speaking in Hunger: Gender, Discourse, and Consumption in* Clarissa; and Maud Ellmann's *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment.*
3. In "Ode to a Nightingale" as well as in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the sense of sight is associated with morbidity. What the speaker sees with his eyes in "Ode to a

Nightingale" reminds him of death and "leaden-eyed despairs": palsy shaking an old man; a youth growing "pale, and spectre-thin." "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is structured on space rather than time in that it appeals "Not to the sensual ear," but to the visual, to objects frozen on the urn; and in its immobilization of intense experiences, the urn is a perfect correlative of Keats's concern with the somewhat morbid longing for permanence in a world of change.

4. Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799); quoted in Tanner, 33.

5. For a discussion of the increasing links between rhetoric, gender, and property in English literature from Renaissance times on, see Patricia Parker's *Literary Fat Ladies*.

6. Bessie may indeed put a little too much "leaven" in the stories she tells Jane. We are told that Bessie's facility with words and storytelling "fed" Jane's overactive imagination (9), which eventually runs out of control in the Red Room.

7. Of course, Lady Middleton is a minor character and therefore need not make too many appearances in the novel. Like almost all mothers in Austen, however, she comes in for more than a little criticism; and, taking into consideration her husband's more frequent appearances in the novel, she is conspicuous by her absence. She isn't the only character in Austen's novel who is almost invisible, though. As I have argued in Chapter 3, Edward Ferrars, the lover of domestic comforts, is another such character.

8. See Boskind-Lodahl, 344-54. Although the psychoanalytical interpretation of anorexia as a fear of oral impregnation or of growing and maturation is no longer

current in modern theorizing about this disease, the symptoms described in Caroline Helstone's case are currently recognized as part of the etiology of the disease (see Matra Robertson's *Starving in the Silences*).

9. Caroline remembers with horror the time she was separated from her mother and lived with her alcoholic father, when she was "shut up, day and night" and often went unfed (126).

10. While there is an etiology of anorexia prevalent in Marianne's case, the following symptoms indicate that Marianne is also depressed: hyperactivity, displayed in constantly "walking backwards and forwards" (181) and the desire for a "continual change of place" (193), alternating with periods of lethargy (202); mental agitation, or a "mind that was never quiet" (184), combined with apathy about herself and others, manifested in, for example, a lack of personal grooming (189) and indifference "to her dress and appearance" (252); "nervous irritability" (193) and hypersensitivity to noise (213); the need for "solitude" (193); and "hysteria" and uncontrollable fits of crying (197, 202).

11. Describing the ephemeral qualities of the young Mrs Tulliver's beauty and amiability, the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* notes how "milk and mildness are not the best things for keeping, and when they turn only a little sour they may disagree with young stomachs seriously" (62).

12. A possible exception to this rule may be Wentworth's monologue on a hazelnut in *Persuasion*, although I would argue that it is not an exception for two reasons: first, the object upon which Wentworth waxes so eloquent is not really food in that it is not intended to be eaten; and second, Wentworth's illustration does little

to endear him to readers, in that, for all his earnest eloquence on the need to stay "firm," he does not see or acknowledge the heroine's firmness through long years of waiting for his return, while she grows thin and sickly. More likely to be exceptions to Austen's rule about food and drink are Mrs Jennings's effusions about them in *Sense and Sensibility*, as I will argue in this chapter.

Chapter 5

Orality and Literacy

St John's unsociable custom of reading during meals in *Jane Eyre*; Frederick Lawrence's excessive reserve and association with letters and books in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; Casaubon's bad table manners and bookish reticence in *Middlemarch* – what these characters' habits have in common is that they stem from an inordinate fondness for or reliance on literacy and a kind of oral poverty in eating or speaking, illustrating an inability or unwillingness to engage in the social give-and-take to which these oral activities lend themselves. The portrayal of these characters also implicates the modern reader in the tendency to privilege literacy over orality. As Walter Ong notes in his seminal work, *Orality and Literacy*, we are inclined to think of writing rather than speaking as the basic form of language, with one result being a "relentless dominance of textuality in the scholarly mind" (10). In his examination of the orality-literacy-print shift in history, Ong issues the necessary corrective by reminding us that "Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality" (8).

In this chapter I will argue that the kind of character portrayal we see in St John and Frederick Lawrence and Casaubon, and the oral tropes we have discussed in previous chapters, are related to the theme of orality and literacy in nineteenth-century novels by women, and that this theme signifies an important stage in the historical orality-literacy-print shift. Little research has been done on the effect of this shift on nineteenth-century

literature, and next to none on how it is reflected in nineteenth-century novels, particularly novels by women. Walter Ong has argued that the difference in the way women and men were educated in the nineteenth century "had a great deal to do with the rise of the novel" (112), but that there is a "great gap in our understanding of the influence of women" on this genre (159). Following Walter Ong, I will argue that this gap "could be bridged or closed through attention to the orality-literacy-print shift" (159); whereas Ong argues that the shift from orality to literacy was largely completed by the end of the Romantic period, however, I will argue nineteenth-century novels illustrate that the shift was not completed until sometime after the nineteenth century.

When orality is mentioned specifically in connection with the historical orality-literacy-print shift in this chapter, the term denotes speech; but as we have seen in previous chapters, speech is never separated in this way from other aspects of orality by the novelists we have been examining. The oral difficulties of St John, Frederick Lawrence, and Casaubon, for example, have just as much to do with their way of speaking and their other oral habits (which I have described in Chapter 3) as with their association with literacy. The importance of orality – orality in the sense of discourse which is transmitted orally, rather than by writing or print – is signified not only in the speech of the characters in the novels we are examining, but in whatever else they do with their mouths. In previous chapters we have seen the importance of oral tropes and themes in nineteenth-century novels by women; and in this chapter I will argue that these tropes and themes signify that the orality-literacy-print shift was not completed by the nineteenth-century but continued through the period, and that orally-based discourse was in no way a thing of the past in nineteenth-century novels. Central to this contention is

not only the primacy of orality in the novels we have been examining, but the fact that the English novel is a product of the confluence of literary traditions closely associated with orality. This is why, as we have seen, orality is prevalent in nineteenth-century novels by men as well as women; as we shall see, however, orality is especially prevalent in novels by women because of the nature of the orality-literacy shift in literary history.

The novel no doubt developed out of a highly complex interaction of various cultural and literary factors, with roots in both orality and literacy. Here I will not attempt to account for all of these factors or to go to great length in explaining their complex interaction. But by examining the influences of orality on the novel, I will begin to account for the oral tropes in the novels I have been discussing. In so doing, I hope to begin to remedy the chirographic bias in scholarship which has led to criticism concerned almost exclusively with examining influences on the novel by literary traditions, as opposed to oral traditions.

By limiting my discussion of the influences on the development of the novel to only a few oral traditions, I hope to avoid the danger of going too far afield when attempting to account for orality in nineteenth-century novels by women. One could go as far back as the Middle Ages, or indeed to classical times as Doody does in *The True Story of the Novel*, to trace oral influences on the novel. In her work on literature by Medieval women, Régnier-Bohler points out that "the literature of feminine spirituality in the Middle Ages is indispensable for understanding the history of subjectivity" (479). The collaboration between illiterate female mystics and male scribes to produce works such as *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a classic example of the complex interplay between orality and literacy in literary history, and "marked an important step in the

development of the capacity for self-analysis and self-expression" (448); and it is subjectivity, self-analysis, and self-expression that, as Ian Watt has pointed out in *The Rise of the Novel*, is so vital to the novel.[1] As regards the development of the novel, mention may also be made of courtesy books of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Moers has argued, these books are "among the several kinds of writing that in confluence gave rise to modern fiction" (220) and "helped produce the novel of manners" (227). Not insignificantly, courtesy books were also written to be read aloud by parent to child and discussed between them (220). The influence of the oral traditions of folklore and fairy tales may also account for orality in nineteenth-century novels. In her article "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale," Karen Rowe provocatively suggests that fairy tales and folklore "foreshadow, indeed perhaps foster, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emergence of a passion for romantic fictions, particularly among women writers and readers" (71).

While the impact of these oral influences on the novel has largely been unexplored in literary criticism and deserves fuller discussion, in the interests of space I have limited my discussion to only two literary traditions with strong oral roots which played a role in the development of the novel – rhetoric and letter writing. As usual, I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of how my findings earlier in the chapter apply to selected nineteenth-century novels, in this case, *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Middlemarch*.

The Latin-based, academic, rhetorical tradition

In a well-known passage of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf points out that "Judith Shakespeare," Shakespeare's hypothetical sister, would have written nothing at all even if she had the same natural talent as her brother. One of the reasons for this difference is the education given boys but not girls in Shakespeare's time. However "small" Shakespeare's Latin was claimed to be, or however "lesse" his Greek, scholars have shown that he was thoroughly grounded in the Latin rhetorical tradition of his time. Walter Ong notes that this tradition arose from the ancient art of public speaking, of oral address, practised by the Greeks and Romans and formalized through a "vast and intricate terminology classifying hundreds of figures of speech in Greek and Latin" in order to teach, not writing, but public speaking skills (*Orality and Literacy*, 110).[2] Ong goes on to point out that for centuries rhetoric maintained its dominance in academia and literature, so that "into the nineteenth century most literary style throughout the west was formed by academic rhetoric, in one way or another, with one notable exception: the literary style of female authors" (111).

Before we can determine exactly how and why female authors were an exception with regard to rhetoric and literary style, we must examine how rhetoric interacted with Latin and vernacular languages. Ong argues that, after the development of rhetoric as an academic subject, the "second massive development in the west affecting the interaction of writing and orality was Learned Latin" (113), that is, academic/written Latin as opposed to vernacular/spoken Latin. Learned Latin, however, related to orality and literacy in paradoxical ways, in that it was a chirographically controlled language with no purely oral users, but was still rooted in the classical ideal of education which aimed to

produce not the effective writer but the orator, the public speaker. This kind of paradoxical relationship between orality and literacy made the transition from orality to literacy very complex and slow. Morris Croll, for example, views the interaction between more orally-based and more literacy-based forms of rhetoric in literary history as a "battle," and dates the emergence of a new, more conversational style of writing in English literature as early as 1600. Croll's views have been disputed by R.F. Jones, who dates the shift to a more oral style of writing slightly later, at 1660.[3] In *Orality and Literacy*, however, Ong points out that since classical times orality and literacy have engaged one another in complex ways, and that it was not until the Age of Romanticism, "when the thrust of rhetoric was diverted, definitively if not totally, from oral performance to writing" (109), that literacy finally achieved supremacy over orality. For reasons I will discuss below, I would argue that orality continued to be a major force in the literature of nineteenth-century England.

Tom's Latin lessons in *The Mill on the Floss* show quite clearly not only the sexism in the education of boys and girls in the nineteenth-century, but the interplay between orality and literacy during the period. In the first chapter of the section of the novel entitled "School Time," the narrator launches into a lengthy critique of Tom's education under the tutelage of Mr Stelling. It is clear by this point in the novel that Maggie has a greater facility with language than her brother; but Tom, being the male, is given the education in Latin and other subjects from which Maggie is barred, like almost all girls of her time. The experience for Tom, however, is less than satisfactory, and during his time at the Stellings' he is made painfully aware of his oral inadequacy: he has difficulty "enunciating a monosyllable in reply to Mr and Mrs Stelling" (202); he is

intimidated by Mr Stelling's "bass voice" (202), his "striking" preaching (203), and his "loud and impressive manner" (203); and fittingly, while at the Stellings' he experiences toothache, "the only malady to which Tom had ever been subject" (214). Tom's education, particularly in Latin, leaves him unsatisfied, or more precisely undernourished, as is illustrated when he "declines" the roast beef at table (204).

The chapter detailing Tom's education makes it clear that even a chirographic language like Latin involves orality, and that orality is the nexus of gender relations. When positing that by the Romantic Period literacy and print had gained supremacy over orality in English culture, Ong seems to lose sight of the fact that Latin was learned (and still is learned) largely by oral recitation. Eliot makes much of this fact in her description of Maggie's attempt to help Tom with his Latin lessons. When Tom struggles with his recitation, Maggie is bold to correct him by "opening her mouth and shaking her head," and then by providing a verbal prompt, to which Tom responds by demanding that she "'hold [her] tongue'" (218). After more of Tom's "stammering" and "whispered gabbling," Maggie attempts to correct him again and earns a "derisive laugh" from Tom for her troubles (219). As in the jam puff scene or the sweet cake scene discussed in the previous chapter, the dynamics of gender relations are portrayed in this novel in oral terms, in this case, in the *saying*: "'I told you girls couldn't learn Latin,'" Tom declares after Maggie's repeated corrections of his Latin, to which Maggie retorts, "'I can say as well as you can'" (219). Maggie is wrong here, not because her facility with language is any less than Tom's, but because she is a female and must be verbally stifled. "'[D]on't chatter. Let me go on,'" Tom commands (219); and, because he is the male and therefore the Latin lessons are his and not Maggie's, Tom does go on. Of course, Maggie is

generally allowed to speak, but what she says is carefully controlled by others. During the dialogue between Maggie and Tom just described, we are told that Mr Stelling likes what he calls Maggie's "prattle," but that he thinks she is like all girls: "They've a great deal of superficial cleverness," he informs Tom and Maggie, "but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow" (220-21). Tom's lessons teach him not only Latin, but how to speak and relate to females, as is further illustrated when at the end of his lesson with Maggie he echoes his tutor by telling her: "You'll never go far into anything" (221). Despite Maggie's facility with language, Tom's words have enormous power over her, for they carry the weight of the ideology that has made Latin a male right. Maggie is so "oppressed" by the "dreadful destiny" uttered by Tom that she has "no spirit for a retort" (221).

Tom's education signals his coming of age as well as the subjugation of the "hungry" heroine in *The Mill on the Floss*. Walter Ong has pointed out that the Latin schooling system, as it developed from the Middle Ages, was basically a male initiation rite. In *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, he shows how for well over a thousand years, Learned Latin was a sex-linked language, studied only by males, outside the home and in a kind of tribal setting, which made it in effect a male rite of passage (113-41).[4] Eliot subverts the sexist ideology behind this kind of education to a certain extent by making it clear that Maggie is more fit than Tom to receive a classical education: whereas Tom has a "congenital deficiency" in language (242), is "slow with his tongue" and "reads but poorly" (69), Maggie is a good reader, delights in the "peculiar tongue" of Latin sentences (217), but is tragically destined to live a "starved life" (529). Further undercutting the ideology governing the education of boys and girls in her century, Eliot

emphasizes that Tom's education ironically makes him "like a girl" (210, 212) because of the bruises to his manly pride inflicted by Mr Stelling's strict regimen of studies and the "feminine virtues" (212) Tom is exposed to because of Mrs Stelling's insistent domestic requirements. Nevertheless, Tom's education at the Stellings' reinforces the sexist values he has learned at home and helps him become more of a man, as is clear in the dialogue between him and Maggie during his Latin lesson, and in the conditioning of his "ear and tongue" to what the narrator ironically calls "educated" words and phrases (264). However deficient Tom's language skills prove to be, by the end of his Latin lesson with Maggie he has at least learned to put her in her proper place.

In *Middlemarch*, in the scene where Mrs Garth gives her daughter and son language lessons, George Eliot continues to show the interplay between orality and literacy and to comment on nineteenth-century modes of education. Again, the passage shows that the shift from orality to literacy is still under way: the purpose of these lessons is to teach Letty and Ben how "to speak and write correctly" (276); and (in lieu of textbooks) Mrs Garth relies on storytelling and verbal instruction and recitation. As in *The Mill on the Floss*, orality in this passage is portrayed as the nexus of gender relations: Mrs Garth's "grammatical fervour" in teaching her son and daughter is shown while she is baking, and she handles verbs and pronouns as deftly as her pastry (276). She is the typical female character discussed in previous chapters, who has a "solid matronly figure" (276) and is associated with food and garrulity or oral productivity. She regulates what her children eat as well as how they speak, telling Ben during the course of the lesson not to eat the apple peels reserved for pigs, and drawing his attention toward the lesson and away from the apple-puffs. As in Tom's Latin lesson, the interaction between

brother and sister in this grammar lesson reveals that Ben and Letty are learning gender roles as they learn language. Like Tom, Ben is a (stereo)typical boy who hates the sedentary learning of an abstract topic and identifies strongly with his father, as is shown in his preference for tales about heroes who are like Mr Garth. Ben is a typical "energetic young male" (276), and Mrs Garth has become accustomed to the "obstructive arguments of her male offspring" (277). Like Maggie, Letty is the outspoken young girl who must learn her place, attempting to correct the language of her brother and earning his contempt and her mother's censure for doing so. After her contentious request to "'let *me* tell,'" Letty is taught that it is wrong for a "daughter [to] behave so," and her "volubility" is quickly "repressed" (278). Like Maggie, Letty learns during the course of the language lesson that life is "a painful affair" for a girl (278). She must learn to be like her mother, who, for all her "grammatical fervour," never allows herself "over-hasty speech" with her husband, but "submits . . . without murmuring" (274). Thus, even though Mrs Garth has control of her children's education, and even though her "grammar and accent were above the town standard" (275) and are presumably being passed on to her teachable daughter, the subordinate status of the mother and the daughter is ultimately reinforced in the language lesson. Perhaps the main point of the passage is to illustrate that the mother can only teach her children what she has been taught – therefore, Latin is not a part of her children's education because, as a woman, Mrs Garth would of course not have been taught it herself.

George Eliot's descriptions of the education of boys and girls in the nineteenth century are just two illustrations of the problem with Walter Ong's proposition that from the Romantic Period the thrust of rhetoric was diverted from oral performance to writing.

This position tends to downplay the overwhelming evidence for the influence of rhetoric as an oral art, and of orality in general, on nineteenth-century literature. How closely connected an interest in speech was to the formal study of rhetoric in the nineteenth century is difficult to determine; but that rhetoric was still predominantly an oral art is reflected in the literature of the time. Indeed, the Romantic movement did not mark the end of the influence of orality, but may have helped in its resurgence, in that Romantic literature is to a great extent a reaction against the highly formalized conventions of literate discourse established by eighteenth-century neoclassicism. The extent to which rhetoric had become steeped in literacy in the eighteenth century is shown in Thomas Sheridan's attempt to revive the classical art of oratory in *Lectures on Elocution* (1759), which clearly separates spoken from written language, privileging the former as "living" and disparaging the latter as "dead" (cited in Thompson 520). Perhaps more successful in its contribution to the establishment of a new type of literature was the poetry of Robert Burns, whose use of Scottish oral and folk traditions marked a break from neoclassical literary conventions. From its beginnings, Romantic literature largely seems to privilege the spoken word over the written word, as Blake does in his introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, where he moves from the immediacy of an oral situation to the solitary, unreciprocating, sedentary act of writing and leaves the reader with the impression that writing guarantees neither audience nor joy.[5] As Stewart Crehan points out, William Blake's work also imitates oral performance in its combination of orthography and writing in that there is no "authentic" or "standard" text, so that each performance is unique. Blake's poetry is indeed acutely attuned to orality/aurality: who

can forget the haunting "'weep! 'weep! 'weep!" of the "Chimney Sweeper," or the hum of the children in "Holy Thursday," for example?

William Wordsworth formalized the emphasis on orality in Romantic literature in his *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800, 1802), where he explored "how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society" may be "adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure." Wordsworth subverts the neoclassical principle that the language of poetry must be elevated over standard speech by using a "selection of language really used by men" in his poetry, on the grounds that there can be no "essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." Though one may disagree about the possibility of capturing language "really spoken by men" in written form, and though writers like Byron and even Coleridge took issue with Wordsworth's statements about the importance of incorporating the patterns of speech in poetry, Wordsworth's poetic theory points out that the shift from orality to literacy was far from complete at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and that novelists such as Jane Austen had to look no further than their Romantic contemporaries for inspiration for their work.

Indeed, there is ample evidence that throughout the nineteenth century writers of all kinds of literature paid close attention to how their work sounded, not only because they expected it to be read aloud, but because they were interested and skilled in public speaking. Many nineteenth-century writers were equally well known for their skills in speaking as in writing. Legends arose about the conversational and recitational prowess of poets such as Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, Browning, and Tennyson, as well as prose writers such as Carlyle,[6] Newman, Ruskin, Huxley, and Arnold. The interest in public

speaking on the part of nineteenth-century audiences carried over to the way they read texts. As Jerome Bump has pointed out, the importance of sound and voice to nineteenth-century authors and readers is often underestimated by modern readers, who have a much more visual approach to reading. We have already seen how Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot studied Jane Austen's novels by reading them aloud, several times over. This exercise was not at all unusual for the time. Bump argues that reading aloud was so popular and auditory models of reading so pervasive in the nineteenth century that these models "can be discovered even in texts apparently completely dominated by visual paradigms, indeed even in the seminal text of 'spatiality,' *Marius the Epicurean*" (190). Bump makes a convincing case for the importance of aurality/orality in Walter Pater's text, as one could for the work of another nineteenth-century advocate of the visual arts, John Ruskin. No doubt Ruskin was highly adept at word-paintings that communicate his intense experience of the visual world; but at least part of the appeal of Ruskin's prose is that it makes claims for visual art "in the language his audience was accustomed to hear the evangelical clergy employ" (Landow 114), that his prose "sounds the note of the evangelical sermon" (117).

As writers on speech in the nineteenth-century novel have noted, there is an increasing, not a diminishing, interest in speech as the century progressed. Norman Page notes that in the work of Jane Austen, which stands between Johnsonian and Romantic literary ideals, there is a growing emphasis on orality, so that the style of her last completed novel, *Persuasion*, gives way to "speech-derived patterns" (*The Language of Jane Austen*, 101) and is more "relaxed and conversational" than eighteenth-century prose (49). Raymond Chapman argues that by the Victorian Age, there is a "growing

resolution by writers to come closer to representing what they and their readers really heard around them," and that "Concern for the relationship of written dialogue to actual conversation was often expressed, and became stronger after the middle of the century" (10). The oral performances and prose of Charles Dickens certainly contributed a great deal to the influence of orality on nineteenth-century literature. Dickens's prose has been aptly characterized as "a voice manipulating language" (Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, quoted in Watt, "Oral Dickens," 176). Dickens's addiction to declamatory reading of selections from his writing had much to do with his and his readers' interest in the theatre. In *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre*, Deborah Vlock notes the influence of the stage over Dickens's novels in their comic-dramatic idiom, that emphasized verbal delivery over content. Vlock has coined the term "imaginary text" to describe readers' experience of reading novels with characters and dialogue from the theatre resonating in their minds. One could also extend many of Vlock's arguments about the influence of the theatre on Dickens's novels to the poetry of Robert Browning, whose work has been described by critics as "colloquial" and "prosy," and whose innovative use of dramatic monologues derived from the fact that he began his career writing dialogue for actors.[7] Also attesting to the importance of orality in the nineteenth century were "elocution" contests, in which contestants would memorize the texts verbatim and recite them so that they would sound like extempore oral productions.[8] And the continuing influence of orality at the end of the nineteenth century is shown in Thomas Hardy's abhorrence of "the jeweled line," and his decision to follow Wordsworth and Robert Browning in his endeavour to write in a language close to that of speech.

All of this is to provide a context in which we can see the justice of Margaret Ann Doody's declaration that the novel "talks prose" (10). Coming of age in a century which was still very much characterized by orality, it is hardly surprising that the novel should have close ties with oral traditions. Of course, as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, it is necessary to go back a little further than the Romantic or Victorian Periods in order to trace factors which gave rise to the novel or influenced its style or form. As Ian Watt has pointed out, the challenge to eighteenth-century neoclassical literary conventions would hardly have been possible without philosophical shifts which occurred centuries before. The view that writers must follow highly formalized rules of literary decorum was challenged by philosophical theories begun with Decartes's "determination to accept nothing on trust . . . whereby the pursuit of truth is conceived of as a wholly individual matter, logically independent of the tradition of past thought" (Watt, *Rise*, 13). Watt goes on to explain that "literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel" because this genre asserts the value of individual experience and details of everyday life (13). This is not to say that novelists in the eighteenth century did not appeal to literary tradition. Watt cites Fielding's lament that critics were allowed to publish "without knowing one word of the ancient laws (that is, classical literary conventions)" (58)[9]; but the novel provided a way to publish for cultural outsiders, such as women and less educated men – that is, the novel was the product of writers less entrenched in the literary conventions of the time and more attuned to colloquial language and life than their highly literate counterparts in the mainstream of literature. This fact is also important when considering the impact which another literary development was to have on the novel – letter writing, which I will examine below.

I have gone a long way about answering the question posed at the beginning of this discussion – that is, to what extent was the literary style of female novelists affected by the Latin-based, academic, rhetorical tradition – only to come to the conclusion that this is perhaps an unanswerable question. Ong has argued that women writers "expressed themselves in a different, far less oratorical voice, which had a great deal to do with the rise of the novel" (112). This statement necessarily involves us in measuring difference, which, as I have argued, is an impossible task. The statement must also be discounted because, as we have seen, the writing of both female and male authors in the nineteenth century showed that they were highly attuned to orality, in the sense of speech, and in the broader sense. Moreover, the word "oratorical" in Ong's statement is used in the more modern sense of rhetoric as a literary discipline rather than in the sense which recognizes its oral roots, and assumes that rhetoric was associated more closely with literacy than with orality in the nineteenth century. However, as we have seen, the art of public speaking was not lost in the nineteenth century, and was reflected in the style and content of nineteenth-century literature.

Letter writing and the rise of the novel

As well as subverting eighteenth-century literary authority by affirming individual experience over literary traditionalism, the novel also broke with the neo-classical rhetorical doctrine that the domestic world was not appropriate matter for "high" literary attention. According to this doctrine, the novel could not be considered an important work of literature because it dealt with common, everyday matters, using the "plain style." As I have already pointed out, this meant that even though the novel was critically

disparaged it was nevertheless a genre which women and other cultural outsiders (less well-educated men) were free to use. The freedom which novelists enjoyed meant that in practising their craft they could use material taken from everyday life, as well as adapt techniques of writing already at their disposal. Besides the novel, a form of writing concerned with everyday life and readily engaged in by less well-educated persons was letter writing, practised by women since at least the seventeenth century.[10] Women were of course in an ideal situation to observe the everyday details of domestic life, and these details formed much of the matter of their letters, just as they were to form much of the material of the English "indoor" novel. Letter writing can be seen as a transitional genre in women's writing in the sense that it was one of the only forms of literature women could write in and did write in for centuries prior to the rise of the novel, without fear of chastisement.[11] The epistolary form can also be seen as transitional to the novel in the sense that both forms of literature had a more oral style: the waning power of neoclassical rules governing the content and form of published writing during the eighteenth century allowed women to write *and publish* in a vernacular close to the style in which they spoke without fear of critical censure, as they did in the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, and as in fact they had been doing in letter writing.

The epistolary form developed in part from what was a popular feminine pastime in the seventeenth century, "amateur" letter writing (Watt, *Rise*, 193). In an essay on Dorothy Osborne, Virginia Woolf notes the popularity of the form with women in the seventeenth century, and alludes to it as a transitional genre in writing by women: "Had she been born in 1827, Dorothy Osborne would have written novels; had she been born in 1527, she would never have written at all; but she was born in 1627, and at that date

though writing books was ridiculous for a woman there was nothing unseemly in writing a letter. And so by degrees the silence was broken . . ." (60). While the familiar letter was a classical genre, the form had been popularized by a series of letter-writing manuals written in the 1600s, providing correspondents with models of letters and style to be used in stock situations (Wurzbach xiii-xiv). Because of these models it was no longer necessary to receive formal rhetorical training in order to write acceptable, if informal, prose. Samuel Richardson had in fact been commissioned to compose a letter-writing manual, a project which apparently gave him the idea of using the epistolary form in *Pamela*. Moers suggests that it was probably Richardson's own status as a cultural outsider that led him to identify with women as a class (115); and Watt points out that the use of the letter-writing style permitted Richardson to "break with the traditional decorums of prose," a move which may have been deliberate on Richardson's part (*Rise*, 194). The continuing popularity of the epistolary style during the infancy of the English novel in the eighteenth century is shown in the success of Frances Burney's *Evelina*, and in Jane Austen's *Eleanor and Marianne*, the precursor to *Sense and Sensibility*. (I have discussed the possible reasons why Austen abandoned the epistolary form in Chapter 3).

Whether or not the epistolary novel was a conscious break from rhetorical conventions in Richardson's mind at the time he wrote *Pamela*, his followers were certainly conscious of its being so. "Daddy" Crisp, Fanny Burney's epistolary mentor when she was a girl, and after whom she modeled her heroine's guardian in *Evelina*, discouraged Burney from writing letters which are "correct, nicely grammatical, and run in smooth periods" (quoted in Moers 64). What he was referring to in the phrase "smooth periods" is otherwise known as the Ciceronian "rounded period," literally a

balanced sentence, but referring also to a writing style heavily influenced by rhetoric and literacy, and producing "circular" or syllogistic logic (Croll 68).[12] The "loose period," on the other hand, attempted "to express . . . the order in which an idea presented itself when it is first experienced," producing a more conversational writing style because it is "without premeditation" (224). In the epistolary style, as in the loose period, "everything was subordinated to the aim of expressing the ideas passing in the mind at the moment of writing" (Watt, *Rise*, 194). This writing style implies a spontaneous, unpractised quality: Burney's mentor went on to urge her to "dash away, whatever comes uppermost. . . . " (Moers 64). As Moers observes, this "dashaway" style, or what Richardson called the "familiar style," "though not the only one Fanny Burney used, undoubtedly became the medium of her best letters and her best fiction" (64).

Jane Austen approached letter writing in much the same way as proponents of the dashaway style – that is, she saw it as more of an oral style of writing than typical Johnsonian prose. In a letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen said that letter writing is "talking on paper," an imitation of "word of mouth";[13] and Page has pointed out that letters in Austen's fiction may be seen as substitutes for dialogue between characters who are separated by distance (*Jane Austen* 32). We have seen that critics have shown how Jane Austen's oral writing style has carried over into her novels: how Jane Austen's novels give way to speech-derived patterns (Page, *Jane Austen*, 101); how they constantly make an appeal to the mind's ear (119); how "Almost exclusively the characters (in her novels) define themselves in their speech" (Tanner 41); and how critics have long recognized that Austen's novels are "chameleon-like" in style in the way their characters' speech impresses itself on the narration (Lascelles 102). Norman Page is

perhaps the writer on speech in the novel one can least afford to ignore; he is probably the critic who has spent the most time on the orality of Austen's style, and he has given many examples of it, such as the way Elizabeth's speech in *Pride and Prejudice* recalls the conversational style of Austen's letters (*Jane Austen* 29), and the ways in which *Persuasion* is more conversational than eighteenth-century prose (49). However, while writing may imitate speaking and novel writing reflect the style of letter writing, it must be said that writing is of course different from speaking in many ways, and that the style of Austen's novels is vastly different from her letters. No matter how obvious these differences seem to be, it easy to lose sight of them in a discussion of the oral influences on literacy, as Norman Page seems to do at times. In *The Language of Jane Austen*, Page seems at times to view writing by and in Austen as a complement to, or almost simply an extension of, speech. A variation on this way of examining an author's writing is to assume that orality should have an equal degree of emphasis in all of her works. The fact that in Austen's novels there is a dialectic between orality and literacy, rather than a uniform emphasis on orality as opposed to literacy, may explain the colloquial tone of Austen's letters, and her ubiquitous interest in her letters in domestic affairs and the mundane details of everyday life; but the style and content of her letter writing do not carry over into her mature fiction – as opposed to her juvenilia, which contain a great deal of colloquial language – and she almost always critiques her characters' concern with mundane "things" in her novels.

I would argue that these differences between Austen's letters and novels suggest that Austen's writing style underwent a great shift early in her career as a writer, when she consciously decided to balance literacy-based conventions of writing with those

which are more orally-based, such as the epistolary convention. Austen eventually rejected the epistolary convention when drafting her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, in an attempt to balance neo-classical standards of writing with more oral styles of writing (see Chapter 3). In accordance with this shift, letters are a suspect genre in Austen's novels. As Ian Jack has noted, there are more letters by bad or minor characters in Austen's novels than by good or major characters, and each of the former letters reveals the moral and linguistic failings of its author (cited in Page, *Jane Austen*, 182-83). However, as we shall see below in the discussion of orality and literacy in nineteenth-century novels by women, the value of letter writing and literacy is problematized in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, as it is in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

Orality and Literacy in Sense and Sensibility, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, *and* Middlemarch

I have already shown in Chapter 3 how the oral quality of Jane Austen's novels influenced the style of writers such as Anne Brontë and George Eliot. We may see further similarities between these authors' novels in an analysis of the interplay between orality and literacy in their novels.

Letters, as Page points out, are central to *Sense and Sensibility* (*Jane Austen* 177). Certainly Page is also correct in pointing out a congruity between the letter-writing styles, the speech patterns, and the morality of given characters in the novel. As I have just argued, however, it is dangerous to see too much of a congruity between a character's speech and writing in Austen's work. In *Sense and Sensibility* this rule of congruity has

its degrees, and one major exception – Marianne; and as well as being fundamentally two different modes of discourse, the speech and writing of characters in Austen also have more subtle differences in form and effect.

The letters and speech of the morally flawed major characters in *Sense and Sensibility*, Willoughby and Lucy Steele, certainly reveal their moral character, but this revelation is more of a confirmation of what characters and readers already know by having listened to their speech; and while their letters are relatively ineffectual in terms of the ability to manipulate other characters, their speech never fails to do so. One may wonder, for example, why Elinor does not simply put Lucy Steele off and refuse to play along in her language games of hypocrisy and deceit. The answer seems to be that, while Lucy's horrible writing does little to change the behaviour of anyone, her speech has an insidious effect on other characters, even the supposedly sensible heroine of the novel. We may laugh at how easily Lucy ingratiates herself into the company and favour of the Middletons and Ferrars; but the fact is that she also manipulates Elinor into playing her language games. In her conversations with Lucy, Elinor is drawn into deceit as well, as when she endeavours "to convince Lucy that her heart was unwounded" (160); and because Marianne refuses to play Lucy's language games, "the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it" falls on Elinor (144). Indeed, in her conversations with Lucy Elinor shows that she is surprisingly adept at politic talk, at equivocation and the manipulation of words to "gain her own end" (162). Lucy's letters show her motives and character much more transparently than her speech; and while Mrs Jennings declares that Lucy's letter writing style is "pretty" (277), her letters have little effect on anyone, other than to set all who read them against her (all but the morally obtuse Mrs Jennings).

Elinor has little trouble concluding what is "the writer's real design" after reading Lucy's first letter (277), written after her engagement to Edward is revealed; and Lucy's second letter, written after her marriage to Robert, only confirms what the Dashwoods and Edward have so long known about her character. We hear very little about how Lucy won the affections of the sensible Edward. We can speculate with some degree of certainty, however, that like Elinor, Edward was taken in by the oral skill of his temptress; for Edward says he was disabused of his attachment to Lucy only when he had to "blush over the pages of her writing" (355).

Willoughby's speech and letter writing function in much the same way as Lucy's. In Elinor's mind, the letter to Marianne ending her relationship with Willoughby proclaims "its writer to be deep in hardened villainy" (196) – that is, until Willoughby gets a chance to defend himself to Elinor in person. Like Lucy's speech, Willoughby's oral defence of himself in Chapter 44 has a strange impact on Elinor, and her reaction to it shows she is hardly a better judge of him than Marianne.[14] The influence of Willoughby's speech over Elinor, which continues long after their conversation, makes this normally sensible heroine oblivious to his sentimental and manipulative justification of his actions. This lack of judgment on Elinor's part is all the more strange because she has already had Willoughby's character revealed to her by Colonel Brandon's story of the two Elizas. But then, unlike Willoughby, Brandon is "a very awkward narrator" (214).

Marianne is another character who disproves the rule of congruity between a character's speech and writing in Austen's work. As we have seen, Marianne literally and figuratively exposes herself when writing to Willoughby, as when she writes to him half dressed in front of a window; but while Marianne shows in her speaking that she is

the heroine with seemingly all the sensibility, her letters prove to be sensible, unsentimental, and eloquent. Like her mother, who fires off important letters at an impulse (57), Marianne is an "eager" and "rapid" writer (176); but her writing is more economical and succinct than the writing style implied by Mrs Dashwood's "long letters" (221).[15] This portrayal of the style and content of Marianne's letters may be yet another subtle affirmation of Marianne's character, an approbation by the author that, as I have argued in Chapter 3, is otherwise shown through indirect comparisons in the novel between Marianne's speech and that of others.

Marianne seems to be the best writer in the novel, as her letter writing is in fact in stark contrast to all the other writing which is mentioned in the text. Only Lucy's and Willoughby's letters are given verbatim, and Marianne's letters are of course far superior to theirs in the force of their style and content. Willoughby's letter is in fact "servilely" copied from his wife's dictation; and he has in other instances proved that he is a poor or reluctant writer, as when he claims he tried to write in response to Marianne's notes, but "could not frame a sentence" (320). There is plenty of mention made in the novel of other writing, of ambiguous letters, reluctant writers, and pre-empted writing. Sir John is always picking up and delivering the Dashwoods' mail, but mention of him writing is made only once, when by letter he invites the Dashwoods to rent Barton Cottage. Nancy Steele is a reluctant letter writer (274). Mr Palmer "can't bear writing" (137). John Dashwood is shown at one point to be "thinking about writing a letter" (260). Elinor is just about to write Edward about Colonel Brandon's offer of a curacy when Edward walks into the room (286). We read of Elinor writing at other points in the text, but never do we get a chance to see her letters and judge their quality, as we do Marianne's; and

while good writing comes easily to Marianne, even when she is very distraught – as she certainly is when composing her last letter to Willoughby (193) – Elinor is at various times shown struggling with writing, as when she prepares to write a letter to Edward or when she faces the "hardship of the task" of writing her mother about Marianne's health (213). As for the ambiguity of written words, Marianne's letters to Willoughby are widely and incorrectly considered to be proof of their engagement. Their correspondence remains a source of uncertainty for Elinor as she attempts to judge Willoughby's actions toward her sister; and it remains so even after the reception of Willoughby's letter ending his relationship with Marianne, a letter which proclaims "its writer to be deep in hardened villainy" (196) only until Elinor remembers that Marianne and Willoughby's engagement was never proved. This same kind of uncertainty is created when on more than one occasion Lucy refers to Edward's letters as proof of his love for her (155, 169), and when Elinor, the sensible and supposedly discerning heroine, believes her. As well, the mysterious letter that arrives for Colonel Brandon on the morning of the planned excursion to Whitwell remains a source of curiosity for both characters and readers for much of the novel.

These examples show not only the hardship and ambiguity of writing, but the problem inherent in all discourse, both written and oral – the fact that sometimes signs do not signify, or signify something other than the truth; and this problem of language includes the question how to "read" both oral and written discourse. We have seen how the speech of the villains in *Sense and Sensibility* draws in and deceives even the sensible Elinor and Edward, and how there is a great deal of epistemological uncertainty raised by certain letters in the novel. The uncertainty about Willoughby's letter and the one

received by Colonel Brandon is not removed until after Colonel Brandon's rambling story of the two Elizas – that is, speaking clarifies the epistemological uncertainty caused by writing; but the efficacy of oral discourse is problematized in Elinor's surprising reaction to Willoughby's defense of himself. The uncertainty occasioned by written discourse in *Sense and Sensibility* finds a corollary in the motif of perception/sight in the novel in the difficulty characters (and readers) have, for example, with reading emblems and pictures. Austen gives us a kind of parody of the endeavour to read signs in Mrs Jennings's and Sir John's foolish and prolonged attempt to decipher the significance of the letter "F." Though the attempt of these characters to read the mysterious sign is a source of discomfort for the heroines of the novel and of humour if not ridicule for the reader, the heroines and the reader are implicated in the same kind of activity in, for example, seeking to determine the significance of the locks of hair carried by both Edward and Willoughby, and of the picture of Edward in Lucy's locket. If readers determine that these emblems signify Edward loves Lucy and Willoughby loves Marianne, they would of course be wrong – but they would be in good company; for both the sentimental and the sensible heroines of the novel are fooled by the signs. In her description of Mrs Jennings's and Sir John's attempt to decipher signs, Austen may thus be commenting on the difficulty, and even to some extent the absurdity, of the larger enterprise of reading signs in which we are all engaged.

In a discussion of the importance of orality in nineteenth-century novels, it is tempting to conclude that orality is privileged over literacy in these texts, especially since I have argued that orality was alive and well throughout the nineteenth century. As we

have seen in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, however, the question of whether orality is privileged over literacy, or vice versa, is perhaps wrongheaded, as Austen seems to be arguing that both oral and written discourse are far from perfect forms of signification, that both speaking and writing are subject to abuse.[16] Although at times orality is apparently privileged over literacy in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë seems to come to the same conclusion as Austen about the shortcomings of language.

The dialectic between orality and literacy infuses the whole of Brontë's novel, as the critical debate over the efficacy of the device of the diary has shown. George Moore came down clearly on the side of preserving a more oral quality in the narrative of the novel when he wrote to Anne:

> You must not let your heroine give up her diary to the young farmer . . . Your heroine must tell the young farmer her story, and an entrancing scene you will make of the telling . . . The presence of your heroine, her voice, her gestures, the questions that would arise and the answers that would be given . . . would preserve the atmosphere of a passionate love story. (Gérin 14)

While modern critics such as Winifred Gérin agree with Moore in the same unequivocal terms, Moore's comments illustrate the continuing concern with orality in the nineteenth century: Moore's primary complaint is that the diary takes the immediacy of *telling* away from the narrative, though he oddly anticipates Hollywood's method of storytelling when he justifies his complaint by an appeal for the preservation of a passionate love story in *The Tenant*, as if this is the core of the novel.

It is difficult to see Brontë's choice of the diary as opposed to a dialogue between Helen and Gilbert to tell Helen's story, as a move away from telling and a concession to more chirographic methods of discourse. Helen's diary is, within the fictional world of the novel, meant for no one else to read; but of course in the real world of Brontë's

readership the author of the novel has an intended audience, and in both Helen's and Gilbert's narratives this audience is treated primarily as *listeners*: Gilbert, for example, in a variation of the "dear reader" motif in nineteenth-century fiction, at times addresses his audience directly, establishing a kind of dialogue with the reader[17] and assuming an immediacy that seems strange for modern readers immersed in a more chirographic culture; and in both Gilbert's and Helen's narration there are plenty of vivid passages of dialogue to make up for any supposed deficiency of immediacy and telling caused by the diary. Brontë makes it clear, furthermore, that handing over the diary is Helen's only way to make her story known to Gilbert, as she gives him the diary only after he has refused to listen to her tell her story.

Helen's diary is portrayed not only as a response to the failure of men to listen to a woman's speech, but also as the next best thing to talking. About Helen's diary Arthur says disdainfully but with more truth than he intends: ". . . women must be babbling – if they haven't a friend to talk to, they must whisper their secrets to the fishes, or write them on sand or something" (372). Arthur's comment is true of both women and men – in order to have some sense of who we are, we must express ourselves, even if no one is listening except ourselves. It is important to Helen that her diary is a "silent" recipient to whom she can tell the thoughts and feelings "gloomily cloistered within my own mind," as she puts it (256). Helen views her diary as an interlocutor, a "confidential friend into whose ear I might pour forth the overflowings of my heart . . . [I]f I keep it close, it cannot tell again" (170). Her description of the diary recalls one of the diary entries of another, real writer, Frances Burney, whose "incessant scribbling," as she called it, was an important part of her development as a person and as an author. Just as Helen calls

her diary a silent interlocutor, Burney called her diary "Nobody": "To Nobody I can be wholly unreserved," she wrote, "to Nobody can I reveal every thought, every wish of my heart, with the most unlimited confidence . . ." (quoted in Epstein 6). It seems as though Burney's sense of "nobodiness" in her diary, like Helen's sense of silent anonymity, inspired her writing and helped form her identity by allowing her to define herself as a subject in the subjective world of writing. The fact that there is no one who will truly listen to Helen's talking leads her to write her diary; and the fact that women were not listened to in English society is one of the primary reasons for the influx of women's writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: deprived of a strong "voice," either literary or oral, women sought some mode of expression in the genres of letter writing or, as in Helen's case, autobiographical memoir – two genres that women could increasingly write and publish without fear of critical censure, that were more oral in style than other forms of literature, and that contributed significantly to the rise of the novel by emphasizing individuality and subjectivity. It is therefore fitting that Anne Brontë should have chosen the diary form to tell Helen's story; for Helen's diary no doubt helps her express who she is and allows her to form a strong sense of herself in relation to society. Her writing is also a recourse to address the pain suffered by listening to the speech of others, as is illustrated when, in response to Annabella's "loquacious vivacity" and "malicious pertinacity," Helen secretly writes a note to her husband's mistress that makes the recipient "bite her lip" (320).

This incident is unusual in that Helen's writing is mostly intended not to be read by others; for to the extent that her diary is a reflection of herself, reading it is a kind of violation of its writer. Helen's opening up her diary for Gilbert is a signal that she would

be willing at some time in the future to pursue a more than platonic relationship with him, to open herself up to him emotionally and sexually. This is why it is a matter of "honour" that Gilbert not "breathe a word" of her diary to anyone (146), and why Gilbert has such a "longing" to "gaze" at Helen's writing (437). Indeed, there is something voyeuristic, selfish, and crude about Gilbert's desire to read Helen's writing: he gloats over the "prize" of Helen's diary (147); and when Helen is unwilling to give him the parts of her diary that talk about him, he confesses that he "would have given much to see it all" (401). As in *Sense and Sensibility*, there is a motif of sight/gazing in *The Tenant* that is perhaps associated with the temporal-spatial dialectic inherent in the interplay between orality and literacy. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the subjection of women in history has been reflected in the objectification of women through art, and in the limitation of her discourse and movements, the "placing" of her, according to rules of property and propriety. In *The Tenant* these notions of propriety are inverted; for it is objectifying the woman, placing her in a subordinate role and marginalizing her writing, that makes gazing upon and reading Helen's diary improper. Just as Helen fears being found out or "placed" at Wildfell Hall, so she fears the violation of herself as a subject that results from improperly reading her writing. Part of the abuse that Helen suffers from Arthur is his showing his friends her open and affectionate letters, and his confiscating her diary: "I could not bear the idea of his amusing himself over my secret thoughts and recollections," she says after the confiscation. "I would sooner burn [the diary] than he should read what I had written . . ." (373). Brontë's comments on the improper reading of Helen's diary may show how she wants her audience to read her novel – not with titillation or censoriousness over Helen's openness about her private life,

but with an acknowledgment of Helen's right to be her own person and live how and where she wants.

The problem of reading in *The Tenant* is associated with the larger question that the novel raises about the efficacy of both writing and speaking. The efficacy of writing is shown not only in the power of Helen's diary, but in smaller details in the novel, such as the rapprochement achieved between Milicent and her husband when Helen shows Hattersley some of Milicent's letters to Helen. The importance of speech is shown in Helen's response to Gilbert's unspoken notion that Frederick is her lover: "'You should have come to me . . . and heard what I had to say in my own justification. . . . You should have told me all – no matter *how* bitterly – It would have been better than this silence" (145). Perhaps speech would have been better than silence in this case; but if the miscommunication which occurs between Gilbert and Helen is any indication of the efficacy of language, perhaps speech would not have been much better than silence. What Gilbert needs to do in order for their relationship to work is to shut up and read Helen's diary. Brontë seems to be saying, however, that language in general is flawed – or perhaps more precisely that the users of language are flawed. This is shown in Gilbert's misreading the significance of Frederick's name on one of Helen's books, and the evidence of his eyes and ears when he eavesdrops on Frederick and Helen. Gilbert's inability to speak also almost costs him his relationship with Helen again in their meeting after the death of Arthur. Speech cannot be trusted at times, as when Helen cannot believe her husband's "oaths and promises" not to take her son away from her, and must coerce him into signing a written agreement to that effect (430). Such a document, however, would probably not have held up in court, since the notion that both wife and

child were practically the property of the husband and father was firmly entrenched in the laws of Helen's day. In other words, one of the reasons for the inefficacy of language and of communication between the sexes is the flawed nature of a society's codified rules that govern the relationship between a man and a woman, and that objectify the woman.

The inadequacy of language, both spoken and written, is also a theme in *Middlemarch*.[18] As in *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the efficacy of writing in Eliot's novel is questioned. Mr Brooke's "fluent" pen (894) is indicative not of his writing skill, but of his lack of intelligence. Mr Bulstrode's letter to Mr Featherstone on behalf of Fred is highly equivocal and indicative of the writer's hypocritical nature. And Rosamond's letter to Lydgate's uncle distances Lydgate even further from his relatives and undermines the little affection and respect left between him and his wife. There is a great deal of irony attached in *Middlemarch* to learned writing, or to writing that attempts too much, as Casaubon's "Key to all Mythologies" clearly illustrates. Casaubon's and Featherstone's wills are yet two more examples of the inadequacy of writing. We would be mistaken, though, if we thought that Eliot's comments on the inadequacy of writing extended only to her "bad" characters; for Eliot shows the questionable writing competency of even her "good" characters: Dorothea writes only infrequently, as when she sends a brief note to Mr Bulstrode regarding Lydgate's loan; and the most the narrator can say about Will's journalistic writing is that it is "not worse" than others' (501). Eliot points out that sometimes disastrous events can be caused by even the smallest bit of writing, as in the portrayal of the consequences that follow upon Raffles's chance discovery of a small piece of paper with Bulstrode's name

on it. It is fitting therefore that Eliot's "Finale" to what is arguably the greatest novel in the English language should include ironic comments on the praise attendant on writing, and on the entire enterprise of writing and publishing: neither Fred's nor Mary's book wins its author praise; and Lydgate's treatise on gout is a rather dubious achievement in what had once been a promising career.

Speech seems to fare no better in *Middlemarch*. As Barbara Hardy has pointed out, dialogue in *Middlemarch* "may bring no more than a momentary conjunction" between characters (144). Mrs Bulstrode, for example, never even begins to know her husband; and while Rosamond is deeply affected by Dorothea's talk with her and keeps it in "religious remembrance" throughout her life (893), the talk never leads to a moral transformation in Rosamond's life. Indeed, despite the ardour of Dorothea's moral character, her speech seems to have little effect on the moral life of anyone in Middlemarch. Thus, while Stwertka has convincingly argued that "the immediacy of talk is given preference in *Middlemarch* to the considered spontaneity of writing" (180), we have seen that in the interplay between orality and literacy in literary history it is not so easy to separate written from spoken discourse, and that both speech and writing to some extent compromise true communication. The connection between speech and writing in *Middlemarch* is seen when problems caused by writing extend inevitably to speech: we are told, for example, that Casaubon's will puts an end to Will and Dorothea's "young delight in speaking" (591). The influence of speech on writing is seen when in one passage Dorothea's talk makes it physically impossible for Casaubon to write: in response to Dorothea's speaking about Will, Casaubon's hand trembles so much that he can barely use his pen (317). As regards the relative merits of oral and written discourse,

Lydgate's comments on writing and speaking are similar to those of Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*. When contemplating the prospect of writing to Edward about Colonel Brandon's offer of the curacy, Elinor concludes that "however difficult it might be to express herself properly by letter, it was at least preferable to giving the information by word of mouth" (286). Speaking, it is implied, is more painful in certain circumstances than writing because of the immediacy of talk; but "this greatest exertion of all" (286) is not spared Elinor as Edward walks into the room before she has a chance to put pen to paper. The context of Lydgate's thoughts on speech and writing is his consideration of whether to write Bulstrode requesting a loan, or to talk to him. Lydgate determines that writing is less "circuitous" than talk, but decides to talk to Bulstrode anyway because of the immediacy offered by a dialogue: "I could make a retreat before any signs of disinclination," he thinks (732). Because Lydgate's association with Bulstrode wrongfully implicates him in the death of Raffles, the result of this meeting turns out to be disastrous. And perhaps this outcome is a measurement of the extent of the narrator's cynicism about human communication. When Lydgate attempts to extricate himself from the results of his meeting with Bulstrode by the help of Dorothea's loan, he wonders again whether to speak or write, this time a note of thanks to the heroine. He decides to write, not because he has found writing to be any better a means of communication than speaking, but because "writing is less unsatisfactory than speech" in that "one does not at least *hear* how inadequate the words are" (849).

This comment is interesting not only in its cynicism about language, but in Lydgate's inability to hear how his prose sounds – an inability that is unusual because, as we have seen, he lives in an age in which oral models of reading were still quite

prevalent. Lydgate's detachment from orality, however, is typical of the bookish and anti-social men in several of the novels we have examined. In *Jane Eyre*, for example, St John's preference for books over social interaction extends to the table, where he eats little but reads much. He is thin and looks "wasted" (382), but continues to deny his "insatiate yearnings" (357) by preparing himself for missionary work over "crabbed oriental scrolls" (401). Constantly associated with literacy, he keeps up a regular correspondence even while facing hardship and sickness in India. Likewise, Frederick Lawrence is closely associated with literacy in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Helen's reticent and highly literate brother prefers to live a "secluded" and "self-contained" life (61); and if he is listless when reading (413) and has "considerable difficulty in writing" (415), it is only due to the illness brought on by Gilbert's beating, which, as we have seen, is an oral as well as a physical attack. Lawrence never forgives Gilbert, the spoiled oral character, for the beating, and attempts to keep Helen and Gilbert apart by his reticence about Helen's feelings for Gilbert, and by withholding her letters. He does give Gilbert some of Helen's letters, always "without remark" (452), because he fears that Gilbert is capable of dragging the information in the letters out of him "morsel by morsel" (444), and because simply handing them over is "so much less trouble than to tell . . . their contents" (444).

The reticence of these highly literate characters may be explained by Jerome Bump's point that oral performance tends to stimulate "external dialogue," while written words tend to stimulate only "internal dialogue" (204). Like Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, St John and Frederick "feed too much on the inward sources" (40) and have a tendency to speak as they write, as though "reading according to the rubric" (229). Because they live

so much within books and within their own minds, they often cannot acknowledge an "equivalent center of self" (243), so that, like Casaubon's contrapuntal way of talking, their speech is often at odds with others'. Indeed, the characteristic that seems to bother Casaubon most about Dorothea is that her voice gives "loud emphatic iteration" to the "muffled suggestions" which remain in his own mind (232), that she feels "impelled to have the argument aloud, which she had been having with her own mind" (254). In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong's description of the differences between oral and literate discourse may explain why characters closely associated with literacy are ultimately isolated from their fellow person:

> Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer. . . . A sound-dominated verbal economy is consonant with aggregative (harmonizing) tendencies rather than with analytic, dissecting tendencies (which would come with the inscribed, visualized word: vision is a dissecting sense). (72, 73-74)

Perhaps Ong's comments also explain why Lydgate, who is not only bookish but has little care for how he is seen by others in his community, is accused of dissecting people, even before they are dead.

In the same discussion of the differences between orality and literacy just quoted, Ong makes a comment that strikes close to the heart of novel writing and reading – subjectivity and interiority. I have argued that it is the highly literate characters in novels who live mostly inside their heads; but this is not to say that orality precludes interiority. As Ong argues, sound has a unique relationship to interiority as compared with the rest of the senses:

> This relationship is important because of the interiority of human consciousness and of human communication itself. . . . Hearing can register interiority without violating it. . . . Sounds all register the interior structures of whatever it is that produces them. . . . Above all, the human voice comes from inside the human organism which provides the voice's resonances. (71-72)

It is perhaps this relationship between voice and interiority that explains the highly complex interplay between orality and literacy in history and in nineteenth-century novels by women. If orality is associated with interiority, so too is literacy; for literacy requires self-reflection and analysis, two qualities which are uniquely human and which, as we have seen in Helen Huntingdon's diary, are concerned with interiority. And if orality is associated with the aggregative impulse to put the subject together, literacy is associated with the equally important task of distancing oneself from the subject and analyzing it objectively. It is arguably both of these traits that make interiority possible. It is the interplay of orality and literacy, therefore, that makes the novel possible.

The relationship between voice and that which is inside a human being may also explain women novelists' preoccupation with orality in the nineteenth century; for the novel and other literary genres with oral roots, such as letter writing and autobiography, are above all concerned with subjectivity and interiority. Women writing in these genres found a "voice" and a sense of themselves that was otherwise denied them by society. And if this voice was not always clear, it perhaps had as much to do with the fact that women's writing and speaking were denigrated, as with the fact that, as Austen, Brontë, and Eliot all argue, language itself is flawed.

Notes

Chapter 5

1. Régnier-Bohler notes that in works by female mystics, "the subject . . . is king" (479), and that scribes, "as outside observers, vouched for the authenticity" of the mystic's words, "helping women skirt the danger they would have courted had they acted too independently" (448). The question remains unresolved as to the extent to which a woman's oral story was faithfully translated into writing and influenced the style of the scribe, making the writing more "oral" according to the classifications established by Ong in *Orality and Literacy* (38-57); but in the case of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, both Régnier-Bohler and Windeatt argue that Margery's oral style impressed itself greatly on the writing style of the scribe.
2. The Greek for *rhetor* is from the same root as the Latin *orator* and means public speaker. Rhetoric, as Ong points out, became a subject of "universal and obsessive interest" in Europe from classical antiquity into the Age of Enlightenment, providing "a rationale for effective and often showy oral performance" (*Orality and Literacy*, 109). Thus, while rhetoric now usually means simply the study of how to write effectively, for many centuries it was primarily an oral discipline.
3. Jones's views are summarized in Robert Adolph's *The Rise of Modern Prose Style*, 4-5, 19-20.

4. Ong points out that the learning of Latin involved not only isolation from the family and the achievement of identity in a totally male group (the school), but also the learning of a body of relatively abstract tribal lore inaccessible to those outside the group. Although Tom Tulliver does not attend an all-boys school, his education otherwise corresponds with the kind described by Ong.

5. This apparent privileging in Romantic literature of orality over literacy, of the "strange power of speech," as Coleridge puts it, is of course paradoxical in what is after all a *literary* movement. This interplay between orality and literacy also finds a corollary in the dialectic between temporality/aurality/orality and spatiality/sight which we have seen in some of Keats's *Odes*. I would argue that the continuing influence of orality in the nineteenth century is shown by the fact that this dialectic carries well into the nineteenth century, in, for example, literature emphasizing the morbidity of the gaze, such as Browning's "My Last Duchess" or Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott"; in the novelistic sin of food as spectacle, which has been discussed in Chapter 4; and in the restriction of women's speech and movement, which has also been discussed in previous chapters. The dialectic between orality/aurality and sight/spatiality comes to the fore in Pre-Raphaelite paintings in which a woman is shown gazing wistfully at nothing in particular. As Jerome Bump suggests, the women in these works of art may be *listening* more than *looking* (206).

6. Carlyle's oral style in *Sartor Resartus* contributes to his thesis that language, like clothes, limits us and becomes worn out. Carlyle relies on a number of tropes directly or indirectly related to orality in his text to make his argument, such as

the famous image of Dutch milk cows "grazing deliberately with jackets and petticoats . . . in the meadows of Gouda," or his equating utilitarian notions of morality with "Cookery."

7. If one was inclined to explore the connection between an author's work and his life (which is not always a fruitful endeavour), it would be interesting to see how many nineteenth-century authors fit into a kind of oral personality type that seems to describe Robert Browning so well. As a widower and after his return to London, at any rate, Browning developed a reputation for being a hearty diner-out, with a fondness for talking loudly and emphatically about many topics. Gerard Manley Hopkins once said of Browning that he was like "a man bouncing up from table with his mouth full of bread and cheese and saying that he meant to stand no blasted nonsense."

8. Cited in Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 115. Ong mentions a number of other examples of what he argues is only residual orality in the nineteenth century, such as the famous *McGuffey's Readers* published in the United States, which were to improve not reading for comprehension, but oral, declamatory reading (115-16). One of the modern examples Ong gives of residual orality is the defense of the doctoral dissertation.

9. In his fiction Fielding shows that he is well aware of these rhetorical laws; for example, in *Joseph Andrews* he devotes an entire chapter to the question "Of Divisions in Authors," referring to the rhetorical tradition of the dilation of discourse through "partition" or rhetorical division. Fielding notes that "common readers imagine, that by this art of dividing, we mean only to swell our works to a

much larger bulk than they would otherwise be extended to" (99). In Chapters 2 and 3 I examined the connections between rhetorical strategies such as divisions, and the "dilated" woman who is constricted by boundaries of one kind or another in literature.

10. Many of the English women prose writers of the seventeenth century are known for their correspondence, including Lady Brilliana Harley; Margaret Lucas Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle; Katherine Fowler Philips; Dorothy Osborne (Temple); Aphra Behn; and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Most of their letters were unpublished, due to the unseemliness of a woman publishing at that time. Of the writers just mentioned, only Cavendish was not coy about publishing, which is certainly one of the reasons she was called "Mad Madge" by her contemporaries and singled out for criticism in Pope's *The Dunciad.*

11. The other major prose writing practised by English women prior to the rise of the novel was the autobiography or memoir. This genre may also be seen as transitional to the novel in that it asserts "the primacy of individual experience" (Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 15). Some of the earliest novels, those of Defoe, for example, subordinate the plot "to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir" (15). In its generally more conversational style and closeness to colloquial life and language, autobiography is also closely associated with orality. We have seen how both subjectivity and orality are prominent in the earliest extant autobiography in English literature, *The Book of Margery Kempe*; and it would be interesting if space permitted to examine orality in autobiography in more detail.

12. Mary Wollstonecraft consciously rejects the classical Ciceronian style in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, opting for what was called the "plain style": "I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style. . . . for wishing rather to persuade by the force of my argument than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods . . ." (10). There has been considerable debate about the exact reasons for the transition to the "plain style" and when it occurred, reflecting the complex interplay between orality and literacy which we have already seen with regard to the historical development of rhetoric as a discipline.

13. Letter to Cassandra, dated 3 January, 1801. Quoted in Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen*, 169, and *Speech in the English Novel*, 46.

14. Derrida would undoubtedly posit that the effect Willoughby's speech has on Elinor is illustrative of the "metaphysics of presence" in Western literature. As I have argued in Chapter 1, however, this interpretation does not account for the complexity of the interaction between orality and literacy in Western history, a complexity which I have attempted to illustrate earlier in the present chapter.

15. Although the name Dashwood is undoubtedly a part of the novelistic convention of using dashes for fictional names and places (e.g. Mr –, –shire), in connection with Marianne's "eager" letter writing it may also be an allusion to the "dashaway" or "familiar" style of writing popular in epistolary novels. The heroines' family name may also have other significance, judging from the number of times dashes occur in the novel. Dashes when recording a character's speech are common in the novel, and usually signify a difficulty in speaking, as is the

case when either heroine is anxious or upset or confused. For example, as is typical of the effect that Lucy's or Willoughby's speech has on characters in the novel, the sensible Elinor shows a great deal of confusion when she tries to judge the trustworthiness of Willoughby's sly and manipulative speech in defense of himself in Chapter 44. When asked by Willoughby whether his talk has "explained away" any part of his guilt, the normally cogent heroine's response is halting (there are four dashes in as many lines) and contradictory: she says he has eradicated his guilt "'a little,'" then says that he has proved his heart is "'much less'" wicked than she previously thought (323). The frequent dashes in the novel are thus illustrative of the theme of the problem of language and "reading," a topic which I will discuss below.

16. There has been considerable and sometimes acrimonious critical debate over the last twenty years or so concerning Austen's view of the efficacy of language, with arguments about Austen's portrayal of the inefficacy of language becoming more common with the rise of poststructural criticism. Although I tend to side with those critics who hold that Austen is rather pessimistic about language, I would acknowledge that the danger of this critical opinion is its tendency at times to lose sight of the fact that Austen lived in the nineteenth century and therefore also shared to some extent her contemporaries' optimism about the ability of language ultimately to convey meaning.

17. Because Gilbert's fictional correspondent, Halford, is treated as an interlocutor as much as a reader, Gilbert's letters also establish a kind of dialogue with Brontë's audience. In Chapter 8, for example, both the fictional and the real audience is

brought into a kind of dialogue with Gilbert when he anticipates Halford's response to one of his statements by stating the question he thinks his reader is asking, and then answering it (92).

18. I am aware of the irony of discussing the theme of the inadequacy of language in what is arguably the best novel in the English language. As I have already acknowledged, one must be careful not to read one's own ideas about language into a nineteenth-century text – as much as this is possible, at any rate. On the other hand, we shouldn't assume that because a book was written in the nineteenth century, it has no "modern" things to say about the nature of language.

Conclusion

My overarching thesis in this discussion of orality and gender is that the texts of certain nineteenth-century female novelists are, to varying degrees, subversive of existing social norms, and that their treatment of orality is an important strategy in this subversion; yet a preoccupation with orality in nineteenth-century texts by women is not only illustrative of social injustice, but on a more basic level and apart from issues of gender, an indication of our own craving needs as human beings. Orality reflects who we are as human beings, our complex and sometimes contradictory needs and desires, and how we as individuals negotiate with our world in order to satisfy these needs and desires. I have broadened my discussion of orality to include texts by male authors and works before the nineteenth century in order to show that, because of its mirroring of the complexity of human nature, orality is a universal concern in literature. I have also argued that because of its focus on the way the individual relates to his or her environment, the genre of literature most concerned with orality is the novel. Moreover, because of their status as cultural outsiders or "boundary stalkers," women novelists of the nineteenth century were paradoxically in a unique position to "work (in) the in-between," to question the bipolar classification of men's and women's nature and roles which derived from the ideology that saw women more as types than as human beings. In their employment of oral tropes, nineteenth-century women novelists such as Jane Austen, Anne Brontë, and George Eliot captured the complexity not only of women, but of human beings in general, and of how humans relate to the world.

While I have often surrendered to the oral impulse to "get it all in" and be encyclopedic in my discussion of orality in nineteenth-century novels, there are other topics that I have only had time to touch on briefly, and which deserve further attention in literary criticism. Gossip is an example of such a topic. Although Patricia Meyer Spacks has written an excellent book-length study of gossip in the novel, her work does not focus specifically on gossip as an aspect of orality. George Eliot goes out of her way to connect gossip with other oral activities. After the news of Bulstrode's former life goes public in *Middlemarch*, for example, Eliot says that the gossip "required dinners to feed it" (774). In this and other novels by women, gossip seems to illustrate the ambiguous status of women in culture in general, and of women's speaking in particular. On the one hand, gossip is sometimes the only way women can exert any degree of influence in society. On the other hand, it can be a very powerful and effective mode of social control over the individual. As Ruth Borker puts it, gossip is "constant verbal surveillance" (36), and there is no other way to describe what often goes on in the very public lives of the characters, both female and male, in nineteenth-century novels. Gossip, then, is not simply "idle talk"; it is a source of social power and a means of social assimilation which the individual resists at her peril. At the same time, gossip opposes social hierarchy and acts as an economic and social leveler – it is after all, as Eliot says in *Middlemarch*, "free of expense" (770). Most importantly, gossip is predominantly an *oral* form of communication which is capable of appropriating written information and disseminating it for its own purposes. For a case in point, one has only to see what gossip does, justifiably, to Bulstrode and, unjustifiably, to Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, all because Raffles falls into possession of a bit of writing and then cannot keep his mouth shut.

While much of my discussion of orality has centered on voice and speech, I have argued that in novels such as *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Middlemarch*, speech is always associated with whatever else characters do with their mouths. In these novels speech is reflective of orality in general, and of the elusive search for who we are as human beings. And just as our speech proves imperfect and even deceptive with regard to revealing who we are, the written word ultimately proves inadequate to the task of representing any human being. I would like to close with a scene from *Middlemarch* which illustrates this inadequacy, and in which an individual's voice is once again metonymous for her entire personality. In the scene where Dorothea Brooke sits inscrutable in the Vatican, she attracts the attentive gaze of Ladislaw and Naumann, who begin to discuss what art form would best represent her – language or painting. Naumann thinks he could capture the essence of Dorothea in his painting; but Ladislaw points out the reductiveness involved in such a task, and the limitations of representation and signification in both painting and language. At the same time, Will argues that language – both oral and written, it is assumed – is all the better for being imperfect:

> Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection. I feel that especially about representations of women. As if a woman were a mere coloured superficies! You must wait for movement and tone. There is a difference in their very breathing: they change from moment to moment. – This woman whom you have just seen, for example: how would you paint her voice, pray?

Voice – and more generally speaking orality – reflects the complexity and changeableness of human character, and its resistance to classification and reduction. I

have argued that Jane Austen, Anne Brontë, and George Eliot point out the imperfection of language in their work; but as Will points out, it is this very imperfection that enables them to come as close as any other writers have come to describing what it means to be human. We will never know what Dorothea is thinking as Naumann and Ladislaw look on; but this is as it should be.

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