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UNDERSTANDING THE GRAY: AGING WOMEN IN VICTORIAN CULTURE AND FICTION

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UNDERSTANDING THE GRAY: AGING WOMEN IN VICTORIAN CULTURE
AND FICTION

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By

Hannah Tamar Ruehl

Director: Dr. Jonathan Allison, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2018

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

UNDERSTANDING THE GRAY: AGING WOMEN IN VICTORIAN CULTURE AND FICTION

My dissertation, *Understanding the Gray: Aging Women in Victorian Culture and Fiction*, explores the cultural construction of aging for middle-class Victorian women and how aging was experienced and then depicted within novels. Chiefly, I work from midcentury to the end of the century in order to understand the experience of aging and ways women were ascribed age due to their position in society as spinsters, mothers, and progressive women. I explore how the age of fictional women reflects and contributes to critical debates concerning how Victorian women were expected to behave. Debates over separate spheres, how women were perceived in British society, and how women's rights changed during the 19th century highlight how aging affected women and how they were treated throughout the century. Victorian fiction illustrates the ways women achieved different roles in society and how age and the perception of age affected their ability to do so. Understanding how aging was experienced, understood, and ascribed to Victorian women who fought in various ways for new terms of citizenship and mobility helps us begin to trace how we treat and respond to aging in women today. The first chapter outlines the social status of unmarried women and spinsters, considering how age affected women's ability to lead professional lives in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). The second chapter, on George Eliot's *Felix Holt: The Radical*, explores older motherhood through Mrs Transome and illustrates how the novel seeks to teach younger women of the pitfalls of unequal marriages. The third chapter builds a cultural understanding of how aging was linked to progressive, anti-domestic womanhood and racial impurity through the New Woman and in H.R. Haggard's *She*.

KEYWORDS: Victorian Literature, Women and Age Studies, Separate Spheres, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, H.R. Haggard

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Hannah Tamar Ruehl

22 June 2018

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Introduction

British novels of the nineteenth century frequently feature middle-aged and older women of the middle- to upper-class. Novels such as Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), and H.R. Haggard's *She* (1887) illustrate how aging foregrounds questions about women's roles in society. Despite the frequency of these women in fiction, age scholarship has only recently begun to focus on Victorian women. In an effort to illuminate representations of Victorian women and their experiences of getting older, *Understanding the Gray: Aging Women in Victorian Culture and Fiction* explores the women of novels from midcentury to the end of the century in order to understand how the age of fictional woman reflects and contributes to debates concerning how Victorian women were expected to behave.

Chiefly, I look at how expectations for these women changed as they aged past marriage and motherhood and as the pressure to marry or bear children subsided. Women who aged out of these roles simultaneously could experience both marginalization and freedom. For instance, contemporary medical manuals often categorized women after menopause as diseased, infantile, unnatural, or mannish. In literature, Miss Flite, featured in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), is as eccentric and half-crazed as her name suggests. She lives an impoverished, solitary life with a cage of birds that she will release only once her case in the chancery has been resolved. She is a creature to be pitied and not admired. In reality, older middle-class women also had opportunities to take part in a larger public life. Older women of the period often partook in politics, business, and general public life. For example, it was women in their fifties and beyond who ran the suffragette movement, for the most part. Similarly, in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

(1851), Miss Matty Jenkyns, a middle-class spinster in her fifties, takes on a public role as a shopkeeper when her regular source of income dries up. The support of her community when she does so exemplifies some of the allowances that getting older afforded Victorian women. My project argues that from a position of social marginalization, older women, nonetheless, exercised certain liberties to act outside of prescribed domestic roles for women, and the novels evaluated in this project particularly illustrate how women within the period could both subvert gender roles and explore new avenues of freedom within the public sphere due to biological and cultural concepts of aging.

The gendered division of space and roles, commonly known as separate spheres ideology, set forth a standard for men and women's lives throughout the nineteenth century. The basis of this ideology was the idea that men, as the primary legal representatives of family units, worked outside of the home and led civic lives in the public sphere. Conversely, women led private lives in the domestic sphere as the center of home life and the moral compass of the family as they cared for husbands and children.

The division of gendered space was first referred to as separate spheres by the Victorians themselves. Historically, gendered division of space and roles has existed in many societies in many various forms. The phrase separate spheres most likely took off in Victorian scholarship according to Linda Kerber, due to Alexis de Tocqueville (30). In 1835, Tocqueville published *Democracy in America*. In it, he described how women of America lived in a "narrow circle of domestic duties" and had little opportunity to step out of it (qtd in Kerber 30). Tocqueville's text became a standard text in American

history courses after WWII. According to Kerber, Tocqueville's work was particularly important to the increased number of women in academia who wanted to study and reclaim women's history in America and elsewhere. By the 1960's, Barbara Welter, Aileen S. Kraditor, and Gerde Lerner argued that women's history needed to be understood through the ideology of separate spheres. From here, separate spheres became an easy metaphor for historians and scholars to understand and complicate women's experience beyond the 19th century and America. For example, Gerde Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* took the metaphor of separate spheres to look at Western civilization as a whole and discovered that some kind of distinction between men and women's role in their societies have often been geographically separated.

However, for the Victorians, separate spheres ideology was pervasive and accepted in Britain as an almost scientific truth, especially for men and women of the middle- to upper-classes. This is made evident by popular domestic manuals of the early to mid-nineteenth century that often noted that a woman's place was dictated by her physical and mental make-up and that this biology led to a geographic and social division from men that was considered both natural and logical. For instance, Sarah Ellis's *Daughters of England* (1842) begins with this understanding of women:

I must now take it for granted, that the youthful reader of these pages has reflected seriously upon her position in society as a woman, has acknowledged her inferiority to man, has examined her own nature, and found there a capability of feeling, a quickness of perception, and a facility of adaptation, beyond what he possesses, and which, consequently, fit her for a distinct and separate sphere. (5)

Ellis's use of the word "sphere" immediately assumes that a geographic separation of men and women is natural and based on biological, gendered aptitudes. This assumption was so widespread among the Victorians that scholar Ellen Jordan notes, "it was widely believed that this separation of spheres had existed from time immemorial" (42). This, of course, was not entirely true.

Linda Kerber's essay "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History" complicates and elucidates the pervasive nature of separate spheres ideology in ways that are helpful in understanding its effect on the nineteenth century. Kerber notes that historians have shown that the division of public and private for men and women was intricately tied to classic Greek thought (39). Even when Europeans came over to America, they brought their beliefs about the division of men and women's worlds. Kerber sees industrialization and capitalism at the root of the separate spheres emergence in the nineteenth century. However, the articulation of separate spheres by Victorians and to Victorians emerged as a way to control and maintain the world as a patriarchal society. As Kerber states "the ideology of ... womanhood was an effort to bring the older version of the separation of spheres into a rough conformity with the new politics that valued autonomy and individualism" (40). This makes sense when considering how writers like Mary Wollstonecraft fought for women's inclusion in public life at the end of the eighteenth century. The "Woman Question" debate that plagued nineteenth-century Britain is only further evidence that the separate spheres ideology was being contested and questioned in a changing society. However, despite its contested nature, the division of men and women in public and private roles was the dominant, accepted belief.

Scholars such as Barbara Caine suggest that the ideology of separate spheres took root due to economic and social changes of the 17th and 18th century. More particularly, Caine argues that industrialization enhanced the idea of gendered space due to debates about men's rights and economic advances for men of the middle-class in the eighteenth century (Caine 12). In other words, industrialization helped widen the middle-class and gained greater prestige for middle-class men through professionalization. This growth in prestige and size of professional men in society brought new social changes for women. Caine notes that the increases of wealth to middle-class men also called for proof that increased wealth meant increased social status (Caine 12). By removing wives and daughters from industrial labor, where previously they were active participants, men of the middle-class helped prove the worth of the middle-class. In turn, this led to the idea that women were more suitable for the home, and that women's morality in the home softened the brutality of the industrial world for men (Caine 16). Separate spheres became not just a division of the public and private that was predicated on excluding women from economic participation, but also kept women as physical and social markers of male economic and social advancement. However, it is important that the Victorians themselves characterized their lives as organized by this guiding principle.

Therefore, women's ages were often framed in relation to how their numerical and biological years could limit their participation in prescribed roles. Numerically, women could be seen as past their prime at thirty if they were not yet married. Biologically, women would be considered in a state of decline as soon as they could no longer have children. Kay Heath notes in *Aging by the Book* that "women were aged into midlife earlier than men, due in particular to the concept of spinsterhood and medical

theories of reproduction” (9). Aging into midlife earlier than men was a problem for women, since confirmed spinsterhood began at thirty years of age.¹ This allowed a very short window for women to marry.

Biologically, women were considered old by their ability to bear children. Jeannette King demonstrates in *Discourses of Aging in Fiction and Feminism* that the Victorian medical community judged women as “old” as soon as their reproductive roles ended in menopause (8). With these ascriptions of aging from doctors also came assumptions of disease and disorder. While some medical discourse of the nineteenth century notes that women past menopause experienced some freedom and relief from childbearing, much of the discourse favored two particular framings: a model of regression that saw women returning to a pre-pubescent state and a model of unnatural masculinity that saw women as gaining unattractive qualities of men.²

But the concept of aging was not purely numerical or biological. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette notes, “As early as you begin to apply the attributes [of age] to your own self, you are being aged by culture” (5). While Gullette addresses aging from a 20th century perspective, her observation applies to Victorian women. As Eliza Lynn Linton

¹ The cultural anxiety about this short marriageability window alongside the broad societal expectations of marriage becomes clearer in light of the panic that sparked from the Census of 1851. The Census of 1851 was the first British census that surveyed and published the ages and marital status of women. The results of the census suggested that there were over 400,000 more women of marriageable age (18-29) in England than men (Worsnop 22). The public commonly referred to these women as “surplus women,” and it was also thought that the majority of these women were from the middle-class. After the census publication, many argued about what should be done with these women and how society should think of women who did not marry. W. R. Greg and Francis Power Cobbe are the more notable of these debaters. Greg’s 1868 essay, “Why Are Women Redundant,” notes that surplus women, “not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves” (Greg 5). His solution is to ship women off to the Americas. Cobbe’s “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids” (1862), however, argues for the educating of women so that they do not have to rely solely on marriage for their support.

²Besides King’s study, Pat Jalland’s work *Women from Birth to Death* offers a selection of primary sources from medical texts that describe the aging of women in more detail.

remarks in *The Girl of the Period* (1868-1883), “Youth and beauty make up so much of [women’s] personal value, so much of their natural final cause, that when these are gone many feel as if their whole career were at an end” (309). Linton’s sentiments about age demonstrate that women’s outward appearance or perception of their outward appearance is tied to the way society sees them and the loss of youth. Significantly, Linton observes that the mere perception of getting older for women can change what “career” they might have. Thus, women can appear old due to the ascription of age by others, and not necessarily due to the accumulation of years or menopause.

The cultural ascription of aging can, like physical aging, exclude women from marriage and motherhood. For instance, when *Bleak House*’s 20-year-old Esther is called “little old lady” and “Mother Hubbard,” readers understand her to be somehow dismissed from participating in marriage, *the* career choice for most women (Dickens 119). It is then that her relegation to the role of caretaker and companion to Ada (who is around the same age) seems reasonable. While Esther does eventually marry the young handsome doctor, Mr. Woodcourt, her reputation for being aged seems to bar her from marriage. Linton’s and Dickens’ depictions show that the experience of age is also a cultural process wherein age disempowers and limits access to certain roles or relationships.

As a counterweight to this argument, I claim that aging can also liberate. For instance, when Esther is a “little old lady,” she can be both a suitable companion to Ada and move around the city freely with no companion. Esther experiences an economic independence and mobility that other young women of her class might lack.³ So, while

³ Deborah Nord’s *Walking the Victorian City Streets* and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s *Family Fortunes* note that women of the middle- to upper-class actually had quite a bit of mobility in country and urban spaces. However, these scholars note this as a difference to what is being portrayed in Victorian

the perception of aging might bar some women from participating in various roles like marriage and motherhood, getting older also opens avenues of mobility and independence that were not always available to middle-class women.

This project contributes to the developing field of age studies. In the early 1990s, Kathleen Woodard noticed “recent research in cultural studies has been virtually dominated by studies of difference. We have invented courses in colleges and universities that study gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class. But not age” (x). In the past twenty-five years, the work of Pat Thane, Karen Chase, and Kay Heath have explored how the aging process was understood and experienced for men and women in the Victorian period. Because Thane’s, Chase’s, and Heath’s works are broad in scope across classes and genders, my dissertation differs from the work of these scholars by focusing on perceptions of age and accepted behaviors in one group (middle- to upper-class women) through one ideological lens (separate spheres). Primarily, by focusing on one gender and class, I add a more nuanced understanding of how one set of women experienced and *used* aging to their advantage. By using one ideological lens, I add a context for what the cultural experience of aging allowed. Exploring how behaviors and actions of Victorian women changed as they aged in novels allows me to demonstrate shifts in gender norms of the period as those norms are complicated by the experience and perception of getting older.

There are still many gaps in what Victorian scholarship has revealed about Victorian experiences of and conceptions of old age. However, Pat Thane’s historical

fictions. Nord, particularly, is clear in noting that the mobility of women in city streets was of public concern.

work *Old Age in English History* makes it clear, despite current common misconceptions to the contrary, that old age was common across classes (19)⁴. Particularly, old age was a common for women, who have on average historically outlived men, despite issues of childbirth (Thane 2). Thane reveals that getting older in the Victorian period was a question that concerned Victorians due to the period's large and growing population of elderly individuals, especially among the working classes. Because of this growing population, Victorians struggled with how to define and mark "old age" and what to do with the large number of women (and men) who could no longer support themselves by their own labor (Thane 151).⁵ Similarly, Karen Chase in *Victorians and Old Age* shows how "old" was both a term and a varied experience that Victorians struggled to understand. Admitting that there was no defined experience or understanding of senescence across gender and classes, Chase discovers a wide range of expressions of old age from literature, to politics, and to art.⁶

⁴ Thane notes that old age was defined by most societies in the past by "apparent physical condition" and not an exact age (19). However, most western societies seem to begin conceiving of old age as starting around 60 (20).

⁵ Thane's work takes a long chronological approach. She first looks into representations of old age from the Greeks and Romans before tracing those to England from the medieval period to the 20th century. In the 19th century, she delves deeply into the details of the New Poor Laws of 1834, which tried to grant poor relief based on work ability and age, pensions for the elderly, the idea of retirement, and the family lives of the elderly.

In regards to middle-class women, Thane notes there was an expectation that one daughter would remain a spinster in order to take care of her aging parents, depending on the wealth their families and the provisions for them, these care takers could reach old age themselves with little-to-no material provisions and reduced social standing due to their spinsterhood (301). However, other middle-class women, such as widows or those no longer necessarily confined to home life, had varied experiences of getting older. Some became involved in politics, such as Georgiana Burne-Jones who ran and won a position on her local parish council in 1894 (Thane 259). Others embraced cultural ideas of ageing and remained closed off to affairs outside of their immediate family circle, such as Maria Jackson who wrote of herself as ill and infirmed with old age in her diary from her fifties till her death in her mid-seventies (Thane 261).

⁶ Chase's study of Dickens and Anthony Trollope looks at how older men and women were marginalized in workhouses, asylums, and almshouses. Her study of Queen Victoria looks at the premature aging of the Queen after Albert's death and how she uses her performance of age as a way to retain public power. Her next chapters look at representations of aging in portraiture through a study of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* alongside Herbert von Herkomer's paintings. She ends her books with a chapter that looks

In contrast, Kay Heath's *Aging by the Book* focuses on the emergence of a new conception of midlife in Victorian England. Heath's study of middle-class men and women shows how midlife is seen as a state of decline (rather than prime) for the first time in the nineteenth century (15). Her work reveals an important shift in thinking about what it means to get older in the Victorian period. Importantly, Heath's work on the gendered division of aging illuminates a difference in how aging affected men in contrast to its effects on women. While middle age was ascribed to men in their fifties or later, women could be considered middle aged anywhere between their thirties and fifties.

Thane's, Chase's, and Heath's discussions are often both broad and selective in focusing on the old, very old, and midlife, and their discussions explore across classes. Building and expanding on their work, this project examines middle- to upper-class women's cultural experience of aging and how aging could offer women alternative ways of navigating the restrictions of separate spheres. My project more specifically examines how aging functioned as a cultural construct (and not just a biological experience) that gave a kind of power to middle-class women to revise their public and private roles.

My project also draws on the work of scholars, Linda Kerber, Cathy Davidson, and Jessamyn Hatcher, who propose that any scholarly exploration of the concept of separate spheres should now should shift to a post-separate spheres model due to the concept's rhetorical ambiguity and inability to account for and articulate accurately the experience of gender in a certain time or place. I utilize their ideas and approach to continue show the inaccuracy of the deployment of the concept of separate spheres and

into how aging has become both synonymously a symbol of death and also a reality that needed to be dealt with on a political and social level.

how it fails to adequately address middle-class women's position as they aged. Kerber, particularly, claims the term separate spheres in scholarship has acted as a "trope that hid its instrumentality even from those who employed it; in that sense it was deeply ambiguous" (49). Davidson and Hatcher elaborate by arguing that "In separate spheres discourse, *woman* is distinct from and even opposite to *man*; nothing else counts. By this logic, *woman* is the one universal or stable category, and other attributes are transient or irrelevant" (11). In addition, Davidson and Hatcher argue that the opacity of the trope often allows scholars to position women as victims and, as victims, always virtuous. Furthermore, since the woman in separate spheres scholarship is almost always white and middle-class, it does not account for other races, classes or experience of identity (12).

Post-separate spheres scholarship tries to account for how gendering space worked in the period by showing its uneven deployment and how, even if uneven, it did apply to men and women's lives. Additionally, this approach allows for questions of race and other transitory identities and the exploration of more kinds of sources (diaries, advice manuals, letters, periodicals, etc.). It is also an approach that does not assume virtue for those who have less power, nor does the post separate spheres scholarship limit itself simply to binaries. Instead, it attempts to articulate the experience of man or woman, black or white, rich or poor, with consistent recognition of the complexity and the inaccuracy of the deployment of separate spheres. I work to employ post-separate spheres criticism by adding yet an additional lens to the way that we have conceptualized existing as a woman in Victorian England. While my work is limited to middle-class, white woman, looking at how age complicates the ideological binary of public and private helps illustrate how fragile the binary is.

In addition to Kerber, Davidson, and Hatcher, my approach to understanding separate spheres deployment has been refined by the work of Mary Poovey, John Tosh, Elizabeth Langland, and Caroline Levine because they show that separate spheres application was always problematic, and always changing, for men and women. Mary Poovey in *Uneven Developments* shows how ideas of the domestic sphere were irregularly practiced and contradictorily interpreted (12). Dealing first with ways in which “the ideological image [of white middle-class women] was produced, maintained, and deployed as a symbolic solution to problems,” Poovey then looks at how some women benefited by the social ideological constraints and how some women suffered (21). Similarly, Elizabeth Langland’s *Nobody’s Angels* argues that women’s domesticity could be empowering for middle-class women when they set the rules for how middle-class women’s homes should look and function. John Tosh’s *A Man’s Place* demonstrates how men were as much a part of the private sphere within the home as the public by showing how they were involved in domestic concerns of the home, often working from home at the beginning of the century, and how the ideology of the domestic pushed men out of their homes by the end of the century. These works are important because they show that separate spheres application was always problematic, and always changing, for men and women. While these scholars show how fragile that ideology is, Caroline Levine points out that “the social world is complex, then, not because it eludes binaries altogether, but because multiple crude categories are always in operation, and because they collide, overlap, and decenter each other” (630). In this way, she shows that this ideology cannot be dismissed even if it did not always evenly apply to men and women’s reality. Despite the issues of applying and adhering to separate spheres

ideology, its existence nonetheless framed men's and women's experience in the Victorian period.

Accepting that separate spheres ideology did not apply evenly to men or women (Poovey and Tosh), was sometimes empowering and often not (Langland), but was part of a cultural idea that organized Victorians' experience of life (Levine), I contend that aging past marriage and motherhood, culturally or biologically, complicated women's participation inside and outside domestic spheres. More particularly, by looking at the ways aging affected women and empowered them to act outside of the dictates of their society, my dissertation takes a post separate spheres approach to create a fuller understanding of the limits and boundaries of the separate spheres ideology.

To do so, my chapters are aimed at taking a chronological approach and also look specifically at unique experiences that were ripe with cultural aging. My goal is to demonstrate the particularly complex political position for women to show how ideas of age intersects with women's identity in public and private. As Kathryn Gleadle notes, Victorian women were "borderline citizens" because "their status as political actors, as well as their own political subjectivities, were often fragile and contingent" (2). In other words, in any one moment in time a woman might be integral to a political process and also be dismissed from it. Understanding this, I have chosen novels that span the period because they address concepts of aging and reflect on women's issues as they changed throughout the Victorian period.

Starting with Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, I look at the experience of spinsterhood in the context of surplus women in the 1850's. I choose this novel because it is one of the few Victorian novels that deals seriously with spinsterhood and labor. Additionally, it is

reflective of the particular debates in the 1850's about surplus women since spinsterhood and needing labor was Charlotte Brontë's own experience. Spinsterhood is very much defined by both the age at which someone is no longer deemed able to marry and often linked to a need for labor. *Villette* explores how a good marriage would be difficult to for all to obtain and how little support is available to women who do not have families to support them.

In my second chapter, I look at the experience of older motherhood in George Eliot's *Felix Holt: The Radical*. A mid period novel, this novel is unique because it gives an internal voice to an older woman, Mrs. Transome. Separate spheres ideology in many ways makes promises to women that are entirely about women's youth. That is, if they marry and produce children, they will have the bliss of managing both their home and their children. However, the reality of women's civic position is that nothing protects or make sure that a woman will really be granted those roles. Additionally, as a mother ages, she can lose the position of manager when her male children become the new patriarchs of the home and their own wives take over.

Last, I explore the New Woman figure at the end of the period in the context of the boom of advertising that particularly targeted middle-class, Victorian women before turning to look at the New Woman figure in H. R. Haggard's *She*. The end of the period saw the rise in women attending college and pursuing jobs that had once been held only by men. Imperial expansion was also at its height and brought new questions of who we were as a society and what it meant to be British. Fears of degeneration from the outside 'other,' ran rampant, and in some ways this involved doubling down on the presumed role of women to maintain the British nation with their morality and with producing

white, British citizens. However, if women were too busy pursuing work, education, and outside of England, how could they maintain the nation? Advertising, the New Woman, and H.R. Haggard's *She* demonstrate the pervasiveness of these fears at the end of the period and how attempting to keep a woman concerned with her age and her race policed progressive women into maintaining separate spheres ideals of womanhood.

Chapter 1: Work for all the Single Ladies: Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

“Not that it is a crime to marry--or a crime to wish to be married--but it is an imbecility which I reject with contempt--for women [who] have neither fortune nor beauty--to make marriage the principal object of their wishes & hopes & the aim of all their actions” (*The Letters of Charlotte Brontë* 315).

“Old maid.” As a child, for me this term referred to a card game where each card had a pair but one with an older looking woman. In my research, I have returned to this term over and over. For most of my time, seeing it merely as a demeaning label. As my thinking and research has grown this term has grown in nuance for me, and I cannot help but see it as two separate words. Old. Maid. Separating parts of this term highlights how time, today, and in the past, has served to show how unmarried women are, rhetorically, not granted prime, independent adulthood, how time can unequally effect women. The term ‘old’ denotes a woman nearer death. The word ‘maid’ denotes a woman who has not yet reached adulthood because she is unmarried. It is both infantilizing and sexualizing because she has the naivete of the innocent and is desired also for those qualities. But ‘old’ creates a mockery of that image, because that maid never ‘matures’ culturally while, physically, her body does.

Married or unmarried, Victorian women legally and culturally were seen as below men, the true adults, and in this way, always a kind of child. Operating independently as a single women under the additional label of ‘old maid’ was not easy. Moreover, the struggle for many Victorian unmarried middle-class women was that they needed to find independence in work outside of the home.

Particularly, the label of 'spinster' or 'old maid' seemed to demarcate women as people who failed to live up to the ideal of separate spheres, because without marriage they had no home to run, and at an older age, their promise of producing children to rear was considered diminished, if not impossible. To be of 'marriageable age' was to be young enough for marriage and motherhood to still be considered viable options as defined by societal expectations. While the age at which one was no longer marriageable was debatable and varied from person to person, once a woman was labeled an 'old maid' those same expectations no longer remained.

Though the label of 'spinster' and 'old maid' did mark a woman as failing to reach the roles deemed most desirable for women, the label also creates a space in which women could, and often had to, consider other options besides marriage because the older age associated with it made marriage seem less possible. It is in this marginal position that women had more leeway to act outside of the norms. As Emma Liggins notes in her own work on lesbians, spinsters and widows, "the outsider status...could, and often did, allow them to transgress the norms of female behaviour and to stretch the rules governing sexuality which hemmed in conventional wives and mothers" (Liggins 1). Some women even intentionally accentuated their age in order to be able to create a more "professional identity" (Vicinus 40).

Additionally, creating a spinster main character was a way of exploring the possibilities for women. Or as Emma Liggins states "These odd women, positioned outside heteronormativity, albeit in different ways, not only challenged ideologies of middle-class femininity and sexuality, but also helped to reinvent them" (Liggins 2). While there were more blatant spinster characters in novels in the latter half of the

century such as, Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883), Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), and George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), having a main character spinster was not common in a serious novel of the 1850s. Even Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851-1853), a novel about a town of spinsters, was done as a comedy, that in many ways, laughed at old maids even while it pointed out the difficulties of their lives.

This chapter outlines how the cultural perceptions of age played into women's ability and necessity to lead professional, rather than solely domestic, lives. While no one woman's experience was the same, this chapter explores single women's lives in historical context and then looks at how Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) uses ideas of age to show how being single and needing work was a norm for many Victorian women, and not an exception.

The Spinster & Labor

The term 'spinster' evolved over 17th and 18th century into its nineteenth century negative stereotype of the ugly, unnatural old woman.⁷ The original use of the term comes from the labor that single women often did around the 1660's, spinning (Hill 4). It also operated as a legal term to describe an unmarried woman adult woman of any age be they 17 or 50 (Froide 159). In the second half of the 17th century, the idea of a spinster,

⁷ The experience of spinsterhood has a long cultural history in England that is, at times, still shrouded in mystery. Those on the margins of society often lose their history; therefore, their history was often left unrecorded, inaccurately recorded by those in privileged positions, or misinterpreted by the cultural biases of others. I have written this section relying heavily on the work of a few scholars who have built our best understanding of spinsterhood in England: Bridget Hill's *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660-1850*, Martha Vicinus's *Independent Women*, Amy Froide's *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England*, and Emma Liggins' *Odd Women? Spinsters, Lesbians, and Widows in British Women's Fiction 1850-1930*. If that seems sparse, it's because it is sparse. As Amy Froide notes most of the information we have about unmarried women has "emerged as a by-product of research on other topics" (4). In doing research on this chapter, I could find book after book of research on married women in British history. Within these volumes, a mere paragraph to page was spared for unmarried, and most of it appeared speculative. I'm grateful for these scholars for building a more in depth understanding of the history of single women in England. More historical work in this area is necessary.

and its sister term 'old maid,' became connected with being beyond marriageable age due, in part, to single women's complaints that there were not eligible men to marry because too many were off to war (Froide 161).⁸ Still, it was not clear at what age women were no longer considered marriageable. According to Hill, younger women might say it was thirty; older women might push it as far back as fifty or sixty (5).

However, the term 'spinster' or 'old maid' has been mostly negative in connotation. Amy Froide convincingly argues that this might be, in part, due to some single women's economic independence during the growth of the industrialization of the 17th and 18th centuries. She posits that because single women of means were important to the growth of urban towns by renting property, offering credit, paying taxes, and philanthropy, this was sometimes seen as threatening to patriarchy (Froide 117/180).⁹ Money gave these women some influence, and there was the concern that some of these well-off single women might decide to *remain* single. And some well-off single women did just that. Amanda Vickery's *The Gentleman's Daughter*, notes that marriage was sometimes even avoided by women because the likelihood of a good spouse was deemed low and spinsters of the Georgian period (1714-1830) appeared happier unmarried (40). While it is not clear exactly what made society turn on single women, by the 18th century the negative portrayal of the spinster as an ugly, promiscuous, mannish, old, unnatural woman was a fully formed trope (Froide 155).

⁸ Amy Froide's work *Never Married* details how at around the 1640's in England, around the English Civil War, until the 1690s, the complaints of single woman became more prevalent in fiction and nonfiction (161).

⁹ Amy Froide's arguments are based off her archival research in many towns in England, but mainly Southampton Bristol, Oxford, and York (11). She used various legal and financial records, church records, diaries, family papers and memoirs to come to her conclusions (11). Her research is rich and wide ranging about single women in Modern England.

By the nineteenth century, spinsters were expected to live in service to others, to become mothers to nieces, nephews, brothers, sisters, and society (Liggins 48). It was also imagined that singlehood was often seen as the fault of the single woman, as mostly accidental, a missing of your chance (Liggins 2). With the expectation that spinster's were to care for others and the perception that they were to blame for their own position, the ability to find work outside of the home was difficult. As Martha Vicinus notes "Single women had to tackle their marginal position ideologically, economically, and socially. First, a rationale had to be found for justifying creating a new role for women in which they could be both public, that is, paid workers, and feminine, that is, domestic" (12). Furthermore, not all kinds of paid, professional labor were available to middle-class to upper-class women where the rhetoric of the ideology of separate spheres was more influential. Most scholars, such as Hill and Vicinus note, that poor single women middle-class women in the mid-nineteenth century had usually three poorly paid options: governess, companion, or seamstress. And even in these jobs, less positions became available to women in the early nineteenth century. For example, the Governesses Benevolent Institute (GBI, founded in 1841) had one job that received over 150 applicants most of whom were over fifty years of age (Vicinus 23). Poor single women in many ways *had* to work in order to support themselves.

Redundant Woman and Time as a Uniquely Female Problem

Important to the context of my argument is the concern over the employment of women in relation to the increasing number of single, marriageable women, brought to a head by the Census of 1851. The report listed that there was, shockingly, over 400,000 more women of twenty years and older than men, and that this surplus was "unnatural"

(qtd in Worsnop 22). The public commonly referred to these women as “surplus” or “redundant” women, and it was thought, both from the report and others, that the majority of these women were from the middle-class (Worsnop 22). Moreover, the concern spread by the census report was spread not just by women’s conjugal status, but that status in relation to their ages:

Millions of women have returned their ages correctly; thousands have allowed themselves to be called 20, or some age near it, --which happens to be the age at which marriage is most commonly contracted in England;-- either because they are quite unconscious of the silent lapse of time,-- or because their imaginations still lingered over the hours of that age, --or because they chose, foolishly, to represent themselves younger than they really were, at the scandalous risk of bringing countrywomen into discredit. (qtd in Worsnop 22)

There are a few important things to note here: one, as Judith Worsnop notes, there appears to be some suggestion that men, the heads of household, are falsely reporting women’s ages; two, the assumption of false reporting supposes women are *allowing* themselves to be thought of as the most common marriageable age, twenty (22). So not only are there a surplus of unmarried women of marriageable age, there could women who have had their ages inaccurately *intentionally*. The report implies that these women have not only deceived men, but also eluded the reports, and in some ways, eluded society’s judgment. But, as the report makes clear, the census publishers have not been deceived, and their judgement was certainly not avoided.

The judgement in this report helped spur opposing outcries from society: some demanded education for women; some demanded women should try harder to marry. There were many prevalent speakers in this debate. Of the notable ones relevant to this chapter are W. R. Greg and Mary Taylor. Greg's 1862 essay, "Why Are Women Redundant," notes that surplus women, "not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves" (Greg 5). Greg offers solutions for this unnatural multitude such as emigration and for women to stop having expensive tastes so they will be as desirable as mistresses. He also asserts that those "who would throw open the professions to women, and teach them to become lawyers and physicians and professors" do not understand women's true nature and their physical inability to work (32). Greg notes that many have tried to address the issue of what to do with redundant women, but they have to yet to address the problem. According to Greg, first, one must give a "diagnosis... before the medicine is administered" (3) Moreover, he declares that this discussion of woman has been discussed haphazardly by:

beating about the bush; flying at this symptom; attacking that fragment; relieving this distress; denouncing that abomination. First it was the factory girls; then the distressed needlewoman; then the aged and decayed governesses; latterly Magdalens, in esse or in futurum.... We have occupied ourselves more with 'Woman's Mission,' and 'Woman's Employment.' (4)

Sympathy towards the women who are noted as suffering from lack of resources is not what Greg cares about, and he clearly thinks that those who suggest women who are aged

past marriage who want to consider employment or a career for women are foolish. Rather, in Greg's opinion, by nature, only about 2% of the population should not marry (9). This 2% fall into the following categories: women devoid of feminine feeling, women who have "diffusive" rather than concentrated affection and are "ideal old maids," women who have a higher spiritual calling, and women who seem are gender neutral and have minds analogous to men (Greg 9-10). These women, are clearly, according to Greg, not actually women. Contradictorily, they are also an acceptable natural anomaly. He also explains which women have no excuse for not getting married: those who have never been asked at all, those who think a marriage proposal may not offer enough financial security, those who have loved and lost, those who only want to marry for love, and those who are waiting for better offers (Greg 10-11).

Remarkably, Greg makes clear that these arguments do not apply to women of the working classes who do not marry because they are appropriately employed in domestic service and doing what comes naturally to women, "ministering to men" (25). However, "Single life to those on whom it is forced by individual errors or by vicious social prejudices or arrangements, is unnatural, and therefore essentially unsound, unstable, and the source of immeasurable wretchedness and mischief" (30). Greg also believes that any alternatives besides marriage for middle-class women are misplaced and misguided for these "radical or more fatal errors" that "lie marked and strewn with wrecks, and failures, and astounding theories, and incredible assumptions." (31).

In contrast, Mary Taylor, childhood friend of Charlotte Brontë, wrote "Redundant Women," in response to Greg's piece in 1870. Here, she dissects and rails against his assertions that all women should marry. Calling Greg's essay a "pretty crop of

contradictions,” Taylor points out that Greg’s only solution is for women to just marry (41). Additionally, Taylor notes that when Greg’s refers to redundant women, he is really referring to women who are poor:

he really means starving women very often, and almost always women whose means have fallen so much below their position that they are miserably poor. To call the single poor women redundant in any sense that does not apply to poor people in general, a man must believe that marriage is the proper and only cure for feminine poverty. But that marriage is a cure at all is only true because of that forethought which makes so many celibates. (27)

For Taylor, this forethought, is women who are holding out for better support and this can be a problem of age, particularly for women. Men tend to marry at about 35 and women at 20 or 25, so that men have “ten or fifteen years more of single life than the women.” (Taylor 26). Taylor suggests that the better question is “why are they[women] so poor,” and this she responds with because they are non-workers, non-earners (28). She also notes that “men marry at all ages,” but very few woman past the common marriageable age do (Taylor 43). Taylor lays out the impossibility of this position for women: “Why is she not to seek, and to be helped and taught to find some lucrative employment? Because her life is not to be made too easy, lest she should be less willing for the matrimony which is already what she likes best” (32). In other words, Taylor believed that those who were opposed to women working feared women would wholesale reject domesticity and marriage to engage in professional and civic roles by taking men’s roles and men’s work.

The Census report and the debates that it spurred illuminate how time culturally affected men and women differently. Women were victims of time. Men were considered capable of getting married at any age, but women were limited by reproductive years, and even then less than that considering that women could be called spinsters in their 30s. How do you win against time in such a system? Furthermore, prime, independent adulthood is culturally not granted to women. The closest a woman comes to being considered an adult is when she is considered 'unnatural' and 'masculine'. As Greg would say, she has the mind of a man. These women cannot marry because if they did they would be equals to their husbands, and not beneath them. They are strong and decisive. Therefore, men. But culture does not allow this, so it hurries them into old age by calling them 'old maids' at 35. This returns women to a comfortable category for society. In the label 'old maid' they are given the frailty of older age, turned rhetorically back to children. Maids need saving. Maids need the protection of men. Maids need to marry and produce children. Since the mirror phrase of old maid is young maiden, the lack of adulthood granted to women becomes apparent. Work complicates the labeling of old maid, because it proves a woman is independent and not dependent on others.

Charlotte Brontë and the Redundant Woman:

Charlotte Brontë would herself have been numbered among the 'redundant women' of the Victorian period for most of her life for she did not marry till she was in her late 30s (Harman 361). Most of Charlotte Brontë's adult life was spent single, poor, and looking for ways of gaining enough money to survive without means of more lucrative employment since she spent her time caring for her father and ailing siblings (Harman 352). Moreover, Brontë was familiar with the question of surplus women and of

the solutions proposed by others. Particularly, her friendship with Mary Taylor was marked by their own heated debates on women and labor. After Mary read *Shirley*, she wrote to Brontë:

And this first duty [work], this great necessity you seem to think that *some* women may indulge in--if they give up marriage and don't make themselves too disagreeable to the other sex. You are a coward and a traitor. A woman who works is by that alone better than one who does not and a woman who does not happen to be rich and who *still* earns no money and does not wish to do so, is guilty of a great fault--almost a crime--A dereliction of duty which rapidly leads and almost certainly to all manner of degradation. (*Mary Taylor's Letters* 93-94)

If Taylor's words to her friend seem strong here, they were not apparently strange to Brontë. Brontë and Taylor met along with their other lifelong friend, Ellen Nussey, when they all went to school together at Roe Head in 1831 (Whitehead 85). Nussey was known as the sweet friend and Taylor as the radical, brash friend who often loudly voiced her differing political opinions to Brontë (Whitehead 85). As we've already seen in *Redundant Women*, Taylor was an adamant supporter of women finding fulfillment in their own work and outside of marriage. Taylor, herself a spinster, emigrated to New Zealand in her twenties and became a landowner and shopkeeper (Fenton-Hathaway 139). How much Taylor influenced Brontë is not exactly known, but Brontë's own concern with the place of women comes through in her letters to others.

While it is unknown how Brontë may have responded to Mary Taylor's letters (Brontë's letters to Taylor did not survive or were destroyed by Taylor) on *Shirley*,

thoughts of labor and spinsterhood were not far from Brontë's own thoughts (Fenton-Hathaway 139). For in a letter to Ellen Nussey in 1843 she spoke in her own fiery terms:

“Not that it is a crime to marry--or a crime to wish to be married--but it is an imbecility which I reject with contempt--for women [who] have neither fortune nor beauty--to make marriage the principal object of their wishes & hopes & the aim of all their actions--not to be able to convince themselves that they are unattractive--and that they had better be quiet & think of other things than wedlock” (*Letters of Charlotte Brontë* 315).

Clearly, here Brontë, at the age of 27 felt strongly that not all women could marry and that those who couldn't needed suitable employment. Three years later, she voices a similar sentiment to Margaret Wooller:

“I speculate much on the existence of unmarried and never-to-be married women nowadays and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman who makes her own way through life quietly persevering--without support of husband or brother and who having attained the age of 45 or upwards--retains in her possession a well-regulated mind--a disposition to enjoy simple pleasures--fortitude to support inevitable pains, sympathy with the sufferings of others & willingness to relieve want as far as her means extend--” (*Letters of Charlotte Brontë* 448).

At the age of 31, having written *The Professor* and working on *Jane Eyre*, Brontë is perhaps imagining the unmarried existence as the most likely scenario for her. Since her father could also offer little support especially after his death, she would need to support

herself (Glen 138). For, during the writing of Brontë's penultimate novel, *Shirley*, all of her siblings died within the same year. Brontë wrote *Villette* in considerable isolation and with an ailing father (Glen 138). By the time Brontë finished *Villette* in 1852, Brontë was 36 and, likely, felt herself to be more destined for unmarried life than ever before.¹⁰

The *Villette* is very autobiographical in nature. Even Lucy Snowe's established school at the end of the novel was a plan that Brontë and her sisters had once had themselves (Langland 305). Reportedly, Matthew Arnold despised *Villette* because "it dealt too clearly with a malaise among the middle-class woman" for he said "the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage, and therefore that is all she can put in her book" (qtd in Harman 350). What Arnold fails to see in the novel is, even if these are Charlotte Brontë's own feelings, the novel attempts to show that Lucy's life is the lives of many women. To show the life of the redundant woman is to show one representative of a multitude, not of an anomaly.

Arnold's own view aside, it is clear that Brontë was one of these 'redundant women,' Greg railed about and even more clear that she was one of the poor women that Mary Taylor was dearly saddened by. In a letter to Brontë after the publication of *Shirley*, Taylor wrote "To no one would money bring more happiness, for no one would use it better than you would" (87). She advises her to keep up her employment in writing, since

¹⁰ Brontë did eventually marry in the last year and a half of her life. Her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nichols, worked at the parish with Reverend Patrick Brontë for eight years before he left after disrupting the Brontë home with his confession of love to Brontë, after she had sent off *Villette* to be published (Harman 352). She would accept Nichols 2 years later in 1854 after eventually bringing her father around to the idea (Harman 361). However, Brontë's churlish father refused to give her away at her wedding (Harman 363). Brontë died of complications from her pregnancy, a condition called hyperemesis gravidarum, where the women have extreme reactions to pregnancy hormones by intense sickness (Harman 374). She died at the age of 39. And I am still not over how terribly tragic and sad her life story is.

she believes it will bring success. When Elizabeth Gaskell's own biography of Brontë came out, Taylor wrote to Ellen Nussey saying,

I wish I could set the world right on many points, but above all respecting Charlotte. It would do said world good to know her and be forced to revere her in spite of their contempt for poverty and helplessness. No one ever gave up more than she did and with full consciousness of what she sacrificed. I don't think myself that women are justified in sacrificing themselves for others, but since the world generally expects it of them they should at least acknowledge it. (128)

It was, perhaps, partly this that Taylor had in mind as she readied *The First Duty of Women*, and particularly "Redundant Woman" for publication. Taylor's painting of Brontë is unfortunately similar to the women referenced in her essay. She is poor, older than other more marriageable women, and has too few opportunities to produce and make money for herself. Yet, it was already the story of Taylor's own life and of so many others that professions, careers, and opportunities were mostly unavailable to women who did not marry or did not seek to marry. It is perhaps telling that both Taylor and Lucy Snowe can only make a life for themselves in business outside of England.

Villette

Villette, serially published in 1853, was Brontë's last novel published in her lifetime. Narrated by the main character, Lucy Snowe, when she is an old woman, this story follows the often unspecified tragedies of Lucy Snowe. The novel begins when Lucy is a young girl visiting her godmother, Mrs. Bretton and her son, Graham. The first three chapters are focused on the visit of a seven-year-old girl Paulina Holmes (Polly)

and her developing friendship with fourteen year old John Graham Bretton (Graham). When Polly rejoins her father, the story jumps forward eight years to when Lucy, for unknown reasons, has lost contact with the Brettons and all her family is gone. She becomes a companion to sickly women, Miss Marchmont.

At Miss Marchmont's death, Lucy, without other resources travels to France to find work. On the boat, she meets Ginevra Fanshawe, a selfish young English woman, who is headed to Madame Beck's school for girls in the city of Vilette. Miss Fanshawe suggests Lucy can probably find work there. Lucy is hired on by Madame Beck as a governess for her two small children, and then eventually the English teacher for the school. Here, Lucy becomes reunited with Graham, now known as Dr. John, who is the school's doctor. His attachment to the flighty, manipulative Miss Fanshawe brings him often to the school. Lucy renews her relationship with him and his mother. It is hinted that Lucy falls in love with Graham, but knows that John does not return her affection. Polly, Paulina Holmes, also reunites with both Graham and Lucy when Graham rescues Polly from being trampled during a theater fire. Graham then falls in love with Polly, and eventually they marry. Lucy acts as friend to both Graham and Polly as their relationship develops.

Back at the school, Lucy eventually strikes up a friendship with M. Paul Emanuel, another teacher at the school and a relative of Madame Beck's. Their friendship takes a turn towards romance, much to the chagrin of Madame Beck, who was hoping to marry M. Paul Emanuel herself. Madame Beck, Père Silas (a Catholic priest), and Madame Walravens (the mother of M. Paul's dead betrothed) plot to keep M. Paul Emanuel away from Lucy by sending him off to the West Indies to make their fortune for them. Despite

the machinations of these three, M. Paul manages to see Lucy before he leaves where he sets her up in a school of her own and they become engaged. M. Paul is gone for three years, and it is strongly hinted that he dies in a storm coming back to France.

Without the heroine of the novel marrying off at the end, *Villette* is a novel that disrupts the expected norms of marriage for the single heroine. No other of Charlotte Brontë's novel ends with the main character unmarried. As Heather Glen notes "Unlike Charlotte Brontë's two previous first-person novels, this bears neither the narrator's name nor that of her profession. Its title signifies a central concern not merely with her particular viewpoint, but with what that viewpoint reveals about the world through which she moves." (Glenn 135-136). A novel about a spinster marrying would be a more expected narrative, but justifying the existence of the spinster is more outside the norm in the 1850s.

Lucy mirrors both in character and story style the isolations and struggles of many surplus women and in extreme ways as she has no family of any kind and has to make her own way in France. As Gilbert and Gubar describe: "Lucy, older and wiser than any other of Brontë's other heroines, is from first to last a woman *without*--outside society, without parents or friends, without physical or mental attractions, without money or confidence or health--and her story is perhaps the most moving and terrifying account of female deprivation ever written" (Gilbert and Gubar 400). Lucy Snowe, narratively also feels like a woman outside of the novel. Laura Engle describes Lucy as "the novel's principal ghost" (vii). As a first person narrative, Lucy Snowe is conspicuously absent at times as a character and narrator. As Anna Gibson notes, "first person narrative involves both structuring a plan of the world and narrating one's own movements within it; the

narrator steps outside in order to set the limits on and rules governing that world and also dwells in it” (205). However, the rules that Lucy, the narrator, sets for this story are often unknown to the reader, and the information about the narrator and character come in fits and spurts. As Janet Gezari explains “Lucy’s voice is everywhere audible as the agency of the narrative, but in her dual role as narrated and narrating self, she is silent at crucial moments” (Gezari 146). The novel asks the reader to understand the main character mainly through inference while at the same time making very clear the stories of the other main characters.

A lot of this insecurity on the part of the reader is how little concrete information is given to the reader about Lucy Snowe. When the novel opens in Lucy Snowe’s girlhood, it is immediately centered around the arrival and the story of the child Polly and the teenager Graham. Much about Lucy remains unknown as she seems to serve as merely a witness to the story of Polly and Graham at the beginning of the novel. It is not till Polly departs after chapter three, that information about Lucy seems to become the focus. Lucy Snowe addresses the reader by asking them to imagine a life for her, a life she did not have: “I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass....A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest” (39). When the narrator makes it clear that young Lucy does not spend her next eight years in pleasant idleness, her information is vague and compared to a ship in a great storm which eventually results in the ship being lost and “the crew perished” (39). Here the narrator chides the reader. By first ‘permitting’ the reader to imagine a narrative for women that is *supposed* to be more common, she mocks them for having a fantasy

that she implies is not reality, and the reality of young Lucy Snowe's traumatic life she refuses to reveal to the reader.

Critics have long argued over the significance of Lucy Snowe acting as narrator and as an elusive character. Flint notes that Margaret Oliphant claimed that Brontë made public women's feelings where they should have been kept private (190). Timothy Carnes argues that this break in narrative expectation is rooted in "religious anxieties about a potential conflict between human and divine love" since Victorian Protestant culture expressed concerns that love for another human could "slip into idolatry" (337). Emily Heady likewise sees spiritual significance in the narration style and genre and argues that the narrative mode is a kind of typology that is meant to reveal the "extraordinary power of the material world as it exists in mid-century England" and expose its world as "a type or figure for the spiritual world that coexists with it," so as to give Lucy a way to avoid "the culture-wide materialism." (342). As Anna Gibson notes the narrative style shows Brontë's engagement with psychological debates about identity formation, and she argues that Lucy Snowe's narrative offers an "alternative form of identity formation" (204). All of these arguments about the narrative structure are well made, and well supported, but a more general argument seems reasonable; such as the one put forth by Gilbert and Gubar when they remark that Lucy "feels as if she has no story, Lucy cannot employ the narrative structures available to her, yet there are no existing alternatives" (419). Because Lucy Snowe as a spinster would likely have been a hard sell.

This narrative ambivalence opens Lucy up to being read as a character and a narrator that is always a part of the past, already aged. The liberty that older age allows

for a more deviant character, one that does not have to conform to expected roles for women. Furthermore, when the narrator is revealed to the reader as, Lucy Snow, old woman, the story of Lucy Snowe, young woman, becomes framed by Lucy Snowe, older woman's knowledge, experience, and allowances of her older age, allowances that a younger woman would not have. After Miss Marchmont dies in chapter five, Lucy begins her journey to London to find work at the age of 23 (50). She tells the reader "I speak of a time gone by: my hair which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now, at last white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow" (50). This is important because the reader now knows the Lucy Snowe who tells us the tale is telling a story that has already played out: the ending cannot be changed, the circumstances never altered, they are the past, and Lucy Snow is already an old woman. By framing the novel from the perspective of an older woman, the story of an unmarried woman becomes more reasonable to a reader who sees an old unmarried woman as not viable for marriage. Additionally, Lucy as character as nearly absent puts her on the margin of her story just as a spinster would be in society.

The novel also emphasizes the issues of age for women in marriage through the comparison of Polly and Lucy's stories of romance. One of the ways the novel perpetuates the difference between young Lucy and the other young women on a path towards marriage is by showing how, in contrast, Lucy is always an independent adult ready and forced to make her own way, and other women appear childlike and in need.

Lucy is set before the reader as the almost constant adult and Polly the constant child. In fact, the first time that the reader learns Lucy's age is right after she has served as a companion for Miss Marchmont, and we find out that she is 23 (48). Since the reader

is told this is about 9 years after she has left the Brettons, it is easy to calculate that Lucy was likely 14 or 15 when she was visiting with the Brettons. However, the reader does not have this knowledge when they are reading what appears to be simply a narrative of Polly's childhood friendship with Graham. In fact, Lucy appears to be rather a caretaker for Paulina than a child herself. For example, Polly always refers to Lucy as "Miss Snowe," and Lucy often advises her on how to behave as would a caretaker or governess (37). It would be unlikely for most readers to reflect on Lucy's age when Paulina, and her growing friendship with the much older Graham, is such a focus. However, in thinking about Lucy's age, it is strange that she is about the same age as Graham and yet they never seem to be companions or playmates. Since Lucy apparently would visit the Brettons throughout twice a year in her childhood, it is even stranger that they do not even seem to have years of past acquaintance to make them companions even in their teenage years (7). Polly seems the only playmate for Graham in what little story we do get of Lucy's own childhood.

In contrast, Polly is almost seen always playing at adulthood and unable to manage it. She plays wife to both her father and Graham. When her father visits seven year old Polly before taking off to Europe, Polly is constantly at his side playing his companion by serving him tea and bread and butter even though with her size she can barely handle the sugar tongs or have the strength to carry plates to him (18). Still, she performs these tasks like a "little woman" and even sits by his side hemming a handkerchief (19). However, the needle "in her fingers seemed almost a skewer," and that she can barely handle the needle is made evident by her "marking the cambric with a track of minute red dots" (19). After her father has left, she cares for Graham the same

way by bringing him tea and sweets, and calling him “dear boy” as his mother does (25). Just like with her father, she waits on him and sees to his every desire. In her behavior with Graham, Lucy notes “One would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another: now that her father was taken from her, she nestled to Graham” (28). This judgement by the narrator demonstrates that Lucy, in opposition, is not one who *must* have another to live for and in like Polly.

Lucy as independent adult, woman and Polly as child-woman gets reinforced when Polly comes back into the novel at the marriageable age of seventeen. The novel reinforces these two ideas by showing Lucy first as an independent woman, and Polly, as always a child-woman in need of a man. Lucy is shown first as independent woman when she goes to the theater with Graham to see a play. The play, starring Vashti, performed by a famous actress, reinforces the work of independent women and men’s inability to love them the way they do childlike women. The play is presumably a reenactment of the biblical story of how Queen Vashti responded to her husband’s banishment of her when she refused to display herself to the public for his pleasure, and his subsequent marriage to the more submissive Esther (Delahunty and Dignen).¹¹ Vashti is a character known for her defiance of her husband, and Lucy paints her as a marvel of woman’s independence. To Lucy, this character was both “a marvelous sight” and “a mighty revelation.” (291). Lucy calls the actress a “stage empress” (291). Like Lucy, this actress had been “termed

¹¹ Vashti is a biblical character from the book of Esther in the Old Testament. Vashti is the wife of King Ahasuerus who refuses to come before his court to be viewed when he summons her. She was known for her great beauty. Her refusal led to her being banished and the King marrying the submissive and obedient Esther (Delahunty and Dignen).

plain,” but Lucy saw “a queen, fair as the day, turned pale now like the twilight, and wasted in wax flame” (291). Vashti is further described as wonderfully strong:

Before calamity she is a tigress; she rends her woes, shivers them in convulsed abhorrence. Pain, for her, has no result in good; tears water no harvest of wisdom: on sickness, on death itself, she looks with the eye of the rebel. Wicked, perhaps, she is, but also she is strong. (292)

Having experienced unstated tragedies herself, Lucy is mesmerized by the performance, but also mesmerized by the kind of strength character Vashti has. Vashti is, in her eyes, only ‘perhaps’ wicked. But Vashti definitely is powerful in the face of many obstacles. Once a powerful queen, Vashti is stripped of her position by someone more submissive, more childlike.

Graham’s response to the performance highlights how an independent woman like Lucy might be seen by society. Lucy sees that Graham is unmoved by Vashti for “her agony did not pain him, her wild moan--worse than a shriek--did not much move him; her fury revolted him somewhat, but not to the point of horror” (294). Graham’s response illustrates that he does not and, perhaps cannot, empathize with a woman’s trials. Vashti loses her station, her life, and her stability, and Graham is disgusted with her rage. Tellingly, Lucy disappointedly thinks “He judged her as a woman, not an artist; it was a branding judgement.” (294). In other words, Graham’s cannot separate the woman from the artistry, and therefore, finds the performance lacking because he first finds a woman. Since, in the story of Vashti and Esther, Esther is considered blessed with marriage to the King that was once Vashti’s husband because of her submissiveness, the kind of woman

praised by this story is one that seeks their approval in men, not a woman who stands on her own.

The realization of Graham's inability to value a woman of substance is followed by an explanation of its importance to the narrator: "That night was already marked in my book of life, not with white, but with a deep-red cross" (294). As this statement follows Graham's response and precedes the fire that introduces Graham to Polly, her words refer to Graham's response to Vashti. The contrast between a vague whiteness with no stated form and the deep-red cross shows a contrast in feeling. Innocence and happiness is the vague white elusive dream. A deep-red cross is sacrifice and turmoil. Blood here is not washing away to white, as in other Christian metaphors, but remaining. Lucy's life is a symbol of sacrifice without the reward that others have deemed bliss, marriage. Graham's response to the actress, as Lucy understands, is his response to a substantive woman and that kind of woman is damned in Victorian society.

When the fire breaks out in the theater, Lucy proves herself to be an individual who can care for herself. When Graham sees Paula knocked down across the room, he rushes to save the, then, unknown child of his past leaving Lucy to fend for herself. When Paulina's father allows for Graham to assist him with his fallen daughter, he does so under the contention "If you have no lady with you, be it so" (296). Graham quickly clarifies that he does have a lady, but she is "neither hindrance nor incumbrance" (296). In other words, Lucy can stand on her own, and at the same time she is almost a non-presence.

However, Polly, despite her protestations of "I am a person of seventeen," her inability to care for herself and slight frame mark her as child, and also somehow woman.

In meeting Polly again, Lucy sees that “the child of seven, was in the girl of seventeen” (318). While this was in part to describe her personality, it adds to what personality she has, that of a woman-child. Over and over she is described as both a woman and child as she’s seen as growing neither “in wisdom nor in stature”, as “infantile”, a “lamb,” a “little fawn” (318; 325). Furthermore, this is youth that she will never lose for

Her eyes were that of one who can remember, one whose childhood does not fade like a dream, nor whose youth vanish like a sunbeam. She would not take life, loosely and incoherently, in parts, and let one season slip as she entered another: she would retain and add; often review from the commencement, and so grow in harmony and consistency as she grew in years. (312)

Polly may add years but always retains childhood somehow. Every association of Paulina is with youth or sunshine. In fact, hardships that other women might have are beyond her comprehension. When Polly finds out that Lucy is a teacher and does not always like it, she exclaims “why do you go on with it?” (321). To this Lucy has to explain, “Chiefly, I fear, for the sake of the money I get” and “for the roof of shelter I am thus enabled to keep over my head; and for the comfort of mine it gives me to think that while I can work for myself, I am spared the pain of being a burden to anybody” (321). At this Polly claims “Papa, say what you will, I pity Lucy” (322). To which Polly’s father corrects her and says he would wish Polly to the same as Lucy in her circumstance. Furthermore, he chides Polly for not seeing Lucy as “one who had to guard and not be guarded; to act and not be served” (322). Lucy must stand on her own.

The contrast between Lucy and Polly is further build up in the titles of the chapters that describe Lucy and Polly's romantic lives. Polly's eventual marriage and life with Graham is concluded in the chapter titled "Sunshine." Here, Lucy notes:

I *do* believe there are some human beings, so born, so reared, so guided from a soft cradle to a calm and late grave, that no excessive suffering penetrates their lot, and no tempestuous blackness overcasts their journey. And often, these are not pampered, selfish beings, but Nature's elect, harmonious and benign; men and women mild with charity, kind agents of God's kind attributes. (492)

In her view, then, marriage is often a special experience for some and not all. Of herself, she says "If life be a war, it seemed my destiny to conduct it singlehanded" (334). These external forces 'God' and 'Destiny,' mark some for happy lives and others not.

And if Polly's life is sunshine, Lucy's is a storm. The chapter titled "Cloud" immediately follows Polly's "sunshine" chapter and helps bring Lucy's own love story with M. Paul to a close. It is in this chapter that Lucy is kept from seeing M. Paul before he leaves for the West Indies by the conniving of Madame Walravens, Madame Beck, and Père Silas (518). Rather than the chapter "Cloud" bringing the whole conclusion of Lucy's love story, like the chapter "Sunshine" did for Polly, "Cloud" is a chapter that shows the beginning of the end of Lucy's romance with M. Paul. Yet their love story almost seems absurdly impossible from the very beginning. This is because M. Paul Emanuel is not a realistic romantic option for almost any English heroine. When romance does appear to blossom between M. Paul and Lucy, the narrator reminds the reader multiple times of his ill temper and mercurial manner: "the reader is advised not to be in

any hurry with his kindly conclusions, or to suppose, with an over-hasty charity, that from that day M. Paul became a changed character--easy to live with, and no longer apt to flash danger and discomfort round him” (394). Rather in fact, M. Paul “had no control over his own passions; an unspeakable and active aversion impelled him to a war of extermination” (396). Additionally, his views on women of intellect was riddled with contempt, for at one point he threatened vague “doom” if Lucy “every trespassed the limits proper to [her] sex, and conceived a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge” (398). Because to M. Paul “A ‘woman of intellect’ ...was a luckless accident, a thing for which neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as a wife nor worker” (401). That Lucy is a woman of intellect is clear because M. Paul believes that Lucy needs “so much checking, regulating, and keeping down.” (410). Since Lucy plans to have a school of her own much like Madame Beck, it is not clear how Lucy and M. Paul would really suit (408).

M. Paul, as rather an impossible romantic option, does however, make it possible for her to have her own business. Despite the attempts of others, Lucy does reunite herself with Paul before he leaves for the West Indies, and their reunion results in her obtaining her own school and M. Paul as a fiancé. In his absence, Lucy tells the reader: “M. Emanuel was away three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life. Do you scout the paradox? Listen.” (552). To explain the paradox, Lucy first relates how hard she worked on her school and how prosperous it became in M. Paul’s absence, and *then* explains that she was very happy in receiving his letters full of love. Lucy explains: “The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a

relieved heart” (553). Her changed circumstances have much to do with having her own school and means even if she does now have a distant fiancé.

However, M. Paul does not live. In the final paragraphs of the novel, M. Paul is on his return journey home when a storm hits. The storm that goes for 7 days “till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full sustenance” (555). Here nature eats M. Paul. Lucy tells the reader of her pain and M. Paul’s death in vague words with no names: “Oh! A thousand weepers, praying in agony on waiting shores, listened for that voice, but it was not uttered--not uttered till, when the hush came, some could not feel it: till, when the sun returned, his light was night to some!”(555) Clearly, the sun is rising for the next day when others, who have died in the storm, do not rise. Lucy then tells the reader to ignore the death of M. Paul: “Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of the great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture a union and a happy succeeding life” (555). The use of “them” and “theirs” refer to people of “quiet, kind hearts.” The reader cannot help but know that in having ‘to picture’ a happy reunion they are pretending like they did at the beginning of the novel that Lucy’s life passed as other peoples did.

Brontë is also pointing out the fiction of these kind of happy endings. Lucy wants the reader to know that her life is the life of many. Back in the chapter of Sunshine, Lucy notes:

Some real lives do--for some certain days or years--actually anticipate the happiness of Heaven; and, I believe, if such perfect happiness is once felt

by good people (to the wicked it never comes), its sweet effect is never wholly lost. Whatever trials follow, whatever pains of sickness or shades of death, the glory precedent still shines through, cheering the keen anguish, and tinging the deep cloud. (492)

It appears that only be the prosperity that Lucy has felt in her school will be her happiness. The novel ends, one, telling you to imagine her happiness and then telling you the truth of those who tried to prevent her and M. Paul from being together: “Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas ; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell” (555).

The last lines of the novel are an indictment against the foolish reader; against a society that imagines happy endings for all young women when it is not possible. An indictment against society that does not realize that life is not fair. Those who are manipulative and cruel *can* prosper. Those with resources and networks of support, like Polly and Graham, are blessed by nature. But Lucy Snowe is alone.

My purpose in this chapter is to argue that reading Lucy Snowe as aged allows for the reader to see her not as a wife, but an entrepreneur. Comparing Jane Eyre’s “Reader, I married him” to Lucy Snowe’s enigmatic address at the end of *Villette*, reveals a shift in narrative voice that leaves the interpretation of Lucy’s involvement in marriage or in business opened to the reader (*Jane Eyre* 437). Garrett Stewart describes in *Dear Reader* that Brontë’s father urged her to allow *Villette* to end in a happy marriage (252). However, Brontë, rather than giving the reader the sure satisfaction of Lucy Snowe’s marriage, “undertakes no narrative, only discursive revisions” (Stewart 252). The narrative ambivalence allows the reader to decide the fate of Lucy. The ambivalence of

the character and the narrator are important to understand how Lucy's decision can be accepted.

Villette is a novel that almost seems to hide the position of marginal women in plain sight by allowing the reader to imagine something different for young women while telling them the truth. Lucy *is* a spinster; Lucy *is* a woman who works. When she tells the reader at the beginning of the story that she writes this story "I speak of a time gone by: my hair which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now, at last white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow" it is hard not to notice that this also in Lucy's name. She is marked from the beginning as a woman who was beyond the possibility of marriage. And while she allows the reader to imagine a "happy union;" the fact that it *has* to be imagined only makes it clear that imagining is as close as some Victorian women will get to marriage. They will need work to support themselves as they grow into their older age. Fortunately, work is the one thing we are certain Lucy does have.

**Chapter 2: The Older Mother—A Lesson to Victorian Daughters: George
Eliot’s *Felix Holt the Radical***

“If a woman really believes herself to be a lower kind of being, she should place herself in subjection: she should be ruled by the thoughts of her father or husband. If not, let her show her power of choosing something better.” (*Felix Holt* 122)

Introduction:

Women of the Victorian period were always negotiating their reality with the expectations of multiple ideologies that applied to them. The novel as an exploration of human experience helps us understand how that negotiation might feel to an older woman. This chapter is, first, an exploration of the expectations of separate spheres ideology as it relates to middle to upper-class women in motherhood and domesticity; second, it is an exploration of how aging affected Victorian mothers; and, third, this chapter seeks to demonstrate the difficulty of balancing the reality of older Victorian motherhood with the ideologies of motherhood. My exploration involves historical, sociological scholarship and Victorian domestic manuals to build an understanding of how the older mother fits into the ideology of motherhood; I will then explore how one novel addresses the experience of the older mother. Specifically, I turn to George Eliot’s *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866) to explore the loss of power mothers could experience as they aged and how these mothers might subvert their prescribed roles by displays of discontent. I argue that Mrs. Transome’s display of discontent with domesticity and motherhood as an older woman helps guide the younger Esther into a more egalitarian marriage and a better future as a woman.

There has not been a great deal written about older mothers of the Victorian period in either literature or scholarship. This chapter looks to bring into focus the experience of older motherhood often by the absence of how it is addressed in literature, Victorian ideologies, and scholarship and then look at how the novel helps us understand that experience for older women. In literature, older women characters often have a few common characteristics.¹² First and foremost, they are often flat characters who have little influence on the protagonist.¹³ They might be witches, muses, eccentrics, or serve merely symbolic roles that may offer insights to the readers. Second, authors that create older women characters often do not give the reader a sense of the older woman's thoughts or emotions. In other words, older women are often flat characters who serve as symbols, and their own history and experiences do not overshadow the protagonist's journey to self-actualization. For example, Dicken's *Bleak House* character Miss Flite is an eccentric old woman, who serves in an almost muse-like capacity. She is a poor, old woman obsessed with the Jaryndyce and Jaryndyce case. Mostly, Miss Flite exemplifies the terrors of the Chancery. Living with cages full of birds, Miss Flite's naming of the birds demonstrates what an obsession with a law case can do to a person: suck away Hope, Joy, and Youth, and leave Rags, Folly, Waste, and Ruin (Dickens 211). She plans to release these birds only once the Jaryndyce and Jaryndyce case has been decided. Readers get an understanding of her as a kind, old, poor woman, but she is on the whole

¹² To be clear, I am not claiming these features are universal for older women characters in Victorian novels or that each older woman character would embody each of these traits. However, I am noting common emerging features.

¹³ E.M. Forster definition of flat character is a helpful addition here. He describes characters as either flat or round. A flat character is "constructed around a single idea or quality" and they are "unalterable for the reason that they were not changed by circumstance" (Forster 67; 69). This is often the case with older women characters, especially Miss Flite.

presented without emotional complexity and serves mostly to symbolize what will be taken and left to Richard Carstone if he continues his obsession with the case.

Victorian scholars in various fields have begun wonderful work constructing the experience of getting older for both men and women and across classes. Because old age is not experienced the same across gender or class, it is obviously impossible for any one scholar to pin down what it felt like, looked like, or even how old age was thought about for any one class or gender. The experience of age for the working poor or those in poverty has been to some degree easier to construct because of the extensive records that were conducted and kept on the poor. There is also a wealth of scholarship on middle-class women in the home, in marriage, as spinsters, and as New Women, but again, the older woman is often left out when scholars address those experiences. In terms of motherhood, specifically, many scholars have looked at it as an ideology, an experience, an identity, and they do so through several filters: geography, class, anthropology, autobiography, biography, and fiction. However, scholars often skim over or fail to address the older middle-class mother in both reality and in fiction. In this chapter, I try to paint a more vivid picture of older middle-class motherhood.

The Ideology and Reality of Domesticity

In order to discuss motherhood, it is important to first discuss the ideology of domesticity, or home life, and its realities. As previously mentioned, separate spheres ideology dictated that women were relegated to the private sphere, the home, in which they were both mother and wife. When discussing the imagined role of a mother then, it is nearly impossible to separate it from the domestic ideology that it is entwined with. By the 1850s there was a strong domestic ideology that favored a nuclear family (father,

mother, and children) within one household. Scholars such as Karen Chase and Michael Levenson in *The Spectacle of Intimacy* demonstrate that Victorians were obsessed with the idea of the nuclear family and domesticity, and their print culture demonstrated that obsession in the wealth of advice manuals, essays, short stories, and letters. Chase and Levenson's research shows that there was a hunger to display the idea of home and family, and that hunger cultivated a norm of what home and family would look like. The vision of domesticity that was often displayed as the standard of family was a happy youthful couple and their happy youthful children (7).¹⁴ In this idea of family, a narrative existed in which a young woman would meet her future husband, leave her parents to live with her husband, have and care for children, and create a home atmosphere of purifying, educational Christianity and warmth. The ideology rarely suggested life with extended family members, the lives of parents as they got older, common law marriages, unhappy marriages, unmarried children, new wives that moved in with their husband's family, second marriages, or fathers at home. Many Victorian scholars have worked to complicate and bring into focus what the real lives of Victorian households looked like across classes, and many continue to try to complicate this picture.¹⁵ While this was not an uncontested narrative of family in the Victorian period or an uncontested narrative by

¹⁴ Chase and Levenson also explain that Victorians desired to display the home in print because "so estimable, so complementary to national character, the virtues of an English home should not hide their light in the parlor" (7). Consequently, this meant that the home was constantly under surveillance even while domesticity was being defined. From this, Chase and Levenson showed that this led to the theater of spectacle: "The norm needed and cultivated the disturbance. An eagerness to display home virtue fed an appetite for domestic failure"(12). The desire to view domestic failure shows up in both periodicals and in novels throughout the Victorian period. For example, Chase and Levenson point to Caroline Norton's essays that exposed how she was abused by her husband and kept from her children. So the standards of family were not present without contrasts.

¹⁵ John Tosh's *A Man's Place* is an important work that demonstrates men's relationship to the home and how separate spheres ideology made that fraught over the Victorian period. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's momentous work *Family Fortunes* similarly highlights the disparities on Victorian ideology and reality in family life.

Victorian scholarship, it was the dominant narrative about domesticity in the period that was being constantly sought after, fought against, and revised.

The reality of Victorian middle-class families was often more complex than the ideology suggested. While some Victorian families were composed of what we would consider the nuclear family, families of all classes often lived in homes that housed extended family members through multiple generations. Scholars such as Pat Thane, Claudia Nelson, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, among others, have noted that homes across classes could house grandparents, adult siblings, mother and father, and children. It is important to note, that at some point in their lives, most Victorians married. In fact, about 90 percent of the population of Victorian England married (Nelson 15).¹⁶ By 1860, marriages of twenty years or more produced on average 6.16 live births (Jalland 175). By 1915, with the increased use and availability of birth control, the number of children produced in marriages of twenty years or more had steadily declined to about 2.43 (Jalland 175). This picture of family life gets further complicated by the death and life expectancy of women and men. For instance, almost 20 percent of marriages experienced the death of a spouse within 10 years (Murdoch 87). If women made it past childbearing years, they would, on average, outlive men.¹⁷ Toward the beginning of the Victorian period (1841), the life expectancy for women was about 42 and for men, 39

¹⁶ Lydia Murdoch's work *Daily Life of Victorian Women* notes that though there was an increase in common law marriages within the late 18th century and early 19th century, legal marriage was on the rise by the mid 19th century (75). Additionally, common law marriages were more common among the working classes and some radical groups in the middle- to upper-classes (Murdoch 75).

¹⁷ For every thousand live births, about five mothers died (Jalland 171). Pat Jalland also notes that the number of deaths of women during childbirth does not include those who died during miscarriages because miscarriages were not recorded the same way as live births (171). Due to this, it's hard to know how many Victorian women died due to the complications of pregnancy. It also is important to note that much of this historical information does not distinguish between classes although many scholars note that middle- to upper-classes could likely survive childbirth better for having better access to doctors services.

(Thane 479). By 1891, life expectancy for women was 54 and men 48 (Thane 479).

However, life expectancy does not accurately help us understand who may have lived into old age in a family. Pat Thane clarifies that

The popular belief that in the ‘past’ most people died in midlife, around the ages of 35 to 40, arises from the confusion between life expectancy at birth, in the centuries of high infant and child mortality which preceded the twentieth century, and the survival chances of those who survived the hazardous early years of life. (3)

In fact, if men or women made it into adulthood, and for women past childbearing years, they often lived to what we consider today old age. Both death and life occurred in abundance. The death of a husband, wife, parent, sibling or child could either remove a member from one household or add a member to other households. So when imagining the lives and, more particularly, the families of the Victorian period, it is important to see those members as changed by numerous circumstances and, often, not nuclear.

Marriage and Motherhood

Despite the fickleness of life and death, most Victorian families were formed through marriage, and in marriage, women’s place was both well marked and fluid. Marriage functioned as the “economic and social building block” for the middle classes (Davidoff and Hall 322). As such, it was as much a political unit as it was a social practice. The home was a reflection of the health of a family unit and a reflection of the health of the nation state. Partly, this was due to how Victorians looked to their Queen as a representation for home life. When Queen Victoria married Prince Albert three years after her coronation in 1837, their marriage and their life with what was to eventually be

their nine children became the context for how Victorians viewed the power of their Queen—as a matriarch of both her home and of Britain. It became a common enough phrase for women to be thought of as “queens in their own homes” (Davidoff and Hall 154). Or, interestingly, Barbara Thaden notes it as “Every mother was a queen” (3). Rhetorically, then, the domestic ideology that saw the home as the woman’s domain reinforced women’s place by seemingly granting them the rule of their home through the rule of their queen.

Additionally, women were granted this ruling through assumed inherent spiritual virtue. Most domestic manuals from the late 18th century and through mid-19th century portray not only visions of the home as a religious and moral center, but also the woman as the arbiter of that moral center.¹⁸ As the moral center, ideally, women were selfless, sacrificing whatever was necessary for their husbands and children; they were the symbol of purity in the home and a moralizing influence for their family; and they were the giver of tender and constant love. In this role, a woman is always seen as a mother, regardless of whether she is wife or the mother of children. A woman’s innate nature was imagined as that of a nurturer, a mother. Pat Jalland has noted, regardless of a woman’s status she was constantly defined by motherhood: “Women who were women were potential mothers, actual mothers, or retired mothers” (5). Motherhood was then an identity, an ideology, and a career.

¹⁸ Davidoff and Hall do a thorough tracing of the effect of William Cowper and Hannah More as foundational advice manuals that build up a particularly domestic rhetoric concerning the home. Particularly, they build a rhetoric that helped build the idea of separate spheres as natural for both cultural reasons and religious ones. Part of this involved giving particular instruction to women over household management, manners, behavior, and child rearing. By the time Sarah Stickney Ellis came on to the scene in the 1830s, religion was no longer the center of the message and instruction to women on their work in the home was solidified.

In this idealized career, married women had both the responsibility of managing the home and the children and influencing the morality of their husbands while also being paradoxically dependent on and submissive to their husbands. Barbara Thaden's work on *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction* explains that the imagined role of the mother and the reality of motherhood for Victorian women were conflicting roles:

which would plague any nineteenth-century middle-class mother, conflicts created by family structure, by the duties and responsibilities of the bourgeois wife, and by the legal status of married women, all of which made it impossible for a bourgeois woman to realize anything approaching the idealized role she was expected to play within her household; her social and legal status made her role as moral arbiter questionable if not ludicrous to anyone over the age of six, while the educational system from cradle to college ensured the ever-widening gulf between male and female spheres of employment, interests, and empathies, ensuring that a mother's sons would become strangers and her daughters victims. (7)

Marriage, and by extension motherhood, was then constantly a sight of conflicting power for women. The reality suggested that women might have very little power to execute her role that the ideology supposedly bestowed on her. For some, the ideology could empower women where the reality of women's social and legal position did not. For instance, Caroline Norton's published letter "A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill" in 1839 uses the care and morality that women supposedly had by nature to help fight for her and other women's ability to obtain custody of their children. Likewise, in the later end of the nineteenth century, some women fought the Contagious

Diseases Acts (1864; 1866; 1869) by often citing women's natural purity.¹⁹ Elizabeth Langland's *Nobody's Angels* makes a similar argument by noting that since bourgeois women were the managers in the home, they had power then over the servants they employed and could dictate the experience of the working class in contrast to themselves. In some ways, then, these ideologies could help empower women politically.

However, despite ideologies' abilities to empower, the ideology of domesticity, and, particularly, of motherhood were impossible in reality and often damaging. Claudia Klaver and Ellen Rosenman note in their edited collection *Other Mothers* that "no one could live up to perfect selflessness, purity, and love connoted by 'mother'; all mothers are other mothers" (Klaver and Rosenman 1).²⁰ All blame for any error of the child could fall on the mother. Since all women were also the nurturers of all, and the family was a representation of the health of the nation state, they could even be blamed for the faults of society. In "Modern Mothers," Victorian contemporary Eliza Lynn Linton's claims "the young are what the mothers make them, just as society is what the matrons allow it to be; and if these mothers and matrons did their duty, we should hear no more of the willfulness of the one or the shameless vagaries of the other. The remedy for each lies in their own hands only" ("Modern Mothers"). Clearly, all women are mothers who could *always* be in error.

¹⁹ Judith Walkowitz historical book *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* extensively explores women's fight with the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDA). Her work looks at how women used the idea of women's innate purity to show that the CDAs, which was enforced by plainclothes police officers taking suspected prostitutes in for medical inspection, violated that purity and could potentially create more prostitutes rather than preventing them.

²⁰ Thaden notes that even if the role of being the moral arbiter of the family had its difficulties for women, it was not completely without its benefits. Being the moral arbiter gave women a kind of authority and status that they may not have had previously. In previous centuries, women were regarded as "reproducing machines, whose health and well-being, like that of children, was of no importance" (Thaden 54).

Despite the expectation that all women should help create the health of society through their mothering in both the home and in society, mothering within the home was often a distant affair. One of the reasons for the difficulty in fulfilling the role of the ideal mother was that the majority of a middle-class mother's work was that of a manager. Children of middle- to upper-class mothers were often left in the charge of wet or dry nurses, servants, nannies, or boarding schools (Thaden 46). Parents, even mothers, often spent very little time with their children, seeing them as little as an hour a day (Thaden 46). Victorian domestic manuals reveal that middle- to upper-class mothers were in charge of, or at least expected to be in charge of their children's diet, their education by choosing their tutors, readings and boarding schools, and their spiritual growth.²¹ Claudia Nelson's research on family relations shows that this supervisory role was just that, supervisory, and in that way important: "For instance, if [mothers] did not make their children's food or clothing, they nonetheless chose it; it was assumed that they would vet at least their daughters' reading and responsible mothers exercised absolute authority over their children's social circles, forbidding contact with prospective playmates who came from the wrong kind of family" (52). From these expectations on the management of children, Thaden claims that "a middle-class mother's primary duty towards her children was not to wash their diapers or to pick up their toys but to *pay them more attention*" (114). Since most women of the middle classes had servants to take care of the physical needs of their children, it was the lack of attention to any issues of diet, spirituality, education, and socialization of her children that was judged to cause harm

²¹ Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Mothers of England* is chapter after chapter of instruction on how to manage the care of children. Again, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes* goes into this in considerable detail.

(Thaden 112). Yet, since most of mothering might be done without much contact with children, the difficulty in making sure that they were raised appropriately seems an almost impossible task.

Rhetoric of Victorian Motherhood and Older Motherhood

This problematic position of power of the Victorian mother was compounded in the constant rhetoric of Victorian motherhood. Contemporarily, we know that to view a woman as simply a mother, no matter her age or marital status, is problematic. Women are not simply reproductive machines that before or after giving birth are merely biological nurturers. However, we also know that even today, women are still often defined by the ability to be wife and mother, and in both of these roles, somehow naturally a mother to both husband and child. Contemporary TV commercials still display the oafish floundering husband unable to figure out how to wash dishes, care for children, and vacuum. This cultural rhetoric perpetuates and reiterates the idea that wives are innate mothers who must care and nurture the husband and their children. Even the simple JIF slogan of “Choosy moms choose JIF” shows that the mother is still seen as the manager of her children, much like a Victorian mother. If this is still a base rhetoric for how we advertise, how much more powerful was this idea to Victorians? While the question of woman’s nature and what work she should or could do were clearly up for debate in the Victorian period, the power of the rhetoric of motherhood was one that defined all British women.

The power of this rhetoric helps explain why, as scholars, we have failed to examine the experience of the older Victorian mother. Ellen Ross makes a similar point about working class motherhood in her book *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast*

London. While her scholarship does significant and important work at looking at how the ideology of motherhood affected the lives of working class women and their children from 1870-1918, her explanation of how the scholarship on motherhood has been limited by our own assumptions of motherhood is helpful.²² Ross explains “Because most scholars are committed to motherhood as a biological given permanent in the human condition, they have been reluctant to examine it as a set of interlocking practices with a history or anthropology of variation and change” (Ross 5). To this, I would add, that part of our reluctance is to view women as older and conceive of how their identity as mothers and individuals might change. The wealth of rhetoric within the Victorian period that focused on women by the roles that they were meant to fill in their youth—that is marriage and motherhood—and the wealth of scholarly rhetoric that covers those same topics demonstrates our own difficulty in seeing women outside of these roles, and seeing how older women might be neglected in both.

One reason scholarship has been sparse on looking at the older middle-class mother has been, in part, because of our contemporary beliefs about old age. Pat Thane notes that it is a 20th century social science narrative that in the pre-industrial past few people lived into old age (1). This furthers the idea that “old people had a rarity value which meant that not only were they financially less costly, they were culturally more valued and respected than in the present. Families took for granted that they cared for older relatives and so they imposed little or no charge on public welfare” (Thane 1). Our

²² Ross’s work is focused on bringing to the forefront the physical and emotional work of working class mothers that often took on the brunt of taking care of the children and husband both in terms of nurturing and emotional labor. Ross sees working class motherhood as neglected by scholarship since the focus is primarily on middle-class motherhood. Explicitly, Ross claims that the survival of the family was the work of the mother in many of London’s poor and working class families (9).

scholarly interests often follow our own lines of thinking; if we do not give much thought to older people as a population with their own set of needs, we likely do not pursue those ideas in our scholarship. As scholars of cultural history, Thane notices “more attention has been paid to the history of childhood, youth, adolescence, marriage, sickness, even madness and death, than to old age, despite the importance of old age as an aspect of identity” (Thane 2). Though, for purely numerical reasons, it makes sense that scholars have paid less attention to old age in the 19th century. Susannah Ottaway in her study of 18th century aging argues that old age only becomes a more defined population category because of the increased numbers of the elderly (13). The growth itself then led to discussion of how old age should be defined because a growing older population has needs that a younger population does not. Ottaway demonstrates that this begins a rhetoric of the elder community as a burden on society and helps set the stage for talk of pensions and retirement (13).²³ Thane’s *Old Age in English History* demonstrates how that discussion comes to a full debate by the *end* of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. This historical arc then makes it somewhat clear that the discussion of the old was one that even Victorian’s took to with some reluctance.

Additionally, the focus of much of 19th century domestic advice manuals on motherhood were clearly focused on the young mother. For example, a quick perusal of Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *The Mothers of England* (1843) shows an interest in guiding the mind and manners of young mothers to be examples to their children. Page after page of instruction to these mothers is about how they should guide their young children. Of

²³ Interestingly, the nineteenth century had a lower elder population in previous centuries at 7 percent in part due to its high birth rate (Thane 3).

course, logically it makes sense to need guidance as a young mother rather than as an older mother with raised children. However, the lack of guidance on the conduct of the older mother points to a problem of identity in women's lives as they aged. If your entire identity has been wrapped up in marriage and motherhood by a culture that encourages you to do so, what was left for women who aged past motherhood? Thaden remarks that "Victorian mothers/authors remind us that while nineteenth-century mothers were expected to make a great emotional investment in every child, social and legal conventions made it very unlikely that they themselves would gain any *return* on their investment" (8). Remembering that young mothers were charged mostly with the management of their children and their household, why would their children, who likely spend little time with them, invest emotionally in their mothers or even consider their mothers after reaching adulthood?

Fortunately, there are two popular Victorian writers of domestic manuals that did address older women, motherhood and their conduct to some extent. Dinah Maria Mulock Craik's chapter "Growing Old" from *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (1858) and Eliza Lynn Linton's *Girl of the Period* (1868-1888) both focus on women's experience as they got older. However, their purpose was to highlight the view of all women as mothers and show that older women's duty was to reconcile themselves to the continued role of mothering self-sacrifice but at an even greater extreme. In their opinion, as women aged, they were encouraged to forget themselves and serve others. In other words, aging ought, in their opinion, to teach women to become comfortable being identified as only a mother and often ignored. Craik describes how women will undoubtedly lose their influence over men as they age: "be her wit ever so sparkling, her

influence ever so pure and true, she will often find her listener preferring bright eyes to intellectual conversation, and the satisfaction of his mind. And who can blame him?" (336).²⁴ Linton similarly argues that all women can be loved past youth as long as those women learn how to be ignored because an older woman is loved because: "she is essentially a mother—that is, a woman who can forget herself; who can give without asking to receive" (90). Craik and Linton demonstrate that aging is a cultural process that demands women leave off any other identity of themselves besides motherhood that they may have formed and find their identity in service to any living relatives and children. Linton, particularly, notes that a truly noble woman is "essentially in retirement" because her "influence is necessarily confined" to her domestic life (19). Similarly, Kay Heath argues that the matron was expected to move into "sexless service" putting aside her own attractions and focusing on mothering the rest of society (Heath 74). Yet, older motherhood is one that has less social capital than young motherhood since older women are told that essentially their conduct should be an act of disappearance.

Additionally, according to Linton and Craik, getting older as a woman is almost always a dreaded experience because it will likely be felt as a loss. Linton, particularly, notes that for a woman:

Youth and beauty make up so much of their personal value, so much of their natural final cause, that when these are gone many feel as if their whole career were at an end, and as if nothing were left to them now that they are no longer young enough to be loved as girls are loved. (309)

²⁴ Craik's work and her chapter over growing older is mostly referring to single women. Since all women are mothers, Craik's words here are still relevant to thinking about older motherhood.

The equating of aging with loss of a “whole career” and beauty with youth makes it clear that the absence of youth or the appearance of age can be experienced as a loss of identity. Craik describes a woman’s aging as a time of crisis:

Without doubt, it is a trying crisis in a woman’s life...when she begins to suspect she is “not so young as she used to be;....—the grim wolf, old age, is actually showing his teeth in the distance; and no courteous blindness on the part of these said friends, no alarmed indifference on her own, can neutralise the fact that he is, if still far off, in sight....To feel that you have had your fair half at least of the ordinary terms of years allotted to mortals; that you have no right to expect to be any handsomer, or stronger, or happier than you are now; that you have climbed to the summit of life, whence the next step must necessarily be decadence;—ay, though you do not feel it, though the air may be as fresh, and the view as grand—still, you know that it is so. Slower or faster, you are going down-hill. (316-317).

Craik here notes not just the loss that women might experience as they get older, but identifies that in women’s older age, they may have no hope to experience anything better than what has come before.

Linton and Craik do offer some hope to Victorian women about aging by suggesting that if they can resolve themselves to their losses, to growing older, to their new roles, they may retain/gain some kind of wizened beauty. Linton suggests this when she claims that “harmony is the very keystone of beauty” (Linton 312). Craik also maintains that there is a joy in growing old if one can reconcile her life with it by giving

up the powers of youth and accept the change of her life: “Yes, if women could only believe it, there is a wonderful beauty even in growing old. The charm of expression arising from softened temper or ripened intellect, often amply atones for the loss of form and colouring; and, consequently, to those who never could boast either of these latter, years give much more than they take away” (329). But Craik’s claims about the harmony of old age seem to wring more true for those women who may not have had much beauty or intellect, suggesting that old age can give to them what youth could not. And, somehow, women’s resignation to these biological factors will help induce harmony that may bring older beauty. Craik’s claim also enlightens us to an unintentional claim about women in their youth: women are seen as more their own agents in life when they have youth, or as youth appears to suggest, beauty. In women’s youth, they have beauty to influence men. Since it was the beauty of youth that appeared to give women an influence on men which in turn got them married and with children, the beauty of getting older does not seem to suggest that it comes with any accompanying powers besides resignation that *somehow* leads to its own kind of harmonious beauty. According to Craik and Linton, this is not to say that there is not beauty in older age, but, that beauty is often centered on the physical presentation of youth: smooth unwrinkled skin, vibrant hair, rosy cheeks. When aging takes those away, beauty can only be found in hidden mental states: resignation and harmony. Understandably, the loss of the appearance of youth might be harder for any woman of the Victorian period who understands that the appearance of youth is easily perceived, but harmonious beauty through resignation relies on societies ability to see the inner workings of the individual whose outer trappings may no longer interest them.

The Duties and Position of Older Mothers

What can be gleaned from the work of sociologists and historians gives a brief understanding of what responsibilities and duties older mothers and grandmothers would likely have fulfilled. Mothers of daughters of 16 years were expected to socialize and help bring their daughters out. They would chaperone their daughters at social events where eligible and appropriate bachelors would be available to meet them. Keeping a watchful eye, mothers would then bring about a suitable and, hopefully, advantageous match for their daughters (Nelson 52).²⁵ But after daughters had married and left or when sons married and brought in wives, the role of the older mother could be complicated because family responses to aging relatives varied. As Nelson explains, these responses ran “the gamut from fear to contempt to admiration to love. The diversity of attitudes towards the old, and the corresponding diversity of the roles that such people might occupy within the Victorian family, reminds us that the strength of kinship ties was by no means constant from household to household.” (Nelson 134). Likewise, it is hard to make any particular claim about how an older middle-class woman might experience her own family life, but is easy to imagine how the ideologies might lead to frustrations. If a young wife moved into her husband’s home with a living mother, she might resent the dominion of her mother-in-law which ideologically should be hers. Likewise, a mother or mother-in-law might feel that she loses her place of dominion when a son returns home or brings home a wife. What is clear about a woman’s position in the home, is that it is not a point of stasis. As she ages, innumerable factors might give her more or less power

²⁵ The role of fathers was to negotiate their daughter’s settlements (Nelson 52).

in her own sphere. The older woman's position can be tenuous in a way in which a man of the same time and place would not have had to worry about.

Additionally, women's reduced position in their own homes was reinforced by ideas of women's regression into a second childhood as they aged. Some medical discourse of the nineteenth century notes that women past menopause regressed to a pre-pubescent state (King 9).²⁶ Particularly, because of the actual physical generation that came with aging and the perception of what that might mean for women in the home, women past menopause were often reduced to "secondary social roles such as household management, and even these duties were conceived as progressively impaired" by their aging (Jalland and Hooper 281). However, this view of older age as a second childhood was not just a medical view, but one that was repeated in children's literature. Teresa Mangum's essay "Little Women: The Aging Female Character in Nineteenth-Century British Children's Literature" demonstrates how old age for women was conceived of as a second childhood and how this relegated women to the same social position as children—in hidden rooms and as people to be managed (63). Mangum notes that in children's fiction "female characters who age beyond their productive years find themselves eclipsed by the master social narrative of the nineteenth-century—the belief in separate spheres" (64). Mangum goes on to claim that "Advocates for the division between public life and a protected domestic space for women and children promised that by trading financial autonomy, economic productivity, and political rights for reproductive work and child care, middle-class women would accrue endless if ineffable

²⁶ King notes that much of the medical discourse tended towards a model of regression or a model of unnatural masculinity that saw women as gaining unattractive qualities of men (9).

moral and spiritual powers” (64). Yet, these mothers were often treated like children, and if they did get to rule their roost, it was still under the authority of a husband and might be usurped by a son, a daughter-in-law or someone else.

Menopause and Freedom

However, getting older, much like how some of the ideologies helped empower some women, could also bring freedom for middle-class women. Particularly, post-menopausal women were often encouraged by the medical community to turn their attention toward the betterment of their family or society in acceptable charities or educational circles (King 3).²⁷ Jeanette King, Pat Jalland and John Hooper, and Kay Heath notice that menopause, as conceptualized by medical doctors, was conceived of in a variety of ways, but there was a consensus among the medical community to see menopause as a turning point at which a woman might be considered old.²⁸ Once considered ‘old,’ women might gain some freedoms. Women who no longer had the responsibility of childbearing and childrearing, might choose to work outside the home in ways beyond charity and more towards social activism. For example, Victorian and women’s suffrage campaigner, Frances Power Cobbe, claimed that once “a woman’s family is complete and her children are grown up” a woman “may then enter or return to public life” (qtd in Jalland and Hooper 127). Likewise, Jeanette King demonstrates that

²⁷ It was normal for young married women of the middle-class to take part in society by joining charitable organizations or voluntary associations. Women’s work in charities was seen as part of their natural maternal nature of caring for others and of their moral purity. Women’s philanthropic work in organizations grew to new heights in the Victorian period (Murdoch 50). By the middle of the century, there were hundreds charity organizations and societies ran entirely by women (Murdoch 50). However, Charles Dicken’s *Bleak House* (1853) characters Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle are reminders that women took part in various charities and philanthropy work, and their work was not always smiled upon.

²⁸ Explanations of how menopause was experienced varied from doctor to doctor. Menopause was seen in varied lights as a disease, a relief, a part of hysteria, a loss of women’s prime function, a reversion to childhood, and a progression into masculinity. The above-mentioned scholars all point to the various interpretations of menopause for women.

older women did make up much of those who fought for women's rights in the second half of the century (5). Older women then did have an ability to move outside of the home and participate in public life in a way that may have been less acceptable as young mothers.

Still, it is necessary to note that the agency of older feminists in the mid-century and after does not parallel perfectly with portrayals of older women within novels. The older women who took up the cause of women's rights within the Victorian period were the exception. However, they were part of a real cultural discussion of women's place. Particularly, the Victorian women suffragettes and the older mother of the Victorian novel can, at times, share one important similarity: older women's discontent with women's place in Victorian society. Novelistic portrayals of aging mothers and their lack of power help us understand how aging might be understood or experienced for other middle-class mothers and what that can mean for younger women of the same time.

Felix Holt: The Radical

I turn now to George Eliot's *Felix Holt: The Radical* for an exploration of older motherhood. I use this novel for a couple of reasons. First, it is an intentionally political novel in that it comments on the Second Reform Act of 1867 through an exploration of the first Reform Act of 1832. Second, it is a novel that has a complex older woman character in Mrs. Transome. The politics of the novel encompasses more than just one man or even one gender. This political contextualization is important for both understanding Eliot's context for the eponymous Felix Holt, the protagonist, but also for understanding the political position of mothers as they aged.

The novel is set during the time of the Reform Act of 1832 and explores the election process in the small town of Treby Magna.²⁹ Published only one year prior to the Second Reform Act of 1867 which expanded the vote to working class men, Eliot's novel uses the first Reform Act as a commentary on the second act ("Reform Bill").³⁰ The novel, in part, weighs the pros and cons of working class men obtaining a vote and a voice in government through two Radicals: middle- to upper-class Harold Transome's and working-class, well-educated Felix Holt. Holt's character makes it clear that a vote for all men is desired, but only if those men are educated enough to use their vote wisely and to be aware of how to conduct themselves till they have a vote by using their power of public opinion (Eliot 292).³¹ The lack of a vote for the working man and their fight for a vote echoes the similar fight women had for enfranchisement and citizenship. The novel does not suggest that women should have a vote. However, it makes a similar argument for the working man that it does for women, well-educated and informed women should make a better place for themselves by, first, becoming better themselves.

Both contemporary Victorian critics and Victorian scholars have commented on Eliot's seemingly ambiguous relationship with politics and political activism in relation to her life and her novels. Avrom Fleishman extensively explores the political

²⁹ The Reform Act of 1832 was passed to shift the concentrated power of the landed gentry in the electoral college system that concentrated representations of votes within small boroughs that were mostly occupied by the gentry ("Reform Bill"). The bill also expanded the qualifications of those who were allowed to vote to some of the wealthier middle-class men with properties, but still excluded the lower middle-class and working class men ("Reform Bill").

³⁰ In English and Welsh electorates, this act increased the voting pool from 500,000 in 1866 to 1.25 million in 1868 (Ford 211). This act gave substantial voting representation to the urban and working class man in a way that had not existed prior.

³¹ After the publication of *Felix Holt, the Radical*, Eliot published separately an "Address to Working Men" in January 1868 at the request of her editor, John Blackwood. This expands on Felix/Eliot's position that ignorance must first be addressed in the working class before they can be given a vote.

engagement of George Eliot to conclude that Eliot, particularly in *Felix Holt*, is anti-political because of the lack of trust she demonstrates in politics generally and the greater trust she appears to place in the idea of creating a more educated and informed culture from the working classes as a form of slow political reform. In regard to the political position of women, particularly, Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi shows that Eliot's relationship with the Victorian feminist movement and the Woman Question was fraught because, though she was a reader and supporter of John Stuart Mill and had other friends involved in the women's movement, she was a quiet supporter of the political progress of women (139). Over the years, feminist critics such as Elizabeth Langland and Elaine Showalter have voiced their dissatisfaction with Eliot's lack of action and the lack of action on the part of her female characters (Atkinson 83-84). Hadjiafxendi, however, notes, that one of the reasons that Eliot herself gave for her lack of engagement was her commitment to writing novels (139). While Fleishman's assessment of Eliot's engagement in politics and opinions is well supported, I disagree that Eliot's belief in a changing people and changing culture is somehow anti-political. Eliot clearly had little hope in the political system as is, but that does not make her or her novel anti-political. In fact, Eliot's political action is to change minds through her work.

To start, the mere act of reading *Felix Holt* begs the reader to consider the political position of men and women. Specifically, the interconnectedness of Felix Holt's story with Esther's and, therefore, Harold Transome's and Mrs. Transome's does not allow the reader to ignore the connection. By first encountering the title of the novel, the reader has expectations of the political focus, and that its focus will seemingly be about, first and foremost, men. The reader is warned away from that kind of reading by the

narrator's address at the end of the first chapter, "This history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life" (50).³² Alison Booth, Rita Bode, and Heather Milton have noted that the political position of women portrayed in this novel comes from the interplay of the private and public. Particularly, Alison Booth notes the novel has a sense of "hushed politics" that "implies that the social progress relies on some form of fellow-feeling and on the sympathy that women are conditioned to extend rather than on practical measures or on the active pursuit of change usually reserved for men" (Booth 145). Likewise, Rita Bode notes that the novel portrays the political through the private, quiet struggle of women with men, focusing in on Esther Lyon as the one "who articulates most directly the restrictions with which women grapple" (Bode 769). Heather Milton tries to wed what some have considered the two separate plots of the novel (the election and the love story of Esther, Harold, and Felix) by showing that the private life effects the public life. (56) Specifically focusing on failing motherhood, she states "the development of character and morality this is so influential on politics is largely represented through women's private lives" (Milton 57). More particularly, Milton notes that through Mrs. Transome and Esther "Eliot promotes a feminized subjectivity as one for the working classes to emulate and explores the political implications of improving the self internally rather than externally through the attainments of greater rights" (58). While many critics have written on the problematic position of Eliot's politics, I seek not to make any particular statement about what Eliot intended politically, but, rather, what

³² That Eliot had a sense of a wider public that was being reached was noted by the response of Victorian critics. Juliette Atkinson notes that Victorian critics saw *Felix Holt* as a novel that distinguished Eliot as a writer, even going so far as to say that Eliot had replaced Jane Austen in "the first place among our lady novelists" (68).

her novel demonstrates particularly about the political position of older mothers in Victorian society and how the exploration of that position might help readers and women at large think differently about their position in society.

Particularly, the private life of older womanhood and how it intersects with the public life of men becomes immediately apparent when the novel opens by introducing Mrs. Transome as a woman “between fifty or sixty” who has spent her life trying to achieve power through youthful guile, marriage, and motherhood (13). In her youth, Mrs. Transome was a notable beauty and wit. She did whatever possible to have what she considered the best life had to offer: money and power. She married a wealthy, landed older idiot husband in order to have the management of an estate and money. She had an affair with the family lawyer, Jermyn, in order to keep the family estate when it rightfully belonged to another family. She prayed with fervor for her legitimate first child to die so she could leave it to her second illegitimate child, Harold. She tried to leave the estate to Harold because she believed that in him she might be a counselor, having almost equal power and access to money as her son. As the narrator sums it up: Mrs. Transome’s “part in life had been that of the clever sinner, and she was equipped with the views, the reasons, and the habits which belonged to the character” (17). Clearly, Mrs. Transome is not a character that is presented as a heroine or even that of an innocent victim. However, Mrs. Trasome’s life, up to the point we meet her, demonstrates the kind of work women might have to do in order to have access to a semblance of the same power and wealth men have. When the novel begins, there is a shift in Mrs. Transome’s work and power due both to the return of her illegitimate son and her son’s interpretation of what a mother “somewhere beyond fifty” should be and do. In this way, Mrs. Transome quickly

becomes a political representation of older women's position in Victorian society by demonstrating limited agency available to middle-class to upper-class mothers as they aged.

Mrs. Transome's position as an older woman whose life is affected by the whims of the men in her life without much recourse is notable. The chapter opens by describing Mrs. Transome while she waits for the return of Harold from a fifteen-year absence abroad. Before meeting her son, Mrs. Transome hopes "to reap an assured joy" in the return of a "rich, clever, possibly....tender son" because with him by her side she might feel that "the doubtful deeds of her life were justified by the result" (15). She desired that Harold

should feel that he was come home to a mother who was to be consulted on all things, and who could supply his lack of the local experience necessary to an English landholder....Life would have little meaning for her if she were to be gently thrust aside as a harmless old woman. (17)

In this list of hopes, Mrs. Transome's desire for agency in her own life and her awareness of her position as an older woman are evident. Her youth was a struggle for agency within her own life. Her one hope now being that her motherly investment in her son will encourage him to view her like a child to a mother—not a man to a woman. However, her hopes for filial love to grant her continued power in her home are quickly dashed after Harold returns and shows his thoughts "had no reference to any woman's feelings" (19). Despite being aware of the work that his mother had been doing in running the estate, Harold tells her that now she should do nothing "but be grandmamma on satin cushions" (21). And while not cruel, Harold's thoughtlessness show that Mrs. Transome is merely

an old woman to her son and not a person to be referred to or asked advice of. The narrator notes “A woman’s hopes are woven of sunbeams; a shadow annihilates them. The shadow which had fallen over Mrs. Transome in this first interview with her son was the presentiment of her powerlessness.” (26) This powerlessness of position brings a new awareness to Mrs. Transome of women’s positions in life, for she states “I don’t know who would be a mother if she could foresee what a slight thing she will be to her son when she is old” (40).

Harold’s rejection and thoughtlessness towards his mother move her further into the position of old age that he imagines women, and older mothers have in the home. Prior to Harold’s return to England, Mrs. Transome at the age of fifty-six has both physical and mental good health (16). Her physical and mental ability are described at length at the beginning of the novel as those of someone young and active. Physically, she is slender and lithe for she is used to riding about her estate for 2-3 hours a day. By others she is described as “upright” and able ride to “like a girl of twenty” (92). Mentally, she is acute and perceptive. Mrs. Transome not only has a working knowledge of how to run the estate, but also neighborhood politics which would be valuable to her son. When Harold learns of how much Mrs. Transome has done to maintain the estate, he declares that his mother has had to “worry [her]self about with things that don’t properly belong to a woman” (21). He follows this by assuring his mother that with him back she will have nothing to do but be a grandmother to Harry. Despite Mrs. Transome’s rejection of this role by her own response that being a grandmother is “part of the old woman’s duty that I am not prepared for,” Harold sees his mother as physically limited in her ability to help beyond managing Harry.

Harold also dismisses her mental ability. For instance, Mrs. Transome warns Harold not to run in the town's upcoming as a Radical because she knows it will not be well received by the conservative town. Harold responds "Women, very properly, don't change their views, but keep to the notions in which they have been brought up. It doesn't signify what they think--they are not called upon to judge or act" (39). At this revelation of her son's political party and his dismissal of her advice, the narrator describes that "Mrs. Transome's limbs tottered" (18). This description points to the frailty of age and the common conception of aging as a return to childhood, invoking the idea of a toddler, a human who has a shaky foundation like an elderly person might. When this first meeting is over, Mrs. Transome knows herself as her son sees her: "an ugly old woman who happens to be his mother. That is what he sees in me, as I see a stranger in him. I shall count for nothing. I was foolish to expect anything else" (22). Mrs. Transome's reflection on her place in life notes the limited agency allowed to mothers as they age. Similarly, the narrator notes that affection between mother and child changes with age, and mothers have only one way to maintain a place in their children's affections as they grow older:

The mother's love is at first an absorbing delight, blunting all other sensibilities; it is an expansion of the animal existence; it enlarges the imagined range for self to move in: but in after years it can only continue to be joy on the same terms as other long-lived love--that is, by much suppression of self, and power of living in the experience of another. (23)

While the ideological role of mother promised bourgeois women a kind of ruling in their own households and with their own children through their sacrifices and management of

their children, when mother's sons reach adulthood, mothers can easily become old women *who happen* to be their mothers. The narrator suggest that a mother's love only continues to aid them if they suppress themselves and live through their children. Heather Milton notes that "For Eliot, mothers who live entirely for and through their children create self-absorbed sons" and this "illustrates how Mrs. Transome participated in constructing the condition of her own oppression through inadequate mothering" (65). Yet this is the encouragement that older woman are given according to Craik and Linton—to be mothers who live for the service of others. Mrs. Transome in many ways merely illustrates the fate of an older mother who has lived to serve her child in hope of a reward. The reward that older women appear to get both in the ideology and in Eliot's novel is to be stripped of their status as adult people and makes them adolescent, infantile mothers.

Having been rejected as the kind of consultant to her son that she would like to be in terms on the estate and politics of the town, the only options left to Mrs. Transome are only other versions of mother. However, Mrs. Transome, at various turns rejects, is rejected from, or revises the mother work expected of a woman of her position and age. Her first role as an older woman is that of grandmother to her grandson Harry. It is clear that Harold believes this to be a fitting role for her, for when Mrs. Transome notes that "Old people are not so easily taught to change all their ways," Harold responds with "Well, they can give up and watch the young ones" (37). Mrs. Transome demonstrates her refusal of this role in the first interaction seen between Harry and Mrs. Transome. As Mrs. Transome entertains visitors, 3-4-year-old Harry wildly plays around them while mostly attached to Mr. Transome. Mrs. Transome explains away the notable oddity of

Harry attaching himself to his grandfather instead of her by clarifying that Harry had taken an instant dislike to her, but “he makes quite a new life for Mr. Transome” for “they were playfellows at once” (94). The distance between her and her grandson is further marked by his physical violence towards her. At one point, he comes to pull on the tail of her old spaniel dog, Puff. When Mrs. Transome chides him and suggests that the aged dog might bite Harry if he is unkind, the narrator declares “Her words were too suggestive, for Harry immediately laid hold of her arm with his teeth, and bit with all his might” (94). While Harry might just be an unruly toddler, his misbehavior shows that she has not taken on the role of a grandmother by managing/rearing him in the absence of his mother. Their relationship is adversarial rather than that of doting or even disciplinary grandmother. Rather than taking up either of these visions of grandmother, Mrs. Transome leaves her grandson to her husband and pays no attention to both.

With an unmarried son, Mrs. Transome’s next role as an older mother would be matchmaker. In this role, it is to some extent necessary for Mrs. Transome to be a confidant and, possibly by extension, an advisor to her son. Unfortunately, Harold immediately dismisses this possibility for his mother during their first interview with each other by claiming “I shall not marry again” (20). Later, Harold finds he needs his mother for matchmaking when his lawyer, Jermyn, reveals that Esther Lyon is the rightful owner of the Transome estate. While Jermyn uses this information to blackmail Harold into not continuing his investigation of Jermyn’s nefarious dealings with the estate, Harold chooses to instead reveal the information to Esther in such a way that would invite her to be sympathetic to his position but also encourage the possibility of her marrying him and minimizing any possibility of scandal. For Harold’s plan to work,

he actively needs his mother's assistance as a chaperone and to help smooth a possible match between him and Esther. In order to gain his mother's assistance, Harold knows that it is "necessary that he should both confide in her and persuade her" (345). This turns out to be easy work for Harold, as Mrs. Transome's response to his confidence and his request astonish and please Harold. The narrator describes "Mrs. Transome said little in the course of the story; she made no exclamations, but she listened with close attention, and asked a few questions so much to the point as to surprise Harold. When he showed her the copy of the legal opinion which Jermyn had left with him, she said she knew it well; she had a copy herself" (345). While Mrs. Transome demonstrates an ability to handle the information, sharp questions, and a clear understanding of the situation that Harold finds himself in, Mrs. Transome can tell by the "final decisiveness of tone" with which Harold relays the story that he is still not open to hearing her opinion, only soliciting her services as *he* would like them to be provided (346). Mrs. Transome bitterly concedes to Harold's request first, because she feels "I must put up with all the things as they are determined for me" and second, in hopes that she might offer a "counter-consideration" (346). Because Mrs. Transome knows that Jermyn is Harold's father, she realizes that Jermyn can do more damage to Harold than he is aware of. Mrs. Transome does not reveal the precariousness of Harold's position to him, but rather tries to reason him into seeking a less than public ruin for Jermyn. She suggests Harold could arrange for Jermyn to compensate him for lost profits and intentional mismanagement of the estate as a way to completely avoid scandal. When Harold, again decisively, says "I will arrange nothing amicably with him," Mrs. Transome is forced again to confront her own "hard unalterable past" and recognize that in the possible

compromise of Harold's marriage to Esther, she is still in a general sense, powerless to effect change in Harold (346).

Rejected from any real power to effect Harold's decisions as a matchmaker, Mrs. Transome in her role as matchmaker does have the power to effect Esther's decisions through her display of discontentment in her own life and how her age helps visualize that disappointment to Esther. As part of Harold's plan to woo over Esther, Mrs. Transome hosts Esther within her possible future home, but always demonstrates the undesirability of her own lot and how it could become Esther's. She does so by pointing out her own invisibility in the house and how easily dismissed she is. She declares,

Dear, I shall make this house dull for you. You sit with me like an embodied patience. I am unendurable; I am getting into a melancholy dotage. A fidgety old woman like me is as unpleasant to see as a rook with its wing broken. Don't mind me, my dear. Run away from me without ceremony. Everyone else does, you see. I am pat of the old furniture with new drapery. (432)

In Mrs. Transome's speech she notes how dull the house is in part because she is considered an old woman. Mrs. Transome points out that it is the others, particularly Harold's, view of her that help create her "fidgety oldness." Others view her as unpleasant. Others leave her without consulting her and without ceremony. To them, she is a fixture in the house and not someone who affects change in the house. This description points to the limited power available to her with a son like Harold. Additionally, Mrs. Transome's experience of aging for middle- to upper-class women who have a head of the household like Harold suggests that such a life for a woman will

always be unpleasant no matter her age. A woman in her situation will be ignored and, as she ages, invisible to such a man.

Since Esther's interests were already divided between Felix and Harold, Mrs. Transome's role is important. Esther, in many ways, represents the younger version of Mrs. Transome. While Esther was raised as a minister's daughter, she was educated as a lady and had a great sense of her own superiority and desire for her own will to be at the center of the decisions surrounding her life. The narrator describes her as having a "native tendency towards luxury, fastidiousness," and she preferred what independence she could find in life that didn't put her in submission or servitude to others. A marriage to a man of land and wealth (like Harold) would in many ways grant her the life of wealth and luxury that she desired and a semblance of power with it. Her interactions with Felix begin her on a path of questioning her choices which originally only pursued her own pleasures. Felix's desire to remain in the working classes despite education and ability and his belief that his life is well spent educating the working classes towards being better political citizens are demonstrations of a kind of radicalism that beg Esther to question the life and status of women. When Esther chooses Felix, she is choosing for herself a higher life and one that allows her more equality with her husband. Felix is a husband she will work beside and not below.

Mrs. Transome's unhappiness in her own lot helps Esther choose Felix rather than her own son. When Esther realizes that soon she will have to choose between a wealthy life of leisure with Harold and a hard life of poverty with working class Felix, her reflections on her time spent at the Transome estate and her observations of Mrs. Transome help her choose. Using the drawing room where she and Mrs. Transome have

sat many afternoons together to reflect on her choice, Esther finds both the room and what she has experienced of her life at Transome Court displeasing:

Pretty as this room was, she did not like it. Mrs. Transome's full-length portrait, being the only picture there, urged itself too strongly on her attention: the youthful brilliancy it represented saddened Esther by its inevitable association with what she daily saw had come of it—a joyless, embittered age. (459)

Esther not only reflects on Mrs. Transome's unhappiness and her age, but this reflection helps solidify her decision to not marry Harold. The narrator describes “Esther had got far beyond that childhood to a time and circumstances with this daily presence of elderly dissatisfaction amidst such outward things as had always thought must greatly satisfy, awaked, not merely vague questioning emotion, but strong determination of thought” (460). Esther, as a discerning young woman, could see Mrs. Transome not as an old woman, but as a woman made bitter by her circumstances. More importantly, Ester realizes how those circumstances are ones that can apply to all women, especially, since all women are mothers.

Still, Esther's choice between Harold and Felix is fraught. In choosing Harold, she chooses a man she admires but does not love, wealth, status, and leisure. In Harold, she also solves the issue of Harold losing the estate which rightfully belongs to Esther. In rejecting Harold, she is also not guaranteed that Felix will want to marry her, since he has renounced marriage and plans to live the life of a poor working man. Ultimately, she has to consciously reject Harold with the knowledge that a life with Felix may or may not be available to her. In reflecting, she again looks back at her experience at Transome Court:

And on the other side there was a lot where everything seemed easy—but for the fatal absence of those feelings which, now she had once known them, it seemed nothing less than a fall and a degradation to do without. With a terrible prescience which a multitude of impressions during her stay at Transome Court had contributed to form, she saw herself in a silken bondage that arrested all motive, and was nothing better than a well cushioned despair. To be restless amidst ease, to be languid among all appliances for pleasure, was a possibility that seemed to haunt the rooms of this house, and wander with her under the oaks and elms of the park.

(465)

Esther here demonstrates again a growing intelligence on her own part due to her time spent at Transome Court. Her ‘prescience’ is foresight from knowledge gathered during her time there. The choice to of “silken bondage” and “well cushioned despair” to describe Esther’s feelings on choosing Harold harkens closely back to the phrase that Harold used to describe the role he imagines for his mother—a “grandmamma on satin cushions.” These similar phrases remind the reader that these two women represent two small private lives that are very much affected by a wider public, a wider public that does not grant women much voice besides who they choose to marry.

There is no doubt that the novel portrays Felix as helping mold Esther to become a selfless higher version of herself that is motivated by purer motives. But without Mrs. Transome’s example of older motherhood, an example of an individual who has ability and intellect to contribute and lead being ignored, would Esther feel as sure of her decision? I contend not. Mrs. Transome’s life before Esther lived with her represented the

dream of power that many women would have believed could be found among higher ranks and as mothers. But Mrs. Transome's life represents that this is not always so. It matters not the position and wealth that Mrs. Transome has for she is for all intents and very limited in power in her own sphere. It is only in Mrs. Transome's reconstitution of the work of aging women as a matchmaker by displaying the disempowerment of women and women as they age that she exercises some influence. In this way, Mrs. Transome does several important things. First, she helps Esther choose a marriage that will allow her to work alongside her husband rather than beneath him. In turn, this illuminates ways in which mothers in middle to upper-class marriages have restricted powers and agency. Second, Mrs. Transome highlights the ways that aging even further restricts the agency of middle- to upper-class mothers despite the promises of the ideology of motherhood. Third, Mrs. Transome's reworking of the work available to aging women demonstrates that there is an agency that emerges from the marginalization of age. In revising her work as an older woman of the middle-class, Mrs. Transome ultimately helps younger women find a greater agency in youth.

Conclusion

Esther is a product of her environment as much as Mrs. Transome. These are smart and capable women, but they do not live in a system that encourages or allows them to be their best selves. This argument is not new. Wollstonecraft, Craik, Cobbe, and other women of the time have made similar arguments, that women are not educated to anything better, to be better citizens. The experience of older motherhood of a middle- to upper-class woman highlights the consequences for women living within a system that encourages them to nothing better. But in choosing something better for herself in Felix,

rather than ease with Harold, Esther is choosing the possibility of effecting wider public because her private life is one that will allow her greater agency individually.

The experience of older motherhood shows that the promise of separate spheres consistently fails women. Marriage and motherhood are supposed to bring bliss, happiness, and dominion over the home. Age exacerbates the issues already inherent within separate spheres when a woman no longer has the authority of adulthood over her child or legal citizenship herself. The appearance of older age strips away all the promises of wife, motherhood, and class that separate spheres appears to give to women.

Chapter 3: Age and Race in the Time of Empire: The Policing of the New Women in Culture and H.R. Haggard's *She*

This chapter builds a cultural understanding of how getting older was linked to progressive, anti-domestic womanhood and racial impurity towards the end of the period. Particularly, the ascription of older age on a woman becomes a way of policing women who are seen as leaving traditional domesticity. To make this argument, I look at three seemingly disparate subjects: Pear's Soap Advertisements, depictions of the New Woman, and the Imperial Novel *She* by H.R. Haggard. While any one of these subjects might generate a small understanding of how race and age were used to police women, a study of all three demonstrates how pervasive representations of older age were often linked to 'bad' womanhood.

My argument, in large part, is about building a rhetorical understanding of how the effects of the increasingly visual culture of the Imperial age created negative associations of aging for women. Beyond the extensive print culture, markers of imperial expansion had a visible presence in Victorians daily lives in terms of goods, immigrants, and new ideas. Encounters with new people and from new lands widened debates that had already been fueled by the Woman Question earlier in the period. Moreover, English women were active agents in imperial expansion. As early as the 1830s, women (usually of the working classes) emigrated to the far reaches empire in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand for employment and marriage (Murdoch 242). By the 1850s, a rising number of middle-class women also began joining their ranks (Murdoch 246). Notably, living outside of England provided greater freedom of mobility and work for women. For men, working outside of England was seen as necessary because it offered them greater

economic opportunity. In contrast, middle-class women were expected to remain at home in England and maintain a domestic life. But life outside of England offered fewer restrictions for women in their careers and daily lives.

The main figure of progressive womanhood toward the end of the period was the New Woman. By turns revered and feared, the figure of the New Woman often presented a study in contrasts and contradictions, a representation of a changing world and of women's place in it. The New Woman's emergence in society preceded her coinage, as she was born out of the debates of the Woman Question from the 1850's. The official coining of the New Woman came out of an exchange of debating essays between Sarah Grand and Ouida in 1894 (Ledger 9).³³ As a term, the New Woman acted as a shorthand for representation of women who did not conform to old social expectations for women. This non-conformity was interpreted and used in many contradictory ways. As Lyn Pykett explains,

The New Woman was by turns: a mannish amazon, and a Womanly woman; she was oversexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial supermother; she was male-identified, or manhating and/or man-eating, or self-appointed savior of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic, or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, or she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline. (xii)

³³ The term "New Woman" was introduced by Ouida in 1894 by her essay of the same title that originated from her reading and contentious response to Sarah Grand's "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" (Ledger 9)

Despite all of these contradictory interpretations of the New Woman, two unified qualities emerge. First, the New Woman represented women who were willing to redefine the roles of women in society. Second, as the very title New Woman suggests, she differs from versions of womanhood that came before her; she is modern and ‘new.’ Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis summarize: “from the various competing definitions of the New Woman certain common features emerge: her perceived newness, her autonomous self-definition and her determination to set her own agenda in developing an alternative vision of the future” (12). Particularly, the newness of the New Woman is of primary importance.

By 1894, British magazines often showed various depictions of the New Woman. Those in favor of her, illustrated her as a well-educated, pretty, self-possessed young woman. For those opposed to her, the New Woman seemed masculine, unmarriageable, loud, garish, overtly sexual, muscular, anti-domestic, and obtuse to the ways of the world. One of the ways in which she was mocked was by portraying her as middle aged or older with darkened features, heavy lines, and disproportionate features. No longer ‘new,’ older women labeled as New Woman were seen, in the least, as ridiculous and, at their worst a catalyst of the social degeneration suggested by their overt sexualization and racial ambiguity. In other words, ascriptions of older age suggest that the New Woman is a threat to traditional British ways of life because she is non-traditional.

The arguments surrounding the New Woman were brought on by the debates over the Woman Question earlier in the century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the ideological and legal position of women were topics of public debate, and many changes to women’s status were underway. Early feminists such as Caroline Norton,

Josephine Butler, Barbara Smith Bodichon, and Frances Power Cobbe used their public voices to criticize the limited legal power of women. For example, Norton's *English Laws Regarding Women* (1854) laid out in stark, almost encyclopedic fashion the limits of women's rights and legal status as a way of fighting for more legal rights. By 1857, women's rights in marriage changed with the Matrimonial Causes Act, which allowed the possibility for women to divorce their husbands.³⁴ The Married Women's Property Acts of the 1870 and 1882 gave all married women rights to their own property. The Matrimonial Causes Act in 1884 gave women greater ability to refuse their husbands (Richardson and Willis 7).

At the same time, the English suffragette movement turned its attention to campaigns over moral purity and questions surrounding women's bodies. For instance, the battle against the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1870s (and subsequent CDA's) tried abolishing prostitution by having plain clothes policemen take 'suspicious' looking women to doctors to be inspected rather than create laws that would punish men for solicitation (Walkowitz 18). Women and men who fought against the government's right to inspect and police women's bodies argued that controlling and regulating prostitution only perpetuated prostitution rather than removing women from this "white slavery" (Richardson and Willis 7). Just as earlier agitators fought to secure women's property rights, women's and men's concern with prostitution demonstrated a continuing struggle for women to have greater ownership of their own bodies.

Women's rights in marriage and as citizens expanded alongside their ability to

³⁴ It was still very difficult for a wife to divorce her husband, but this act made it easier and brought the question of divorce into common conversation in a way that helped shift women's ability to divorce more easily in later years.

obtain higher education, join the workforce, and go abroad. By the 1870s, several colleges had opened up for women and with better education came better job opportunities. Since the 1850s, more women began entering the workforce. In fact, the number of women in the workforce doubled from 1851 to 1901 from 2.8 million to 4.7 million (Richardson and Willis 5). Additionally, more women were joining professional occupations. By 1891, 240,000 women had jobs that were considered 'professional occupations,' such as clerics or nurses (Tosh 152). Changes in the economy and technology allowed women not only to establish careers at home, but also to live and make careers for themselves in colonial outposts. While these women were often stereotyped as spinsters, eccentrics, or British officials' wives, such as the "Memsahib," Victorian women did have a place in colonial outposts (Ledger 63).³⁵

The shifting and redefinition of women's position in society both in relation to her legal rights and ability to participate in the public sphere was dramatic from the midcentury to the end of the century. These fights that Victorian men and women participated in created tensions because, by working for equality of opportunity in education, employment, sexuality, mobility, and citizenship, they were challenging the very fundamentals of how British patriarchy organized society. LeeAnne Richardson notes "The logic of complementary thinking dictates that when women take the active role, men are necessarily rendered passive, displaced from their masculine responsibilities" (13). In other words, if it is men's role to be active, public economic figures, and it is women's role to be passive, private domestic figures, women moving

³⁵ As missionaries, and as feminist reformers, women's place and activism in colonial outposts was often highly problematic and often assumed a white savior complex (Murdoch 240).

into the workforce could be seen as pushing men out of the workforce. Thus, the New Woman became an easy representation of all of these threats to masculine roles. Educated, mobile on her bicycle, and capable of doing professional labor, the New Woman (for many) was trespassing on masculine territory.

In the mid-Victorian period, middle-class masculinity was either marked by ideas of ‘muscular Christianity’ or the self-made man of industry. This ideal man was young, physically active, homosocial, and had a strong work ethic (Bourrier 2).³⁶ The ideal man was imagined to be “chaste, content, and devout...he could live on a crust of bread while doing hard physical labor all day and studying at night” (Bourrier 8). While in the mid-century men were expected to work outside of the home, they also were seen as the patriarchs of their own home and saw marriage and work for Britain as part of that definition. However, John Tosh notes that the home was a contested site for men because the home was both a feminine place and also a place that men were meant to be patriarchs. This tension drove some men away from the perceived feminizing presence of the home into more homosocial spaces and abroad (Tosh 108). By the end of the period, serving overseas was seen as a specifically masculine task. Tosh further explains that “Imperial reputation was grounded in a small repertoire of masculine qualities: stoicism...., steely self-control...., self-reliance.They gave credence to the belief that the empire, in which Britain’s destiny seemed to lie at the time, was quintessentially a masculine area, where men worked better without the company of women” (Tosh 174). Metaphorically, the empire overseas became a safe place for keeping masculinity defined

³⁶ Much like the ideas of womanhood, ideas of masculinity were not static. Karen Bourrier’s work *The Measure of Manliness: Disability and Masculinity in the Mid-Victorian Novel* explores how the figure of the disabled or infirmed male character helped foster new ideas of masculinity. Additionally, John Tosh’s *A Man’s Place* explores men’s work, experience, and (sometimes) their fight with domesticity.

against progressive women. Since women increasingly were seeking work in colonial outposts, the progressive, mobile New Woman became another threat to their safe space abroad.

19th Century Imaging and Advertising

In order to understand how impactful imaging print culture was to Victorian culture, we must first have an understanding of the growth of advertising. Advertising was an industry that was in flux and development throughout the 19th century. In fact, advertising as we know it today developed out of the 19th century practices (Hindley 18-19).³⁷ At the start of the century, work in advertising was seen as the work of charlatans, but by the late 19th century it became a respected area in which a man might make a professional career (Hindley 20). Over the century, advertisers developed their own set of professional rules of business and even bought or commissioned high art for the use of ad campaigns.³⁸ By numbers alone, the growth of the advertising industry reflects an awareness of not only new methods for getting people to buy, but also an awareness of how culture, often represented in images, was an effective way to sell. For example, by World War I, America spent over a billion dollars in advertising (Pope 6). This gives us some insight on why advertising is an important reflection of developing ideas about culture--including domesticity, women, and age.

³⁷ Town criers were originally used for official announcements, and by the 19th century, large cities had largely moved away from town criers, but in small towns they moved from public announcements to making announcements for businesses for a fee (Hindley 18-19).

³⁸ Diana and Geoffrey Hindley's book *Advertising in Victorian England 1837-1901* extensively explores the creation of the advertising industry as a changing job and a developing profession for 19th century men. For example, in the 1830's, ad men often only set ads in the London provincial press and procured a room for people to study the papers (Hindley 21). By the 1880's, ad men designed, wrote, and advised people how to sell their products (Hindley 25). There were even books published to help advertisers learn the 'art' of advertising (Hindley 28;34).

Before the mid-century, most British advertisements were small and in the back of a few periodicals, but by the 1880s ads were abundant and marked by bold images and sensational text (Loeb 7). As incomes rose in the 19th century, so did the expectation that the middle-classes should gain the material goods that demonstrated their gentility. With images of clothes, china, furniture, and cosmetics representing what middle-class people should have in their home the advertisement, as Lori Loeb notes in *Consuming Angels*, “became both a mirror and an instrument of the social ideal” (Loeb 10). Towards the end of the century, the rapid proliferation of cheap print and improved imaging technology led to increasing visual representation in magazines and periodicals that told the growing literate population what they should want, who they should look like, and what they should buy.

We are all, to some degree, influenced by the images that surround us. As Jean Kilbourne notes in her groundbreaking work on advertising, *Can't Buy Me Love*, “much of advertising’s power comes from [a] belief that advertising does not affect us” (27). She goes on to remark “The most effective kind of propaganda is that which is not recognized as propaganda” (Kilbourne 27). Recognizing that visual images and, particularly those used in advertising, work as a kind of propaganda, it follows that advertisements are a representation of culture and ideology. Anandi Ramamurthy states in *Imperial Persuaders*, “Images are historical documents. They do not simply reflect the ideological perspectives of an era, but form part of the process through which these ideologies are produced” (Ramamurthy 1). Particularly, it is important to understand that these images/advertisements are a representation of culture and ideologies as they existed (and a catalyst that continued to build what those ideas would be). As scholars of culture and

literature, we know that culture and ideology are not fixed or static, but can be perpetuated or contradicted through many kinds of practices. The developments in British advertising through the 19th century helped perpetuate and build various, and sometimes contradictory ideas, of culture. The pervasiveness of these images, according to Loeb, “possessed an unprecedented visual potency that made it almost as important to nineteenth-century culture as the television is to our own time” (7).

Moreover, the main target for most British advertisements were middle-class women. Particularly, it was the growth of domesticity as an idealized concept of women being the moralizing influence over the home and tending to home affairs, otherwise known as the cult of domesticity, that helped build middle-class women as the target for advertisers (“Cult of Domesticity”). The ideal of domesticity, as it grew out of the 18th century and was solidified in the 19th century, helped make a unified concept of the middle classes and clear roles for men and women. As Anne McClintock states:

The cult of domesticity was crucial in helping to fashion the identity of a large class of people (hitherto disunited) with clear affiliations, distinct boundaries and separate values--organized around the presiding domestic values of monogamy, thrift, order, accumulation, classification, quantification and regulation--the values of liberal rationality through which the disunited middling classes fashioned the appearance of a unified class identity. (168)

Importantly, this is an ‘appearance’ of unification. We see these appearances of unity in identities today when we think of the different ideologies of our political parties and how they appear to create a united sense of who Republicans or Democrats might be. This

sense of unification often becomes the base of our rhetoric for arguing for or against any particular political idea. Because there was an imagined ideal of how 19th century British women act in the home, advertisers had a ready image of the middle-class woman that they could both package for consumption and help build as an ideal.³⁹ Additionally, advertisers saw women as the “the power of the purse in household affairs” due to their ideological roles as managers of their homes (Loeb 9).

Image Analysis Introduction

Representations of women within ads reflected a myriad of tensions over age, class, race, labor, and sexuality. Here I turn to offer a few analyses of first, soap ads, and then imaging of the New Woman. For the first analysis, a Sunlight soap ad, I look at the original painting and the advertisement that it was later used to focus on how labor, age, and domesticity intersect. In my second analysis, I look at the Pear’s soap ad in terms of domesticity, age, and race, particularly in terms of imaging of empire. Finally, I turn to imaging of the New Woman. As a, sometimes, figure of anti-domesticity, the treatment of the New Woman highlights age and race to explore how all of these can coalesce in late Victorian culture. For each analysis, I place the image analysis, first within a larger cultural picture: domesticity, race, and progressive women.

The Domestic Labor in Soap Advertising

Women’s work, as explained in chapter two, was imagined mostly as home management and was not envisioned as hands on labor. In fact, middle-class and upper-class women were *presumed* to have the leisure of idleness. However, it was only ladies

³⁹ Lori Anne Loeb notes that men were more rarely depicted in advertisements, and when they were, they were often depicted in scenes of action such as in battle or participating in a sport and have almost now white male villains (71). This, she claims is because “acquiring the goods for consumption, it seems, was socially perceived as a feminine task” (Loeb 12).

of great means of the middle- and of the upper class who could avoid manual domestic labor completely. Yet because idleness was the ideal, most women had to do manual labor within in their homes while working to create an appearance for the public that they did not. McClintock notes that “housewifery became a career in vanishing acts. A wife’s vocation was not only to create a clean and productive family but also to ensure the skilled erasure of every *sign* of her work” (162). Moreover, as the number of women attending college and pursuing more professional careers increased among the working classes by the late 19th century, so fewer people were entering domestic service (Hindley 123). For some middle-class women, this meant taking on more direct labor within the home while still having the expectation that they should not appear to have worked. The extensive use of gloves by middle-class women illustrate how important it was to erase any sign of middle-class women’s labor. Hands that showed labor in any way could link an individual to the working classes. Additionally, Ariel Beujot argues that signs of labor on women’s hands became a stand-in for other concerns. She explains of the middle classes:

They were anxious that if they failed to represent their class correctly, they would not only be seen as working class, they would also be seen as having a characteristic of a different race: a darkened complexion. Class, race, and nation were imbedded into the practice of wearing gloves, which protected white skin. (168)

This removal of labor from women’s hands within society was enmeshed with class, race, and, I would add, age. For example, Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* often has accounts of the working class where they are described as prematurely

aged by their labor.⁴⁰ Showing labor on your hands as a man was not as dire. In fact, it could even help prove your masculinity. If women wore gloves to erase their labor and keep a presentation of their class and race on their hands, rhetoric that caused anxiety over age, race, or class on women's faces must have been even more detrimental.



Figure 1. “Wedding Morning,” Sunlight Soap.

⁴⁰ Particularly, Mayhew's work showed that the working classes were almost always elderly.



Figure 2. “Wedding Morning,” Original Painting.

(“The Wedding Morning” (1892)).

[1]

⁴¹Text under picture:

“What happy recollections the above Picture recalls to those who have helped a Bride with her toilet! Friends ask themselves, Has the Bride a thorough knowledge of all the duties of a household, especially of that ever-recurring worry. Washing Day and Spring Cleaning? Does she know what SUNLIGHT SOAP can do? Does she know that for a few pence, without boiling or bleaching, she can by using SUNLIGHT SOAP, have all the household linen washed at home and made to look white as snow and fresh as roses?”

Happy is the bride who has been instructed in these matters, because it is on such simple household details as these that the future happiness and comfort of herself and husband must depend!”

⁴¹ “The Illustrated London News” 21 i 1893

The illustrations above are prime examples of how advertisers used the cult of domesticity, specifically, ideas of middle-class women's work to advertise to women. Originally a painting by John Henry Fredrick Bacon in 1892, the Sunlight Soap company purchased it for use in their own advertising in 1893 ("The Wedding Morning;" "The Illustrated London News"). I've included the original painting (for its richness of detail and the clarity of the image) and the advertisement as seen in the "The Illustrated London News" with the written text for comparison. In the advertisement, the happy whimsical wedding prep is contrasted with the concerns of those who are more knowledgeable about marriage, the bride's friends and family who were or are already married. The text of the ad suggests that those prepping the bride are uncertain whether the bride knows the work she will be expected to do as a wife and how *well* will she know to do it. Particularly, the heavy labor in the form of the "ever-recurring worry" of "Washing Day and Spring Cleaning" are of significant concern. Sunlight promises to alleviate that concern by helping the bride clean all her linen "at home," a task so strenuous that those who do not use their soap must employ others. In truth, thinking merely about the effort in boiling or bleaching all the households' linens seems like an overwhelming task.⁴² However, Sunlight makes two promises to the bride--to teach her about her duties and to reduce the weight of those duties with a product.⁴³ Her responsibilities include not only partaking in all the labor, but also in finding a way to do so economically so as to save her husband money, perhaps not only in the cost of the cleaning product, but also in not

⁴² Anna Letitia Barbauld's, a romantic era poet, poem "Washing Day" is a helpful reminder of the kind of labor that might be involved in a washing day and how it was very much connected to a housewife's duties.

⁴³ Advertisements almost always play some kind of didactic role. They aim to teach how to have good health, wealth, education, etc.

hiring domestic help. She must wash and keep house because what Sunlight has now made a simple task is required for the “happiness and comfort of herself and her husband.”

Additionally, Sunlight soap argues here that the young need to learn to prevent the early onset of aging by reducing their domestic labor. Loeb notes that anxiety over age for women existed because of “the sheer quantity of physical work required to maintain cleanliness, that shining evidence of respectability” (Loeb 117). It was thought that working too much would age a woman prematurely. This was a common advertising strategy for Sunlight Soap, as seen in ad titled “Why does a Woman Look Old Sooner than a Man?” which suggested it was manual labor that aged women faster than men (Loeb 117).⁴⁴

The emphasis on youth made by the prevention of labor is notable in this ad as well. Notably, all of the people, young and old, are turned towards the bride. All are engaged in preparing her for the first day of matrimony. At her side, an old woman helps prepare her dress and the little girl looks up at her. Both of them are turned towards the bride, and their position suggests their lower social position. The older woman aiding the bride is made subservient by her dressing of the bride. Moreover, her clothes are dark and hard to discern from all others. She is almost blurry, making her the least visible person despite being directly next to the bride. While all the faces within the painting are somewhat in shadow, her face is almost completely in shadow. Her turned away face indicates the bride is her past and her only future is to continue to decline. In contrast, the

⁴⁴ Hard labor for men, however, was seen as necessarily masculine. Men who could not do hard labor were often connected to the working classes or to women. Kay Heath’s *Aging By the Book* has a chapter that explores how men are aged by their inability to do work. In contrast, women are prematurely aged by doing too much of it.

young girl in cheery white and red has the side of her face in full brightness as she looks up at the bride, her conceivable future. While the future looks bright for the young girl who can look forward to becoming a bride, for the grandmother, there is little to no path for her but to regress to the status of a child or a servant. The advertisement then suggests that young adulthood is freedom from manual labor of lower classes, while older age is connected to being reduced into a lower class by labor. Sunlight appears to offer those who are not brides the opportunity to return their time as a bride by also learning how to more efficiently labor as a wife and retard the appearance of age.

Race, Domestic Labor, and Age in Soap Advertising

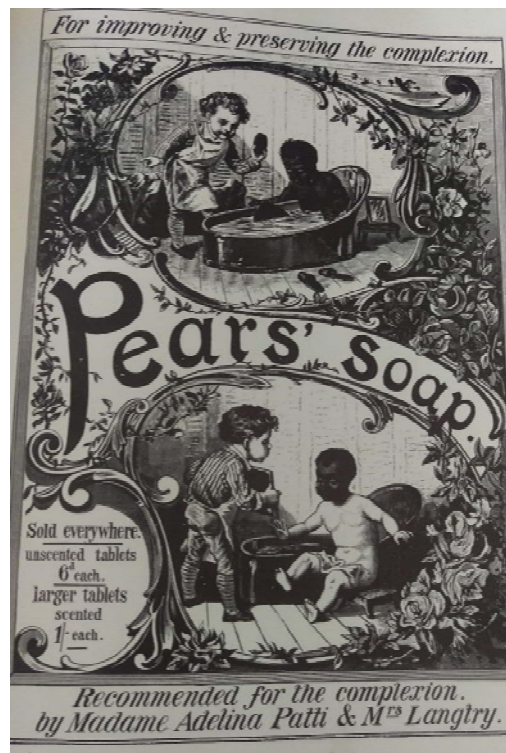


Figure 3. “Pears’ Soap,” Little Boys.

I turn now to look at how anxiety about aging in ads were conflated with fears of race for middle-class women. Pears’ soap ads often had which promised young women a “healthy,” young complexion. Additionally, they both promised and prescribed white

skin. For example, the ad to the right is one famous Pears' soap ads from 1885 showing a white boy washing away the black skin of a black boy.⁴⁵

This importance of being white was, in part, brought on by British exposure to other cultures and people that challenged the British ideas of superiority. Imperialism often suggests an expansion in one direction, one conquering another. However, expanding the empire also meant bringing not just goods back to England, but also people and ideas. Sensational news articles were printed throughout the 19th century on the godless horrors that existed outside of England. Some Victorians believed that imperialism could lead to degeneration, and others believed it was their responsibility to save the savage other (Heath 175). This had noticeable impacts on the world of advertising. As Heath explains, "Major innovations in the British advertising industry-- conditions of material production as well as psychological strategy--created a climate in which degeneration fears became an ideal vehicle" (Heath 177). Fear is clearly a heavy motivator in all kinds of advertising, but in the climate of the fin de siècle how advertisers chose to illustrate those fears is telling.

More particularly, Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* argues that Pears' soap advertisements should be seen in the context of imperial expansion because imperialism helped reinforce a need to define the middle-classes back home against the colonial 'other' abroad (5). Two parts of this definition were specific to women: the cult of domesticity and whiteness. For, just as the public sphere grew to encompass many new British holdings, the private sphere worked to encompass and protect native soil. During the later years of imperial expansion into foreign lands, concerns of miscegenation and

⁴⁵ 25. "The Illustrated London News" 6 vi 1885

the preservation of the white race became rampant—among women, at least. Though not condoned, miscegenation by British men with foreign women, like domestic prostitution, was widespread and well-documented. Miscegenation for British men was, to some extent, excused because men were expected, as economic providers, to move into the public sphere, and the empire outside of England was seen as a natural extension of that. What's more, the sentiment of 'boys will be boys' was as much a part of their culture as it is in ours. By contrast, women, were expected to maintain the purity of the English race. As women began to move out into the empire outside of England in greater numbers, the threat of mixing races began to deeply concern the Victorians. Since women were the were seen as upholding the morality and purity of the home, miscegenation became associated with degeneration. As McClintock argues, imperialism ushered in an "analogy between race and gender degeneration" which served create a kind of "social domination...-between the domestication of the colonies and the racializing of the metropolis" (43). In this analogy, ideas of racial degeneration (or deviance of any kind) were perpetuated to control any population in the metropolis that deviated from the ideological norms, such as "the militant working class, the Irish, Jews, feminists, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, criminals, alcoholics, and the insane" (McClintock 43). McClintock's argument points out how fluid the rhetoric of discrimination because degeneration could become anything undesired or not the ideal norm.

Moreover, Kay Heath shows that Pears' soap advertisements use age as a sign of degeneration. For her, these soap ads "expose and accelerate late-Victorian age anxiety by projecting fears of national decline onto the commercialized, midlife body" and in doing so "raised age consciousness to new levels, further augmenting the unacceptability

of the first signs of senescence in midlife” (Heath 173; 198). Soap ads then attribute to rhetoric that associated imperialism with racial degeneration and racial degeneration with aging. Furthermore, advertising that dictated that women’s power was in their youth and purity of their race suggests that there was a fear of women taking on roles that offered them greater mobility outside of the nation that might imitate or be equal to men’s freedom both in their careers and their sexuality.

I want to highlight here aging’s conflation with the fear of racial impurity. While the connection of aging to racial impurity is not logical, the rhetoric of the advertising that connected them demonstrates a cultural concept about aging that can help clarify how aging could take on the same fearful qualities of the fears of racial impurity. In advertising’s reductive logic, aging and racial impurity are not equivalents, but, rhetorically, the fear surrounding them is. Advertising’s function is often to create anxiety in order to generate consumer need. Heath notes that these prescriptions of youth created an “age anxiety [which] powerfully motivated the Victorian consumer” (172). Women buying these soaps were not just purchasing reassurances about how white they are as opposed to the women their men might meet on their adventures throughout the empire, they were buying the assurance that they would still be appealing to their menfolk because of their youth. Youth then becomes a representation of the ideal domestic, and aging, like other races, is associated with anti-domestic ideals.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ 42. “The Graphic” 27 iv 1895

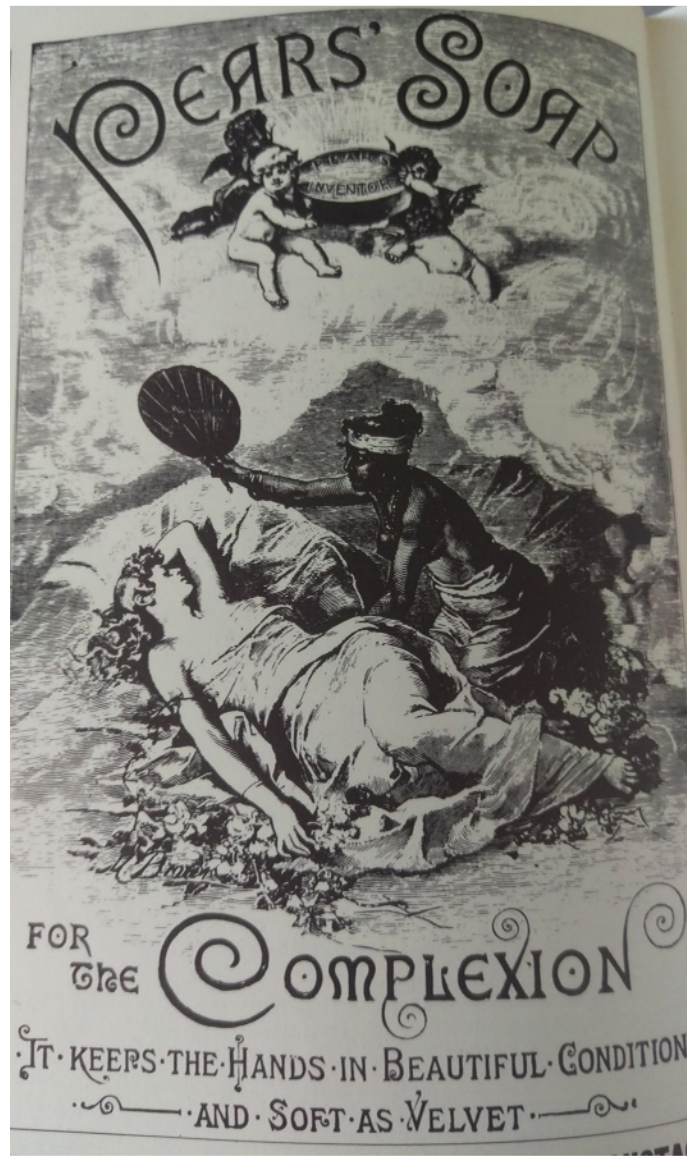


Figure 4. “Pears’ Soap,” Women.

This next advertisement by Pears’ Soap (1895) illustrates the anxieties over the mobility of women, race, age, and work. Here, a reclining young, white woman is luxuriating in white sheets in a remote, possibly foreign location while a brown woman fans her. Above them both, four cherubs hold a giant bar of Pears’ Soap with “Pears’ Inventor” etched into the soap. The cherubs in the front appear to be white and at least one cherub in the back is ambiguously raced by either being a white cherub in shadow or

a brown cherub. The advertisement assures the viewer that Pears' soap keeps the hands in "beautiful condition" meaning, white, and as "soft as velvet," meaning free from the signs of labor. Ironically, as the white lady remains in repose there is no need for her hands to work, so almost no need for Pears' soap. The woman fanning her, however, is blatantly laboring with her hands to keep the white, young goddess-like figure cool. While the position of the white woman says that she does not labor, the text suggests that her labor is only hidden. Since the only one seen working is the brown woman, labor becomes associated with losing whiteness.

Much like the Sunlight soap ad suggested that labor made reduce your status, the difference in sexual maturity between the two women also suggests that labor can take away innocence and youth. While the woman in repose has her breasts covered suggesting purity, the brown woman's breasts are exposed suggesting full sexual maturity, adulthood, and deviance. In this way, the brown woman becomes a representation of the loss of innocence and youth. Nazera Wright makes a similar argument about black women in America in the 19th century. She states, "black girls did not have much time to be youthful before they arrived at the age when they needed to make mature decisions and take on adult roles" (10). While Wright's point is specific to black American girlhood, her argument highlights how minorities in oppression can be made adults before their time, aged before their time.⁴⁷ Labor and age are often connected in culture. The brown woman in this advertisement represents what the woman in repose is avoiding, labor that is meant of lesser people. However, labor is also what the white

⁴⁷ John Tosh's *A Man's Place* explains that middle-class boys were also forced into manhood much earlier than their sisters. For example, most middle-class boys began training for a profession or a business in their teens (Tosh 105). A lot of this had to do with work being separated from home life by separate spheres ideology.

woman cannot avoid through fulfilling her domestic role. And we must not forget that the soap is there to *help* the white woman labor. That the brown woman represents what the white woman is avoiding by the use of soap suggests a fluidity between these two women.

The threats posed by Victorian women's mobility is underscored by the setting. The location appears to be foreign based on the white woman's Grecian dress and the brown woman's attendance of her. This foreign setting references not only the greater mobility of Victorian women, but the greater sexual freedoms that might entail. Ann Loeb argues that Victorian advertising that put women in Grecian dress and in foreign places allows for distancing by way of the historic and exotic past (36). More particularly, this allowed for greater license to show women as both the angel of the house and a creature of awakening sexuality (Loeb 36-38). The white woman of this ad is alluringly posed. Her arms are open and inviting, her breasts almost exposed. Her body invites a sensual gaze, as does the bare breasted brown woman posed over her. Since brown woman is seen here as overtly sexual, it appears that the brown women's imagined sexual characteristics might also be influencing the white woman. The brown woman's position then suggests both protection and danger. Ultimately, the brown woman takes on the labor, age, and sexual presentation that the white woman is avoiding, but the white woman's avoidance of labor, racial mixing, and age create an association of labor, non-whiteness, non-purity, and even non-Britishness that can threaten the white woman, especially outside of the British homeland.

Age as "othering" on the New Woman

This brings us to the "New Woman." As previously explained, representations of

the New Woman in print varied by who presented her and their own aims for womanhood. One of the common interpretations of the New Woman was that of a progressive and anti-domestic woman. Her progressiveness was seen in the desire to go to school or work, and even live outside of England. The New Woman was also a caricature commonly caught in comics. Similar to soap ads, fears about womanhood showed up in the caricatures of the New Woman demonstrating similar ideas of how degenerative womanhood becomes mixed with ideas of age, race, class, sexuality and general ideas of degeneration. Specifically, the ascription of age on a figure associated with women's possible mobility into more public roles highlights a cultural fear of aging and demonstrates how aging could be used to symbolically hamper women, making them fear progress they might desire.

As stated before, the New Woman was often depicted in various ways in periodicals. Most often though, she was mocked. As Tosh notes, "The mockery directed at the New Woman by the press in the 1890s reflected an acute anxiety that the new freedoms claimed by women in public would disrupt traditional notions of gender inequality in the private sphere" (Tosh 153). Particularly, when caricatures of the New Women ascribed age to her she was clearly marked as a kind of 'other' that Victorian audiences would be familiar with. Specifically, the 'older' New Woman's grouping with other social degeneratives acted as a fluid marker that framed her as a kind of other, a social unwanted. McClintock notes that by mid-century "A triangulated analogy among racial, class and gender degeneration emerged" because ideas of "'natural' male control of reproduction" and the "'natural' bourgeois control of capital" legitimized the idea of anything outside of that as abnormal and "other" (McClintock 44). In other words,

depictions of social degeneration were often ascribed to those outside the traditional patriarchy in depictions of other races, overt sexuality, or questionable gender presentation. I would add that to this triangulation of race, class, and gender can be added age. The ascription of age, the marking of women with older age, exists among other markers used to express social degeneration. The New Woman is shown to be a social outsider with when depicted with older age. As well, she is often given ‘darker’, disproportionate European features that suggest she is a racialized other.



Figure 5. “New Woman.”

⁴⁸ THE NEW WOMAN.
Judy: The Conservative Comic (London, England), Wednesday, November 14, 1894; pg. 237. *New Readerships. 19th Century UK Periodicals. Gale Cengage.* Web. 2 June 2017.



Figure 6. “She Goes In For Being a New Woman, Doesn’t She.”

⁴⁹ “SHE GOES IN FOR BEING A ‘NEW WOMAN,’ DOESN’T SHE?”.
Judy: The Conservative Comic (London, England), Wednesday, November 28, 1894; pg. 254. *New Readerships. 19th Century UK Periodicals*. Gale Cengage. Web. 2 June 2017.

⁵⁰ “Passionate Female Literary Types.” *Punch*, May 12, 1894; pg 225.



Figure 7. "Passionate Female Literary Types."

In the images above from various magazines, the New Woman and older women are linked together in ideas of age, race, and overt sexuality. In the first two images, the ideas of the New Woman are mocked by others who better conform to societal standards and demonstrate the New Woman is someone who is undesirable. In the first image, the woman announces, defiantly, "I should like to see a man kiss me." To which the old man beside her replies "I daresay you would, but you oughtn't admit it." The New Woman is supposedly demonstrating her lack of a need for a man, but the old man suggests that this is just a ploy to be more inviting to men. That the New Woman does not appear to be a woman in the first blush of youth adds to the mockery of a woman of older age trying to tempt a man to kiss her. The second image with the two young, attractive women

demonstrate younger women conforming more to societal standards of beauty, but also mocking an older woman they identify as a New Woman. In their remarks, that she is only new by the painting of her face, suggesting that she is trying to take on youth, and that she is probably doing so in order to be attractive to men. In the last illustration, we see two women marked as “the passionate female literary types,” relating them to the New Woman by their profession and single status. Both are labeled as authors of books such as “Boots and Spurs and a Baritone Voice” and “Oh, the Meeting of Lips.” Like the woman in the first image, these women are older and romance crazed, easily falling in love with any man. As older women longing for love, they are painted as ridiculous and undesirable.

In the first image and the last, a unified quality of how older age is depicted emerges: the women all have darker, disproportionate features. It could be surmised that these women are of possibly Jewish descent. Fears of Jewish citizens was heightened by competition among other European nations for colonial territory. Iveta Jusová explains “when Britain was preoccupied with its quest for an unambiguous and homogenous national and racial identity, the Anglo-Jewish community easily became framed as problematic in that it appeared to resist being represented as unequivocally white and European” (Jusová 132). Sander Gilman notes that, as early as the eighteenth century, the Germans thought of Jews as the blacks of their society, those who could not be beautiful and did not belong (21). Particularly, Gilman states that “the fin-de-siècle world was dominated [with] discourse on race in which the Jew served as the central marker of difference” (121). Linking the New Woman to a racially ambiguous other such as the

Jewish community among qualities of older age and sexuality makes her more ridiculous, unwanted and threatening.

Ultimately, for Victorian women at the end of the century, beauty, symbolically, becomes equated with whiteness and youth and is defined against other races and old age. One assurance that white women have had over centuries is that their beauty is their power over men. Regardless of how effective that power has proven to be for them throughout time, beauty acts as the mysterious quality that lends women some influence over men. The connection that bad/progressive women might be ascribed older age is important. A woman connected to the New Woman would lose the long-held power that women have over men if she is considered aged. While beauty is always ephemeral, if always linked to youth, and subjective, cultural ascriptions of aging as a way of removing beauty and women's sexual desirability demonstrate a desire to punish and/or control women. Age then becomes detrimental when linked with other races and genders that it is a clear way of punishing the New Woman and marking her as the other.

H.R. Haggard's *She*

I turn now to the novel, *She* to round out how ascriptions of older age on women were used as a way of controlling non-traditional women. H.R. Haggard's *She* is just one imperial, anti-New Woman novel that illustrates the conflation of fears surrounding race, age, and gender. Particularly, *She* illustrates how the presentation of age allows Ayesha, our representative New Woman, to gain power and how she loses it. Ayesha is a 2000-year-old white Arabian woman in Africa who perpetually looks like a beautiful twenty-year-old because of her great scientific knowledge. Ayesha, as both a scientist and a desirable, young, white woman, is a woman to be feared. Like other New Women who

sought to educate themselves, Ayesha has an insatiable desire for knowledge that allows her greater power in the world. Ayesha's scientific prowess is so great that it appears to be magic to the Victorian modern man. Understandably so because she can retard the appearance of age, see into the past and present, and kill by her will alone. Ayesha's knowledge, beauty, and physical ability are dubbed as dangerous, and, ultimately, she is destroyed.

She, originally published in 1887, explores the possibility of female superiority in a time of great British colonial expansion. Told from the perspective of the learned scholar, Horace Holly, we follow Holly and his journey to the interior of Africa with his adult ward, Leo Vincy. Holly was unexpectedly granted the guardianship of Leo Vincy when his school friend, Leo's father falls ill and asks Holly to care for his son after his death.⁵¹ Vincy, the sixty-sixth descendent of an Egyptian priest of Isis of Grecian lineage (Kallikrates), charges Holly to raise his son up to take on the family quest that was passed down from son to son, to hunt and kill a mysterious, powerful white Queen in Africa who killed Kallikrates because he loved another (23). A few of Leo's ancestors, including Leo's father, attempted to fulfill the quest, but none found the woman or her remote village in Central Africa. At 25, Leo is given the details of the mission and has to decide whether or not to pursue the long-lived quest that has killed many of his forefathers. He and Holly, and their manservant, Job, go on this quest without much hope of finding this nearly impossible-to-find queen.

But with tragedy and luck, their boat crashes in a storm and washes them onto the

⁵¹ We later find out that Leo's father kills himself because the strain of his illness and his grief over the loss of his wife (Haggard 21).

shore of the African coast that Leo's father identified as the probable village of the queen. Losing all their man crew but Job, Leo and Holly find the Amhagger's village. The Amhagger's are a matriarchal society in which women choose their husbands by kissing them (and sometimes have multiple husbands). Trouble breaks out when Job scorns a kiss of one of the Amhagger women, and she takes revenge by riling their village up to their tradition of cannibalising outsiders. Leo, Holly, and Job fight back and the arrival of Billali, an old Amhagger, saves them from immediate death. Since the queen, "She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed," has ordered that any white men be immediately taken to her, Billali takes the three men, Leo wounded during the battle, and Ustane, the Amhagger woman who has married Leo, to the queen's city of Kôr (78). Once at Kôr, Leo, now seriously ill, is charted off to be cared for, and Holly is introduced to the queen, Ayesha ("She-who-must-be-obeyed"), a veiled beautiful white woman (103). Ayesha explains that she must remain veiled because to look on her face is to put any under her spell forever (103). Holly braves her unveiling and becomes smitten with her forever. Ayesha, seeing Holly as a learned man of such as those in ancient Greece, shows him about her home.

Eventually, she goes to Leo because she hears he is near death. When she first lays eyes on Leo, she knows the he is the reincarnation of her past lover Kallikrates (143). Casting Ustane away from Leo with her power, Ayesha plays handmaiden and host to Leo in hopes of winning his love (150). However, when Leo sees Ustane again from afar and tries to get her to remain with him, Ayesha kills Ustane (164). At this, Leo declares he hates Ayesha and tries to kill her, but Ayesha stays him with her great power. She then unveils herself, and Leo falls immediately in love with her for the rest of his life (165). The next night, Ayesha takes Leo and Holly out of Kôr so that Leo may step in the

Pillar of Life like her and become immortal. She plans then return to England with Leo and Holly so that they can conquer it (184). Yet when Ayesha steps into the Pillar of Fire to demonstrate for Leo how it is harmless, her body ages all of her 2000 years (turning into a childlike, brown, monkey creature) and she dies (213). After her death, Leo and Holly return home (228).

A novel of the imperial Gothic genre, *She*, captures British anxieties about their progression in science, society, and perceived primitive lands. As Patrick Brantlinger notes, “the three principal themes of imperial Gothic are individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world” (230). Brantlinger notes that the progression of scientific materialism, “the search for new sources of faith,” happened alongside the ‘declining faith in Britain’s future’ (228). Progression and regression were intricately for Victorians who saw their advancing society as possibly reaching a pinnacle and falling into decline and degeneration. And while for Brantlinger, the regressive threat of *She*, is not limited to one gender, he agrees that “the New Woman is one of the threats underlying the demonism of Ayesha” (234).

Ayesha, as an educated, powerful woman, is the clear New Woman of this novel, and her power is not well tolerated. As I have demonstrated in soap ads and the caricatures of the New Woman, womanhood that looks non-traditional or anti-domestic womanhood was often not tolerated in Victorian culture without consequence or response. The same can be said for progressive women in novels. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that Haggard’s novel is an example, among other anti-New Women novels, of the “mythology of female otherness” that exhibit the need to eliminate the

threat of progressive womanhood (48). More particularly, they claim that “for Haggard, the threat of native power is encoded through the disturbing magnetism of his heroine...and his imperialist script dramatizes how She (Ayesha) must be sought, silenced, and destroyed” (Gilbert and Gubar 52). Importantly, the ‘native power’ that Gilbert and Gubar refer to is that of Ayesha’s African, non-British power. Agreeing with both Gilbert and Gubar, I am interested in what makes Ayesha feared and how she is to be silenced and destroyed. Age, again, comes into play with questions of race and women’s mobility here in a way that highlights that the presentation of youth and whiteness on a New Woman figure is seen as threatening to the British homeland.

Kay Heath notes that Haggard’s *She* “raises anxiety about age, especially female senescence” and “exposes the need of Victorians to place women within a matrix of age-determined value” (105). Heath’s aim with *She* is to look at the way midlife was defined, and how midlife, as a liminal space between old and young, could be an increasing source of anxiety for Victorian society, acknowledging that a woman’s value could be determined by the presentation of their age and that midlife made that value difficult to determine. Particularly, Ayesha, by *appearing* perpetually young, could throw off Victorians ability to determine a woman’s value. While Heath does note that in Ayesha’s aging she becomes an example of what Victorian’s feared—that they “were regressing to more primitive states by degeneration”—her argument does not address how the degeneration is somehow synonymous with both fears of age *and* race (112). Both Ayesha’s race and age *appear* antithetical to what we know of her background, geographic location, and her numerical age. An Arabian woman in the interior of Africa, Ayesha is white and youthful. However, when she ages rapidly at the end of the novel all

of her 2,000 years, she looks African. The presentation of older age with African ethnic markers mark Ayesha as 'other.' Here, age and race work together to control and contain progressive women.

Moreover, the fear of Ayesha's power is framed by the *appearance* of her age and race. Ayesha, as an Arabian white woman of almost impossible beauty and constant youth, physical prowess, and mental acumen, her power is seen as more threatening than other progressive women. If a man cannot best a woman in terms of brute strength or intellect, why are men considered superior and the leaders of society? The novel drives this point home by juxtaposing Leo and Holly, physically and intellectually superior to most men, to Ayesha's physical and intellectual powers. When they stand against Ayesha in any way, they are emasculated. Physically fit and attractive, Leo is described at the outset of the novel as so handsome that he "might have stood for a statue of the youthful Apollo" (16). Additionally, he can take on men twice his size and best them (16). Intellectually, Leo is 'brilliant and keen witted" (16). Throughout the novel, Holly is shown to be the ultimate scholar, and an imposing, if ugly, physical figure. A Cambridge University professor that has spent most his life sequestered on a college campus studying language and life, Holly is a learned man. As the narrator of the story, he demonstrates vast knowledge of obscure languages, anthropological knowledge of the people he encounters, botanical knowledge of the varying plants, and zoological knowledge of animals. Furthermore, Holly is considered wise for Ayesha notes that Holly's thoughts are reminiscent of "old philosophers" that she knew of in Athens (137). His physical strength also borders on the absurd. Described as having been built "with iron and abnormal strength," Holly, at one point, severs the head of a man with a hunting

knife and squeezes two large, strong men to death (6; 74).

Clearly, both fine specimens of English men, they still stood no chance against Ayesha. Like some other New Women who sought to educate themselves, Ayesha is educated through her own insatiable desire for knowledge. With her pursuit of knowledge, Ayesha gains several powers that have the appearance of magic to the less informed mind: she can retard the appearance of age, see into the past and present, and kill by her will alone. Importantly, her powers are so great that they are beyond the intellectual comprehension of Holly or Leo. In fact, Ayesha is quick to correct Holly every time he suggests that her powers are magic. She explains “it is no magic, that is a fiction of ignorance. There is no such thing as magic, though there is such a thing as a knowledge of the secrets of Nature” (110). Ayesha many claims towards powers are always linked back to her “knowledge of the secrets of Nature.” So physically and intellectually, Ayesha is superior to Leo and Holly. In fact, Leo and Holly lose all appearance of their masculinity when in opposition to Ayesha. When Leo tries to stop Ayesha from killing Ustane, he is stopped by her “mysterious electric agency or overwhelming will-force” (164). He describes it to Holly “as though he had suddenly received a violent blow in the chest, and what is more, utterly cowed, as if all the manhood had been taken out of him” (164). Likewise, when Holly, who has learned to despise all women because of his own ugliness, sees Ayesha unveiled for the first time, he is in love with her for the rest of his life. He cannot withstand her other powers either because he is twice brought to his knees in a “babbling” confused mess when Ayesha unveils or demonstrates her ability to kill at will (138; 113).

Furthermore, Ayesha’s threat to men becomes clear at moments when she is seen

not as a powerful, wise, and knowledgeable scientist, but when she is also seen as a typical 'woman.' Emotionally ill tempered, Ayesha flies from calm to rage to tears to love in a matter of seconds when almost anything concerns Leo. When Ayesha discovers Leo, her reincarnated lover, dying, she shakes violently and bursts into violent tears. To this expression of emotion, she explains to Holly, "Thou sees after all I am a very woman" (144). In fact, the terrors of Ayesha to Holly, seem to be the terrors of any young woman. When Holly contemplates Leo's possible marriage to Ayesha, he thinks "in uniting himself to this dread woman, he would place his life under the influence of a mysterious creature of evil tendencies, but then that would be likely enough to happen to him in any ordinary marriage" (175). The problem with Ayesha is that she is powerful beyond any other known human *and* a woman.

However, Ayesha's powers are tenuous when she loses her appearance of youth and whiteness. While both Leo and Holly claim to be in love with her for all time, their declarations are due to their memory of her young, white form. Holly even claims:

I am in love with Ayesha myself to this day, and I would rather have been the object of her affection for one short week than that of any other woman in the world for a lifetime. And let me add that, if anybody who doubts this statement, and thinks me foolish for making it, could have seen Ayesha draw her veil and flash out beauty on his gaze, his view would exactly coincide with my own. (176)

Though this claim comes after Ayesha's death and Holly's return to England, his claim of everlasting love is based only on recalling her beauty and not her transition into an old, brown woman. His declaration skips over his horror of Ayesha as old and brown.

When Ayesha steps back into the Pillar of Fire to demonstrate the process to Leo, the process starts going notably awry when Job cries out “Look!--look!--look! she’s shriveling up! she’s turning into a monkey!” (212). The narration compounds on both the aging and the racial markers:

smaller and smaller she grew; her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow, like a piece of withered parchment. She felt at her head: the delicate hand was nothing but a claw now, a human talon like that of a badly-preserved Egyptian mummy....smaller she grew, and smaller yet, till she was no larger than a monkey. Now the skin puckered into a million wrinkles, and on the shapeless face was the stamp of unutterable age. (212-2130)

This combination of both older age with the loss of whiteness is described as so horrifying that Holly suggests, “all men [should] pray they never may” see such “frightful age” if “they wish to keep their reason” (213). Leo’s own physical reaction is telling because “he recoiled a step or two” (212).

While supposedly Holly’s and Leo’s love for Ayesha is enduring, neither of them choose to step into the pillar in order to suspend time’s ravages to their bodies and wait for her to be reincarnated. Leo, who had promised to marry her, does concede to wait till the day he dies. Still, Holly privately reflects on her reincarnation in horror, wondering “supposing she came back like that!” (216) This thought is followed by a later edit by Holly:

What a terrifying reflection it is, by the way, that nearly all our deep love for women who are not our kindred depends--at any rate, in the first

instance--upon their personal appearance. If we lost them, and found them again dreadful to look on, though otherwise they were the very same, should we still love them? (216)

This unanswered question appears to offer its own answer--no. Heath remarks that Ayesha's death scene encapsulates what Victorians feared: "that evolution was turning backward and the human body and culture were regressing to more primitive states by the process of degeneration" (Heath 112). While Ayesha's death scene does point to fears of degeneration and of age being part of that degeneration, it is important to understand what aging linked to degeneration rhetorically does to women: it tries to control them. Ayesha without her youth and beauty has considerably less power over Leo and Holly. Since Ayesha has powers beyond the norm, if a normal woman loses her youth and beauty, then, as Holly's reflection here suggests, they have no power over men. Rhetoric that suggests that women *must* maintain their youth, beauty, and whiteness by abstaining from the appearance of labor or intellectual pursuits usually seen as in the purview of men seeks to keep women contained within domesticity.

On a larger scale, the novel suggests that progressive, non-traditional women in Britain will never have real power; that patriarchy is still the basis of every society. For example, the Amhagger, the people Ayesha rules, are a microcosm of how women may not ever be able rule or have equality in society. In this mixed-race society, the women are supposedly the ones who rule. Billali, one of the elder males of the society, explains: "In this country, the women do what they please. We worship them, and give them their way, because without them the world could not go on; they are the source of life" (83). While this is the claim that Billali makes for the society, women do not seem to have any

power beyond not doing hard labor and choosing and discarding their own husbands at will. For instance, when Ustane, who chooses to wed Leo, decides to travel with Holly, Leo, and their servant, Job, to meet Ayesha for the first time, Ustane gets blindfolded along with Holly, Leo, and Job. Holly surmises that this might be “from fear that she should impart the secrets of the route to us” (94). The women among the Amhagger may appear to get their way, but they are not trusted. Billali even explains “We worship them up to a point, till at last they get unbearable, which they do about every second generation” (83). In this scenario, the Amhagger men “rise, and kill the old ones as an example to the young ones, and to show them that we are the strongest” (83). Importantly, the Amhagger men refrain from killing the young, and therefore presumably more beautiful women, but the old they kill easily. This is a demonstration to the young women that the worship that they receive can easily and violently be taken away. The Amhagger women really have only the appearance of power.

Again here, gender, race, and age seem to matter to how the novel asks people to respond to the idea of women in power. In the case of the Amhagger people, their mixed race is as much a part of their society as the way their society operates. When Holly sees them for the first time, he describes them as a “yellowish” beautiful people whose grim appearance fill him “with a sick fear” (56). Since, part of this culture is to kill off the old women as a threat to keep the young women in place, it would be hard for a Victorian reader not to connect the Amhagger’s race with their actions towards the aged.

Why is it important that issues of race get conflated with issues of aging? Because the fear surrounding both suggest a fear of women’s progression not just into British society, but into the world that the British are seeking to conquer. Rhetoric against older

age shows how aging can act as a distraction and a greater means of discrimination against women. When getting older can become symbolically analogous to losing the appearance of your race by simply being a woman, it illuminates the perceived potential threat women might have in Victorian society. Age and race are categories which are biological and irrevocable and also cultural. No one can stop the march of time or choose the color of their skin, but we can change the way society chooses to use ideology to see us. As Anne McClintock argues “race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like the armatures of Lego. Rather, they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other--if in contradictory and conflictual ways” (5).

Shackled together by fear, the Victorian rhetoric surrounding race and age in advertising, the New Woman, and the novel *She* promote a sense of responsibility to Victorian woman to maintain their youth and their race at home in the boundaries of Britain. Women who seek education, adventure, employment, and lives beyond the home and hearth, may become marked as outsiders.

Conclusion

“We think we age by nature; we are insistently and precociously being aged by culture. But *how* we are aged by culture--that we need to know much more about.” (Margaret Morganroth Gullette *Declining to Decline* 7).

This project explores the cultural experience of aging and then look at how novels reflect the feelings and the experience of middle-class Victorian women. Because my focus is cultural aging, my project is guided by the ideology of separate spheres because it was a belief system that influenced women’s lives and how society imagined what the human experience should be for men and women. For women, chiefly, this meant marriage and motherhood. A problematic position for women if society present those as their only life goals. In marriage and motherhood, Victorian women are supposedly granted an almost blissful existence. However, the promise of separate spheres consistently failed women, and my project explores the way conceptions of aging illustrate these issues by looking at spinsterhood, older motherhood, and progressive women.

This project has been an exploration, in many ways, of feelings about aging brought on by culture. In writing and researching for these chapters, I could not remove myself from the page. I referenced Margaret Morganroth Gullette at the beginning of this project by noting her argument that “as early as you begin to apply the attributes [of aging] to your own self, you are being aged by culture” (5). At the heart of Gullette’s argument is feeling, the feeling of anxiety because anxiety can help create a particular identity. Gullette’s own work in the 90’s was trying to show “how our dominant culture teaches us to feel bad about aging and just how to feel bad and how early to start” (5). In

my own way, that is what this dissertation has tried to do--to figure out *how* Victorian women were aged by culture and what the effects of that were, and what ways they could combat it. Aging is a cultural experience just as it is a biological experience, and when we treat age as just nature, we ignore the *how* of how we build our culture and the effects of that culture on the individual.

Through this project, I have built a historical and cultural understanding of issues of aging for women in the Victorian period. Through the debates of the ‘redundant’/ ‘surplus’ women, we see how age unevenly affects women in marriage. This conversation of age forces the conversation of the Woman Questions, causing us to engage fundamentally more with women’s political position and seeing them as needing education in order to labor to support themselves. Through looking at domestic ideology and older motherhood, chapter two makes clear that older motherhood is a space where the rhetoric of separate spheres fails to grant the power it promises to women who marry and produce children. While many women may have had very real power in their individual homes as the aged, that is the not a promise that is upheld for all women as sub-citizens and as children grow into adulthood. By the end of the period, we see how developed debates of the Woman Question deal with the perceived progressive New Woman. Fears of general degeneration due to science and imperial expansion created rhetoric that combined fears of aging with fears of miscegenation and a loss of the British homeland in advertising, the New Woman, and the novel *She*.

This dissertation is a small contribution to understanding questions of cultural aging both in the Victorian period and today. In each chapter, I have referenced places of misconceptions about aging and age populations. Importantly, in each chapter, I also

reference where there are gaps in our historical, anthropological, literary, and sociological studies. These two issues (misconceptions and scholarly gaps) are a reflection of our own value systems today.

We do not like to think about getting older past prime adulthood and what that could mean for men and women. The consequences are different for men and women, and that too is something we do not always like to think of. Moreover, Pat Thane notes that, historically, “Old age has long been predominantly a female experience” since women have historically outlived men (3). In addition, historically, patriarchy has framed even the perception of whether or not women lived longer than men. Aristotle believed that men outlived women because women had less heat; Albertus Magnus, in the thirteenth century, thought women lived longer by accident; eighteenth century French physicians thought women were unnatural when they consistently outlived men (Thane 22). This past reflects our gendered responses to getting older.

The experiences and feelings explored here about aging are ones built by cultural and biological ideas of aging. The experience of being married or unmarried, a mother, or a career/progressive woman are not new experiences for us today. Women are taught at very young ages to be very aware of their ages and what it means to get older. Daily, we get reminders from others how our age is connected to our ability to be successful according to the world. At 21, my grandfather, noticing that I was not dating anyone, inquired pointedly, “But you do want to get married, right?” At 25 years of age, working at a community college in Montana, a young freshmen found out my age, and declared in shock “You’re that OLD!” At 32, I break it to my mother that I probably will not ever have children, and probably do not want them. To which she responds, “Of course, you

will! It will happen. You're still young!" Daily, I am accosted with reminders that my value is in my youth and my ability to meet the expectations of my gender in my youth by friends, family, and media. Every time we make a woman's merit about her ability to fulfill these roles, we add anxiety and reduce the potential energy she has to pursue other avenues of life. Even if it does not reduce the woman's potential energy, it asks her to constantly engage in questioning her satisfaction in her life based on society's definition of what success looks like at a particular age. Regardless of how she answers society's question, her age value changes in their response to her.

The act of questioning your value because of ideas of age can be a kind of trauma. The act of questioning the value of the system that asks you to find your value in particular experiences and ages is a kind of freedom. This project is an attempt at showing moments of Victorian questioning and moving us closer to better questioning of cultural aging in the past and present.

Our contemporary gendered ways of framing age is often how I explain my research to others. The easy example of couple pairings in movies shows how readily we accept certain age disparities. It is almost without thought that we view a 40-50 something man paired with a 20 something woman in a film, but the reverse would likely feel comical and unnatural to most audiences. In recent years, the limited shelf life of female film and television stars has gotten considerable attention. It is so common a topic that Amy Schumer easily parodied it in a skit in 2015 on ComedyCentral with Tina Fey, Patricia Arquette, and Julia Louis-Dreyfus. In the skit, Schumer happens upon Fey, Arquette, and Louis-Dreyfus as they are eating bread and melted ice cream as a way of celebrating Louis-Dreyfus's no longer being seen as a sexually viable media figure.

Confused, Schumer asks for an explanation to which Fey explains how Sally Fields plays both a love interest for Tom Hanks in one movie “and then 20 minutes later, his mother in *Forest Gump*” (“Last Fuckable Day”). This parody lays out how ageing is culturally gendered because men, as the skit explains, never have a last fuckable day; they are always sexually viable in the media.

Furthermore, the negative associations of aging for women have a long cultural history in our mythology and the stories we tell children today. Lynn Segal, in *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Aging*, notes:

Fears of aging are fed from birth by terrifying images in myth and folktale—the hag, harridan, gorgon, witch, or Medusa. Such frightening figures are not incidentally female, they are quintessentially female, seen as monstrous because of the combination of age and gender.” (13)

Segal’s notice here of how age as is monstrosity for women is noticeable beyond our fairytale mythologies. I found myself alarmed in 2015 for similar reasons. In teaching a film course themed around female monsters, it was easy to find films that showed women as horrifying due in large part to their appearance, and older age was among the chief areas of revulsion. For instance, *All about Eve*, *101 Dalmatians*, *Mommy Dearest*, and *Misery* all helped paint the women as evil or flawed through their appearance and, particularly ages and weights. In contrast, the iconic British show *Doctor Who* (well watched in America), is the story of an extraterrestrial human looking man who gets reborn into body after body, his body never showing the signs of his age. Yet, probably one of the best-known contemporary doctors, played by David Tennant, emphasized in his relationship with the Prime Minister, Harriet Jones, that it is easy to destroy a woman

simply by remarking upon her appearance. In the first episode starring Tennant, “The Christmas Invasion,” the Prime Minister, Harriet Jones, destroys a retreating alien race’s ship for fear they would bring war to Earth. The Doctor, in rage, declares that he will destroy her in just six words. He whispers to her assistant “Don’t you think she’s looking tired”(“The Christmas Invasion”). This is seen as an almost heroic moment; the Doctor is portrayed as doing good! However, what he does is cast aspersions on her because of her appearance with the suggestion that perhaps she is too old, too tired to be prime minister.

I list these contemporary cultural examples because they help illustrate how aging issues for women today exist in our media today and in our recent past as mostly negative. Often, as Victorian scholars and as teachers, we look for cultural context to help frame our arguments to show how novels reflect the human experience for men and women of the Victorian period. The increased access to print was part of that context just as TV shows and video advertisements are have become part of our modern day context. Today’s media plays a large part in how we have come to understand ourselves as individual citizens. The media offers us a mirror for us to compare whether or not we fit in and a suggestion of how we should alter ourselves to fit in within a larger society. Contradictorily, we have a culture that values both individuality and conformity. We are taught that we are each unique, that we must make our way ourselves. Yet, we are sold cookie cutter images of what that success looks like from childhood on in forms of heteronormative family homes and professional jobs such as doctors and lawyers. Much like separate spheres ideology offered a template to Victorians about who they should be and what their lives should look like, our media plays off our own contradictory ideologies to offer us the same. While our media has begun (albeit slowly) demonstrating

diversity in the form of LGBTQ communities and racial minorities, they are not great at diversity in terms of ages, particularly where women are concerned.

Interestingly, Lynn Segal notes that is our culture of individualism that contributes to our aversion of age because age is commonly seen as a form of dependency (Segal 36). Understandably then, it is difficult for someone to reconcile themselves to the passing of years. Especially if, as you age, you feel as independent and active as you believe an older person would not. This then can be a site of identity crisis. As Segal explains:

It is when we are young that we are most obviously busy with the project of trying to construct a self we hope the world appreciate, monitoring and re-arranging the impressions we make on others. Yet, as we age, most of us are still trying to hold on to some of who and what we are, however hard this may become for those who start to feel increasingly invisible. (1)

Considering that each person is actively shaping their identity in youth, and is actively encouraged to find out who they are, what they should do, who they should marry or not, the process of aging in a culture that does not always accept getting older can rife with tensions.

However, the march of time is unavoidable. Even so, accepting or reveling in the passing of time may be seen as culturally unacceptable. As Elaine Showalter notes:

identifying yourself as old is to admit something everyone can see, and is thus somehow more shaming, carrying more of a stigma. We're supposed to deny being old; it is seen as an insulting, or at least unwelcome, self-description, unless jocular and well padded with euphemisms: senior

citizen, oldie. Ageing is a process, a matter of degree rather than a fixed identity (xi).

Showalter is correct in pointing out here how our language can influence how we try to come to terms with our identity. Much like Judith Butler noted about gender performativity, our age identity can be a constructed set of actions and thoughts both brought to us by society and reproduced by ourselves. And though older age, as Pat Thane argues, “cannot simply be a social construct, an artifice of perception, or fashioned through discourse” because it has very real biological processes (5). Still, the “meaning of old age is not fixed and it has different meanings in different contexts” as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation (Thane 5). Our current context for how we speak of getting older for women has hegemonic age identity issues that can be hard to break.

However, the hegemony of older age identity should be broken in our language, our media, and our policy. Much like Gullette argues:

If we can demystify midlife aging, we can begin to imagine, experience, and share a more vital, fair, bearable vision of the entire life course. To do this, individuals must see themselves not as isolated bodies but as collective stakeholders capable of resisting the culture and transforming it.
(3)

Regardless of whether we are demystifying midlife or any other period of perceived older age, the demystification process can empower each of us individually and as a larger community.

As we have noticed in this dissertation throughout, work that fights against that hegemonic identity may not go unpunished by those who are in power. Germaine Greer, an iconic feminist in the 70's writes, wrote about menopause and the perception of women's age as connected with aging in the 90's in her book *The Change*. She notes

There have always been women who ignored the eternal-youth bandwagon and agreed to grow up...In a childish world this behavior is seen as threatening. Nobody knows what to do with a woman who is not perpetually smiling or fawning. Calm, grave, quiet women drive anophobes to desperation. Women who refuse to empower the penis are old bats and old bags, crones, mothers-in-law, castrating women, and so forth. (Greer 4-5)

Similar to Greer, my final chapter on the New Woman makes the same point by pointing out that ascriptions of age could be put on women who refused to comply with separate spheres. Greer follows this up with another point that is worth considering: "There is no point in growing old unless you can be a witch, and accumulate spiritual power in place of the political and economic power that has been denied you as a woman" (Greer 9).

While resistance to negative narratives of older age for women might cause some women to be called witches, what is the point unless you can be called a witch, unless you can grow in power by ignoring narratives and creating your own.

So, there must be real ways of moving forward. First and foremost, we must recognize the cultural inequities of getting older for men and women and call out narratives perpetuated by media who intentionally or unintentionally support it, much like Amy Schumer's skit did. While most of us do not have Amy Schumer's stage, most of us

have a community platform in the classroom. We can teach our student to see how inequities about age, gender, race, and sexuality are built through our language and culture.

Second, we can advocate for changes recognizing that our society is changing on the surface. Moving forward, Caroline Lodge, Eileen Carnell, and Marianne Coleman in their book *The New Age of Aging: How Society Needs to Change*, offer policy proposals and a holistic approach on how the UK can change its attitude towards their growing aging population. They notice that in “popular discussion about aging, language is used to imply that ageing is happening only to other people, to older people. Yet we all begin to age from birth, and everyone who survives will become an older person. People who are older are not a separate category.” (Lodge, Carnell, and Coleman 4) Moreover, Lodge et al note that in the UK and elsewhere we have a growing older population because the death rate is slowing, as is the birthrate (14). Often this growth is referred to as a “demographic time bomb” despite the fact that this has been a growing change in our population for a while and assumes that having a larger older population is a “one-off occurrence” (13). Recognizing that our growing older population is not random nor going away, we need to advocate for policies that create spaces for older people in our society that does not marginalize them. For example, understanding that people are living longer our tax policies should be built around being able to provide for our growing elder population. Additionally, our language around economics should credit older people for contributing to the economy because they also continue to pay taxes longer because many can continue to work longer before retirement.

I bring up these possible actions in our contemporary lives, because it is important as literature scholars of the past that we bring our understanding of culture and history to bear on our present and assist in creating an equitable future. If we do not shake our heads at gendered age inequities today, we cannot (in good conscience) shake our heads in rage at how preposterous it is that Victorian women were marginalized when they aged out of marriage and motherhood or mocked for pursuing careers. Today, women are told they have to choose between career and family; today, women are chastised for waiting too long to have families or not having them at all; today, women are not chosen for jobs because of their age even when men of the same age are still considered viable. We have the opportunity as humanities scholars to have public voices in our classrooms and in our communities. Let us be that voice.

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