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“Relations in the Unseen”: An Asexual Reading of Long Nineteenth Century British Literature

by

Keith Huntington Derrick

Under the Direction of Paul Schmidt, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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ABSTRACT

Media production will often sexualize their products, creating an encumbrance to asexual representation, all under the guise that “sex sells.” Because of that belief in the selling power of sexualization, there has been little asexual representation, preventing people from understanding asexuals or even realizing they are asexual. It wasn’t until the mid-twentieth century that asexuality came to mean feeling no, little, or conditional sexual attraction. Accepting that asexuality is, at least in some part, inherent and that aspects of life that lack the adequate language to be explicitly stated are still capable of being artistically expressed, then it follows that there are asexual characters and asexual stories that were created prior to the mid-twentieth century. This enables readers to find intersections between implicitly expressed asexuality and literature. My research is a re-imagining of established queer theory through the lens of asexuality. I then take that new critical framework and apply it to long nineteenth century British Literature, before the term “asexual” gained its meaning as we understand it today, and identify potentially asexual characters and narratives. The readings conducted discover new ways to read characters like Emma Woodhouse and Aurora Leigh. But, beyond that, these readings also explore new ways of being that are not bound by compulsory sexuality. The implications of this research are two-fold: first, to reclaim a compendium of lost texts as “asexual literature” in much the same way feminist literary theory did in the sixties and seventies; secondly, to dispel the modern notion that sex is integral to every person’s happiness and well-being and illustrate that asexual characters can be a core component to media that is compelling, popular, and profitable. By dispelling that myth, this research will encourage modern media production to reconsider asexuality in their work. Those works will contribute to making asexuality more visible so that

the next generation of asexuals will not have to struggle for decades before they finally realize who they are.

INDEX WORDS: Queer Theory, Jane Austen, E. M. Forster, George Moore, Walter Scott, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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2023

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August 2023

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Charmian, whose unending support made this all possible.

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I would like to thank Paul Schmidt, my director, for all that he has done to make this project possible. For five years, he has encouraged me to feel confident in my instincts. His support through this process was invaluable and has set a stellar example for me to model when the time comes for me to act as a director for students in the future. His constant encouragement, even when I was at my lowest, ensured the following work could be completed. The same is also true of my readers, LeeAnne Richardson and Randy Malamud, whose insightful feedback enriched my prose immeasurably.

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QUEER VICTORY: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAILURE AND ASEXUAL

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INTRODUCTION

It was August 28, 2019, the first day of my sociology class exploring the intersections between sexuality and society. I was very excited to begin some earnest research on asexuality so I could better hone how I would identify it in literature. To start the class, the instructor passed around index cards and asked us to write one word that described for us an “ideal sexual encounter.” Not having an ideal sexual encounter, I wrote down “If I am having a sexual encounter, it isn’t ideal.” To my surprise, the instructor then took up the cards and began to read them aloud. My classmates gave answers like “consensual” or “pleasurable;” however, when it came time to read my response to the prompt, the instructor, with a bit of disappointment in her voice, indicated the next one did not follow her instructions and read mine aloud. The class had a good laugh. They found my answer humorous. I greatly respect my instructor and classmates and know they would never intentionally cast me as the Other. Yet that is what occurred. I felt obligated to point out that my response was not a joke and explain my sexuality to the class. After class, I chatted with the instructor to discover if there would be any asexual research that we would be reading. I was told there simply wasn’t any significant research on the subject to warrant any inclusion in the curriculum.

The purpose of this dissertation is to fill that gap in scholarship. While I disagree with the assertion my instructor made, it is an understandable one. Julie Sondra Decker’s book about asexuality is titled *The Invisible Orientation* precisely because of how easy asexuality is to overlook. Consequently, there is not nearly as much scholarship on asexuality as there is on trans issues or lesbian studies. In addition to a lack of scholarship, there is also a lack of explicitly stated asexual representation in media which further compounds the community’s lack of visibility. I hope to address both of these concerns by analyzing English, Scottish, Welsh, and

Irish literature from the long nineteenth century. I argue that several major works from the long nineteenth century contain characters who experience what we describe today as asexuality, despite the term “asexuality” not referring to the sexual identity at the time. Through this analysis, I intend to illustrate the benefits of conducting an asexual reading, beginning the process of reclaiming a compendium of lost texts as asexual literature. I also hope to demonstrate the benefit of asexual characters engaging in asexual stories. So much of modern media production is driven by the axiom that “sex sells,” creating an obstacle to asexual representation. I will complicate the idea of sex’s essentiality and demonstrate that art containing asexual characters and narratives is compelling, popular, and profitable.

I begin with this anecdote to highlight the stakes of this project. Asexuals are a marginalized group that are often dismissed as not being real. This attitude even exists among the broader LGBT2SQIA+ community as well.¹ Part of this sentiment stems from a lack of understanding of what precisely asexuality is as well as how it acts as a queering force. Queerness as a concept is difficult to define. Quantifying it into measurable metrics would, in some ways, de-queer queerness. As a result, critical applications of queer theory vary dramatically. These variations become starker when analyzing sexual orientation where sexual identity is not explicitly stated and even more so when that sexual identity cannot be stated. However, as long as I am mindful of the subjective nature of queerness and its relationship to the status quo as a natural disruptor of normative forces surrounding gender and sexuality, I can still critically explore asexuality as a queer identity. Highlighting asexuality’s inherent queerness is essential when analyzing the various characters and narratives of the long nineteenth century through an asexual lens. To accomplish this challenging task, I will apply Ela Przybylo’s theory

in *Asexual Erotics* to established queer theory scholarship, enabling me to conduct entirely new and revelatory readings.

Before I begin any significant reading and interpretation, I need to develop several working definitions that will enable the analysis. Asexuality studies owes a great deal to the foundational feminist and queer scholarship by Michel Foucault, bell hooks, and Adrienne Rich. Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* claims that the medical codification of sexual acts by sexologists in the late nineteenth century created the concept of sexual identity (101). He specifically refers to homosexuality as an identity; he argues that homosexuality as an orientation existed long before the identity ever did, making an important distinction between sexual identity and sexual orientation. Foucault claims that the study of sex codified the existing discourse to exclude some as homosexual and include others within a heterosexual-normalized sphere. Regarding asexuality, Foucault's hypothesis finds a very convincing foothold. Rich then sets the stage for reclaiming past texts as queer when she analyzed the effects of compulsory heterosexuality ("comphet") on the queer community in the article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Like Foucault, Rich does not explicitly address asexuality. Her focus is on the insidious effect comphet has on the queer community when heterosexuality is assumed and enforced as the default in society (632). Because of Rich's work on expanding our understanding of comphet, Przybylo and others began to explore the concept of compulsory sexuality, the idea that sexual attraction, activity, and relationships are the enforced default position. That discourse ultimately inspired *Asexual Erotics*.

These works advance the idea that sexuality is not defined by action. The trend scholarship takes as a result of defining sexuality via attraction rather than behavior enables asexuality studies to exist. Rather than being forced to define asexuality by what it is not,

asexuality studies seeks to emphasize what the space of not feeling sexual attraction means in and of itself. Rich's compulsory heterosexuality and hooks's marginality created a theoretical framework through which the established structure of feminism failed to account for various communities that exist within the sphere of what it meant to be a "woman." The fallacy of the monolithic woman and the negative, marginalized space where the Other is forced to inhabit mirrors the relationship that Michael D. Storms pointed out in the Kinsey studies between the 'X' participants and those classified on the Kinsey scale. In the decades following hooks and Rich, various scholars explored the space that encompasses the sphere of asexuality, helping us to get a better understanding of asexuality and its implications.² The culmination of this arc is the publication of Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* in 2019.

The history of asexuality studies is relatively short. Before the 1950s, asexuality was not generally considered a sexual identity. An early predecessor to the idea of asexual identity comes from Magnus Hirschfeld, an early twentieth-century sexologist, describing the sexual appetites of great thinkers like Immanuel Kant as being indifferent to the physical and focused primarily on the mental. He coined the term "*atropische*" as a means of categorizing these people who gain what an allosexual (someone who experiences sexual attraction) would consider sexual gratification through purely mental activity (Hirschfeld 163).³ Since there is no direct translation for the term, the etymology and context are all Hirschfeld gives the reader to deduce what is meant. I would suggest that the root word here is deliberately obscure, queer even. It could potentially be *Atropos*, one of the three Furies, specifically the Fury responsible for deciding the time and manner of death of mortals, highlighting the unique relationship asexuals have with what Sigmund Freud would later term the death drive. It could also be *a-* for without and *tropikos* referring to the peak delineation of the sun mercatorially during the solstice, in other

words, as not favoring any of the two established poles, or, in this metaphor, genders. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, asexuality as an identity did not enter usage in the English language until the early twentieth century. Storms recognizes that Alfred Kinsey's studies identified asexual people but did not have a place to put them. He, for the first time in an academic setting, refers to them as asexual (172). In Foucauldian terms, Storms defined asexuality as an identity with the already existing orientation using the "X" codification of the Kinsey studies in 1979. However, he did not create asexuals themselves. They have existed throughout time. We may assume that, if art is a reflection of reality, asexual characters also existed throughout literary history but society did not have the language at its disposal to properly identify them. They only need someone to discover them.

Despite the growth of asexuality studies over the last few decades, there is relatively little scholarship that attempts to identify asexual characters in literature. In recent years, there has been increased attention to the intersections between asexuality studies and literary studies. Meagan Arkenberg published an asexual reading of Arthurian legend in 2014. In the same year, Elizabeth Hannah Hanson published an essay about asexual narratology in a collection about asexual studies. Justin Smith, a Ph.D. candidate at Pennsylvania State University, recently published an article in a special issue of *Feminist Formations* discussing asexuality in the work of Claude McKay. The most expansive example is the recent dissertation of Aley O'Mara, whose research performed a similar asexual reading of early modern English literature. While there is not a significant amount of scholarship, it is quite evident that this burgeoning interest in the subject of asexuality and literature will continue to expand into new areas. In each of these examples, the scholars take pre-existing theory and apply an asexual lens to it in their analysis. For example, Arkenberg argues Lee Edelman's *No Future* and his argument for aggressive queer

opposition to heteronormativity is asexually embodied in Malory's portrayal of Galahad. The methodology of this study will be similar. Each chapter will take pre-existing theory, apply Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics*, and then analyze literature through the newly created construct.

Some readers may feel there is an inherent reductiveness to reading a character as asexual, as illustrated by Hanson when she describes the concept of "asexual possibility" (346). Hanson's approach is to identify the "logic of asexuality" within a text to avoid the "evidentiary problems" that will naturally occur when attempting to examine sexual attraction (345). She relies on a teleological approach examining formal elements of the text and highlighting areas where an asexual logic asserts itself. But there is a blind spot here – or perhaps, an incompleteness, that serves as a point of ingress for subsequent scholars to come back to this work and explore it further beyond the logic of asexuality. Hanson presumes that any analysis of asexuality as an orientation before its association with asexuality as an identity must be predicated on behavior, particularly in a novel like *Aurora Leigh* or *A Room with a View* where a significant emphasis is placed on the plot. She argues that this problem makes narratology the easiest way of assessing asexual possibility in a text itself, avoiding making claims about the sexual orientation of any particular character. But asexuality is not defined quite so easily in terms of behavior.⁴ Sexual orientations are relative to sexual attraction, not sexual activity. Otherwise, everyone who ever took a vow of chastity would be considered asexual. Sexual identity is merely a label used to describe an individual's orientation, and that label can take on a variety of different connotations depending on the context. Someone may feel comfortable describing themselves as heteroromantic asexual in the company of other asexuals but prefer to describe themselves as queer when at a gay bar. There may even be times that they say they are straight. It doesn't change their orientation, only the label.

That label can mean many different things, but for this project, I need to use a flexible and functional definition rather than a prescriptive one. A flexible definition will help me in doing what Hanson would not: explore representations of asexual characters. Asexuality, simply put, is the experience of not being sexually attracted to others (Decker 3), but that simple definition neglects a portion of the community. Neutral language must be maintained when discussing asexuality. Asexuals, more colloquially referred to as Aces, are often described as “lacking” or having an “absence” of sexual desire. These terms are unproductive, biased toward conventionality as the default condition, and result in a breakdown of the dialogue. When someone describes a gay man as *not* being attracted to women, that speaker is offensively describing a person as what they are not rather than what they are. The person being discussed is relegated to the role of the “Other” by implying a person is defined by what other people are rather than who the individual is. In her book, *The Invisible Orientation*, Decker spends an entire chapter defining terms like “asexual,” “aromantic,” “demisexual,” and many other concepts that are alien to most people. Recognizing her audience is unfamiliar with these concepts, she specifically takes the time to point out to what asexuals are not, using that framing her reader would have to highlight more productive and inclusive asexual terminology. For example, “we don’t have a hole in our lives where sexual attraction ‘should’ be” (Decker 3). For Decker, the greatest obstacles to overcome in gaining visibility are the misconceptions that come from the language surrounding asexuality.

People outside of asexual circles have been conditioned to think that asexuality comes with certain strings attached. The notion that an asexual person might masturbate seems incongruent with the image they have developed of asexuals.⁵ Nothing could be farther from the truth. Decker elaborates on the wide variety of subcultures that fall under the Ace umbrella, most

notably discussing the difference between sexual attraction and romantic attraction (17). But Decker's definition is not the only one that exists. Hanson, in her essay, "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure," defines asexuality as a "non-experience of sexual attraction" (344). AVEN, the world's largest asexuality advocacy group, recently made news in the asexual community by changing their definition from the one used by Decker and others to "someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction" ("Updating").⁶ Even now, there is a debate surrounding whether to amend that definition to include "conditional." This debate illustrates the difficulty in creating a prescriptive definition for any sexual orientation.⁷ Much as Hanson does in her essay, a more functional definition relative to our subject is needed. I use definitions that rely on the literary devices each author employs to better identify areas where they are expressing asexuality.

The central principle surrounding *Asexual Erotics* is that the erotic and the sexual are not mutually inclusive concepts. Przybylo points out that this assumption is a product of Freud's misplaced theory on sexuality that did not account for the death drive and the tendency of sexologists wanting to codify sexuality behaviorally, similar to Foucault's theory on *scientia sexualis* (20).⁸ She differentiates between the concepts of asexuality, nonsexuality, and desexualization so the reader may understand that these terms, while having a certain overlap with one another in various ways, are far from interchangeable in their usage (93). It is the notion that these concepts are synonymous that allows asexual studies to be dismissed, even among the pride community. When so much of queer theory is predicated on the assumption that sexual behavior is inherent to the application of the theory, asexuality becomes antithetical to queer empowerment. But if the erotic is reclaimed as encompassing all pleasure, not simply sexual pleasure, then asexuality becomes not only an important aspect of all extant queer theory, but also an essential consideration for any queer reading. When basing our understanding of

sexuality on behavior rather than attraction, non-heteronormative identities become easier targets for regulation, whether through individual, self-restraint or through broad societal laws like those criminalizing sodomy. By emphasizing that queerness is not fundamentally predicated on behavior, Przybylo recognizes the fundamental complexities inherent to queerness, allowing the reader to dispel their worldview based on those false assumptions. In each chapter that follows, I will apply a facet of her theory from *Asexual Erotics* to literary texts so I may illustrate the utility of a practical application to several works of fiction.

The final component of my methodology is stressing that this is a forensic approach to studying literature. Forensic science seeks to provide the most likely conclusions based on a complete collection of available evidence. Forensic scientists do not state their conclusion in absolutes but rather give their recommendation of the likelihood of a particular conclusion being the case based upon the totality of all available evidence. They may also warrant that one piece of evidence is not as strong as others, possibly even contradictory to the conclusion, but when taken in the context of the totality of the evidence as a whole, the outcome of a character being a-spectrum cannot be dismissed out of hand. This study is, ultimately, speculating about the orientations of characters to whom no one at the time of publication could refer to as asexual. But my speculation will be backed up with close readings of the texts grounded in a solidly formed theoretical framework.

In the first chapter, I explore Jane Austen's *Emma* and Walter Scott's *Waverley* and their unique depictions of asexuality. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman points out the usage of the child as a biopolitical weapon that privileges heterosexuals, relegating the queer community to an untenable situation: accept a society based upon reproductive futurity in which they cannot be full participants or be erased from societal discourse. He refers to this as

the idolization of the child. The Romantics and their contemporaries went to great lengths to idealize the child but did not necessarily extend that idealization to idolization, or at least not the idolization as described by Edelman. These writers idealized the child-state and encouraged the adoption of the child-state as a means of regaining access to the lost innate knowledge, particularly about death. If the Romantics idolized the child, it was done so as a means of accessing the death drive rather than ignoring it. While the association with the child is usually associated with the Romantic poets, I intend to explore how contemporary novelists draw upon the ideal of the child-state to subvert allonormative expectations society places upon the characters, the story, and the reader.

I then move on to the Victorian period. This era represents a series of societal attempts to redress the Romantic notion that the collective individual should have some measure of control over the status quo. When considering sexuality, the implications become quite plain. Throughout the Victorian era, the British government took several steps to try to limit perceived sexual depravities.⁹ The effect of these laws and society's strictures as a whole tended to force discussion of sex underground. In fiction, expressions of sexuality often became more subtextual rather than the explicit sexuality seen in Byron or Blake. My second chapter is focused on applying Hanson's asexual narratology, taking it a step further and exploring asexual structuralism. As a result of restrictive laws and societal codes of conduct, writers needed to resort to subtle expressions of sexuality, particularly for women authors. A reader receptive to sexual discourse will read the text and see the subtle clues the author left for them to interpret, whereas the Puritanical reader who would call for bans and censorship should they read something they perceive to be lewd could more easily dismiss the text.¹⁰ This tool is particularly important for female authors who often faced added scrutiny in their work. By conducting an

asexual structuralist reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*, I highlight a great deal of subtextual discourse on asexuality taking place and how it skews readers' expectations.

My final chapter focuses on *fin de siècle* texts. These writers inhabit an interesting period in literature. If the Victorians represent a response to the Romantics, picking and choosing which elements of Romanticism are worth keeping and which should be discarded, then the *fin de siècle* is the culmination of that collective effort. A variety of ideologies become prominent in a society that is struggling to accommodate both the individual and the institution. Chapter three represents an analysis of the literature that came out of some of these movements. The slow decay of Victorian imperialism also coincided with a questioning of the societal values codified during that period, especially those surrounding sexuality. The laws still being a concern, many writers chose to express their ideas on sexuality through the same subtle codes written in the Victorian era. However, coinciding with the failure of the empire, much of their expression revolves around failure at being straight. In this chapter, I employ Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* to find areas where a character's asexuality is expressed via a failure to be allosexual. I engage and dispel both heterosexual and homo-normative assumptions about characters like Agnes Lahens in *Celibates* and George Emerson and Lucy Honeychurch in *A Room with a View*. It is assumed these characters are straight because they are either in a romantic relationship with someone of the opposite sex or being prepared for one. By illustrating how these characters fail to meet allonormative standards, I highlight their interactions with asexuality.

As I will demonstrate with each of these readings, conducting an asexual analysis offers unique insight into each text as well as the scholarship surrounding it. This re-envisioning of

these texts and the theory used to analyze them will have implications in how similar scholarship is conducted as well as having applications outside the academy.

Endnotes

1. The LGBT2SQIA+ acronym is something of a point of contention in the queer community. In much the same vein as transphobic members of the community attempt to remove the “T,” other members of the community also attempt to argue asexuals do not belong and remove the “A.” The acronym being an inherently exclusionary way to describe what is inherently an inclusive community, I will, in the remainder of the text, refer to it as either the queer community or the pride community.

2. See Kristina Gupta’s usage of compulsory sexuality in “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept” (2015) and Elizabeth Brake’s neologism “amatonormativity” in *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* (2012) as examples of works exploring the nebulous space that surrounds and sometimes intertwines with the asexual.

3. An allosexual is someone who experiences sexual attraction. The term began to be used on message boards and other virtual spaces frequented by asexuals in the early 2010s. The etymology is similar to that of asexuality. “Allo” is Greek meaning “another” or “other,” as in an allosexual experiences sexual attraction to another person. There is, however, some discussion about using the term “zedsexual” instead. The idea behind this term is to try to create distance between the modern-day discourse and the sexual codification by sexologists. Zedsexual highlights that sexual attraction exists on a spectrum from none to all, or a to z. For my part, I will use the more established term here, although I would welcome using a more inclusive term.

4. Hanson cites sociologist Anthony F. Bogaert whose work has often been criticized by the asexual community for incorrectly identifying what asexuality is. This may explain why Hanson is somewhat hesitant to explore a text beyond its asexual logic.

5. A common complaint within the Ace community is that other queer individuals do not think an asexual person is queer precisely because they might have sex. This form of gatekeeping resembles the same biphobic stereotype that in order to be bisexual a person must be in a same-sex relationship, erasing the bisexuality of bisexuals in opposite-sex relationships. As a result, there are many who erroneously connect asexuality with the intel phenomena. It is so prevalent that Przybylo even devotes a whole chapter of her book to it.

6. The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network.

7. For a further example of the difficulties that exist when applying a prescriptive definition to sexual orientation, please see Jane Ward's *Not Gay*, in which she explores the homosexual sexual practices that exist among self-identified straight men.

8. Sigmund Freud's theories in *Three Essays on Sexuality* argue that all people are driven by unconscious sexual desires, effectively erasing asexuals in the process. However, if we apply his theory on the death drive in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," asexuality becomes the effect of the desire to return to the womb being sublimated non-sexually or being eliminated altogether via the death drive. Despite that, the effects of those initial theories have had long-lasting effects for asexuality studies.

9. See the Offences Against the Person Act of 1828, the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 as examples of laws enacted designed to criminalize certain sexual behavior like male homosexual acts.

10. A modern-day example of this behavior exists in the rash of book banning going on across the country. Explicitly queer representation is easily targeted by fascists and their enablers. Books that are implicit in their representation yet still queer are capable of sneaking in under the radar, like a queer book living in the closet. This lead me to a moral and ethical

quandary: am I outing these texts and potentially placing them in that path of fascists who would see them excised from our culture?

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**IDEALIZING THE CHILD: ASEXUALITY & THE CHILD-STATE IN THE NOVELS
OF JANE AUSTEN AND SIR WALTER SCOTT**

“He who woos her must love the barren rock more than the fertile valley.”

-Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley*

The long nineteenth century began with a revolution of ideologies, a rebellion against the very notion of tradition now referred to as Romanticism. A fascination with childhood numbers among many of the tenets of the Romantic movement. Jonathan Bate even goes so far as to claim that the Romantics “invented the modern idea of childhood” (00:20). Coleridge describes genius as “carrying on the freshness and feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood” (497). It is this adoption of the faculties of childhood into the physical body of an adult that I will coin here as the child-state. The child-state is a conscious cultivation of what is perceived as immaturity in an adult with the purpose of finding value there. In the case of this reading, that value is a sense of queer empowerment. I use the term child-state, but Romantic scholars will be more familiar with the term “boy-man” or the “child-man.” Scholars like Pete Newbon, Claudia Nelson, and others use boy-man and child-man more regularly to refer to authors who attempt to cultivate feelings of childhood as adults. While those are the terms most traditionally used, it is essential to emphasize not only the quality as a state of being but also to employ a gender-neutral terminology, playing into the disruption of gender norms that Romantics often address in their work. “Boy-man” and “child-man” don’t do that and rely on an exclusionary discourse that, at least rhetorically, is not empowering. The term child-state can encompass all that those other terms do while also being inclusive of more empowering narratives, as I will soon illustrate.

Finding and cultivating child-like qualities of the self within the body of a fully grown adult offers a rich opportunity to apply queer theory. A queer theory reading will acknowledge the complex incongruity of adopting the child-state in a physically and sexually mature adult body. I argue that the portrayal of a child-state in the novels *Emma* and *Waverley* allows the reader to conduct a queer reading in which asexual characters retain their queerness while successfully retaining agency in navigating the status quo, finding a way to reject reproductive futurism that Lee Edelman decries in *No Future* but resisting his aggressive call to perpetual resistance to the status quo.

Jane Austen and Walter Scott, the authors of the two novels analyzed in this chapter, are themselves unique in their relation to Romanticism. Scott is generally considered a Romantic in his poetry only, and Austen is only tangentially related to Romanticism (Frye, “The Drunken Boat” 12). However, because they wrote alongside contemporaries like Wordsworth and Byron, there is a certain amount of Romanticism that the two engaged with as a part of the discourse in their novels. Of particular note are Austen’s and Scott’s portrayals of children and childhood and how those texts offer Romantic discourse on childhood from that time. One of the progenitors of this radical discourse surrounding childhood was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his treatise on education, *Émile*, Rousseau describes the child as having innate access to knowledge that we part with as we age and are socialized. This was fundamentally different from the established practices of education. John Locke’s approach to education based upon his theory of *tabula rasa* was the prevailing pedagogical doctrine at the time, and children’s education was designed to socialize them, emphasizing virtuosity (Gaul 50). Rousseau shifted the discourse on education by arguing that children possess innate knowledge, and it is the very socialization Locke lauds

that has a deleterious effect on the development of children into virtuous adults. There was a push to try and reconnect with that innate knowledge that eventually becomes lost as an adult.

Scott addresses the concept of innate knowledge at various points throughout his vast catalog of written work. He kept a very rigorous journal later in life. In his journal, the reader can see the genesis of his idea for the children's book *Tales of a Grandfather*, where he states that children's literature should be simplistic only in its form. "The grand and interesting consists in ideas, not words" (Scott, *Journal* 396). Reflecting on his own play as a child, Scott remarks that "I remember to this day the accuracy of my childish imagination" (374). This informs the readers understanding of Edward Waverley, the main character of Scott's novel *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*. Scott's description of Edward's education acknowledges that, as a child, Edward has a variety of instinctual knowledge and faculties (*Waverley* 67).¹ His education is described as a means of stamping out some of these and honing others, in a process that much resembles the process of socialization described by Rousseau. Some may point out that in the very next paragraph, Scott professes the importance of education and is advocating for the very socialization Rousseau deems deleterious. While it is true that Scott's narrator advocates on behalf of education, it would be rash to assume he intends to counter Rousseau's claims. Rather, it seems that he agrees with Rousseau about innate knowledge versus socialization, but also sees value in socialization. He is bemoaning educational half-measures that transform a lazy student into an adult with no critical thinking skills and no intellectual curiosity. In other words, if that innate knowledge must be sacrificed in the name of society, let it be sacrificed and replaced with faculties at their peak merging Rousseau's ideas on innate knowledge with Pope's axiom that "a little learning is a dangerous thing" (202).² Whereas Scott's views on innate knowledge seem clear despite not being explicitly indicated, Austen's are a bit murkier.

Unlike Scott, Austen did not keep a journal that we are aware of. Everything of hers that she wrote was written for an intended audience other than herself or hypothetical future biographers. Nor was Austen a governess where I could analyze her pedagogical approach. Many of her letters were burned. All that is left to scholars are her novels, some extant letters, and some juvenilia. There is no hard evidence to explicitly indicate that she was familiar with Rousseau. There does seem to be scholarly consensus that Austen was, at the very least, stylistically influenced by the Sentimentalist style of Rousseau and those who followed him (Cohen 216). As a result, I can only speculate about her perspective on innate knowledge versus socialization based on how education and youth are treated in her literature.³ However, it is somewhat telling in how Austen depicts marriage. In Austen's novels, marriage, for young women, becomes a socializing force in much the same manner as Rousseau describes. In a letter to Cassandra Austen, Jane's elder sister, Jane discusses a young, unmarried acquaintance. "She goes on now as young Ladies of 17 ought to do; admitted & admiring; in a much more rational way than her three elder Sisters, who had little of that kind of Youth" ("To Cassandra Austen" 32). Harriot Bridges, the young woman in question, was not marrying immediately following her education as her three elder sisters did (Le Faye 379n12). While there is no direct mention of innate knowledge, there is an implication that a woman's "Youth" has value and should not be rushed in favor of the domestic and maternal roles entailed in marriage. A common theme throughout much of Austen's work is about balancing the effect and control over reasoning and the effect and control over emotion. Austen's first novel is even titled *Sense and Sensibility* to emphasize that very theme.⁴ So while it would be overzealous to claim with any amount of certainty that Austen was an acolyte of Rousseau, it does stand to reason that she felt that

children possessed certain qualities that the institution of marriage represses and that those qualities should be fostered and appreciated while they are at a young woman's disposal.

Many prominent British writers of the period incorporated Rousseau's ideas into their works. Charles Lamb and his sister Mary, for example, adapted various plays of William Shakespeare into stories targeted to school children in an attempt to illustrate that the thematic quality of Shakespeare has utility separated from the beautiful but dense poetics so as not to confuse a child reader (1). In another example, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in part as a response to Rousseau's insistence that boys and girls should be educated separately and differently, describing his central thesis as "reared on a false hypothesis his arguments in favour of a state of nature are plausible, but unsound" (16). But for many Romantics, the idea of innate knowledge being lost to socialization became a quest to reconnect with that knowledge themselves.

Some Romantics even took the idea of innate knowledge so far as to believe that a child, as a quality of being temporally closer to a state of nonexistence, possessed a keener awareness of death. Rather than fear death as an end, a child would see death as another state of being. William Wordsworth's poem "We are Seven" is a common example when discussing Romanticism and childhood. The poet chances upon a child in a graveyard who, to the speaker, seems quite absurd in her claims about death. But the verse would tell us there is perhaps some truth to the girl's worldview, and it is the speaker who is being obstinate. Wordsworth is not alone in his fascination with the value of analyzing childhood. In Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Elizabeth's first appearance as a child is described in angelic terms. She naturally inspires in those around her a desire to do right by their fellow man. It is never fully articulated why this is the case but is solely presented as a sensation imparted by her. Conversely, Victor's

lust for acquired knowledge not only dilutes his sense of morality but is the impetus that leads him into disaster. The *bildungsroman* became a prevalent genre during this time and often related the value of a child's perspective on the world. The Romantics went to great lengths to idealize the child but did not necessarily extend that idealization to idolization, or at least not the idolization described by Edelman in *No Future*.

Considering *No Future* through the lens of asexuality requires a rethinking of Edelman. Edelman criticizes society's positioning of "the Child" as an unassailable drive behind social decisions. By weaponizing humanity's awareness of its mortality and the desire to maintain futurity, society can support any decision and make any opposition to that decision seem immoral by merely saying, "won't someone think of the children?" That conscious positioning inherently excludes queer voices from public discourse, relegating them to second-class citizens. Edelman further explains why queer voices are purposefully diminished because of their connection to the death drive. With little or no connection to the child, the queer community is othered for its appearance of embracing the death drive. To gain society's acceptance, members of the queer community must either remain silent or parrot the status quo's ideologies, ultimately suppressing their queerness. Otherwise, they face the scorn of the status quo. All of this is done in the name of the child. Edelman proposes that the queer community refuse to allow the discourse to be dictated by futurity and instead reinforce the queer community's connection with the death drive. This is accomplished through the adoption of the *sinthomosexual*. This neologism is a portmanteau of Lacan's "sinthome" and "homosexuality." In this context, it refers to a person, typically a queer individual, who dispels the "fantasy of futurism" and admits to the fallacy of reproduction as a placeholder for mankind's ultimate *jouissance*: immortality (Edelman 38). The ecstasy of breaking free from the cyclical illusion of reproductive futurity is

something the queer community can do and only by consciously embracing *sinthomosexuality*, or so Edelman would have us believe, but, in asexuality, his theory loses some of its teeth.

Edelman's theory is predicated upon queerness and its relationship to behavior, specifically the behavior of non-reproductive sex and the pleasure found as a result of the act. But in the face of asexuality, adherents to Edelman's theory must do one of two things, ignore asexuals and erase them from being queer because their queerness cannot be easily explained by behavior, or make room in the theory for asexuality and recognize that behavior cannot define queerness.

This fault, at its core, is not a flaw of Edelman so much as the reality facing queer individuals. Because the status quo seeks to pathologize sexuality as behavior, the queer community, in its resistance, must meet them on that field for battle or cede it to the status quo's control. The antisocial approach to queer theory following in the tradition of Leo Bersani's *Homos* is compelling. That tradition is steeped in the notion that sexuality is fundamentally about sexual intercourse. As Bersani puts it, for any man "to *want* sex with another man is not exactly a credential for political radicalism" (205; emphasis added). Antisocial queer theory takes the grim reality faced by much of the queer community, offering the possibility of achieving a state of being the straight community could never hope to achieve. It serves to flip the power dynamic fundamentally. However, antisocial queer theory predicates itself on the understanding that sexuality is defined by the act of sex. Nonetheless, the idolization of the child and the *sinthomosexual* are compatible with asexuality studies, even though they were not conceived in a way that immediately enables their use. Ela Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics* provides a critical bridge between *No Future* and an asexual reading of the Romantic writers who had rather inventive approaches to expressing sex, sexual attraction, and childhood.

Przybylo's theory separates the erotic from the sexual. The erotic now becomes broad, encompassing all manner of fantasies and attractions rather than being limited to purely sexual stimulation. This enables the erotic to become more Lordean, based on both a pleasurable and, most notably for this argument, revolutionary quality. As Audre Lorde puts it, sexuality can encompass "dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, [and] examining an idea" (57). The very radical politics that Bersani and Edelman seek to reinforce through their emphasis on behavior can be addressed through a queer semiotic approach to sexuality in which "queerness" has a much broader definition and application. The queer rhetoric of revolution is also the rhetoric of sexuality. If the Romantics are anything, they are revolutionaries. From their varying degrees of support for Napoleon to their controversial opinions on art, it seems Romantic writers were doing something to challenge the status quo regularly, including their approach to sexuality. Generating erotic pleasure from disrupting established orthodoxies not only describes the Romantics but also compliments Edelman's theory on how the queer community is better served by achieving *jouissance* through disruption rather than seeking comity with elements of society that see queerness as fundamentally detrimental to heteronormative social order, exemplifying Edelman's *sinthomosexual*.

An asexual reading of the Romantics and those influenced by them can resolve some of the critiques of Edelman's theory of the *sinthomosexual*. The *sinthomosexual* is a response to the unrealized fallacy that occurs as a result of heteronormativity. Reproductive futurity is, at its core, a delusion that sublimates a desire to live forever into a sexual desire that results in offspring as a proxy for immortality. The *sinthomosexual* is someone who supplants that delusion "tethered to Imaginary form" by recognizing the power "fantasy" holds over reality (Edelman 33). Critics of Edelman's work have argued that "Edelman's own conceptual

framework neutralises the *sinthomosexual's* stance" (Coffman 66). These arguments highlight the difficulty in orienting a theory seeking to destroy the symbolic order while relying on that same symbolic order to define what opposition should resemble. What neither Edelman nor his critics consider is that the very queer *jouissance* Edelman espouses as inherent to the *sinthomosexual's* means of disrupting the symbolic order is exemplified through an asexual reading of the Romantics. Not only do the Romantics engage with childhood in a way that emphasizes adoption of the child-state, idealizing the child-state rather than idolizing the child, but an asexual reading of Romantic characters and texts reveals that the *jouissance* that Edelman believes will come from disrupting the symbolic order is more readily apparent when the social order is disrupted by achieving ecstasy through non-heteronormative and non-reproductive eroticisms.

Some Romantic authors explore this through the fantastical exercise of the imagination. Take, for example, William Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris, or, The New Pygmalion*. Throughout the novella, the narrator expresses his love for a woman, of whom he only has an image. The narrator refuses to reconcile the reality with the perception he constructed in his imagination. He interprets every action his object of love makes as evidence of their love, even her eventual scorn for him. The child-state is recognized several times in the course of the story, with the narrator considering himself "childish, wanton, drunk with pleasure" or calling himself a "child in love" (Hazlitt 107 & 32). Unfortunately for the narrator, he embraces compulsory sexuality, as well. As a result, the narrator's expectation of a return of his affections leads him to ruination. Were the narrator to reject compulsory sexuality and adopt an asexual appreciation of his love, the imagination would fulfill the need for her affection. The heteronormativity and compulsory

sexuality within the narrative prevent *Liber Amoris* from a happy ending as well as being more than just a brief example of the relationship between Romanticism and queer theory.

By recognizing that fantasy influences perception and adjusts our notion of reality, or as Edelman would describe in Lacanian terms, the real, the *sinthomosexual* can embrace both reality and fantasy simultaneously. In contrast, those invested in the delusion created by heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality must accept everything is a reality to prevent their worldview from collapsing upon its own hypocrisy. This recognition of the power that the imagination wields is not unique to Edelman and Lacan and is a basic principle of Romanticism. Of the imagination, Wordsworth said,

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of the imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature. (307)

Note how Wordsworth stresses the relationship between reality and the creative elements afforded him as the poet. Not only do Romantic writers like Wordsworth engage with the real world, but they do so with a “certain colouring of imagination,” presenting the world in an unusual, or, as I will argue here, queer way. Percy Shelley went so far as to describe himself and other poets as the “legislators of the World” (363). The relationship between sexual orientation, which is unique and only knowable to the individual, and sexual identity, a label used to describe that orientation, is a discussion between the signifier and the signified. That relationship parallels

the strange relationship between the imaginary and the real and how the two affect one another. Sexual orientation is quite subjective. Much like the imaginative faculty, it defies empirical observation as sexual orientation is a function of attraction, not behavior. But sexual identity takes on the form of the real as a means of expressing our orientation, even if it is inadequate at doing so. Queer theory is, itself, indebted to Romanticism for influencing society and enabling such modern ideas as queerness. The Romantic imagination is a simultaneous recognition of the relationship between reality and the fantasy fabricating our perception of that reality. The relationship between signifier and signified that Edelman seeks to queer through the adaptation of Lacan's *sinthome* into his *sinthomosexual* is the same relationship that Austen and Scott recognize between sense and sensibility, the imagination and reason. While there have been queer readings of Austen and Scott in the past, none of them addressed asexuality. By employing Lacanian ideas about symbolic order, Edelman, perhaps unknowingly, provided a narrow window for an asexual reading of writers like Austen and Scott who disrupted that same order by asexually idealizing the child-state.

***Emma*: A Queer (un)Accounting of Emma Woodhouse**

While critics have analyzed sexuality within Austen's novels, even going so far as to speculate about Austen herself, no academic scholarship has ever attempted a reading of her work to identify areas that may intersect with asexualities.⁵ "She works within a narrow range of discontinuities, but that narrowness makes the oscillation the more powerful. An adequate response to Austen is a pretty dizzying experience. To miss it is to miss utterly, for example, *Emma*" (Peckham 315). That dizzying effect encourages queer readings of her texts. Austen's dizzying experience is at the center of her work, but is also one that can subtly be overlooked.

Considering the focus of the marriage-plot used by Austen in all of her works, I infer some of that dizziness is a subtextual means of expressing queerness. In the case of Emma Woodhouse, that queerness is distinctly asexual in nature. Emma Woodhouse firmly rejects allonormativity as informed by her relationship to the child-state, further highlighting other events that seem to denote queerness. By seeing Emma as asexual, the reader is granted an opportunity to see *Emma* as a queer-affirming plot rather than a somewhat dissatisfying heteronormative plot. But before I can do that, it is important to contextualize the complex portrayal of sexuality in Austen's work and then discuss how Emma's unique portrayal distinguishes her from other Austen heroines.

Any one of Austen's heroines could be described as a woman struggling to navigate maturity while maintaining a child-like demeanor. A litany of literature from the long nineteenth century deals with the nature of a prospective bride's maturity level and the complexities of embracing maturity and immaturity simultaneously.⁶ In many respects, a wife's role was seen as property, transferrable from father to husband. The Biblical doctrine of a daughter being subservient to her father transfers that relationship onto the husband. The numerous marriage and conduct manuals published during this period reinforced this idea, many of which Austen read and incorporated into the various characters in her novels (H. Jones 4). The chapter immediately following the opening chapter, "General Comments," of William A. Alcott's *The Young Wife, or, Duties of Woman in the Marriage Relation* is titled "Submission" and focuses on the Biblical justification of a woman's role in a marriage. This infantilization of the wife is reinforced later when discussing childhood. Alcott claims it is not enough for a wife to love children but they must love childhood so they may better understand their children and be of better utility in their maturation (265-6).

Using my framework, Alcott and other authors of etiquette manuals advocate for an adoption of a child-state in women to make them more valuable to prospective suitors. This commodification of youth is evident in the literature at the time. Female love interests are often infantilized in various ways, including in the literature of Austen. But Emma is unique in her characterization when compared to other Austen heroines. She is an experimental character deliberately written to create an unlikeable heroine (Austen-Leigh 119). However, if Emma is read as asexual, her story becomes one of an asexual coming to terms with her queerness. The narrative addresses queer empowerment and queer joy. That intentional dislike becomes blunted and instead becomes an essential component of the reader's journey toward empathy for an asexual Emma. I posit that Emma is not infantilized like other heroines in Romantic literature. Instead, she retains her autonomy despite the patriarchal, heteronormative forces surrounding her by cultivating an asexuality-empowering child-state.

Comparing *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*, Virginia Woolf describes *Jane Eyre* as evincing Brontë's understandable bitterness at her confinement to patriarchal standards (605). Austen, comparably, is described using terms like "without bitterness" and "a miracle" (602). Woolf wants her reader to conclude that Austen more easily navigates a patriarchal society. She is "glad that a hinge creaked," referencing an apocryphal story about Austen composing in the common room, carefully listening for anyone approaching lest she is caught writing (602). While there is room to debate whether Austen found comfort in her ability to navigate patriarchal society, there is ample support claiming she could at least find techniques for her and her characters to maintain their agency and avoid infantilization. A defining component of infantilization is the subject's lack of agency over it. Characteristics of a child are enforced upon a character, usually a woman, rather than those characteristics being deliberately nurtured by the

character. Should a character retain their agency over the trajectory and manner of their maturation, including what aspects of childhood they retain as adults, then the character cannot be said to be infantilized; instead, they can be described as cultivating the child-state. In the case of Emma, she certainly retains agency over the course of her maturation.

Olivia Murphy, in “Queering Jane Austen in the Twenty-First Century,” argues that queerness is somewhat synonymous with modernity when examining the domestic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her central argument is that the number of queer characters in modern Austen adaptation is best explained by highlighting parallels between queerness and Austen’s novels that easily lends Austen’s work to queerness being represented in adaptation. However, she never extends that notion of queerness to be inherent in the text and its readings as they existed in the early nineteenth century. Murphy claims it is only in the context of modernity that Austen’s queerness exists. While Murphy may be correct in her discussion of other Austen works, I do not believe she is correct in excluding *Emma* from a contemporary representation of queerness.

Emma’s refusal to participate in compulsory sexuality is immediately evident and opens up an opportunity to read her as asexual. The novel opens with Mr. Woodhouse pleading with Emma not to make any more matches, as Emma’s latest match resulted in the loss of his governess. Emma’s reply is, “I promise you to make none for myself, papa; but I must indeed, for other people. It is the greatest amusement in the world!” (Austen, *Emma* 60).⁷ Throughout the novel, Emma shows little interest in getting married, as he explicitly tells her friends (116). Emma’s agency not only extends to her own romantic relationships but also attempts to exert influence on the relationships of others, not at all unlike a child playing with dolls, bringing her that amusement, not through romantic and sexual interaction herself, not through fantasy

involving her, but through playful ministrations and manipulations. The stoic and pragmatic Mr. Knightley describes Emma's child-like ministrations by exclaiming that it is better "to be without sense than misapply it as you do" (99). Emma emphasizes her ambivalence toward the idea of her getting married but expresses a detached interest, an "amusement," in the marital relations of others. It is also curious that she uses the word amusement. This indicates a disparity between the pleasure she receives from seeing her matches become successful and the pleasure she receives from romantic relationships herself. Given the sexual connotations inherent in the societally enforced, patriarchal institution of marriage, her taking pleasure in the resistance to and manipulation of that system is indicative of an asexual orientation.

Because Emma embraces her asexual orientation more readily through her expanded agency on the matter of marriage, she finds a very queer pleasure in disrupting the heteronormative expectations of her peers. When she is called "odd" for stating she has no interest in marriage, Emma emphasizes that if she were to fall in love, "it would be a different thing, . . . it is not my way or my nature" (116-7). Emma is so unfamiliar with the sensation of love that she attempts to rationalize that she must be in love with Frank Churchill.

"I certainly must," said she. "This sensation of listlessness, weariness, stupidity, the disinclination to sit down and employ myself, this feeling of everything's being dull and insipid about the house!—I must be in love; I should be the oddest creature in the world if I were not." (243)

Austen invites the reader to apply their understanding of love to Emma. The disparity they find there reinforces how the characters around Emma, and consequently the reader, perceive her, whether through Mr. Knightley's comment about her strange application of sense or how other single women describe her perspective on marriage as odd. She unknowingly describes herself as

odd. But, perhaps to the reader's dismay, Emma seems undisturbed by her oddity, what can be seen as an anticipation of the queer connotations "odd" will take on later in the nineteenth century. She embraces her oddness and ultimately finds happiness by embracing her queerness.

Compare that with how Austen's other heroines retain their agency. While it is undoubtedly the case that Elizabeth Bennet refuses the marriage proposal of Mr. Collins, the ultimate fate of her possible wedding to the clergyman hinges solely upon whether her father will force her to do so, resulting in one of the more impactful lines of the entire novel.⁸ In addition, unlike Emma, Elizabeth refuses both Collins and Darcy's proposals because she does not love them (Austen, *Pride* 105, 182). Emma does not seem to have that sense of what is and is not love, or, at least not that which is expected of a marriageable woman in a patriarchal, hetero-normative society in which compulsory sexuality is forcibly imprinted upon her. The freedom Elizabeth is granted at the behest of her father is typical of Austen's heroines, the notable exception being Emma Woodhouse. Emma's freedom is a reflection of her seemingly absolute control over her father and the vast resources he commands.⁹ This added dimension to her agency not granted to Austen's other heroines further empowers Emma to embrace her asexuality and emphasizes queerness for a reader familiar with Austen's works. She has the option of choice, and, in the exercise of that choice, she chooses not to pursue marriage for herself. This is not because of a principled opposition to marriage, since it is evident that she thinks marriage is a perfectly agreeable situation for her closest friends. Nor is it a statement of political opposition to the inequalities women face, similar to Wollstonecraft's refusal to marry until it became necessary for her well-being. Emma's refusal to seek marriage is based on her disinterest in romantic and sexual relationships. It is perhaps Emma's exploration of that queerness that leads her to be such a polemic figure in Austen's catalog (Worsley 00:30). As

beloved as the novel is, the areas in which *Emma* is poorly regarded are usually relative to its lack of story and its somewhat unsatisfying ending, both of which are the result of the queer agency Emma possesses.

Emma's asexuality becomes evident when exploring how Austen usually expresses sexual attraction in her work. The description of physiology in Austen's female characters is often used as a means of discussing latent sexual tension, specifically in the form of blush and illness (Wiltshire 18). Two typical tropes in romance fiction at the time were a woman expressing interest in a male suitor by blushing with great frequency and a woman falling physically ill as a manifestation of unrequited love. These tropes assign female sexuality to that sexuality's very repression. Austen not only was familiar with these tropes but employed them liberally in her own works. In *Emma*, the reader need only compare Emma's reactions to that of the other two female love interests in the novel, Harriet Smith and Jane Fairfax. Harriet seems to blush at the slightest provocation, and Jane Fairfax also blushes regularly. Emma even uses these moments to, incorrectly, come to conclusions about Jane Fairfax's affections. Emma's blushes, with the sole exception being a reaction to a compliment from Mr. Knightley some time after he confessed his feeling to her, take the form of social embarrassments or indignations, like Mr. Knightley's remonstrance for her mistreatment of Miss Bates or her shock at Mr. Elton's attempting to kiss her despite her refusal to marry him, respectively.

Both Jane Fairfax and Harriet Smith suffer from illnesses when the possibility of their affection resulting in marriage and physical intimacy is stymied. Harriet is bedridden after the rejection of Mr. Elton. Jane Fairfax becomes ill upon finally accepting a position as governess and giving up hope of ever marrying her secret lover, Frank Churchill. There is also an association between Jane Fairfax, the sea-town of Weymouth where she lived before she arrived

in Highbury and where she and Frank Churchill first begin their romance, and the restorative properties of sea-bathing espoused several times throughout the novel. In contrast, Emma never falls ill whatsoever. Not only is Emma healthy, but her health is another means by which she exhibits the child-state. “One hears sometimes of a child being ‘the picture of health;’ now Emma always gives me the idea of being the complete picture of grown-up health” (81). Even Emma’s physical health is described in terms of childhood, further attaching her to a child-state. It can be extrapolated from the parallel between Emma’s health and childish health and the connections between illness and sexual attraction that Emma’s asexuality is represented in the language Austen employs to describe sexuality. Emma presents as asexual because, despite having a sexually mature body, she does not engage in the same sexual attraction, albeit repressed sexual attraction, of her peers.

A seemingly contradictory approach to reading sexuality in the works of Austen explores how Austen interweaves her subtle discourse on sexuality with the discourse on domesticity. Recent scholarship on Austen’s representation of sexuality explores her use of the concept of accountability. Married women in the gentry acted as domestic accountants, not just accounting for the finances of the home but also managing its cultural operation through control over the servants, even to the point of giving a wife some measure of situational legal authority over her husband (Vickery 159-160). Austen extends her characters’ accounting into the realm of interpersonal relationships within the home by having them attempt to account for the genesis of their husbands’ attractions, argues David Sigler. He points out, using the example of Elizabeth Bennet, that the desire to understand what event or cause resulted in Fitzgerald Darcy’s affection is an unaccountable event, a stimulus that goes unrecognized until its effects overshadow the stimulus (59).

This disruptive relationship between the role of the wife as a domestic accountant and the unaccountability of attraction makes eroticism a retroactive creation in the texts of Austen, an *ex post facto* assumption upon which the precipitating event that sparks sexual attraction is unknowable. In setting up the novel in this way, Austen places the reader in the position of a domestic accountant, carefully measuring details and attempting to determine their meaning. Sigler's indication that sexuality and eroticism are only knowable after the fact would seemingly challenge my asexual reading of Emma. An alternate reading might point out that my conclusion about Emma's asexuality is actually a misreading of the text that ignores the potential for retroactive eroticism, a sexual attraction that is not revealed by the end of the novel but still exists. This approach is predicated on the narrative distance between the reader and, in Sigler's example, Darcy. Were the reader given access to his thoughts and desires, his inner monologue, they would have better luck in discerning his affections. That would make for quite a dull novel, though. Instead the majority of thoughts and desires the reader has access to is Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist, and the narrative distance between Darcy and the reader prevents those sorts of thoughts that can be read erotically from being shown to the reader, hence the need for retroactive eroticisms.

But the reader is given access to those thoughts in Emma. Of all the characters in the novel, she is the one the narrator gives the reader the most access to. Elizabeth gives subtle indications of sexual attraction for Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, albeit in the conservative language a contemporary reader would expect from an Austen novel. Emma, on the other hand, does not. The idea that the reader must wait until after the fact to see her attraction doesn't make much sense given the insight we have into her as the protagonist. To make that reading work, it would need to be argued that Emma is incapable of understanding herself; the inherent

unaccountability would extend to herself. Since my reading relies on an understanding that the erotic and the sexual are not mutually inclusive, the idea that retroactive eroticism is evidence of sexual attraction is also fundamentally counter-intuitive to my approach. Emma does not retroactively express sexual attraction like Darcy does nor does she give subtle hints at sexual attraction like Elizabeth. In the absence of these two elements, Sigler's reading of sexuality in Austen does not extend to Emma Woodhouse.

However, a physiological reading and retroactive eroticism are not entirely incompatible when reading *Emma*. Certainly, the example of *Pride and Prejudice* works well in Sigler's reading, and arguably other of Austen's novels as well. But *Emma* is slightly different. Emma Woodhouse is, herself, unaccountable to the other characters in the novel. "The unaccountable, [...] by Austen's time, had become a marker of perverse sexuality and a signifier for the total failure of a sexual union" (Sigler 59). Emma displays her own form of unaccountability in a variety of ways. Upon his confession of love, Mr. Knightley asks "to hear your voice" (366). While she does speak to him, it is not even in the form of an indirect quote, much less a direct quote. The free indirect speech of the narrator merely indicates that she did speak. That unintelligibility, a subject I will expand upon momentarily, contributes to her unaccountability. It is also important that Emma's inability to act as a reliable domestic accountant throughout the novel is the impetus that drives events in the novel. Emma is even described as "accountable to nobody but her father" (82). While the immediate understanding of this phrase is to indicate only her father has authority over her, Emma's display of control over her father, thus supplanting his authority, leads us to question if this is actually what is meant. Austen is sending a subtle hint to the reader that Emma defies ever being fully understood. Given the connections between accountability and sexuality in Austen's other works, it is reasonable to conclude that, along with

Emma's lack of physiological responses to sexual stimuli common in Austen and her association with unaccountability, that Emma is queer and asexual.

Critics of Austen's work often point to its ending as unsatisfying because Emma ultimately ends up marrying her father figure.¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick goes so far as to describe the plot of *Emma*, among other Austen novels, as a spectacle of a girl needing to be taught a lesson (833). Stephanie Insley Hershnow describes the culmination of the *bildungsroman* "reveal[ing] how limp Emma's *Bildung* ultimately turns out to be" (131). As a *bildungsroman* for a straight woman, I would certainly agree. But as a coming-out story, at least to herself, about a young queer woman coming to terms with and finding avenues to navigate a heteronormative world while maintaining the empowerment of queer realization, this narrative is far from the dull, unimpressive ending Hershnow would have us believe it is. The notion of the *bildungsroman* inherently requires at least some relation to, as Hershnow and others put it, inexperience or, in terminology I have employed so far, immaturity and maturation. The novel's conclusion and lack of story are dissatisfying only if the reader does not accept Emma's immaturity as an expression of her asexuality, immaturity being a common marker of queer orientations (Chen 66).

While the critics may find Emma's immaturity somewhat disconcerting, I read her immaturity as that of the social construct of love. Since Emma does not possess that sense of romantic and sexual attraction, her story is a comedy of errors in which her matches are devoid of any sense of whether the two people care for each other. It is only by recognizing in herself her own asexual orientation, if not in name than in manner, that she can see how dissociated she is from love and is finally able to appreciate it by way of Mr. Knightley. "It is more than just the marriage: it is the *rightness* of *this* marriage, as a conclusion to all the comic wrongness that has

gone before” (Booth 260). Even the marriage itself is rather queer in its form. Emma is more of a partner in the relationship, an equal, a relationship that is highly different than other marriages in the novel, most notably that between Isabella and Mr. John Knightley (Brown 70-1). Mr. Knightley even agrees to move into her home with her and her father, where her father will almost certainly continue to reinforce Emma’s autonomy and control over the domain of Hartfield. This compromise is necessitated by Emma’s orientation as it relates to the child-state, resembling an adult taking the path of least resistance, knowing that to do otherwise would potentially cause acrimony with a child incapable of being reasoned with. Only in this case, Emma is an adult with the adult powers of reasoning and deliberately cultivates that environment to suit her autonomy.

The marriage that is the culmination of this comedy of errors also emphasizes Emma’s queerness and her queering effect on those around her. Mr. Knightley’s overt consequentialism, focusing on the outcome of actions and the relationship between cause and effect, is in direct comparison to the capricious nature of Emma, further emphasizing his maturity and her childishness. It is not that Emma does not think about the effects her actions will have; it is just that she is, at her core, quite awful at determining the outcome of her machinations. She is even described in terms that are antithetical to endings themselves when Mr. Knightley points out that Emma is a voracious reader but never actually finishes any of the books she reads (79). Austen encourages the reader to look beyond the assumption that the ending is indeed the conclusion of the work and to see that the novel is not defined by its ending, just further informed by it (Newman 694).

Emma ends on a rather unsatisfying note. There is no grand wedding. There is no swooning in the arms of a lover. Even the declaration of love from Mr. Knightley is relatively

muted. Given that these elements are expected in a nineteenth-century romantic novel, a formalist reading reinforces a queer one. Instead of meeting these expectations, Emma makes several demands of Mr. Knightley that challenge normative marital relations. For example, rather than move in with him at his luxurious estate, Donwell Abbey, Emma's refusal to leave her father requires that George Knightley move in with her at Hartfield as a condition of her agreeing to be his wife (379). Emma also makes no indication that she had altered her position that no one will inherit Donwell Abbey except her nephew. She has no "sense of injury to her nephew Henry, whose rights before had been so tenaciously regarded," emphasizing her ambivalence toward her own, rightful claim on the estate (380). *Emma's* ending, much like Emma herself, forces the reader to reject the allonormative expectations they hold for an ending in a romantic novel or reinforce the delusion of reproductive futurity and claim that this is not a happy ending, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Austen uses the novel to explore how communication can be revelatory to the characters and reader. Emma is revealed to be capricious and lacks an understanding of the people around her she professes to perceive. The letter written by Frank Churchill is declared by Emma and others who read it to be proof positive of his great gentlemanly qualities. Only Mr. Knightley can discern Churchill's actual character from the letter. Emma realizes the true disconnect she has with other people only through idle chat, a more feminine form of communication (Armstrong 148-9). While this dynamic between masculine and feminine forms of communication plays out throughout the novel, it is perhaps most evident in Emma's insult of Miss Bates, to which Mr. Knightley quite critically replies,

"You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour,--to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of

the moment, laugh at her, humble her--and before her niece, too--and before others, many of whom (certainly some) would be entirely guided by your treatment of her.” (326)

Emma again expresses a moment of immaturity, but rather than choosing to mature, she instead embraces the child-state, seeking to find ways to manage living in an adult world, in an adult body, while still paying tribute to the child-state she has cultivated in spirit. In response to Mr. Knightley’s approbation, she sulks and isolates herself, much as a child would do. Ultimately, she apologizes in earnest contrition for hurting Miss Bates so dearly but does not attempt to excise that child-state she possesses, only learning how to articulate its relationship to those around her better. Mr. Knightley’s confession of love further emphasizes how Emma becomes more aware of her character’s effects on those she believes she understands implicitly. “If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more” (366). Austen encapsulates how Emma’s embracing her asexuality through a child-state not only queers her but those around her. Mr. Knightley is rendered incapable of verbalizing himself by Emma’s queerness, a feat unparalleled throughout the novel, given the novel’s emphasis on communication.¹¹

Critics of my reading might point to other scholars who do find sexual eroticisms within the text. For example, Meaghan Malone argues that Emma’s sexual attraction for Mr. Knightley is hinted at during the ball. On its face, Malone’s argument is interesting. The imagery of bodies pressing against one another, intricately weaving around one another taking on sexual connotations is not so far fetched. However, there is a component to the ball that Malone touches on, but does not explore: the public nature of these dances. Dancing is a performance. Following Malone’s logic, the sexuality becomes performative, which may explain why Emma enjoys them so much as this is perhaps as close to allosexuality as she will become. “The Dance becomes an opportunity to read the body and decipher its nuances,” an activity which Emma is

embarrassingly bad at (Malone 434). In the end, following these readings to their natural conclusion only serves to reinforce an asexual reading of Emma.

In a letter to Fanny Knight, Austen writes that “of Novels and Heroines;—pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked” (350). In an example of her penchant for zeugma, Austen makes it plain that novels *and* heroines that attempt to be represented as idyllic are anathema to her sensibilities.¹² Given this is the manner in which she wrote her novels and that disrupting the reader’s sensibilities is one of her stated goals, the question should not be “Why read Emma Woodhouse as asexual?” but “Why hasn’t it been done already?” Many harsher interpretations of Austen become more easily resolved when reading Emma Woodhouse as an asexual coming to terms with her sexual orientation. Sarah Raff argues that *Emma* evinces a toxic and manipulative side of Austen in her advice to Fanny Knight based upon Fanny’s role as the “privileged reader” (63). But the relationship between Austen, Knight, and *Emma* is not nearly as troubling when we consider how Fanny’s supposed betrayal of Austen is heavily informed by her Victorian sensibilities developed in her old age. These Victorian sensibilities often mask animosity toward marginalized queer communities.¹³ *Emma* is not the only Regency-era novel that benefits from a close, asexual reading.

***Waverley*: Flora MacIvor’s Asexuality and Scottish Nationalism**

Scott’s *Waverley* offers an interesting opportunity to conduct an asexual reading of Flora MacIvor and further inform our understanding of the text. Not all Romantics think favorably about the child-state; many found the notion anathema to the revolutionary sensibilities of the time (Newbon 9). Scott can see value in the child-state, but only if there is also utility in it. Unlike *Emma*, *Waverley* is written by a man; the gendered expectations are written by a male

author who, throughout the novel, reinforces patriarchal structures. In a book where the primary plot revolves around a literal revolution, Flora MacIvor takes on a figurative revolutionary persona within those patriarchal structures in which she is expected to exist as well as a revolution against a more tangible foe. Using an analysis of two depictions of maturity by comparing Rose Bradwardine's allosexual sacrifice of her agency on the altar of the patriarchy and Flora's asexual refusal to cede her agency in service to the patriarchy illustrates how Scott's perception of the child-state is conditional upon its utility to the status quo. That asexual/allosexual binary and the consequences of its employment have broad implications for the scholarship surrounding Scott and *Waverley*.

Despite taking a position of opposition to patriarchal and heteronormative forces, MacIvor is not traditionally read as a queer character by critics. There is something of a critical gulf between the works of Scott and queer readings. Most queer readings focus on the medieval homoerotic imagery of knights piercing one another with their swords.¹⁴ The most notable example of a queer reading of Scott is Christopher Whyte's argument in favor of more queer readings of Scottish Literature, but, as Gavin Miller points out, Whyte's approach has several blindspots, the most prominent of which is intentionality. While author intentionality may be more relevant in the application of some queer theory, Edelman's *No Future* does not. I believe that the circumstances of my critical lens circumvent the need for intentionality since the author could not possibly know about asexuality as an identity but instead is expressing the orientation's occurrence in nature, allowing my analysis to, at least partially, fill that gulf.

The central plot of *Waverley* surrounds the fictional Edward Waverley's journey through Scotland, his subsequent joining in the cause of the Jacobite uprising of 1745, and the consequences of his doing so. The story reflects Scott's Unionist sentiments in the very real

public debate that was and still is going on around Scottish Nationalism and the Act of Union. Interwoven within that story is a love triangle between the protagonist, Edward, and two potential brides, Flora MacIvor and Rose Bradwardine. Because so much of Flora's character development acts as the incitement of Waverley's actions, particularly her rejections of Waverley's marriage proposals, it is helpful to explore Scott's views on a woman's etiquette in response to a marriage proposal, specifically a woman's agency in the courtship process. While Scott was a prolific author, he never wrote anything resembling an etiquette guide. However, he did write extensively about marriage in his poetry, fiction, and non-fiction to give us a sense of his views on marriage. Scott's views seem to be greatly informed by his medievalism and the events of his own life. Much of his fiction and poetry that touches on the subject of marriage, does so through tales of knights and the tales of rigid rules of courtship. The characters in Scott's historical fiction take on anachronistic qualities to enable the reader to act as a proxy for contemporary sensibilities and coalesce the cultural *milieu* of the past with their present-day worldview (Duncan 61). Scott's biographical information indicates that these opinions on a patriarchal role in marriage proposals were forged through the hardship he himself faced.

Scott admits little about his first love and youthful romances. Scott seemed quite enamored with a "Jessie." There are several letters concerning his relationship with her (*Letters Vol. 1*, 1-8). But Jessie seemed to be a passing fancy. The true first love of Scott's life is Williamina Belsches, daughter and heir to a wealthy baronet, ensuring any child Scott was to have with her would be bequeathed a baronetcy (Sutherland 55). Despite his best efforts, Scott could not secure the match. The details surrounding Scott's rejection are somewhat murky. However, there is one point most biographers do agree on, the interference of Scott's and Belsches's respective fathers was the greatest impediment to their union. Scott's father even

surreptitiously alerted Sir John, Williamina's father, about his son's intentions (Sutherland 57). This rejection affected Scott greatly. He described the effect on his heart as a "crack [that] will remain till my dying day" (*Journal* 43).¹⁵ The effect on Scott was apparent. The lesson learned, he was much more forthcoming with his pursuits of the woman who would ultimately be his wife, Charlotte Carpenter. After Williamina's marriage in January 1797, Scott struggled with depression. He eventually went on a trip to the Lake District where he would meet and woo his future bride. Unlike his courtship of Williamina which seemed to exclusively attempt to win her heart, Scott almost immediately began a campaign to win the approval of his parents and Carpenter's guardians. Charlotte, born in France, had lost her parents during the Revolution and was under the guardianship of Lord Downshire. Scott was forbidden from seeing Carpenter, presumably by Charlotte herself, before approval of the match was received (*Letters, Vol. 1*, 65). Both Lord Downshire and Scott's parents were quickly convinced, and the pair were married on Christmas Eve in 1797.

Scott certainly seemed to adjust his posture on how marriage proposals should be conducted after the disaster with Williamina. Biographical readings of Scott's works often point out the similarities between the character's marriages and Scott's. Scott would dole out advice that emphasized patriarchal involvement.

But there are two points on which I give you my earnest advice. The first is to listen to no proposal of marrying without your father's countenance. A woman's character always suffers in such a case, for the world we live in is not that of poetry and romance. (Scott, "To Miss Margaret Laidlaw" 43-4)

Scott emphasizes to the young lady he is advising that she must insist that any overtures from a man adhere to the established patriarchy.¹⁶ A woman's agency must accommodate, if not

outright succumb, to the will of a man. That discussion of agency appears again in another letter where Scott expands on a hypothetical scenario where Flora does indeed marry Waverley. He posits that, had Waverley ended up with Flora, he would have been emasculated and treated as mere decoration (Scott, “To John B. S. Morritt” 478).¹⁷

Because Scott mentions literature in his cautionary piece of advice, I can more easily apply the advice he gives to Laidlaw to how courtship is treated in his works. While Scott cautions Laidlaw to discard the events of novels, given the portrayal of courtship in *Waverley*, Scott’s advice on respecting the role a woman should have in courtship is reinforced rather than challenged. Flora does not conform to these expectations and can be said to queer them, rejecting the maturation trajectory for a Lady of her station established by society. After refusing Waverley’s first proposal, she explains her decision by telling Waverley,

“I could esteem you, Mr. Waverley, as much, perhaps more, than any man I have ever seen; but I cannot love you as you ought to be loved. Oh! do not, for your own sake, desire so hazardous an experiment! The woman whom you marry ought to have affections and opinions moulded upon yours.” (213)

Flora is not describing a matter of taste but rather her inability to appreciate Waverley in the manner a wife is expected to feel for her husband. She specifically uses the terminology of the patriarchal institution of marriage enumerated by Scott to deglamorize Waverley’s artistically informed views on love and marriage. She instead uses that clinical rationale to argue that she would be better suited to marry a man who does not love her as intensely as Waverley “because his blunted sensibility would not require the return of enthusiasm which I have not to bestow,” essentially highlighting her asexuality as a reality any suitor must learn to accept (212).

In response, Waverley is prompted into a series of decisions to make himself appear more worthy of Flora's affections, eventually leading him to join the cause of the Stuarts. Despite those efforts, Flora continues to be a queering force. The second time she refuses his proposal, a wedge is driven between Waverley, Fergus MacIvor, Baron Cosmo Bradwardine, and Prince Charles, resulting in Fergus nearly abandoning his oath to the Prince and leaving, taking his Highland forces with him. The third and final time Flora refuses Waverley, after the failure of the revolution, Flora faces possible death. Instead of marrying Waverley to save herself, she instead chooses to join a convent. All three refusals have queer implications that affect the reader's perception of events. While there are certainly other reasons a woman in Flora's position would refuse a marriage proposal, it becomes more and more apparent that these are not the case as the reader proceeds in the novel. Not only does Flora declare that Waverley is a man whom she could esteem above all others and still refuse him, eliminating the possibility that it is simply a matter of being incompatible with him, but she also refuses in the face of etiquette enforced upon her by the patriarchy. The narrator points out that Fergus fully expects Flora to bend to his "patriarchal power" and wed Waverley once he officially approves the match (205). There are also no other suitors presented to rival Waverley's affections, aside from Flora's love of Scotland.

While each refusal has far-reaching consequences that influence the novel outside the confines of the love triangle narrative, the final refusal is particularly interesting to a queer reading of the character. Fergus MacIvor, Flora's brother and chieftain, in discussing the free spirit of the roguish Highlanders, stresses that "everything will keep after its kind, whether it be a hawk or Highlander" (170). It is strange, then, that Flora, a Highland lady, member of the aristocracy, and heir to the Scottish traditions her brother died to defend would choose to seclude

herself in a convent in France, never to see Scotland again (432). When Fergus discusses the Scots in the earlier passage, he connects them with hawks, a predatory animal. A short while later, at the same party where Fergus makes his claim, the MacIvor family bard describes Flora's beauty as "the fairest apple," leading to a natural comparison between the bird of prey and the piece of produce (175). Not only does she queer the situation, but she does so by rejecting what Judith Butler calls "compulsory heterosexuality," subverting the general expectation of Waverley, the reader, and society in general (24). The connection between Flora, whose name literally means plant life, and an apple also hints at a disruption of compulsory sexuality that coincides with Przybylo's theory as well as Edelman's. Flora's decision rejects the futurity promised by marriage to Waverley and embraces the death drive, a process that, according to Edelman, "insist[s] the future stops here" (Edelman 31). By portraying a character who not only queers the world around them but also queers heteronormative futurity as a function of social constraints, Scott created a character where post-Kinsey study readers can relate to a pre-Kinsey study character. The effect is particularly effective given the use of Edward Waverley as a filter for the reader. With the narrative being related through the perspective of Waverley, the struggle Waverley goes through mirrors that of the reader, who also attempts to navigate their subjective aesthetic judgment of Flora.

Compare Flora's depiction with that of her foil and rival in Waverley's romantic triangle, Rose Bradwardine. She first approaches Waverley "with a manner that hovered between bashfulness and courtesy" and is said to have "bent her whole soul to listen" to Waverley (126, 304). This is a stark contrast to Flora's indomitable spirit. Rose is highly malleable to the needs of the men in her life, including her affections. Whereas Flora explicitly informs Waverley that she is incapable of feeling any attraction to him, or any man for that matter, Rose's pliant

character makes her more valuable to patriarchal systems. Flora even uses this to her advantage to try and cultivate Rose into someone who could draw Waverley's affections away from her (345). The expectation of Rose to produce male heirs that would inherit the Baron's title and the notion that Rose would not object to that arrangement so long as her father is happy highlights how Rose is meant to sustain the allonormativity that is expected in a patriarchal society. As Rose's foil, Flora disrupts that allonormativity and ultimately must enter a convent to find a place in society suited to her sexual orientation. Whereas Rose is an active participant in compulsory sexuality, Flora is not. She is often characterized as a "Celtic Muse," a philosophical spark that ignites a passion in others to create but not to take action herself (C. Jones 65).

Scott regularly sought to identify a uniquely Scottish muse, idealizing it in his work.¹⁸ The muse does not, itself, create. Instead, a muse inspires others to act on their behalf. This is undoubtedly the case in the relationship between Waverley and Flora, who inspires Waverley to mature. Upon hearing about Waverley's rejection, Fergus tells him,

"You have taken pet at some of Flora's prudery, or high-flying notions of loyalty, and now, like a child, you quarrel with the plaything you have been crying for, and beat me, your faithful keeper, because my arm cannot reach to Edinburgh to hand it to you." (366)

This connection between Flora's prudery and the childishness of both Edward and Flora gives us the added commentary of Fergus, who also has a vested interest in seeing Flora married to Waverley. However, there is a criticism of Edward's childishness in this matter, and Flora, who is the one who refuses the match, is described as prudish. Fergus does not even regard her as a being with agency, calling her a "plaything." When measured by the same metric applied to Waverley, her behavior can be described as being equally childish by Fergus and is instead accepted and dismissed as prudishness, further hinting that Flora's non-allonormative agency

over her own maturation is asexual in nature. Her asexual immaturity is inherent in her not participating in the marriage economy the patriarchy needs to sustain itself through societally enforced sexual reproduction. But, despite that, she is never regarded as anything but beautiful, intelligent, graceful, and strong-willed. She is Scott's ideal woman, except for her inability to serve the patriarchy, which inherently disqualifies her from participation in a social order predicated on patriarchy. To find comity within that structure, she must either betray her asexuality or join a convent.

There are, of course, a litany of reasons to explain why a woman would reject a marriage proposal in favor of life in a convent. Financial issues may inform the decision. For example, if a family has several daughters, but can afford a marriage dowry for only some of them, convent dowries were a cheaper way to provide for the welfare of a daughter. Out of the many reasons a woman may join a convent, there are only two that may plausibly explain Flora's refusal of Waverley and the comforts a marriage to him would provide in preference for a life in a convent. First and foremost is a devout level of spiritual dedication. Throughout the text, there is no indication from Flora that she is any more devout than what is expected of a Christian woman of her upbringing. An argument might even be made that her patriotism transforms into idolatry of Scotland. Another alternative reading that may explain Flora's decisions also involves her sexuality. Reading Flora as having homosexual feelings, the refusal of Waverley's proposal and decision to join a convent makes more sense. Her declaration that she "esteems" Waverley as much as, if not more than, any other man would certainly suit a reading of Flora as a lesbian.

Unfortunately, there are few interactions between Flora and other women the reader is privy to. There are "two well-dressed young women, whose character seemed to hover between that of companions and dependents" whose presence offers the possibility of a lesbian reading

(177-8). These “pretty girls” are completely ignored by both Waverley and Flora, so the only insight into these women is from the narrator (178). The fact that the narrator, who has thus far provided vivid details about the character, appearance, and utility of even the most minor of characters in the story, fails at quantifying their purpose and only gives the vaguest description of pretty may imply a certain latent queerness. The narrator cannot describe them properly because they are somewhat incompatible with the narrator’s heteronormative perspective. The only other interaction Flora has with another woman is with her friend Rose Bradwardine, whom she is effectively grooming to be more appealing to Waverley as a romantic partner, taking her on as a pupil and subtly influencing social scenes to elevate Rose in the eyes of Waverley (345-6). While a queer reading of Flora as a lesbian would explain why she feels she is incompatible with marriage and her choice to go to a convent, a lesbian reading of Flora and an asexual reading of her are not mutually exclusive. Recent scholarship has explored the works of sexologists like Magnus Hirschfeld whose work outlined the possibility of asexuality. These scholars have developed what is known as the Split Attraction Model or SAM. The premise surrounding this theory is that sexual attraction and romantic attraction are not inherently functions of one another.¹⁹ In other words, Flora can be read as an asexual lesbian, a woman who does not feel sexual attraction but also feels romantic attraction solely for women making a reading of Flora as lesbian perfectly compatible with reading her as asexual.

There is also some question about whether she is joining a convent at all. She explicitly states that she has “secured a retreat in the convent” (432). The implication is that she is joining a convent. However, there are boarders at convents who are not nuns, specifically young girls obtaining an education. Flora was educated at a convent in this manner, but when Scott refers to that time in Flora’s life he uses some very interesting language. He states that Flora was

“maintained for some time at a convent” (175). Scott uses the word “maintained” here in lieu of “educated.” But the connotations are clear given Scott’s feelings on education. Scott believed in the refinement of young people so that they may achieve something beyond their natural talents, a sacrifice of innate knowledge for more refined sensibilities. However, the implication that Flora’s education is more of a maintenance rather than an exchange emphasizes a relation with the child-state. The fact that she chooses to potentially return to a state of maintenance rather than embracing compulsory sexuality through marriage indicates Flora possesses qualities that modern-day readers would see as asexual.

In addition to Flora’s subversion of reproductive futurity and rejection of compulsory heterosexuality by rejecting patriarchal expectations of marriage and joining a convent, Scott also creates a discussion of what Calvin Thomas calls literal desire (59). Compounding Žižek and Lacan, Thomas theorizes that all language is a desire for an object or concept that is not present. Language can therefore be perceived as, in part, a function of inherent sexual desire. This applies to asexuality and aromanticism. People who do not experience sexual attraction are not necessarily devoid of sexual desire. When Flora first enchants Waverley, it is through the recitation of lyrical Highland poetry performed to the backdrop of a Highland waterfall and garden.²⁰ When Scott describes this recitation, he does not directly quote it. Instead, he relates what the words might have been and emphasizes that their actual effect cannot be conveyed on paper (182). These moments of indirect quotes are in stark contrast to Rose, who is regularly quoted directly and at great length. When she recites poetry for Waverley, the poem is directly transcribed (127-8). To further emphasize this difference, the poem is then explained and distilled by Rose’s father for Waverley’s benefit. Even Rose’s appearance can be read as “even the slightest emotion sent her whole blood at once to her face and neck” (102). In comparison to

Flora's beautiful yet ineffable face, the differences between Rose and Flora become a metaphor between empiricism and rationalism.

By differentiating between directly quoted dialogue on the one hand and indirectly quoted dialogue on the other, Scott generates a construct where the reader may interpret a separation between the desire inherent in language and the desire inherent in allosexual attraction. While Edward Waverley plays a continual game of *fort da*, reaching out for one object of his desire after another, Flora queers his pursuit. She, unlike Rose, refuses to become an object. Waverley cannot play with her because she is not a toy to be played with. She subverts the ultimate maturation stage masculinity seeks to enforce on a woman, and she does so by embracing her asexuality, much like Emma Woodhouse did.

While these details are essential in allowing the reader opportunities to perceive Flora as asexual, it is important to remember that any critical reading resulting in a more definitive claim of asexuality must depend on a level of the character's awareness. Flora does not need to, and cannot, be aware of her identity, but she may be aware of the qualities that make her asexual. Otherwise, a critical reader could readily dismiss any claim of asexuality as merely coincidental and more representative of celibacy or chastity. For Flora MacIvor, it could not be stated more plainly (in the context of an early nineteenth-century text) that she is cognizant of her queerness. When she attempts to woo Waverley, it is not to love her but to love Scotland. But her directive is, in itself, a peculiar one. She tells Waverley he must "love the barren rock more than the fertile valley," emphasizing Scotland's ruggedness and using vocabulary significant to her asexuality to describe that love (182). By emphasizing her appreciation of Scotland's barrenness, Flora hints to Waverley and the reader that they must embrace her and Scotland over futurity; she

encourages us to embrace her asexuality and the death drive and reject the futurity inherent in compulsory sexuality.

Upon the first proposition of marriage, Flora, in an attempt to alleviate Waverley's feelings at being rejected, tells him that she "never yet saw the person on whom I thought with reference to the present subject," that subject being love and marriage (207). It is important to note that Flora is not simply in a position where she is incapable of seeing Waverley's value as a husband. When gossiping with Rose about Waverley's romantic future, she extolls his virtues and qualities as a suitor (348). In support of an asexual reading of Flora, she sees Waverley's marriage as resulting in his being a very happy husband. Listening to the same points Flora is making, Rose thinks of the wife as a happy woman. Rose cannot verbalize her attraction, whereas Flora has no attraction to verbalize. It is precisely this Kantian disinterest that allows Flora to appreciate Waverley's qualities fully. But more importantly, she is aware of that disinterest. Her knowledge of her disinterest in Waverley and all potential suitors indicates that her indifference is not coincidental to the suitors who have pursued her but is instead emblematic of an asexual orientation incapable of being vocalized in nineteenth-century vocabulary.

It is crucial to examine how reading Flora as asexual affects reading other aspects of the text. The narrative of *Waverley* surrounds the failed attempt by the Scottish Highlanders loyal to the Stuart cause to overthrow the current Hanoverian government and establish a free and independent Scotland. Flora expresses her romanticism as a love of Scotland. Flora's unabashed pursuit of a Scotland free from British tyranny takes on new meaning when viewed in the context of Scotland's position as romantic interest and her asexuality. Accepting the premise that Flora's asexuality exhibits a rejection of futurity and embracing of the death drive, then it is her goal to

pursue a lost cause. She willingly pushes for the Stuart cause knowing it will fail but, in true Romantic fashion, be glorious in its failure.

Her personal ideology's success, now unpaired from reproductive futurism, is measured not in the fulfillment of her goals but in the integrity with which she acquits herself in the process. At the culmination of Flora's narrative, she reflects on events, and while saddened by them, she does not express regret. Instead, in her last scene in the book, she remarks on the futility of talking "of the future..., so far as earthly events are concerned" (430). Her resolution to ignore the outcome of "earthly" events illustrates a belief in an ethereal outcome, one where ideology triumphs over the fallen, physical realm. By employing this construct, Scott further reinforces in the reader the notion that the rights of Scotland are a worthy cause to support, but one that cannot be fully achieved in this life. When compared with the future Rose promises, Scott's unionist support becomes reinforced through the romantic endeavors of Edward Waverley. Marriage to the idyllic but asexual Flora would result in the end of the Waverley line. Marriage to the meek and subservient Rose will result in prosperity and the continuance of the Waverley line and the Scottish gentry born to English husbands. This metaphorical *apologia* of unionism reveals Scott's opinion that Scotland must either be a part of England and serve its needs or cease to exist in a glorious but futile struggle for a national identity.

The form *Waverley* takes is also informed by reading Flora as asexual. Scott wrote the book as if it were a historical account told through the life of Edward Waverley. This new form of historical fiction would later inspire the genre. But because the story is told per the events of Waverley, the reader is granted a great deal of insight into his thoughts. Thus his journey with Flora MacIvor is the same one the reader takes. By reading Flora MacIvor as asexual, the reader enhances the romance between the two beyond the clichéd romance trope of the love triangle and

adds a unique dimension to how the characters interact. While Flora undeniably loves Waverley, the person, she is devoted entirely to her first love, Scotland, the abstract concept expressed in her lyrical poetry. When Waverley finally realizes that his love for Flora cannot co-exist with Flora's Romantic love for Scotland, the reader also comes to the same realization. The romance genre typically encourages readers to envision possible romantic liaisons and relationships as the novel progresses. While these fantasies typically do not come to fruition in the text itself, they encourage the reader to invest in the fantasy as it is a possible one. Here, Scott subverts that trope by encouraging the reader to invest in an impossible romantic fantasy, made all the more apparent as Flora's asexuality and indifference to romantic relationships become clearer as the narrative progresses. In employing this strategy in a new form that blurs the lines of fantasy and reality, the reader is faced with a jarring narrative that causes them to question the rationale behind a Scotland subservient to England. They are simultaneously forced to either respect Scotland's right to autonomy and Flora's right to express her sexuality, which Waverley does, or willfully delineate from the hero's journey and participate in a system that ignores Scotland's rights and Flora's autonomy. Ultimately, an asexual reading of *Waverley* offers the reader new critical areas of study while simultaneously reinforcing other established scholarship. Further study is warranted to explore how this discourse between sexuality, nationalism, and Romanticism is advanced in other works in the *Waverley* series, Scott's numerous imitators, and the genres of historical fiction and romance in general.

Final Thoughts

In this chapter, I have argued that the characters of Emma Woodhouse and Flora MacIvor can be read as asexual. Beyond that, I have illustrated what an asexual reading can offer us

regarding scholarship surrounding these texts and how considering Romanticism's relationship with allonormative forces can significantly enrich the experience of reading texts from this period. Implementing Przybylo's theory of asexual erotics, I built a critical bridge between Edelman's idolization of the child and the Romantic idealization of the child-state. While Edelman and his hyper-aggressive and radical theory would almost certainly tell Wordsworth's young girl from "We Are Seven" to "fuck off" as much as he does Tiny Tim and the waif, I don't think it would be reasonable to assume that he would lambast Wordsworth's Romantic reader as well. Instead, I suspect he would encourage the reader to displace the child by continuing to take what was once the sole province of the child and seizing it as an adult through an appreciation of the child-state. That symbolic order that Edelman seeks to destroy but is arguably prevented from doing so is disrupted by an appreciation of the child-state in the body of an adult.

This study has opened up other possible readings of texts like *Frankenstein* as potentially offering characters that can be read as asexual in some manner using my critical construction. With the success of this reading, other potential critical bridges can be discussed. Earlier, I touched on Kantian notions of disinterest and purely aesthetic appreciation. For Immanuel Kant, all judgment save that of taste is influenced by morality, is thus a moral decision, and is by definition not free and disinterested (52). While purely theoretical suppositions by Kant, these ideas seem to find practical applications in asexual readings of Romantic characters like Lady Adeline from *Don Juan*, who has no sexual interest in the titular character or her husband, two characters she is expected to have a sexual interest in given the sexually explicit nature of the plot, but instead finds a disinterested clinical appreciation for both. Lady Adeline is described as an extreme beauty, but "her heart was vacant, though a splendid mansion" (Byron XIV.674).

Lady Adeline's keen sense of love but lack of sexual and romantic affection, as is typically expected of a female love interest, makes her an ideal candidate to advance this sort of asexual reading.

The influence of Kant on the Romantics creates an opportunity for scholars to continue this application of Pryzbylo in a way that further increases asexual visibility in the community and enhances Romantic scholarship into the revolutionary field of asexuality studies, a revolution I would have to imagine the Romantics would approve of themselves. I hope that these areas of expansion upon my research will ultimately lead to fruitful discourse in queer Romanticism and its effect on the arc of the long nineteenth century. For example, the Romantic idealization of the child-state shifts to the Victorian idolization of the child at roughly the same time as the sexual codification described by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*. The very process that forced asexuality into becoming an identity began as Britain transitioned from the unapologetic, socially-liberal tendencies of the Romantics to the somewhat more conservative views of Victorian society. If we view *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis* as a spectrum, Romantic art certainly leans more toward the Foucauldian ideas of *ars erotica* than its Victorian counterpart (Foucault 20). The intersection between Romanticism and asexuality studies is a promising area of study that needs further attention from the academy.

Endnotes

1. All further references to Walter Scott will refer to *Waverley* unless otherwise noted.
2. “A little learning is a dangerous thing;
 Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.
 There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
 And drinking largely sobers us again.”
3. Other examples of scholarly articles that perceive and explore connections between Rousseau and Austen include Vivasvan Soni’s “Committing Freedom: The Cultivation of Judgment in Rousseau’s *Emile* and Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*” and Stephanie Diehl’s “*Emma* and *Emile*: Austen’s Critique of the Rousseauist Model of Education.”
4. This idea of maintaining a balance between emotional sensibility and logical sense is in keeping with Wordsworth’s poetic philosophy in *Lyrical Ballads* in which he describes poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and written by someone who “thought long and deeply.”
5. While there has not been any traditional scholarly analysis of Emma Woodhouse as asexual, there has been non-scholarly discussion within the community itself. For example, blog posts like “There’s A Place For Us: Aromanticism and Amatonormativity in Jane Austen’s Emma” by Caitlin Khong and “Asexuality in Jane Austen?” by a blogger using the handle sildarmillion discuss the topic. While these are not scholarly in the traditional sense, they do use some of the same close reading principles on a smaller scale that would be expected of a scholarly reading of *Emma*.

6. Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Charlotte Mew's "The Farmer's Bride" are examples of how this discourse on the expectations of a young bride persisted throughout the era.

7. All further references to Jane Austen will refer to *Emma* unless otherwise noted.

8. "From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do."

(Austen, *Pride* 108)

9. As a result of Emma's ability to control her father, she is seen as the wealthiest heroine in all of Austen's works.

10. See Michael Kramp's *Jane Austen and Masculinity* as an example.

11. This seemingly reciprocal relationship of improving one another is pointed out by Patrick Fessenbecker in his article "Jane Austen on Love and Pedagogical Power." He portrays the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley as one of teacher/student in which the roles are periodically alternated between the pair. While the student/teacher is not, at its core, a non-sexualized relationship, there is a public expectation that de-sexualizes the interactions between teacher and student, to use Przybylo's terminology.

12. Jane Austen further emphasizes this point in her satirical essay, "Plan of a Novel," which she wrote around the time of *Emma*'s publication.

13. In 1869, Fanny Knight, then Lady Knatchbull, wrote a letter in preparation for a biography of Austen in which she derides her aunt as a poorly raised commoner, having only attained a sense of decorum and high society from the benevolence of Fanny's father, Jane's brother.

14. This is not to say that scholars have not hinted at a queer subtext. For example, among the qualities of the novel of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries described by Andrew Cayton in his article “The Authority of the Imagination in an Age of Wonder” is “the disciplining of sexuality into a heterosexual act justified by conjugal love” (7). He then goes on to differentiate the nineteenth-century novel as changing those qualities using *Waverley* as one of his examples of this shift. He does not extend that claim slightly further to conduct a queer reading, though.

15. It is important to note that this account comes from Scott’s journal decades after the incident. He also wrote this journal with the intent that it would one day be published. So there may be some gilding of the truth here on the part of Scott for dramatic effect.

16. Margaret Laidlaw was a neighbor of Scott’s who was around the same age as his own children. He took on the role of a second father for Margaret who would reach out to him for advice on several occasions.

17. Specifically, he claims Flora would treat Waverley like Count Boralaski, a dwarf performer in France, was treated by his wife. The story is that whenever Boralaski would upset his wife, she would pick him up and place him on the mantle above the fireplace where he could not get down by himself without risking severe injury. The fact that Scott uses this simile to describe a potential marriage between Flora and Waverley illustrates his concern over the power dynamics in marriage and the need to favor the husband.

18. There are several examples of Scott referring to a Scottish or Celtic muse in his collected letters. For example, a letter to Anna Seward in September 1806 and a letter to Thomas Goodlake in October 1828 make reference to his search for a muse that is emblematic of Scotland.

19. The Split Attraction Model is even being extended into other forms of attraction like aesthetic and sensual. The SAM has the benefit of disrupting amatonormative assumptions but also the downside of adding an extremely complex and controversial element to sexual discourse. For further reading, see: “Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive” by Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, “Implicit and Explicit Attitudes Towards Sex and Romance in Asexuals” by Maria Bulmer and Keise Izuma, “What Does Sexual Orientation Orient? A BioBehavioral Model Distinguishing Romantic Love and Sexual Desire” by Lisa M. Diamond, and “Ace and Aro: Understanding Differences in Romantic Attractions Among Persons Identifying as Asexual” by Amy N. Antonsen, et al.

20. In *Moral Taste: Aesthetics, Subjectivity, and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, Marjorie Garson uses this scene juxtaposed with the drawing room of Rose to emphasize Flora’s relationship with disruption to patriarchal norms and Rose with female domesticity. That reading is further explored by Tom Bragg’s “Scott’s Elementals: Vanishing Points Between Space and Narrative in the Waverley Novels.” Bragg argues that characters associated with nature of a physical place like Flora is in this scene blur the line between person and place.

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**ASEXUAL ANTICIPATION: A QUEER STRUCTURALIST READING OF
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S *AURORA LEIGH* AND CHARLOTTE
BRONTË'S *THE PROFESSOR***

“My nature was not his nature, and its signs were to him like the words of an unknown tongue.”

-Charlotte Brontë in *The Professor*

The nature of the novel, with its access to the unobservable in everyday life, is an ideal place to investigate asexual possibility. Because of the specious relationship between signifier and signified and its implications for examining orientation rather than identity, a scholar can identify narratives that subvert allosexual expectations and demonstrate that narrative conundrums are best resolved by reading a character as asexual. When I present my research at conferences the primary criticism I receive is that I am ascribing a modern idea, asexuality, explicitly to texts written when no explicit representation could possibly exist. I do not think this criticism is a fair one given similar readings are conducted in other queer contexts, so I do not afford too much attention navigating those critics concerns. However, other researchers have gone to great lengths to proactively address this issue. Elizabeth Hanna Hanson, when defining what she calls “asexual possibility,” claims there is an inherent reductiveness to reading a character as asexual (346). A blindspot in Hanson’s analysis leaves room for exploring that asexual possibility. Hanson presumes that any analysis of asexuality as an orientation before its association with asexuality as an identity must be predicated on behavior and explicit statements of a lack of sexual attraction. Reading a novel like *Aurora Leigh* for asexuality where a significant emphasis is placed on narrative becomes problematic. As a result, her article focuses

heavily on the teleological effect of an asexual narrative structure rather than an analysis of asexuality within the narrative.

As an asexual myself, I can understand why Hanson would choose to do this. By focusing on the more objective observation of how asexuality as a logic can meta-textually interject itself into formal elements of a text, Hanson quells any potential criticism from an aggressive reader who would see what I am doing as purely fantastical speculation unworthy of serious academic attention. But as an “Own Voices” scholar, I contend that I, as an asexual, am better equipped to identify potential asexual characters in fiction and that asexuality is not defined quite so easily in terms of behavior.¹ I will expand Hanson’s narratology to include both teleological and ontological elements through the use of queer structuralism.

I have discussed how the *bildungsroman* offers an opportunity to examine the child-state and the various intersections that exist between asexuality and maturation. The formal elements of the *bildungsroman* informs a reader’s expectations, lending it to a structuralist approach. The novel is perhaps the best form to analyze using a queer structuralist approach. As a form, the novel’s core quality is its “plasticity” and lack of a classical canon (Bakhtin 39). The novel’s disruptive nature to normative analysis makes it ideal for the application of queer theory. The plots of novels are capable of both perpetuating and subverting normative social function when informed by a discourse on sexuality, particularly the marriage plot (Boone 2). My queer structuralist reading seeks to define the novel’s rebellious nature as it relates to compulsory sexuality and allonormativity. For example, in Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the reader is presented the protagonist and antagonist as separate characters and realizes that they are actually both components of the same person only repressing certain aspects of themselves. The experience enables the reader to reinforce their cisnormativity by

condemning Mr. Hyde as a villain and ruinous of the illustrious Dr. Jekyll, but it also enables a discourse on a trans narrative that emphasizes how alien our own natures are even to ourselves.² The reader's understanding of antagonists, protagonists, and the relationship that exists between the two is informed by their reading of previous texts that are similar in nature. Readers are given access to a queer discourse but also are able to reinforce the cultural structures in which they live.

While Hanson might argue that this is emblematic of an asexual possibility built into the structural elements of the text, I suggest it goes further than that. The reader's expectations of the text and how those expectations are challenged create a "horizon change" that can be analyzed through the lens of sexuality (Jauss 14). By manipulating the audience and their understanding of the text as it relates to their experience reading other, similar works, these authors create moments for the reader of asexual anticipation. The reader's expectations are informed by the compulsory sexuality and allonormativity that is pervasive in media, but those expectations abruptly denied that resolution through asexual means or are subtly reoriented in their expectations by the plot reaching the expected outcome in a way that does not rely on compulsory sexuality or allonormativity. Because of the novel's nebulous nature, these moments of asexual anticipation are not immediately apparent, and the reader is able to reinforce societal norms while also questioning them on some level.

The Victorian novel is perfect for this kind of analysis. The readership of the novel was skyrocketing during the Victorian era. The Museums Act of 1845 and the Public Libraries Act of 1850 enabled the opening of public libraries. Subscription lending libraries like Mudie's Circulating Library allowed people to continually read an ever-growing catalog of books relatively inexpensively. The novel's popularity and advances in printing technology helped

stabilize the market and lower printing costs. For writers like Scott and Austen, printing was such a great expense that it sometimes prohibited creating inexpensive versions of a novel. In Victorian book culture, the publisher could use the profits from a first printing to print a less expensive second printing until a very low-cost version of the text was made available for purchase (Gaull 12; Flint 16-7). These factors combined to create a population of voracious readers. Because Victorians read so avidly and so broadly, they consequently would have a larger data set to compare a text to, increasing the possibility of moments of asexual anticipation occurring.

Victorian austerity also contributes to the ripeness of the literature from this period for analysis of asexual anticipation. Normative forces ranging from snubbing due to a social *faux pas* to legislation criminalizing homosexual sex forced queer desire into the shadows. But within that negative space, queerness was able to find coded ways to flourish within the confines of that Lacanian “erotic negativity” (D. Friedman 4). Victorian artists and sentiment toward gardening intersected in horticulture handbooks that discussed the various meaning of flowers, Mrs. Hales’s *The Book of Flowers*, for example. Writers and other artists would use the language of flowers to hint at subtextual eroticisms.³ Antonious, the lover of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, became a reference in Victorian literature implying homosexuality (Waters 195). Language like “confirmed bachelor,” “spinster,” and “frigid” was often used to describe characters with an implied queer identity. This secret language was a means to navigate that negative space where queer desire could be embraced while still reinforcing the status quo, or at least not explicitly acting in opposition to it. Analysis of that navigation is not limited to homosexual eroticisms but can also be used to investigate asexual eroticisms.

***Aurora Leigh*: Writing Around Compulsory Sexuality**

Readings of sexuality in the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning are hardly new. Analysis of the sexuality expressed in *Aurora Leigh* dates back as far as the original criticism to come out of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1857, albeit in the reserved tone and diction of the censorious Victorian sensibilities. Perhaps the most poignant queer theory analysis of Browning's work relative to my own comes from Annelise Brinck-Johnsen's "Lyric Ecstasies of Queer Time," in which she analyzes the queer temporality that exists in Browning's "Love." Most recently, Fiona Sampson's biography of Browning, the first in thirty years, explored the possibility of a same-sex attraction between Mary Russell Mitford and Browning. It is worth mentioning that Browning herself might bristle a bit at how modern-day scholars use her literature; she was not nearly as libertine as some of her other contemporaries and was surprised that *Aurora Leigh* did not receive condemnation.

This is not to say that Browning's work is devoid of sexual complexity, only that, at first glance, such analysis may seem better suited for more sexually explicit texts. When the reader accounts for asexual eroticisms, Browning's literature, *Aurora Leigh* in particular, is revealed to be a sexually nuanced text well worth consideration for a queer theory analysis. But despite the rich tradition of both feminist and queer approaches to examining the expression of sexuality within Browning's work, there has never been an exploration of that literature that not only includes asexual possibility but actively seeks it out. With a structuralist approach, analyzing *Aurora Leigh* for elements that subvert the reader's expectations reveals insight into the queerness of Aurora, especially in areas where the subversion taking place is relative to the patriarchal expectations of a gendered hierarchy that places limitations on Aurora's sexuality. Specifically, I will examine the marriage-plot, Aurora's views on motherhood, and the texts

Browning subtly (and not so subtly) references to queer her readers' expectations. My analysis will focus mainly on Books I, II, and IX. The purpose behind this focus is two-fold. An ontological reading of asexuality's presentation within the text needs to explore the process of asexuality coming into being as displayed by a character. In this case, Aurora's queer development into womanhood uses the *bildungsroman* as a model to decipher that development. The teleological aspect of this analysis necessitates taking those abstract concepts that Aurora describes in Books I and II and seeing how they ultimately manifest in the climax of Book IX.

Aurora Leigh follows the titular character's development from earliest memory to adulthood. The verse novel borrows elements from a wide array of mediums and genres, making the task of classifying it quite difficult. It truly represents the plasticity of the novel. The earlier books discuss Aurora's childhood, her becoming an orphan, being taken in by her aunt, and her several refusals of marriage to her cousin Romney, the story's chief love interest. Aurora then takes us on her journey from London to Paris and finally back to her Italian birthplace. During these travels, she stumbles upon Marian Erle, the woman Romney proposed to after Aurora's rejections. She takes Marian and her infant child with her to Italy, and is eventually sought out by a now-destitute Romney. Romney's efforts at feeding and housing the poor to provide for their well-being — *noblesse oblige* — resulted in catastrophe when Marian's father attacked him and burned the Leigh estate to the ground. Only after having gone through these trials and relinquishing their attachment to elements of the physical world do Aurora and Romney finally accept each other and marry.

Within the story, Browning uses three texts to contextualize *Aurora Leigh*; the Bible, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Plato's various dialogues. Browning uses each text in a variety of ways that adds credence to an asexual reading of Aurora. Her most significant influence is the

Bible. Much of the research surrounding *Aurora Leigh* includes an examination of its relationship to Biblical passages: the narrative is in many ways a theodicy. Browning uses the text to expand the interconnecting tissue between her worldview and scripture. These intersections often take on the discussion of chastity and marriage, resulting in many areas where the discourse touches on asexualities. Of these moments of asexual possibility, none are quite as apparent as when Aurora discovers Marian's child. Upon hearing about Marian's misfortune and pregnancy, Aurora is mortified.

If his mother's palms are clean
 They need be glad of course in clasping such;
 But if not, I would rather lay my hand,
 Were I she, on God's brazen altar-bars
 Red-hot with burning sacrificial lambs,
 Than touch the sacred curls of such a child. (Browning VI.618-23)⁴

Perceiving the child as evidence of sin, Aurora is disgusted by the idea of Marian touching the innocent baby. Aurora goes so far as to claim that Marian has kidnapped the child, arguing it is impossible for a person who has sinned to possess a young child (VI.637). It is not until Marian reveals to Aurora that the pregnancy was the result of a sexual assault and not, as Aurora assumed, Marian being seduced, that Aurora's view of Marian is dramatically altered. From Aurora's perspective, Marian has retained her virtue. The biblical connection between Marian and the Virgin Mary becomes more apparent as the child is described as pure and free of sin. She even directly refers to the infant as "her poor unfathered Child," further emphasizing the idea that the child's birth was miraculous (VII.327). This implication of virgin birth has queer connotations. Browning implies that chastity and virginity are not physical states of being but

rather spiritual ones, while simultaneously extolling chastity's importance as a virtue. The audience of *Aurora Leigh* being primarily Christian, this is a seemingly heterodox view on sexuality, one that is steeped in the ideas of John Milton.

The connections between Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Browning's *Aurora Leigh* are plentiful and also offer an opportunity to examine queerness. Sarah Annes Brown goes so far as to say that *Aurora Leigh* is more closely intertwined with *Paradise Lost* than with the Bible. Aurora regularly makes reference to Milton's view of the religious universe as an expression of her reality, as best exemplified in referring to the crystalline structure that exists beyond the firmament (Browning l.265, Reynolds 13n5). The reader gains a unique insight into Aurora's sexuality when they compare it to the portrayal of sexuality in *Paradise Lost*. Sex within both works is connected as the two poems share a poetic universe as Aurora seems to treat Milton's poem, at least in some instances, as an expression of fact. Her initial reaction to Marian's child triggers the reader's natural inclination when reading this passage to assume the sin referred to by Aurora is sex out of wedlock. However, there are several references to Bacchus, wine, and Bacchanalia throughout Book Six (518, 599). This focus on physical pleasure indicates that Aurora believes that Marian engaged in sex merely for pleasure, and thus the child is an undeserved reward. It is not the sex itself, but rather the physical pleasure inherent in its manifestation, that Aurora considers unseemly.

This is important in the context of Milton. Both *Paradise Lost* and *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* parallel the sentiment toward physical sex expressed in *Aurora Leigh*. Because Browning explicitly is using the Miltonic epic as an antecedent to her work, she provides clues as to the sexuality that is implied in her work as a function of Milton's. In *Paradise Lost*, there is no higher form of sex than that which occurs between angels. Milton emphasizes a contrast

between the sex Adam and Eve have and the sex the angels participate in. To further emphasize this contrast, Milton briefly describes prelapsarian sex between angels. Raphael explains the mechanics of ethereal copulation as an abandonment of the physical and a merger of the two spirits to the point where one angel is indistinguishable from the other (VIII.618-29). The fact that Adam and Raphael are discussing the differences between their approaches to sex is particularly interesting. The implication is that there is a continuum of sexual intercourse: on one end, the ethereal, and on the other end, the physical and carnal. Raphael's perception of Adam and Eve offers a starting point from which Adam and Raphael find parallels between their sexual intercourse.

But if the sense of touch whereby mankind
 Is propagated seem such dear delight
 Beyond all other, think the same vouchsafed
 To cattle and each beast; which would not be
 To them made common and divulged, if aught
 Therein enjoyed were worthy to subdue
 The soul of man, or passion in him move. (VIII.579-85)

Raphael points to the reproductive sex conducted by animals as an example of how demeaning the act is to the spirit. This is his advice to Adam on how to maintain a healthy romantic relationship with Eve. He sees procreative sex as distasteful and a lower form of communication, in keeping with Milton's differentiation between prelapsarian and postlapsarian sex. When Adam addresses this advice, he argues that his sexual acts with Eve are of a higher reverence than those of animals. But when doing so, Adam uses the language of procreation, not sex. The two are not the same, as evidenced in Adam and Eve's sexual acts in Book IV where sex is more akin to

prayer, a celebration of the Creator, not a usurpation of the Creator by perverting the act of creation. Indeed, when Raphael describes angelic sex, it is not in terms of physical union, but spiritual union and incapable of conception.

Aurora regularly cites Milton, *Paradise Lost* in particular, as a reflection of reality and mirrors Raphael's sentiment. Her distaste for sex is because of its physicality; she favors a more spiritual — what we would now describe as asexual — level of intimacy. This connection between the ethereal and the natural recurs throughout Browning's other writings. Her dramatic play which picks up where *Paradise Lost* leaves off further cements the connections Browning seeks to make between Milton's theodicy and her own religious views. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, Browning describes the relationship between art and artists using angels as a simile.

If we looked at nature as the angels do, we might say so of nature too (as indeed we may of particular portions of nature)—but the difference between art & nature is, that we see the whole of art, as the chief angels may, nature—& that each great work of art is a universe suited to the finite embrace of our souls & whose full meaning is evolved in their embrace. (Browning, Letter to MRM)

Browning is clearly exploring the angelic notion of the physical realm and associating it with the artistic creation she herself employs. In many regards, she engages in a theodicy herself, one that exemplifies artistic creation as a holy act upon which a connection to God may be made. Both Aurora and Milton use the same construction to explain their attitude toward the purpose of sex as a non-carnal act. The emphasis on sex as an ethereal act illustrates Aurora's asexuality as well as her queerness.

Milton's *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* similarly depicts sexuality, particularly virginity, that perfectly mirroring Aurora's revelation in Book VI. The drama explores the relationship between freedom and chastity: in the context of *Aurora Leigh*, chastity without agency is not a virtue. Milton emphasizes this when the elder brother, upon enumerating a variety of supernatural threats, states that none of them have "hurtful power o'er true virginity (line 437; emphasis added). The elder brother's implication is that the younger brother confuses virginity as a state of never having had sex, rather than as a spiritual state of being. The former implies the same association with physical sex as a carnal act whereas the latter represents a higher state of being. It is no surprise that Milton's ideas on sex would appeal to Browning since they so closely resemble Plato's position on *eros*. Confronted with a similar situation, Aurora initially passes judgment on Marian Erle for having a child, initially because she believed she stole it and then because she believed she was unchaste. However, when told the truth about Marian's circumstances, including the rape, she becomes overwhelmed.

But I, convicted, broken utterly,
 With woman's passion clung about her waist
 And kissed her hair and eyes,—“I have been wrong,
 Sweet Marian”

.....

I swear his mother shall be innocent
 Before my conscience, as in the open Book
 Of Him who read for judgement. (VI.778-781, 785-787)

The level of disruption in the opening line indicates Aurora's revelation. While there are moments where a singular line is disrupted by a caesura within the poem, it is not often that a

single line has several disruptions. In reading the line aloud, it is difficult to avoid staggering through the verse as though the voice naturally becomes choked with emotion. The language surrounding Aurora as the one convicted and Marian as an innocent also offers the reader a moment where their prejudicial judgment of a character is called into question by exploring their ideas of sexuality. Here, a seemingly virtuous woman is judged guilty through no fault of her own. By stripping her of her agency, Aurora commits the same act as the reader who is meant to look down on Marian. By understanding chastity as a state of spirit, not a physical state of being, Aurora emphasizes to the reader her asexuality and even queers them by potentially convincing them to agree with her.

That emphasis on a spiritual rather than physical state typifies Browning's use of Plato in *Aurora Leigh*. As the story progresses, Aurora has several discussions with other characters in which her worldview is defined. Like Socratic dialogues, these discussions do not attempt to bludgeon the reader by explicitly privileging one perspective over another. Instead, Aurora subtly finds common ground with the characters she disagrees with, asks leading questions, and gently guides the other party and the reader so they may better see the world from her perspective. This Socratic method highlights Browning's attempt to simultaneously challenge the status quo while also finding ways to support it, or, more accurately, finding ways to alleviate the concerns of those who find comfort in the status quo. This functions as a parallel to Platonic *aporia* which serves two functions, to purge the interlocutor of the pretense of knowledge and provide the comfort of a direction in which knowledge may be obtained (Politis 109). In no place is this more evident than in Aurora's debates with Romney. Throughout *Aurora Leigh's* story, Aurora and her cousin Romney debate the means by which mankind can best improve itself. Aurora emphasizes improvements to the spirit whereas Romney emphasizes that of material

conditions, thus a spiritual or intangible versus a physical perspective. This connection with the Socratic method, and Plato in particular, appears in a variety of forms throughout the text and help us understand the relationship Browning wanted the reader to have with the text.

Perhaps the most obvious connection is how both Aurora and Browning express a desire to read Plato. In a journal entry dated 16 April 1832, Browning exclaimed a desire to read many Greek books she was not permitted to. She makes specific reference to “Plato whole” (235). She read a copy of Plato when she was recovering physically and emotionally from her miscarriage so much so that the binding was so worn that it resembled that of a cheaply made novel (Mitford 12). The appreciation for Plato is important because the Platonic view of love as *eros* takes on various forms, not simply romantic love with all of its sexual connotations. *The Symposium* and *The Phaedrus*, specifically, explore the complexities of *eros*. While there is some debate about what Plato means by the term, it is generally accepted that it falls to Diotima’s view on the matter as fundamental to understanding Plato’s meaning (Cobb 13). For Diotima, *eros* is the daimon that “interprets and conveys things to the gods from human beings and to human beings from the gods” (Plato 41). Sex is not an inherent component of *eros* nor, therefore, the erotic. Nor is the traditionally romantic. In Plato’s view, *eros* is how mankind achieves communion with a higher power. Browning’s connection between the asexually erotic and higher Truth becomes evident when Aurora recounts a childhood memory.

And old Assunta to make up the fire,
 Crossing herself whenever a sudden flame
 Which lightened from the firewood, made alive
 That picture of my mother on the wall. (I.124-7)

Browning not only alludes to Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave," but also connects it to the Christian faith and the love of her mother. The caesura between the iambic foot of "firewood" and "made" in line 126 disrupts the reading flow. This disruption, given its connotations, results in a subtle, queer force enacted upon the reader, hinting at the asexual nature of Aurora. The parallels between Aurora's relationship to her societally enforced curriculum and Browning's are interesting in and of themselves. Given the sexual and gendered nature of these prescriptions and both Aurora and Browning's demonstrated desire to subvert them using Platonic *eros* as a tool to re-envision human relationships, these parallels can be seen as further evidence of an unstated queerness. That queerness is further emphasized by her treatment of the art Aurora is assigned and that which she chose to consume.

When discussing the literature she was prescribed and, as a result of the prescription, literature that she resented, she unflatteringly contrasts the literature to the *Stimulus Divini Amoris* or the "Prick of Love" (l.395). There are several points of interest in Aurora's mentioning of this particular text. First, the text is incorrectly attributed to Saint Bonaventure when the actual author is James of Milan (Reynolds 17n6). The incorrect attribution may be seen as just that, an accidental inaccuracy; many copies of the *Stimulus* identify Bonaventure as the author.⁵ But Browning, proficient in Latin, would potentially have had access to the correct text. While it may never be known if this was intentional or not, it would certainly make sense for Browning to hint at Aurora's sentiments by attributing *Stimulus* to Bonaventure. His Neoplatonic theology argued for a division between the domain of Platonic Rationalism in support of faith and any Aristotelian Empiricism that has applications outside that domain (Murphy 127). While it is reasonable to question whether the misattribution is intentional or not, it would be quite absurd to question the intentionality of Browning's translation. Margaret Reynolds, editor of the

Norton Critical Edition of *Aurora Leigh*, indicates that the book is often and arguably more accurately translated as *The Goad of Love* (17n6). These terms being interchangeable, the connotations of each, particularly for the translation Browning chose, are essential. According to the OED, “prick” as slang for male genitalia was in regular usage starting around the sixteenth century, long before Browning first put pen to paper. *Stimulus*’s central premise “emphasizes an emotional, rather than logical, approach to the mysteries” (Collins & Rundle 88n7). Browning rhetorically associates men with the application of emotion to problem-solving, a trait stereotypically associated with women as a reason for their subordinate condition. Given the sexual connotation of using “Prick,” this subtle gibe also distances Aurora from compulsory sexuality as she is associating the male reproductive organ with emotion. Given her disinterest in the physical world, we can infer that this is an effect of Aurora’s asexuality.

Browning famously balked against the books she was told to read, first by her father and then by her husband. In many ways, Browning lives vicariously through Aurora who, in her free time, reads a broad array of texts. She references Homer, Shakespeare, and even several of the Romantics, most notably Keats. Poets like Shelley, Byron, and Keats were relatively novel at the time but faced significant animosity from the literary establishment. By 1856, when *Aurora Leigh* was published, several prominent authors were quite critical of the collection of poets now called the Romantics. For example, Thomas Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* said, “Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe” (198). The term “Romantic” was often used by Victorian critics like Matthew Arnold as a way to disparage the writers of the first quarter of the century. It is telling that Aurora does not refer to them as “Romantic” but instead identifies them by name in an affectionate way.⁶ This further distances her from her immediate environment and those who occupy that space, whether that be Romney, her aunt, or “good-for-nothing people” (II.646).

That distance explicitly surfaces when she says, “I had relations in the Unseen” (I.473). The word “relations” offers multiple implications, that, when taken as all equally valid and intended, provide a moment of what reader-response theorists call “interpretive communities” for the reader. An interpretive community is one in which various social, political, cultural, and psychological factors tend to lead a reader to a particular interpretation of a text (Parker 341). For *Aurora Leigh*, these communities can include those invested in the heteronormative status quo as well as those who are not. Here, “relations” may simply be referring to a connection with people. It may also mean familial relationships, which bears further weight from Aurora’s earlier discussion of her deceased parents and her own “mother-want of the world” (I.40). But there is also its definition as jargon that needs to be considered. “Relations” may refer to the act of sex. Since jargon often enters the zeitgeist before it enters usage in text, it can be supposed that Browning has an anticipatory usage of “relations” as a term for sex before its first explicit use in literature at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷

A sexual connection with the “Unseen” might be how a Victorian would describe the sexual orientation of an asexual or aegosexual prior to those terms being codified as sexual identities.⁸ As a result, Aurora can be considered queer, and her Unseen domain interpreted as the negative space social constructs build around her where she can explore her sexuality.⁹ This moment where interpretive communities can diverge from one another does several things. First, it connects Aurora’s innate desire for parents and even parenthood to the negative space she populates with poetry. This would later take her to enter motherhood itself by writing poetry for publication. The multiple interpretations also offer the reader an opportunity to access Aurora’s queerness. Further than that, Browning uses flexible, nebulous language allowing the reader to dismiss the queerness and only read the line to mean familial relations or social relations, itself a

queering of the reader. The reader must choose to ignore the interpretation and thus further reinforce the negative space in which Aurora finds so much freedom, a freedom we as readers infringe upon as I will soon discuss. Browning quite literally is using the poetic form of *Aurora Leigh* to queer her reader, whether or not they are Fish's "ideal reader" (Parker 333).¹⁰

Analyzing the structure of the verse novel is quite informative in an asexual reading. Rather than relying on a nebulous speaker, Browning presents the fictional Aurora as the poem's author and narrator. Many female authors who were contemporaries of Browning would often use pseudonyms or redact their names from their publications to avoid the stigma associated with women writers.¹¹ The fact that Browning chose to keep her name attached to the work is quite impressive, especially since she thought her book would be decried for "gross indecency" (Browning, Letter to Anna Brownwell Jameson). Aurora directly tells us that this poem is her story written for "my better self" (I.4), illustrating that she is both narrator and audience. This construction produces several effects that are relevant to my analysis. It speaks to Aurora's reliability as a narrator and explores the reader's role in the development of the narrative.

Aurora's reliability is crucial to any reading of the text. The narrative poem is epistolary in nature in that it is written in the form of a journal reflection, albeit in blank verse, on events that have transpired. The *intended* audience is an audience of one, Aurora. As a result, any other reader takes on a rather sinister role. Browning's technique places the reader in the position of the actual antagonist of the story. Like a small child reading their sibling's diary, I, the reader of Aurora's innermost, unfiltered thoughts, am an unwanted presence violating Aurora's agency. I, the reader, am an uninvited occupant of her private, negative Unseen. That invasion, be the reader man or woman, takes on sexual connotations as they become privy to her innermost wants and desires and are encouraged, as readers are expected to do, to interpret the text and thus mold

Aurora as they want to see her, despite her protestations. This access to her mental and spiritual self illustrates an intangible want, one that an allosexual reader might sublimate via the fulfillment of physical sexual desire. The fact that sublimation into physical, sexual attraction and activities does not occur creates an anxiety in the reader. That anxiety queers them as they are forced to grapple with Aurora's refusal to participate in the very process they are naturally subjected to themselves. Aurora's resistance to the very process that would identify the reader with the normative status quo represented by Romney or her aunt acts as the ultimate rejection of the space created by the status quo around Aurora, now taking the form of the invasive reader, and embracing the negative queer space she truly inhabits. By creating a form of resistance to the actual reader (us), the intended reader (Aurora) subtly creates an asexual queering force upon the reader in the same way in which the society in which Aurora exists places a heteronormative force upon her.

Browning also uses various literary forms within *Aurora Leigh* to deliberately disturb the reader in a fashion that can be described as queer. These forms include epic poetry, the novel of manners, the novel of sensibility, the novel of incident, epistolary literature, and apocalyptic literature, among others.¹² But in each of these instances, the form is deviated from in telling ways to create a poem so unique in its construction that it stands alone in the compendium of English literature. As T. S. Eliot says, "parts [of a long poem] can form a whole which is more than the sum of the parts" (334). Examining the specific manner that the whole and its parts deviate from the various forms employed by Browning illustrates a disruption that can be read as queer and asexual. For example, epics consist of certain characteristics: the hero has a physical presence that amazes the poet, the setting includes great nations and realms, the actions are considered valorous and brave, there is a supernatural element, and the poet operates at a

distance from the actions (Harmon 185). *Aurora Leigh* complicates each of those expectations that come with reading an epic, adjusting the reader's expectations based on non-normative gendered disruption. Brinck-Johnsen argues that in her poem "Love," Browning engages with queer temporality to divert the reader's attention away from the mere seconds in which the action of the poem occurs and instead relish "the moment of ecstasy as a catalyst for simultaneous dreams of the future and memories of the past combined in one imaginative erotic moment outside the bounds of narrative temporality" (334). Browning plays with queer temporality in *Aurora Leigh* as well.

An epic poem heavily relies on narrative and the reader's perception of how that narrative will be constructed. In this case, the contemporary reader will be immensely familiar with the epics of John Milton, Homer, and Virgil, just to name a few. Whereas in "Love" the reader is encouraged to dispatch their temporal selves in the reading, *Aurora Leigh* encourages the reader to rely on their notion of the temporal, linear flow of events by utilizing the Miltonic epic form in conjunction with the *künstlerroman* plot structure. Susan Stanford Friedman posits that Browning uses the epic, narrative, and lyrical form as a means to supplement the perceived weaknesses of one with the strengths of the others when the reader knows the author is a woman. What is not accounted for in this analysis is the reader's perception of Browning's and Aurora's sexuality. These forms create an anticipation in the reader. For example, a contemporary reader would expect Aurora to get married with the ultimate intention of having children if not actually explicitly stating that she does.

It is that anticipation, that faith that events will resolve themselves in a way that is both consistent with the various genre forms and satisfying to the reader's adopted allonormativity, the queer, asexual ending ultimately disrupts.¹³ This sexual anticipation forces the reader to

examine the qualities of *Aurora Leigh* as an epic poem, but in a way that forces the reader to question why the poem meets those qualifications. The poem doesn't really contain the supernatural element expected from a standard epic. No gods or demons vie for power in a struggle that interrupts the lives of Aurora and Romney. But there is a struggle that goes on in the intangible, that Unseen negative space in which Aurora's true self occupies operating in direct contention with the physical realm in which she is expected to reside within traditional patriarchal roles and become a domestic housewife to bear and raise children. In asking these questions, the reader inherently must address the lack of the anticipated sexual resolution within the narrative, resulting in engaging with what Ela Przybylo would describe as a differentiation between asexual and non-sexual (29). The resulting reading is naturally queer, even if the reader is not consciously aware of the queerness, and the reader must contend with their inherent biases to resolve the plot of the narrative caused by its intangible setting.

That queer, intangible space becomes rewarding for both Aurora and the reader, regardless of allosexuality or asexuality; using the metaphor of an angel making thunder, she explains that she has achieved intangible satisfaction (IX.737-60). She emphasizes that the semiotic limitations inherent to language can be overcome using poetry. Aurora identifies the purpose of this narrative poem as a means for her to return to that moment when her intangible want is fulfilled spiritually and psychologically rather than sublimated through physical intimacy. The reader who may have found the aunt's case compelling or Romney's proposals perfectly reasonable, the reader who inherently cannot grasp Aurora's queerness simply by virtue of their own normativity, is granted, albeit through their invasive lens, access to that transformative moment and becomes, at least for a moment, queer themselves. With all of this in

mind, the only way to not read *Aurora Leigh* as queer is to participate in the very prescriptive behavior Aurora abhors.

If there were any question of Aurora's inherent asexuality by this point, Browning further emphasizes her predilection toward an ethereal intimacy rather than physical sex in the poem's resolution. After Romney is blinded in a fire that destroys the Leigh estate, the worldly physical representation of the Leighs and their heteronormative, patriarchal ancestry, Aurora and Romney finally reach an understanding on their romantic affection. This revelatory moment comes as the result of a blow to the forehead caused by Marian Erle's father during the collapse of the Leigh edifice (Browning IX.546-7). Given Aurora's previously illustrated interest in Indian spiritualism, it cannot go unnoticed that the forehead is where the bindi goes.¹⁴ A bindi is a representation of the third eye and is supposed to remind the wearer of access to concealed wisdom. After Romney lost his eyesight in the fire, he was able to see truly for the first time through this third, spiritual, and intangible eye.

Aurora, too, must resolve her sight to embrace the intangible in ways that she failed to do until the climax of the Ninth Book.

Could I see his face,
 I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
 Or did his arms constrain me? Were my cheeks
 Hot, overflowed, with my tears, or his?
 And which of our two large explosive hearts
 So shook me? That, I know not. There were words
 That broke in utterance... melted, in the fire, -
 Embrace, that was convulsion... then a kiss

As long and silent as the ecstatic night,
 And deep, deep, shuddering breaths, which meant beyond
 Whatever could be told by word or kiss. (IX.714-24)

She too must go blind and fail to see Romney's physical form, blending his tears with her own, and reconcile the perception of Romney she has so long held with the one she is now able to conceive before her.¹⁵ Because they both recognized their privileging the physical and neglecting the intangible (Romney in his philanthropy to change men's lives and Aurora in her poetry to change men's souls, a mimetic approach by both), they were unable to properly express love for one another. But once they recognize the distance between the intangible want and physical want that exists within themselves, they were able to discuss their love in a way they could both understand, using neither words nor sexual action. There is also a connection to Plato's views on gender and sexuality in these lines. Plato describes a third, original gender that "was androgynous in form and name, being a combination of both male and female" (29). This original form was then split apart by the gods and humankind longs to return to that perfect state. Love becomes the pursuit of "wholeness" (31). The unity that Aurora creates between her and Romney represents this wholeness. Whereas the physical union of the body is an impossibility that can only be temporarily sated through sexual intercourse, the Platonic desire to become whole can be fulfilled asexually, through a spiritual bonding. Aurora emphasizes that dimension of the asexually erotic when she states that these "shuddering breaths" and "convulsion[s]" within their embrace are neither expressible via kiss nor word. It is an intangible orgasm brought on by this union of spirits. It is this union that Aurora has an innate attraction to pursue and finally finds in a marriage that is removed from the physical imperative that society normally

impresses upon women but instead satisfies her intangible desires on an equal footing with her partner.

Aurora's ultimate union with Romney and her acceptance of marriage also reflects a queerness that I read as asexual. Sharon Marcus illustrates an interesting dynamic in the opportunities for women in Victorian marriage: the opportunities for same-sex unions not officially sanctioned by church and state among Victorian women offered more agency than for women in the 1940s (195). That empowering agency is eliminated when marrying a man. Considering the stigma associated with being an older, unwed woman, there is room to consider marriage and its relationship to a woman's maturity as a socially natural part of her development. Marriage, at least in the case of women in Victorian England, can then be analyzed through the lens of queer temporality in a similar fashion to that of Brinck-Johnsen. Queer temporality is a resistance to heteronormative expectations socially imposed upon the development of a queer individual. For most of the queer community, this takes on the form of a perceived immaturity as they embrace activities more associated with youth, activities they were denied as having lived a life in the closet. For asexuals, that queer temporality takes on a unique dimension. Sexuality acts as a maturity narrative, where the climax (if you will pardon the pun) is one in which sex occurs (Chen 66). Resistance to that narrative is a form of asexual temporality.

Aurora displays that resistance regularly when she discusses marriage. In Romney's early interactions with Aurora, he often calls her "child," emphasizing his perception of immaturity (II.180, 213, 229). Aurora tells us this is a common occurrence. In response to his condescension, Aurora responds by saying:

"I perceive.

The headache is too noble for my sex.

You think the heartache would sound decenter,
 Since that's the woman's special, proper ache,
 And altogether tolerable, except
 To a woman." (II.110-115)

Aurora emphasizes a preference for headaches induced by the creation of poetry over heartaches induced by the pangs of love, positioning Aurora in immediate opposition to romance. She regularly substitutes children with literature, and this statement, which takes place during Romney's first proposal of marriage, takes on a queer tone and implies an asexually queer observation about marriage. Each line flows smoothly, uninterrupted by any hard caesura or disruption to the meter. This implies a level of confidence in Aurora punctuated by the final two lines where a caesura snaps the thought to a conclusion with a punctuated conclusion inviting Romney, and simultaneously the read, to ask if they would be so condescending toward Aurora were she a man and sought intellectual pursuits instead of romantic ones.

The Professor: The Asexual Pedagogy of William Crimsworth

Another example of asexual anticipation can be found in William Crimsworth from Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*. Brontë's only complete novel to be published posthumously, it was her first novel and was rejected more than nine times. Brontë felt the numerous rejections were something of a unique distinction, a mark of honor to be proud of (Brontë, "To George Smith" 311).¹⁶ Much of the novel is autobiographical, detailing Brontë's time in Belgium and her failed romance with a married man (Paddock). Scholarship surrounding the Brontës often overlooks *The Professor*, treating it more as a footnote, a steppingstone in Brontë's development as a writer, but these views of Brontë's early work ignore the subtle yet complex narrative

structure that distinguishes it from other similar romances of the time. These subtleties, when read through a queer lens, reveal a rich and vibrant text that asks the reader to question their own relationship with compulsory sexuality. In Brontë's own words, *The Professor* "is as good as I can write; it contains more pith, more substance, more reality, in my judgment, than much of 'Jane Eyre'" ("To William Smith Williams" 173). With such esteem as both novel and reflection of Brontë's own life, *The Professor* deserves more attention. *The Professor* subverts the reader's expectations relative to the genre, form, and narration by introducing a queer character whose asexuality becomes so disruptive to the reader that the character of William Crimsworth becomes quite controversial. Unlike *Aurora Leigh*, *The Professor* does not directly reference a significant number of works as a referential homage. Instead, Brontë skews her reader's expectations of William by relying on their previous experience with systemic education in Victorian literature. *The Professor* is unique in its seemingly positive portrayal of systemic education when compared to other texts of that era about schools. In my queer structuralist reading examining asexual anticipation, I argue that William Crimsworth incorporates elements of what we would today consider a proto-queer pedagogy, albeit in a Victorian mindset, and does so in a way that suggests he is asexual. To do this I first need to demonstrate elements within the text that indicate William exhibits various asexualities, then provide an overview of the depiction of schooling as a contemporary reader would have had access to, and then I can more adequately illustrate that Brontë's description of education engages with an asexual queerness by comparison.

Much of the scholarship surrounding *The Professor* revolves around the gendered expectations that are created by a male character narrating a book written by a woman whose initial intent was to publish the book under a male pseudonym. While the text certainly allows

for ample reading that explores gender roles, there is also a significant discourse on sexuality that is informed by that gender dynamic. Brontë does this by creating a story that is far more cheerful than her other works. There is none of the “bitterness” that Virginia Woolf found so off-putting in *Jane Eyre* because the protagonist in *The Professor* is a man (605). While many critics viewed the novel’s heroine, Frances Henri, as representative of Brontë, there is also a great deal that connects Brontë with the male protagonist, specifically his affinity for privileging reality over sentiment to the point that his observations resemble a proto-anthropologist conducting an ethnography of the culture within these schools. When the principal of the boy’s school, Monsieur Pelet, asks about William’s experience as a part-time instructor at the neighboring girls’ school, he deliberately tries to coax William into revealing some internal fetishizing of William’s students.

“Confess, William, do not the mere good looks of Zoraïde Reuter appear dowdyish and commonplace compared with the splendid charms of some of her pupils?”

The question discomposed me, but I now felt plainly that my principal was endeavouring (for reasons best-known to himself— at that time I could not fathom them) to excite ideas and wishes in my mind alien to what was right and honourable. The iniquity of the instigation proved its antidote. (Brontë, *The Professor* 96)¹⁷

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that Brontë used the male pseudonym and male narrator as a means of eliminating the anxiety of female authorship, which inadvertently resulted in William’s analytical and clinical distance that he has when dealing with other people (70). By not embracing her femininity, Brontë writes a character who is somewhat unrelatable. Gilbert and Gubar might imagine, in this secluded moment between two men, that William, were he written by a man or even if he were written by a woman without the encumbrance of writing

under a male identity, would indulge in the salacious talk to some extent. The emphasis on aesthetic tension that permeates the novel is an accident.

The interpretations of Woolf, Gilbert, and Gubar certainly fit the situation of a writer who is young and still working out her craft. The bitterness that Woolf reads in *Jane Eyre* is almost completely lacking in *The Professor*, only appearing in brief snippets. They see an aberration best explained by Brontë's development into the writer she would one day become. Using a queer structuralist framework, I consider these qualities that critics see as cumbersome or demeaning as intentional, measuring their meaning in comparison to other similar works as well as the totality of Brontë's fiction. By doing so, *The Professor* becomes more than a footnote used to inform our readings of *Jane Eyre* or *Villette*, but a work worthy of scholarly praise in its own right as an asexual narrative empowering William Crimsworth's marginalized sexuality.

Woolf's assessment of Brontë's bitterness at the need to use a male pseudonym and forego her femininity in the process does occasionally exhibit itself in *The Professor*. The most poignant example is Frances's desire to earn the same wages as her husband for doing the same work. But that bitterness is somewhat muted. The extent of Frances's anger is "I am not satisfied" (219). The blunt statement about injustice illustrates that, while Brontë's bitterness is present, it is not so dominant in her writing as to turn her into a nihilist. *The Professor* has a rather content ending when compared to some of her other works. *The Professor*'s plot is particularly idyllic when compared to the story of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. I read these moments of bitterness that appear throughout the text as intentional, rather than the accidental fumbling of a fresh-faced writer trying their hand at a novel for the first time. Frances's declaration forces the reader, who is quite sympathetic of Frances, to recognize that women who work are grossly underpaid in comparison to their male counterparts who do the same amount and quality of

work. Because this is a work written by a woman under a male pseudonym through the lens of a male narrator the reader is less inclined to feel prejudiced against the theme being expressed here of the absurdity of the marginalization of women.

Brontë uses the same technique portraying William's marginalization as an eligible bachelor creating a point of intersection with asexuality. Unfortunately, most readers do not seem to notice it. Contemporary reviewers certainly didn't. William Crimsworth was considered dull and unengaging as a protagonist.¹⁸ A meta-analysis of contemporary reviews contextualized through a modern reading of *The Professor* makes the case that Crimsworth's perception of his sexuality is inaccurate and that is the source of his dramatic tension (Malone 178). None of these readings perceive William as a queer character and, as a result, they see him as alienating, rather than queering. But one of William's most noticeable qualities is his disruption of the reader's allonormative assumptions. His perception of attraction embodies Przybylo's theory of asexual eroticism. The opening of the novel consists of a copy of a letter written by William to a schoolmate from Eton:

What animal magnetism drew thee and me together I know not; certainly I never experienced anything of the "Pylades and Orestes" sentiment for you, and I have reason to believe that you, on your part, were equally free from all romantic regard to me. Still, out of school hours we walked and talked continually together; when the theme of conversation was our companions or our masters, we understood each other, and when I recurred to some sentiment of affection, some vague love of an excellent or beautiful object, whether in animate or in inanimate nature, your sardonic coldness did not move me. I felt myself superior to that check *then* as I do *now*. (Brontë 5)

The OED indicates that “animal magnetism” does not hold any sexual connotation at the time of writing; however, its usage does indicate an attraction to one another is ineffable in nature, or, rather, one that defies biological and sociological ideas surrounding attraction. William describes an attraction that is natural in origin and non-sexual, overriding what is deemed socially sensible. This creates a sense of the unknown in the reader, hinting that there are dimensions to these characters that might be inaccessible to them, setting the stage for the queering effect of the asexual anticipation. William then immediately follows up by indicating that his relationship with this unseen schoolmate is nothing like that of “Pylades and Orestes.” The endnote simply refers to them as loyal friends (Smith 269n“p. 5”). However, there is a tradition dating as far back as Roman antiquity in portraying these two Greek mythological figures as homosexual (Hubbard 527).

While a reader might consider the idea of animal magnetism to be potentially a queer-coded expression of homosexuality, William immediately challenges that reading and denies that their relationship resembles two characters who possess homosexual connotations. He further emphasizes this queerness by characterizing their interactions with one another. William uses the term “romantic” with a plasticity of meaning similar to Plato’s when discussing *eros*. Romantic in this context is not necessarily the romance of love, but rather the notion of embellishing reality in favor of emotional sentiment. William describes his own sentimentality as “vague” and stimulated by both animate and inanimate objects. His friend reacts to that sentimentality in a way that can best be described as a questioning eye roll. The school chum does not seem capable of understanding the sentimentality that is a core component of William’s character, further adding to the implication that William is queer. His closeness to this mystery man is based on his friend’s acceptance of William’s queerness, a queerness that is asexual in nature. That asexual

sentimentality is similar to how Przybylo uses Audre Lorde's description of the radical and revolutionary erotics to encompass an infinite array of tastes and affectations, describing erotics that "did not bind emotional depth and intimate relating to sex" (Przybylo 22). The reader is led to expect a potentially sexual implication, only to have that implication queered through asexual anticipation.

A similar pattern occurs when William interacts with women. I have already demonstrated his abhorrence of Pelet's attempt to goad him into sexualizing the young women he teaches. But that lack of sexual interest extends far beyond a moral barrier erected around his students. From the perspective of an allonormative reading, how William interacts with the women around him is quite off-putting. He is a queering influence on his fellow characters as well as contemporary reviewers. He observes other people as a scientist might in collecting data, creating a social filter between him and his fellow characters that intersects with asexuality. When examining his quarters in M. Pelet's school, he finds it "astonishing how disappointed I felt" at having a window overlooking the neighboring girls' school boarded up (Brontë 65). He goes on to describe that disappointment: he wishes to examine the "female character" from a vantage point where he will not be detected, not to excite his lust after the young women but simply as a clinical observer. This is diametrically opposed to how Pelet anticipates William will react. Instead of lusting after his charges, William seems more interested in teaching them and, in turn, learning from them. His reaction is not the disappointment other allosexual readers would expect his disappointment to be in that situation.

William further asexually queers the reader's expectations when discussing his attraction to Zoraïde Reuter and Frances Evans Henri. In both cases, William's appreciation of the women's appearances is entirely dependent upon his first developing an attraction for their

personalities. Anything resembling a sexual attraction is best described as an appreciation for their unity of body and spirit. Upon realizing Zoraïde's duplicitous nature, William reflects:

Reason was my physician; she began by proving that the prize I had missed was of little value: she admitted that, physically, Zoraïde might have suited me, but affirmed that our souls were not in harmony, and that discord must have resulted from the union of her mind with mine. (Brontë 113)

William uses the faculty of Reason to reconcile the idea he developed in his head of Zoraïde developed through her perceived flirtations and his imagination. When thinking about the physical qualities of Frances that he admires, it is specifically done through "contemplating" after the fact, never actually in the moment, relegating sexual attraction to the domain of romanticization and the imagination (Brontë 227). It is only after forming a strong bond with Frances as a student, then as a friend, that he is able to see her physical beauty. The fact that William's first impression of Frances encouraged nothing more than a passing glance when he has demonstrated a pedantic level of detail to his observations directly indicates that his attraction to Frances's physical qualities was purely dependent upon his finding things to love in her character (Brontë 104). Assuming this physical attraction is a coded means of inserting sexual attraction without exciting the austere Victorian sensibilities, then William can be interpreted as demisexual. Demisexuality is an asexual umbrella identity where sexual attraction is conditional upon forming a strong emotional bond (Decker 38-41). We further see how William's asexuality appears in his teaching methods and how those methods disrupt the reader's perceptions.

Representations of the education system, and the educator in particular, during the Victorian era were not particularly flattering. Teachers were often depicted as manipulative

degenerates, using their posts to exploit labor or otherwise take advantage of their students. For example, the malignant cruelty of Wackford Squeers, headmaster of Dotheboys Hall in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, is responsible for the vicious beating, malnutrition, and exploitation of labor for his young charges. Dickens wrote that "schoolmasters, as a race, were the blockheads and imposters who might naturally be expected to spring from such a state of things" (xv). He even claims he deliberately diminished the portrayal of Mr. Squeers malice, afraid the reader would find a more honest portrayal of schoolmasters too far-fetched to be believed (xviii). The general depiction of the education system and those who taught within it leaves the reader with the impression that teachers are, on the whole, immoral and sadistic. Perhaps this negative depiction was due to most authors being privately educated (Reed 58). There may have even been resentment at the abuse that young boys often received at school, whether that be in the form of corporal punishment at the hands of the teachers or the bullying at the hands of fellow students that went on unchecked by the adult administrators. There were also significant advances being made in education, and reformers spotlighted the education system's failings throughout the Victorian era.¹⁹ The Victorian reader would naturally expect William Crimsworth to behave like other fictional educators, and would find him abhorrent. Brontë deliberately relies on the expectation to jar the reader into examining William's qualities as a teacher, qualities that I will demonstrate are queer.

William has the opportunity to use his students' affections to his advantage. There are clear instances where the young women evince an attraction for the handsome, young professor. Most notably, William snubs the affections of Aurelia Koslow. He describes this particular student in very telling language as well, highlighting her ineffectual attempts to grab his attention using her feminine charms in the terms of warfare. Her flirtations are "artillery," though he is

unassailable. He says, “we scorn what, unasked, is lavishly offered” (Brontë 99). At first glance, the reader may consider the “we” to refer to gentlemen or perhaps men in general and the offering being unprompted affections. That gendered hierarchy of courtship would certainly make sense of this somewhat vague statement. However, I offer an alternative reading. The “we” in this sentence may refer to someone of his asexual orientation and the offerings are sexual attraction — against which he is armored, to continue the military metaphor. The fact that he chooses to engage with his students with a controlled, professional demeanor rather than manipulate their individual feelings to make his job easier illustrates that his queer pedagogy intersects with asexuality to inform his practical decision-making in the classroom.

That methodical disposition is displayed again when William responds to the students’ teasing. He isn’t angry or agitated. He is actually quite calm, despite the initial resistance from his first class at the girls’ school. Instead, he takes an assignment of one of the instigators and compares its flaws to an assignment of another student who did not engage in the antics (Brontë 86-88). Many readers, and even the headmistress, might feel it reasonable for William to become upset. However he remains calm and carefully measures a response, one that creates a comparison between behavior that he reinforces to be acceptable and that which is clearly an impediment to his classroom management. That comparison further models expectations regarding assignments. William uses natural consequences to orient normalcy within the curriculum. While his approach would by no means be considered a queer praxis by today’s standards, in comparison to Victorian practices, it certainly can be considered a proto-queer praxis. Corporal punishment that stressed punitive measures was considered a staple of Victorian education (Reed 103). William deliberately disrupts normative education practices, and does so

successfully with no formal training or experience as an educator, revealing a natural inclination to queer the classroom.

William's disruption of normativity infuses the scaffolding he incorporates into his curriculum. After teaching his first lesson at Pelet's school, he describes his approach as "ever gentle, considerate, yielding even, to a certain point, with dispositions so irrationally perverse" (Brontë 67). William innately recognizes a fundamental principle in queer pedagogy that differentiates him from the chief educational theories at the time, namely that each student learns uniquely and those differences should be embraced and accommodated. The Prussian system, which was predominant in the 1830s, emphasized rote memorization, marking the mistakes a student made, and then having the student repeatedly perform the same task until they are able to do it without error (Levinson 218). The Prussian model's purpose was to instill a sense of obedience to authority, even when the threat of force is not present (Paglayan 1246). The Prussian system served many interests. It supported capitalist interests by creating a generation of laborers capable of repetitive behavior, indistinguishable from one another, making them perfectly replaceable on a factory line and severely depressing the wages they could command. Imperialism and fascism would benefit from the blind obedience granted to the state indoctrinated into children at an early age.

When William disrupts the expected curriculum by addressing the individual needs of the students and being pliant to them, he also disrupts those larger systems of oppression and inequality, and he does so in a way that can be read as queer. For example, when William notices Frances's affinity for English, he takes her aside to discuss her education individually. He even points out to the reader that "I knew what I was doing would be considered a very strange thing, and, what was more, I did not care" (Brontë 136). He then proceeds to determine Frances's

personal desires for her education. This emphasis on personalized utility illustrates that William is uninterested in creating a cohort of perfectly interchangeable students. Instead, he endeavors to create students who are interested in applying their education in the manner which best suits their own life goals. For Frances's part, her ultimate goal is to open her own school, teach her own students with her own curriculum, and receive a wage she feels she deserves (Brontë 248).

Frances's plan to open her own school mirrors Karl Marx's conceptions of an ideal economy in which the worker owns the means of production and controls the price of their goods or services, thus dictating their own wages rather than capital and avoiding the alienation of labor. Seeing William's pedagogy and praxis applied and the effects of that application, it is plain that the reader is exposed to a proto-queer pedagogy that intersects with William's asexuality, especially when compared to the totality of education's depiction in contemporary British literature.

Final Thoughts

Concluding that Aurora Leigh and William Crimsworth interact with asexuality as a core component of their characters has broad critical implications. Of particular interest to Aurora is how the dimension of asexuality interacts with Aurora as a woman. Gilbert and Gubar argue that in struggling between her own wants as a woman and societal demands placed upon her as a woman, Aurora's journey is one between the angelic state she ultimately arrives at and the monstrous one from which she delivers herself (18-9). Overlaying my analysis of that journey as one between inherent asexuality and amatonormativity prescribed allosexuality, Gilbert and Gubar's theory of gender in Victorian literature as it pertains to women authors can be applied to asexual and aromantic characters as well.²⁰ Using that theory, we can explore the idea that Aurora has both intangible want and physical want, but they are ultimately disconnected, both

mastered separately rather than combined to the detriment of the whole. When contemplating Madhavi Menon's ideas about identity fundamentally being constraining and queer universalism being the only means by which true liberation may be achieved, *Aurora* may very well be an early example of her theory being applied in the literature. While Dustin Friedman's *Before Queer Theory* focuses on queerness as it is expressed in the writings of homosexual authors, I have clearly demonstrated how a non-homosexual author can create a negative space around their character in which queerness can be expressed. An application of any of these theories, particularly those that deal with elements addressed here, could reveal new dimensions in both *Aurora Leigh* as well as the play *A Drama of Exile* as it relates to our Miltonic connections, and are ripe for analysis and could result in shifting the focus of scholarship, highlighting a-spectrum connotations that exist in the broader body of Browning's works. All a result of an asexual reading of *Aurora Leigh*.

Given that *The Professor* is Brontë's first novel, an asexual reading can potentially inform a reading of Brontë's other works, particularly *Villette*, since aspects of early manuscripts of *The Professor* eventually became *Villette* (Rosengarten xxiv). Using this reading, a more comprehensive exploration of Brontë's pedagogy could be discerned. Given *The Professor*'s distinctive and positive depiction of an educator within the aggregate of Victorian literature that tends to view educators as despotic figures, there may be a historical context for viewing the arc of education through Brontë's influence on educationalists like Matthew Arnold and Oscar Browning. The existence of a proto-queer pedagogy merits an examination of pedagogy as it existed throughout history and how those approaches are disruptive to normativity in the classroom supporting the use of queer pedagogy in education today, especially when examining

education through an asexual lens. Reading William as asexual may even have biographical contexts considering how interwoven the details of *The Professor* are with Brontë's own life.

Endnotes

1. Own Voices is a movement typically associated with the creative community where a work of art identified as Own Voices lends credence to its portrayal of a particular identity because the artist is a member of the community instead of an observer.

2. For a thorough reading of *Jekyll and Hyde* as a trans-narrative, see Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005).

3. The Pre-Raphaelites, for example, would include specific flowers in their art to interject sexual themes while skirting public condemnation and accusations of lewdness.

4. All further reference to Browning will refer to *Aurora Leigh* and use the citation system of (Book #.Line #) unless otherwise noted.

5. The *Opera Omnia* edited by Adolphe Charles Peltier in 1864 is a good example of a contemporary text that attributes the *Stimulus* to Saint Bonaventure.

6. Browning herself had quite an affinity for Romantic poets, particularly the aesthetic of William Wordsworth with whom she corresponded. For further analysis on this connection, see Kathleen Blake's essay "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and William Wordsworth: The Romantic Poet as a Woman."

7. The Brownings regularly use terms with a slang definition that are not recognized by the *OED* at the time of publication. For example, the use of the word "cherry" in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess."

8. Asexuality being a person who does not feel or feels very limited sexual attraction and an aegosexual being a subset of asexuality where a person fantasizes about sexual activity, often between other people without the person fantasizing being involved in any way, but with no desire for that fantasy to become real.

9. For further reading on negation and its relationship to Victorian era queerness, see Dustin Friedman's *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self*.

10. Interestingly, Stanley Fish's foundational text establishing reader-response Theory, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, explores how the reader interacts with a text by analyzing Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a major influence on Browning's *Aurora Leigh*.

11. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters just to name a few.

12. Michelle C. Martinez's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh: A Reading Guide* provides a detailed description of these forms employed.

13. Allonormativity is the notion that sexual attraction is natural, innate, and that society should be structured around allosexuality.

14. See V.104 and VII.1212 for a few examples.

15. In her article "Feeling Intellect in *Aurora Leigh* and *The Prelude*," Emily V. Epstein Kobayashi uses this passage to demonstrate how Browning expanded upon Wordsworthian poetics, connecting it with Wordsworth's blind Beggar character.

16. Brontë took her failure, altered the metrics of success, and found ways to be proud of what others deemed a failure. This is very in keeping with Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, which I adapt in the third chapter.

17. All further references to Brontë will refer to *The Professor* unless otherwise noted.

18. While reviews of *The Professor* varied greatly, there appear to be two points of general consensus among contemporary critics: first, that *The Professor* is not nearly as impressive as *Jane Eyre* or other works from Charlotte Brontë; second, that William Crimsworth is not particularly relatable as a hero.

19. The Grammar Schools Act of 1840, the Factories Act of 1844, and the Forster Elementary Education Act of 1870 are just a few of the transformation reforms to education enacted in Victorian Britain.

20. Amatonormativity, coined by Professor Elizabeth Drake, refers to the societal pressures and expectations relating to romantic relationships. For example, the idea that everyone is better off married with children is amatonormative. Aurora regularly challenges this societal force.

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**QUEER VICTORY: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAILURE AND ASEXUAL
JOUISSANCE IN GEORGE MOORE'S *CELIBATES* AND E. M. FORSTER'S *A ROOM
WITH A VIEW***

“She loved to play on the side of Victory. Victory of what and over what—that is more than the words of daily life can tell us.”

-E. M. Forster in *A Room with a View*

In the previous chapters, I discussed how asexuality can be found within texts using modified queer theory. I examined how asexuality can appear as immaturity or a failure to grow up in the first chapter. In the second chapter, I argued that asexual characters and narratives can be explored through an examination of how the character and story fail to meet the reader's expectations. This process of identifying implicit asexuality generally revolves around recognizing queer joy when we see it. Another way to understand queer joy is to examine queer success. Quantifying the various successes the queer community achieved in recent history is a difficult task. Is a success that is not divested from the status quo really a queer success? For example, the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States is hard to describe as a victory when it is predicated upon the queer community supporting the historically patriarchal institution of marriage and can be overturned at a mere whim, leaving any queer joy taken from same-sex marriage in a constant state of anxiety about whether the status quo will recognize that marriage in the future. That is not to say that there are no tangible benefits to marriage equality; I only question whether receiving those benefits as conditional acquiescence of a society that may alter the arrangement at any time as opposed to innate rights is a queer victory or not.

Queer victory is difficult to define in Western media. The structure in much of Western narrative relies on conflict with external forces and defeating those forces. That victory often reinforces heteronormativity, as in Edward Waverley's marriage to Rose Bradwardine. The binary of victory/defeat is disrupted by queerness. Queer victory is embracing your true self in the face of normative sexual and gender expectations, not the vanquishing of those expectations. A story that explores queerness emphasizes fulfillment and harmony. That perhaps explains why characters like William Crimsworth and Emma Woodhouse are so off-putting to allonormative readers. Western society has ingrained in the allonormative reader a sense that those external expectations should be defeated and cast out.¹ But queer victory is subjective and individual. A collective accomplishment over society is still reliant on the principles of normativity. Queer victory must be measured when reading literature in the amount of queer empowerment and queer *jouissance* that can be felt.

The achievement of *jouissance* through failure does offer a robust opportunity to contextualize queerness among queer theorists. The incomprehensibility of queerness, that difficulty defining what queer is and is not, is itself a form of failure. Jack Halberstam examines the complex relationship that exists between failure and queer *jouissance* in their book *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam claims that "the queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and then losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (88). While the exploration of queer failure is not new, Halberstam is the first to do so through the lens of media.² Asexuality can be seen as a failure to conform to expectations of amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality. Using Halberstam's conception of queer failure, I will find moments where characters and narratives in

the works of George Moore and E. M. Forster fail at allosexuality, reorient the metrics of success, and achieve a queer *jouissance*.

There is an oddly counter-productive relationship for many queer theorists between queer acceptance and queer empowerment. The third chapter of *The Queer Art of Failure* shares the title of the book and begins with an epigraph highlighting that as queer identities become more socially liberated (decriminalization, the emergence of rainbow capitalism), those identity labels become prescriptive and, ultimately, restrictive to queer empowerment (Halberstam 87). As an identity label becomes more concrete and prescriptive in its use by the status quo, the label's decreased semantic flexibility limit's a queer person's ability to adequately express or not express their unique and subjective orientation as they see fit. The response by many queer theorists to this problem is to emphasize queerness over identity in their work. Halberstam does this by exploring the relationship between queerness and failure, not the relationship between a particular identity and failure. This might be a problem when conducting a reading of failure and its relationship to asexuality; however, asexuality is not a measure of behavior. The mere discourse around asexuality necessitates disrupting the idea that sexual identity is an observable trait. Instead, sexuality is individually subjective and also universally true. Because that is so paradoxical, any discourse surrounding asexuality has the potential to cause participants to rethink their previously held views that are based on a behavior-centered notion of sexuality. That realization is itself a failure, a reorientation, and an achievement of fulfillment, just as Halberstam argues in their book.

The *fin de siècle* is a perfect opportunity to explore queerness and its relationship to failure. This period of transition boasts a litany of queer writers like Oscar Wilde, Michael Field, Forrest Reid, and E. M. Forster, all of whom had queer relationships. But beyond the mere fact

that there were prominent queer authors of the period, *fin de siècle* Britain touches on the issue of failure on various other levels as well. The British empire was slowly collapsing. Despite the loss of the American War of Independence at the start of the long nineteenth century, Britain continued to expand its colonial influence throughout the century, setting up colonies in Australia and annexing territories like Hong Kong. When Britain became the first world power to industrialize, it naturally developed a market monopoly on many trade goods on a global scale not seen since the days of ancient Rome. That fact did not escape the notice of the British people, who saw themselves reiterating the Roman imperium (Monsman 409). Rapid industrialization in other countries, particularly the United States and Germany, resulted in a challenge to the dominance the British enjoyed for several decades; the result was the increase in aggressive colonizing tactics now known as New Imperialism (Platt 121). Instead of colonizing by settlement, Britain set about the process of setting up administrative entities in their colonies to manage the cheap labor and extraction of local resources to maintain their industrial project's competitiveness with the of other nations.

Instead of exporting colonists, Britain began to export culture, whether the locals wanted it or not. In exchange for Western society's "civilizing mission" the locals were forced to provide labor and resources. The empire's expansion shifted focus to an economic endeavor rather than a colonial one. Now in stiff competition, Britain fell victim to the consequences of what C. L. R. James terms "the theory of the offensive" (Johnson 248). Imperialism by its very nature must constantly be in a state of expansion. Stagnation only serves to highlight the cracks in its foundation, and Britain's struggle to keep up with other world powers certainly called into question British superiority. The visible strain offered opportunities for movements like aestheticism and naturalism to highlight value in British culture that was independent of British

exceptionalism and its imperial counterpart. These movements were a recognition of the failure of empire and a reorientation of values to find new ways of living a fulfilling life.

That reorientation became necessary as three radical thinkers caused a fundamental shift in how we see ourselves. Sigmund Freud's discovery of the unconscious was monumental, despite how pernicious his theories eventually became.³ Charles Darwin's discovery of evolution challenged the idea that humanity was created by God. Karl Marx's discussion of the proletariat and the exploitation inherent in capitalist systems caused a series of revolutions to occur that threatened to demolish systems of control that provided those in power with unfathomable riches. The systems that the public believed indissoluble grounding the Victorian worldview were more and more in a state of contestation during the *fin de siècle*. Faith, economics, education, and seemingly every aspect of society in Britain fell under further and further scrutiny. In that environment, finding ways to develop new metrics of success was essential to the livelihood of the average British citizen.

These movements within the *fin de siècle* and the literature they produced share a common thread of addressing failure and finding new metrics of success despite their seemingly disparate ideologies. For example, while some contemporary scholarship argues that there is little in common between the Decadent and New Woman movements, the work of modern-day scholars like Linda Dowling has shed light on their similarities.⁴ The Decadent movement criticized the normative view among Western cultures that see "birth and growth as positive, and decay and death as negative" (Denisoff 32). The Decadents extended that challenge to systems that are entwined in what they perceived as a false binary. Their anti-conformist approach enabled them to find pleasure and beauty in aspects of existence that society dismissed and devalued. They re-evaluated the metrics of failure and instead developed a worldview that

embraces their otherness similarly to how Halberstam describes success. Other scholars make strong connections that complement this reading of the Decadents. Dustin Friedman's *Before Queer Theory*, for example, argues that Aesthetes like Wilde used their art to develop an autonomous sense of self in reaction to society othering their sexual desires. Choosing not to engage in the metrics which would define their existence as a failure, these writers chose to find new ways of living and new values within a Hegelian negative space (Friedman 3). While the New Woman in many ways fundamentally opposes the tenets of Decadence, there are areas where they overlap, and that overlap primarily occurs in the area of failure. Dowson, a prominent Decadent writer, annotated a version of Olive Schreiner's *A Story of an African Farm*, a well-known text of the New Woman movement. He admired the novel's "portrayal of isolated consciousness and desire quenched in futility" (Dowling 436). Dowson appreciated Schreiner's ability to articulate a failure of desire that could be resolved only by embracing futility, or failure.

Other scholars have pointed out the similarities between various forms and mediums that the contemporary reader would perceive as incompatible with one another. LeeAnne Richardson, for example, examines the parallels between New Woman and adventure fictions, describing them both as engaging with "cultural forces typically identified (depending on one's vantage point) as 'cultural decline' or cultural evolution'" (1). Richardson concludes by demonstrating that the connections shared by these two different genres can be extended to other genres as well, like the science fiction of Wells (133). The blurring of these ideological lines illustrates how modern scholarship is able to coalesce these artistic philosophies around a central theme. The various ideologies that dominated the public discourse during the *fin de siècle* all grapple with the scrutiny and doubt thrust upon traditional systems that construct society. They each call into

question aspects of society, point out its failure and collapse, and offer new options to navigate the world, paralleling Halberstam's theory on the relationship that exists between queerness and failure.

The *fin de siècle* and the variety of ideologies that occurred within it also coincide with the first mentions of asexuality as a sexual identity. While it wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that the term "asexuality" came to mean feeling no, little, or conditional sexual attraction, early sexologists did postulate that there may be people whose sexual attraction defies the assumption that all people can and should experience sexual attraction. Of particular note are the works of Magnus Hirschfeld. He coined terms like "*Anästhesia sexualis*" and "*Atropische*" to describe people whose sexual attraction cannot be classified on a binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Ramien 6; Hirschfeld 163).⁵ Asexuality appeared in practical application, as well. Carl Schlegel openly supported equal rights for "homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals, [and] asexuals" during an ecclesiastical trial that saw him excommunicated (*Minutes* 120). The institutional failures of the *fin de siècle* included marriage, the traditional family, and sexual normativity. People scrutinized such societal labels as the frigid spinster and the confirmed bachelor (Cryle 100), queering the lexicon to enable the expression of asexuality through those tropes. The coalescence of the factors enumerated so far combined with the sheer magnitude of literature produced during the *fin de siècle* provides the reader with ample opportunities to find works where characters and their stories can be interpreted as intersecting with asexuality informed by the failures of allonormative expectations.

Celibates: Agnes Lahens and Natural Celibacy

George Moore is often described as a naturalist since he was a student of Émile Zola and self-identified as a naturalist. However, it is an oversimplification to label him a naturalist, particularly at the time he wrote *Celibates*. The collection of long short stories explores why a person would not marry and have sex.⁶ *Celibates* tells the stories of Mildred Lawson, John Norton, and Agnes Lahens. Each character is celibate and attempting to navigate a world constructed around finding happiness in marriage.⁷ Agnes is a girl of sixteen who is visiting home in an attempt to expose herself to the world outside the convent where she was raised. The purpose of this visit is to see if life in the convent is preferable to life in the world. While at their family home, she is introduced to her mother's friends, most of whom are somewhat unscrupulous. Mr. Morton is particularly vile, telling obscene jokes and eventually attempting to sexually assault Agnes. Her father, his money stolen from him, is destitute and living in the attic of the house. Upon seeing her father's poverty, learning of her mother's infidelity, and seeing the agony her parents' situation causes them, Agnes decides to go back to the convent, never to return. The plot is minimalist, but the appeal of "Agnes Lahens" lies in its treatment of Agnes's celibacy. I will argue that Agnes Lahens exhibits an asexual orientation by failing at allosexuality, but then finds *jouissance* by embracing her asexuality in a healthy and productive way for herself and all of those around her.

Moore's usage of the term celibate borrows a great deal from asexuality, despite the difference between the two terms. He is primarily interested in the relationship between celibacy and religion (Llewellyn 220). A religious prohibition to extramarital sex naturally affects how Moore and his readers view celibacy, despite abstinence and celibacy not being mutually inclusive.⁸ Constructing a definition of celibacy as it exists in practice as opposed to theory also

presents scholars with a variety of issues. Elizabeth Abbott tried to define celibacy but needed to conflate celibacy with chastity and virginity to make sense of it in practice (16-17). A. W. Richard Sipe freely admits that celibacy is not abstinence, but then goes on to treat abstinence as a fundamental component of celibacy (55). These analyses of practical applications of celibacy tend to occur within the confines of religion. Moore's relationship to celibacy is centered around his fascination with sexual beauty and his lack of understanding of social customs associated with sex. He is described as standing outside of sex and used art as his personal solution to navigating sexual practices (Frazier, *George Moore* 21-22). The complications surrounding Moore's description of his characters as celibate is equally complicated, but becomes more easily resolved when examined through the lens of asexuality. Celibacy is, in its strictest definition, a state of being unmarried, specifically a consciously-made vow (*OED*). Navigating that agency is important in examining the asexuality depicted in the text. Unlike celibacy, asexuality is not a choice. Examining that distinction offers an opportunity to see where agency over celibacy ends and indicates asexuality.

In his introduction to the 1915 edition of *Celibates*, Temple Scott describes Mildred Lawson and John Norton as "celibates by nature" and Agnes Lahens as celibate by "circumstance" (vi). Similarly, Adrian Frazier argues Agnes is unprepared for life because she was raised in a convent and that is why she responds negatively to life in her family home ("Albert Nobbs" 189). If this is true, Mildred and John would be perfect for analysis as asexual characters. "Celibates by nature" seems to be an ideal term for a turn-of-the-century writer to use when describing asexuality. However, I feel that Scott's assessment is somewhat inaccurate. Mildred Lawson is a problematic character to analyze through an asexual lens. At times she reads as advocating for what can be perceived as a New Woman ideology; at other times she

appears completely disinterested in all human interaction; at other points, she is a *femme fatale* relishing in the notion that a man attracted to her might kill himself if she rejects his marriage proposal. Even the narrator struggles to grasp the nature of her character. “Of course, no such girl had ever existed or could exist, those melting eyes and impossible innocence of that mouth! It was the soul of a courtesan in the body of a virgin” (Moore 91). Mildred is so capable of a natural state of duplicity that it is impossible for the reader to ever fully get a sense of when she is being truthful or when she is deceiving them. This quality, while making for compelling reading, makes it difficult to analyze Mildred’s connection to asexuality. Even in those moments where she seems to evince an asexual possibility, she will then do, say, or think something that will cause a reader to wonder if their conclusion was too hasty. That sense of artifice and guile are absent in Agnes’s character.

What little criticism there is surrounding “Agnes Lahens” reduces the story to a commentary on corrupt worldliness filtered through the experiences of young Agnes who is somewhat alien to the world (Chaikin 41).⁹ This lack of significant scholarship is best explained by comparing the revisions of “Agnes Lahens” and those of “Mildred Lawson” and “John Norton.” Both “Mildred Lawson” and “John Norton” represent stepping stones in an editorial process spanning more than forty years. “Mildred Lawson” first appeared in the serial version in *Lady’s Pictorial* at the beginning of 1888 (Fleming 143). “John Norton” was a condensed version of his novel *A Mere Accident* (Frazier, *George Moore* 252). Both stories were dissected and reconstituted in various future works like *In Single Strictness* and *Celibate Lives*. The constituent contents of *Celibates* are regarded as “more altered, more rearranged, more deleted and added to, than any other of his incessantly revised works” (Burkhart 225). This particular focus is understandable. As a writer, Moore was constantly developing his worldview and used

his fiction to experiment with those shifts. Oscar Wilde mocked Moore for having “conducted his whole education in public” (Harris 475).¹⁰ Moore wrote *Celibates* at a time in his life when he was coalescing the seemingly disparate ideologies of Zola’s naturalism and Walter Pater’s aestheticism. It is quite understandable that these texts which represent stepping stones on that journey would receive significant attention.

“Agnes Lahens,” however, is not the product of a previous work nor did it go through any further revision. It somehow snuck under the radar of most academics, failing to fit the mold of a writer’s product emblematic of his ever-changing attitudes. But despite that failure as a source of academic focus, when describing “Agnes Lahens” beyond merely summarizing its story, the academics who do mention it describe it as “less ambitious yet more successful than either of the other stories” (Weaver 239). This appears to be Moore’s intended effect. His writing style employed what he describes as “‘only...an indication’ in representing character [...] minimalist in detail” (Frazier, *George Moore* 252).¹¹ If that is indeed the experiment, then the style expressed in “Agnes Lahens” is itself an embracing of failure that challenges the reader’s desire to fully flesh out the intimate details of the story. This style lends itself to a powerful portrayal of asexuality in the eponymous character.

Moore violently recoiled at and repressed his homosexual tendencies (Frazier, *George Moore* 53). He is intolerant of non-normative sexuality, most notably homosexuality, which he considered unnatural, but this can also be seen to extend to the tragedies surrounding the individual characters in *Celibates* who interact with asexuality in one way or another (Farrow 148). Critics perceived the lewdness in Moore’s early works as unrealistic for a naturalist writer. Realizing Moore’s internalized queer-phobia, a modern reader might agree with those critics and see the lewdness as performative. This also helps to explain the more uplifting tone of “Agnes

Lahens.” The other stories in *Celibates* hint at a queer tension, specifically homosexuality. But that tension is never fully embraced, nor is it ever resolved. It is merely left to fester in the reader’s mind, triggering one reviewer to remark “*Celibates* arouses a sense of disgust and a doubt whether life is worth living at all” (“Literary Chat” 553). Unlike the other central characters in the story, Agnes’s character arc culminates in her embracing her queerness. She does not comprehend why Father White and her parents think she should see the world and experience society (Moore 394). The story ends with an emotional breakdown in which she begs Father White to return her to the convent. Father White even thinks “for such knowledge of life seemed very strange in one of Agnes’ age and ignorance,” a knowledge that is driven specifically by “instinct” (Moore 450). The reader knows that knowledge is evidence of Agnes’s sexuality, even if they cannot articulate that sexuality into words, while the other characters perceive her behavior as a matter of her upbringing. Moore’s recoil at queerness completely dissipates when reading Agnes’s story.

The complexities of Moore’s approach to sexuality become even more evident when analyzing the queer joy Agnes feels at moments when she defies allonormativity. Moore uses the French language as a secret sexual code, capable of surreptitiously communicating socially suppressed desires (Grubgeld 13). In a discussion Agnes has with her mother’s lover, Lord Chadwick, she remarks “very often you used to speak French to mother. I never could understand why—I used to think and think” (Moore 390). Agnes fails at understanding the coded desire. Even now, fluent in French, she cannot understand the sexual implications of what she overheard. Attempting to resolve this issue by thinking rather than feeling illustrates that she fails not because she doesn’t understand French but because she doesn’t understand the sexual desires communicated. That failure at communicating becomes empowering at the end of the

story when she is quietly sitting in the cab with Father White who “did not speak” (Moore 452). In this contemplative silence, the grief she feels disappears simultaneously with the disruption of normative space and time.

And, though they were still five miles away or more, she saw the gate at the corner of the lane, the portress too. She saw the quiet sedate nuns hastening down the narrow passages towards their chapel. She saw them playing with their doves like innocent children, she saw them chase the ball down the gravel walks and across the swards. She saw her life from end to end, from the moment the portress would open the door to the time when she would be laid in the little cemetery at the end of the garden where the nuns go to rest.

(Moore 453)

While physically she is very much in that cab, mentally she is miles away at the convent. There is no mention of the nuns speaking. They are “quiet and sedate.” Time itself seems to slip away as Agnes enters the chapel, plays ball, and lies in the garden cemetery all at the same time. She can achieve this queer asexual joy because she reoriented her failed understanding of allonormative expectations, rejecting the belief that she should get married and have children. She finds joy in the cloister precisely because she is asexual and chooses the celibate lifestyle to complement her innate asexuality. Compare the queer ecstasy and temporality she experiences in embracing her asexuality with the how time flows when she is attempting to force herself into the allonormative mold imposed on her by her parents. “She had been a week at home, and it had seemed a century. The time would never pass” (Moore 414). When in this allonormative space repressing her asexuality, time itself becomes oppressive. It is only when she is spiritually in the cloister that time disappears entirely, and Agnes feels a sense of queer joy.

Agnes's affinity for her cloister is in stark contrast to her parents who are, themselves metaphorically cloistered. Major Lahens is trapped financially, but also by the societal expectations of a man's position as the breadwinner. He goes so far as to compare his room to a "monk's cell" and opines that Agnes inherited her taste for the minimalism of convent life from him (Moore 418). The Major's diet is also quite minimalist, one of "bread and cheese" which the narrator oddly describes as "significant" (Moore 416). The bread and cheese may be a reference to hawthorn, which is known as the "Bread and Cheese Tree" (Llewellyn 226). Hawthorn was used during marriage rituals in Greek antiquity to pay tribute to Hymen, the Greek god of the marriage bed. Medieval myth also said that the crown of thorns placed on Jesus's head during the crucifixion was made of hawthorn. Moore uses this metaphor to illustrate a direct cause-and-effect relationship between Major Lahens's failings as a husband and his misery. The religious implications do not end there, though.

Mr. Lahens is also in debt, but his greatest debt, he feels, is to his wife (Moore 420). This debt weighs down his spirit and causes him to resent his position in life. He took a loan from his wife to purchase the typewriter by which he makes his living; he then continued to borrow more money for clothes, and furniture (Moore 419). As expenses continue to mount, he is merely in a state of preservation, paying off debt while incurring more debt, representing the plight of the working class. However, because this debt is one he perpetually owes to his wife, the reader is given a reference to original sin (Llewellyn 224).¹² From the reader's perspective, Mrs. Lahens is not exhibiting the behavior that is expected of a wife. Instead, she allows her husband to become indebted to her, thus usurping his role as the provider and causing him turmoil. Mrs. Lahens respects her husband despite resenting his presence. She defends her husband from her lover's attacks by saying, "he is the most honorable man that comes to this house. It was not on account

of my money that he did not divorce me” (Moore 377). Because he loses his money, the power dynamic that is typical of Victorian marriages is fundamentally shifted (Pierse 173). But that is not to say that Mrs. Lahens is an unsympathetic character.

Mrs. Lahens is also trapped by social judgments upon her character as she seeks to satisfy her desires. She futilely tries to obscure her age using cosmetics, “method only disguised its cracks and thinness as powder and rouge did the fading and withering of her skin” (Moore 371). Further, she privately resents her daughter for not using her youth and beauty the way she would.

“Mrs. Lahens was unconsciously affected by the contrast that her own regular and painted features, and her long life of social adventure, presented to this pretty, dovelike girl, this pale conventual rose, without instinct of the world, and into whose guileless mind no knowledge of the world would apparently ever enter.” (Moore 388)

Agnes does not participate in the same artifice as others do. Her mind is straightforward and without deceit, without “guile.”¹³ Yet she is still beautiful. Describing Agnes as “doveline” further connects her with religious purity, but it is not a purity that must be masked. It is a natural purity inherent to her, implying that Agnes is asexual. That has a queering effect on her mother, agitating her and stirring her resentment. Her husband demands she respects her marriage vows and not see her lover, Lord Chadwick.

While the Victorian reader might find this a reasonable request, it strips Mrs. Lahens of her agency in favor of her husband’s ego. When she refuses, the Major attacks Mrs. Lahens, further illustrating the sheer toxicity of this relationship, one which society reinforces (Moore 439). She cannot divorce her husband even though he does not satisfy or provide for her. Neither of Agnes’s parents has agency over their situation. Their cloister is a societally imposed one rather than self-imposed. That is why it does not suit them at all and they are both living such

miserable existences. The reader is directed to conclude that if they were freed from the cloister they were imprisoned in they could then more readily pursue their own form of joy outside the cloister. They aren't miserable because they failed; they are miserable because upon failing they refused to reorient the metrics of success. They retained their fidelity to a system that denied them happiness rather than finding new ways to experience joy. The failure of the parental roles in Agnes's life and her desire to reenter the convent walls is an "infantile" act of sublimation seeking to return to the womb of the now absent good mother (Heilmann 154). Extending that idea to the relationship between asexuality, sublimation, and the child-state, what Agnes is more accurately doing is choosing to embrace an environment in which she can experience the queer joy her asexuality demands. It is not an infantile regression but instead a culmination of her queer journey.

Agency is a primary concern for Moore, particularly in *Celibates*. Moore's distaste for artifice and love of the natural leads him to question the utility of any artificial system that imposes on human nature. Moore uses his titles to emphasize the agency of his characters (Grundmann 131). Each story in *Celibates* is titled with the name of the main character, highlighting their agency and informing the reader precisely whose story they are reading. However, the title of the book itself is *Celibates*. By naming the book after a quality the characters named in the individual stories share, Moore implies that, while Agnes has agency, she does not have agency over her celibacy. Agnes's celibacy is, unlike Temple Scott's alternative reading, innate and natural, intersecting with asexuality throughout the story. Agnes's story then goes on to reinforce an asexual reading where she fails at meeting the expectation of allonormativity, reorienting success, and embracing the queer joy she feels in that new success.

***A Room with a View*: Forster’s “Unembodied Ideal” Sexuality**

There is no better capstone on this project than an asexual reading of E. M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*. The text contains elements that intersect with the asexual child-state and asexual structuralism I explored in the previous chapters, and part of my argument will touch on that, though they could easily become the central focus. *A Room* is the only book where I analyze the asexualities of two characters in the same narrative. When discussing the differences between characters and real people, Forster writes,

The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of action. And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source: to tell us more about Queen Victoria than could be known, and thus to produce a character who is not the Queen Victoria of history. (*Aspects* 45)

He emphasizes the novel’s ability to provide access to the inner workings of his characters’ minds to better justify their actions. It is not enough for the reader to know that a thing was done. They must know why an action occurred, and Forster’s theory on character in the novel emphasizes that relationship.

The genre’s power is in making the fantastical access the reader has to the inner workings of the characters seem real. Forster’s conception of the novel revolves around connecting the reader’s sense of reality to the fictitious world the author has created. But here the reader comes to a problem in reading *A Room with a View*. A certain amount of action that takes place doesn’t make sense. A certain amount of discontinuity taking place jars the reader. Later on in *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster refers to the “hidden life” that he described above as “queer experiences” (48). Forster likely knew the context “queer” implied by the early 1900s. That queer jarring existed metatextually as well as within the novels themselves. Forster reflected on his work negatively,

thinking his novels unimpressive. His successes brought him dismay because what appeared to the general community as a success was, in truth, a failure for Forster, one in which he struggled to repress his homosexuality in the text (Lane 109). No, it appears Forster was indicating that some queer experiences should jar the reader — especially when those experiences are queer in nature and the reader is allonormative in their worldview — just as they jarred him. I argue that the character arcs of George Emerson and Lucy Honeychurch exhibit asexual tension with a world designed around compulsory sexuality; it is only after they embrace their orientation, redefining the metrics of success, that they are able to feel fulfilled.

Because of Forster's perspective that the world in the novel must reflect aspects of reality convenient to the author at the time, it is relevant to examine how queer, asexual failure becomes especially evident when examining *A Room* transtextually using Forster's own life to detail the form his unique queerness took. Forster is remembered as a gay writer, but his sexuality cannot be so easily defined as that. As Virginia Woolf puts it, "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (4). This certainly is the case for Forster's sexuality, or at least his conception of it. It wasn't until some point around 1910 that he began to embrace the physical aspect of homosexuality. In a 1915 letter to Forrest Reid, Forster wrote "Is it ever right that such a relation should include the physical? Yes - sometimes. If both people want it and are old enough to know what they want - yes. I used not to think this, but now do." Forster thus indicates to his literary confidant that he has come to an awareness about the physical necessity of his sexual orientation. This letter implies that, at one point in his life, he did not see a physical component was of any importance in a romantic relationship. In 1910, Forster gave two talks based on his essay "The Feminine Note in Literature." One was for an all-male audience and reflected that, the other was for both men and women.¹⁴ In each, he references the masculine

“unembodied ideal” (Forster, “Feminine Note” 33). The distinctly sexual language used to describe literature as a fulfillment of desire creates a connection between the pre-1910 Forster’s disembodied ideal and his sexual desire. He seems to aspire to an ineffable intimacy that defies physicality, at least so far as men are concerned.

While his sexual exploits as a youth are somewhat shrouded in mystery, there are several indications that Forster navigated his life as if he were an asexual homoromantic man. To begin, Forster’s letters as a student at Kent House paint a picture of a very sad child whose quiet intellectual charm was wasted on his peers. His classmates often tortured him with their taunts; he was particularly frustrated during baths (Forster, Letter to ACF [late Sept. 1890]). Indeed, Forster was even the victim of a molestation, if not repeated victimization. In a letter to his mother, Forster apologizes for not writing and explains his arm was injured when a schoolmaster snuck into his room at night and began “pinching” Forster under his bed sheets (Letter to ACF [Before 26 Nov. 1890]). Couple that information with the fact that he recounts performing sexual acts for a pedophile while walking in the woods at the same time and there is reason to suspect that Forster was victimized numerous times (Forster, “About Sex” 267-8). While that level of sexual abuse as a child is staggering, sexual abuse-triggered sexual aversion is not asexuality (Decker 106-7). What is of interest, however, is how Forster described these moments. Mr. Hatch “pokes” him. Given how prominent tickling is in Forster’s incomplete memoir of his sexual exploits, it is reasonable to think the nighttime, secret poking elicited a similar association in the young Forster’s mind that the adult Forster did with sex. The incident in the woods with the child molester is connected “with no sensations of my own.” Forster apparently suffers from acute sex aversion as a result of these events and is able to properly verbalize the experiences only many years later. While sexual aversion is not asexuality, they do share similarities in

presentation. It would be naïve to think these events did not influence him or his work. Forster seemed to develop his “unembodied ideal” sexuality as a means of navigating the complex emotions felt at the time and then proceeded to apply that ideal to his writing in a way that intersects with asexuality.

Upon leaving Kent House and arriving at Cambridge, Forster continued to develop his non-physical homosexuality. Forster’s outlook on life did not improve much at first. He was quite a loner: his letters from that period have a melancholic tone. But things change when Oscar Browning takes an interest in him (Letter to ACH [18 Feb. 1899]). Browning is a curious figure: he was an instructor at Eton and later, after being fired for reasons I will shortly explain, taught at King’s College, Cambridge. Browning was quite controversial for many reasons, but mostly for having romantic but non-sexual relationships with young boys (Davenport-Hines). At a particularly important point in Forster’s life, their paths crossed. Forster was then taken under the mentorship of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson who was in a passionate, nonphysical homoromantic relationship with Roger Fry, not because Fry resisted more physical intimacy but because Dickinson believed a physical relationship would ruin their romantic one (Deacon 71; Dickinson 92). Dickinson sparked a love of Greece and Italy in the impressionable Forster, one that emphasized “that the Greek love, as I had read of it in Plato, was a continuous and still existing fact” (Dickinson 90). Dickinson was acutely aware of the separation of sexual and romantic attraction. In his biography of fellow Apostle J. M. E. McTaggart, Dickinson describes McTaggart’s sexual preferences as a “nonsexual ideal passion for men, but sexually only for women” (Lubenow 70n189).

Browning and Dickinson introduced Forster to the Apostles, a secret society at Cambridge where Browning and Dickinson were members. Forster eventually joined and began

friendships with the other students that lasted a lifetime. Forster did not participate in gay sexual acts during this time. The Apostles was always a place where intellectual gay men safely expressed their sexuality, but in Forster's time, that expression became less of a free expression of affection and more of a consummation of physical sex, so much so that homosexuality became a "creed" within the group (Deacon 55). The fact that Forster did not use this opportunity to engage in sex with his fellow Apostles and instead embraces an asexual homoromantic view of male intimacy further reinforces this reading of Forster engaging with asexuality on a conscious level. Until this point in his letters, Forster signs them as "Morgan." Forster immediately begins to sign his name as "E. M. Forster" following this introduction to Browning and his inner circle. Seeing two men so unabashedly homoromantic but also asexual as a component of their failures at allonormative expectations seems to have caused an awakening in Forster that cannot be ignored. But the relationship between Browning and Forster's perception of asexuality may not end there and potentially has implications for the genesis of *A Room with a View*.

In a letter to Robert Trevelyan, his literary confidant, Forster mentions seeing "George" for the first time in two or three years (Letter [14 Nov. 1904]). P. N. Furbank and Mary Lago speculate he means George Trevelyan, Robert's older brother (61n6).¹⁵ However, both were active members of the Apostles, G. M. Trevelyan was editing the *Independent Review*, and Forster made contributions to the journal as well as continually kept in touch with this intellectual circle of friends (Lubenow 216). It seems inconceivable that they would not see one another when in such close proximity.

I propose an alternate theory. It is well known that Forster uses queer-coded language in his letters to hide and prevent prosecution under the statute outlawing sodomy (Zeikowitz 2). Forster often used the term "charming" to refer to attractive young men he saw in public, for

example (Rahman 80). Considering Forster's penchant for using codes among his friends when referring to the sexual discourse going on in his letters, I suggest the "George" referred to in the letter is George Emerson from the novel, which R. Trevelyan already read and given notes on. In the same letter, Forster refers to Leonardo which may also be another reference to *A Room with a View* where the two love interests are representative of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Forster's blending of his fictional worlds into his social circle is not unique to this letter. This coded dialogue can be further seen when Forster takes on the persona of Miss Charlotte Bartlett, breaking a barrier between character and the real world (Letter to R. Trevelyan [20 Jan. 1908]). Given this knowledge, I infer that George Emerson is perhaps inspired by one of Forster's acquaintances at the time. Prior to the 1904 letter to R. Trevelyan, Forster last saw Browning sometime in 1901, in or around Florence, days before Forster was made to give up his own room with a view, inspiring the opening for *A Room with a View* (Letter to EJD). Based on the time span between Forster meeting Browning in Italy and the date of the letter corresponding with the three year period. I posit that Browning, at least in part, is the inspiration for George Emerson and his asexuality.¹⁶ That reading is supported by the fact that the timeline corresponds with the three year period mentioned in the letter combined with Forster's awareness of Browning's proclivities and the adaptation of them into the "unembodied ideal" sexuality of George Emerson.

That connection between Forster's real-life sexual attraction and how he expresses his characters' sexualities offers insight into the characters of George Emerson and Lucy Honeychurch. Parminder Kaur Bakshi argues that Forster expunged homoerotic desire from early drafts of *A Room*, thus sanitizing George Emerson (129). But that does not account for the queer ways Forster does express himself. Forster instead transposes physical desire into non-

physical, intellectual desire (Lane 104). The effect of that transposition is a narrative and characters that exhibit an affinity for asexuality. Consider how George is introduced to the reader. George has only a single quality about him described when he is first introduced, his voice, and it is described as “perplexed and sorrowful” (Forster, *A Room* 4).¹⁷ The reader’s first picture of George is painted in the language of emotion, not the physical body. In fact, throughout the novel, George’s physical appearance remains oddly vague. The narrator never elaborates on what the young man looks like, even when viewing him from over the shoulder of other characters.

As a comparison, the passage where Cecil, George’s romantic rival and foil, first appears is dense with physical description. His shoulders are broad and squared, his head is tilted upward, giving the impression he looks down on people, and he is described as “well-endowed” (Forster 87), a term with specific sexual implications. While literally he is referring to the imposing nature of his frame, the term endowment also has other meanings that offer a unique context, particularly given his gender. For a man, this can also refer to his wealth, which was brought up earlier by Mrs. Honeychurch, and the size of his penis (*OED*). While it is indeed possible that Forster did not intend the implication of using the phrase “well endowed,” since the term was just beginning to take its meaning in the early half of the twentieth century, it would be irresponsible to not explore the idea. Given Forster’s stated position on creating characters in a way that allows the fictitious elements of their actions to seem realistic, it seems an odd choice to avoid a physical description of the main love interest. In naturally playing the narrative out in their mind, the reader uses those physical details to create a depiction of the character that suits their reading. By not providing those details, Forster seems to encourage his reader to forego the pleasure of mentally manifesting an image of a physical person in their mind and instead

manifest the emotions associated with that character.¹⁸ Divesting the reader from the physical is itself a queer act, one that relies on a sense of failure. To find any amount of pleasure in the pairing of Lucy and George, the reader must ignore their compunction to rely on physical details and instead embrace the nebulous and queer space created for them by Forster.

Forster is more interested in describing George's state of being than focusing on his physical attributes. One of those states is that of a child. In his critique of Lee Edelman, Halberstam points to the proliferation of queer narratives in children's media (118). There is a subtle implication that the child which Edelman decries has the potential for becoming a scion of queerness, a queer child. George exemplifies this in his failure in participating in the language and process of maturity. He is, at various times throughout the novel, described as "He hasn't learned to talk yet," "My baby's worth the whole of Paradise," "like the little child who ought to have been playing, and who hurt himself on the tombstone" all referring to George using the language of childhood (Forster 8, 25, 26). Keeping in mind that he is in his twenties, his father's claim that George should embrace his youthful spirit but instead has injured himself on a tombstone is a powerful metaphor. The use of a tombstone to represent an investment in maturation that ultimately results in death emphasizes that George's sullenness is a product of normative temporality and hints that embracing his asexuality and queer temporality would alter that state. The reader gets a brief glimpse into that queer temporality when time seems to stand still during George and Lucy's first kiss. "For a moment he contemplated her," and at that moment an overwhelming surge of thought and emotion overtakes him to the point that the narrator is incapable of fully conveying it all (Forster 68). It is that moment of queer temporality, where his emotions swell and seem to override the natural flow of time, that he embraces and kisses Lucy for the first time.

Like George, Lucy also exhibits a sense of queer temporality. The walk through the woods where she ultimately runs into George is described as brisk with only a single stop to pick a few violets. Yet simultaneously “she was rejoicing in her escape from dullness. Not a step, not a twig, was unimportant to her” (Forster 67). She, like George, is even capable of disrupting the narrator’s sense of time. Chapter twelve concludes with Lucy meeting George again, this time also in the woods, in the middle of bathing with her brother and Mr. Beebe. The narrator is observing the scene filtered through Lucy’s shock. As a result of that filter, the reader sees that her shock is not at the nudity but at the queerness George excites in her. The final lines of the chapter reflect how the pond would lose some of its water, becoming smaller in size. The next chapter picks up as if it were continuing the scene from Lucy’s perspective, quite literally in mid-greeting to George (Forster 133-34). That odd narratorial aside concluding chapter twelve disrupts the reader’s flow of events. Because the narrator filters their depiction of events through the lens of Lucy at the time, it prosaically emphasizes the jarring effect George has on Lucy and now the reader, as well. Lucy also participates in reinforcing the child-state that George embraces, enjoying his unique, queer maturation. At the end of the novel, with George’s head resting comfortably on her lap, Lucy reflects on her lover, thinking

He was a boy after all. When it came to the point, it was she who remembered the past, she whose soul the iron had entered, she who knew whose room this had been last year. It endeared him to her strangely that he should be sometimes wrong. (Forster 206)

Note the use of the word “strangely” to indicate the queering taking place at this moment.

George Emerson does not refute futurity, as Edelman demands, but as an asexual man subverts it and co-opts the idolization of the child simply by inherently connecting to the child within himself. It is only through failure at maturity that this childishness can be embraced. George, at

the outset of the novel, is asking himself a question represented by a question mark he pins on the wall of his room (Forster 13). That question is answered when he witnesses a murder alongside Lucy and he first feels affection for her. He decides that he “shall want to live,” indicating that the alternative option was to seek death (Forster 45). Forster is juxtaposing George’s abject depression at the thought of becoming an adult and the *jouissance* he feels after embracing his asexuality alongside Lucy emphasizing to the reader their failures at allonormativity and compulsory sexuality.

Compare George and Lucy’s asexual relationship with Cecil and Lucy’s. Upon seeing George’s, Freddy’s, and Mr. Beebe’s youthful outburst of unrestrained masculinity during the bathing scene, Cecil proposes to kiss Lucy.

“Hitherto never—not even that day on the lawn when you agreed to marry me—”

He became self-conscious and kept glancing round to see if they were observed. His courage had gone.

“Yes?”

“Up to now I have never kissed you.”

She was as scarlet as if he had put the thing most indelicately.

“No—more you have,” she stammered.

“Then I ask you—may I now?” (Forster 107-08)

While the preservation of Lucy’s agency is commendable, the discussion is almost business-like in tone. The em dashes indicate Cecil’s anxiety; his concern about being observed hints that his anxiety is more about what conclusions others may come to than what Lucy will think of him. As a result, Cecil considers the kiss “a failure” (108). However, in stark contrast to the failures of George and Lucy, Cecil does not reorient himself and pursue new metrics of success. Instead, he

resigns himself to fulfilling his role as husband to passionlessly “lead women, though he knew not whither, and protect them, though he knew not against what,” resulting in the stripping of Lucy’s agency in service of patriarchy and compulsory sexuality. His concern over her agency is one of decorum rather than one of love and respect.

That certainly seems to be Lucy’s sense of their relationship. When Lucy begins to criticize Cecil, she does so by pointing out the life they would have together. She focuses specifically on how she will leave for London so she may “entertain the grandchildren of gentlemen” (Forster 154). Her future with Cecil is perceived as that of a utility in service of compulsory sexuality rather than a partnership. The fact that this thought in her head comes from “a Being not visible to the mortal eye—a Being who whispered to her soul” tells the reader that it is Forster’s unembodied ideal speaking to Lucy. That innate unembodied ideal and the recoil at compulsory sexuality emphasizes her asexual qualities. Cecil Vyse is a mundane suitor grounded in an anesthetized aestheticism when compared to the passions of George Emerson.

These interactions create what Lucy described as a muddle. A more modern-day description is illegibility. Legibility is a function of curtailing expression in the vocabulary, diction, and form adopted by the status quo (J. Scott 183). This principle applies to queerness in that illegibility is a path of autonomy. Illegibility, then, subverts communication in the terms of the status quo. That queer illegibility is demonstrated when George incorrectly remembers what room he was in during his stay in Florence. But queer illegibility is a common occurrence throughout the novel. Mr. Beebe hints at George’s queer illegibility early in the novel when he says “I find it difficult—to understand people who speak the truth” (Forster 7). Forster humorously jabs Victorian culture in the ribs with such a statement. This paradoxically places

truth as an element incongruent with understanding. George naturally adopts the mannerisms of his father and becomes a queering force in his earnest expression of his feelings.

Lucy does not escape this illegibility, either. She becomes more capable of expressing her feelings when she is playing the piano. In doing so, she transcends the commonplace (Moss 496). Forsterian transcendence of the common can also be read as a transcending of the normative sexual and gendered expectations; the narrator explicitly states that music “accept[s] those whom breeding and intellect and culture have alike rejected” (Forster 29). It is Lucy’s playing that Mr. Beebe remembers. It is her playing that Cecil expects will entertain his guests at dinner parties. It is her playing that she turns to for focus when she is troubled by her feelings for George. When playing, the narrator describes her emotions. “Passion was there, but it could not be easily labeled” (Forster 29). Her feelings are a queering force on the narrator and also the reader because of their illegibility. And yet, Lucy achieves *jouissance* despite that illegibility. “She loved to play on the side of Victory. Victory of what and over what—that is more than the words of daily life can tell us” (Forster 29). Lucy is capable of simultaneously disturbing and experiencing happiness, as evidenced by her choice of music. Mr. Beebe foreshadows for the reader Lucy’s embracing of her queerness when he makes the prophetic claim “If Miss Honeychurch ever takes to live as she plays, it will be very exciting—both for us and for her” (31).¹⁹ Mr. Beebe’s role as prophet is not unwarranted (Hinojosa 77). He initially believes that Lucy can only be happy living a celibate life. He is, in many ways, correct. However, celibacy has a connotation of chastity in religious contexts.

While Lucy does not take a vow of celibacy, she does explore that nebulous characteristic of chastity in her asexual relationship with George. At the end of the novel, Lucy, in conversation with Mr. Emerson, “could not understand him; the words were remote. Yet as he

spoke the darkness was withdrawn, veil after veil, and she saw to the bottom of her soul” (202). Mr. Emerson reveals Lucy’s true self in a moment of illegibility and in pointing out her love for George’s illegibility. An alternative reading of this section may perceive this as a remnant of the homoeroticism purged from the prior versions of the novel (Bakshi 129). After all, Mr. Beebe seems to encourage Lucy to embrace her queerness here, and Mr. Beebe does joyously participate in the bathing scene only to eventually disapprove of Lucy’s acceptance of her feelings for George.²⁰ However, these are not entirely incompatible readings. Mr. Beebe can exhibit elements of purged homosexuality while also leaving room for Lucy and George’s asexuality. He notices moments of asexuality within George and Lucy precisely *because* he holds remnants of queerness left over from previous drafts: an Edwardian gaydar, if you will. The reader sees these moments because the narrator is granted unique access to color the events as they unfold through various characters’ perspectives.

The narrator and their narrative style also exhibit similar moments of failure that exhibits asexuality. The narrative of *A Room with a View* defies success in any view that is temporally normative. Instead, it exhibits a “narrative without progress” (Halberstam 88). Lucy and George are in the same place at the end of the novel that they would have been had they become lovers upon first meeting. Measuring their romance through traditional metrics of success, they certainly failed. They lost an entire year of their lives only to end up where they were at the start. A capitalist view of the text would certainly chastise the pair over such waste. However, the lovers and the reader are encouraged by the narrative to see the ending as happy. Even in the face of estrangement from their friends and family and grim financial outlooks, Lucy and George are untroubled and blissfully happy in their “great joy and the countless little joys they did not expect” (Forster 207). By shirking off the pressures of an emotional economy, an economy

emphasizing some people succeed and implicitly demands others lose, Lucy and George redefine what it means to succeed and find a queer joy in life.

This narrative style is described somewhat uncharitably as directing the reader “to feel one thing and forced to feel another, the reader finds his pleasure checked by an involuntary impulse of protesting irritation” (Cecil 199). Yet that irritation is precisely the point and the appeal of Forster. Jane Austen was Forster’s favorite novelist and was a significant influence on his style (Piggford 10-11). The effect of reading Jane Austen is best described as a “dizzying experience” resulting from the rapid oscillation between a narrow range of social elements (Peckham 315). Forster adopted the same narrative style that enables an asexual reading of *Emma*.

That dizziness Forster adopts from Austen defies the reader’s expectations for the story in a way that hints at an asexual romance. For example, the climax of the novel is quite atypical for a romance novel. *A Room*’s climax is when Lucy accepts that she loves George and decides to tell him so. Most romance novels generate the climax of their story around a confession of love and physical intimacy, but not *A Room*. Forster subverts the reader’s expectations and doesn’t even write the scene where Lucy and George are reunited. Instead, he chooses to immediately jump to their reflection on the past year as they enjoy each other’s company in Florence. Depriving the reader of that expected moment of physical intimacy further reinforces Forster’s asexual “unembodied ideal.” The novel’s final line indicates that the story does not end on a note highlighting the passionate love of Lucy and George. This is no “and they lived happily ever after.” The reader is given a somewhat disquieting passage.

Youth enwrapped them; the song of Phaethon announced passion requited, love attained.

But they were conscious of a love more mysterious than this. The song died away; they

heard the river, bearing down the snows of winter into the Mediterranean. (Forster 209)²¹

The final line of the novel is about a “mysterious love” the pair are now merely aware of, a love that is represented by the winter snows in the Alps melting and feeding the river Arno and the Mediterranean. That Forster uses this metaphor of the transition of elements from one state to another is telling. The focus is on water in its most physical form, as ice or snow, transforming into a less solid form, liquid water, by the warmth of Italy. It is still the same thing but possesses different properties. There is an implication about what the water will become next, vapor. This is the disembodied love that Forster aspires to. Where the physical which bounds and stymies human *jouissance* is jettisoned and pleasure can be enjoyed without relying on carnal acts. The transformative and ceaseless waters of the Arno while with George create a stark contrast to the image of the pond at Windy Corner slowly draining of water while Lucy pursued a relationship with Cecil.

The “Q” in LGBTQ2SIA+ means both queer and questioning. George begins the novel with a question mark pinned to the wall of his room (Forster 13). That questioning unsettles George and causes a great amount of *ennui*. It isn’t until he witnesses the murder and provides comfort and aid to Lucy that he decides that he wishes to live (Forster 45). And yet, the end of the novel sees George facing down a similar unknown, the “mysterious love,” and yet he is in a state of utter contentment. A normative reading would conclude he is satisfied by his relationship with Lucy and can thus ignore this mysterious last line that looms over their satisfaction with one another. A normative reading might not even notice those last lines, becoming comatose like a diabetic on the sugary scene and language that immediately precede the closing lines. However,

given the queer elements of the text, a more convincing reading sees George and Lucy embracing their failures and instead finding new, more rewarding perspectives on life that enable them to face this “mysterious love” together and to revel in the asexual pleasure it promises to provide. These final lines illustrate that, even though Forster gives the reader a happy ending, if Lucy and George do not recognize the folly of relying on the sexual and sensual for pleasure then they can never achieve a higher form of pleasure; they can never achieve *jouissance*. Forster encourages not just an asexual reading of the text, but also an asexual way of life. When Forster writes that “love and youth matter intellectually,” it is this affection separate from baser, carnal intimacies where love and youth reside (Forster 167). Love and youth are states of being, and, as such, they are the province of the mind, not the body.

Final Thoughts

Many lessons can be taken away from this analysis of failure and asexuality. Most importantly, queer failure is true failure only if it is not reoriented into creating new modes of living and achieving joy. Forster privately described *A Room* to close confidant Nathaniel Wedd as “slight, unambitious, and uninteresting” but he calls the characters “more alive to me than any others I have put together” (Bakshi 131). Forster seems to recognize areas in which the novel itself fails, but in that failure he finds something to take great pleasure in. Furthermore, he also seems to find similarities between that process and actual life. Given his queerness, it is understandable that he relates to life through the lens of failure. It is difficult not to wonder what Forster would make of my reading of his literature or how he would regard my assessment of asexuality in general. The course his sexuality took, from a firm belief in an unembodied ideal of masculine affection to a belief that physical intimacy is essential is the exact opposite of the path

my own personal journey took. That same struggle to deal with homosexual tension by repressing it led Moore to compose “Agnes Lahens.” His obsession with celibacy and constant revisions of his work that dealt with the subject indicates a unique relationship between heteronormative failure and celibacy, particularly when celibacy provides a means of obscuring his sexual desires while still engaging with queer pleasure.

The concept of asexuality’s unintelligibility is also quite compelling. The very nature of queerness, and marginalized identities in general, indicates a certain amount of unintelligibility. It is impossible for an allosexual person to fully grasp what it is to be asexual. That is one of the major benefits of having asexual characters and stories created by actual asexuals; it helps to instill empathy in the audience.²² But, despite the empathy, perfect understanding is forever out of reach. That is perhaps the greatest value of my research, its ability to aid in bridging that intelligibility gap while maintaining the empowering nature of unintelligibility. Highlighting those moments of asexual characters and how they can relate to a wider audience is also a goal of my research.

Endnotes

1. An example of a narrative structure that does not rely on external conflict as much as Western narrative structure does is the east Asian *kishōtenketsu*. The *kishōtenketsu* relies on self-realization, a turn from the previously-held worldview, and the consequence of that turn.

“Whereas Westerners enjoy having accounts of individual struggle and victory beamed into their neural realms, Easterners take pleasure from the narrative pursuit of harmony” (Storr 85).

2. Queer scholars like Oscar Muñoz and Leo Bersani as well as Marxist scholars like James C. Scott have touched on the variety of ways in which queerness intersects with failure.

3. Freud’s theories have negatively affected the public’s understanding of sexuality and created impediments to the advancement of asexual visibility, particularly his notion that humanity is motivated by unconscious sexual desire.

4. Joseph Stein’s “The New Woman and the Decadent Dandy” is a good example of how some scholarship sees these ideologies as incompatible.

5. The translation from *Sexualpathologie* is my own. The translation of *Sappho und Sokrates* was done by a contributor to the AVEN discussion board forums who uses the handle “Tommy92.”

6. The central theme organizing these stories makes each entry ideal for analyzing the characters as asexual. Each of the three main characters can be read as asexual to some extent. However, the depictions of these characters’ sexuality are not interchangeable. While Mildred Lawson and John Norton are quite compelling characters to read as asexual, their behavior can be read as contemptible. However, that behavior is better understood when we realize that there are no normative avenues for them to pursue because they are asexual. By comparison, Agnes Lahens’s failures not only emphasize her asexuality but also result in a life-affirming ending that

informs our understanding of Moore's confusion with his own sexuality. The goal of this research project is to increase asexual visibility. The process of peer community review argues that any research that would cause harm to the community being studied is fundamentally unethical and community members are the best judges as to whether the research is causing harm or not (Liboiron). It would take a significant amount of space to properly contextualize Mildred Lawson and John Norton in a way that emphasizes them as pitiable characters placed in a difficult situation, space I do not have. As an asexual, it would be irresponsible of me to argue Mildred Lawson and John Norton are asexuals knowing that their depiction, without the space to properly contextualize them, would paint asexuality as disturbingly toxic.

7. This idea today is known as amatonormativity.

8. Samuel Johnson's dictionary describes celibacy as "single life" making no mention of sex.

9. George Moore as an author has not received a tremendous amount of scholarly attention in comparison to his contemporaries. Of his large body of work, *Celibates* seems to receive a minimal amount of consideration, and "Agnes Lahens" even less so. In recent years, more attention has been paid to Moore in what Simon Joyce describes as "the George Moore revival" (6). My analysis of "Agnes Lahens" seems to be following the trend of recent research that Joyce enumerates in his article.

10. This quote of Wilde's first appears in a recollection of this conversation by Frank Harris in 1916. Despite the distance between the conversation and its recording, Moore biographer Adrian Frazier would describe this quote as "right on the mark" (*George Moore* 199). Further examination of the quote can be found in Graham Owens's "The Melodic Line in Narrative" at 118n53.

11. The quote Frazier uses here is George Moore's letter to Lady Eden in late December 1894. I did not have access to this particular letter and quoted it as it appears in Frazier's biography of Moore.

12. There are several passages in the Bible where sin and debt are used interchangeably. For example, in Matthew 6:12 the Greek *ophelilema*, which literally translates as someone how owes, is often translated as sinner. Original sin is considered a perpetual sin that is inherited from generation to generation. George Moore, raised a devote Catholic, would have understood the idea of sin as a debt owed to God as well as the perpetual nature of original sin, if not out right regarded it as reality.

13. This is also a commentary on nature versus artifice. Moore, as a student of Zola, despised the artifice of contemporaries like Oscar Wilde. So this commentary may be in a response to works like *The Decay of Lying*. But it should also be noted that Moore, upon meeting and reading Walter Pater began to explore the subtleties of Aestheticism. You can see areas in *Celibates* where that occurs, particularly the inner monologue of Mildred Lawson that helped inform James Joyce's choice of narrator in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

14. The variants of the manuscript are for talks given to two clubs, the all male Apostles and the Friday Club consisting of both men and women. While the general content of the variants are relatively similar, the tone is vastly different. The Apostles version is, at times, a bit jocular. There is also a certain amount of authority expressed on the subject. The Friday Club version eliminated most of the humor and arrogance of the original in favor of a slightly more serious tone that does not attempt to lecture to women what it is to be a woman. While there are numerous examples in the variants, the most apparent is in the treatment of the two endings. In the Apostles' ending, Forster ends with a declarative statement, emphasizing the finality of his

discussion. In the Friday Club version, he ends the talk with a question: “Is this the feminine note?” (34). That decision to alter the tenor illustrates his awareness of the two very different audiences and his willingness to adapt to each’s needs.

15. In the *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster* edited by Lago and Furbank “George” is italicized. However, in a facsimile copy of the letter obtained from the Trinity College Library Archives “George” is written in the same thin, slanted handwriting that Forster used at the time. While it can be inferred that they italicized the name because they were uncertain as to the person being referred to, I was unable to find other instances in the text where the editors italicized a name they were uncertain about. An examination of Lago’s and Furbank’s archived papers may reveal what rationale was used for this peculiar editorial decision and whether it is relevant to my exploration of asexuality’s relationship with *A Room with a View*.

16. It should be noted that the scholarly community on the whole generally believe Hugh Owen Meredith, Forster’s first unrequited love, is the inspiration for George Emerson. An example can be found in the article “Forster Without *Maurice* (still gay)” by David LaFontaine. It is not my argument that Meredith was not an influence on the character, only that George Emerson is a composite of a variety of influences.

17. All further references to Forster will refer to *A Room with a View* unless otherwise noted.

18. Ironically, in the 1985 adaptation of *A Room*, George is highly sexualized and Cecil’s sexuality is somewhat dulled. This is, at least in some small part, due to the nature of film as a medium. That vagueness in George’s physical description that forces the reader focus on his emotional qualities, is impossible when played by an actor in a visual medium. But it goes further than that. George becomes highly sexualized in the film and Cecil’s sexuality becomes

somewhat dulled. In the context of my reading, it is hard to see this as anything less than allonormativity exerting itself unconsciously through the filmmakers. For example, the phallic descriptions of Cecil are jettisoned and George's penis becomes visible on-screen, further associating George with passionate sexuality rather than the "unembodied ideal."

19. Susan Roszak uses Lucy's playing and its disruptive ability as a subtext for the reason she was sent abroad in the first place. In "Social Non-Conformists in Forster's Italy: Otherness and the Enlightened English Tourist," Roszak points out that Lucy is shipped off with her straight-laced cousin to try and temper Lucy's musical talent for disturbing the listener. Italy, however, has a different effect, fostering her non-conformity and sparking the events of the novel. Roszak's reading seems to support a queer reading of Lucy, although she does not go so far as to say so herself.

20. Mr. Beebe's snubbing occurs off-page. In the final chapter of the novel, Lucy remarks that Mr. Beebe "will never forgive us" (Forster 207). While this may be hyperbolic, it would be out of character for it to be invented whole-cloth by Lucy.

21. It is worth mentioning that much of the scholarship surrounding Italy's role in Forster's work tends to focus on sexual passion. My reading argues that it is not sexual passion, but sexual liberation that occurs due to Italy's portrayal. Not only is it a freedom to express sexual desire, but also an opportunity to relish life free from sexual desire. An example of this traditional scholarship on Italy is Barbara Hardy's "Women in Italy: Amy Dorrit to Lucy Honeychurch."

22. Olivia Bailey uses *A Room with a View* as her subject when analyzing the effect of empathy in her article "Empathy and the Value of Humane Understanding."

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(OUT)RODUCTION

While most dissertations end with a Conclusion section, I have deliberately chosen the term “Outroduction.”¹ The concept of a “Conclusion” is steeped in finality, but the notion that mine is the last word in anything is antithetical to this project. The idea of an “Outroduction,” on the other hand, is less about finality and more about encouraging the next step in a journey for both author and reader. Outroductions are usually musical works that conclude a performance on a desired emotion or act as a transition to the next performer taking the stage by sharing some thematic elements.² All good research should contain some idea of what the research can be utilized to do next. Any knowledge that exists in a vacuum is no knowledge at all. My Outroduction is both a promise to myself to continue this research into new and unforeseen areas of scholarship as well as a challenge to my readers to do the same in finding applications for this work.

While my focus has been on the British literature from the long nineteenth century, my research has uses beyond that field of study. There are a variety of applications that this dissertation can be used for, both in and out of academia. I also enjoy the idea of this project as being out of the closet. Coming out of the closet was an idea originally intended to raise the visibility of the gay community, increasing empathy and understanding from those around them who would have otherwise lived their lives unaware that they knew someone who is gay. One of my chief goals is to raise the visibility of asexuality, so an (Out)roduction seems an appropriate way to emphasize that. I have performed my musical set, and now I will play myself off the stage to make room for another performer with variations on my theme that I could not have conceived of myself.

Research surrounding asexuality often has difficulty in determining just how prevalent asexuality is among the general population. A study by Anthony Bogaert of roughly 18,000 UK citizens determined that 1% of the population is asexual (279). This number is often cited when discussing the asexual population despite there being numerous concerns with the study's methodology. For example, this is only in the UK. Variables not considered by Bogaert would alter the results in other countries. Another issue is the sample group. There is no explanation about whether the people being surveyed have a good understanding of what asexuality is. In a 2017 study by GLAAD, participants aged 18-34, who would typically be better informed about the existence and qualities of asexuality, identified as asexual at a much higher rate than any other age group (4). This differentiation indicates that when surveying a population that has grown up in a society more informed about asexuality, more people tend to identify as asexual. As a result, when compounded with the chief obstacles for the asexual community, visibility and education, it is difficult to say just what percentage of the population is asexual.

While I detest encouraging what Marx might describe as the commodification of art as an industry, there is very real harm being done to the asexual community by having such little representation in television and film. Rainbow capitalism is the intersection of the Pride community and the marketplace. On paper, it makes sense. The Pride community and its allies make up a growing segment of the population. Queer people often have a larger amount of disposable income. CEOs ignore that revenue stream at their own peril. Rainbow capitalism is the reason why every June logos are changed to have rainbows and displays are put up in stores selling Pride merchandise. But in most cases, these displays are just that: performative displays. There are numerous examples where companies appear to be friendly to the Pride community in word but not in action. For example, Disney is quite well known for including subtle queer

representation in their media and being queer-friendly; however, they also donated thousands of dollars to politicians in the state of Florida who actively advocate for queer-phobic legislation like the “Don’t Say Gay” bill (Nugent). In the 2016 Democratic Presidential primary there was speculation that Clinton, who was vocally against same-sex marriage as a Senator, received an endorsement from the Human Rights Campaign, the nation’s largest queer advocacy group, due to the corporate control of the HRC board (Jilani). Rainbow capitalism may be quite problematic, but one good thing it has done is proliferated queer characters on television and film in a way that was not possible until now.

While this is true for most identities in the community, there are several notable exceptions, in this case: asexuals. In what became a widely celebrated move, Jughead Jones was made canonically asexual in 2016 (Zdarsky). But when the show *Riverdale* entered production, they regularly teased the idea that Jughead may eventually be written as asexual (Bell), only to abandon that potential storyline, an act common in big-budget productions known as queer-baiting. Aside from Todd from *Bojack Horseman*, there is little to no asexual representation of asexuals in media. Much of this stems from the notion that “sex sells.” From a practical point of view, this adage makes sense. If sex is a fundamental drive that intertwines with everything that we do, as Freud would have us believe, then it would be irresponsible for people attempting to market a product not to emphasize any sexual aspect of it. Asexuality complicates the premise that sex sells. There have even been studies that call the cause-and-effect relationship between sexualization and marketability into question (Gramazio 716). Instead of relying on Freudian-constructed views on sex that do not bear out in empirical data, it would instead be wiser to take the approach Przybylo takes and dismiss the Freudian notion that sex and the erotic are bound together. Doing so enables rainbow capitalism to view asexuality as a potential for robust content

that appeals to a broad audience instead of dismissing it outright as inconsequential to their profit margin. This dissertation has analyzed texts that were popular with their readers in their day, E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View*, as well as those that are popular with modern-day readers, Jane Austen's *Emma*. Many of the texts I have discussed have been adapted into popular movies like *Clueless*. My analysis illustrates the appeal of having asexual characters in media as well as having those characters participate in asexual plots.

This dissertation can also be used as a jumping-off point for further exploration into long nineteenth-century studies. One area that I would like to return and explore more deeply involves critical race theory. While British literature of the nineteenth century is not nearly as monochromatic as people realize, there is still a vast gulf between the number of works written by white authors and those written by Black and POC authors. But that does not mean that a discussion of racial intersections with asexuality in the confines of nineteenth-century British literature cannot be had. Because of the exportation of British literature globally for the first time in the nineteenth century, it would be extremely beneficial to explore what local cultures thought about literature exported to them through British imperialism (Gagnier 7). This could be particularly interesting for asexuality given the discussion of Foucault and his ideas about *scientia sexualis* discussed in the "Introduction." What would an analysis of Walter Scott's *Waverley* look like to a reader in India, where, as Foucault would have us believe, their culture developed through *ars erotica*, unencumbered by the sexual repression of British society?

I began the "Introduction" with an anecdote about a time in my life when I encountered a blind spot that society held about my sexual orientation. My instructor and classmates unintentionally Othered me as a result of their compulsory sexuality. Several months after that class had ended, I was allowed to present at a virtual conference during the Covid pandemic.

Given the few conference opportunities available, I contacted that instructor to let them know about the free virtual event. She thanked me for the information and let me know that, since my discussion with her on that first day of class, she had looked into some of the asexual research I recommended and would be including it in the course syllabus next year as well as on the sociology department's reading list. That change, be it ever so minor, is a positive step in the right direction. It makes me hopeful that my research and efforts will not only contribute to the discourse on asexuality but fundamentally shape the foundations upon which future research will be conducted.

Endnotes

1. While I am not the first scholar to use the term “Outroduction” in their work, I am one of only a handful. Adam Nayman wrote “An Outroduction” for *The Coen Brothers: This Book Really Ties the Films Together*. Jerry Kaplan wrote “Outroduction: Welcome to you Children’s Future” to wrap up his thoughts in *Humans Need Not Apply: A Guide to Wealth and Work in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*.

2. Several bands have songs titled “Outroduction” or “Outro” that they usually save for the end of a performance. For example, M83, 2 Chainz, and Thousand Foot Krutch have songs titled “Outro” or “Outroduction.” The title of The New Amsterdams’ final album is “Outroduction,” marking the dissolution of the band but also the sinned solo career of Matt Pryor, the band’s guitarist and vocalist.

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