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PRIVATE READER, PUBLIC REDACTOR: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF THE
NINETEENTH-CENTURY FEMALE REVISIONIST

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and
Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Amy Criniti Phillips

May 2011

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Amy Criniti Phillips

2011

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NINETEENTH-CENTURY FEMALE REVISIONIST

By

Amy Criniti Phillips

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ABSTRACT

PRIVATE READER, PUBLIC REDACTOR: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FEMALE REVISIONIST

By

Amy Criniti Phillips

May 2011

Dissertation supervised by Laura Callanan, Ph.D.

This dissertation investigates the vital role of the private female reading experience in the creation of the mid-Victorian British woman writer's authorial persona. In particular, I examine the role of the female redactor, a woman writer who revises a particular text, genre, or convention within a patriarchal literary tradition. The public and private contexts of the female redactor become imperative to the text that she creates, for the final narrative product is not only a public revision but also a series of private, gendered negotiations that define the woman writer and determine her contribution to female authorship.

With a specific focus on Geraldine Jewsbury, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, I closely examine the ways in which these female redactors invoke and challenge male-authored texts within an established patriarchal literary tradition in order to create for themselves a distinctly female literary identity. Chapter One centers on Geraldine Jewsbury's feminist revision of Thomas Carlyle's gospel of work in her novel, *The Half*

Sisters (1848), in which Jewsbury emphasizes the importance of women's work in Victorian England. Chapter Two explores the manner in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning—inspired by John Donne's *Songs and Sonets* (1633) in her own *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850)—engages in a gendered revision of the Petrarchan sonnet, both in content and form, in order to represent realistically the complex poetic place of woman as desiring subject, desired object, and empowered female poet. Chapter Three examines Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), in which Braddon aims to subvert critical understandings of high and low literary culture that dismiss the value of both the female consumer and the sensation genre. I conclude with a brief epilogue, which focuses on two contemporary revisions of nineteenth-century female-authored texts: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Jane Slayre*. These co-authored revisions of classic nineteenth-century texts, which simultaneously lampoon and pay homage to nineteenth-century female authorship, highlight the importance not only of revision as a narrative strategy for constructing authorial identity but also of a nineteenth-century female literary tradition that mid-Victorian female redactors aimed to establish.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the late Albert C. Labriola, a world-renowned scholar, distinguished professor, mentor, and beloved friend. I couldn't have “gotten out of the nest” without his infinite guidance, wisdom, humor, and friendship. Thanks for stopping, ACL—you've played an epic role in my life.

“Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.”

—John Milton

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I must begin by thanking two very important people whose insights, guidance, and literary interests inspired me to write this dissertation. Firstly, I thank the late Albert C. Labriola, my dear friend and mentor, who introduced me to the love poetry of John Donne. As his research assistant I devoted seven years to *The Donne Variorum*, and—to Dr. Labriola’s great satisfaction and my own dismay—I eventually developed an affinity for Donne’s love poetry. Secondly, I thank my dissertation director, Laura Callanan, for her unwavering support, infinite patience, constructive feedback, and sound advice throughout the dissertation process. My profound experiences in the first graduate class that Laura taught at Duquesne actually inspired me to pursue a Ph.D. in English, and she has been “stuck” with me ever since. Moreover, it was in her “Victorian Poetry” course that I first became fixated on the literary connection between Elizabeth Barrett Browning and John Donne and fell in love with the concept of revision. Thus, my dissertation originated from the symbolic marriage of two outstanding professors, each of whom struck a perfect balance between gently guiding me on the path to scholarly success and constantly challenging me to reach my full potential as an academic. I am eternally grateful for their support, wisdom, and mentorship, which have made me into the scholar, teacher, and person that I am today.

I would like to thank the other two members of my dissertation committee, Laura Engel and Dan Watkins, whose detailed and prompt feedback, encouragement, and enthusiasm for my scholarship have been invaluable to the formation of this dissertation.

They are two of the finest teachers, scholars, and individuals I have ever met, and I am constantly humbled by their steadfast commitment to my own academic pursuits.

Though too numerous to list individually, I thank the exceptional and supportive graduate students at Duquesne University who befriended me throughout this process and served as a constant source of advice, encouragement, and entertainment. In particular, I thank Heather Shippen Cianciola, Kristianne Kalata Vaccaro, Rita Allison Kondrath, and Amanda Johnson—four of my dearest friends and unofficial mentors—for blazing the academic trail before me and assuring me that I could follow in their brilliant footsteps. I also extend my most heartfelt thanks to Matthew Vickless for his patience, commiseration, and companionship. Circumstance (i.e., *The Donne Variorum*) may have brought us together, but choice (and lots of coffee) made us friends.

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I thank my parents, Stephen and Kathryn Criniti, and my siblings, Jen and Stephen, for their love, generosity, support, and advice throughout my career as a graduate student. I especially thank my older brother, Stephen, whose pursuit of the same subject matter and degree—he received his Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Cincinnati in 2008—forged an eternal bond between us and forced him to serve as his little sister's ad hoc advisor.

I cannot forget Panera Bread, my home away from home, where I wrote most of the dissertation. Although I witnessed a drastic forty-two-cent price increase in my decaf coffee (\$1.07 to \$1.49!!!) and endured countless hours of horrible Muzak, I thank the staff for kindly allowing me to loiter in their facility at least three days a week for the past 6 ½ years.

Lastly, I don't think words could possibly express how grateful I am to my husband, Mark Phillips, without whom I truly could not have made it through this process. His humility, hard work, and unselfish devotion to our marriage provided me with the financial security and motivation to pursue my dreams of earning a doctoral degree. More important, it was because of his daily encouragement, his unwavering belief in my abilities as a scholar, his willingness to read parts of the dissertation (over and over) and provide me with constructive feedback, and his unconditional love that I made it to the other side. To my husband, my soul mate, and my hero, I am eternally grateful.

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Introduction

The Mid-Victorian Female Redactor's Quest for Authorial Identity

[W]hen women get to be energetic, strong characters, with literary reputations of their own, and live in the world, with business to attend to, they all do get in the habit of making use of people, and of taking care of themselves in a way that is startling! And yet how are they to help it? If they are thrown into the world, they must swim for their life. And yet, again, one has a prejudice against anything that looks like personal calculation in a woman, though, as the Devil knows, they are the greatest schemers on earth. In short, whenever a woman gets to be a personage in any shape, it makes her hard and unwomanly in some point or other, and, as I tell you, I am bothered to explain how it is, or why it is, or how it should be otherwise. — Geraldine Jewsbury, *Selections from the Letters of Geraldine E. Jewsbury to Jane Welsh Carlyle* (367-68)

As an unmarried novelist in mid-Victorian England, Geraldine Jewsbury dared to transgress the social boundaries that dictated a strict definition of proper womanhood. However, in an intimate letter to her friend Jane Welsh Carlyle, Jewsbury exposes the central conflict that faced every female author in mid-Victorian England: how does a woman craft for herself a public authorial identity in a society that rigidly defines proper womanhood within the confines of the private, domestic sphere? Can a woman be both respected and visible? Can she escape the gendered stereotypes of her society? Or, more important, can—and *should*—she redefine those stereotypes? While the concept of the professional woman writer emerged long before the Victorian Era,¹ the female author in mid-Victorian England faced a unique set of challenges—she inhabited a historical and literary era in which “gender came to mark the most important difference among individuals” (Armstrong 4). Consequently, she encountered rigid patriarchal social constructs which relegated her gender to the private sphere while also witnessing the emergence of women’s rights: the first petitions for women’s suffrage were drafted;

political advocacy groups were formed in order to increase female freedom with respect to education, employment, marriage, and sexuality; laws on marriage, divorce, custody, and property were passed in order to provide women with greater freedom and control; and the first women's college was established.² Thus, the mid-Victorian woman writer inhabited a world of binaries that centered on gender, and her mere decision to publicly author a text punctured culturally accepted conventions about her inferior gender. Unable to completely escape these binaries, the mid-Victorian woman writer often manipulated them in order to craft multilayered and double-voiced texts that both conformed to and subverted these strict cultural expectations.

My project centers on one particular strategy, textual revision, which was implemented by the mid-Victorian woman writer who sought to create for herself an authorial identity in the absence of a respected female literary tradition. With a focus on Geraldine Jewsbury, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, I aim to highlight the vital role of the private female reading experience in the creation of the mid-Victorian woman writer's authorial persona, a role often overlooked or only implicitly mentioned in literary scholarship on nineteenth-century women writers. I have chosen to focus on the female redactor—a woman writer who revises texts, genres, or conventions within a patriarchal literary tradition—because she directly draws attention to her role as both reader and (re)writer. Through her revision of an established literary text—especially one written by a male author—the female redactor draws explicit attention to the relationship between private readership, personal (authorial) interpretation of the original text, and the public narrative restructuring of that text. Such revisions are a way not only of subverting the traditional text but also of laying claim to it. By revising a

specific literary work, the female redactor publicly incorporates her individual reading experience into her writing: she merges the private, autobiographical, reading “self” with the public writing persona she creates. The public *and* private contexts of the female redactor become imperative to the text that she creates, for the final narrative product is not only a public revision but also a series of private, gendered negotiations that determine the individual female author and her contribution to (and understanding of) female authorship.

Mid-Victorian England: A Cultural and Historical Overview

In her book-length study of gender in mid-Victorian England, Mary Poovey explores in detail the binary nature of mid-Victorian culture, categorizing the ideology of the era as “uneven both in the sense of being experienced differently by individuals who were positioned differently within the social formation (by sex, class, or race, for example) and in the sense of being articulated differently by the different institutions, discourses, and practices that it both constituted and was constituted by” (3). The Victorian era was defined by gender difference, and the ambivalent role of the woman within mid-Victorian society calls particular attention to the fractured nature of this “uneven” culture. According to Poovey, “The model of a binary opposition between the sexes, which was socially realized in separate but supposedly equal ‘spheres,’ underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions at midcentury, ranging from a sexual division of labor to a sexual division of economic and political rights” (8-9). Women were simultaneously revered and denigrated; they were “considered physically unfit to vote or compete for work” (8), but were hailed as superior moral beacons in society whose commitment to wifedom and motherhood “conferr[ed] upon them

extraordinary power over men” (7-8). Ultimately, women were relegated to the private domestic sphere—where their moral aptitude reigned supreme—and discouraged from entering the public sphere—a space dominated by the truly superior male sex.

The duality of mid-Victorian society is further complicated by the two diametrically opposed views of the Victorian woman that emerged—the angel and monster. On the one hand, Victorian society honored the “self-sacrificing and self-regulating” “domestic deity [who] radiated morality because her ‘substance’ was love, not self-interest or ambition” (Poovey 8). Such an image was based on the (in)famous character of Honoria in Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* (1854) whose “essential virtue [. . .] is that her virtue makes her *man* ‘great.’ In and of herself, she is neither great nor extraordinary” (Gilbert and Gubar 22). In their pioneering work, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note, “it is the surrender of her self—of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both—that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act” (25). In other words, the angel is a moral beacon who is literally and figuratively *selfless*.

In juxtaposition to this image, Victorian society feared the angel’s sexually charged counterpart—what Poovey deems “an aggressive, carnal magdalen” (11). The female monster is anything but selfless: she is, according to Gilbert and Gubar, a threatening representation of female autonomy (28). Her “assertiveness, aggressiveness—all characteristics of a male life of ‘significant action’—are ‘monstrous’ in women precisely because ‘unfeminine’ and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of

‘contemplative purity’” (Gilbert and Gubar 28). These opposing images of woman, Poovey argues, are particularly relevant in mid-Victorian England, where

virtue was depoliticized, moralized, and associated with the domestic sphere, which was being abstracted at the same time—both rhetorically and, to a certain extent, materially—from the so-called public sphere of competition, self-interest, and economic aggression. As superintendents of the domestic sphere, (middle-class) women were represented as protecting and, increasingly, incarnating virtue. (10)

Consequently, the mid-Victorian woman occupied a literal, metaphorical, and ideological space of both power and impotence. Contained within the private sphere, she was assigned moral and cultural authority; outside these socially constructed bounds, however, she was feared—and thus marginalized, demonized, or ignored altogether—because she threatened to disrupt the already “uneven” balance of the gender binaries that dominated mid-Victorian society.

In particular, the woman writer challenged these rigid stereotypes by utilizing the double-voiced and multilayered elements of the mid-Victorian generation to establish for herself a place within literary history. With the democracy of print and the rise of the middle class³, mid-Victorian England experienced a dramatic increase in a literate, “reading public,” which “affected the production and marketing of fiction and of literary works generally” (Hoppen 375). Publishing was a booming business: the mid-Victorian generation was characterized by the three-volume novel, serial publication, and circulating libraries. In his historical study on the mid-Victorian generation—K. Theodore Hoppen posits, “Between 1840 and 1870 the British population increased by 40

per cent, the number of books published annually by 400 per cent. Between 1800 and 1825 about 580 books appeared each year, by mid-century over 2,600, by 1900 6,044” (381). Within this booming literary marketplace, the woman writer attempted to define for herself a professional identity.⁴ In her landmark monograph, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), Elaine Showalter notes that while most women novelists were “daughters of the upper middle class, the aristocracy, and the professions” (37), middle-class Victorian women “had very few alternative occupations to writing in the nineteenth century” and turned to writing as a means of economic survival (47).

This increase in female authorship posed a direct threat to the gender binaries of the mid-Victorian generation by challenging the prescriptive understandings of public and private spheres. Showalter points out, however, that the number of women writers actually entering the literary marketplace is much smaller than often thought, for “the proportion of women writers to men remained steady at about 20 percent from 1800 to 1935” (39). Ultimately, this exaggerated concept of female authorship invading the public sphere results from the transgression of accepted gender roles, which endangered the patriarchal structure of Victorian society. Showalter posits,

The Victorian illusion of enormous numbers came from the overreaction of male competitors, the exaggerated visibility of the woman writer, the overwhelming success of a few novels in the 1840s, the conjunction of feminist themes in fiction with feminist activism in England, and the availability of biographical information about the novelists, which made them living heroines, rather than sets of cold and inky initials. (40)

More important than the numbers of female authors who transgressed social boundaries, then, is the impact that such transgressions made on the mid-Victorian generation and its rigid understandings of gender. Through the power of the pen, women became literally and figuratively more visible within mid-Victorian society as published authors, public professionals, and empowered individuals.

Although women writers' emergence into the public sphere certainly threatened mid-Victorian representations of gender, these authors were constantly plagued by feelings of fear, anxiety, and inferiority. As literary professionals, women writers were not taken seriously: "Gentleman reviewers had patronized lady novelists since the beginning of the nineteenth century" (Showalter 74). In her monograph, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (2009), Linda H. Peterson points out that women served as "amateur counterparts against which male authors defined their professional careers" (5). Thus, mid-Victorian women writers "found themselves in a double bind. They felt humiliated by the condescension of male critics and spoke intensely of their desire to avoid special treatment and achieve genuine excellence, but they were deeply anxious about the possibility of appearing unwomanly" (Showalter 21). As they sought to establish professional literary careers, these women writers struggled to determine

whether they should adopt masculine patterns of work or formulate feminine (or feminist) models of maternal, familial, or collaborative literary production; whether they should participate in debates over copyright, royalties, and other material aspects of authorship or restrict their public statements to intellectual and imaginative concerns that

reflected a more high-minded, idealistic view of literary labor; and how they might achieve economic success without sacrificing the equally important need for critical esteem and lasting literary status. (Peterson 6)

These legitimate concerns exemplify the nineteenth-century woman writer's anxiety about the profession itself as well as the manner in which her gender impacted the level of success she could publicly achieve in mid-Victorian England.

As Showalter notes, women writers devised strategies to cope with these injustices, several of which played into accepted gender roles. Many women writers adopted male pseudonyms, which—while allowing them to write more freely, glean unbiased critical feedback, and protect their reputations—ultimately reinforced the notion that women were inferior beings who belonged within the private sphere. Thus, those women writers who chose to reveal their gendered identities faced the challenge of both adhering to and transgressing mid-Victorian binaries in order to establish a literary identity. Gilbert and Gubar remark,

the literary woman has always faced equally degrading options when she had to define her public presence in the world. If she did not suppress her work entirely or publish it pseudonymously or anonymously, she could modestly confess her female “limitations” and concentrate on the “lesser” subjects reserved for ladies as becoming to their inferior powers. If the latter alternative seemed an admission of failure, she could rebel, accepting the ostracism that must have seemed inevitable. Thus, [. . .] the woman writer seemed locked into a disconcerting double bind: she had to

choose between admitting she was “only a woman” or protesting that she was “as good as a man.” (64)

Ultimately, the woman writer’s presence in the public sphere was defined almost solely by her gender. In order to establish for herself a literary identity, she appeared to have only two choices: deny her gender altogether or conform to social stereotypes about her gender’s intellectual and biological limitations. Ironically, the woman writer’s only alternative to this double bind was to write without regard for mid-Victorian society’s gender politics—an alternative that, as Gilbert and Gubar attest, would ultimately lead to public humiliation.

Despite the challenges presented by such strict representations of gender, mid-Victorian women writers still managed to take advantage of the “flowering of literary professionalism” that took place in the nineteenth century (Peterson 4). Peterson acknowledges the emergence of promising literary opportunities in Victorian England, such as “the opening of new genres for women writers: the essay, the literary review, the periodical column, the biographical portrait and historical sketch, the travelogue, and the serialized tale. Women writers were no longer confined to fiction and drama, the authors (and subjects) of ‘nobody’s story’” (4). Although she faced far more obstacles than the male author as a result of her gender, the woman writer seized the opportunity to “negotiate[e] individually—sometimes successfully, sometimes not” her status as a professional author (4). Consequently, the manner in which the mid-Victorian woman writer established for herself an individualized, gendered “authorial self-construction” proved, in many instances, to be “more enabling than disabling,” for these self-constructions—what Peterson deems “models and myths of the author” (10)—“allowed

women writers to claim new territories of endeavor and high achievement for their work” (10).

The role of the woman writer is further complicated by the controversy of the woman reader, which also emerged within the nineteenth century. Both Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (1993) and Catherine Golden’s *Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction* (2003) explore the historical—and controversial—position of the Victorian woman reader.⁵ Regarded primarily as a private activity, the act of reading for women became an increasing concern not only with respect to “what moral, sexual, religious, ideological dangers may lie in a woman’s being absorbed by so preoccupying a pursuit” (Flint 4), but also with respect to its role in a woman’s education. Moreover, the woman reader had a direct influence on “the composition distribution, and marking of literature,” for texts “were received, classified, and interpreted by both publishers and critics within a context of what women should and should not be reading, and what they expected from their books” (Flint 13). Ultimately, the private act of reading was considered “the vehicle through which an individual’s sense of identity was achieved or confirmed” (Flint 14); thus, it became a (gendered) point of contention that patriarchal mid-Victorian culture attempted to contain.

In her study of the woman reader, which builds upon Flint’s pivotal work, Catherine Golden summarizes the dual ideologies about the woman reader:

On the one hand, regulated and carefully supervised reading was a vital part of a woman’s education, improving knowledge, confidence, social grace, as well as intellect and imagination. To the conservative advocate, it was a mark of gentility and a socialization tool supporting the ideology

of the middle-class home. To the more enlightened, it was also a means for empowerment and uplifting education, ushering in social change for women. (*Woman Reader* 21)

Thus, proponents viewed the private act of women's reading a means by which to reinforce proper conduct: "From the ideological viewpoint of gentility, a woman's reading in the private home is a mark of culture, polish, grace, and refinement" (23). Also a tool of socialization, reading could further develop a woman's moral nature by properly preparing her for her ideal role as wife and mother. Golden notes, "The century accordingly witnessed a proliferation of self-help books and advice manuals geared for readers of the rising middle class as well as newly literate readers, many of them designed to guide young women to make effective choices in life" (23). In addition, reading was viewed a means by which to expand the woman's mind, either by challenging her intellect or liberating her imagination; the act of reading allowed her to vicariously (and safely) transgress the bounds of Victorian culture through the pages of literature (Golden, *Woman Reader* 26-30).

In juxtaposition to such favorable views, those opposed to the notion of the woman reader characterized the act of reading as both morally and medically dangerous. Golden summarizes,

some feared reading could have damning affects. Critics presented a range of arguments against women's reading that tapped into biology, medicine, and morality. From an antifiction vantage point, a book of romance, sensation fiction, or sentimental fiction could arouse a female's sexual impulses, drain her vital energies, damage her mental and

reproductive health, divorce her attention from her maternal and domestic duties, undermine her self control, and rot her mind, leading to ruination.

(21-22)

Detractors who discouraged the private act of reading focused on the manner in which such an unregulated habit could physically damage the inferior sex or sexually corrupt her. In particular, these arguments about the biological inferiority of the woman reader permeated mid-Victorian culture. Flint posits, “during the 1830s and 1840s, whilst the relation between a woman’s reading and her social behaviour was still of central interest, attention shifted towards those biological characteristics of woman which make her different from a man” (30). According to Golden, the biological argument was rooted in the theory that “women read differently than men because they possessed greater morality, sensibility, sensitivity, intuition, piety, and empathy” (*Woman Reader* 30). Moreover, because a Victorian woman’s primary responsibility centered on her role as wife and mother, “Reading was damned because it was thought to damage a woman’s nervous system and reproductive health. Medical authorities linked excessive, unsupervised reading to a host of female reproductive ailments (for example, early menstruation, painful menses, infertility, etc.), insanity, and premature death” (31-32). Due to her innate biological differences, the Victorian woman was also more susceptible to a reading addiction as well as possible moral decline. Rather than expanding a woman’s intellect or imagination, the unsupervised act—especially of novel consumption—served as a threat to accepted social mores: “novel-reading was believed to raise false expectations about love and marriage and, in turn, bring about dissatisfaction with domesticity and upset the status quo” (39).

The arguments against the private act of women's reading parallel those that mid-Victorian critics postulated against the public act of women's writing. Showalter remarks, "When the Victorians thought of the woman writer, they immediately thought of the female body and its presumed afflictions and liabilities. They did so, first, because the biological creativity of childbirth seemed to them directly to rival the aesthetic creativity of writing" (76). Hence, it was believed that both the act of reading and the act of writing ultimately threatened a woman's physical health as well as her capacity to serve as a proper Victorian wife and mother. A direct threat to the gender binaries that dictated mid-Victorian culture, "Female intellectual distinction [. . .] suggested not only a self-destructive imitation of a male skill but also a masculine physical development" (77). Consequently, the female author who dared to express any sense of intelligence or sense of *self* that defied social expectations ultimately transgressed her gender and denied her femininity.

Thus, the controversial topic of the woman reader—like that of the woman writer—was indelibly linked to empowerment and identity. While some proponents aimed to harness this power within the constraints of accepted Victorian gender norms, others supported proto-feminist efforts to expand a woman's intellectual and imaginative capacity to form her own identity despite cultural restrictions. On the other hand, detractors ultimately attempted to stifle the female identity by using the concept of the woman reader to support theories of her gendered inferiority. Deeming the unregulated female reader dangerous, they aggressively opposed any possibility of a woman's private engagement with free, unregulated thought. As a result, opponents of a woman's private reading practices subconsciously confirmed her potentially powerful role as a threat to

the patriarchal status quo: left to her own reading devices, the woman reader was in danger of discovering a sense of identity independent of mid-Victorian representations of gender.⁶

Private Reader, Public Author: The Mid-Victorian Woman Writer

Consequently, this lack of a comprehensive understanding of the nineteenth-century woman reader demonstrates the importance of investigating the individual female reading experience, particularly with respect to the female author. The way in which an individual writer negotiates her public position as female author relies heavily on her private reading practice; thus, a biographical understanding of the woman writer is not merely tangential, but rather *necessary*, to positioning her text within literary history. In particular, the female redactor's authorial identity relies on the crucial interplay between her private act of reading, the public act of writing, and the reading audience's awareness of this symbiotic relationship. Through the act of revision, she establishes a sense of authorial identity by usurping and rewriting an existing literary text, genre, or convention in order to create for herself a unique literary space. Consequently, her private act of reading serves as the foundation of not only her public narrative but also her public persona.

Ultimately, the relationship between the female reading experience, the individual (and biographical) reading practice of a particular female author, and that female author's written text forms a complex nexus of issues that is central in defining the woman writer. While several ground-breaking texts on Victorian women writers have gestured toward the inextricable link between the reading and writing woman, this topic warrants further investigation. My project, which explores the nuances of the reading and writing female

redactor, expands upon the work of two texts in particular—Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977) and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (1979)—which chart the historical and theoretical landscape for an investigation into the role of the nineteenth-century female writer.⁷

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter argues that—despite their dismissal from the traditional literary canon—women writers did establish a collective literary voice and, in some sense, a female literary tradition. Focusing in particular on the English novel from the nineteenth through the twentieth century, Showalter investigates “the ways in which the self-awareness of the woman writer has translated itself into a literary form in a specific place and time-span, how this self-awareness has changed and developed, and where it might lead” (12). In her own assessment of a female literary tradition, Showalter identifies “three major phases” in the history of the woman writer: the feminine stage, which is “a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles”; the feminist stage, which is a stage of “*protest* against these standards and values, and *advocacy* of minority rights and values”; and the female stage, which centers on “*self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity” (13). For the purposes of my project, I am most interested in Showalter’s feminine stage, “the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880” (13), which encompasses mid-Victorian women authors.

While Showalter does trace a progression of self-assertion among the feminine writers (19-20), she concludes that—due to gendered cultural constraints that I discussed earlier in this chapter—feminine novelists typically “worked hard to present their writing as an extension of their feminine role, an activity that did not detract from their womanhood, but in some sense augmented it” (85). Although she gestures toward feminine novelists’ engagement with subversive narrative strategies, including revision (84), Showalter ultimately deems these women a literary product of their gendered culture. Showalter’s general categorization of the feminine novelists as mere imitators fails to account for the crucial role that the private act of reading and the public act of revision play in defining and, in some ways, empowering mid-Victorian woman writers. Through the act of revision, female redactors subtly manipulate not only the double bind but also the male literary tradition, both of which—according to Showalter—appear to subsume them. Thus, the female redactor becomes a key contributor to the manner in which women writers establish an authorial voice and a “literature of their own.”

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar take this argument of the woman writer’s place within literary history one step further. Focusing on the complex web of issues facing the nineteenth-century woman writer, Gilbert and Gubar elucidate the challenges she must face with respect to the solely patriarchal literary tradition that she attempts to penetrate. Gilbert and Gubar specifically address Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), which centers on the psychological process of the male poet who attempts to situate himself within the dominant male-centered literary tradition. It is important to acknowledge the manner in which Bloom’s theory rests on the symbiotic relationship between reading, writing, revision, and authorial identity, for he traces the

“six revisionary movements” taken by the male poet who grapples with the poetic influence of his male predecessors in order to craft for himself a seemingly original poetic identity (Bloom 10). These six revisionary stages trace the male poet’s psychological experience with reading the works of his poetic predecessor, appropriating elements of the “parent-poem” (14), and eventually crafting his own poem that appears “not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work” (16). Drawing attention to the integral relationship between reading, writing, and revision, Bloom focuses on the manner in which this “anxiety of influence” solely affects the male poet (10).

While Bloom’s psychological study centers on how men fear the influence of their precursors as well as the prospect of creating nothing original, Gilbert and Gubar build upon his pivotal theory to address the woman writer’s “anxiety of authorship” (49), in which she feels that she cannot create. Without any precursor, the woman writer fears an isolation and destruction with respect to constructing a narrative—will she ever have (or *become*) a precursor? Furthermore, the patriarchal tradition of male authorship has created specific dyadic understandings of the woman—the angel and the monster—against which the woman must battle. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the angel captures the domestic and idyllic notion of the (literally) self-less woman, while the monster captures the woman who dares to oppose such restrictions. A woman must “examine, assimilate, and transcend” these images of woman in order to create her own narrative (17).

According to Gilbert and Gubar, this process of (re)forming an authorial identity relies on the concept of revision: “And just as the male artist’s struggle against his

precursor takes the form of what Bloom calls revisionary swerves, flights, misreadings, so the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*" (49). Before the woman writer can even pick up the pen, she must first "redefine the terms of her socialization" (49); in other words, she must read, comprehend, and revise Victorian gender stereotypes that strictly limit her identity.

Through their exploration of the female writer's "anxiety of authorship," Gilbert and Gubar implicitly point to the inextricable relationship between woman-as-writer and woman-as-reader. Behind every female author is a female reader who first develops a private relationship with texts, and at least some facets of a dominantly patriarchal literary tradition, before she publicly creates a text of her own. Moreover, according to Gilbert and Gubar, before a woman can write, she must familiarize herself with the literary tradition with which she is about to engage. Alluding to Virginia Woolf's pronouncement that a woman writer must first "'kill' the 'angel in the house,'" Gilbert and Gubar assert, "women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art" (17). Thus, the first crucial obstacle that the woman writer must face is a confrontation of an established male literary tradition, an obstacle that relies on the private practice of reading and an individual examination of the self. Gilbert and Gubar remark, "For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is. But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself" (17). An authoress must both literally read the male-centered texts that create generic definitions of her

gender and metaphorically read *herself*—her physical body, her history, and her relationship to pre-established gender roles—into the established canon. Working against a limited patriarchal understanding of womanhood, the woman writer must first negotiate her own feminine identity before she can craft—and publicly present—her authorial persona. Thus, the pen can only become a successful public weapon of combat after the woman has privately armed herself with the knowledge that comes from her own particular practice as reader.

Gilbert and Gubar also explicitly highlight revision as one of many strategies that the Victorian woman writer adopts to combat the anxiety of authorship, noting that many nineteenth-century women writers “transcend their anxiety of authorship by *revising* male genres, using them to record their own dreams and their own stories *in disguise*” (73). Ultimately, these women writers create “works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards” (73). While Gilbert and Gubar touch on this literary strategy, my project centers solely on the manner in which the female redactor’s private reading experience of the male literary tradition directly informs her public (re)structuring of a patriarchal text in order to establish for herself a public authorial identity. More specifically, I argue that this intersection of the reader, biography, and textuality becomes indispensable for the female author who engages in the explicit act of redaction. Ultimately, the concept of revision becomes a crucial means by which mid-Victorian women writers manipulate gender binaries in

order to negotiate female identity and establish some semblance of a respected public literary tradition.

Methodology

My methodological approach to revision as a narrative strategy is rooted Nancy's A. Walker's discussion of revision in *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* (1995). Although Walker's monograph primarily investigates twentieth-century North American fiction, her theories on the woman writer's engagement with revision as a subversive narrative strategy directly apply to mid-Victorian women writers.⁸ Walker argues that while "The practice of appropriating existing stories in one's own work—borrowing, revising, recontextualizing—has a long and distinguished history" (1), gender informs an author's engagement with the act of revision. Walker remarks, "most male writers who have appropriated and revised previous texts have worked within a tradition that included them and their experience, whereas women writers have more commonly addressed such texts from the position of outsider, altering them either to point up the biases they encode or to make them into narratives that women can more comfortably inhabit" (3). Due to the political, cultural, and literary impact of gender in mid-Victorian England, Walker's insights on the specific manner in which gender impacts an author's approach to revision are particularly useful to my project.

Moreover, Walker acknowledges the important—and often ignored—role of the woman reader, whose private engagement with a male literary tradition necessarily precedes the act of revision. She states: "implicit in a discussion of women's imaginative encounters with a literary tradition of which they are not an obvious part is a

consideration of women as readers of this tradition, for prior to resisting the authority of the assumptions or narrative necessities of a text must come an understanding of its putative power and an ability to read through it to possibilities of altered meaning (3). Thus, Walker acknowledges the interdependent relationship between a woman's private reading experience and her public act of revision, which serves as the foundation of my own work on mid-Victorian female authors: a woman must first read and comprehend the literary tradition with which she engages and ultimately rewrites.

To further emphasize this crucial connection between reader and redactor, Walker refers to the work of a female revisionist writer as a "'disobedient' reading"—"a reading that resists sexist and racist formulations and that results in a new text that attempts to overturn these formulations while remaining sufficiently referential to the original to make clear its point of origin" (3). By labeling these revisions as "disobedient," Walker draws attention to the ways in which such texts react against the same patriarchal literary tradition to which Showalter, Gilbert, and Gubar refer. By labeling these revisions as "readings," Walker acknowledges the manner in which a woman's private reading experience informs her narrative and shapes her authorial identity.

Moreover, Walker's description of the particular types of revision that female redactors implement applies directly to mid-Victorian woman writers who use revision to negotiate the double bind and ultimately establish themselves as public authorial personas. While many female redactors appropriate particular literary genres, "cultural mythologies" (4), or "'public domain' stories as biblical narrative and folk tales" (5), Walker highlights a much more specific type of writerly disobedience—the revision of a specific literary work. She states: "To rework a specific text by a specific author [. . .] is

to exercise a different kind of disobedience, one that questions the singularity and ownership of certain themes, plots, tropes, and narrative strategies. Such revisions are a way not only of subverting the traditional text, but also of laying claim to it, entering into dialogue with it on an equal plane” (5). By revising a specific literary work, the female redactor first publicly incorporates her individual reading experience into her writing: she merges the private, autobiographical, reading “self” with the public writing persona she creates. Thus, the female redactor not only “enter[s] into dialogue” with the author of the original text through the explicit and specific act of revision but also enters into dialogue with herself through a negotiation of private reader and public writer.

While my methodological approach to the mid-Victorian female redactor builds upon Walker’s theoretical approach to revision, which astutely investigates the relationship between the female reading experience and the narrative act of redaction, I also implement feminist narrative theory to further explore the connection between the author, her written text, her cultural environment, and *herself*. In addition to this complex set of relationships that the mid-Victorian female redactor establishes between herself and a patriarchal literary tradition, she also develops a specific relationship with her anticipated audience, or what Wolfgang Iser termed “the implied reader” (34).⁹ By engaging in the act of revision, the woman writer’s “implied reader” explicitly influences her narrative strategy: because the female redactor’s work “enter[s] into dialogue” with a text that precedes it (Walker 5), the anticipated reception of her text relies on her own assumptions about her reader’s familiarity with the original text. In addition, the mid-Victorian woman writer’s cultural experience with gender directly informs the manner in which she addresses her implied reader. Struggling against strict gender conventions in

order to establish for herself a legitimate public authorial identity, the mid-Victorian woman writer utilizes revision as a means by which to both conform to and subvert cultural expectations, or what Showalter, Gilbert, and Gubar refer to as the double bind. Thus, the woman writer—the redactor in particular—ultimately crafts her text with *two* implied readers in mind: the male reader to whom she must compose a proper, feminine (and restrained) text that will enable her to establish a respected literary reputation, and the female reader whose gender alone provides her with the necessary tools to decode the subversive layer(s) of the text.

In combination with Walker’s theoretical approach to the narrative strategy of revision, Susan Lanser’s feminist approach to narratology—a revision itself—provides an ideal methodological framework for my project. Ultimately, Lanser attempts to revise narratology, which centers on male texts, by blending its critical approaches with those of feminism in order “to raise new questions” and “to add to the narratological distinctions that already exist” (676). In “Toward a Feminist Narratology” (1986), she discusses the important role of gender in narrative: acknowledging narratology’s reliance upon a male-dominated literary tradition, Lanser argues that no narrative theory can be complete without “tak[ing] into account the contributions of women as both producers and interpreters of texts” (676). Lanser also attempts to merge the seemingly disparate narrative approach of semiotics and the feminist approach of mimesis through a careful blending of the remote study of narrative elements with the exploration of the context that surrounds the text’s creation. Lanser argues, “The challenge to both feminism and narratology is to recognize the dual nature of narrative, to find categories and terms that are abstract and semiotic enough to be useful, but concrete and mimetic enough to seem

relevant for critics whose theories root literature in ‘the real conditions of our lives’” (677). A theory of narrative, then, must consider the rhetoric of reception and the circumstances in which a narrative is composed, deeming the historical, biographical, and social circumstances critical—rather than tangential and irrelevant—aspects of the narrative.

More specifically, Lanser’s *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (1992) explores the complex concept of the female narrative voice, which is particularly useful to my project on mid-Victorian female redactors. Lanser’s monograph, which addresses the concept of “Discursive authority”¹⁰ in the works of women novelists from the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries (6), emphasizes the link between a woman writer’s gendered cultural experience and the narrative product that she creates. Lanser argues,

I maintain that both narrative structures and women’s writing are determined not by essential properties or isolated aesthetic imperatives but by complex and changing conventions that are themselves produced in and by the relations of power that implicate writer, reader, and text. In modern Western societies during the centuries of “print culture” with which I am concerned, these constituents of power must include, at the very least, race, gender, class, nationality, education, sexuality and marital status, interacting with and within a given social formation. (5-6)

Virtually all of the “constituents of power” that Lanser acknowledges directly influence the mid-Victorian female redactor, whose engagement with these particular factors not

only affects her authorial identity but, in many ways, dictates the manner in which she structures her narrative.

Furthermore, Lanser's focus on "self-authorization" speaks directly to the struggle of the mid-Victorian woman writer's attempts to establish a public authorial persona (7). Lanser posits, "I assume that regardless of any woman writer's ambivalence toward authoritative institutions and ideologies, the act of writing a novel and seeking to publish it [. . .] is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence" (7). Like Showalter, Gilbert, and Gubar, Lanser defines the struggle of women writers within the context of a patriarchal society. She states: "Such narrators often call into question the very authority they endorse or, conversely, endorse the authority they seem to be questioning. That is, as they strive to create fictions of *authority*, these narrators expose *fictions* of authority as the Western novel has constructed it—and in exposing the fictions, they may end up re-establishing the authority" (8). Once again, Lanser's narrative approach recalls the Victorian concept of the double bind, drawing attention to the ambivalent narrative space that mid-Victorian women writers must inhabit.

In her exploration of "what forms of voice have been available to women, and to which women, at particular moments" (15), Lanser clearly defines the complex relationship between the woman writer, her environment, her text, and her audience. Through her analysis of authorial, personal, and communal voice in women's narratives, Lanser concludes,

The three modes of narrative voice on which this book concentrates seem to me to represent the three distinct kinds of authority that women have

needed to constitute in order to make their place in Western literary history: respectively, the authority, to establish alternative “worlds” and the “maxims” by which they will operate, to construct and publicly represent female subjectivity and redefine the “feminine,” and to constitute as a discursive subject a female body politic. (22)

In their own quest for discursive authority, mid-Victorian women writers face these precise challenges. Steeped in a culture that dismisses their gender—and thus their texts—as inferior, these women must utilize subversive narrative strategies in order to puncture these patriarchal strictures without upsetting the status quo. My project centers on the manner in which mid-Victorian female redactors utilize the subversive strategy of revision to manipulate the double bind, assert a discursive authority, and attempt to “make their place in Western literary history.”

Private Readers, Public Redactors: The Mid-Victorian Female Revisionists

In particular, I examine the mid-Victorian narratives of Geraldine Jewsbury, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who demonstrate the ways in which female redactors in mid-Victorian England engage with complex binaries of male and female, public and private, reader and writer, to create texts that simultaneously conform to and subvert cultural expectations. In each chapter, I focus on how the female redactor utilizes revision to negotiate between her private, autobiographical reading self and the public writing persona she presents to her reader in order to establish some sense of discursive authority. Her textual strategies are inextricably linked to her contextual reality, which engenders the multilayered female author—who is simultaneously privatized and publicized—and her multilayered text, which is the polyphonic product.

The three female redactors on whom I focus present a sample collective of mid-Victorian woman writers whose cultural experiences and narrative strategies trace a similar pattern of quiet rebellion against the strict representations of gender that defined their era. With respect to their “private” lives and personal cultural experiences, all were avid readers and ambitious women of letters who—to varying degrees—rebelled against mid-Victorian patriarchal stereotypes of marriage and family. Despite her involvement in a number of serious romances, Geraldine Jewsbury chose never to marry and actually made an unrequited proposal to one of her male suitors. Elizabeth Barrett Browning secretly married Robert Browning against her tyrannical father’s iron will and fled the country, creating a permanent rift in their relationship. And Mary Elizabeth Braddon became the common law wife of John Maxwell, a married man, eventually marrying him after his legal wife passed away. With respect to family, Jewsbury remained single until her death, never bearing her own children; Barrett Browning had only one son, Pen, whose upbringing in Italy defied the strict gender conventions enforced in mid-Victorian England; and despite Maxwell’s marriage to another woman, Braddon had five children with him and eventually became the stepmother to the five children that Maxwell fathered with his legal wife.

In addition to these parallels within their private lives, Jewsbury, Barrett Browning, and Braddon all aspired to attain respected public literary personas, and all—to some extent—successfully achieved these aspirations. Jewsbury hoped to be a journalist, eventually establishing herself as a novelist, essayist, reviewer, publisher’s reader, translator, and editor. Far more popular and prolific than her husband-poet, Barrett Browning achieved her childhood dreams of becoming a successful female

poet—what Dorothy Mermin deems “for most practical purposes the first woman poet in English literature” and “the first woman to establish herself in the main English tradition” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 1). And Braddon abandoned a three-year acting career to write fiction and eventually earn the distinction of “the undisputed queen of Victorian sensation fiction and the circulating library” (Golden, “Censoring Her Sensationalism” 29). Although Jewsbury and Braddon were novelists and Barrett Browning a poet, all three women grappled with similar issues of genre, form, gender, and cultural power within their respective texts. More specifically, each female redactor engaged in the subversive act of revision, performing a “‘disobedient’ reading” of a male-authored text (Walker 3)—“laying claim to it, entering into dialogue with it on an equal plane” (Walker 5). Thus, each female redactor merged the private act of reading and the public act of revision in order to assert a discursive authority that simultaneously adhered to and punctured the mid-Victorian double bind. Defying Showalter’s categorization as merely “feminine” and striving to overcome what Gilbert and Gubar term “the anxiety of authorship,” these three female redactors manipulate both the male literary tradition and mid-Victorian gender binaries in order to create for themselves an authorial identity, a distinctly female voice, and a unique space within literary history.

I have divided my project into three chronological chapters, one on each female redactor, and an epilogue. My first chapter focuses on Geraldine Jewsbury’s feminist revision of Thomas Carlyle’s gospel of work in *The Half Sisters* (1848). Although some critics point to the manner in which Jewsbury’s novel was influenced by Carlyle’s gospel of work, none trace this important connection in great detail. In particular, critics neglect to address the manner in which Jewsbury engages with and revises Carlyle’s grim

assessment of the condition of England and his patriarchal concept of work in *Past and Present* (1843). In this chapter, I first outline the manner in which Jewsbury uses Carlyle's concepts of Mammonism and Dilettantism to create an analogous fictional model of the greedy, spiritually bereft, and misguided England of Carlyle's *Past and Present*; I then address the manner in which Jewsbury rejects Carlyle's reliance on a thirteenth-century monastic community as the paradigm for change in favor of a contemporary, gender-inclusive model of work that values the contributions of both men and women; finally, I argue that the controversial conclusion of *The Half Sisters* highlights society's—and Carlyle's—failure to recognize the necessary gendered revisions to the gospel of work, which leads to the perpetuation of a social system that experiences minimal change.

My second chapter centers on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's revision of John Donne's *Songs and Sonets* (1633) in her own *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). Donne's influence on EBB's personal and professional life has remained largely unexplored, and the literary connection between these two poets is evident in EBB's sonnet sequence. In this chapter, I first highlight EBB's knowledge of—and admiration for—John Donne's works through an examination of her epistolary correspondences; I then perform a comparative analysis of selected poems from Donne's *Songs and Sonets* and EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in order to explore the ways in which EBB incorporates the Donnean concepts of realism and mutual love as well as the imagery of expansion and enclosure into her sonnet sequence; I conclude by arguing that Donne's thematic and formal experimentation in *Songs and Sonets* influences EBB's own gendered revision of the Petrarchan sonnet form.

In my third and final chapter, I examine Mary Elizabeth Braddon's feminist revision of the producer, consumer, and self in *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), a novel that explicitly borrows and revises the plot of Gustav Flaubert's notorious novel, *Madame Bovary* (1857). Torn between her artistic aspirations to craft a more highbrow novel and the pragmatic benefits of her career as a popular author, Braddon attempts to please literary critics while quietly critiquing them through her negotiation and revision of cultural understandings of production and consumption in *The Doctor's Wife*. In this chapter, I examine the "textual" relationship between the characters of Isabel (Sleaford) Gilbert and Roland Lansdell in order to demonstrate how Braddon subtly redeems and empowers the lowbrow female consumer while calling into question the authority of the alleged highbrow male producer; I then analyze manner in which Braddon uses both Lansdell's character and the character of Sigsumund Smith, a lowbrow sensation author, in order to invert—and thus undercut—critical understandings of high and low literary culture that dismiss the value of both the female consumer and the sensation genre.

The epilogue focuses on two contemporary revisions of nineteenth-century female-authored texts: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) and *Jane Slayre* (2010). Such contemporary revisions solidify the relevance of my project by validating the importance of an established female literary tradition as well as demonstrating the power of revision as a narrative strategy for constructing authorial identity. In the epilogue, I argue that while nineteenth-century female redactors once engaged with male-authored texts in order to create a female literary tradition for themselves, they have now perpetuated an "anxiety of influence" (Bloom 10)—a term once reserved only for male poets within a male tradition—among twenty-first century authors who attempt to revise

their female-authored works to establish some sense of literary identity. Through their horrific revisions of classic female-authored texts, these contemporary redactors engage in a *commodification of authorship* as they attempt to spearhead a literary tradition of their own.

The emergence of these contemporary revisions evidences the manner in which mid-Victorian women writers successfully manipulated the double bind in order to create for themselves a place within literary history. In particular, the mid-Victorian female redactor merged the private act of reading—a role often overlooked or only implicitly mentioned in scholarship on nineteenth-century women writers—with the public act of writing in order to subtly subvert the gender binaries of her culture and assert a discursive authority. In establishing her identity as a female author, the female redactor champions the manner in which *she* privately reads her male predecessors as the foundation of her newfound literary tradition. Consequently, she becomes part of a collective of female voices in mid-Victorian England—an emerging group of women writers whom Geraldine Jewsbury deems “energetic, strong characters, with literary reputations of their own” (Ireland 367).

Chapter One

She, too, must “Know [her] work and do it”: Geraldine Jewsbury’s Feminist Revision of Thomas Carlyle’s Gospel of Work in *The Half Sisters*

By the time of her death in 1880, Geraldine Endsor Jewsbury had achieved professional success as a novelist, essayist, reviewer, publisher’s reader, translator, editor, and woman of letters, ultimately establishing for herself a career as a professional writer, reader, and redactor. What Jewsbury is often most well known for, however, is not her professional career but rather her lifelong—albeit tumultuous—friendship with Jane and Thomas Carlyle. Jewsbury’s initial encounter with Thomas Carlyle was through the pages of his literary texts, which led to a long-time admiration for Carlyle’s literary genius. According to Jewsbury’s biographer, Susanne Howe, Carlyle’s “essays¹¹ fell into [Jewsbury’s] hands about Christmas time, 1839, and for months she read little else” (40-41). At a difficult crossroads in her life, especially after the death of her father in 1840, Jewsbury took comfort in Carlyle’s words, especially his gospel of work. Howe notes, “Shaken and stirred to the depths of her impressionable soul by this new gospel [. . .], she never forgot the debt she owed to Carlyle. ‘She frequently remarked,’ as her friends remembered, in after years, ‘that to him she owed it that she had succeeded in doing anything whatever’” (41). Determined to express her gratitude to Carlyle, who “had done her an inestimable, regenerating service” through his inspiring essays (Howe 42), Jewsbury initiated a letter correspondence with him in 1840. This epistolary exchange

eventually led to a life-changing friendship with the Carlyles that influenced most of Jewsbury's literary career, including *The Half Sisters* (1848), in which—I will argue—Jewsbury adopts and revises some of Carlyle's theories on Victorian society and work in *Past and Present* (1843).

Jewsbury's relationship with Thomas Carlyle served as an amalgam of personal admiration and professional interest, for Carlyle was both her friend and literary mentor. In her monograph, *Ambitious Heights: Writing, Friendship, Love—The Jewsbury Sisters, Felicia Hemans, and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (1990), Norma Clarke argues that Jewsbury's aspirations of becoming a writer influenced her initial decision to compose that first letter to Thomas Carlyle in 1840 (9). According to Clarke, the resulting epistolary correspondence proved that “Carlyle's emotional interest in [Jewsbury] was as evident and as unspoken as her excitement at having succeeded, through the power of her words, in interesting him in her future” (9). Carlyle's responses to Jewsbury during their brief epistolary correspondence in 1840-41 indicate his willingness to serve as Jewsbury's spiritual and literary mentor. In response to Jewsbury's initial letter to Carlyle, in which she seeks his spiritual guidance, Carlyle responds on 12 April 1840, writing, “Will my fair unknown Friend accept of a maxim or two, written down in the midst of endless hurry here, but well enough vindicated by experience to myself, and which carry in them the truest wish to be of service to her” (*CLO*). Such a comment sets the tone for the rest of their correspondence, in which Carlyle adopts the position of mentor, offering philosophical, spiritual, and literary advice to his new mentee. Carlyle expresses the same sentiment on 26 April 1840, writing to Jewsbury, “If I at any time can help you in any way whatever, write to me frankly as to an elder brother” (*CLO*).

Moreover, in her letters to Jane Carlyle, with whom Jewsbury cultivated a lifelong friendship,¹² Jewsbury consistently refers to Carlyle with deference, especially regarding his literary genius. In a letter to Jane, dated 1843-4, Jewsbury gushes, “He is much too grand for everyday life. A sphinx does not fit in comfortably to our parlour-life arrangements, but seen from a proper point of view it is a supernaturally grand thing! You must feel proud of belonging to him, after all, and he deserves to have you!” (Ireland 93). Comparing him to a “sphinx,” Jewsbury is captivated by Carlyle’s superior talent, expressing a deep admiration for his character. In a letter to Jane on 29 August 1850, Jewsbury mentions a recent novel she has read, noting, “when I came to read it through from end to end I almost felt vain of the compliment, for it is the most striking book I ever read in my life, except your husband’s” (Ireland 366). Ultimately, Jewsbury’s high regard for Carlyle permeates her professional and personal life, for his influence on her is evident in virtually everything she writes—from her epistolary correspondences to her novels and essays.

Jewsbury, however, still had a voice of her own, one that sometimes conflicted with that of her literary mentor. For example, although Howe argues that Jewsbury was “still under the influence of Carlyle’s prophesyings” when she wrote several essays for *Douglas Jerrold’s Shilling Magazine* in 1846 and 1847 (90), Monica Correa Fryckstedt notes in “Geraldine Jewsbury and *Douglas Jerrold’s Shilling Magazine*” (1985) that Jewsbury—while influenced by Carlyle—“diverges from her mentor” and “rejects Carlyle’s view” in specific essays (329). Moreover, in her monograph, *Germaine de Stael, George Sand, and the Victorian Woman Artist* (2003), Linda M. Lewis posits, “Throughout the intense friendship with Jane Carlyle, Jewsbury remained committed to

Thomas Carlyle's writings and ideas, although a careful reading of the letters suggests she did not have as much respect for him as the marital partner of her 'darling' Jane as she found him a great man of letters" (91-92). Adamantly opposed to Carlyle's more conservative views on women,¹³ Jewsbury often encourages Jane to stand up for herself, writing to her, "Do not go to Mr. Carlyle for sympathy, do not let him dash you with cold water. You must respect your own work and your own motives; if people only did what others thought good and useful, half the work in the world would be left undone. 'She hath done what she could' is all that the best can expect or desire" (Ireland 426). Howe adds, "Carlyle's views on women made [Jewsbury] fly into a royal rage; much as she respected most of his pronouncements, she could not agree with the sage when he declared to his wife that 'a woman's natural object in the world is to *go out* and find herself some sort of *man her superior*—& obey him loyally and lovingly & make herself as much as possible into a *beautiful reflex of him!*'" (105).¹⁴ Indeed, Jewsbury greatly admired Thomas Carlyle, but she was also a woman who demanded, both personally and professionally, that her own voice be heard.

It is this precise combination of admiration for and dissent from Carlyle's *Past and Present* with which Geraldine Jewsbury approaches her own revision of his gospel of work in her second novel, *The Half Sisters*. While critics gesture toward the manner in which Carlyle's gospel of work influenced Jewsbury's composition of *The Half Sisters*,¹⁵ none trace this connection between Jewsbury and Carlyle in great detail. In particular, critics neglect to address the manner in which Jewsbury engages with and revises Carlyle's social critique of the condition of England and the concept of work in *Past and Present*.¹⁶

Although Jewsbury never explicitly discusses *Past and Present* in her letters to either of the Carlyles, her consistent engagement with Thomas Carlyle's texts, the circumstances surrounding Carlyle's composition of *Past and Present*, and Jewsbury's familiarity with Carlyle's gospel of work provide enough evidence to assume Jewsbury's knowledge of the text. More specifically, Howe notes, "Carlyle, busy with the proofs of *Past and Present* early in 1843, suggested to Jane that she invite Geraldine to visit them, remarking that 'the poor lonely young woman' might enjoy and benefit by it, and that she would provide company for Jane" (48)—an invitation that led to Jewsbury's "very nearly disastrous" sojourn from early February to mid-March of 1843 (Howe 48). During her prolonged visit, Carlyle not only completed *Past and Present* but also sent parts of it to the printer, for in a letter to his brother, Alexander, on 22 February 1843, Carlyle notes, "This morning I sent the first portion of my Book off to the Printer. There are still two good weeks or more of right hard labour before the *last* portion be got written: but the Printer will not overtake me; and I want to be *out* as soon as possible, that I may have quite done with it" (*CLO*). Later in the same letter, Carlyle mentions briefly that "the young lady from Manchester [Jewsbury] is still here" (*CLO*). Despite her ambivalent interactions with the Carlyles during the completion and printing of *Past and Present*, Jewsbury both dwelled in the Carlyles' home and spoke with Thomas Carlyle in person. Thus, it is likely that she obtained a copy of *Past and Present*, and it is quite possible that—during her prolonged visit—she even engaged in conversation with Carlyle about the monograph.

Borrowing Carlyle's ideas on the broken condition of England and the healing gospel of work in *Past and Present*, Jewsbury revises these concepts to address issues of

work, gender, and the arts in *The Half Sisters*. Although Jewsbury did not align herself with proto-feminist groups that had begun to form in Victorian England, and despite her opposition to women's suffrage (Fryckstedt, "Woman Question" 56), "she advocated the expansion of women's education and careerism, believing somewhat naively that with open opportunity for women in these areas, full equality before the law was not a necessity" (Lewis 69). Jewsbury believed that "women are rational beings endowed with immortal souls" (Fryckstedt, "Woman Question" 52). Her opinion that a woman is man's equal, not his subordinate, permeates *The Half Sisters* and responds directly to Carlyle's omission of women from his gospel of work in *Past and Present*. In this chapter, I will first outline the manner in which Jewsbury directly applies Carlyle's concepts of Mammonism and Dilettantism to the fictional Victorian world of *The Half Sisters* in order to present a parallel portrait of the broken, misguided, and ill state of England that Carlyle describes in *Past and Present*; I will then address the manner in which Jewsbury replaces Carlyle's reliance on the past as a model of hope and change with an exploration of how a contemporary view of gender and "work," through the valuation of women and the arts in present-day England, can offer a solution to the ailments of contemporary society; lastly, I will discuss the manner in which the novel's controversial conclusion presents Jewsbury's realistic critique of the gendered societal limitations, reinforced by Carlyle himself, that prevent Carlyle's vision for social change from coming to fruition within nineteenth century England.

**“[M]ost intricate obstructed times!”: The Gospels Mammonism and Dilettantism in
*The Half Sisters***

In *Past and Present*, Carlyle provides a vivid and condescending description of Victorian England, a society that is materially rich yet spiritually bereft. Championing the importance of truth and justice as the pillars of a successful society, Carlyle laments the current state of England, which is devoid of these very qualities. He asserts, “the times are really strange; of a complexity intricate with all the new width of the ever-widening world; times here of half-frantic velocity of impetus, there of the deadest-looking stillness and paralysis; times definable as showing two qualities, Dilettantism and Mammonism; —most intricate obstructed times!” (18). He criticizes industrial England for defining itself not on honorable concepts, like truth, justice, spirituality, and work, but rather on these two selfish qualities, Dilettantism and Mammonism, which have contributed to England’s moral decline.

For Carlyle, Mammonism¹⁷ centers on England’s obsession with money and success. In fact, according to Carlyle, contemporary society would describe hell as “The terror of ‘Not succeeding’; of not making money, fame, or some other figure in the world,—chiefly of not making money!” (146). Carlyle continues, “indeed this Hell belongs naturally to the Gospel of Mammonism, which also has its corresponding Heaven. For there *is* one Reality among so many Phantasms; about one thing we are entirely in earnest: The making of money” (146). Condemning the laissez-faire economic system that champions individuality and competition, Carlyle blames society’s focus on money and personal success, in which relationships are understood merely in terms of economic value. In Victorian England, where people adhere to the Gospel of

Mammonism, morality is lost, for “To a deadened soul, seared with the brute Idolatry of Sense, to whom going to Hell is equivalent to not making money, all ‘promises,’ and moral duties, that cannot be pleaded for in Courts of Requests, address themselves in vain” (147). In Carlyle’s view, “Mammon-worship is a melancholy creed” (147), which drives the individual to abandon any sense of humanity for the sake of money.

Far worse than Mammonism, however, is the second defining quality of English society—Dilettantism.¹⁸ Carlyle firmly states: “Idleness is worst, Idleness alone is without hope” (146). Despite the detriments of Mammon-worship, Carlyle argues that the Gospel of Mammon at least engages with the act of work—a quality that Carlyle infuses with hope and redemption. Dilettantism, on the other hand, is a despicable quality with no potential for growth or change. Carlyle argues, “Mammonism has seized some portion of the message of Nature to man; and seizing that, and following it, will seize and appropriate more and more of Nature’s message: but Dilettantism has missed it wholly” (150). For Carlyle, Dilettantism centers on idleness and a false sense of superiority; dilettantes mask their lack of morality and meaningful purpose with an abundance of meaningless and pretentious speech. Frustrated with the aristocratic trend toward “impotent, insolent Donothingism in Practice and Saynothingism in Speech” (150), Carlyle has no tolerance for the manner in which upper-class Englishmen take pride in wasting their potential on “witty, ornamental” and insincere speech that reflects a deep insincerity of action (151). Carlyle condemns “Thou who walkest in a vain show, looking out with ornamental dilettante sniff and serene supremacy at all Life and all Death; and amblest jauntily; perking up thy poor talk into crotchets, thy poor conduct into fatuous somnambulisms” (218). By worshipping the Gospel of Dilettantism and thus

valuing empty, ostentatious speech over the simplicity of spirituality and work, English society remains soulless and stagnant.

Geraldine Jewsbury uses Carlyle's negative description of modern-day England, a society ruled by the Gospels of Mammonism and Dilettantism, to create a parallel fictional Victorian society in *The Half Sisters*. The plot centers on the lives of two disparate half-sisters: Alice, the conventional, domestic, and private Victorian woman, and Bianca, the unconventional public actress. Both women experience first-hand the money-obsessed culture that Carlyle describes, for the narrator simply states: "In this world men cannot resist the temptation of making money when they have an opportunity, or turning aside from a bargain" (Jewsbury 24). In particular, from the moment that Bianca—the illegitimate child of her Italian mother and English father—emigrates from Italy to England, she is inculcated into a society obsessed with money. Left to care for her ailing mother who uprooted them to England in search of Bianca's father, Bianca immediately realizes the importance of money within Victorian English society: "The girl looked anxiously at the contents of the pocket-book, with which she had never before been intrusted; she found some old letters, a lock of light hair, an address written upon a card, and about five shillings in money. 'Is this all?' asked she, anxiously" (4).

Bianca is first exposed to the importance of money once on English soil, which compels her to find work, especially since her mother's idyllic hope that Bianca's English father "would provide for them both" is immediately replaced by the reality of Mammonism (9). Thrown into a world that is obsessed with economic value, Bianca is inundated with the practical monetary concerns of housing, caring for her sick mother, and employment. Her landlord complains to another tenant about Bianca, "I feel very

sorry, for I had a daughter just that age myself once, but I cannot keep them here when their money is all done; a man must live by the fruit of his labour, and I cannot afford to give mine away” (8). The landlord’s behavior exemplifies Carlyle’s view that “Our life is not a mutual helpfulness; but rather, cloaked under due laws-of-war, named ‘fair competition’ and so forth, it is a mutual hostility” (Carlyle 146). Despite the fact that the landlord pities Bianca, his own economic concerns take precedence, and his sympathy for the young immigrant is replaced by the practical demands—the “fair competition”—of business.

Moreover, the past relationship between Bianca’s parents links Mammonism with English identity. Sent by his father to Genoa on business (Jewsbury 16), Phillip Helmsby initially ignores his economic responsibilities and falls passionately in love with Bianca’s mother. Despite his promises to eventually come back to Italy and marry her, however, Phillip succumbs to the powers of money and success as soon as he returns to English soil. The narrator notes, “Arrived at home, all the complicated affairs of the partnership had to be gone into. [. . .] The real work that now devolved upon him made his Italian life seem dreamy and childish;—and after all, getting money does seem to the natural man of more importance than love, however desperate” (17). Once in England, Phillip immediately replaces his passion for romance with Mammon-worship. Consequently, Phillip is “overwhelmed with business from morning till night; whilst the skill necessary for carrying out extensive operations, the calculation, the foresight needed, and a large number of workmen to control, all contributed to blot out his Italian dream” (18). Love, passion, and personal responsibility become secondary to money, eventually leading him

to end things with Bianca's mother and "lawfully marr[y] his [business] partner's daughter, with a large fortune" (19).

Bianca's first employment opportunity in England further emphasizes the manner in which Mammonism defines English society. Her employer, Mr. Simpson, the manager of a circus, provides her with a stingy salary of ten shillings a week and takes advantage of her naïveté (Jewsbury 10). Despite the fact that Bianca's talents improve as she gains more experience in the circus, "her salary was not raised in proportion, for Mr. Simpson was not a generous man, and he insisted on her working out the 'over-payment,' as he called it, which she had received before she became useful" (35). Concerned far more with his own monetary success than with either Bianca's well-being or the ethical implications of his actions, Mr. Simpson continues to underpay Bianca, convincing her that she is in debt to him for his previous services.¹⁹ Simpson's actions recall Carlyle's assertion that "We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that *Cash-payment* is not the sole relation of human beings; we think, nothing doubting, that *it* absolves and liquidates all engagements of man. 'My starving workers?' answers the rich mill-owner: 'Did not I hire them fairly in the market? Did I not pay them, to the last sixpence, the sum covenanted for?'" (Carlyle 146-47). Although Simpson is not a rich mill-owner, his selfish actions reflect the same principles of Mammonism that Carlyle denigrates—a disinterested characterization of employees as a mere cogs in a lucrative machine.

Furthermore, when Bianca's only friend, Conrad, asks Simpson to help him contact Bianca, Simpson is concerned not with the possible exposure of his unethical business practices but rather with the loss of profit, for he "felt an undefined fear, that an interview between Conrad and his *protégée* would end either in his losing her services

altogether, or in being obliged to pay a higher rate for them; so he tried to evade the question” (Jewsbury 86). Due to Simpson’s selfish obsession with his own monetary success, Bianca—while under his tutelage—lives in poverty. The narrator states:

It is no easy matter to keep two persons in food, clothes, and lodging, on twelve shillings a week; her few trinkets had gradually been disposed of, to supply accidental deficiencies as they arose,—and her salary had been anticipated for several weeks. Poor Bianca was suffering under that most wearing of all human ills—anxiety about money; that worst fruit of the tree of knowledge—the utmost value of a shilling! (86)

Held captive by her alleged debts to Simpson, Bianca experiences nothing but monetary hardship after arriving in England. As a result of Simpson’s greedy pursuit of profit, Bianca must temporarily forsake her desire to explore her artistic potential in order to earn a living. It is only through Conrad’s willingness to supply Bianca with the finances to pay off her debt (Jewsbury 88), that Bianca can finally break free from the forces of Mammon that consume English society.

Bianca’s half sister, Alice, also encounters the Gospels of Mammon and Dilettantism, further emphasizing Carlyle’s influence on Jewsbury’s fictional world in *The Half Sisters*. Epitomizing the idleness that Carlyle firmly denigrates, Alice Helmsby and her mother lead a domestic life of “Donothingism in Practice and Saynothingism in Speech” (Carlyle 150). The narrator’s description of the Helmsbys’ sitting room introduces the concept of Dilettantism in the novel:

A bookcase, filled with books of uniform size and binding, stood in a recess by the fire-place; but none were lying about. An engraving of the

Princess Charlotte, and another of [Mrs. Helmsby's] husband, hung against one of the walls; some ornaments of old-fashioned Dresden china, little Cupids with blue scarfs, and pots of roses, stood on the chimney-piece, marshalled at equal distances on each side of a plain time-piece. All the chairs stood in their lawful places against the wall; none of those idle, lounging, pretty inventions for being comfortable, encumbered this singularly prosaic-looking room. A brisk fire in a shining black grate was the only thing that did not seem subdued down to the level of the presiding spirit of decorum. (Jewsbury 13)

Jewsbury contrasts the narrator's blunt characterization of the Helmsbys' sitting room as "prosaic" with the forced sense of aristocratic decorum that envelops the space. A book case "filled with books of uniform size and binding" that look handsome but remain unused, a number of perfectly placed ornaments on the mantle, and a group of impractical chairs all capture a "presiding spirit of decorum" infused with a sense of falsity. The precise placement of each item as well as the juxtaposition of Princess Charlotte's portrait with that of Phillip Helmsby suggests a pretentious and misplaced sense of foolish self-importance.

The narrator also recalls that—prior to his death—Phillips Helmsby was a dilettante. He "became a patron of the arts, and filled his house with pictures, statues, and objects of *vertu*. Although his wife was proud of having her house a show-place, yet that hardly counterbalanced the plague of keeping so much 'ornamental furniture,' as she called it, in order" (20). Drawing attention to the disparity between Mrs. Helmsby's view of her décor and the narrator's previous description of that "grave substantial furniture"

(13), Jewsbury captures Carlyle's definition of Dilettantism: although every item in the room was carefully chosen to reflect a sense of intelligence and superiority, in reality, the furnishings—like those who occupy the space—are devoid of authenticity, meaning, and purpose. Phillip Helmsby, a self-proclaimed lover of the arts, bequeaths to his wife and child a home full of décor that “says nothing” in which his wife and child essentially “do nothing.”

Moreover, Jewsbury explicitly and ironically demonstrates the prevalence of Dilettantism within English society through the blunt commentary of William Bryant, who eventually becomes Alice's husband. When he first meets Alice at a lavish dinner party, Bryant appears intelligent, worldly, and successful, having “just established large iron-works in some outlandish place” (53). During their second encounter at another party of dilettantes, Bryant harshly critiques the Dilettantism that pervades English society. He asserts,

“I can stand any thing but your superior and respectable people. I have been a long time out of England, you know, and that must be my excuse. I can stand dulness [sic] *au naturel*; I consider it as I would any other human affliction—blindness, or lameness, or what not; but, when it will arrogate to itself a superiority, and claim a sort of apostolical succession from the wisdom of Solomon, and set up little fancy anathemas on everything, and everybody, who are not, like themselves, ‘measured from the standard of Cornhill’, I confess I get out of all patience and all charity! [. . .] So much innate vulgarity and stupidity I never heard before.” (55)

Associating his distaste for Dilettantism with his travels outside of England, Bryant emphasizes the manner in which Dilettantism is a defining characteristic of English society. According to Bryant, Dilettantism only succeeds in revealing the “innate vulgarity and stupidity” of its followers by concealing an absence of meaning or depth with a false sense of “superiority.” Moreover, Bryant’s views endorse those of Carlyle, who claims, “Every man feels bound to be something more than plain; to be pungent withal, witty, ornamental. His poor fraction of sense has to be perked into some epigrammatic shape, that it may prick into me” (Carlyle 151). Both men criticize society’s manipulation of language to enforce a false—and empty—sense of self-importance.

Bryant’s acclaim of Mammonism, on the other hand, ironically highlights England’s problematic obsession with money. Bryant correctly asserts, ““This is an industrial country, [. . .] the great mass of sympathy and intellect takes a practical direction—a direction that we understand”” (Jewsbury 263). While Carlyle espouses virtually the same views on Mammonism as Bryant, Carlyle condemns the very behavior that Bryant endorses. Arguing with Conrad about the place of fine arts in English culture, Bryant adds,

“every people must work out its civilisation in its own way. Love of the fine arts is *not* our specialty,—we do not know a good thing from a bad one, unless we are told; and the pretence we make about it has a bad effect on our character. There is such a pressure of competition, and so much enterprise in all departments of industry, that all the energies of English people are absorbed and worked out in that direction.” (263-64)

In his attempt to defend the importance of industry, Bryant ironically points to the manner in which English society blindly follows whatever trend envelops it. Bryant sees England's absorption in the world of industry as a positive reflection of an intelligent and practical society, telling Alice, "As men of business and enterprise, Englishmen are wonderful" (55); yet it is this precise absorption against which Carlyle argues. A bewildered Carlyle quips, "I have not heard in all Past History, and expect not to hear in all Future History, of any Society anywhere under God's Heaven supporting itself on such Philosophy [of Mammonism]" (Carlyle 147). For Carlyle, the manner in which contemporary England "work[s] out its civilisation" may provide financial gain, but it is at the expense of morality, spirituality, and the valuation of humanity. Bryant's naïve absorption in the world of industry proves Carlyle's point: Bryant's failure to recognize the dangers of Mammonism—his inability to discern a "good thing from a bad one"—eventually leads to the dissolution of his marriage.²⁰

“[She] had no place as yet; but she intended to make one”: Jewsbury's Feminist Revisions of Carlyle's Gospel of Work

Although Jewsbury creates a fictional society that mirrors the portrait of contemporary England presented by Carlyle in *Past and Present*, she challenges Carlyle's advice regarding how to rectify a country obsessed with Mammonism and Dilettantism. While Carlyle relies on an exemplary thirteenth-century male monastic community as the foundation on which to rebuild a more spiritual and moral country, Jewsbury examines the manner in which contemporary society already demonstrates the potential to enact the very changes that Carlyle endorses. More specifically, Jewsbury uses the novel's two

female protagonists, Bianca and Alice, to explore the ways in which women equally contribute to the problems and the solutions of contemporary English society.

In *The Half Sisters*, Alice represents a woman who is trapped within the confines of a society ruled by Mammonism and Dilettantism and stifled by traditional domestic roles; encouraged to ignore her desires to contribute to society in any meaningful fashion, Alice reluctantly embodies the role of a dilettante, perpetuating the societal ills that Carlyle firmly denigrates. On the other hand, Bianca represents a woman who successfully redefines the concepts of Mammonism and Dilettantism, ultimately adopting many of the positive qualities that Carlyle endorses in *Past and Present*; viewing her work as a vocation and attempting to redefine society's limited appreciation of the arts, Bianca demonstrates the manner in which women can bring positive change to contemporary society through their adherence to Carlyle's gospel of work. Thus, Jewsbury essentially argues that Carlyle's suggestions for change in *Past and Present* must be revised: by focusing on the manner in which an antiquated community of men can evoke change in present-day England, Carlyle ignores the possible role of women in the rehabilitation of society, consequently presenting an unrealistic and incomplete solution that excludes a significant—and potentially powerful—segment of the English population. Through her critique of the revered domestic housewife and her elevation of the defiled actress, Jewsbury calls attention to the ways in which a revised, gender-inclusive gospel of work—independent of delimiting social stereotypes—can positively rebuild the *present and future* of Victorian England.

Before exploring Jewsbury's revisionary approach to the female protagonists in *The Half Sisters*, it is first necessary to outline briefly Carlyle's stern instructions for

change within *Past and Present*. Despite Carlyle's daunting claim in Book I of *Past and Present* that English society must engage in a "total change of regimen, change of constitution and existence from the very centre of it; a new body to be got, with resuscitated soul,—not without convulsive travail-throes; as all birth and new-birth presupposes travail!" (36), he spends the rest of his monograph articulating ways in which England might begin this seemingly impossible task of systemic change.²¹ In Book II, Carlyle outlines in great detail the government of a thirteenth-century male monastic community whose exemplary methods of obedience, authority, and organization as well as admirable focus on work and spirituality provide a true and historic model for contemporary England—a damaged and inane society in desperate need of change. Carlyle asserts,

Behold therefore, this England of the year 1200 was no chimerical vacuity or dreamland, peopled with mere vaporous Fantasms, Rymer's Foedera, and Doctrines of the Constitution; but a green solid place, that grew corn and several other things. [. . .] Day by day all men and cattle rose to labour, and night by night returned home weary to their several lairs. In wondrous Dualism, then as now, lived nations of breathing men; alternating, in all ways, between Light and Dark; between joy and sorrow, between rest and toil,—between hope, hope reaching high as Heaven, and fear deep as very Hell. (44)

In juxtaposition to modern-day England, a vacuous and misguided people obsessed with rules, doctrines, and "vaporous Fantasms," thirteenth-century England was a country of men built upon hard work, spirituality, and a healthy balance between labor and rest, joy

and sorrow, fear and hope. Earnest, diligent, and grounded in reality, “men then had a *soul*” (48), which—according to Carlyle—is sorely lacking in nineteenth-century England. Carlyle points to the work ethic and obedience of this community as exemplary; their reverence for work, one another, their leader, and—most important—God, provides the necessary foundation for a thriving moral society. Focused on spiritual rather than material riches, thirteenth-century monastic society nurtured men to develop a soul—a noble purpose in life—that focused on work and God.

In contrast, contemporary England has replaced the genuine admiration for God and work, once the foundation of English life, with a hollow and empty worship of Mammon. Lamenting Victorian England’s loss of faith and absence of religion (136), Carlyle fills the remaining pages of his monograph with instructions for social improvement and prophecies about England’s future, all of which center on the exemplary principles of the thirteenth-century monastery. He declares, “With all its miserable shortcomings, with its wars, controversies, with its trades-unions, famine-insurrections,—it is her Practical Material Work alone that England has to show for herself!” (168). Carlyle implores the people of England to abandon their worship of Mammonism and Dilettantism and subscribe to a new gospel: “Know thy work and do it” (196). The first step toward rehabilitating a broken society is to abandon idleness and engage in the noble act of work. Carlyle claims, “Whatsoever of morality and of intelligence; what of patience, perseverance, faithfulness, of method, insight, ingenuity, energy; in a word, whatsoever of Strength the man had in him will lie written in the Work he does” (158). Work is a sincere expression of man’s soul, and it encapsulates all the noble qualities that man is capable of possessing. Moreover, Carlyle’s understanding of

work transgresses class lines, for “All work, even cotton-spinning, is noble; work is alone noble” (153). Although England is a misguided and selfish nation, Carlyle believes that work can provide salvation because, “Labour is Life: from the inmost heart of the Worker rises his god-given Force, the sacred celestial Life-essence breathed into him by Almighty God; from his inmost heart awakens him to all nobleness,—to all knowledge, ‘self-knowledge’ and much else, so soon as Work fitly begins” (197-98). Work is a spiritual vocation that will liberate man from the chains of Mammonism and Dilettantism and fill him with noble purpose. However, Carlyle explicitly emphasizes the struggle that encompasses noble work, for “all dignity is painful; a life of ease is not for any man, nor for any god” (153). Man’s current focus on pleasure and happiness is insignificant; “It is, after all, the one unhappiness of a man, That he cannot work; that he cannot get his destiny as a man fulfilled” (156). Work is the sole source of dignity for earthly man; it is a vocation that may not accrue worldly riches, which Carlyle deems paltry, but will lead to spiritual wealth both on earth and in the afterlife.

For Carlyle, then, Victorian England is at a crossroads. The nation will either engage in honest work and nourish the souls of its people, “or England also will cease to exist among Nations” (221). So Carlyle calls upon the noble workers who already exist in England to become the future leaders who can rebuild Victorian society: “it is to you, ye Workers, who do already work, and are as grown men, noble and honourable in a sort, that the whole world calls for new work and nobleness. Subdue mutiny, discord, wide-spread despair, by manfulness, justice, mercy and wisdom” (297-98). Despite the empty and chaotic state of contemporary England, Carlyle places hope in the minority who already understand the true value of work. He believes in the redemptive power of labor,

which is a pure, humble, and spiritual act that has the potential to heal a broken society. Relying on the principles that a thirteenth-century monastic community once enforced—strong leadership, organization, spiritual order, and unity—Carlyle pleads for change. While he acknowledges the difficulty of such change, he remains hopeful: “it is my firm conviction that the ‘Hell of England’ will *cease* to be that of ‘not making money’; that we shall get a nobler Hell and a nobler Heaven! I anticipate light *in* the Human Chaos, glimmering, shining more and more; under manifold true signals from without That light shall shine” (270). The spiritual and moral power of work can—and must—remedy an ailing society obsessed with Mammonism and Dilettantism, bringing a necessary sense of dignity and morality to a country once deeply rooted in diligence, obedience, and religion.

Although Jewsbury supports these foundational principles of Carlyle’s gospel of work in *The Half Sisters*,²² she also exposes the limitations of Carlyle’s solutions to contemporary England’s corruption. In her essay, “Madame de Staël Meets Mrs. Ellis: Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half Sisters*” (1995), Lisa Surrige points to the ways in which *The Half Sisters* “responds to Thomas Carlyle’s doctrine of work as spiritual salvation,” noting, “Carlyle’s insistently masculinist language emphasizes women’s exclusion from the sacred economy of labour” (88). Through her portrayal of both Alice and Bianca in *The Half Sisters*, Jewsbury demonstrates the manner in which Carlyle’s omission of women within *Past and Present*, which mirrors society’s mistreatment of the allegedly inferior sex, ironically prevents Carlyle’s hopeful solution for systemic change from coming to fruition.²³

From the moment that Alice Helmsby is introduced in *The Half Sisters*, Jewsbury highlights Alice's untapped potential to achieve much more than her gender permits. Alice has the very soul that good *men* must embody, in Carlyle's view, and Jewsbury emphasizes the manner in which both society and Carlyle ignore such promise. In her youth, Alice is a peculiar, "quiet, thoughtful, dreaming child" who "would leave any play she was engaged in to creep to the window-seat in the nursery, there to watch the sun set, firmly believing it was the gate of heaven" (Jewsbury 21). She constantly engages with her imagination, demonstrating not only her creative potential but also her innate sense of spirituality. The narrator notes that, as Alice grows older, "there was a feeling, a striving after some meaning she could not express, which made a difference between her work and [that of her companions]" (22). Unable to articulate her deepest desires, which differ from those of her playmates, Alice spends most of her childhood and adult life feeling dissatisfied and unfulfilled. While in boarding school, "when, after a few years, she had worked her way to be considered the first in the school, the commonness and insignificance of what she had done suddenly struck her; [. . .] a sense of baffled effort depressed and distressed her; and none of those around her could understand the vague, undefined, restless aspirations that filled her heart" (22). Despite her ambition, her academic accomplishments prove insufficient, for they fail to engage her artistic potential—her desire to "understand more than was seen" (22). Moreover, her humility and reverence for nature recall Carlyle's acclaim of both Nature and God (Carlyle 27-28), for on a carriage ride to Derbyshire, Alice is overcome with awe by her surroundings: "She was drinking in the sight—feeling, for the first time in the presence of the power of nature, crushed down before the mute aspect of superhuman beauty and majesty, which

made all human utterance irreverent; taking her, for the moment, out of herself, away from her own hopes, and fears, and personalities, to feel overwhelmed before the grand inorganic majesty around her” (Jewsbury 59). Alice, then, has the innate qualities that demonstrate the potential to change a broken society: she possesses a soul that reveres the unseen and the majestic, and she strives for a deeper sense of fulfillment in her work.

The most influential figures in Alice’s life, however, do not foster her artistic sensibilities, instead stifling her potential and instilling in her the importance of traditional gender roles. In particular, Alice’s mother, Mrs. Helmsby, reprimands Alice for straying from tradition and teaches her the importance of Dilettantism within the domestic sphere.²⁴ Mrs. Helmsby instructs her, ““Your life will be domestic; you are neither to be a fashionable woman nor an authoress; therefore your excessive devotion to books and accomplishments will bring no useful results, but only unfit you for your duties, and fill your mind with fancies”” (14). This comment ironically highlights the manner in which Alice’s pursuit of intellect and the arts is useless for a woman who has no choice but to become a domestic housewife. Discouraging her daughter from engaging in any challenging mental or physical activity, Mrs. Helmsby cultivates in Alice the importance of idleness and unskilled work—“of impotent, insolent Donothingism in Practice and Saynothingism in Speech” (Carlyle 150). She chides, ““Oh, Alice, what are you there at your reading again? Well, you may keep your book for just half an hour, and then do set to work to something useful. You might make Fido a collar; [. . .] There now, make good use of your time”” (Jewsbury 40). Mrs. Helmsby encourages Alice to deny her propensity toward the arts, a subject that both fascinates and challenges her, and embrace what she deems “useful” work—the menial task of fashioning a dog collar.

Ultimately, Mrs. Helmsby, the embodiment of the idle dilettante whose most difficult task centers on watching over her servants (38), encourages Alice to embrace a similar life of idleness within the domestic realm. Although Alice's artistic potential far surpasses the intellectual limitations of the domestic life, her mother pressures her to conform to gendered expectations.

Placing Alice in juxtaposition to her mother, Jewsbury emphasizes the manner in which both society and Carlyle ignore Alice's potential to surpass such gendered limitations. The narrator notes, "Alice was a type of a very numerous class of English women, whose fine qualities, for lack of wise guidance, evaporate amid the common material details of household life, leaving them ineffectual and incomplete—grown children without the grace of childhood" (40-41). Alice, like so many Victorian women, does not have access to employment opportunities that would enable her to contribute to the potential improvement of Victorian society. The narrator adds, "Under wise guidance, [Alice] might have been trained into a valuable character, but wise guidance is precisely the blessing that seldomest falls to a woman's lot. Certainly her clever, worldly, bustling mother was not the one likely to afford it" (41).

Under the imprudent tutelage of her mother, a woman obsessed with marriage and status, Alice is raised to become a dilettante—a useless member of society that contributes to the very problems that Carlyle seeks to combat in *Past and Present*. Mrs. Helmsby argues with Alice,

"This life was given you to do your duty in, of course, there is no difficulty in seeing that; to fill up your time with useful employments. You have very wrong and wild notions of life; it is very different to what

you expect; you have an idea of liking this and not liking that, but what have you to look forward to, I should like to know, but marrying some honest, respectable man, who will support you decently in the sphere in which you were born.” (46-47)

These comments reveal the absurdity of a woman’s social position: she has no choice but to dismiss any opportunity for “useful employments,” which would not only challenge her intellect but also contribute to society, and embrace her only option—marrying a man who can perpetuate her role as a dilettante. In doing so, Alice can “successfully” perpetuate her mother’s legacy of Dilettantism, in which she neither does nor says anything “useful” as well as relies on her marital and social status to display a false sense of superiority. In response to Alice’s resistance to marriage, Mrs. Helmsby bluntly states: “For what else do women come into the world [. . .] but to be good wives? Poor profitless, forlorn creatures they are, when they live single and get to be old; [. . .] if a young woman is lucky enough to be married to a steady, respectable young man, it is the best thing that can happen to her; and then she is something in the world” (47). A mouthpiece for society’s demoralizing views on women, Mrs. Helmsby stifles Alice’s hopes to transgress gendered limitations in pursuit of some greater purpose. Clarke adds, “In order to become something in the world, it is best for [Alice] to become as close to nothing as she can in herself” (191). Because society does not value her as an individual, Alice’s most promising option is to become the literally self-less wife of a successful man. Consequently, there is some truth to Mrs. Helmsby’s statement—married dilettantes *are* “something in the world”; according to Jewsbury, they are passive contributors to the corruption of Victorian culture. Society, even Carlyle, ignores the

ways in which women like Alice could potentially become “valuable characters” outside the domestic sphere.

Jewsbury further emphasizes the manner in which Alice’s occupation as a domestic housewife not only stifles but also destroys her artistic potential, leaving Alice no choice but to contribute to the corruption—rather than the salvation—of Victorian society. Alice’s marriage to Bryant, a businessman fixated on Mammonism, perpetuates the unhealthy patterns of her childhood, in which her aptitude is ignored at the expense of material gain. Shortly after the wedding, for example, “Bryant had weighty business concerns on his mind; the temporary interruption caused by his marriage, had induced an accumulation of urgent affairs, which now occupied a more than ordinary share of his time and attention, so that when they subsided into the ordinary routine of domestic life, Alice was left very much to herself” (Jewsbury 102). Viewing his marriage as an “interruption” of his quest for economic success, Bryant consistently ignores the emotional demands of his wife, understanding her needs only in terms of financial comfort. Oblivious to Alice’s true feelings, Bryant is constantly “engrossed in arduous business undertakings, which tasked all his energies;—he had no leisure to be a companion to his wife, or to provide her either with occupation or amusement” (186). Consequently, Bryant’s obsession with Mammonism ironically pushes Alice toward the lonely life of “impotent, insolent Donothingism in Practice and Saynothingism in Speech” that she reluctantly endured as a child (Carlyle 150). The narrator reports,

Alice was left very much to herself; the daily guidance and sympathy, from which she had anticipated so much comfort, by no means occurred to Bryant as either necessary or desirable: [. . .]. He desired that she should

be happy, and enjoy herself, provided the latter did not imply that he should be expected to visit a great deal, or to see people who were not connected with his business; otherwise, she might do what she liked, go where she liked, and spend as much money as ever she pleased. But what Alice asked was sympathy and guidance; she did not care for indulgence. (Jewsbury 102)

Trapped within a microcosm of the society that Carlyle describes, Alice is surrounded by the Gospels of Dilettantism and Mammonism, and her resistance to these corrupt forces remains ignored and unrecognized due to her gender. Desperately seeking the “sympathy and guidance” that might foster her potential or cultivate the spiritual riches she desires, she finds no fulfillment in the material possessions at her disposal. She tells her friend Conrad, “I am surrounded with every thing that a woman can desire, and yet I feel shut up in prison; I can get to hear and see nothing that my heart cares for” (265). Alice acknowledges that her life is materially comfortable, but without the opportunities to actualize her potential and pursue the neglected—and thus nebulous—artistic forces within her, she remains idle and unhappy.

Despite her resignation to a life of domesticity, Alice continues to yearn for fulfilling employment that transgresses the bounds of her idle life. She laments, “I have nothing to do that seems worth doing. I am depressed under a constant sense of waste, a vague consciousness that I am always doing wrong, and yet I can find out nothing that I ought to do. I need some one to direct me and guide me” (268). Ironically, Carlyle condemns the very life that Alice leads, but he only applies his critique to men, asserting, “To sit idle aloft, like living statues, like absurd Epicurus’-gods, in pampered isolation, in

exclusion from the glorious fateful battlefield of this God's-World: it is a poor life for a man" (Carlyle 286). A reluctant "living statue," Alice longs to engage in the "fateful battlefield" from which even Carlyle excludes her.

Furthermore, Alice embodies many of the qualities that Carlyle praises: her soulful desire for meaningful work, her disgust for Dilettantism, and her deep yearning for spiritual guidance; yet Carlyle's gospel of work does not answer her desperate pleas for meaningful occupation. Surridge adds, "In light of Carlyle's exclusion of women from work, the empty life of Alice in *The Half Sisters* seems an ironic echo of his rhetorical questions" in *Past and Present*: "'What hast thou done, and how?'; '[N]ow thy work, where is thy work?'" (88-89). Alice's desperate pronouncements reinforce this irony, for she decries, "'My whole life is one cloud, and I have a sense of responsibility which I can neither adequately discharge, nor deliver myself from. I have nothing to look forward to'" (Jewsbury 268).²⁵ Alice's comment explicitly addresses the problematic nature of Carlyle's gospel of work in *Past and Present*: women, like men, possess both the aptitude and the responsibility to enact change within Victorian England. Yet until society—and Carlyle—acknowledges a woman's vital role in both the corruption and prospective improvement of Victorian society, Carlyle's predictions for hope and change will remain unattainable. Women like Alice, plagued by "a sense of responsibility which [they] can neither adequately discharge, nor deliver [themselves] from," have no option but to quietly (and marginally) participate in a society that abides by the gospels of Mammonism and Dilettantism.

Jewsbury juxtaposes the stifled character of Alice with her hard-working half-sister, Bianca. Claiming that "Bianca embodies the positive effects of women's work"

(86), Surridge contrasts the two sisters, stating: “Alice is dependent while Bianca is self-sufficient; Alice is stifled while the actress enjoys a rewarding creative outlet; Alice has no purpose in life, but the stage provides her sister with daily occupation and long-term ambitions” (86). From the outset of the novel, then, Bianca’s commitment to her vocation recalls Carlyle’s gospel of work. In particular, Bianca adheres to many of the principles that Carlyle outlines in the minority of men in England who truly understand the value and nobility of hard work—“the elect of the world; the born champions, strong men, and liberatory Samsons of this poor world” (Carlyle 290). According to Carlyle, “Not a May-game is this man’s life; but a battle and a march, a warfare with principalities and powers. [. . .] it is a stern pilgrimage through burning sandy solitudes, through regions of thick-ribbed ice. He walks among men; loves men, with inexpressible soft pity,—as they *cannot* love him: but his soul dwells in solitude, in the uttermost parts of Creation” (291). Carlyle places the hope of England’s future in the male elect, stating: “his strength, let us rejoice to understand, is even this: The quantity of Justice, of Valour and Pity that is in him. [. . .] in his heart, in his great thought, is a sanctuary for all the wretched. This world’s improvement is forever sure” (291-92). Deeming him a “Man of Genius,” Carlyle adds, “Genius is ‘the inspired gift of God.’ It is the clearer presence of God Most High in a man. Dim, potential in all men; in this man it has become clear, actual” (292). Persistent, strong, and devoted to his work, the man of genius pursues a spiritual vocation that not only sets him apart from the average nineteenth-century Englishman but also encapsulates the qualities necessary in man to enact social change.

With the exception of her gender, Bianca embodies these exceptional qualities that Carlyle espouses. By highlighting these traits within a female character in *The Half*

Sisters, Jewsbury draws explicit attention to the detrimental impact of Carlyle's patriarchal approaches to rehabilitating Victorian society. The narrator's words explicitly draw on those of Carlyle:

Men are naturally, and from instinct, in a state of mutual war with each other; go into what society one will, we shall find the ranks serried against us, [. . .] for it is the latent power that lies within us, to obtain what we desire by force, if need be,—the being able to fight for ourselves,—which alone gets us any respect in the world. No mildness, nor amiability, nor goodness will stand us in any stead, unless the power to make ourselves *felt and feared* in an extremity, makes itself apparent through all the beautiful sky-blue haze of amiable qualities. Bianca had no place as yet; but she intended to make one. (Jewsbury 97)

The narrator describes the same corrupt world that Carlyle places in juxtaposition to the superior male elect. Like Carlyle, Jewsbury captures the hard reality of a competitive society that centers on power and individuality rather than spirituality, nobility, or mutual respect. In opposition to Carlyle, however, Jewsbury gestures toward the fact that this society ignores the ways in which women, too, can engage in battle and positively enact social change. For Jewsbury, Bianca serves as an example of how a strong, capable woman of genius can “make a place” within a corrupt society and ultimately participate in Carlyle's plan to rebuild Victorian England.

Echoing Carlyle's theories on the value and power of noble work, Bianca Pazzi views her work within the arts *not* as the means by which to earn money and status but rather as a vocation that is both challenging and spiritually fulfilling. Having recently

emigrated from Italy with her mother, she initially pursues employment out of necessity; forced to care for her ailing mother in a strange country with no friends or familial connections, she accepts the first job that is offered to her—a circus entertainer. Although the circus is, at first, “the means of earning a certain number of shillings, on which she might support her mother” (31), her menial work almost instantly becomes a fulfilling vocation. The narrator states: “At first when she went to the circus she had no idea beyond doing her best; but a spirit was soon roused within her, what she had to do in each piece became a reality for the time, and she flung herself into it with all her force. [. . .] Accident had thrown Bianca into this line of life; but we are obliged to confess she continued in it from choice” (33). While Bianca’s employment in the circus is a necessary source of income, her work almost immediately develops into a calling to which she devotes her life. In juxtaposition to English society, which worships the gospel of Mammon, Bianca abides by Carlyle’s gospel: “Know thy work and do it” (Carlyle 196). Once Bianca leaves the circus and becomes an actress, she embraces her work more fully, stating: “I must be what I am. The stage is to me a *passion*, as well as a profession; I can work in no other direction; I should become worthless and miserable” (Jewsbury 134). As an actress, Bianca experiences a “clear, actual” understanding of her talent and vocation (Carlyle 292), eliminating the possibility of pursuing any other employment. For Bianca, financial gain is of minimal importance; rather, she feels compelled to engage in a gratifying profession that ignites her passion and challenges her soul.

Bianca is not only passionate about her work but also gifted, for her employer, Mr. Simpson, quips, “she is a genius. Most astonishing talent, and has kept herself

perfectly respectable” (Jewsbury 83). Emulating the same qualities as Carlyle’s male elect, Bianca is a “woman of genius” who humbly and respectfully devotes herself to her work. The narrator adds, “Bianca was so patient, so unconscious of the extent of her own powers, so earnest in her endeavours to learn, without any idea of showing off herself in anything she did; in short, possessed so many sterling qualities, which enhanced the value of her genius (qualities, indeed, without which genius cannot ‘have its perfect work’)” (158). Like the male elect and the thirteenth-century monks, she is modest, patient, strong, and obedient; her natural talent, combined with her constant willingness to learn and improve her craft, deem Bianca a genius. Her mentor, the old actor, constantly emphasizes her unprecedented talent: when he first performs with her, he informs her, ““you have strength and patience, and let no difficulties make you distrust your aspirations,—they are the voice of God, you must have faith in them”” (100). Virtually repeating Carlyle’s description of the male elect, in which genius “is the clearer presence of God Most High in a man” (Carlyle 292), the old actor considers Bianca a gifted performer with the God-given talent to elevate artistic work altogether.

In addition, Bianca—like the male elect—consistently faces the hardships of her profession with dignity and grace. Proving Carlyle’s theory that “no noble task was ever easy” (Carlyle 276), Bianca faces constant challenges throughout her career: the daily threat of starvation, the suffering and death of her mother, greedy and manipulative employers, sexual harassment, jealous actors, and the dangers every female actress faces as public commodity. Despite these setbacks, she always remains resolute and noble. Anticipating the trials she will face in her first acting job, Bianca’s “spirit soon rallied; and she made a solemn resolution that no difficulty should present itself to which she

would not oppose at least as much resolution and patience as should be necessary to combat it; that she would turn aside from no drudgery, take offence at no professional humiliation, but keep her eye steadily fixed on her own purpose; and that purpose was to rise to a leading rank in her profession” (Jewsbury 94). Steadfast and diligent, Bianca prepares to face professional challenges, no matter how degrading, without trepidation. She is realistic about the hardships of acting yet firmly committed to her “purpose,” which centers on acknowledgment of her hard work and talent—not on material gain. The narrator reports,

She stood with nothing but her own hands between herself and starvation, and they seemed very feeble to ward it off. [. . .] she felt, instinctively, that she had no choice but to go on, looking neither to the right road, nor the left; and she had an innate conviction, that in one way or other, she should not be mastered by her difficulties. She had no idea that there was anything heroic in this calm bravery; it seemed to her the simplest necessity laid upon her—she could not have told how or why—but a necessity from which there was no appeal, to do the thing that seemed right, and trust courageously for the consequences. (120)

In the face of material hardship, Bianca remains loyal not only to her vocation but also to her innate values—the same values that Carlyle attributes to the soulful monks of the past as well as the few male elect who can redeem nineteenth-century English society. In particular, she demonstrates the “quantity of Justice, of Valour and Pity” that Carlyle praises in the male elect, in whom “This world’s improvement is forever sure” (Carlyle

292). Thus, she adheres to the exceptional qualities of character that Carlyle mistakenly recognizes as valuable only within the souls of men.

Bianca's adherence to the gospel of work, however, is complicated by her romantic infatuation with her friend and benefactor, Conrad Percy. Yet rather than undermine her potential role as a "woman of genius," her relationship with Conrad emphasizes the ways in which patriarchal society reinforces female dependence upon men—an obstacle that even strong women like Bianca struggle to overcome. The narrator comments, "she had a hidden source of life and comfort she would have revealed to no one, [. . .] it was, the memory of the graceful, handsome Conrad, who had appeared like an angel to her in her deepest need. He had made, as was only natural, an indelible impression on her heart" (Jewsbury 36). Throughout much of the novel, Bianca relies upon Conrad for inspiration in her work, viewing him as "the ideal hero to whom she acted" (36). Although she recognizes that her innate talents are God-given, she desires to literally dedicate those talents to Conrad, as opposed to God. She gushes to Conrad, "I believe that God has given me what is called genius. I have power in me to become all I desire; I must prove it and work it out. To you my whole soul is given—you have been the guiding star of my life—you will be its crown and glory. [. . .] I *am* yours; you are my god, my religion, my whole life is yours" (155). Throughout the novel, Bianca recognizes—independent of any being, including Conrad—that her talents are a spiritual gift that she must channel into meaningful employment. She has passion and "desire" for her profession; yet she also passionately idolizes Conrad, which prevents her from fully understanding the source and purpose of her innate talent. While her romantic feelings for Conrad do not discount her noble pursuit of employment, they do obfuscate her

ability to clearly grasp the purpose of her genius, which Carlyle deems “the clearer presence of God Most High in a man” (Carlyle 292).

While Bianca’s devotion to Conrad is problematic, her feelings for him are inextricably linked to the enthusiasm she fosters for her profession, especially since Conrad provides Bianca with her first employment opportunity. She claims, “he helped me to a position in which I could work my own way; he was my benefactor; he gave me books, and showed me the mine of precious things that lies in them. As a young man he showed a noble and generous interest in my fate, and placed me in a regular theatre, where I might rise to a higher grade in my profession; do you wonder that I loved him?” (Jewsbury 198-99). She associates her love for Conrad with her passion for work, feeling indebted to her benefactor for leading her on a path toward meaningful—albeit challenging—employment. One might even argue that Bianca naively conflates her romantic devotion to Conrad with her intense devotion to the theater, unable to distinguish between gratitude and love. While her focus on Conrad certainly detracts from her pure and untainted embodiment of Carlyle’s male elect, Bianca’s obsession with Conrad is consistently linked to her profession—the noble work that fulfills her soul, often independent of Conrad’s presence or influence.

Through the voice of the old actor, Jewsbury highlights the manner in which Bianca’s conflicted focus on Conrad is not only a reflection of her gender but also a potential learning experience that can actually strengthen her commitment to the gospel of work. He advises her, “when you discover that the one object to whom you have dedicated yourself [. . .] shrinks in cowardly fear from your entire and perfect devotion, [. . .] then in your desolation will arise a conviction of a nobler and purer motive” (161-

62). As a woman living in a foreign country with virtually no friends or family, Bianca's propensity toward traditional Victorian gender roles—in which proper English women focus almost solely on love and marriage—is realistic and, to some extent, inevitable. But the old actor's words emphasize Bianca's potential to overcome social stereotypes and bravely engage in Carlyle's male-centered notions of spiritual work. The actor continues,

“You are consecrated to act a certain part, and must give yourself with your whole soul to the work appointed you. In vain will you make idols, and try to give yourself to them; they will break when you trust to them in your need. But alas! alas! through how much suffering will you not have to pass, before you believe this! I had hoped you would be led by an easier path; but excellence can be perfected by suffering alone.” (162)

The old actor's words echo those of Carlyle, advising Bianca to devote her “whole soul” to her work. Despite this setback, the actor still sees her relationship with Conrad as a hardship that can contribute to her humble engagement with work. His words provide a gendered nuance to Carlyle's dictum that “all dignity is painful; a life of ease is not for any man, nor for any god” (Carlyle 153). A woman who follows the gospel of work faces the additional challenges set forth by a patriarchal society that encourages her to focus on marriage and, consequently, attempts to delimit her “work” to that of a domestic housewife.

Moreover, Jewsbury's decision to focus on the profession of acting, or performance, as the exemplary mode of woman's work further emphasizes the problematic nature of women's roles in Victorian England—roles that are reinforced by

Carlyle's exclusion of woman from his gospel of work in *Past and Present*. In contrast to the Victorian paradigm that the private sphere is the only proper space for respectable women, "the novel represents the domestic space, rather than the theatre, as the primary locus of female artifice" (SurrIDGE 88). In other words, it is Alice—not Bianca—who fully engages in performance. Bored, unfulfilled, and desperate to explore her artistic sensibilities, Alice performs the role of domestic housewife, reluctantly fulfilling her duties as a married woman within the private sphere. Mrs. Helmsby reinforces this inextricable link between artifice and the domestic sphere when advising Alice on how to be a proper housewife. She states: "A woman must *never* trust a man: she may *seem* to do so as much as she likes, but woe to her! the instant she really lets him see or know any thing about her, except just as it *suits* her that it should be seen and known" (Jewsbury 76). According to Mrs. Helmsby, a woman must perform—rather than sincerely embody—the role of housewife, for artifice serves as a dutiful wife's primary means of communication. Ultimately, Alice's reluctant performance of domesticity reflects Carlyle's definition of the dilettante, whose identity is built upon falsity. In her essay, "Actresses at Home and on Stage: Spectacular Domesticity and the Victorian Theatrical Novel" (1994), Lauren Chattman notes that Jewsbury's "revelation that domesticity is performed necessarily undercuts the claim that women are naturally domestic" (79). Trapped within Victorian gender constructs, Alice must perform domesticity and deny her natural propensities toward meaningful work that could provide artistic and spiritual fulfillment. Thus, Jewsbury conflates performance and domesticity²⁶ to emphasize the manner in which women's limited cultural roles buttress the immoral and superficial framework of a crumbling Victorian society.

In contrast to Alice, Bianca—whose profession centers on performance—views acting as a genuine vocation, sincerely engaging in her work without artifice or deception. Surridge contends, “By representing the actress as natural and the domestic woman as artificial, Jewsbury reverses an antitheatrical discourse which had consistently linked the acting, costumes, make-up, and stage sets of theatrical performers with falsity” (88). Moreover, Bianca’s passionate devotion to her work despite financial difficulty not only demonstrates her repudiation of Mammonism but also her conscious efforts to combat Dilettantism through her commitment to the value of art. The old actor presents her with this great challenge: “In mechanical and industrial ages, all the fine arts are apt to be looked on as merely amusing, or at best ornamental. But our art has never, in any age, been made honourable. [. . .] I believe you have it in you to raise it from its meretricious degraded state” (Jewsbury 160-61). Once a mere circus performer, Bianca embraces her talent, persistently surmounts professional obstacles, and eventually acquires the title of reputable actress. Lewis adds, “charging her to raise the level of her profession shows that the old actor takes Bianca seriously as a great artist and a true professional” (87).

Although Bianca experiences financial gain, she measures her personal success by the standards of hard work that Carlyle champions. The narrator notes, “her reputation gradually extended, and she became a great favourite [. . .] These were the most important years of her life; she was laying the firm foundation of her future fame; so that when the season of her great success arrived, it was not a sudden and wonderful stroke of good luck, but the legitimate harvest of patient toil” (Jewsbury 165). As Bianca rises through the ranks in the acting world, she evaluates her achievements not on the basis of

money or even fame but rather on the fruits of her hard labor. For Bianca, her work—and even her fame—should serve as a reflection of her innate virtuous qualities, especially her perseverance, which mirror Carlyle’s words: “Whatsoever of morality and of intelligence; what of patience, perseverance, faithfulness, of method, insight, ingenuity, energy; in a word, whatsoever of Strength the man had in him will lie written in the Work he does” (Carlyle 158).

Through Bianca’s continued success as an actress, Jewsbury emphasizes the manner in which she brings respectability and virtue to a career that typically commodifies women and views them as mere spectacle.²⁷ After her debut on the London stage, for example,

Bianca’s popularity kept at its high-tide—every phase that worldly prosperity could assume seemed presented to her; [. . .] for no sooner was it satisfactorily asserted that not the shadow of a shade rested on her “perfect respectability”, than people began without fear to do their share towards rewarding so much virtue, by lighting it up with their “countenance”. Her personal manners, and extreme agreeableness in conversation, kept up the prepossession in her favour, and gave her a *succès*, as marked in its way, as that she had achieved in her profession; she remained to the end of the season, a lion of the first magnitude.

(Jewsbury 178)

Society recognizes Bianca’s role as a noble and dignified actress, and her success reflects the ways in which she manages to elevate the quality of her acting as a valuable career and true expression of art. Despite her monetary success, she remains humble,

valuing a Carlylean sense of hard work. She bluntly states: ““if I am worth any thing, it is the real hard work I have had to go through, which has made me so”” (253). With a focus on work as spiritual fulfillment, Bianca continues, ““All I have achieved looks as nothing beside that which I am striving to attain: but it is out of my very discouragement that I have learned knowledge which triumph cannot give; it is out of my hours of blackness and despondency that I have learned my secrets, and have risen again for the struggle”” (254). She values the knowledge that she has gained through the struggle as the true reward for her hard work—not the consequent financial gain. By cherishing the *process* of her work as opposed to the end product, she embraces Carlyle’s philosophy that “thou hast no other knowledge but what thou hast got by working” (Carlyle 198).

Jewsbury’s focus on the profession of acting, then, serves to further emphasize the urgency of her redaction. By choosing “the profession closest to prostitution in the public mind” as her vehicle to discuss woman’s work and placing it in contrast to the socially revered role of the domestic housewife (Clarke 193), Jewsbury forces the reader to evaluate the manner in which work *in any form* is integral to a woman’s fulfillment. Independent of social stereotypes and delimiting gender roles, work can foster within any woman the noble, moral, and sincere qualities that society narrowly categorizes as domestic and Carlyle deems heroic. These qualities—absent within the proper domestic housewife—flourish within the actress who forsakes proper Victorian gender roles in order to pursue a fulfilling vocation, simultaneously denigrating oppressive gender restrictions and elevating the universal and redemptive power of noble work.

Bianca's own words on the value of work further iterate Jewsbury's demand for a revision of Carlyle's gospel of work. Bianca argues that women, especially those who are not married,

“want an object, they want a strong purpose, they want an adequate employment,—in exchange for a precious life. Days, months, years of perfect leisure run by, and leave nothing but a sediment of *ennui*: and at length they have all vitality choked out of them. This is the true evil of the condition of women. The need of some sort of a stimulant becomes, at last, an imperative necessity—it is the cry of their expiring souls, an impulse of self-preservation; they possess unsatisfied, unemployed powers of mind—a strong vitality of nature, that must consume them, unless an adequate legitimate employment be provided for them. They must find something that is *worth* being done.” (Jewsbury 249)

Once again, Bianca's comments allude to Alice's fruitless life of ennui, which suffocates her vitality and renders her useless and unhappy. Like Carlyle, Bianca repudiates the Gospel of Dilettantism, but she provides the missing element of Carlyle's theory: women not only contribute to the epidemic of Dilettantism but also possess the latent and unacknowledged potential to evoke change. Echoing Jewsbury's own views, Bianca contends that a woman's mind, body, and soul can only flourish through meaningful employment. Thus, by addressing the power of a woman's work, Jewsbury takes the first crucial step toward creating an inclusive plan that places the future of Victorian society in the capable hands of both men and women.

“[S]o well ordered and appointed was her household”: The Conventional

Conclusion of *The Half Sisters*

Although Jewsbury explicitly supports the liberal notion of women engaging in valuable work outside the private sphere throughout *The Half Sisters*, the novel concludes with both Alice’s and Bianca’s reinforcement of proper, conventional Victorian ideals of morality, marriage, domesticity, and femininity. Due to its surprising conclusion, especially with respect to Bianca’s character, virtually every critic that has written on the novel attempts to elucidate the unforeseen conservative ending, which conflicts with the novel’s feminist themes. When read within the context of Jewsbury’s critique and revision of Carlyle’s *Past and Present*, however, the novel’s conclusion serves as an ironic commentary on the social limitations that women face in contemporary society—limitations that Carlyle reinforces through his patriarchal approach to the gospel of work. Ultimately, Jewsbury’s relegation of both Alice and Bianca to the domestic sphere, where Alice dies of hysteria due to moral transgression and Bianca marries Melton and flourishes as a domestic genius, demonstrates the manner in which society’s continued dismissal of a woman’s potential to participate in social change inevitably creates a stagnant and limiting reality for the Victorian woman and—consequently—the future of England.

Through the character of Alice, Jewsbury emphasizes not only the wasted potential of a woman who reluctantly succumbs to the unfulfilling domestic life but also the serious dangers of ennui. More specifically, Alice eventually plans to abandon her husband and run away with Conrad Percy as a result of her boredom and dissatisfaction with married life. When Conrad Percy first visits with Bryant to discuss business

matters, Alice dutifully occupies her role as a proper but idle housewife. The narrator notes that Alice “had never dreamed of transgressing any of the conventional rules of society, which, to her, were synonymous with virtue and propriety;—the idea of questioning them had never occurred to her” (187). Meek, obedient, and earnest, Alice epitomizes the ideal housewife; yet her yearning for more fulfilling occupation eventually leads to infidelity.

Ultimately, Conrad’s willingness to indulge Alice’s long neglected artistic sensibilities awakens within her a dormant passion. He exposes Alice to William Wordsworth’s poetry, and upon reading “Lines on Revisiting Tintern Abbey,” Alice was “penetrated by the poem; it was as if the voice of the heart of nature had syllabled itself, and made her own yearnings articulate” (266). Indebted to Conrad for nurturing her artistic passions and acknowledging her innate potential, Alice—like Bianca—conflates her gratitude with deeper feelings of love. Thus, when Conrad discloses his romantic feelings to Alice (278), Alice also professes her love to Conrad and agrees to run away with him (286). Surridge comments,

Jewsbury depicts this exclusion of middle-class women from purposeful labour as dangerous because it traps energy which demands release; she suggests that, if not given “vent” through an “adequate mode of manifestation,” a woman’s “vitality” will build within her and either overflow into alternative channels or rebound with destructive action upon herself. Thus while women may appear to be indolent or quiet, their excess vitality has not been reduced by the will but diverted into “diseased action.” (84)

Initially obeying social convention, Alice suppresses her sensibilities as well as her passion for more meaningful occupation or interaction; yet this “energy” is still present within her soul, ultimately transforming into a destructive affair with the first man who nurtures her artistic and romantic propensities. The narrator states: “Alice had never witnessed strong passionate emotion. All her life her soul had been athirst for words of love; all the words [Conrad] uttered found an echo in her own soul” (Jewsbury 279). Desperate to nourish the neglected soul within her, Alice—bereft of meaningful occupation—mistakenly projects her energy and vitality onto Conrad.

If given the opportunity to pour her soul into work, however, Alice may have experienced spiritual fulfillment and thus avoided such a moral transgression. In fact, Bianca’s attribution of her own virtue to her work becomes especially relevant to Alice’s eventual demise, for Bianca states: “I had to struggle with vexations in my daily life enough to break any one’s heart, [. . .] but with all this I was kept clear of ENNUI, which eats like a leprosy into the life of women. I was leading a life of my own, and was able to acquire a full control over my own faculties” (249). Bianca argues that her employment kept her both active and virtuous; in juxtaposition to Bianca, Alice’s idle life of ennui, in which her faculties were ignored, leads to dangerous and sinful behavior. When Bryant surprises Alice in the midst of her departure, she experiences a severe case of hysteria as a result of her guilt and impropriety (288-89). Through the character of Alice, then, Jewsbury emphasizes one of the few realistic options for a woman whose potential surpasses the limitations of domestic life—death. Although Alice does transgress proper moral boundaries, Jewsbury carefully points out that her transgressions result not only from her inability to pursue meaningful work but also from her husband’s complete

absorption in his own business. Thus, Alice's death becomes a microcosm for Jewsbury's realistic assessment of contemporary England: like Alice, England is a spiritually bereft country steeped in Mammonism and Dilettantism; its neglect of female potential ultimately destroys the possibility of social change, instead reiterating conventional patterns that will contribute to its own destruction.

Far more surprising than Alice's demise, however, is Bianca's conservative transformation from famous actress to domestic housewife. After rejecting Lord Melton's multiple declarations of love, Bianca finally begins to recognize within herself a genuine affection for him. The narrator states: "Bianca was fulfilling her vocation, but not at all with satisfaction to herself. She was still engrossed with her art. But other feelings had taken possession of her, and prevented its being the only object of her life" (354). Her romantic feelings for Melton begin to interfere with her occupation, and she no longer feels satisfied in her role as an actress. The narrator continues, "She endeavoured to give her whole soul more and more to her art; tried to make herself believe, that to live a calm, self-sustained existence, dedicated like that of a priestess, cold, strong, and pure, to the utterance of the oracle confided to her, was indeed the noblest and highest vocation she could embrace. But it would not do, she needed some more human motive to sustain her" (355). Although she still clings to the theoretical value of Carlyle's gospel of work, her romantic feelings for Melton begin to overshadow her devotion to acting. Consequently, she eventually resigns from the theater—at the request of Melton's sister—and marries Lord Melton. According to the narrator, Bianca still utilizes her innate talents within the private sphere; her genius simply becomes domesticated: "It is a great mistake to suppose that genius is shown in one special mode

of manifestation alone;—it inspires its possessor, and enables him to feel equal to all situations. Bianca might have been born to her new position, so easily she sustained her dignities, and so well ordered and appointed was her household” (391). After Lady Vernon’s death, Bianca also manages Lady Vernon’s school for young girls (396). Once a woman of genius who poured her soul into her occupation as an actress, she now channels her vitality into domestic work, having renounced the stage for a life of love and marriage.

Bianca’s conservative transformation into a domestic housewife has been a constant topic of scholarly interest, for virtually every critic who has written about *The Half Sisters* wrestles with the problematic conclusion. Several critics lament Bianca’s abandonment of the stage and embrace of the conventional domestic life: Clarke asserts that Jewsbury “was too honest to leave Bianca coldly scaling the awesome heights of art; and not honest or brave enough to explore alternatives she knew about from her own life [. . .] Marrying Lord Melton means the end of art” (196). In her essay, “At Home Upon a Stage: Domesticity and Genius in Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half Sisters*” (1996), Judith Rosen argues, “Bianca has married a man who approves of women’s independence, but Jewsbury does not permit her the double passions of wifedom and art [. . .] the rigid distinctions between public and private spheres, independent and relative femininity, assert themselves once again” (29). And Lewis comments, “Jewsbury’s assumption that brilliant women are adaptable in many departments will not do. Granted, certain qualities like energy, tenacity, and originality can be applied to various professions, but it does not follow that a woman with genius to write poetry, sing arias, or paint landscapes will be just as happy running a school” (97). Jewsbury’s decision to relegate Bianca to the

private sphere appears to undermine the feminist strides that Bianca's character takes with respect to both female independence and pursuit of valuable work, especially art.

Yet most critics also attribute some feminist qualities to the unsatisfying conclusion. Clarke points out, "Bianca faces the dilemma of a woman who has succeeded against great odds and made her own place in a society which, while accepting her, has not moved in accordance with her ideas or what she represents" (196). Astutely gesturing toward Jewsbury's blatant acknowledgement that Bianca could not sustain such fame and respectability as a woman within Victorian society, Clarke recognizes Jewsbury's realistic approach to the novel's conclusion. Moreover, Rosen highlights Bianca's ability to make her own decisions, stating: "Bianca's final decision to marry at once 'normalizes' her by returning her story to the central conventions of female development and manages to present her embrace of domesticity as an exercise of individual will, not a surrender to prescriptive plots" (29). Surridge centers on Jewsbury's crucial reversal of morals within the private and public spheres, noting, "At the same time that Jewsbury rewards her actress heroine with social approval and marital bliss, she attributes to the domestic heroine the actress's stereotypical downward path through adultery and madness to death. In *The Half Sisters*, this decline is attributed to the home, not the stage, and to the repression, rather than the overindulgence, of female desire" (92). Finally, Lewis acknowledges Bianca's persistent engagement with work that is not only meaningful but also ground-breaking for women, positing, "In choosing the new 'career' of educating future generations of women, Jewsbury has sent Bianca along a path that no Victorian feminist could reject as trivial—given that, [. . .] women are inadequately educated for life, for professions, and for knowing themselves. Further,

one can assume that the job of educator is most certainly a call to Work, in the Carlylean sense” (97).

Within the context of Jewsbury’s critique and revision of Carlyle’s *Past and Present*, these contradictory elements of the conclusion, described at length by the aforementioned critics, appear both intentional and ironic. Ultimately, Jewsbury’s conservative conclusion highlights society’s—and Carlyle’s—failure to recognize the necessary gendered revisions to the gospel of work, which leads to the perpetuation of a system that experiences minimal change. In other words, proper Victorian women have no choice but to eventually inhabit the private sphere and occupy stereotypical roles until society acknowledges that they are part of both the problem and potential solution. Thus, the half-sisters reveal the two limiting options for Victorian women with artistic sensibilities that exceed the expectations of their gender: for Alice, whose talents remain neglected and thus lead her to immorality, death is the only escape from an unfulfilling domestic life; and Bianca, who actualizes her potential on the stage, must eventually conform to a life of domesticity in order to maintain her status as a respectable woman.

Throughout the novel, Jewsbury acknowledges popular disapproval of the professional woman, especially the actress; Conrad Percy espouses common opinion when he states:

“A woman who makes her mind public, or exhibits herself in any way, no matter how it may be dignified by the title of art, seems to me little better than a woman of a nameless class. [. . .] The stage is still worse, for that is publishing both mind and body too. Every body may go to the theatre to see an actress, and may pass whatever gross comments on her they will;

she has no protection, is open to every species of proposal, and that is not precisely the line of life from which one would choose one's wife."

(Jewsbury 214)

Conrad adds, "'a professional life ruins a woman as a woman'" (215). Throughout the novel, Jewsbury draws attention to these popular prejudices against working women, especially the actress, who is viewed as public commodity. In addition, a woman who transgresses the bounds of proper womanhood by venturing into the public sphere damages her femininity. Conrad asserts, "'[Bianca] is too coarse, too strong, too passionate—you could not feel any real sympathy with her; and when a woman has once dwelt beneath the brazen glare of popularity, her beauty and value as a woman is destroyed, and the intrinsic worth of what she does to compensate for it, is more than doubtful'" (268-69). Thus, Jewsbury's conclusion realistically depicts the only respectable option for Bianca, whose successful role as an actress already transgressed the bounds of acceptable feminine behavior in Victorian society.

Moreover, it is important to note that Bianca's eventual abandonment of the theater—and even her marriage to Lord Melton—is fueled, at least in part, by her loneliness. The narrator states: "Bianca had no friends, no relatives in the world. Admired, flattered, successful as she had been, she had yet no hold on society, no *home*; she was alone, but for her confidential servant, in her deepest need; she belonged to nobody" (234). Her isolation captures the reality of a woman who attempts to abide by Carlyle's gospel of work: alone, unacknowledged, and restricted from the exclusive male community that Carlyle aims to create, she has no support in her pursuit of a meaningful vocation. To Carlyle, she is invisible; and to society, her visibility on the stage deems her

unfeminine. Her feelings for Melton develop only as her feelings of isolation within the public sphere grow deeper, for

Her position was as brilliant as ever; her reputation, if possible, stood higher. She had acquired a fortune amply sufficient for all her wants; but her whole being was drooping in the glare of her success; her heart was aching with desire for that common blessing, which yet is more precious than life—the natural affection of friends and kinsfolks; which comes from God, and is given when men enter on this weary life, to be a rest and refreshing for them, and that they should not walk through the desert alone. (355-56)

These words recall those of Carlyle, who discusses the plight of a man of genius: “it is a stern pilgrimage through burning sandy solitudes, through regions of thick-ribbed ice. He walks among men; loves men, with inexpressible soft pity,—as they *cannot* love him: but his soul dwells in solitude, in the uttermost parts of Creation” (Carlyle 291). Jewsbury’s deliberate repetition of the sexism present in Carlyle’s passage emphasizes Bianca’s exclusion from the gospel of work. Although Carlyle argues that a noble man’s soul “dwells in solitude,” Carlyle attempts to unite a community of working *men*—much like the monastic community of the thirteenth century—to virtuously rebuild Victorian society. Bianca’s isolation, then, not only reflects her aptitude as a woman of genius whose soul, too, “dwells in solitude,” but also her exclusion—on the basis of her gender—from any like-minded community of noble workers. Carlyle’s gospel of work does not even acknowledge women; yet Bianca devotes her life to her vocation and the gospel of work. Thus, the narrator emphasizes Bianca’s inability to sustain such noble

labor in isolation; her transgression of gender norms prevents her from experiencing the necessary support of a community, which only *men* can experience as they “enter on this weary life” and engage in the gospel of work.

Although Bianca does fulfill her vocation and resigns, at least in part, in order to combat her isolation by acquiring a family, her decision to marry and reside within the private sphere realistically captures the present stagnation of a society that has not yet acknowledged the powerful role of women. Moreover, her final decision to resign from the theater is at the request of Melton’s sister, Lady Vernon—a proponent of conventional femininity. The exchange between them emphasizes the inferior state of women in Victorian society: “Lady Vernon said, ‘My dear Bianca will not, I am sure, refuse the first request made by her sister; which is, that she will not again appear on the stage, now that she belongs to us.’ ‘So be it, then,’ said Bianca, gracefully; ‘arrange all as you wish it to be, and I will be conformable.’ ‘That is being a good child!’ said Lady Vernon” (Jewsbury 389-90). Lady Vernon’s words ironically recall an earlier conversation between herself, Lord Melton, and Bianca about society’s mistreatment of women, especially with respect to occupation. In that conversation, Lord Melton laments the condition of women and advocates for women’s rights, arguing, “‘That is the sort of way in which women’s minds are fed. They are kept in a state of perpetual childishness,—not *childhood*—that is a graceful and natural state. Women out-grow childhood without attaining a developed and matured nature’” (248). Rather than heed her brother’s warning, Lady Vernon actually reinforces gender stereotypes not only by asking Bianca to abandon her vocation but also by treating her like a child. Lady Vernon’s reference to Bianca as a possession further highlights the inferior role of

women, whom society views as helpless creatures in need of superior male guidance. Ultimately, Bianca must choose between her profession—in which she has already found great success and artistic fulfillment—or love, family, and stability—concepts that have always eluded her despite her greatest efforts to obtain them. Thus, her decision to resign from the theater not only emphasizes the emotional consequences for women who pursue a vocation outside the domestic sphere but also demonstrates the manner in which a corrupt and patriarchal society relegates talented women with the potential to enact social change to the only place where they are welcome—within the home.

Despite her fictional critique of Carlyle's gospel of work, which must be emended to include the vital role of women, Jewsbury does agree with Carlyle that there is still hope for contemporary Victorian society to "Know thy work and do it" (Carlyle 196). While Carlyle addresses his call for change exclusively "with the hope of awakening here and there a British man to know himself for a man and divine soul" (Carlyle 271), Jewsbury plants fictional seeds of hope in both the men and women of contemporary society, envisioning instead a revised, gender-inclusive gospel of work. For example, although Alice dies as a result of her indiscretions, her demise ignites a necessary change within the heart of her business-obsessed husband, Bryant—a former proponent of Mammonism. Shortly after Alice passes away, Conrad blames her death on Bryant, decrying, "Had you taken her away when she entreated you, she had been saved; but your business, your money, your time, your cursed convenience, made you refuse her harshly,—blind fool that you were!" (Jewsbury 294). Although Bryant denies Conrad's accusations, he eventually abandons the Gospel of Mammon for the gospel of work, even aiming to improve working conditions for the masses. He tells Lord Melton, "I do not

care for making money now, it is the work I care for. [. . .] We have many hundred workmen in our employ—we paid them their wages—they did our work—the rest was their concern. I think we should have considered something more than making our money out of them. [. . .] I shall see what can be done about them” (374). As a result of Alice’s death, Bryant not only reevaluates his material focus on work but also begins to value his employers as human beings, not the means to his own financial success. Ultimately, Bryant recognizes that his participation in the corrupt social system contributed to Alice’s untimely death, and he takes the first necessary steps to ensure future change.

Furthermore, although Bianca does resign herself to the private sphere, Jewsbury introduces the minor character of Clara, Bianca’s protégé, in order to gesture toward the hope for working women of future generations. After hearing Clara—“the principal musician” of Lady Vernon’s school—perform (240), Bianca advises Lady Vernon, ““that girl has real genius, and she will become a singer. It is of no use rebelling against Providence; rather let me add my mite towards your good work. Let her go the Academy when she has finished with you, and I will undertake to see after her”” (241). Lady Vernon eventually agrees, and Bianca not only serves as a kind and supportive mentor for Clara but also instills within her the importance of a woman’s vocation. Bianca tells Lady Vernon, ““she shall have a good starting point, so that she may be free to apply all her powers to the prosecution of her art, and not have to spend her strength in fighting with sordid difficulties, which wear the life and soul out of one to no profit. She will *begin* at a point which I had to attain wearily, working in the dark upwards out of deep mire. She shall begin in the daylight, I am resolved”” (359). Bianca’s words

metaphorically speak to Jewsbury's hope for future generations of women: women like Bianca have made the first great strides in revising the gospel of work to include the valuable contributions of women; thus, the next generation of women, like Clara, will "begin at a point which [Bianca] had to attain wearily" due to social restrictions of Victorian society. Consequently, Clara—unlike Bianca—manages to pursue her dreams as a singer in Italy and also marry a respectable man (377-78; 396), encapsulating Jewsbury's hope that society will allow women to nobly participate in the gospel of work within the near future. Lewis points out that critics "have rightly complained that the ending is too convenient in giving Clara a ready-made protector [in her husband] for her pilgrimage to Italy and a musical career, that such a conclusion undermines the validity of the case of Bianca, who has toiled alone in the world" (91). Yet when read within the context of Jewsbury's revisions of *Past and Present*, Clara's role is clear: she is the physical representation of hope for Jewsbury—the next generation of women whom, Jewsbury believes, will be socially recognized as competent, talented, and nurtured women of genius.

The ambivalent conclusion of *The Half Sisters* captures adequately Jewsbury's own ambivalent reaction to Carlyle's *Past and Present*: while she fully supports Carlyle's interpretation of corrupt Victorian society and his gospel of work as the method to evoke social change, she repudiates the exclusion of women from his theories. Through her fictional revision of Carlyle's gospel of work, Jewsbury draws attention to the ways in which women contribute to both the problems and the potential solutions of contemporary society's corruption. Moreover, the novel's ambivalent conclusion also encapsulates Jewsbury's own struggles to reconcile the harsh realities facing women in

Victorian England with her hope and determination to improve their quality of life. Within the pages of *The Half Sisters*, Jewsbury discusses the hardships that Victorian women face, for Bianca states: “there was no compendious receipt to improve the condition of women; their present position has been of gradual growth, and has all the disadvantages of a transition state” (Jewsbury 250). Through the character of Bianca, Jewsbury admits that evoking change within society—and even revising Carlyle’s theories into a universal gospel of work—is going to be slow, difficult, and frustrating. Despite these hardships, however, Jewsbury clings to “her passionate conviction that ‘in a generation or two women will be very different to what they have ever been yet’” (Howe 106). She tells Jane Carlyle,

I believe we are touching on better days [. . .] when women will have a genuine normal life of their own to lead. . . . Women will be taught not to feel their destiny manqué if they remain single. [. . .] I do not feel either you or I are to be called failures. We are indications of a development of womanhood which as yet is not recognized. . . . I regard myself as a mere faint indication, a rudiment of the idea, of certain higher qualities and possibilities that lie in women, and all the eccentricities and mistakes and miseries and absurdities I have made, are only the consequences of an imperfect formation, an immature growth. (Howe 106)

Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half Sisters*, then, is the fictional “rudiment of the idea,” the “faint indication” that the conditions of women *must* and *will* improve. Through the characters of Alice and Bianca, Jewsbury captures a realistic—yet hopeful—“imperfect formation, an immature growth” in the lives of Victorian women that, she believes, will

eventually lead to an egalitarian society that abides by the revised, gender-inclusive gospel of work.

Chapter Two

“Study our manuscripts”: The Influence of John Donne’s *Songs and Sonets* on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

Literary critics have long acknowledged the explicit connection between John Donne and Robert Browning, for Browning—“Donne’s leading advocate” in the second half of the nineteenth century—not only “felt a degree of artistic kinship with Donne” but also incorporated Donne’s influence into his own poetic composition (Smith 347). This inextricable link between the two male poets has fascinated literary critics and played a crucial role both in understanding the revival of Donne’s work within literary history²⁸ and in reviving Browning’s reputation as a poet. Donne’s influence on Browning, however, has always overshadowed another crucial correlation between Donne and a Victorian poet whose popularity and success far exceeded that of Browning—his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In her essay, “The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*” (1981), Dorothy Mermin argues that EBB’s “poems offered a vital energy, a new and compelling music, a bold engagement with controversial social issues, and a combination of tough wit with passionate intensity that was more like Donne than anything yet published in the nineteenth century” (351). Although critics like Mermin have acknowledged stylistic similarities between these two poets, none have explored this important correlation in any detail.

While separated by several hundred years, the biographical details of John Donne and EBB are often analogous, particularly with respect to their love relationships. Despite Donne's early reputation as "a great visiter of Ladies" (qtd. in Leishman 31), he eventually fell in love with Ann More, daughter of Sir George More, a wealthy landowner. Because of the vast difference in social class, the couple knew that Sir George would never condone the union; thus, in 1601 Donne and Ann More married in secret. When Sir George, who "was given to violent outbreaks of rage" (Bald 129), learned of the marriage, he took drastic measures, placing Donne in prison and seeking an annulment. Although the marriage was legally declared valid, Donne's involvement in public scandal not only damaged his reputation but also hindered his ability to find necessary employment. While Donne biographers and critics agree that Donne's decision to marry Ann More jeopardized his professional career and presented seemingly insurmountable financial and marital challenges, many assert that he was a loving and committed husband. In his comprehensive biography on John Donne, R.C. Bald contends that, at the time of Ann Donne's death in 1617, "There can be little doubt that Donne's marriage had so far been the deepest experience of his life" (326). Little is known about Ann Donne's character, yet it is evident that she and Donne had a devoted and enduring marriage. In addition to having twelve children and remaining together until her death, "all Donne's references reveal his devotion to [his wife]. However much he had suffered during the years of his married life, his marriage itself had been a source of sustenance and comfort to him" (Bald 326).

In her early years, EBB—like Donne—manifested signs of resistance to marriage. While Donne developed a reputation as a playboy, EBB "had always had a low opinion

of marriage” (Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 147). Despite her resistance, EBB fell in love with Robert Browning, and the romance developed primarily through epistolary correspondences centered on an initial mutual admiration for the other’s literary writings. Like Ann More, EBB had an oppressive father—“the infamous domestic tyrant of Wimpole Street” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 15)—who forbade any of his children to marry (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 80). Consequently, in 1846 the couple married in secret and moved to Italy. EBB’s family also disapproved of the marriage due to class differences: Browning “was the son of a bank clerk, with no income and no apparent intention of earning one” while EBB was of higher social status (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 149). In addition, the couple faced hardships, particularly due to EBB’s long battle with illness; however, they also fostered a loving and successful relationship until EBB’s death. Ultimately, “The Brownings’ marriage was, for both of them, not only extremely happy [. . .] but also artistically enabling” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 5).

These clear biographical parallels between John Donne and EBB quite literally extend into their love poetry, for in Donne’s *Songs and Sonets* (1633) and EBB’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), each poet writes so vividly about love that critics continue to investigate the unresolved question of autobiographical influence. Ultimately, both poets occupy a liminal space between “fact” and “fiction” in their love poetry, crafting realistic love lyrics that seem to parallel their personal lives while simultaneously establishing a clear distance between actual self and poetic persona. With respect to Donne’s *Songs and Sonets*, for example, Donne scholars still grapple with both the degree to which Donne’s autobiographical experiences inform these lyrics and whether the speakers of his

love poems represent Donne himself or a collection of imagined personas. J.B. Leishman directly addresses these issues in his book-length study on Donne, entitled *The Monarch of Wit* (1965). Because *Songs and Sonets* contains a diverse range of love poems—from the tender and serious to the witty and outrageous—Leishman concludes that critics must never take Donne’s more serious poems too lightly or his outrageous poems too seriously (180). While Leishman continuously asserts that Donne’s biography plays a role in many of his poems (and that Donne’s real-life marriage to his wife, Ann More, inspired at least *some* of the *Songs and Sonets*), he argues that “What is really important is to attempt to classify the *Songs and Sonets* according to their moods and attitudes and degrees of seriousness, and to use our biographical knowledge, if we use it at all, merely in order to test or confirm conclusions we have reached by methods that can entirely dispense with it” (178). Thus, Donne’s biography inspires the content and emotional representation in his love poetry (to some extent) and informs his creative process; moreover, his collection of love poems captures aspects—however small or fragmented—of his genuine and committed love relationship with his wife.

Similarly, in title alone, EBB’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* demonstrates the crucial intersection of the literary—more specifically, the poetic—and the biographical. Most critics agree that EBB and her husband, Robert Browning, consented to the title on the grounds that it obscured the original source of the poems, thus enabling the Brownings to maintain some level of privacy. In her article on the richer connotations of the title, Barbara Neri cites a letter from EBB to her sister, in which EBB states: “I agreed to slip [*Sonnets*] in under some sort of veil, and after much consideration chose the ‘Portuguese’” (qtd. 50).²⁹ Despite this guise, it is clear that *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

is a collection of sonnets based on the growing love relationship between EBB and Robert Browning. In some form or another, the biographical details of this married couple play a role in EBB's creation of the speaking persona and the beloved within the *Sonnets*, of the content of the love poems, and of the manner in which the informed reader interprets the poetry. Thus, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is a conscious representation of the courtship and marriage of the Brownings; mediated through language and composed according to the conventions of the poetic tradition of the sonnet sequence, the collection is simultaneously "fact" and "fiction." As EBB merges the private, autobiographical self with a constructed public persona, she manages to depict realistic female desire and self-discovery without transgressing the (gendered) boundaries of Victorian poetry.

Although separated by more than two hundred years, EBB and John Donne do not simply occupy corresponding poetic spaces; rather, EBB's poetry deliberately intersects with that of her predecessor, solidifying an inextricable link between the two love poets. In this chapter, I will first posit biographical evidence that proves EBB's knowledge of John Donne and his works by focusing both on EBB's early epistolary correspondences and on the courtship letters exchanged between her and Robert Browning, several of which contain specific references to Donne and his poetry. I will then explore the ways in which EBB's *Sonnets* utilizes language, images, and ideas similar to those of Donne by pairing and comparatively analyzing selected poems of both authors, with specific emphasis on how both poets express mutual love through desire, realism, and images of expansion and enclosure. I will conclude by analyzing the manner in which EBB, influenced by Donne's thematic and formal experimentation in *Songs and Sonets*, crafts

her own gendered revision of the sonnet, both in content and form: EBB ultimately employs the thematic notions of simultaneous expansion and enclosure both to represent realistically the complex poetic place of woman as desiring subject and desired object and to revise, expand, and ultimately explode the contained sonnet form.

The Epistolary Correspondences: EBB's Admiration for John Donne

According to biographical studies, EBB was familiar with Donne even before she met Robert Browning. In *The Browning Collections: A Reconstruction With Other Memorabilia* (1984), which provides a detailed list of materials found in the Brownings' library, Phillip Kelley and Betty A. Coley catalogue a 1639 edition of Donne's *Poems, with Elegies on the Author's Death* within the collection. The volume of poems, which is "Inscribed by EBB on fly-leaf" (71), not only indicates that EBB possessed her own copy of Donne's poetry but also supports the idea that she would have been familiar with at least some of his literary work.³⁰ Moreover, in his study of Donne's changing influence and reputation from the 16th through the 19th centuries, A.J. Smith asserts that EBB first incorporated Donne's work into her poetry in 1838 (*The Seraphim, and Other Poems*) when she "used lines from Donne's *Holy Sonnets* as mottoes for two poems" within the collection (Smith 371). Approximately five years later, EBB provided mottoes for a critical literary text entitled *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), one of which was from Donne's Elegy 4, "The Perfume" (Smith 372). Thus, it is clear that EBB not only owned a copy of Donne's poetry but also read his poems thoroughly, utilizing them within her own writing and alluding to him within the pages of literary criticism.

Several of EBB's letter correspondences with friends and family, from as early as 1825 through 1844, also confirm her familiarity with—and admiration of—Donne's

work. In December of 1825, EBB discusses the Christmas holiday in a letter to her uncle, James Graham Clarke, comparing weather conditions in their respective lodgings in Hastings and Newcastle. She writes, “Were I inclined to be ill natured in respect to your dear coterie (& that, for my credit’s sake, I am not) I might draw ‘COMPARISONS’ which, as the writing master’s copy says, ‘are odious’” (*Brownings’ Correspondence* 1: 227). EBB not only quotes directly from Donne’s “Elegy 8” to express her (playful) point about the uselessness of comparison but also refers to Donne as “the writing master.” Such a comment indicates her admiration for Donne, whom she deems a “master,” and her casual—yet quite explicit—reference to the poet demonstrates her intention to confirm her knowledge of Donne’s poetry.

Moreover, in November of 1827 EBB directly quotes a line from Donne’s *The Second Anniversarie* in a letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd, her older friend and “one of the few people in the Hope End area with whom EBB could communicate on her own intellectual level” (*Brownings’ Correspondence* 2: 340). Commenting on the quality of Boyd’s *Select Translations*, EBB posits, “Translation has been sometimes called the *body* weighing down the soul of original composition; but certainly in *your* case, ‘One might almost say the BODY THOUGHT’—Your language has so much animation, &, —may I use the expression?, —so much *transparency*” (2: 83). Here, EBB relies on Donne’s words to express her approval of Boyd’s accurate translation and excellent use of language while simultaneously flaunting her own intellectual understanding of Donne’s complex poetry. In evoking Donne’s words to elaborate on her analogy between the body, the soul, and translation, EBB draws a crucial thematic connection that appears later in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: like Donne, EBB explores the manner in which

love transgresses the boundaries between body and soul, heaven and earth, life and death. Even in her earlier correspondences, then, EBB reveals a common bond between her own poetic aspirations and those of her male predecessor. Throughout these letters EBB uses Donne's words to better articulate her aims, to express her own intellectual capabilities, and to—perhaps unintentionally—forecast her own endeavors to become a notable female poet. With childhood aspirations of becoming Homer's "female counterpart—the first and greatest of women poets" (Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 11), EBB constantly establishes her knowledge as an avid reader and an intellectual equal.

EBB's frequent correspondences with her friend, Mary Russell Mitford, further demonstrate her admiration for Donne's poetry. In her letter to Mitford in March of 1840, EBB quotes directly from the first two lines of Donne's "Satyre II" in her brief rant on coteries: "do let me gravely assure you that 'I hate' & as Donne says, 'I thank God for it—*perfectly*' all these coteries, (as far as I guess their character) all these menials of literature, all these putters of noble things to vile uses, these desecrators of wisdom & greatness in the very eyes of the wise & the great" (*Brownings' Correspondence* 4: 259). To further emphasize her point, EBB briefly quotes Ben Jonson: "I cannot choose but hold with rare Ben, that 'there goeth more to the making of a good poet than of a sheriff'" (4: 259). Perceiving such coteries to demean the value of literature, EBB uses Donne's words to articulate her anger and to defend the value of the literary—and more specifically—poetic tradition, of which she, Donne, and Jonson are a part. Emphasizing her desire to become a female Homer and thus penetrate the patriarchal canon of great male poets, EBB goes beyond simply quoting and admiring Donne; she aligns herself

with him, amongst “the wise & great” authors who understand the value and dedication of poetic composition.

Moreover, in another letter to Mitford in December of 1841, EBB once again incorporates Donne’s words into her own comments on the importance of poetry. Asking if Mitford has read Francis Trollope’s *The Blue Belles of England*, EBB comments on the inaccuracy of the character, Mortimer, who is a poet. She states: “the poet’s character, Mortimer’s . . . I must believe to be altogether unnatural & impossible, indeed self contradictory from first to last. She goes upon that falsest of all fallacies . . . that poetry is fiction,—but which, being the commonest as well as the falsest, can scarcely surprise us from a quarter the most *antipodic* to poetry, of any on ‘mortal ground’” (5: 193). Once again, EBB invokes Donne’s poetry, “Holy Sonnet VII,” to best articulate her point that Trollope’s fictional portrayal of a poet is grossly erroneous. EBB vehemently creates a hierarchical separation between base fictional works—earlier she deems *Blue Belles* “good for its bad class!” (5: 193)—and the honorable genre of poetry. Combating the common fallacy that “poetry is fiction,” and referring to the divide between the two genres as antipodal (“*antipodic*”), EBB’s letter to Mitford also foreshadows her later engagement with Donne’s poetry. Like Donne, in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* EBB blurs the lines between poetic persona and self, thus engaging with the idea that “poetry is *not* fiction”; moreover, she explores the complex relationship between the “antipodal” realms of real and ideal, heaven and earth—concepts that are forecasted in her innocent comments to Mitford and her direct use of Donne’s poetry in this letter.

In her letters to Mitford, EBB relies on Donne’s words not only to express her opinions on poetry but also to communicate her musings about love. In September of

1842, EBB comments on the marriage of Mitford's friend, Lucy Anderdon, to Rev. E.W. Partridge. Acknowledging Mitford's dissatisfaction with the marriage and her hope that Anderdon would instead marry EBB's brother, George Moutlon-Barrett (6: 85-86), EBB attempts to comfort Mitford, thereafter transitioning into her own reflections on marriage. She ruminates, "Yet I confess I don't like my own idea (however I came by it) of the [']merry bridegroom',—& am of opinion that if a lover of mine sh^d. laugh at the churchdoor, I w^d. spare his walking any farther. Why surely a merry man out of Robin Hood's gang, might by one 'touch of nature,' be grave on his wedding morning. I do *not* like such merriment out of place!" (6: 86). Elaborating on Donne's concept of the "cheerful bridegroom" from *Epithalamions, or Marriage Songs* (Donne 130), EBB discusses her own distaste for—and outright rejection of—the notion of a "merry bridegroom." Viewing solemnity as a sign of sincerity in the marriage ceremony, EBB uses Donne's poetic phrase to verbalize her own stance on propriety in love and marriage. Furthermore, EBB sets herself in opposition to Donne's concept of the "cheerful bridegroom," engaging—and even challenging—the poetic expression of a male author whom she highly regards. EBB's constant references to Donne simultaneously demonstrate her admiration for his genius and her fervent attempts to position herself beside him as a renowned poet and intellectual equal.

Thus, in her early correspondences, EBB's comments demonstrate the intimate manner in which she reads and relates to Donne's works, with respect to both their content and Donne's prestigious position as a "master" poet. Moreover, these early correspondences prove that EBB's knowledge of Donne's poetry is vast, for she refers to an impressive number of poetic phrases spanning virtually every major collection of

Donne's works. Independent of her future husband's influence, then, EBB seems to feel her own particular kinship with Donne, for his subject matter and particular use of language constantly inspire her own thoughts throughout her intimate correspondences with friends and family.

Due to the subject matter of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, EBB's and Robert Browning's mutual references to Donne and his poetry within their epistolary correspondences from 1845-6—the time during which Barrett composed *Sonnets*—become particularly important. While Browning's references to Donne in the private love letters outnumber those made by EBB, Donne's works become a clear vehicle of mutual expression for the couple, enabling them to share deep, often indescribable, feelings as well as intellectual equality. In February 1845, Browning tells Barrett of his conversation with Carlyle, in which Carlyle discusses the composition of "a *Song*": Browning writes, "[Carlyle] is not mechanically 'musical,' he meant,—and the music is the poetry, he holds, and should enwrap the thought as Donne says 'an amber-drop enwraps a bee'" (*Brownings' Correspondence* 10: 98). Quoting one of Donne's verse letters to the Countess of Bedford, Browning uses Donne's skillful manipulation of language to more clearly express his point. A.J. Smith adds, "Browning used Donne at times to suggest a motive [Browning] could not explicitly avow" (348), particularly in his attempts to voice his romantic inclinations.

The use of Donne's words to express Browning's feelings toward EBB become clear in a letter he wrote on 11 September, 1845, in which he comments upon EBB's pending decision to go to Italy. Following his inscription of a musical phrase, which translates into "What shall I do without you, Euridice?" (qtd. in Smith 348)³¹, he writes,

“Why, ‘lean and harken after it’ as Donne says” (*Brownings’ Correspondence* 11: 69). Here, Browning references Donne’s “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning,” a poem that influences EBB’s Sonnet 22 in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.³² Browning responds to the question he poses by claiming “that he will ‘lean and harken after’ her, as the separated lovers respond to each other in Donne’s poem. It amounts to a discreet avowal, preparing the way for the open declaration of love that ensued [between Browning and EBB]” (Smith 348-9). Donne, then, not only supplies Browning with the “right words” but also—within poems such as “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning”—provides for Browning a concrete example of a deep, fulfilling, and committed partnership. The lovers within Donne’s poetry become models of enduring love as well as the means by which Browning expresses his feelings to his beloved.

Browning, determined to articulate to EBB how much he cherishes their correspondence, often relies on Donne’s poetry to communicate his passionate emotions for his future wife. On 21 January 1846, he writes, “And of letters, this makes my 104.th and, like Donne’s Bride, ‘I take / My jewels from their boxes; call / My Diamonds, Pearls and Emeralds, and make / Myself a constellation of them all!’—Bless you, my own Beloved!” (*Brownings’ Correspondence* 12: 6). On 23 August 1846, Browning again utilizes Donne’s words in his efforts to share indescribable feelings of love with EBB: “Every day shows me more to love in you, dearest, and I open my arms as wide as I can . . . ‘incomprehensible’ Ba, as Donne would say!—Also he would say much better things, however” (13: 286). Thus, Donne’s poetry plays such a crucial role in the most intimate expressions between lovers; thus, for Browning and EBB, Donne simultaneously represents a great public poet to whom each aspires to emulate and a true artist whose

poetic expressions of love enable them to deepen their own intimate bond of romance and friendship.

To strengthen the point, not only Browning makes direct reference to Donne in the love letters, but EBB also incorporates the poetry and ideals of Donne in her responses to her future husband. In August of 1845, Barrett asks of Browning, “And talking of Italy & the cardinals, & thinking of some cardinal points you are ignorant of, did you ever hear that I was one of ‘those schismatiques of Amsterdam’ whom your D^r. Donne w^d. have put into the dykes?” (11: 10). Abruptly changing the subject of her letter, EBB clearly uses the couple’s mutual admiration of Donne as the means by which to share new information with her future husband. Pointing to “some cardinal points” about which Browning is unaware, EBB takes a bold step in sharing intimate information with Browning about her religious views. Her hesitation is apparent, particularly in her cautious suggestion that Donne would have disapproved of her; yet EBB—like Browning—utilizes Donne’s words in order to solidify the bond between the lovers, especially through the detailed confession of her religious views that follow.³³ In May 1846, EBB makes a similar reference to Donne: informing Browning of her friend’s visit to London, she claims that her friend “meant to stay here for a time . . . ‘hating it perfectly’ like your Donne” (12: 290). Again, Barrett invokes Donne’s poetry, loosely citing the first two lines of Donne’s “Satire 2.” In both letters, EBB refers to the poet as “your Donne,” demonstrating the intimate connection not only between Browning and Donne—a bond she understands and shares in due to her relationship with Browning—but also between the lovers, for Donne plays an inherent role in their loving correspondences. More specifically, Donne becomes a metaphorical figure of love and passion, enabling

the lovers to merge the literary (public) and autobiographical (private) in their epistolary attempts to explore the depths of desire and language.

Expansion and Enclosure: Thematic Parallels in the Love Poetry of Donne and EBB

During the correspondence between EBB and Browning from 1845-6, EBB composed the bulk of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which she did not publish until 1850,³⁴ four years after she and Browning had married.³⁵ In its entirety, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* represents a woman's journey of self-discovery as a lover and a poet. One of the key elements of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is EBB's union of the earthly and divine in her exploration of love, a concept that first appeared within Donne's poetry in the 16th and 17th centuries. Writing during a time when English poetry focused on ideal rather than real or genuine emotion,³⁶ Donne's poetry invoked more informal, conversational language; developed the character of the (very "human") individual speaker; responded in a "vigorous, coarse, and acute" fashion to "an observation of contemporary manners"; and relied upon ambiguities (Skelton 204).³⁷ Donne, in a sense, created an "anti-poetry" that rebelled against the conventions of traditional poets like Ovid and Petrarch at the same time that he invented a new kind of love lyric "dependent upon a real feeling for the actual, a delighted appreciation of the paradoxes and absurdities of human minds and human relationship, and a reverence for the ultimate clean simplicity of human needs" (Skelton qtd. 208; 209). Moreover, a thread of spirituality, detachment from the material, and a yearning for "otherworldliness" consistently emerge in all of Donne's writings, from his bawdy love poems to his serious religious sermons (Leishman 267-8). His work continuously expresses his desire "to reach beyond language and thought into wonder,"

to “express the inexpressible, and think the unthinkable” (Carey 125). More specifically, in *Songs and Sonets*, Donne developed a number of realistic speaking personas, “express[ed] an attitude with convincing realism and dramatic truth” (Leishman 147), explicitly incorporated desire into his love poetry, and crafted several poems that centered on mutual love.³⁸ In doing so, he consistently employed imagery that paradoxically demonstrated the enclosure and expansion of love, formally and thematically transgressing the poetic boundaries of his era.

Like Donne, EBB approaches the traditional sonnet form from a realistic point of view: centering on the very real desire of the female individual and female poet, EBB engages with the tangible struggle of the woman sonneteer to assert herself as subject while simultaneously functioning as object. In her monograph, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love* (1989), Glennis Stephenson posits that “Barrett Browning explores two major issues in her poems of and about love: the question of woman’s role in love relationships and the question of woman’s voice in love poetry” (3). In doing so, EBB articulates female desire, captures the essence of mutual love, and utilizes Donnean imagery through her exploration of the paradoxical fusion of earthly and heavenly as well as the enclosure and expansion of love. Neri contends that EBB embraces “her own expressionistic realism because she is attempting to experience and have faith in love, divine love, on earth, not after death” (62). Michael R.G. Spiller, in his book-length study on the sonnet sequence, also points to EBB’s use of “the transcendent to enhance the erotic and the physical” as well as her “inherited and powerful vocabulary of idealism and transcendence” that simultaneously grounds *Sonnets* in the earthly realm and elevates the poems to a higher existence (94-5). And Natalie M.

Houston points to the manner in which EBB's love poems "take up the question of closeness and distance, both emotional and physical" (109), further showing that EBB—like Donne—formally and thematically manipulates notions of spatiality to both expand and enclose contemporary understandings of love, particularly those of the nineteenth-century female poet. The parallels are clear, and the content of the individual sonnets further demonstrates the influence of Donne's poetry, particularly *Songs and Sonnets*.³⁹

Within the first sonnet of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the speaker identifies her struggle to assert the infinite power of love to conquer the tangible reality of death. Her doubt permeates Sonnet 2, which—like Sonnet 1—is dominated by images of "Death, darkness, and heaviness" (Elmore 99). Building from Sonnet 1, in which the speaker struggles between love and death, "recogni[zing] that she must at last attempt to speak not of death, but of love" (Elmore 99), the first nine lines of Sonnet 2 focus on death and its connection to God's power. The speaker, "weak, hesitant, and faltering" (Elmore 99), grapples with the power of God to separate the lovers, expressing powerlessness and defeat:

But only three in all God's universe
Have heard this word though hast said,—Himself, beside
Thee speaking, and me listening! and replied
One of us...*that* was God,...and laid the curse
So darkly on my eyelids, as to amerce
My sight from seeing thee,—that if I had died,
The deathweights, placed there, would have signified
Less absolute exclusion. "Nay" is worse

From God than from all others, O my friend! (2.1-9)

The speaker appears to surrender helplessly to the “curse” of separation between the lovers, a divine decree against which she is powerless. In his study of sublimity in EBB’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Jerome Mazzaro contends, “Deity’s opposing Nay, which furnishes the speaker’s first effort at dissuasion, is so absolute that even death could not make her feel more closed to the gentleman than she now feels” (297). The speaker appears to surrender to God’s pronouncement, acknowledging the power of divinity over that of human love.⁴⁰

A shift of tone takes place, however, in the tenth line of the sonnet. The speaker acknowledges the power of the lovers’ bond on earth:

Men could not part us with their worldly jars,
Nor the seas change us, nor the tempests bend;
Our hands would touch for all the mountain bars:
And, heaven being rolled between us at the end,
We should but vow the faster for the stars. (2.10-14)

Abruptly shifting from her previous feelings of powerlessness against divine will, the speaker “begins in assertiveness as she struggles to gain powers” (Elmore 99). A more confident speaking persona suddenly emerges, as the speaker realizes that she and her lover can withstand any degree of earthly separation. Using nautical and geographical images that express the world’s vastness, the speaker asserts that no physical barrier can prevent the lovers’ union: ultimately, then, the world becomes the lovers’ antithesis. The imagery is violent—“worldly jars,” “tempests,” “mountain bars”—and the speaker

realizes the lovers' ability to overcome this seemingly vast and violent antagonist through the power of their love.

The last five lines of Sonnet 2 rely on imagery and concepts of love's relationship to the larger world that parallel Donne's "The Good Morrow." In "The Good Morrow," the speaker—after questioning what he and his beloved did before they loved one another—discusses the power of their love in relation to the world around them. The speaker states:

For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room, an every where.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one. (10-14)

Spatially, the lovers are both contained and uncontainable, for their love "makes one little room, an every where." The "little room" of their love, then, becomes a microcosm for the world, about which the speaker expresses its vast nature through nautical and geographical imagery that EBB also incorporates in Sonnet 2. Typical of Donne's love poetry, a sense of "self-enclosedness and self-inclusiveness" emerges here, in which "love is life" (Leishman 216). According to the speaker, each lover both *has* and *is* the world—"each hath one, and is one"—but, together, they should "possess one world," for "Where can we find two better hemispheres / Without sharp north, without declining west?" (17-18). Together, the lovers *become* the world: they defy worldly limitations while simultaneously embodying a world through the mutual expression of their love. The speaker concludes, "What ever dies, was not mixed equally; / If our two loves be

one, or, thou and I / Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die” (19-21). Thus, the world that the lovers create is a perfect and equal mixture that enables them to defy the world’s ultimate limitation—death—through immortality.

Similar to Donne’s “The Good Morrow,” then, the speaker in Sonnet 2 employs imagery that centers on the vastness of the world as a means by which to prove the strength of love. It is important to note, however, that the speaker of Sonnet 2 demonstrates less confidence⁴¹ than the speaker of “The Good Morrow”: while the lovers in Sonnet 2 struggle against the world, the lovers in “The Good Morrow” possess and engulf the world; and while Donne’s speaker demonstrates a consistent growing confidence in the infinite and all-consuming power of human love, EBB’s speaker struggles against divine and earthly authority, shifting so abruptly toward a stance of confidence that one doubts its stability. Yet it is EBB’s incorporation of Donne’s imagery that first awakens the speaker to the possibilities of love within the sonnet sequence, enabling the “weak, hesitant, and faltering” female speaker to finally abandon her accepted poetic (and historical) position as object (Elmore 99)—even if only temporarily—and embrace her new poetic position as speaking subject. The speaker’s incorporation of Donnean imagery is synonymous with her initial assertion of power: like Donne’s speaker, the speaker in Sonnet 2 fully embraces a stance of confidence, no longer viewing the tangible obstacles around her as a threat to the relationship she and her lover foster. Furthermore, both poems end with the notion of immortality, for the speaker’s intimations of “heaven being rolled between us at the end” in Sonnet 2 imply a similar vein of triumph over death through love as that of “The Good Morrow”; the “end” extends beyond death toward the heavenly. Thus, while more than half of the lines in

Sonnet 2 center on the speaker's helplessness in combating God's decrees, the last line—like “The Good Morrow”—gestures toward the ability of human love to triumph over the earthly and the divine.

In addition to Sonnet 2, one of the most striking parallels between the poetry of Donne and EBB occur in EBB's Sonnet 22—the sonnet at the very center of the sequence—which invokes Donne's “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning.” Essentially, “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning”—a poem that critics unanimously attribute to Donne's real-life marriage to Ann More⁴²—focuses on the physical and spiritual union of the lovers, ending with the famous conceit of the twin compasses: in an effort to convince his beloved that the literal distance between them cannot hinder the union of their souls, the speaker claims,

If [our souls] be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two,
Thy soul the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th'other do.
And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home. (25-32)

Emphasizing the power of the lovers' souls to conquer the physical distance that may separate them, the speaker reasons with his beloved in order to preserve their union. According to John Freccero's groundbreaking analysis of the poem in his essay, “Donne's ‘Valediction: Forbidding Mourning’” (1963), the inextricable union of body and

soul, here, encapsulates the union between committed husband and wife: “In spite of their physical separation, they are still joined by the mind, the pivot of Love’s compass” (374). Thus, the compass image solidifies a conjugal union of minds and souls that transcends earthly limitations.

In addition to the evident use of this poem in the biographical epistolary correspondences between EBB and Browning, EBB’s opening lines in Sonnet 22 demonstrate Donne’s presence in her poetry:

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
Until the lengthening wings break into fire
At either curvèd point... (22.1-4)

Here, EBB uses the same words (like “erect”) and relies on the same imagery as Donne (like the presence of two souls). Emphasizing the union of two souls which, facing one another, continue to physically move closer, EBB grounds her exploration of spiritual union in the real, earthly realm. Stephenson adds, “These two souls are hardly ethereal beings; erect and strong, they convey a vigorous sense of a concrete presence” (87). Furthermore, EBB’s use of the word “drawing” again harkens the image of the compass, which literally draws a circle, for Donne’s speaker recalls: “Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end, where I begun” (35-6). Ultimately, EBB incorporates Donnean imagery in Sonnet 22 in order to unite the physical and the spiritual, the real and ideal. Like Donne’s speaker, the speaker in Sonnet 22 aims to demonstrate the strength of mutual love.

To further emphasize the power of mutual love, both poems express similar notions of love's growing (spatial) capacity. A parallel between EBB and Donne emerges in EBB's concept of "the lengthening wings break[ing] into fire," which emphasizes the lovers' simultaneous closeness and amplification. While their wings continue to stretch outward, the lovers become physically closer, thus encompassing a space that concurrently (and paradoxically) grows larger and smaller. In her discussion of EBB's revision of Petrarchism as a means by which to explore female subjectivity, Mary B. Moore adds that the ambiguous phrase, "At either curvèd point," "implies that the lovers' wing points are indistinguishable—it does not matter which of the points we observe; both curve. This ambiguity supports the fusion of dualisms that the poem enacts: spirit, matter, human, angel, man, and woman" (186). EBB's merging of dualities emulates Donne's characteristic obsession with joining the material and "otherworldly."

Donne's "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," then, demonstrates the same spatial paradox when the speaker argues that the two souls of the lovers "endure not yet / A breach, but an expansion, / Like gold to aery thinness beat" (22-4). This complex alchemical analogy centers on the purity and eternal glorification of the lovers (Freccero 362-72), for the distance does not separate but rather expands the depth and capacity of their love, which aspires to the otherworldly. This analogy captures the fusion of the spiritual and the material, of the alchemical and the human, of the earthly and the heavenly.⁴³ Thus, while both images evoke violence (EBB's "break into fire" and Donne's "gold to aery thinness beat"), each converts that violence into a positive source of power, ultimately emphasizing the expansive nature of the soul's capacity and the lovers' triumph over the limitations of duality.

Moreover, in its entirety, Sonnet 22 explores the possibilities of love within the realm of the earthly and heavenly, focusing on the literal and physical closeness of the lovers. The speaker states:

The angels would press on us and aspire
To drop some golden orb of perfect song
Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
Rather on earth, Belovèd,—where the unfit
Contrarious moods of men recoil away
And isolate pure spirits (22.7-12)

If the lovers inhabited the celestial realm, the angels would interfere, imposing a kind of superior perfection upon the perfectly imperfect relationship of the lovers. Consequently, the speaker suggests that the lovers remain on earth “where the unfit / Contrarious moods of men recoil away / And isolate pure spirits.” Thus, while the lovers exist as two “pure spirits” in direct contrast to the “Contrarious moods of men,” this disparity actually enables the lovers to remain superior, without the perfect demands of heavenly angels: on earth, the impure will “recoil away” and the lovers’ “pure” world of perfection will become heavenly. Moore adds, “The idea of angelic desire on earth, the liminal state between matter and spirit, the way wings become erogenous all show Barrett Browning making an idea of erotic love that rejects neither body nor mind, neither senses nor spirit. This moment truly enacts a logic of ‘both-and,’ an inclusive metaphysics that revalues the worth of both lovers and bodies” (187). Once again, EBB emulates Donne’s characteristic and paradoxical effort to simultaneously embody both the temporal and ethereal by utilizing materiality to grasp the essence of the eternal. The speaker of

Donne's "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" points to a similar elevation of the lovers' intimate bond:

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love, so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss. (13-20)

Unlike the "Dull sublunary" lovers, who are too weak to endure physical separation "because it doth remove / Those things which elemented it," the speaker and his beloved have a "love, so much refined" which enables them to "Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss," thus transcending the limitations of the physical body. Their love supersedes the realm of the carnal: grounded not in a physical (lust-based) relationship that must "see" to "believe," the lovers foster a meaningful union based on an inextricable union of souls.

Ultimately, in both poems, the superior nature of love enables each speaker to assert that the literal location to which each couple is rendered (for Donne, physically separated; for EBB, on earth) does not injure love but rather expands its capacity. Each poet centers on the very real power of human desire, which transcends bodily limitation, to conquer the earthly realm. Through EBB's employment of Donnean imagery, the speaker of Sonnet 22 is transformed from the weak and helpless persona of Sonnet 2 into

a confident and empowered woman. Mazzaro argues, “No longer, it appears, is it deity but the world and her family who pose obstacles (‘bitter wrongs’) to which their spirits—so long as they do not presume on heaven—are more than a match” (301). The speaker’s security in her own desire as well as in the power of mutual love is inextricably linked to Donne: her sense of self is firmly anchored in the images, themes, and imitation of a self-assertive speaking persona that Donne consistently presents in his poems of mutual love.

In EBB’s Sonnet 24, the speaker’s confident proclamations regarding love’s superiority and expansion continue to echo Donne’s poetic sentiments, closely corresponding to Donne’s “The Sun Rising.” In “The Sun Rising,” a poem that develops the more serious and tender “theme of the all-sufficiency of two lovers” despite the speaker’s playful, audacious tone (Leishman 189), the speaker begins by cursing the sun for disturbing the lovers, declaring, “Why dost thou thus, / Through windows, and through curtains call on us? / Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run?” (2-4). In addition to the speaker’s apparent aggravation, his references to the sun as a “Busy old fool” and a “Saucy pedantic wretch” paint a negative image of the sun (1; 5), pitting the lovers against their natural surroundings, as EBB does in many of her sonnets. Like the speaker of “The Good Morrow,” the speaker of “The Sun Rising” then posits that the room in which he and his lover reside is a microcosm for the world, for he and his lover are superior to everything without, deeming that which is within “the world” itself. The speaker asserts,

Thou sun art half as happy as we,
In that the world’s contracted thus;
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be

To warm the world, that's done in warming us.

Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;

This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere. (25-30)

Thus, the world is contained within the lovers' room, and the love that they share is the very core of existence. Alienated from their literal surroundings—from “Late school-boys” (6), “court-huntsmen” (7), “country ants” (8)—the lovers create a world of love upon which the speaker now demands that the sun shine. It is through this separation from the literal world that the speaker defines the strength of love: in contrast to the demands of daily life, “Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime, / Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time” (9-10). Love—timeless, beyond worldly containment or classification—prevails over all that exists outside the lovers' room.

Like the speaker in “The Sun Rising,” the speaker of Sonnet 24 begins by defining the world in harsh terms, comparing its “sharpness” to “a clasping knife” (1). In addition, the lovers in Sonnet 24 are distinctly separated from the harsh, violent outside realm, full of “human strife” (4), for the speaker states:

Let the world's sharpness, like a clasping knife,

Shut in upon itself and do no harm

In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm,

And let us hear no sound of human strife

After the click of the shutting. (24.1-5)

Contrasting the “soft and warm” realm of Love with the “sharp” and dangerous world around them, the speaker—like the speaker of “The Sun Rising”—immediately invokes an image of containment to emphasize the superior nature and invincibility of mutual

love. In Sonnet 24, the speaker encloses both the dangerous world and the space of the lovers, which allows the couple's love to expand even within a contained space, much like the cloistered lovers in "The Sun Rising." While the "world's sharpness" closes "in upon itself" so that "no sound of human strife" can disturb the lovers, the lovers inhabit a realm of safety in the "close hand of Love," distinctly separate from the daily activity (in this case, violent and conflicted) of the now contained world.⁴⁴ "[L]ove itself" becomes "the shelter in which they are both subsumed" (Stephenson 79). The lovers, protected from their literal surroundings, realize the superiority of love. The speaker claims,

I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm,
And feel as safe as guarded by a charm
Against the stab of worldlings, who if rife
Are weak to injure. Very whitely still
The lilies of our lives may reassure
Their blossoms from their roots, accessible
Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer,
Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill. (24.6-13)

Using imagery of expansion and enclosure, the speaker realizes that the lovers have the potential to surpass earthly constraints. Enclosed within the hand of love and separate from the contained world of harm, the couple's love remains pure and literally untouchable. Their love, white lilies firmly rooted in earthly soil, expands exclusively—"accessible / Alone"—toward "heavenly dews." Growing "straight, out of man's reach," their mutual devotion is subject to the will of no one but the other and God. Like "The Sun Rising," then, the surrounding world is merely an inferior distraction that must

remain separate from pure love that exists within the simultaneously contained and expanding realm of the lovers. Within this realm, the lovers in “The Sun Rising” contain the entire world, proving that nothing outside those walls matters, “Nothing else is” (22); and the lovers in Sonnet 24 discover a safe place to foster their love, thus striving for the “heavenly dews” to which they alone are privileged. Ultimately, both Donne and EBB explore the depths of love and its connection to—or rather, separation from—all that is earthly and thus spatially and mortally limited.

In EBB’s Sonnet 41, which is near the end of the sonnet sequence, EBB invokes Donne once again, drawing on the imagery and sentiments of Donne’s “The Canonization.” In “The Canonization,” the speaker—relying heavily on religious language and imagery⁴⁵—emphasizes the lovers’ ability to transcend mortal limits and achieve immortality as legendary figures of love. Even after the lovers succumb to earthly death, the speaker confidently asserts that their love will become immortal:

And if unfit for tombs and hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
As well a well wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve
Us canonized for love:

And thus invoke us; “You whom reverend love

Made one another's hermitage;
You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove
 Into the glasses of your eyes
 (So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to you epitomize,
Countries, towns, courts: beg from above
A pattern of your love!" (29-45)

The speaker argues that the "legend" of their love, "fit for verse," can be contained, preserved, and passed on to future generations in the form of "sonnets." Through these sonnets, the world will "canonize" and thus elevate the lovers' love as divine, superior, and exemplary. In his article on sacerdotalism in "The Canonization," Albert C. Labriola states: "As they mediate between earth and heaven and beseech the saints above on behalf of the laity below, the speaker and his beloved in Donne's poem execute their ministry of sacerdotalism, serving as exemplars of holiness on earth and as aspirants to sainthood in heaven" (119). Fostering a love that transgresses earthly boundaries yet must be contained as a superior example of divine love in order to guide future generations, the speaker employs images of "self-enclosedness and self-inclusiveness" in order to describe the power of mutual love (Leishman 216). Moreover, the speaker argues that—after the lovers die—those on earth will "invoke" their memory, praising the couple "whom reverend love / Made one another's hermitage" and "Who did the whole world's soul contract" through the simultaneous expansion and enclosure of their love. Once again, the lovers in "The Canonization" transgress and consume the world: "love is

life” (Leishman 216), and the speaker argues that their embodiment of true love will breathe life into future generations by providing a perfect “pattern” of love.

In Sonnet 41, the speaker also centers on the legacy of her love relationship, using the backdrop of the surrounding world to emphasize the immortal power of the lovers’ love:

I thank all who have loved me in their hearts,
With thanks and love from mine. Deep thanks to all
Who paused a little near the prison-wall
To hear my music in its louder parts
Ere they went onward, each one to the mart’s
Or temple’s occupation, beyond call.
But thou, who, in my voice’s sink and fall
When the sob took it, thy divinest Art’s
Own instrument didst drop down at thy foot
To hearken what I said between my tears, ... (41.1-10)

While the speaker acknowledges the affection that others have bestowed upon her, she classifies this love as transient (“they went onward”). The love that the speaker has shared with others, one that is divided by a “prison-wall,” is juxtaposed to the deep, divine love that she shares with her lover. Metaphorically equating her voice—overcome with sadness—to music, the speaker claims that her lover is the only one who is able to penetrate “the prison-wall” by truly listening to the subtle nuances of her song. The lover places his “divinest Art’s / Own instrument” at his feet, silencing his own voice to fulfill the speaker’s desperate need to be heard “between [her] tears.” Similar to “The

Canonization,” in which the speaker notes that “Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still / Litigious men, which quarrels move, / Though she and I do love” (16-18), those in Sonnet 41 pay little attention to the speaker, quickly passing her by to fulfill their earthly duties—“each one to the mart’s / Or temple’s occupation.” And despite the daily activity that bustles around them, the lovers in both poems foster a relationship that surpasses earthly limitation.

Like the speaker in “The Canonization,” the speaker in Sonnet 41 also defines her love relationship as immortal:

Instruct me how to thank thee! Oh, to shoot
My soul’s full meaning into future years,
That *they* should lend it utterance, and salute
Love that endures, from Life that disappears! (41.11-14)

Expressing her desire to somehow contain her “soul’s full meaning” so that others may view it as superior, enduring, and exemplary, the speaker echoes “The Canonization” in her hope that future generations will ponder the lovers’ reciprocal love and “lend it utterance.” While, once again, the speaker in Sonnet 41 is less audacious than Donne’s speaker, she is confident that the spirit of her love will live on forever. Stephenson adds, “only the spiritual essence of their love will remain,” which “is exactly what [EBB] achieves in writing the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*” (88). The speaker’s sentiments at the close of Sonnet 41 not only foreshadow the manner in which *Sonnets from the Portuguese* provides an immortal record of the “full meaning” of the speaker’s soul (arguably synonymous with that of EBB) but also executes Donne’s speaker’s wish in

“The Canonization” by literally “build[ing] in sonnets pretty rooms” the legacy of mutual love.

The Female Redactor: EBB’s Gendered Revision of the Sonnet

It is evident, then, that Donne’s concepts of mutual love, realistic portrayal of desire, and imagery of enclosure of expansion inspired EBB during the composition of her own intimate sonnet sequence; yet Donne’s influence over EBB’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* extends beyond his capacity to provide a deep, innovative poetic means of expressing romantic feelings. While critics have long discussed EBB’s revision of the Petrarchan sonnet in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*,⁴⁶ none have acknowledged the manner in which EBB’s experimental revision of poetic form parallels that of Donne. Although differences in gender and cultural circumstance lead Donne and EBB to craft unique poetic products of revision, both poets attempt to expand poetic form and content by revising the limiting strictures and accepted definitions of conventional love poetry.

More specifically, Donne’s imagery of enclosure and expansion provides a new critical lens through which to interpret EBB’s gendered revision, for EBB also experiments with the enclosure and expansion of the sonnet *form*, not just its amorous content. By working within the enclosed sonnet form, which is typically reserved for both the male poet and the male subject, EBB aims to prove her legitimacy as a female poet. Moreover, EBB expands—and explodes—the sonnet form by recasting the silenced, idealized female object of affection as a real, desiring female subject with a cohesive voice. Thus, while Donne’s *Songs and Sonets* explicitly rejects formal poetic conventions and serves as a multi-voiced and somewhat haphazard collection of poems, his consistent themes of expansion and enclosure underpin EBB’s construction of a

strong, female authorial identity that—much like her predecessor—aims to puncture a rigid patriarchal (poetic) tradition.

As EBB's poetic inspiration, Donne's formal and thematic experimentation in his love lyrics in the 16th and 17th centuries sets a bold precedent for the revision of love poetry. In *Songs and Sonets*, for example, "there is not a single sonnet of the usual variety in the group [. . .], and there are only two songs: 'Go and catch a falling star' and 'Sweetest love, I do not go,' neither of which falls into the usual form of the song, iambic tetrameter quatrains, rhyming a b a b or, at times, a a b b" (Shawcross 136). With his blatant disregard for the traditional poetic principles of rhyme, meter, and form, Donne explicitly mocked the strict rules of formal poetic composition in *Songs and Sonets*. Moreover, Leishman argues that, at least in the "more outrageous" poems in *Songs and Sonets*, Donne was "displaying his wit, maintaining [. . .] the most outrageous paradoxes; cocking snooks at the Petrarchan adoration and Platonic idealism of Spenser and the Sonneteers, flouting conventions which he and many of his contemporaries felt to have lasted too long" (148). With the aim of revising—and expanding—the poetic tradition, then, Donne boldly dismisses convention in favor of more complex, witty, and realistic content.

As a volume, Donne's *Songs and Sonets* is a collection of inconsistent and varied love lyrics that defy definition⁴⁷: an assortment of tones, styles, forms, personas, and perspectives on love, Donne's love poems transgress the poetic boundaries of his time in an attempt to explode (or expand) convention and redefine—and thus contain—the very real, complex, and various concepts of love and desire. Leishman notes, "while certain qualities of style are shared in varying degrees by them all, these qualities are combined

in different poems with very different degrees of seriousness. While, that is to say, all the poems are characteristic expressions of Donne's wit, they cannot all be regarded as characteristic expressions of his actual feelings, values, convictions and ideals" (145). *Songs and Sonets* continues to defy any predictable system of dating, arrangement, theme, or style; joined only by his sharp wit and explicit distaste for poetic tradition, Donne's *Songs and Sonets* is a multi-voiced, multi-layered miscellany that successfully expands traditional understandings of poetry by refusing to be enclosed within any predetermined poetic space.

While EBB's revision of the sonnet form may seem less assertive than that of Donne⁴⁸, she also attempts to expand poetic definitions of love through her blatant exploration of real and imperfect female desire. By incorporating Donne's themes of desire and realism as well as subtly revising Petrarchan sonnet conventions, she ultimately employs the thematic notions of simultaneous expansion and enclosure to represent the complex poetic place of woman as desiring subject and desired object. In some ways, then, her revision of the sonnet form may even be considered *more* daring than that of her male predecessor, for although both poets attempt to create some sense of distance between poet and speaker—between “fact” and “fiction”—EBB takes the greater risk of producing a collection that parallels her own intimate personal experiences: the thinly veiled title, the similarities between her actual courtship and the love relationship that develops within the poems, and her bold decision to craft a cohesive, consistent, and realistic female voice through the sonnet sequence allow readers to more easily conflate the speaker with EBB herself.⁴⁹ Thus, through *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, EBB not

only dares to reveal herself as a serious female poet but also risks being identified as the real, humble, and desiring voice of the female speaker.

In *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, EBB uses the enclosed Petrarchan sonnet form in order to establish a poetic place for herself within the patriarchal literary tradition. The Petrarchan sonnet, which traditionally emphasizes male poetic genius not only through the poet's mastery of a difficult and rigid form but also through the complex development of the male subject,⁵⁰ consists of fourteen lines, divided into an octave and a sestet, and contains a "fixed meter" and an "intricate rhyme scheme" (Remoortel 250). By demonstrating her mastery of the classic Petrarchan sonnet form, which explicitly centers on the male poet—a desiring yet unrequited male lover in pursuit of the ideal, distant woman—EBB conveys her intentions to establish herself as a real, legitimate, and skilled *female* poet. Mermin posits that, in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, EBB "wants to find a place within the tradition for modern poems, and especially for female poets—not to mark how far outside it she is. Nor can she mock the sonnet tradition from within as Shakespeare and Sidney could, since she wants to assert her right to use it at all" ("Embarrassed Reader" 364).

In her essay on EBB's gendered revision of the Petrarchan sonnet, Marianne Van Remoortel also remarks, "the sonnet's rich legacy gave her something even more valuable if her ambition was to compete with her male colleagues: a platform on which she could build her version of the sonnet's microcosm" (260). In order to fulfill her childhood aspirations of becoming Homer's "female counterpart—the first and greatest of women poets" (Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 11), EBB uses the enclosed sonnet form, which enables her not only to demonstrate her poetic mastery of patriarchal

literary conventions⁵¹ but also to enter into the exclusive (and enclosed) realm of the patriarchal literary *tradition*—a tradition that she immediately aims to revise. In the absence of any established female literary tradition, EBB must engage with established male poets and existing patriarchal conventions in order to become a publicly recognized—and legitimately visible—poet.

Although EBB uses the enclosed form of the Petrarchan sonnet, she also follows in Donne’s revisionary footsteps by subtly manipulating—and thus expanding—conventional understandings of poetic form. One of the most crucial (gendered) revisions that EBB makes to the Petrarchan sonnet in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is her placement of a woman in the position of speaker. Traditionally, “What should happen in the sonnet sequence, what does happen in Petrarch, in Spenser and, give or take a mysterious young man, in Shakespeare, is that the male poet speaks as the feeling subject, and the female beloved just is, as the silent object. Man does, woman is” (Reynolds 58). Straying from the Petrarchan example of love, then, in which the male poet is the “/I/ of the sequence” and the female is the adored mistress, “an external and magnetizing Other” (Spiller 79), EBB not only gives voice to the objectified female but also writes her entire collection from the perspective of a woman. The female speaker of *Sonnets* is the “/I/ of the sequence” and the “Belovèd” to whom she writes is her male partner. In her book-length study of the life and works of EBB, Dorothy Mermin adds, “Barrett Browning transforms the Renaissance sonnet sequence [. . .] by having a woman as speaker: a woman, furthermore, who does not just respond [. . .] to a male voice, filling the space left by its absence and telling the other side of the story. She takes the male poet’s place too” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 130). By converting the conventional

female object into a poetic speaking subject, EBB not only provides the female with a literal voice but also places her in a position of authority, both as a female and a poet.

Moreover, in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the speaker acknowledges the emotional and physical qualities of her gender, making explicit the female's role as poet-lover. In Sonnet 13, she states: "Nay, let the silence of my womanhood / Commend my woman-love to thy belief" (13.9-10), distinguishing her own means of loving from that of the male poet. EBB's placement of the female in the position of speaker, however, does not simply relegate the male to the inferior position of silent object. Mermin contends, "This is not a reversal of roles, but a doubling of them. There are *two* poets in the poem, and *two* poets' beloveds, and its project is the utopian one of replacing hierarchy by equality" (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 130). While she is the desiring subject who engages with her beloved, she is simultaneously the object of his affection; she is both the giver and the receiver of love—"What can I give thee back, O liberal / And princely giver" (8.1-2)—who expresses poetically a female voice in dialogue with a male partner. Thus, by placing the woman in the role of object, poet, and speaker, EBB explodes the conventional notion of the silent, abstract female within the enclosed form of the sonnet; moreover, the complex multiplicity of the female voice as both subject and object satirizes the one-dimensional subjectivity of the male poet in the traditional Petrarchan sonnet. The female speaker does not merely replace the traditional male poet as speaking subject but actually doubles her role, simultaneously speaking as desiring subject and desired object.

Further revising the limited role of the female in the traditional Petrarchan sonnet, EBB, like Donne, replaces traditional poetic distance with reality—with "a real feeling

for the actual” and “ a reverence for the ultimate clean simplicity of human needs” (Skelton 209). Facing the challenge of co-existing as “the traditionally humble lover and as the object of desire whose beauty is a necessary premise of the sonnet sequence” (Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 131), EBB locates the female-as-object-of-desire within the real rather than ideal realm. The speaker of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* exposes her vulnerability as the simultaneous poet and beloved. She describes herself: “Cheeks as pale / As these you see, and trembling knees that fail / To bear the burden of a heavy heart” (11.2-4); “My day of youth went yesterday; / My hair no longer bounds to my foot’s glee” (18.5-6); “this mask of me / (Against which years have beat thus blanchingly / With their rains)” (39.2-4); “I, long tried / By natural ills” (42.7-8). Throughout the entire sequence the speaker refers to her human faults and frailties, actualizing rather than idealizing the female-as-object-of-desire. At the same time that the speaker’s realistic description provides a less “objectifiable” objectified woman, it also empowers the speaker as active female agent: the speaker’s humble and critical representation of self classifies her as “desiring subject,” for “She soon realizes [. . .] that her desire is the source of her own attractiveness” (Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 133). Because EBB’s gesture of lowering the expectations of the female-as-object-of-desire corresponds to the elevation of woman-as-subject, she successfully demonstrates the possibility of the poetic representation of mutual love.⁵²

Consequently, EBB’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* constructs a cohesive and autonomous female voice that realistically defines the female’s engagement with intimate feelings of love and desire. Mermin comments, “When the speaker looks at herself in the mirror that traditional love poetry holds up to either men or women, she is apologetic and

we are embarrassed. But when she expresses desire, she finds strong new images and a new poetic voice, sensuous, witty, and tender” (“Embarrassed Reader” 356). Just as “the woman who speaks [in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*] actually emerges as a strong and active lover” (Stephenson 70), so too does EBB emerge as a distinctly female poetic presence. By expanding the sonnet form in order to demonstrate the manner in which it can contain the amorous emotions of a speaking female subject, EBB also attempts to establish her own poetic identity as a mid-Victorian female poet. In the absence of any female literary tradition, EBB utilizes the male tradition to establish for herself some sense of authorial presence. In a letter to Henry Chorley (7 January 1845), “a distinguished critic of music and mainstay of the *Athenaeum*” who corresponded with EBB (Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 76), EBB decries,

England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages, in Elizabeth’s time and afterwards—women of deeper acquirements than are common now in the greater diffusion of letters; and yet where were the poetesses? The divine breath which seemed to come and go, and, ere it went, filled the land with that crowd of true poets whom we call the old dramatists—why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers! (Kenyon 231-32)

Having written this letter during the time when she was composing *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, EBB expresses her frustration at the lack of any female literary tradition.

Although she acknowledges her “reverent love” for the male poets—including Petrarch and Donne—that precede her, she also laments the absence of any female influence, of any “grandmothers” to whom she can turn for poetic inspiration.

Inspired by Donne, EBB engages with her “grandfathers” in order to revise the sonnet form, the silenced poetic female object, and the patriarchal literary tradition that excludes the empowered voices of “grandmothers.” Stephenson adds, “her major contribution towards the formation of a female tradition lies in her attempts to adapt the conventional forms and situations used by her male predecessors and her female contemporaries, and in her efforts to provide the woman, previously confined to the role of the silent beloved, with a strong and passionate voice” (3). Enclosing her own poetic rebellion within the space of the sonnet, EBB attempts to expand its borders by empowering the female subject and laying the foundation of a female literary tradition. Through the power of her own poetic voice, EBB ultimately becomes a “grandmother” for future generations: in the words of Donne, she “build[s] in sonnets pretty rooms” with the intention that “all shall approve/ [her] canonized” within an expanded literary tradition (“The Canonization” 32; 35-36).

Chapter Three

“I want to serve two masters”: Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Revision of Producer, Consumer, and Self in *The Doctor’s Wife*

In her eighth novel, *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864), Mary Elizabeth Braddon takes on the role of female redactor, engaging in the process of revision on several levels. Firstly, Braddon borrows and revises the plot of Gustav Flaubert’s scandalous novel, *Madame Bovary* (1857). In her letters to her friend and mentor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon addresses her overt revision of Flaubert’s text, stating: “The idea of the Doctor’s Wife is founded on ‘Madame Bovary’ the style of which book struck me immensely in spite of it’s [sic] hideous immorality” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 22). Similar to *Madame Bovary*,⁵³ *The Doctor’s Wife* centers on a bored, novel-obsessed housewife who—while married to a rather boring, oblivious doctor—falls in love with an egotistical author; however, Braddon, unlike Flaubert, eliminates virtually all opportunities for explicit desire, sexual intrigue, and scandal, instead crafting a more serious, high culture novel⁵⁴ and saturating the text with her extensive knowledge of the patriarchal literary tradition with its capstone texts and authors. Robert Lee Wolff, Braddon’s biographer, asserts that Braddon “primarily intended [*The Doctor’s Wife*] as an anglified *Bovary*, a novel of character rather than a novel of sensation, although there was a murder in it” (*Sensational Victorian* 162). Thus, on one level, *The Doctor’s Wife* serves as an explicit revision of Flaubert’s scandalous novel in which Braddon abandons the plot-driven template of

lowbrow sensation fiction in favor of a character-driven novel that promotes a literary, didactic, and highbrow aesthetic.

In crafting a more highbrow novel, Braddon also engages in another far more personal level of revision, as she attempts to supersede her reputation as “the undisputed queen of Victorian sensation fiction and the circulating library” (Golden, “Censoring Her Sensationalism” 29). Desperate to break free from her popular role as a one-dimensional sensation author, Braddon, in her letters to Bulwer-Lytton, constantly laments the manner in which the mass production of her sensation novels dictates both the quality and quantity of the texts she must compose. She notes, “The ‘behind the scenes’ of literature has in a manner demoralised me. I have learnt to look at everything in a mercantile sense, & to write solely for the circulating library reader, whose palette [*sic*] requires strong meat, & is not very particular as to the quality thereof” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 14).

Consequently, it is in her composition of *The Doctor’s Wife* that Braddon makes her first substantial attempt to ignore the demands of the literary market and instead achieve her personal goal of composing a highbrow novel, or—in her own words—“to devote all my thoughts to a novel I *mean* to write when free of present engagements” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 18). Ignoring the practical demands of production and consumption—the “curse of serial writing & hand to mouth composition” that normally dictates Braddon’s rapid penning of sensation novels (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 10)—Braddon admits that she constructs *The Doctor’s Wife* carefully, with the aim of producing a more aesthetically polished novel. Braddon informs Bulwer-Lytton, “I have done my best with *this* book, & the writing of it has been a labour of love. I know how

infinitely it falls short of what I wanted it to be; how infinitely full of faults it must appear to *you*; but such as it is I submit it to you in all humility as the most conscientious work I have done” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 22). In transgressing the familiar boundaries of literary genre and abandoning her infamous role as “the founder of the sensation novel” (Henry James qtd. in Phegley 114), Braddon acknowledges the possible repercussions of her actions, confiding in Bulwer-Lytton: “I am especially anxious about this novel; as it seems to me a kind of turning point in my life, on the issue of which it must depend whether I sink or swim” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 25). Fully aware of her critically established reputation as a sensation novelist, Braddon realizes that her attempts—particularly as a female author—to revise her literary persona through the construction *The Doctor’s Wife* may lead to critical resistance and public humiliation.

In addition to revising both the content of Flaubert’s novel and her personal reputation,

Braddon engages in another level of redaction within *The Doctor’s Wife*, one that is far more subtle, complex, and subversive—the revision of cultural understandings of production and consumption that personally impact her as both a sensation author and a female reader. It is this particular level of revision, which is inextricably linked to her first two revisionary goals, on which I plan to focus in this chapter. As an author, Braddon capitalizes on the industry of mass production, asserting herself as a popular sensation author and acquiring financial independence (Wolff, *Sensational Victorian* 134-35); however, in order to maintain her successful status, Braddon also constantly succumbs to the demands of the industry, which limit her creative freedom and require her to produce novels at a rapid—and consequently haphazard—pace. Braddon argues,

“I go on grinding & grinding until I feel as if there was nothing left in me but the stalest & most hacknied [*sic*] of ideas” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 14). Torn between her artistic aspirations and the pragmatic benefits of her career as a sensation author, Braddon writes to Bulwer-Lytton in May of 1863, “I want to serve two masters. I want to be artistic & to please *you*. I want to be sensational, & to please Mudie’s subscribers. Are these two things possible, or is the stern scriptural dictum not to be got over, ‘Thou canst not serve God & Mammon.’ Can the sensational be elevated by art, & redeemed from all it’s [*sic*] coarseness” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 14).

Approximately one year later, Braddon attempts to “serve two masters” in her composition of *The Doctor’s Wife* through her subtle and subversive revision of the cultural understandings of textual production that establish a divide between critical readers and mass consumers as well as highbrow authors and lowbrow producers. In her monograph, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (1992), Ann Cvetkovich discusses the inextricable link between capitalism, mass production, and the lowbrow status of the sensation novel, thus clarifying the cultural distinctions made by Victorian critics between highbrow and lowbrow literature. Using Cvetkovich’s critical assertions about the sensation novel, I aim to distinguish the intellectual, sophisticated, and aesthetically informed critical reader from the lowbrow consumer—a member of the less educated mass public who both uncritically devours a text in a fashion “antithetical to traditional aesthetic values” and immediately “discard[s]” the text (Cvetkovich 19), incapable of assessing it on the basis of its moral, literary, or aesthetic value. Moreover, in opposition to the highbrow author, an “elite minority” that is concerned with the “[a]esthetic value” of the text (Cvetkovich 19, 18), the lowbrow

producer succumbs to the demands of an “industry concerned only with economic value” (Cvetkovich 18), focusing on the “market value” of the text and the base interests of the lowbrow consumer (18). Thus, while Braddon aspires to be recognized as a highbrow author, I argue that, in *The Doctor’s Wife*, she attempts to elevate—rather than abandon—her inextricable link to the textual realm of mass production through a revision of these cultural understandings of both consumer and producer. Under the guise of pleasing highbrow critics through the crafting of a more aesthetically polished novel, Braddon actually attempts to manipulate the literary industry of production by inverting the power dynamic and ultimately redefining the roles of textual producer and consumer. In other words, Braddon “serves to masters,” occupying dual roles of literary, highbrow author and subversive defender (and redactor) of lowbrow consumers and producers.

Thus, it is important to note that Braddon’s subtle revision of cultural understandings of production and consumption in *The Doctor’s Wife* serves as a crucial precursor to *Belgravia: A London Magazine*,⁵⁵ the literary publication of which she becomes editor in 1866. Critics such as Jennifer Phegley and Solveig C. Robinson outline and elaborate upon Braddon’s explicit editorial goals in *Belgravia*. In her chapter on Braddon within her monograph, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader* (2004), Phegley asserts, “Braddon created a family literary magazine that would attract a broad middle-class audience, advance her career, and keep her at the forefront of the critical controversy surrounding sensation fiction as she sought to redefine the terms of the Victorian debate over the valuation of literature and culture” (112). Phegley continues, “Braddon also managed to revise the genre of the family literary magazine in important ways that offered women more freedom and enjoyment in reading [. . .] by rejecting the

standards of critics and validating the public's taste for sensationalism" (112). Similarly, Robinson argues in "Editing *Belgravia*: M.E. Braddon's Defense of 'Light Literature'" (1995),

As editor of *Belgravia*, Braddon was able to create a critical forum that was friendly to such low-status popular literary forms as sensation fiction, and thus to reshape the critical discourse surrounding those forms. In addition, the editorship of *Belgravia* also provided Braddon with a "ladylike" platform for campaigning *against* contemporary critical practices that she disliked and *for* an alternative, less venomous and more inclusive, form of literary criticism. *Belgravia* thus represented an important opportunity for Braddon: it was a chance for her to elevate herself from the relatively lowly literary status of sensation novelist to the more exalted status of a woman of letters. (109)

Both authors gesture toward Braddon's explicit attempts to revise both her authorial reputation and the lowbrow status of the sensation novel as well as her attempts to elevate the reader, especially the female consumer.

What both Phegley and Robinson neglect to acknowledge either at length or *at all*⁵⁶, however, is that—two years prior to the publication of *Belgravia*—Braddon implicitly attempts to achieve these very goals through her subversive revisionary approach to *The Doctor's Wife*. By replacing Flaubert's overt use of sexuality with her focus on textuality, Braddon attempts to please literary critics while quietly critiquing them through her negotiation and revision of cultural understandings of production and consumption. In this chapter, I will examine the relationship between Isabel (Sleaford)

Gilbert, the lowbrow female consumer, and Roland Lansdell, the alleged highbrow male producer, as well as the role of lowbrow sensation author, Sigsumund Smith, in order to argue that Braddon's focus on textual consumption and production simultaneously enables her to create a "literary" novel and to revise and negotiate the demeaning and limiting stereotypes that define the consumer—particularly the woman reader—and sensation author. Thus, *The Doctor's Wife* provides a necessary and relevant foundation for her explicit goals in *Belgravia*, as Braddon utilizes the characters in *The Doctor's Wife* to subtly validate, empower, and reward both the female consumer and the sensation novelist.

“That will make a great pile of books”: The Textual Relationship between Female Consumer and Male Producer

From the moment that Isabel Sleaford is introduced in *The Doctor's Wife*, she epitomizes the naïve female consumer, voraciously devouring three volume novels and conflating the fictional world with tangible reality. Referring to Isabel's reading habits as “intellectual opium-eating” (Braddon 29), the narrator draws the connection between literal consumption, addiction, and reading practices, stating:

She had plenty of grievances in a small way, [. . .] but she was willing enough to do these things when once you had wrenched her away from her idolised books, and she carried her ideal world wherever she went, and was tending delirious Byron at Missolonghi, or standing by the deathbed of Napoleon the Great, while the shop-man slapped the butter on the scale, and the vulgar people hustled her before the greasy counter. (29)

Addicted to the habit of reading novels, Isabel spends every possible moment of her free time absorbed within the fictional worlds of her favorite books.

Moreover, Isabel allows the fictional world to literally encroach upon her reality: novels feed her imagination, thus dictating her desire for the dramatic life of a heroine. The narrator notes, “She walked up and down in the moonlight, and thought of all her dreams; and wondered when her life was going to begin. She was getting quite old; yes—she thought of it with a thrill of horror—she was nearly eighteen! Juliet was buried in the tomb of the Capulets before this age” (73). Thus, Isabel not only spends every possible moment reading novels but also allows the plots of the novels to dictate her concept of reality. In their monograph, *From Sensation to Society: Representations of Marriage in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (2006), Natalie and Ronald A. Schroeder argue that Isabel “has shaped her expectations of life around the romantic poetry and fiction that she avidly reads. A dreamer, she immerses herself in illusions of romance and measures the success and happiness of her life by the models of heroism she finds in fiction” (162). Isabel’s consumption of novels, then, goes beyond a literal obsession with reading or whimsical daydreaming: the novels quite literally consume her, for—in her mind—she becomes the heroine of a novel who “wanted the drama of her life to begin, and the hero to appear” (Braddon 73).

It is important to note that the narrator attributes Isabel’s misguided reading practices—her “intellectual opium-eating”—to a lack of education. The narrator states:

Miss Sleaford had received that half-and-half education which is popular with the poorer middle classes. She left the Albany-Road seminary in her sixteenth year, and set to work to educate herself by means of the nearest

circulating library. She did not feed upon garbage, but settled at once upon the highest blossoms in the flower-garden of fiction, and read her favourite novels over and over again. (27-28)

Ironically highlighting Isabel's ability to discern between "garbage" and "the highest blossoms in the flower-garden of fiction," the narrator solidifies the notion that Isabel's misguided consumption of novels results from her poor education. Living in an "ill-looking house"(17), which is "more or less dilapidated" (21), Isabel spends "the best part of her idle, useless life" in a "neglected garden" on the property (23). In her essay, "Fiction Becomes Her: Representations of Female Character in Mary Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*" (2000), Tabitha Sparks correlates Isabel's poor living conditions with her education: "The weedy garden here suggests a social critique of Isabel's idleness and her taste in reading materials, which threaten to sprout beyond the strictly tamed limits of respectable literature and thereby fertilize her incipient romantic impulses" (205).

Having lost her mother when she was only an infant, Isabel lives a miserable existence with her "shrewish" stepmother (Braddon 26), unruly half-brothers, and peculiar father, an alleged barrister (15). Such material conditions beyond Isabel's control propel her to transgress proper cultural boundaries of female readership in order to satiate her desire for textual consumption. Thus, Isabel embodies the misguided, naïve female reader: "If there had been any one to take this lonely girl in hand and organise her education, Heaven only knows what might have been made of her; but there was no friendly finger to point a pathway in the intellectual forest" (29).

From the outset, then, Braddon uses the character of Isabel-as-consumer to position herself within contemporary literary debates about female readers. In the

nineteenth century, the notion of the woman reader was a point of contention, especially within Victorian society. Both Kate Flint's monograph, *The Woman Reader* (1993) and Catherine J. Golden's monograph, *Images of the Woman Reader in British and American Fiction* (2006), explore the socio-historical—and controversial—position of the Victorian woman reader. With the democracy of print and the rise of the middle class⁵⁷, the concept of a common readership was permeated with anxiety. The woman reader was a particular concern, for reading was either a controlled activity that could increase her morality and education through the reading of proper literature, such as conduct books, or it was an unregulated habit that could physically damage her (due to her biological inferiority) or sexually corrupt her through the reading of improper sensation fiction (Golden 21-22). Because the nineteenth-century woman served as the maternal educator and a moral compass, society attempted to control female readership. Thus, Isabel becomes the vehicle by which Braddon—like other literary novelists⁵⁸—situates herself within the serious cultural debate about women's reading. Tabitha Sparks asserts, “the terrain of *The Doctor's Wife* proves to cultivate the same kind of ‘social problem’ narrative familiar to the works of Dickens, Gaskell, and George Eliot” (206). She continues, “Viewing Isabel's reading practice through the lens of social commentary less familiarly applied to Mary Braddon's novels than to those of the Victorian realists helps explain Isabel's propensity to misread, and puts her in the company of a heroine like Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*” (206). It seems apparent, then, that Braddon's revision of *Madame Bovary*, with an emphasis on textual consumption rather than sexual consumption, enables Braddon to craft a highbrow novel that enters the serious debate about female reading practices.

Isabel's questionable relationship with a squire named Roland Lansdell further emphasizes Braddon's focus on the female consumer and the concept of textual production. Despite her lukewarm feelings for her first suitor, a country doctor named George Gilbert, Isabel—captivated by “the first little bit of romance in her life” (87)—accepts George's marriage proposal and becomes his wife. Consequently, Isabel is immediately disappointed with the reality of the domestic life, which departs radically from the lives of the heroines of her favorite novels: “Her life was all settled. She was not to be a great poetess or an actress. [. . .] She was not to be any thing great. She was only to be a country surgeon's wife” (98). In order to cope with the boredom and disenchantment of married life, Isabel immerses herself within the fictional worlds of her beloved novels. One text in particular, a collection of poems by Roland Lansdell, entitled *An Alien's Dreams*, fascinates Isabel: “The Alien's dreams seemed like her own fancies, somehow; for they belonged to that bright *other* world which she was never to see” (120). For Isabel, Lansdell represents a highbrow poet and literary author—while in actuality he was no more than “a scribbler of hazy little verses” (141)—whose life and world are not only superior to her lowly existence as a doctor's wife but also synonymous with the life and world that Isabel reads about and hopes to one day experience.

Isabel's fascination with Lansdell emphasizes her role as naïve female consumer, demonstrating the manner in which Isabel mistakenly creates and inhabits an alternate reality as a result of her addictive habit of textual consumption. For example, a few months after her wedding, while visiting Warncliffe Castle—“the show-place of the county” (122)—with George for her birthday, Isabel meets Roland Lansdell in person and becomes overwhelmed with admiration: “To be introduced to a Being was

something, but to be introduced to a Being who was also a poet, and the very poet whose rhapsodies were her last and favourite idolatry!” (130). Isabel’s fascination with Lansdell is rooted in his power as highbrow author: she has finally met one of the great writers whose books consume her time, her mind, and ultimately her reality. This infatuation, however, extends beyond mere admiration; Lansdell *becomes* the embodiment of Isabel’s textual heroes, and he ultimately represents for her a text that she eagerly wants to consume. For Isabel, Roland “was the incarnation of all the dreams of her life; he was Byron alive again, and come home from Missolonghi. He was Napoleon the First, restored to the faithful soldiers who had never believed that fiction of perfidious England, the asserted death of the immortal hero. He was all this; he was a shadowy and divine creature, amenable to no earthly laws” (139). Lansdell literally becomes a text embodied, and—as with every novel she reads—Isabel becomes obsessed with “this grand and beautiful creature, who possessed in his own person all the attributes of her favorite heroes” (138).

Isabel’s idyllic vision of Lansdell, however, is completely divorced from reality. Far from the embodiment of either a highbrow author *or* a fictional hero brought to life, Roland Lansdell is actually a wealthy squire—“sole master of Lansdell Priory, one of the finest seats in Midlandshire” (Braddon 85)—but a “mediocre poet” at best (Golden, “Censoring” 36), who habitually wastes both his money and potential. The narrator states:

He had dropped out of public life altogether, and was only a drawing-room favourite; a loungeur in gay Continental cities; a drowsy idler in fair Grecian islands; a scribbler of hazy little verses about pretty women, and

veils, and fans, and daggers, and jealous husbands, and moonlit balconies, and withered orange-flowers, and poisoned chalices, and midnight revels, and despair; a beautiful useless, purposeless creature; a mark for manoeuvring mothers; a hero for sentimental young ladies,—altogether a mockery, a delusion, and a snare. (140-41)

A displaced squire who travels from place to place, merely “scribbling” poorly crafted verses in his spare time, Roland Lansdell is a passionate, fickle, and cynical man who is embittered by life and skeptical of his surroundings. He fears failure and thus consistently eludes success: “He picked his fruit before it was ripe, and was angry when he found it sour, and would hew down the tree that bore so badly, and plant another. His fairest projects fell to the ground, and he left them there to rot: while he went away somewhere else to build new schemes and make fresh failures” (143). Here, the narrator highlights Lansdell’s customary tendency to squander his talent and abandon any project that presents challenges, including the crafting of poetry; despite his potential as a poet, Lansdell composes mediocre lyrics about the injustice of his life and of the world.

Even Lansdell’s friend, Mr. Charles Raymond—“an author, a philosopher, a phrenologist, a metaphysician, writing grave books, and publishing them for the instruction of mankind” (67-68)—laments Lansdell’s wasted talent as he peruses *Alien’s Dreams*:

“To think that Roland Lansdell should write such stuff—such a clever young man as he is, too—such a generous-hearted, high-minded young fellow, who might be—” Mr. Raymond opened the volume in a very gingerly fashion, almost as if he expected something unpleasant might

crawl out of it, and looked in a sideways manner between the leaves, muttering the first line or so of a poem, and then skipping on to another, and giving utterance to every species of contemptuous ejaculation between whiles. (84)

To an educated reader, fellow author, and legitimate critic like Raymond, Lansdell is a talented man with the income to compose worthy poetry; yet Lansdell's current body of poetic work is ultimately a failure. Spoiled by wealth and entrenched in ennui, Lansdell's propensity toward cynicism and negativity stifles his ability to produce anything more than a collection of terrible poems concealed within a "neat little volume, bound in glistening green cloth, with uncut edges, and the gilt-letter title on the back of the volume" (84). Thus, while Lansdell embodies the highbrow literary author for Isabel—the author whose beautiful poems are "bound in glistening green cloth"—he is, in reality, as a misguided young squire who produces disappointing verses and fosters no credibility as author or critic within the literary world.

By juxtaposing Isabel's fantasy of Lansdell with the reality of his character, Braddon establishes a clear relationship between the naïve textual consumer and the mediocre textual producer⁵⁹ who performs the role of highbrow expert. After her initial encounter with Lansdell, Isabel spends most of her free time obsessively daydreaming about the author of *An Alien's Dreams*. Oblivious that her infatuation transgresses any marital boundaries, Isabel naively views Lansdell as the physical embodiment of author and text. Schroeder and Schroeder add, "In a very real sense, Isabel never saw Lansdell as a flesh-and-blood man but only as the embodiment of a dream" (184). That dream centers on Isabel's obsession with textual consumption and her desire to make the world

of fiction, produced by authors like Lansdell, her reality. For Isabel, “It was better than reading, to sit through all the length of a hot August afternoon thinking of Roland Lansdell. What romance had ever been written that was equal to this story; this perpetual fiction, with a real hero dominant in every chapter? There was a good deal of repetition in the book, perhaps; but Isabel was never aware of its monotony” (Braddon 183). Isabel literally envisions Lansdell as a text to be explored and consumed, even neglecting her regular visits to the circulating library in order to daydream about—and “read”—the embodied text of Roland Lansdell (183).

Braddon further emphasizes Isabel’s naïveté by establishing a relationship of textual—not sexual—exchange between the female consumer and “literary” producer. This “exchange,” initially resulting from a chance meeting at Thurston’s Crag, begins on “one never-to-be-forgotten day, which made a kind of chasm in [Isabel’s] life, dividing all the past from the present and the future” (158): Lansdell encounters Isabel, who is reading Shelley’s works and Lansdell’s infamous volume of poems, *An Alien’s Dreams*. As they exchange opinions about the Romantic poets, Braddon solidifies Isabel’s focus on textual consumption, for a bewildered Isabel muses, “He was there by her side, a real living hero and poet, and her weak sentimental little heart swelled with a romantic rapture” (160). Clinging to “the familiar green cover and beveled edges of the Alien” (158), Isabel views Lansdell as the physical embodiment of one of her favorite texts—the bodily representation of the ideal and superior world of her imagination. Devoid of sexuality, their initial exchange centers on a discussion of texts and Lansdell’s flirtation with a naïve and uneducated reader: “Mr. Lansdell was amused by Isabel’s talk; and he led her on very gently, till her shyness vanished, and she dared to look up at his face as

she spoke to him; and he attuned his own talk to the key of hers, and wandered with her in the Valhalla of her heroes, from Eugene Aram to Napoleon Buonaparte” (161). Revising his previous opinion that Isabel is nothing more than “a pretty automaton” (154), Lansdell recognizes Isabel’s creative—but misguided—potential as a reader. Moreover, their initial conversation, in which Lansdell deems Isabel’s insights “amusing” and adjusts “his own talk to the key of hers,” solidifies Lansdell’s superior position as textual consumer and producer.

Their second chance meeting at Thurston’s Crag further emphasizes the gap between uneducated consumer and sophisticated producer. The narrator states:

so [Roland] talked to this ignorant girl of books, and pictures, and foreign cities, and wonderful people, living and dead, of whom she had never heard before. He seemed to know every thing, Mrs. Gilbert thought. She felt as if she was before the wonderful gates of a new fairy-land, and Mr. Lansdell had the keys, and could open them for her at his will, and could lead her through the dim mysterious pathways into the beautiful region beyond. (184)

The narrator’s comment not only emphasizes the educational gap—based on book knowledge—between Lansdell and Isabel but also establishes the power dynamic that exists between them. To Isabel, Lansdell-as-producer is omnipotent, and—like the novels that she consumes—Lansdell exists in an ideal realm of the unknown, a world that Isabel desires to experience through the pages of novels and through the text of Lansdell himself. She listens intently to his life experiences, consuming and internalizing every word he speaks, just as she does with her three volume novels.

Furthermore, Lansdell is fully aware of his superiority as an educated gentleman, squire, and producer, thus making the decision to capitalize on his power by providing the critical expertise to guide “this poor little half-educated damsel” toward a more respectable understanding of literature (185). The narrator states:

Mr. Lansdell asked his companion a good many questions about her life at Graybridge, and the books she read. He found that her life was a very idle one, and that she was perpetually reading the same books,—the dear dilapidated volumes of popular novels that were to be had at every circulating-library. Poor little childish creature, who could wonder at her foolish sentimentality? Out of pure philanthropy Roland offered to lend her any of the books in his library. (184-85)

Manipulating his very real position as knowledgeable, sophisticated reader and imagined position as successful poet, Lansdell reinforces a textual relationship with Isabel by “offer[ing] to lend her any of the books in his library” and vowing to guide her toward new, more educated, and thus more fulfilling textual avenues.

Braddon establishes a clear parallel between textual and sexual exchange, making it evident that—while Isabel’s focus is on textuality—an undercurrent of sexual deprivation also exists. Lansdell’s observations about Isabel’s textual habits—“her life was a very idle one” in which “she was perpetually reading the same books”—echoes the monotony present in her married life with George Gilbert. Shortly after Isabel’s marriage, the narrator comments, “it was all over. She had sold her birthright for a vulgar mess of pottage. She had bartered all the chances of the future for a little relief to the monotony of the present,—for a few wedding-clothes, a card-case with a new name on

the cards contained in it, the brief distinction of being a bride” (110). Isabel views her marriage to George as a monotonous entrapment based on exchange—an institution similar to Lansdell’s opinions about the circulating library.⁶⁰ This parallel between textuality and sexuality allows for the discrepancy that begins to take place between Isabel and Lansdell; while Isabel’s attraction to Lansdell centers on his embodiment of the fictional heroes in the novels she reads, Lansdell’s attraction to Isabel initially centers on his superior position as critical reader and textual producer but eventually transforms into an unrequited romance.

As Lansdell begins to foster romantic feelings for Isabel, Braddon draws an explicit connection between Lansdell and the stereotypical depiction of lowbrow producers who succumb to the demands of an “industry concerned only with economic value” (Cvetkovich 18). Centering on the personal “market value” of the text and the base interests of Isabel, the lowbrow consumer, Lansdell—under the guise of improving Isabel’s ability to critically read with a focus on aesthetic value—continues to pursue her by manipulating both her love of texts and her erroneous admiration for the mediocre poet. Regularly visiting Thurston’s Crag—meetings that he claims “arose out of the purest chance” (Braddon 185)—Lansdell provides Isabel with new texts from his collection: ““That will make a great pile of books, but you need not read them laboriously; you can pick out the pages you like here and there, and we can talk about them afterwards”” (185). Manipulating the power structure that Lansdell as producer/mentor has established with Isabel as naïve and misguided female consumer, Lansdell reinforces—rather than corrects—Isabel’s haphazard reading habits, claiming that his conversation will supplement her reading. In other words, Lansdell tries to

solidify his role as aesthetic mentor by fostering a relationship of codependence in which he must constantly serve as the literal text that Isabel continues to read: “Mr. Lansdell had discovered this special fancy in his talk with the Doctor’s Wife, and he was pleased to let in the light of positive knowledge on her vague ideas of the chiefs of the Mountain and the martyrs of the Gironde” (185). As soon as Lansdell discovers the power he can enact by embodying the texts that Isabel desires to consume, he slowly attempts to transform Isabel’s love of his texts into a real romance based on physical and emotional love between Isabel and himself.

It is important to note, however, that throughout this process of textual exchange, Isabel remains ignorant of Lansdell’s intentions, captivated not by Lansdell in reality but rather by Lansdell-as-producer and Lansdell-as-text. Schroeder and Schroeder assert, “Isabel fantasizes about Lansdell with more freedom than she should and only dimly suspects that in so doing she fails to perform her proper duty to her husband” (175). In addition, “Through all their meetings, Isabel sustains her belief in her innocence, first by recognizing that any dream of a romantic liaison with Lansdell will never come true, and second, by ensuring that her dreams do not openly compromise her respectability. She constructs her fantasy from her reading” (Schroeder and Schroeder 175). Ultimately, it is Isabel’s inability to view Lansdell as anything other than an ideal author and the embodiment of a physical text that reinforces her innocence. When composing a letter to Lansdell, Isabel wonders, “In that sublime region in which Mr. Lansdell lived, there might be certain words and phrases that were indispensable,—there might be some arbitrary mode of expression, not to know which would argue yourself unknown. Isabel looked into *Dombey*, but there was no help for her there” (Braddon 164). In Isabel’s

mind, Lansdell literally resides in a different textual world—a world that Isabel, as mere consumer, can neither comprehend nor inhabit. When composing her letter, Isabel relies on her favorite Dickens novel as source material: she engages with the textual world that Lansdell both produces and inhabits in order to determine the proper means by which to communicate with the embodiment of textuality himself.

Ultimately, Lansdell becomes the means by which Isabel can access—and consume—innumerable texts, and he remains for her a remnant of textual fiction, resembling all the heroes about whom she reads and fantasizes. The narrator states: “Was it wrong to think of him? She never asked herself that question. She had read sentimental books all her life, and had been passionately in love with heroes in three volumes, ever since she could remember. What did it matter whether she was in love with Sir Reginald Glanville or Mr. Roland Lansdell?” (154). Because Lansdell is merely a fictional hero within Isabel’s mind, she genuinely believes that her feelings for him are a mere exercise of imagination rather than a violation of her marital vows. The “real” Lansdell does not exist for Isabel: “Did she think of him as what he was,—a young English gentleman, idle, rich, accomplished, and with no better light to guide his erratic wanderings than an uncertain glimmer which he called honour? Had she thought of him thus, she would have been surely wiser than to give him so large a place in her mind, or any place at all. But she never thought of him in this way” (139). Isabel’s idyllic vision of Lansdell, albeit fabricated and improbable, *becomes* her reality: Lansdell is nothing more than the embodiment of a fictional hero—a living, breathing novel onto which she can project her imagination and unabashedly consume.

Braddon further emphasizes this juxtaposition between Isabel's naïveté and Lansdell's textual manipulation through the introduction of a lowbrow sensation author and minor character in the novel, Sigismund Smith. Smith, who happens to be Isabel's dear friend and Lansdell's childhood companion, is a rambling, energetic, and one-dimensional character who is obsessed with producing as many formulaic sensation novels as possible, thus embodying every negative assumption about the popular sensation novelist. First introduced to the reader as "A pale-faced young man, with a smudge of ink upon the end of his nose, and very dirty wrist-bands" (10), Smith—filthy and unrefined in appearance—literally wears his work, and his constant chatter about his sensational "penny numbers" that please the masses emphasizes his association with low culture. The narrator reports: "Sigismund only drew breath once, and then he paused to make frantic gashes at his shirt-collar with an inky bone paper-knife that lay upon the table. 'I'm only trying whether a man would cut his throat from right to left, or left to right,' [...]; 'it's as well to be true to nature; or as true as one can be, for a pound a page;—double-column pages, and eighty-one lines in a column'" (12). Smith's halfhearted effort to capture the reality of murder is a direct reflection of how much money he makes; for Smith, creating novels is not about aesthetics, morality, or even honesty; it is about the market value of the text and the base interests of the lowbrow consumer. Smith reasons, "Why, you see, when you're doing four great stories a week for a public that must have a continuous flow of incident, you can't be quite as original as a strict sense of honour might prompt you to be; and the next best thing you can do if you haven't got ideas of your own, is to steal other people's ideas in an impartial manner"

(45). Smith pitifully defends his lack of integrity, arguing that his obsession with crafting as many novels as possible is a rightful excuse for “minor” forms of plagiarism.

Smith’s obsession with quickly producing novels reduces his character to an absurd caricature that constantly imagines the actual people, places, and events around him as potential elements of his next work of fiction. Focused solely on crafting scandalous novels that excite the audience, Smith constantly studies his surroundings in an effort to turn everything from ordinary situations to his friends’ personal hardships into a narrative formula for success. Like Isabel, Smith is so consumed by texts that he actually begins to embody them, for the narrator conflates the man and his work: “Sigismund had never in his life presented himself before the public in a complete form; he appeared in weekly numbers at a penny, and was always so appearing; [. . .] except on one occasion when he found himself, very greasy and dog’s-eared at the edges, and not exactly pleasant to the sense of smell,—on the shelf of a humble librarian and news vendor” (11). Smith literally becomes the dirty, disreputable, and easily discarded text that he creates—the “forgettable” epitome of lowbrow sensation fiction.

Although Smith is a minor character who seems merely to provide comic relief, his presence in the novel exaggerates the vast divide between the unsophisticated consumer and the intellectual producer. Both Isabel and Smith, for example, are completely immersed in the textual world and conflate fiction with reality; moreover, their friendship represents the symbiotic relationship between lowbrow consumers and lowbrow producers. Smith confides in George Gilbert, “[Isabel] helps me with my work sometimes; at least, she throws out suggestions, and I use them. But she’s dreadfully romantic. She reads too many novels” (30). Smith’s flippant comment inadvertently

gestures toward the ironic and perpetual cycle in which the lowbrow author and consumer nourish the misguided habits of the other: Isabel encourages Smith to craft the scandalous novels that target uneducated mass consumers like herself, demonstrating the manner in which each relies on the unsophisticated role of the other in order to perpetuate a market economy of lowbrow readers and authors. Isabel's consistent interaction with Smith, then, reinforces her role as an unrefined and highly influential female consumer.

In addition, Smith's occupation as a caricatured sensation author widens the chasm between the highbrow author who is concerned with the "[a]esthetic value" of the text and the lowbrow producer who succumbs to the demands of an "industry concerned only with economic value" (Cvetkovich 18). In juxtaposition to Sigismund Smith, Roland Lansdell—despite his tangible literary failures—appears even more sophisticated as both reader and author, "for the Lansdells had been a studious and book-learned race time out of mind" (Braddon 166); although Lansdell's poetry is mediocre at best, it is far more thoughtful, responsible, and sophisticated than Smith's sloppy penny numbers. However, this juxtaposition also highlights the disparity between each author's approach to textual exploitation. While Smith haphazardly attempts to compose poorly constructed texts at a rapid pace in order to make a living, Lansdell tactfully manipulates textuality in order to foster a romantic relationship with Isabel. In other words, Smith focuses on the market value of the text for the purposes of economic gain whereas Lansdell exploits the aesthetic value of the text for the purposes of personal (and romantic) gain.

Lansdell's concern with the personal market value of textuality comes to the fore when the relationship of private exchange between him and Isabel nearly becomes "public." When Smith unexpectedly visits Isabel and accompanies her to Thurston's

Crag, the discrepancy between Isabel's constant focus on textuality and Lansdell's interest in a romantic relationship is evident.⁶¹ It is critical to acknowledge that—as Schroeder and Schroeder point out—Isabel is aware of some sense of culpability and wrongdoing, thus demonstrating some level of discernment with respect to acceptable cultural norms. While she freely entertains *thoughts* of Lansdell without guilt—“she made no endeavour to banish Mr. Lansdell's image from her mind. If she had recognized the need of such an effort, she would have made it perhaps” (184)—she acknowledges some moral discomfort with physically meeting and exchanging texts with her fictional hero. The narrator comments, “She might go to Thurston's Crag now as often as she could beguile Sigismund thitherward, and that haunting sense of something wrong would no longer perplex her in the midst of her unutterable joy” (190-91). Although “perplexed” by the origin of her guilt, Isabel does intuit that her “chance” meetings to Thurston's Crag violate an unspoken code of morality.

Lansdell, on the other hand, fully comprehends the guilt of his romantic feelings for Isabel, although filtered through textuality. When Isabel and Smith arrive at Thurston's Crag, “There was a little pile of books upon the seat under the tree. Mr. Lansdell pushed them off the bench, and tumbled them ignominiously among the long grass and weeds beneath it” (192). The texts, which become the medium through which Lansdell maintains a consistent relationship with Isabel, instantly transform into incriminating evidence of which he tries to quickly dispose. Isabel, however, who is invested in Lansdell as producer, provider of texts, and text himself, eagerly acknowledges the stack of books without hesitation or discernment of deeper meaning. She proclaims, ““You have brought me—’,” but Lansdell “checked her with a frown, and

began to talk about the waterfall, and the trout that were to be caught in the season lower down in the stream. Mr. Lansdell was more worldly wise than the Doctor's Wife, and he knew that the books brought there for her might seem slightly suggestive of an appointment" (192).

While Lansdell's observation is a practical one, it solidifies his intentions to romance Isabel: "worldly wise," Lansdell is aware that the textual exchange that regularly takes place between them serves, for him, as a means by which to build a romantic relationship with Isabel. For Isabel, however, who is wholly absent of the "worldly wisdom" that Lansdell possesses, the texts are merely texts—"the wonderful gates of a new fairy-land" (184) that she desires to consume; Lansdell simply "had the keys, and could open them for her at his will, and could lead her through the dim mysterious pathways into the beautiful region beyond" (184). Lansdell not only physically provides Isabel with the material texts but also intellectually "opens" for Isabel the "wonderful gates" of fictional interpretation, further increasing her desire to engage in a textual relationship with her mentor. While she entertains romantic feelings for Lansdell in her mind, Isabel defines their tangible affiliation as an innocent friendship based on textual exchange, each text fulfilling her desire to consume knowledge, fiction, and the unknown. When dreaming of Lansdell, Isabel enters an entirely different realm of the imagination: "Isabel Gilbert floated away upon the wings of sentiment and fancy, into that unreal region where the young squire of Mordred reigned supreme, beautiful as a prince in a fairy tale, grand as a demigod in some classic legend" (237). Once again equating Lansdell with imaginary princes and demigods, Isabel associates him with the handsome heroes and untouchable superior beings that she reads about in her favorite

texts. Lansdell himself even acknowledges this discrepancy, stating: “I have only been the hero of a story-book; and all this folly has been nothing more than a page out of a novel set in action” (214). Thus, to some extent, Isabel maintains her innocence throughout her relationship with Lansdell, constantly focusing on Lansdell-the-producer and Lansdell-the-fictional-hero while discounting the reality of her dangerous flirtation with adultery.

**“Isabel Gilbert was a woman all at once”: Braddon’s Subversive Revision of
the Female Consumer**

On the surface, Braddon’s portrayal of Isabel as a naïve female consumer and Lansdell as a mediocre producer, performing the role of superior critic and mentor, seems to clearly outline her intentions of revising the sensual plot of Gustav Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* in order to craft a more aesthetically polished novel. However, Braddon’s revisionary shift from sexuality to textuality—from a focus on sexual consumption to an emphasis of the relationship between female consumer and male producer—introduces far more complex and subversive commentary about culturally accepted notions of production and consumption. A precursor to *Belgravia*, *The Doctor’s Wife* attempts to subtly redeem and empower the female consumer while calling into question the authority of the male producer, mentor, and critic. Thus, it is important to re-examine Isabel’s character in order to explore Braddon’s attempt to simultaneously please and critique the highbrow critics who, in Braddon’s own words, “have pelted me with the word ‘sensational,’ & who will gird at me so long as I write a line” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 23). While Braddon presents Isabel as a misguided woman reader who needs a proper education and (male) guidance, Braddon utilizes Isabel’s text-obsessed character

to subtly place blame upon the cultural constraints that prevent naïve female consumers from actualizing their potential as independent and capable readers. Ultimately, Isabel reaps the benefits of independently exploring textuality despite cultural challenges, eventually becoming a rich widow with an unsullied reputation.

Despite her naïveté, Isabel Gilbert is a subversive character who uses her love of textual consumption to challenge the gendered domestic roles of women in marriage. Before Isabel's engagement to George Gilbert, her employer Mr. Raymond comments on the manner in which her active imagination is at odds with her proper role as woman:

“That girl has mental imitation,—the highest and rarest faculty of the human brain,—ideality, and comparison. What could I not make of such a girl as that? And yet—” Mr. Raymond only finished the sentence with a sigh. He was thinking that, after all, these bright faculties might not be the best gifts for a woman. It would have been better, perhaps, for Isabel to have possessed the organ of pudding-making and stocking-darning.

(Braddon 82)

Thus, from the outset of the novel, Braddon gestures toward the manner in which Victorian culture wrongfully labels Isabel's active imagination, proclivity toward consuming texts of any kind, and potential for intellectual growth as useless qualities when fostered by a woman.

Moreover, Isabel's relationship with George demonstrates her resistance to the gendered marital roles of husband and wife that attempt to stifle female creativity. George, who is “a model husband, the embodiment of patriarchy's blindness and narcissism, its inability to see beyond its own contentedness” (Schroeder and Schroeder

169), attempts to mold Isabel into the model wife. At first, he is successful, for on their honeymoon, Isabel “had given up novel-reading, and employed her leisure in the interesting pursuit of plain needlework” (Braddon 106). Yet when George rejects her desire to decorate their home—her desire to “infuse some beauty into her life, something which, in however remote a degree, should be akin to the things she read of in her books” (115)—Isabel rebels against George (and thus against patriarchal understandings of marriage) by rekindling her love of novels and indulging in excessive textual consumption. Bored with typical domestic duties, most of which were completed by George’s housekeeper Mrs. Jeffson, Isabel immerses herself in a subversive world of the imagination: she “acted Shakespearian heroines and Edith Dombey before her looking-glass, and read her novels, and dreamed her dreams, and wrote little scraps of poetry” (156).

Thus, despite the constraints of gender, which are reinforced through her marriage, Isabel continues to foster her “bright faculties” through the process of reading and imaginatively engaging with texts. Schroeder and Schroeder assert that through the act of reading, “Isabel preserves a fragment of her existence as an individual—namely, her imaginative life [. . .] Isabel does not attempt to change or elude the system that imprisons her. Instead, she tries to make an accommodation to that system and as a result exposes the inadequacies of the Victorian marital ideal” (167).⁶² Ultimately, Braddon emphasizes the importance of beauty, creativity, and ingenuity within Isabel’s life, qualities that Isabel can access not through a structured domestic life but rather through the infinite world of her imagination. Thus, Isabel’s constant pursuit of textuality, which

surpasses both gendered expectations and the bounds of marriage, empowers her character and subverts accepted gender norms of domesticity.

Moreover, Braddon utilizes Isabel's character to emphasize the potential power of the unrestricted female imagination. For example, Isabel's engagement with texts, independent of Roland Lansdell, continue to subtly empower her throughout the novel, eventually transforming her from lowbrow consumer into critical reader—a transformation that culminates in her decision to reject Lansdell's inappropriate proposal at the end of the novel. Although Lansdell often provides her with texts, Isabel consistently pursues the expansion of her knowledge in the absence of his influence. The narrator comments, "The education of the Doctor's Wife took a grand stride by this means. She sat for hours together reading in the little parlour at Graybridge; and George, whose life was a very busy one, grew to consider her only in her normal state with a book in her hand, and was in no wise offended when she ate her supper with an open volume by the side of her plate, or responded vaguely to his simple talk" (Braddon 186). Eagerly consuming each book she receives, Isabel ignores the "orders" of her male superiors: she dismisses Lansdell's advice to skim the texts he provides rather than "read them laboriously" (185), thus asserting her power as a reader and rejecting a possible reliance upon the highbrow male producer to expound each text she consumes; and she continues to disobey her husband's initial demands that she replace her love of novels with a love of wifely duty (101), ultimately leading George both to condone her addiction to textual consumption and to subconsciously adjust his marital expectations.

Furthermore, Isabel's thirst for textual knowledge actually increases, both in terms of quantity and quality, when her reading process is unencumbered by male

authority. When Lansdell unexpectedly decides to leave the country, he writes to Isabel, encouraging her to utilize his library in his absence: ““The library will always be prepared for you whenever you feel inclined to read and study there, and the contents of the shelves will be entirely at the service of yourself and Mr. Gilbert”” (216). Heartbroken yet determined to maintain some textual connection to Roland, Isabel eventually decides to visit Mordred Priory and consume the innumerable unexplored works that dwell within the walls of the library. Thus, even without Lansdell’s guidance, Isabel still pursues the act of reading and seeks to explore new texts: “She read a great deal of the lighter literature upon Mr. Lansdell’s bookshelves,—poems and popular histories, biographies and autobiographies, letters, and travels in bright romantic lands. To read of the countries through which Mr. Lansdell wandered seemed almost like following him” (235). Although her thoughts still focus on Lansdell-as-textual-embodiment, Isabel continues to consume texts and expand her literary knowledge despite the absence of her teacher and guide.

Moreover, it is in Lansdell’s absence—without his patriarchal influence and criticism—that Isabel begins realize her potential as a critical reader. As she independently explores and consumes the shelves of books in Lansdell’s library,

Her mind expanded amongst all the beautiful things around her, and the graver thoughts engendered out of grave books pushed away many of her most childish fancies, her simple sentimental yearnings. Until now she had lived too entirely amongst poets and romancers; but now grave volumes of biography opened to her a new picture of life. She read the stories of real men and women, who had lived and suffered real sorrows,

prosaic anguish, hard commonplace trial and misery. [. . .] The consciousness of her ignorance increased as she became less ignorant; and there were times when this romantic girl was almost sensible, and became resigned to the fact that Roland Lansdell could have no part in the story of her life. (235-36)

Without Lansdell's influence—in the absence of “poets and romancers”—Isabel independently reads historical and biographical texts that enable her to, albeit temporarily, shatter the fictional world she has created through her textual consumption and replace it with a realistic and sensible understanding of textuality. Golden asserts, “Braddon's repetition of ‘grave’ and ‘real’ quickly establishes Isabel's sober, responsible frame of mind as a reader” (“Censoring” 39).⁶³ Free to explore the vast world of texts without patriarchal restrictions (in the form of her husband and Lansdell), Isabel systematically pursues knowledge in all its textual forms, ultimately learning the distinction between reality and fiction. Golden also comments, “Isabel adds biography, philosophy, and history to her literary diet. Reading improving works in the library of Mordred Priory during Roland's travels, she ‘expands’ her mind and worldview” (“Censoring” 39). Thus, when given the chance to educate herself without physical or textual restrictions, Isabel replaces her inadequate formal childhood education—one that is perpetuated by Lansdell's manipulative methods of “teaching”—with her personal pursuit of knowledge, maturity, and self.

Despite Isabel's independent transformation from ignorant consumer to critical reader, Braddon immediately points to the realistic cultural constraints that inhibit the female's personal quest for (textual) independence. Isabel's lack of both formal

education and any cultural support for female autonomy leads her to succumb almost immediately to the patriarchal authority that surrounds her. Heavily reliant upon the superior opinions of the male producer and literary “critic,” Isabel immediately dismisses her strides toward maturity as soon as Lansdell’s reinforces his guiding presence, ironically, through the written word. Upon reading a letter that Lansdell writes from Corfu, Isabel returns to her previous state of ignorant idealist: “That fatal letter—so commonplace to a common reader—had revived all the old exaltation of feeling. Once more Isabel Gilbert floated away upon the wings of sentiment and fancy, into that unreal region where the young squire of Mordred reigned supreme, beautiful as a prince in a fairy tale, grand as a demigod in some classic legend” (Braddon 237). As she regresses to the inferior role of naïve female consumer in desperate need of superior male influence, Isabel’s intellectual growth through her own consumption of texts seems futile.

More important than this setback, however, is Braddon’s subtle focus on Isabel’s potential to grow as an independent critical reader and cultured intellectual without the biased guidance of patriarchal teachers and critics. Like her neglected childhood garden in which she used to read her sentimental novels, Isabel consistently demonstrates the aptitude to grow as an individual and a reader if given the proper tools. Moreover, in contrast to Lansdell, who exploits his aesthetic expertise in order to perform the role of critical reader and manipulate Isabel, Isabel demonstrates a genuine thirst for knowledge, a proclivity for textual discovery, and the desire to embody the role of intellectual, sophisticated, and aesthetically informed critical reader.

Despite her apparent regression to naïve female consumer, Isabel finally actualizes her potential as a critical reader when she outwardly rejects Lansdell’s

proposal (and thus the stifling influence of the male producer). Upon his return to Mordred Priory, Lansdell continues to rely on textuality as the means by which to seduce Isabel, gently persuading her: “I suppose you will be walking this way tomorrow,—it is the only walk worth taking hereabouts,—and I’ll bring you the other volume” (240). Immediately lapsing into her typical state of adoration and idealism, Isabel fantasizes about Lansdell: “There was a kind of wickedness in these stolen meetings no doubt, she thought; but her wickedness was no greater than that of the beautiful princess who smiled upon the Italian poet. In that serene region of romance, that mystic fairyland in which Isabel’s fancies dwelt, sin, as the world comprehends it, had no place” (248). Despite this regression, Isabel retains much of the textual education that she independently pursued, thus retaining some sense of reality and of self. When Roland asks her to run away with him and become his mistress despite the fact that she is still married (269-70), Isabel is horrified, and her vision of Roland-as-hero is immediately shattered: “there had been no Platonism, no poet-worship on Roland Lansdell’s side; only the vulgar everyday wish to run away with another man’s wife. From first to last she had been misunderstood; she had been the dupe of her own fancies, her own dreams. [. . .] It was no Dante, no Tasso, who had wandered by her side: only a dissipated young country squire, in the habit of running away with other people’s wives, and glorying in his iniquity” (271).

When Lansdell presents himself before Isabel as a real, flesh-and-blood man—rather than the embodiment of a text or a fictional hero—her obsession with consuming texts, even in the physical form of Roland Lansdell, is replaced by her disgust for Lansdell’s very real and immoral suggestions of infidelity. No longer an uncritical

consumer, Isabel immediately assesses the deeper implications of Lansdell's proposal; although she admits that she is still deeply in love with him (272-75), Isabel's transformation into critical reader leads to her blatant rejection of Roland's request. She asserts, "I have read of people, who by some fatality could never marry, loving each other, and being true to others for years and years—till death, sometimes; and I fancied that you loved me like that: [. . .] I thought, till yesterday, that this might go on for ever, and never, never believed that you would think me like those wicked women who run away from their husbands'" (273). Isabel explains that her feelings for Roland were based on the fictional relationships she had read about, "fancies" that one can safely explore within the imagination. When Lansdell attempts to transform that "fancy" into reality, Isabel stands firm: "I can only make one choice [. . .] I will do my duty to my husband and—think of you'" (275).

Having taught herself the distinction between fantasy and reality, Isabel makes a sophisticated decision that clearly maintains those boundaries that were once conflated in her mind. Schroeder and Schroeder note that in accepting Lansdell's proposal, Isabel "would violate the romantic criteria of her passionate dream, for Lansdell would cease to be the inaccessible hero of her fantasy" (180). Moreover, by rejecting Lansdell, Isabel "preserves the integrity of her fantasy and with it that one part of her identity not subdued by her marriage" (Schroeder and Schroeder 180). Applying the knowledge that she gleaned as independent critical reader, Isabel asserts that while she has the right to stimulate her mind and indulge in sentimental fancy (a practice that she initially "fed" through novel consumption), she also has a very real obligation to serve her husband and obey social codes of morality and respect (a practice that she taught herself through her

pursuit of aesthetic knowledge in Lansdell's library). Isabel's personal maturity as female reader is solidified by her decision to only entertain a relationship of textual—rather than sexual—exchange with Roland Lansdell.

In this climactic moment, Isabel transforms into a sophisticated reader who learns to properly assess texts, to separate fiction from reality, and to assert her right to make decisions for herself as a woman. The narrator notes, “The sweet age of enchantment is over; the fairy companions of girlhood, who were loveliest even when most they deluded, spread their bright wings and flutter away; and the grave genius of common-sense [. . .] stretches out her hand, and offers, with a friendly but uncompromising abruptness, to be the woman's future guide and monitress. Isabel Gilbert was a woman all at once” (Braddon 277). Through her rejection of both the fictional fantasy and the patriarchal critic and mentor, Isabel asserts her ability to independently read and assess textuality. Shaking off the “spell” of uncritical consumption—a spell that Lansdell eagerly reinforced—Isabel spurns patriarchal practices of female passivity and actively pursues an independent course of assertive—and smart—female reading practices.

Braddon emphasizes the importance of Isabel's self-assertion by rewarding her character at the end of the novel, despite Isabel's questionable relationship with Lansdell. Flint notes that, in *The Doctor's Wife*, “Novel-reading remains uncondemned as an activity in itself: what is seen to matter is the cultivation of a self-knowing, responsible attitude towards it. Despite all that has happened to [Isabel] as a result of her misplaced assumptions, there is no admonitory conclusion.” (291). Although Isabel's character appears to remain both innocent and naïve following Lansdell's proposal, her decision to reject Lansdell proves that Isabel utilizes textuality to develop some sense of self, despite

cultural setbacks. Without the cultural distractions of limited education (often reinforced by Lansdell) and a life of domesticity (evident in George's character), Isabel embodies the maturing female reader who can successfully educate herself by developing a "self-knowing, responsible attitude" toward fiction. Thus, the novel ends with the rupture of Isabel's patriarchal shackles, for George dies of typhoid fever and Lansdell is murdered.

Isabel's triumph at the end of the novel, however, is subtle and complicated, for Braddon's conclusion attempts to "serve two masters" by simultaneously adhering to and undermining the expectations of highbrow literary critics. Ultimately "transformed" by "the chastening influence of sorrow" following the deaths of both George and Lansdell (Braddon 402), Isabel remains in a seemingly penitential state for the remainder of her life, quietly leaving England in order to travel abroad and humbly engaging in philanthropy—perhaps to atone for the sins she committed as "the foolish wife who neglected all a wife's duties while she sat by the mill-stream at Thurston's Crag reading the 'Revolt of Islam'" (402). Isabel appears to have abandoned her foolish dreams of imaginary fictional worlds, further emphasizing the importance of proper reading habits. Flint adds, "Braddon determinedly refuses to show [Isabel] receiving any ultimate satisfaction based on romantic premises. Instead, she is finally seen as an excellent manager of her estate, erecting model cottages and a substantial schoolhouse" (291).

Upon closer examination, however, Isabel's final actions subtly emphasize her continued pursuit of the critical reading practices that eluded her for most of her life.⁶⁴ Firstly, Lansdell's death places Isabel in the powerful social position of a rich widow, for he bequeaths to her "the bulk of his fortune" (Braddon 400). No longer trapped in her neglected garden without the education or resources to properly explore her fantasies,

Isabel travels “to those fair foreign lands for which she had pined in the weedy garden at Camberwell” (402). Thus, while Sparks astutely observes that Isabel’s childhood garden represented her “idleness and her taste in reading materials, which threaten to sprout beyond the strictly tamed limits of respectable literature and thereby fertilize her incipient romantic impulses” (205), Isabel’s inheritance allows her to journey to “those fair foreign lands” about which she used to merely fantasize. Thus, Isabel’s childhood fantasies, her “idleness,” and her poor “taste in reading materials,” are replaced with her very real, active exploration of rich foreign lands—a metaphor for her growth and maturity as a critical reader.

Moreover, Isabel’s philanthropic endeavors at the end of the novel center on education, a critical opportunity that eluded Isabel during her life and consequently reinforced her own misguided reading practices. The narrator describes Isabel’s estate:

Allotment gardens spread themselves here and there on pleasant slopes; and coming suddenly upon some woody hollow, you generally found yourself face to face with the Tudor windows of a schoolhouse, a substantial modern building, set in an old-world garden, where there were great gnarled pear-trees, and a cluster of beehives in a bowery corner, sheltered by bushes of elder and hazel. (Braddon 403)

Braddon’s detailed description of the landscape surrounding the school suggests that Isabel’s establishment of a schoolhouse subtly solidifies the triumph of the female reader. Isabel has replaced her neglected childhood garden, in which she haphazardly pursued her own curiosities, with a lush landscape that provides endless opportunities for growth, sustenance, and formal education. In contrast to her own childhood experiences of

reading lowbrow fiction “under her favourite pear-tree” in her overgrown garden, Isabel’s model estate provides formal opportunities to responsibly pursue the act of reading. Nestled within an “old-world garden” that contains a number of “great gnarled pear-trees,” the schoolhouse becomes a symbol of structured, traditional, and fruitful education. Isabel’s estate also serves as a symbol of her own quiet triumph: no longer a misguided consumer in search of the next sensation novel, Isabel has become for others the “friendly finger to point a pathway in the intellectual forest” (29), subtly actualizing her potential as a mature critical reader and an educational advocate.

“This is *not* a sensation novel”: Braddon’s Inversion of High and Low Culture

Braddon’s elevation of the female consumer through Isabel Gilbert’s character explicitly connects to her equally important cultural revision of the textual producer in *The Doctor’s Wife*. Once again, Braddon’s explicit goals in *Belgravia* initially take shape in *The Doctor’s Wife*, especially with respect to cultural production. According to Phegley, *Belgravia* “sought to invert the critical standard by putting the high in the position of the low and the low in the position of the high, thereby introducing an alternative system of classification that was more amenable to women readers and writers” (112). Through the characters of Roland Lansdell and Sigismund Smith, Braddon experiments with this concept of inversion. Each male producer occupies dual roles, thus fulfilling Braddon’s goal of both pleasing and undermining the literary critics: Lansdell has the money and potential to *become* a successful poet but—despite his efforts to perform the role of highbrow critic for Isabel—dies a lonely and mediocre author; and Sigismund Smith, a quirky minor character and sensation novelist in constant search of

his next scandalous plot, appears to be a parody of the sensation author; yet he subtly proves to be more than just comic relief within *The Doctor's Wife*, ultimately elevating his position as lowbrow producer.

Throughout the novel, Lansdell's literary position as mediocre poet is transparent, yet his attempts to perform the role as superior educator and critic solidify Braddon's inversion of high and low culture. Despite his potential to become a highbrow author, Lansdell's own brilliance impedes him. Mr. Raymond argues, "He stands quite alone in the world, and has more money than he knows how to spend; two very bad things for a young man. He's handsome and fascinating,—another disadvantage; and he's brilliant without being a genius. In short, he's just the sort of man to dawdle away the brightest years of his life in the drawing-rooms of a lot of women, and take to writing cynical trash about better men in his old age" (Braddon 133). Although Lansdell has the necessary resources to deem him highbrow—gender, income, time, genius, and natural talent—he fails to properly foster these gifts, instead degrading himself to the position of commonplace poet and ne'er do well skeptic. Moreover, while Isabel views Roland as a highbrow author and critic throughout the novel, Braddon constantly juxtaposes this fantasy with Lansdell's "average" reality. Before Isabel even meets Lansdell, she imaginatively replaces his ordinary status as squire with an elevated status that seems more appropriate for her favorite poet: "Surely no squire could have written those half-heartbroken, half-cynical verses, those deliciously scornful elegies upon the hollowness of lovely woman and things in general! Isabel had her own image of the writer—her own ideal poet, who rose in all his melancholy glory, and pushed the red-coated country squire out of her mind" (120). Isabel's thoughts reinforce Braddon's attempts to invert the

highbrow author by casting him instead as a disappointing poet that even the naïve female consumer cannot tolerate in reality. Braddon further emphasizes this inversion through Lansdell's own thoughts when he first meets Isabel at Thurston's Crag. Studying Isabel as she reaches for one of her books, Lansdell concludes that she is "very pretty" but "also very stupid" (158). Immediately after this unflattering assessment of her intellectual capacity, however, Lansdell "recognised the familiar green cover and beveled edges of the *Alien*" on the bench near her—his own volume of poetry which Isabel "stupidly" admires (158).

Similarly, Braddon also critiques the failed "literary" efforts of Sigismund Smith, who embodies the position of lowbrow producer. Aggressively lampooning the pathetic aspirations of the obsessive, comical, and seemingly foolish character, Braddon appears to separate herself from her potential male counterpart. In addition to his compulsive crafting of lowbrow novels, Smith's constant comparison of himself to esteemed writers of respected literature allows Braddon to emphasize the vast gulf between the "cheap" success of lowbrow sensation writers and the aesthetic achievements of highbrow novelists. Despite his aspirations to eventually write a great novel, Smith claims that he would much rather compose sensation novels that please an audience than "write a dull five-act tragedy, in the unities of which Aristotle himself could find no flaw, but from whose performance panic-stricken spectators should slink away or ere the second act came to its dreary close" (47). Smith even goes so far as to mentally revise *The Vicar of Wakefield*, confidently asserting, "There wouldn't be much in it, you know; but the story would be pervaded by Moses's body lying murdered in a ditch half a mile from the vicarage" (49). Smith's absurd comments explicitly juxtapose highbrow literature to

inferior popular penny numbers, and his “revision” of a reputable work demonstrates the destruction such sensation fiction imposes upon the literary world. In addition, the narrator constantly critiques Smith’s character and profession, further emphasizing Braddon’s attempts to distance herself from her sensational past. The narrator frankly states: “[Smith] slapped his heroes into marketable shape, as coolly as a buttermilk slaps a pat of butter into the semblance of a swan or a crown, in accordance with the requirements of his customers” (28). Thus, the character of Sigismund Smith seems an obvious narrative tool by which Braddon can extricate herself from the label of “sensation novelist”: by crafting a dirty, foolish, male sensation author who seems extraneous in the novel, merely providing comic relief, Braddon appears to explicitly dismiss the lowbrow world that Smith inhabits, deeming such literature cheap and expendable. Her narrator not only confirms that “This is *not* a sensation novel” (358), but her absurd portrayal of Smith’s character appears to implicitly assert, “This is *not* who I am.”

One should not discount Smith so easily, however, for Braddon actually utilizes his character, much like that of Isabel, to undermine common cultural understandings of literary production. Thus, Smith simultaneously embodies two competing interpretations: the obvious satirical reading of Smith, above, that confirms the negative views of sensation novelists held by a highbrow literary audience and allows Braddon to achieve her goal of composing a more aesthetically polished novel; and a more subtle yet powerful reading of Smith, in which Braddon utilizes him as a spokesperson for her own views on the important—and ignored—role of sensation fiction within the literary tradition.⁶⁵ By placing subtle value on Smith’s character and drawing attention to his

physical body, Braddon proves that the textual body of the sensation novel is far more vital to literary culture than it appears and thus deserves to be reevaluated.

First, despite Smith's seemingly tangential role in the novel, the plot—the entire body of the text—depends upon the Smith's physical presence. While Smith only appears a handful of times throughout the novel, the main characters are all connected to him, and their interactions and “chance” meetings rely on his influence. George Gilbert is an “old schoolfellow” of Smith's who visits him while on holiday (8). It is during this visit that Smith, a partial boarder at the Sleaford Home, introduces George to Isabel, while the two gentlemen occupy rooms there. Shortly after these two main characters meet, when Isabel disappears without explanation, it is Sigismund Smith with whom she makes contact, and—through his letters—Smith keeps George informed of her whereabouts. Smith immediately helps Isabel to secure steady employment with his uncle, Charles Raymond, and he then personally invites George to a picnic at his uncle's home, which places the main characters in direct contact, eventually leading to George's proposal of marriage and Isabel's acceptance.

Furthermore, it is through Isabel's contact with Smith's uncle that she meets Roland Lansdell, with whom Smith studied as a child. He tells Isabel, ““when Roland Lansdell was being coached-up in the Classics by a private tutor, I used to go up to the Priory and read with him”” (189). Ultimately, the key elements of the plot rely on Smith's physical presence, for the main characters literally cross paths because of Smith, leading to the complex love triangle that is central to the plot and character development of *The Doctor's Wife*. Thus, by subtly placing such importance on the too easily ignored Smith, Braddon calls attention to an important truth: just as the plot, or textual body, of

this aspiring highbrow novel depends upon Smith's physical body, the textual bodies of many highbrow novels inevitably rely on the skeleton of sensation fiction. Highbrow novels, like those authored by Dickens and Eliot⁶⁶, freely incorporate "watered down" elements of sensation—such as crime, marital or family scandal, mystery, and even murder—to set the seemingly "moral" or aesthetic plot in motion. These literary novels, then, are inextricably linked—and even indebted—to the "Sigismund Smiths" of the literary world, to the lower art form that critics are so quick to condemn.

Second, Braddon juxtaposes the characters of Lansdell and Smith in order to not only demonstrate the common ground between high and low culture but also solidify an inversion of these two opposing literary categories. When Smith and Lansdell reunite by chance at Thurston's Crag, the narrator also comments, "Mr. Lansdell must have been quite ardently attached to Sigismund in those early days, if one might judge of the past by the present; for he greeted his old acquaintance with absolute effusion" (193). Having studied together in their youth, Lansdell and Smith are "quite ardently attached" despite their different careers and class status; thus, Braddon uses this notion of "attachment" to demonstrate the common ground that these seemingly disparate male producers share. Both men aspire—but fall short—of literary prominence; both essentially embody their work, taking on characteristics of the texts they compose; and both develop a significant relationship with Isabel based on textuality. These similarities provide a common foundation, which Braddon manipulates in order to subtly highlight the key (textual) distinctions between these two male producers—distinctions that solidify an inversion of high and low culture. Despite his sophisticated appearance and high social standing, Roland Lansdell simulates the role of highbrow author in order to convert Isabel Gilbert's

love of texts into a potential love relationship with him—a course of action that would conceivably destroy her marriage. Smith, on the other hand, develops a genuine friendship with Isabel, bonding with her over their mutual love of texts. In fact, the narrator argues that “Nobody, except perhaps Sigismund Smith, had ever yet understood Isabel” (115). Moreover, when Smith suspects Isabel’s illicit feelings for Lansdell, he encourages her to nourish her marriage and practice morality. He informs her, “I know that [George] loves you dearly, and would break his honest heart if any thing happened to you; or he was—anyhow to take it into his head that you didn’t love him” (229).

Sympathetic to Isabel’s need for aesthetic pleasure and excitement, Smith advises her to pour her romantic feelings for Lansdell into the pages of a novel, which provides a proper textual outlet for emotion (as opposed to an extramarital affair). He suggests, “if I were a young lady, and—and had a kind of romantic fancy for a person I ought not to care about, I’ll tell you what I’d do with him,—I’d put him into a novel, Izzie, and work him out in three volumes; and if I wasn’t heartily sick of him by the time I got to the last chapter, nothing on earth would cure me” (230). Thus, while Lansdell manipulates Isabel’s love of textuality as the means by which to seduce Isabel and convince her to become his mistress, Smith attempts to cultivate Isabel’s aesthetic sensibilities by encouraging her to channel those energies into textual production.

Ultimately, then, the lowbrow author utilizes his love of texts to assume the position of moral mentor while the potentially highbrow poet exploits Isabel’s love of texts in order to seduce a married woman. The inversion of these two male producers reaches its climax when Lansdell is murdered in a brief moment of sensation within *The Doctor’s Wife*: bludgeoned to death by Isabel’s father, Jack the Scribe—whom Lansdell

testified against many years before—Lansdell’s violent and fatal scuffle serves as one of the only sensational incidents in the novel. Metaphorically, Lansdell—the already pathetic excuse for a highbrow author—dies at the hands of sensation, further solidifying the “strength” and importance of the underestimated lowbrow genre, which ultimately triumphs.

Finally, Braddon utilizes the “doubleness” of Smith’s physical body throughout the novel to further articulate the importance of sensation fiction. Throughout the novel, the narrator constantly points to the discrepancy between what audiences expect Smith to look like and his actual physical appearance. Fans of his fiction “had their own idea of what the author of the *Smuggler’s Bride* and *Lilia the Deserted* ought to be, and Mr. Smith did not at all come up to the popular standard; so the most enthusiastic admirers of his romances were apt to complain of him as an impostor when they beheld him in private life” (13). It is this very “doubleness,” the inconsistency between Smith’s actual self and the public’s elaborate fabrications of him, with which Braddon ends the entire novel. The narrator concludes,

He is very happy and very inky; and the rustic wanderers who meet a pale-faced and mild-looking gentleman loitering in the green lanes about Mordred, with his hat upon the back of his head, and his insipid blue eyes fixed on vacancy, would be slow to perceive in him the deliberate contriver of one of the most atrocious and cold-blooded schemes of vengeance that ever outraged the common dictates of human nature and adorned the richly-illustrated pages of a penny periodical. (404)

Ending the novel with Sigismund Smith, whom the public fails to identify with his “(in)famous” name due to their own inability to reconcile their ideals with reality, Braddon criticizes the high ideals of critics and audiences who cannot recognize the very real and important place of sensation fiction within the literary tradition. Through Smith, Braddon acknowledges—and even validates—many of the negative cultural assumptions about sensation writers; she is aware of the key differences between scandalous, plot-driven sensation novels and aesthetic texts that focus on character. However, Braddon also utilizes Smith’s character to refute a complete division between high and low art, for—while critics are quick to point to the vast differences between genres—they ignore the important role that elements of sensation play within both kinds of texts. Sigismund Smith’s character, then, challenges current understandings of the sensational: while Smith epitomizes the lowbrow producer, body and soul, he plays a critical yet easily overlooked role in the novel, demonstrating how—even in its basest form—the very roots of sensation cannot be extricated from the seemingly elevated roots of high literary culture.

In the final line of the novel, which again focuses the minor character of Smith, the narrator comments on Smith’s financial situation: “he has consulted Mr. Raymond respecting the investment of his deposit-account, which is supposed to be something considerable; for a gentleman who lives chiefly upon bread-and-marmalade and weak tea may amass a very comfortable little independence from the cultivation of sensational literature in penny numbers” (404). While this last line appears to take one final jab at the money-hungry endeavors of the sensation novelist, a more subtle message surfaces: the jab is actually at the opponents of sensation novels, for the “cultivation” of sensation takes place not only among the lowly, public masses but also within the pages of even the

most literary of novels. Just as the seemingly “forgettable” or merely comical Smith becomes inextricable from the plot and characters of *The Doctor’s Wife*, Braddon argues that sensation fiction—too quickly condemned and dismissed—is linked to higher and more literary traditions.

Thus, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s subtle approach to revision culminates in the elevation of the lowbrow female consumer and producer of sensation fiction, ultimately setting the stage for *Belgravia*, in which Braddon explicitly addresses the necessary revision of high and low literary culture. Phegley notes of *Belgravia*, “By emphasizing the wrongs of the critics of sensation, Braddon’s magazine effectively shifted the blame for the corruption of literature from the supposedly scandalous women writers and uncritical women readers to the critics of respected journals” (126). Years before Braddon articulates these explicit goals, she subtly and ironically revises cultural understandings of the lowbrow consumer and producer in her more aesthetically polished novel, *The Doctor’s Wife*. Emphasizing the subtle importance of both the female reader and sensation author, Braddon acknowledges the aesthetic potential of mass culture, ultimately arguing that neither a more highbrow novel like *The Doctor’s Wife* nor a lowbrow sensation novel like those authored by Sigismund Smith should be judged merely by its cover.

Epilogue

“Reader, I buried him”: The Revival of Revision, the Nineteenth-Century British Woman Writer, and the Undead in Contemporary (and Monstrous) Literary Mash-ups

When asked about his collaboration with Jane Austen, in which he revised her classic text into *The New York Times* best-seller, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), Seth Grahame-Smith mused, “[Austen] wasn’t very helpful. All she left me was the complete manuscript of one of the most beloved novels in the English language. I had to start on Page 1 and edit her work and weave in the zombie subplot that she had so carelessly forgotten” (Memmott D4). With the publication of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* in 2009, a new genre of literature—rooted in the concept of revision—was born: the literary mash-up. While the genre may appear to be a clever marketing strategy in which “a small publishing house in Philadelphia hit on a more effective formula: Take some Jane Austen, add a healthy dollop of gore and start counting the money” (Schuessler 67), these literary mash-ups actually do far more than bring zombies and vampires into the parlor; they draw attention to the intersection between the private practice of reading, the public act of writing, and the formation of authorial identity. While contemporary writers are currently revising both male- and female-authored classics, the genre began with a nineteenth-century British woman author who—like most female authors in her era—sought to create for herself an authorial identity in the absence of a female literary tradition. In an attempt to establish a writerly reputation within the

twenty-first century, then, these contemporary authors of literary mash-ups simultaneously lampoon and pay homage to nineteenth-century female authorship. What is more important, however, is the manner in which these texts highlight the significance not only of revision as a strategy for crafting one's authorial identity but also of a nineteenth-century female literary tradition that female redactors aimed to establish.

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies was published in 2009 by Quirk Classics, a division of the publishing company Quirk Books, which aims to make a name for itself through the revision of classic texts and the creation of the first literary mash-up. According to its website, "Quirk Classics blends the work of classic literary masters with new scenes of horrific creatures and gruesome action. Our Mission: To enhance classic novels with pop culture phenomena" (*Quirk Classics*). Establishing itself as the trailblazer of this new literary genre, the Quirk Classics website states:

As the home of the original literary mash-up and New York Times Best Seller, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Quirk Classics is the premier brand in literary monster mash-ups and remixed classics. Soon to be literary cult-classics, Quirk Classics are designed to be cleverly conceived, well-written, and entertainingly executed masterpieces that bring new fans to both classic works of literature and to original works of genre-based fiction. (*Quirk Classics*)

Thus, the mission of Quirk Classics seems explicit enough: to revise well-known, classic literary texts as the means by which to create a new genre that will "enhance classic novels," draw in both new and seasoned readers, and ultimately create the next commercial and literary sensation of "cult-classics."

In doing so, the authors of these novels adopt the same principles as nineteenth-century British women authors in order to infiltrate the literary marketplace and establish for themselves some sort of literary identity: they simultaneously lay claim to and revise the works of well-respected authors in order to start a new tradition. Much like nineteenth-century female redactors, the twenty-first-century authors of literary mash-ups operate within—as opposed to against—their cultural surroundings. Daring to even enter the literary marketplace, an arena dominated by men and devoid of any female tradition, nineteenth-century female redactors carefully crafted texts that appeared, in many respects, to conform to proper (mis)understandings of Victorian gender roles while subtly challenging these patriarchal misconceptions. Similarly, twenty-first-century male and female redactors attempt to revive classic texts by appealing to the hedonistic nature of contemporary culture. By incorporating the “pop culture phenomena” of zombies, vampires, robots, werewolves, blood, guts, and horror, twenty-first-century redactors transform and commercialize the classics in an attempt to appeal to the contemporary consumer. As the forerunner of these revisions, Quirk Classics also exploits the twenty-first-century consumer’s reliance on technology. The website includes links to “Blogs,” “Message Boards,” “Social Media” “T-shirts and Merch,” and even an iTunes application for *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*; moreover, Quirk Classics is also launching “A Social Media Experience” in which the publishing company creates an interactive dimension to the literary world (*Quirk Classics*). Thus, while twenty-first-century redactors utilize use the concept of literary revision to revive the practice of reading and create a new—and culturally relevant—sense of authorial identity, they ultimately

commodify the literary classics in order to redefine literature for the twenty-first-century reader.

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Jane Slayre: Breathing New (and Undead) Life into the Nineteenth Century

From the first sentence, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith demonstrates the style and function of the literary mash-up: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains” (7). While the first half of the sentence stems from Austen’s classic text, the second half playfully adds Grahame-Smith’s flair for the horrific. According to Grahame-Smith, “The book is about 85 percent Jane Austen, with copious added references to cracked skulls and ninja swordplay” (Schuessler 67). In fact, according to Carolyn Kellogg’s article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Grahame-Smith “pasted the original text into a document on his computer, then, using a second color, began adding zombie elements. Periodically, he would zoom out to assess the balance between the Austen and zombie parts. Of course, the zombie text was red” (D1). Regardless of his precise methods, Grahame-Smith’s bold revision of Austen’s classic text literally combines his own writing with that of his literary predecessor in order to create the first literary mash-up; moreover, Grahame-Smith cleverly merges the plot, characters, and wit of the original *Pride and Prejudice* with a bawdy twenty-first-century sense of humor that pokes fun at nineteenth-century tropes and uses the elements of horror to appeal to twenty-first-century readers. In his attempt to please Austen fans and scholars while also drawing in a new fan base, Grahame-Smith breathes new life into *Pride and Prejudice* by injecting the undead into Austen’s literary world.

The plot of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is “deceptively simple: Zombies have overtaken the English countryside, eating villagers and basically making it extremely difficult to go about the tasks of daily life—travel, attending parties, marrying off five daughters” (Reaves 13). In essence, it is the same classic love story but with life-threatening complications, for “The business of Mr. Bennet’s life was to keep his daughters alive. The business of Mrs. Bennet’s was to get them married” (Austen and Grahame-Smith 9). As the Bennet sisters search for love, they encounter what they politely refer to as “unmentionables” (7), often using their extensive martial arts training to save as many party guests as possible from losing their brains and entrails to a hungry mob of zombies. For example, when unmentionables raid a ball at Netherfield, the Bennet sisters immediately form a “Pentagram of Death” in which “they began stepping outward in unison—each thrusting a razor-sharp dagger with one hand, the other hand modestly tucked into the small of her back” in order to behead as many zombies as possible (14). As the novel progresses, Elizabeth and her sisters face the constant threat of zombie invasion, delicately integrating their rigorous training in the deadly arts with their heartfelt search for love and their respect for proper manners.

This astute balance between admiration for the original text and an absurd sense of humor about nineteenth-century culture serves as the foundation of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. The manner in which Grahame-Smith cleverly uses violence to highlight the biting wit of Austen’s humor ultimately teases out the “level of complexity and subtext” that exists just under the surface in all of Austen’s novels (Hesse C1). Grahame-Smith argues, “‘People in this period never really said what they meant,’” ultimately providing him with the opportunity to “Fill in the gaps...with zombies!”

(Hesse C1). Thus, Grahame-Smith's revision of *Pride and Prejudice* certainly pays homage to Austen's subtle, "wicked sense of humor" and satirical genius (Memmot D4), simply adding zombies and roundhouse ninja kicks to emphasize her subtle wit. In the classic scene when Darcy professes his love to Elizabeth, for example, Grahame-Smith adds the violence of battle to express the latent emotional tension between the two characters. Elizabeth quips,

"Do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man who has been the means of ruining, perhaps forever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?" As she pronounced these words, Mr. Darcy changed colour; but the emotion was short, for Elizabeth presently attacked with a series of kicks, forcing him to counter with the drunken washwoman defense. She spoke as they battled. (151)

The physical violence of the scene complements the original dialogue, making explicit the emotions that bubble below the surface. Grahame-Smith's revisions, then, recall the same emphasis on the private practice of reading that nineteenth-century women writers employed in their own revisions: while the violence is explicit, Grahame-Smith's own use of humor and nuance requires knowledge of the original text both on the part of the author and reader, drawing attention to Grahame-Smith's own literary identity as a well-informed reader and redactor.

On the other hand, Grahame-Smith's revisionary techniques easily appeal to new audiences with little to no knowledge of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. With a humorous focus on zombies, brains, blood, and the deadly arts, Grahame-Smith's additions to the original text attract contemporary audiences who appreciate the current cultural trend of

horror in movies, TV, books, and media. Young adults who are devouring Stephenie Meyer's latest volume of the *Twilight* saga, for example, may find themselves taking interest in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, a similar tale of love and romance with a healthy dose of the supernatural. Grahame-Smith also adds explicit bawdy humor to the text, which certainly would have proven offensive to Austen and nineteenth-century audiences but appeals to the twenty-first-century reader: "[Elizabeth] remembered the lead ammunition in her pocket and offered it to [Darcy]. 'Your balls, Mr. Darcy?' He reached out and closed her hand around them, and offered, 'They belong to you, Miss Bennet.' Upon this, their colour changed, and they were forced to look away from one another, lest they laugh" (Austen and Grahame-Smith 205). It is important to remember that Austen's own wit is intermingled with such brazen additions, ultimately introducing new readers to the subtle humor of the original author. In her article in *The Washington Post*, Monica Hesse notes, "Reading 'Zombies' means discovering that half of the things you're laughing about were written 200 years ago by Austen herself" (C1). Regardless of whether or not readers are familiar with Austen, Grahame-Smith's zombified revision of *Pride and Prejudice* cleverly uses the undead to revive a literary classic, ultimately leading seasoned readers to revisit Austen's texts and encouraging young readers to discover them for the first time. While Grahame-Smith's revisionary goal is simple—"to make you suspend your disbelief enough to allow you to get lost in the story and believe what you're reading for a while" (Memmott D4)—it is significant: encourage audiences to engage in the critical practice of reading, whether it be for the purposes of entertainment, scholarship, rediscovery, or a zombified escape from reality.

Quirk Classics, however, is not the only publishing company supporting the literary mash-up; Gallery Books, a division of Simon and Schuster, just published *Jane Slayre* (2010), a vampiric retelling of *Jane Eyre*, co-authored by Charlotte Bronte and Sherri Browning Erwin. Like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *Jane Slayre* maintains much of the original text, simply interweaving vampires, zombies, and werewolves throughout the classic plot. As a mortal orphan forced to live with the vampiric Reed family, Jane Slayre finds herself decapitating zombies at Lowood School, slaying vampires at Thornfield Hall, discovering Rochester's werewolf bride, rejecting St. John's invitation to move to India in order to combat the growing vampire population, and going to great lengths—such as burying Rochester alive—to transform him from a werewolf into a human so they can happily marry. Like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *Jane Slayre* is a clever revision that uses horror to explicitly highlight important elements of the original text. While Grahame-Smith emphasizes Austen's humor in his revision of *Pride and Prejudice*, Erwin focuses on Bronte's use of gothic, supernatural, and Romantic tropes within the original. Far more serious than Grahame-Smith's revision, Erwin's *Jane Slayre* employs vampires, werewolves, and zombies to heighten the subtle—and sometimes explicit—suspense already present within *Jane Eyre*. Thus, both Grahame-Smith and Erwin honor the novel that they (respectively) revise by delicately balancing the original text with clever revisions that draw in new audiences and reintroduce seasoned readers to a classic.

**Anxiety of Influence and the Authorial Identity Crisis: The Legacy of the
Nineteenth-Century British Woman Writer**

In both *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Jane Slayre*, revision becomes the narrative tool for establishing authorial identity, ultimately solidifying the presence of a nineteenth-century female literary tradition that female redactors aimed to establish. Perhaps plagued by an “anxiety of authorship” similar to that of nineteenth-century authors (Gilbert and Gubar 49), these twenty-first-century redactors choose to rely on the established texts of classic authors in order to build for themselves literary identities as the authors of a new mash-up genre. Regardless of motive, the presence of nineteenth-century authors (such as Austen and Bronte) among these contemporary revisions demonstrates the manner in which these women successfully established a tradition of authorship that eluded them in their own era. Thus, the chain of authorial anxiety persists well into the twenty-first century, now instigated—rather than merely experienced—by nineteenth-century female authors. While nineteenth-century female redactors utilized the patriarchal literary tradition in order to create a female literary tradition for themselves, they have now perpetuated “the anxiety of influence” (Bloom 10)—a term once reserved only for male poets within a male tradition—among contemporary male and female authors alike who are now revising *their* works to establish some sort of “new” literary identity. Consequently, twenty-first-century redactors ultimately commodify nineteenth-century woman writers in order to create some sense of distance between their own newly formed authorial identities and the well-respected authorial legacies of their respective nineteenth-century co-authors. Through their horrific revisions of classic female-authored texts, contemporary authors engage in a *commodification of authorship* as they attempt to spearhead a literary tradition of their own.

Moreover, much like nineteenth-century female redactors, twenty-first-century authors of literary mash-ups perform the dual role of simultaneously laying claim to the original text while also cleverly manipulating it in order to comment upon contemporary cultural phenomena and establish a literary reputation. While nineteenth-century female redactors were steeped in issues of gender, often fighting to establish a cultural and literary sense of self within a patriarchal society, twenty-first-century redactors engage with pop culture trends in order to pique the interests and anxieties of twenty-first-century readers. With respect to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Adam Cohen reports,

Monster stories are a projection of our collective anxieties—and that may explain why in the current economic downturn, zombies are starting to catch up with the long-fashionable vampire. [. . .] Zombies are more bluntly menacing. When they rise up, what results is a ‘zombie apocalypse,’ or complete social breakdown. That image resonated in 1968, the chaotic year when ‘Night of the Living Dead,’ the black-and-white zombie classic, was released. And it resonates today, when the banking system teeters on the brink of collapse and once-solid companies like Lehman Brothers are melting into air.” (A22)

Grahame-Smith also states: “‘We live in an age when it’s very easy to be afraid of everything that’s going on, [. . .] There are these large groups of faceless people somewhere in the world who mean to do us harm and cannot be reasoned with. Zombies are sort of familiar territory’” (Grossman 61). Vampires, on the other hand, “are the very essence of taboo eros, seductive and unreachable and otherworldly” (Leal). Thus, supernatural figures explicitly represent both the latent fears and desires of twenty-first-

century culture, emotions that—when smoothly incorporated into classic texts that subtly engage with these same fears and desires—unite two seemingly different cultures and literary traditions.

While these contemporary revisions border on irreverent, this irreverence also plays a crucial role in affecting change within an established literary culture. Jill Lawless's sentiment in the *Los Angeles Times* is astute : “If nothing else, the [mash-up] trend proves the willingness of readers and writers to eliminate the gap between pop culture and what used to be known as high art” (A16). Ultimately, the nineteenth-century female redactor engaged in a literary struggle to bridge this same gap, for high art was typically out of reach for a female author, reserved instead for respected male authors within a long patriarchal tradition of highbrow literature. Thus, nineteenth-century female redactors relied on the principles of revision to subtly merge the works of male authors with their own cultural experiences in order to create something new that spoke to women's issues—and was “spoken” by women—within the era. Despite the more shocking nature of their techniques, contemporary redactors use the same methods of literary reclamation in the quest to establish authorship and reach a larger reading audience. In many ways these contemporary revisions strip away the layers of difference between texts written hundreds of years apart, drawing instead upon the simple elements of human emotion and experience, which serve as the foundation of virtually every literary classic.

Both *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Jane Slayre* conclude with list of guided reading questions aimed at generating discussion, which cleverly solidify the juxtaposed concepts of admiration and parody that dominate these literary mash-ups. In

conjunction with the tone of the text, the “Reader’s Discussion Guide” at the end of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is comical and lighthearted, including questions like, “Is Mr. Collins merely too fat and stupid to notice his wife’s gradual transformation into a zombie, or could there be another explanation for his failure to acknowledge the problem?” (318); “Who receives the sorrier fate: Wickham, left paralyzed in a seminary for the lame, forever soiling himself and studying ankle-high books of scripture? Or Lydia, removed from her family, married to an invalid, and childless, yet forever changing filthy diapers?” (318); and “Vomit plays an important role in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. [. . .] Do the authors mean for this regurgitation to symbolize something greater, or is it a cheap device to get laughs?” (319). The “Reading Group Guide” at the end of *Jane Slayre* is similarly lighthearted, posing questions like: “Do you think Mrs. Reed is more irritated that her niece has a continuous flow of warm blood on tap and she doesn’t, or that Jane won’t share?” (393); “Does Helen inspire or annoy the crap out of you? Were you surprised that Jane didn’t cut off her head sooner? What would you have done?” (393-94); and “On page 269, Mr. Rochester exclaims that in revealing the truth about his wife, others may judge ‘whether or not I had a right to break the compact.’ Do you think he’s justified, or is he just another Englishman looking to unload his stroppey cow of a wife?” (394-5). Although silly in nature and apparently mocking the notion of critically assessing either the original text or its horrific counterpart, the discussion questions subtly suggest the necessity to take a closer look at these contemporary revisions in order to discover the manner in which such gruesome (and often humorous) textual additions not only comment upon popular culture but also engage with the original text.

In particular, each novel poses one explicit question that asks audiences to acknowledge the importance of the original work within its nineteenth-century context. Grahame-Smith states: “Some scholars believe that the zombies were a last-minute addition to the novel, requested by the publisher in a shameless attempt to boost sales. Others argue that the hordes of living dead are integral to Jane Austen’s plot and social commentary. What do you think? Can you imagine what this novel might be like without the violent zombie mayhem?” (319). Similarly, Erwin suggests, “An abridged version of the novel is available under the title *Jane Eyre*. It’s been hailed by some as a truer representation of Victorian England than the original, but others believe its deletion of all vampires, zombies, werewolves and the like has made it much duller. Read a few chapters and compare the two versions, sharing your opinion with your book club” (396). These questions playfully gesture toward the original works of their nineteenth-century co-authors, drawing attention both to Grahame-Smith’s and Erwin’s own indebtedness and to the crucial interplay between the private act of reading, the public act of writing, and the creation of authorial identity. Even more provocative, however, is the manner in which both authors cleverly pose the question of how the original text could have possibly existed *without* such supernatural additions, ultimately introducing a new and profound question about the act of literary redaction: how does the public revision of a literary text alter the way in which the reader privately engages with, interprets, and perceives *the original work and its author*? Perhaps I’ll reveal my answer in the revised zombie mash-up of my own dissertation...coming soon.

Notes

¹ In *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), Elaine Showalter notes, “It is impossible to say when women began to write fiction. From about 1750 on, English women made steady inroads into the literary marketplace, mainly as novelists” (16). And in her study, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986), Jane Spencer argues that the concept of the “professional woman writer” first surfaces in England in the eighteenth century (viii).

² The following sources provide more detailed information on the feminist efforts that I have briefly alluded to here: *Women in England, 1760-1914: A Social History* (2004), by Susie Steinbach; *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*, 8th edition (2006), edited by Stephen Greenblatt; and *The Victorian Web* (<http://www.victorianweb.org/>).

³ Richard Altick discusses the rise of the common reader in his monograph, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (1957).

⁴ In her monograph, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (2009), Linda H. Peterson discusses in detail another layer to this complex issue of the professional woman writer: regardless of gender, “whether authorship was or, indeed, should be considered a profession—equal to that of law or medicine, the military or the clergy—was a hotly debated question in the nineteenth century” (1).

⁵ Flint notes that while “The latter half of the sixteenth century seems to have been [. . .] the first time in English literary history that women were recognized as constituting a specific secular readership” (22), it is during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that

“the volume of commentary on women’s reading increased dramatically” (24), allowing critics to more easily chart the history of the British woman reader.

⁶ With respect to historical data, Flint concludes that there is no stereotypical or binary response that encapsulates the woman reader: “It is impossible to speak of the woman reader as though she ever held a consistent, stable identity: she is herself fragmented both into many sets of rhetorical patterns, each serving particular ideological ends, and into an endless variety of actual reading practices” (322).

⁷ While these texts mention the woman writer’s engagement with revision on some level, neither examines the impact of the female redactor on mid-Victorian culture or her specific role in manipulating the infamous double bind of the female author.

⁸ Walker acknowledges that “The revisionary tendency in women’s literature did not, of course, originate in the twentieth century” (3). She cites Margaret Cavendish as an early example of a female redactor.

⁹ In his pivotal work, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), Iser centers on the importance of the reader, arguing that the text anticipates an audience. Distinct from the actual reader, the implied reader is a “textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient” (34). It is also important to note that the mid-Victorian female redactor who revises a male-authored text is most likely not the “implied reader” of the text that she chooses to revise, which contributes to the complex concept of the private female reader, her interpretation of a male-authored text, and her public revision of that text.

¹⁰ Lanser defines discursive authority as “the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice” (6).

¹¹ Howe later specifies that Jewsbury had read “Carlyle’s earlier writings, *Sartor*, the essays about German literature, and especially the essay called *Characteristics*” (42).

¹² Although the relationship between Jane Carlyle and Geraldine Jewsbury was plagued with jealousy, drama, estrangement, impropriety, and ambivalence, it has long since captivated critics and authors alike. For example, Norma Clarke asserts, “It was the longest lasting and most significant friendship in [Jane’s] life. It was crossed by stormy differences and bitter quarrels, errors of what were called ‘bad taste’ on Geraldine’s part and patches of unforgiving coldness on Jane’s. The two women were an unlikely combination, and the closer one looked the more unlikely they became” (7).

¹³ Clarke states: “There is no doubt that Thomas Carlyle genuinely wished for an end to the constructed insipidities of femininity. But his refusal to acknowledge men’s part in it left him floundering in bafflement and mystery” (130).

¹⁴ To strengthen the point, it is worth noting that Jewsbury incorporates Carlyle’s sexist views, almost verbatim, into *The Half Sisters*. Conrad Percy, a lazy, self-centered dilettante with conservative views on women, espouses Carlyle’s point of view, stating: “Let [women] find out some man wiser and better than themselves, and make themselves into a beautiful reflex of his best qualities. It would be far better, and more becoming, in a woman, to do this, than to set up, on her own basis, as a superior, independent being” (221). In the novel, Jewsbury combats this view with the feminist opinions of Lord Melton, who serves as her liberal mouthpiece on women’s issues.

¹⁵ See Norma Clarke's *Ambitious Heights: Writing, Friendship, Love—The Jewsbury Sisters, Felicia Hemans, and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (1990), Lisa Surrridge's "Madame de Staël Meets Mrs. Ellis: Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*" (1995), and Linda M. Lewis's *Germaine de Staël, George Sand, and the Victorian Woman Artist* (2003).

¹⁶ Only Lewis and Surrridge specifically mention Jewsbury's engagement with *Past and Present*, and each critic provides very brief and general commentary.

¹⁷ The OED online defines mammonism as "Devotion to the pursuit of riches."

¹⁸ The OED online defines dilettantism as "The practice or method of a dilettante; the quality or character of dilettanti." The OED online defines a dilettante as "A lover of the fine arts; originally, one who cultivates them for the love of them rather than professionally, and so = *amateur* as opposed to *professional*; but in later use generally applied more or less depreciatively to one who interests himself in an art or science merely as a pastime and without serious aim or study." Although Carlyle's definition of dilettantism does not rely heavily on the notion of the amateur artist, both Jewsbury and Carlyle incorporate this concept into their explorations and/or revisions of the term.

¹⁹ When Mr. Simpson first hires Bianca, he claims that her salary of ten shillings a week is "more than she's worth now, but she will improve and be useful, and she may work it out then" (10).

²⁰ I discuss the marriage of Alice and Bryant in detail later in this chapter.

²¹ Carlyle insists that he cannot provide a concrete answer to "How that alarming problem of the Working Classes is to be managed" (269). While Carlyle posits theories throughout *Past and Present* on how England can utilize work to become a stronger and more noble nation, he asserts, "A certain Editor thanks the gods that nobody pays him

three hundred thousand pounds a year, two hundred thousand, twenty thousand, or any similar sum of cash for saying How; [. . .] An Editor's stipulated work is to apprise *thee* that it must be done" (269).

²² Linda M. Lewis argues, "The passion for one's work, as well as the way one defines herself by work, is a central theme in the novel as it was in Jewsbury's life" (75). Lewis adds, "Thomas Carlyle's ideas on human happiness and the necessity and dignity of work (the 'Gospel of Work') shape the philosophy in all Geraldine Jewsbury's novels" (91).

²³ In her entry on "Women" in *The Carlyle Encyclopedia* (2004), Anne M. Skabarnicki notes that "An overview of the Carlyles' views on women is not easy to attain" because Carlyle never directly addressed the issue of women in his works (495). Skabarnicki does conclude that "Although living in an age of nascent feminism, the Carlyles retreated into traditional positions that were generally neither liberal nor progressive" (495), views which are evident within the Carlyles' epistolary correspondences.

²⁴ While Dilettantism, by Carlyle's definition, is by no means restricted to the domestic sphere, Jewsbury examines this term within a domestic setting due to her gendered exploration of women and work. Moreover, it is important to note that while Alice's father pursues an amateur love of the arts, Alice's propensity toward the arts is denied. Ultimately, Jewsbury's gendered exploration of dilettantism demonstrates the increased limitations on a woman's intellectual freedom as a result of contemporary expectations of the proper role of the Victorian woman—a selfless domestic housewife. For Jewsbury, then, Carlyle's notions of "impotent, insolent Donothingism in Practice and Saynothingism in Speech" (150) become socially enforced for women like Alice, as opposed to freely chosen by lazy aristocratic men.

²⁵ It is important to note, here, that Norma Clarke draws a parallel between Alice and Jane Carlyle, which strengthens the point: “In *The Half Sisters*, the two heroines, Alice and Bianca, live out extreme versions of the lives chosen by Jane and Geraldine. Alice is the dutiful middle-class wife of a man who cannot respond to her emotional needs; Bianca a professional woman, single, earning a living and a place in society through the hard mastery of dramatic art” (188).

²⁶ Several critics discuss at length the complex issue of performance and its inextricable relationship to gender, domesticity, subjectivity, and the public and private spheres in *The Half Sisters*. For a detailed analysis of performance in *The Half Sisters*, see Lauren Chattman’s “Actress at Home and on Stage: Spectacular Domesticity and the Victorian Theatrical Novel” (1994), Lisa Surridge’s “Madame de Staël Meets Mrs. Ellis: Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half Sisters*” (1995), and Judith Rosen’s “Domesticity and Genius in Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half Sisters*” (1996).

²⁷ Linda M. Lewis asserts, “when a Victorian woman violated the terms of her womanliness by exchanging the private for the ‘public sphere’—and nothing could be more public than displaying herself on a stage—she invited public conversation about her personal life, and speculation about her morality” (74).

²⁸ In his monograph, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (1975), A.J. Smith argues, “What admits no dispute is that Donne’s poetry has come back into a general esteem in the present [twentieth] century such as it had not enjoyed since the time of Charles I—that his fame came full circle from Carew’s day to [T.S.] Eliot’s” (1). Although Smith traces the history of Donne’s reputation from the seventeenth through the nineteenth

centuries, he argues that Donne is not recognized as a “major poet” until the twentieth century, most notably through the work of T.S. Eliot (27).

²⁹ Dorothy Mermin points to the important discrepancy between Edmund Gosse’s somewhat fictional tale and the truth about the manner in which EBB shared these sonnets with Robert Browning (“Embarrassed Reader” 358-59). Despite Gosse’s insistence on EBB’s resistance to their publication, Mermin reports, “[Robert] Browning makes it clear that his wife’s reticence had been mostly the deferential reflex of his own. In 1846 she had answered his question about what she had been writing recently (almost certainly these sonnets) with a wit and self-possession absolutely antithetical to Gosse’s emblematic tale of coyness, self-dramatization, and shame” (“Embarrassed Reader” 359).

³⁰ A.J. Smith also notes that EBB “owned a copy of the 1639 edition of Donne’s poems and herself inscribed it on the fly leaf ‘Elizabeth B. Barrett, from her very dear Stormie’” (371). Smith’s detailed information on the inscription, which is in EBB’s maiden name, further indicates that EBB owned the copy before her marriage to Robert Browning.

³¹ According to Smith, the musical phrase (which Browning ends with a question mark) that precedes this direct reference is the beginning of an aria from Gluck’s *Orpheus and Euridice* (348).

³² I return to—and elaborate upon—this point in the second section of this chapter.

³³ While I only touch briefly on the religious overlap between Donne and EBB in this chapter, a detailed analysis of the religious connections and/or points of contention between these two poets requires further investigation. Such critical analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the “relationship” between Donne and EBB extends, in my opinion, beyond the love poetry I mention here. An analysis of their respective religious

stances as well as their religious poetry will most likely further elucidate the personal and poetic connections between these two poets.

³⁴ There seems to be some biographical discrepancy on this point: some critics assert that *Sonnets* was not published until 1850 while others argue that some selections of *Sonnets* were published as early 1844. Thus, I have concluded that 1850 represents the date in which *Sonnets from the Portuguese*—in its entirety—was first published.

³⁵ To further solidify this connection between the private (autobiographical) letters of EBB and Browning and EBB's sonnet sequence, it is important to note Michael R.G. Spiller's statement with respect to EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: "the genre that lies closest to the [sonnet] sequence, and provides its special kind of connectedness, is the letter" (93).

³⁶ In his essay, "The Poetry of John Donne," Robin Skelton elaborates on this point. He states: "a conventional, highly decorative and graceful, vocabulary and diction became characteristic of what has been called 'The Golden Age of English Lyricism'. The language of lyric poetry became simply a series of stock emotional gestures. [. . .] More importantly, there was little attempt to present the real complexities of any human involvement in an emotional relationship. The poems existed at a distance from actuality" (203).

³⁷ Thus, his "style" can be compared to that of the woman writer.

³⁸ It is important to note that Donne's *Songs and Sonets* is a miscellaneous collection of poems ranging from "outrageous, paradoxical, or cynical poems" to "witty and ingenious poems about love" to "serious analyses of love" (Leishman 178-79). In this chapter, I focus mainly on Donne's "more serious" love poems (Leishman 179), which most

strongly correlate to those of EBB, which suggests that it was Donne's serious love poems within the collection that influenced her own serious investigation of love and subjectivity in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

³⁹ To further strengthen this point, A.J. Smith contends that Donne first became "known" as a love poet with the 1633 publication of his poetry. By the mid-1630s, *Songs and Sonets* had gained popularity among poets as well as a reading public (11). The 1639 edition of poems that EBB owned, then, would have contained *Songs and Sonets*, proving EBB to have been familiar not just with the few poems mentioned in her epistolary correspondences with Browning ("A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" and "The Will") but with a larger portion of the collection.

⁴⁰ Many critics, like Mary B. Moore and Glennis Stephenson, argue that EBB's weak, self-deprecating, and helpless persona throughout *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is a dramatic performance: "she is assuming the stance for specific dramatic effects," and "one of these effects is the subversion of what might superficially appear as the dominant ideology of the sonnets: the woman who speaks actually emerges as a strong and active lover" (Stephenson 70).

⁴¹ This lack of confidence is not synonymous with the lack of assertion of the woman author. Rather, as I previously mentioned, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* represents a woman's honest and realistic journey of self-discovery with respect to her role as lover and poet. This sonnet, which appears very early in the sequence, represents the self-conscious and vulnerable speaker, who has just begun her quest for sexual and poetic selfhood. Michael R.G. Spiller discusses the speaker's progression from "hesitation and

a kind of pathetic gratitude toward erotic welcome and self-discovery as a woman capable of love and sexual fulfillment” (97).

⁴² Izaak Walton, Donne’s first biographer, who published *Life of Donne* within a few years of Donne’s death, explicitly states that “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning” “was written and addressed by Donne to his wife” (Bald 242).

⁴³ See Freccero for a brief historical account of alchemy with respect to Donne’s specific uses of the alchemical process in this complex analogy.

⁴⁴ Dorothy Mermin reads these exact five lines very differently. She argues, “Love enfolds, rather than casting out, what opposes it” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 134). I perceive the “world’s sharpness, like a clasping knife, / Shut[ting] in upon itself” as separate from the “close hand of Love” rather than enclosed within it.

⁴⁵ Albert C. Labriola discusses Donne’s focus on sacerdotalism in “The Canonization” in his article, “Sacerdotalism and Sainthood in the Poetry and Life of John Donne: ‘The Canonization’ and Canonization” (1995), providing a detailed analysis of religious language, images, and implications in the poem.

⁴⁶ These critics include—but are not limited to—Glennis Stephenson’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love* (1989), Margaret M. Morlier’s “Sonnets from the Portuguese and the Politics of Rhyme” (1999), Marjorie Stone’s “*Monna Innominata* and *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: Sonnet Traditions and Spiritual Trajectories” (1999), Mary B. Moore’s *Desiring Voices: Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism* (2000), Natalie M. Houston’s “Affecting Authenticity: *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Modern Love*” (2002), and Marianne Van Remoortel’s “(Re)gendering Petrarch: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*” (2006).

⁴⁷ In the “General Introduction” to her groundbreaking edition of *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* (1965), Helen Gardner notes that the poems first appeared in 1633 and were first assigned their title by the editor of the second edition of 1635 (xlvii). She adds, “A great many of these can be dated with absolute certainty; for others there are *termini*, and for others dates can be proposed with a high degree of probability” (lvii).

⁴⁸ While this discrepancy in poetic tone can be attributed to gender, it is important to also note a discrepancy in motivation: according to Helen Gardner, Donne’s poems which eventually formed *Songs and Sonets* “were not written for publication and Donne may well have thought that their free circulation would be unlikely to enhance his reputation as serious person” (l).

⁴⁹ For a detailed analysis on how EBB uses performance in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, see Glennis Stephenson’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love* (1989) and Angela Leighton’s “Stirring ‘a Dust of Figures’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Love” (1999).

⁵⁰ For a detailed analysis of EBB’s complex revision of the Petrarchan sonnet, which is outside the scope of this chapter, see Mary B. Moore’s *Desiring Voices: Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism* (2000).

⁵¹ Several critics, including Houston, Mazzaro, and Morlier, investigate the ways in which EBB’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* violates traditional Petrarchan conventions of rhyme, meter, and syntax.

⁵² Moore also supports this idea in her chapter, “Indeterminacy and the Economy of Love” in *Desiring Voices: Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism* (2000).

⁵³ Because my chapter focuses on Braddon's cultural revision of production and consumption in *The Doctor's Wife*, I do not discuss her revision of *Madame Bovary* in any detail. Several critics do perform comparative studies on *Madame Bovary* and *The Doctor's Wife*, including—but not limited to—C. Heywood's "Flaubert, Miss Braddon, and George Moore" (1960), Ann Heilman's "Emma Bovary's Sisters: Infectious Desire and Female Reading Appetites in Mary Braddon and George Moore" (2003), and Catherine J. Golden's *Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction* (2003) and "Censoring Her Sensationalism: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and *The Doctor's Wife*" (2006).

⁵⁴ In her monograph, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (1992), Ann Cvetkovich notes, "From the moment of its appearance in England in the eighteenth century, the novel had to struggle to achieve respectability as a form of high culture, a process which was the subject of intense debate by the middle of the 19th century, and which ultimately culminated by the end of the century in the splitting of the novel into a high-culture form and a series of popular or mass-produced subgenres" (15).

⁵⁵ Although a detailed investigation of Braddon's role as editor of *Belgravia* is outside the scope of this chapter, I gesture toward the ways in which Braddon's revisionary goals in *The Doctor's Wife* may impact the manner in which critics interpret both the novel and Braddon's subsequent position as editor of *Belgravia*—a topic worthy of further literary investigation.

⁵⁶ While Robinson does not acknowledge *The Doctor's Wife* at all, it is important to note that Phegley does establish a connection between these two publications. She states: "It

seems that the unfulfilling outcome of *The Doctor's Wife* precipitated a shift in the maturing writer's thinking that led directly to her Belgravian strategy to redefine the relationship between women readers and sensationalism rather than try to live up to the standards of realism" (137).

⁵⁷ Richard Altick discusses the rise of the common reader in his monograph, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (1957).

⁵⁸ Such novelists include Gustav Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*), Jane Austen (*Northanger Abbey*), and George Eliot (*The Mill on the Floss*).

⁵⁹ I use the term "producer," here deliberately, in order to draw connections to my earlier definition. While Lansdell is not a lowbrow producer who succumbs to the demands of the industry of mass production, he does focus on the personal "market value" of the text and the base interests of the lowbrow consumer in his attempts to manipulate textuality in order to subtly seduce Isabel.

⁶⁰ In "Emma Bovary's Sisters: Infectious Desire and Female Reading Appetites in Mary Braddon and George Moore" (2003), Ann Heilman asserts that the Gilberts' marriage was also completely devoid of sexuality: "In subtle hints the text implies that George is, in effect, impotent and Isabel still a virgin—the only possible explanation for her apparent ignorance of Roland's erotic intentions" (36).

⁶¹ In one of her letters to Bulwer-Lytton, she comments, "I am so afraid of making Roland Lansdell unmanly *or* ungentlemanly. I want him to be gentleman whatever he is—but I want also to show the wide difference between a man's love & a woman's sentimental fancy" (Wolff, "Devoted Disciple" 23).

⁶² Schroeder and Schroeder devote a chapter of their monograph, *From Sensation to Society: Representations of Marriage in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 1862-1866* (2006), to the complex topic of marriage in *The Doctor's Wife*.

⁶³ The constant repetition of “grave” also foreshadows the manner in which the deaths of both George and Lansdell eventually allow Isabel to freely pursue textuality in whatever manner she chooses.

⁶⁴ Melissa Schaub’s analysis of the conclusion in her essay, “‘Divine Right to Happiness’: The Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Woman Reader in *Madame Bovary* and *The Doctor's Wife*” (2003), is worth noting: “Isabel’s conversion to this desirable critical maturity takes place essentially outside the narrative frame, and indeed I would argue that the narrator describes it in such a way as to make it clear that Isabel’s metamorphosis into a realistic reader makes her story essentially unnarratable [. . .]. In other words, the new Isabel cannot be the heroine of a novel, even the ostensibly realist novel this narrator has claimed to be writing; the picture of the old Isabel reading and dreaming of a better world than the real one remains impressed in the reader’s mind” (34).

⁶⁵ Both Robert Lee Wolff, in *Sensational Victorian* (1979), and Lyn Pykett, in her introduction to *The Doctor's Wife* (1998), discuss this concept of Smith-as-mouthpiece-for-Braddon in more detail. Moreover, Braddon’s letters reveal the same struggles of production (time, money, etc.) that Smith comically faces throughout the novel.

⁶⁶ In particular, consider Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, which includes incidents of sexual manipulation, crime, money, and scandal; and Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, which incorporates sex, pregnancy, and murder into the plot.

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