

**The Identities and Anxieties of Nineteenth-Century Women Writers: An Analysis of George Eliot’s “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, and Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre**

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## **John Cabot University**

Department of English Literature

Bachelor of Arts in English Literature  
Minor in Creative Writing

The Identities and Anxieties of Nineteenth-Century Women Writers:

An Analysis of George Eliot's "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," Elizabeth Barrett Browning's

*Aurora Leigh*, and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

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## Abstract

The cultural turbulence of the Nineteenth-Century along with the increase and prevalence of literature written by women, gave rise to a complex discourse concerning women in the public domain. The amalgamation of the “Woman Question,” the nature of criticism, and prejudice towards the practice of female authorship engendered within the class of women writers both anxieties and an awareness of the singularity of their position. This shared cognizance within the set of woman writers developed three distinct effects: the widespread use of pseudonyms and anonymity; the fictional representation of the capable female author and artist in the literature of women; and finally, the seeking of a distinctive, sophisticated feminine literary voice and tradition. Using George Eliot’s essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” sections of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s epic poem *Aurora Leigh*, and Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre*, this thesis argues that as women sought recognition of their talent in the midst of conflicting social conditions, they discovered truths about the essence of female literature and the identity of the woman writer. These truths include the importance of reconciling love and art, or femininity and career; the necessity of accepting one’s womanhood and not imitating men; and the idea that the perfect literary tradition is the meeting of ostensibly “masculine” and “feminine” qualities in literature. The latter point is perhaps one of the most important queries answered in this thesis; Nineteenth-Century women were beginning to understand that men and women have the same skills, deserve the same respect, and do not in actuality write within the confines of a “manly” or “womanly” style.

## **Dedication**

To Lele

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# 1. Introduction

This thesis investigates how women writers responded in their own work to the often harsh or indulgent criticism and prejudice by male reviewers and society as a whole towards the professional woman writer. With the use of George Eliot's essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," sections of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epic poem *Aurora Leigh*, and Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*, I seek to prove that this cultural atmosphere created for these authors anxiety regarding writing, publishing, and the need to prove their worth and skill, which is reflected in their publications. The tumult of Nineteenth-Century society is recognized as a period of questioning and change, and the challenging of traditional values. Naturally, the predicament of women became an issue that greatly interested society. As women began to take a greater role in the workforce, they exposed themselves to the public eye and drew attention to their second-rate position, an action that spurred controversy and conversation.

This discourse, a reevaluation of women's roles, was widely considered the "Woman Question," and roused arguments either supporting financial, political, and educational rights, or proposing the continuation of the status quo in which women occupied an inferior position. The second factor born from this period was the complicated nature of criticism. Eliot complained that male critics judged bad writing by women with undue indulgence, while either ignoring or attacking harshly the literature of skilled, serious female authors who sought true commentary and respect for their efforts. The third element was the notion that women did not have the skill to write moral, intellectual, and excellent literature; and the number of frivolous romances that flooded the market with formulaic plots and bad characters, called "silly novels"

by Eliot, only supported prejudice. The Nineteenth-Century's preconceptions towards women, and the harmful stereotype that they could not write well, or do so with the prowess of men, inundated the mental state of every earnest, female author.

Quelling fears and surpassing these impediments of public opinion, criticism, and prejudice, the female writers who published changed the landscape of the Nineteenth-Century's literary realm. Through the use of pseudonyms, the creation of fictional characters who embody the nature of the independent artist, and the pursuit of a new and feminine textual heritage, they reveal both anxieties and their knowledge of their role as female authors, in addition to discovering truths about notions of masculinity and femininity.

Though the literary forms of the essay, the novel, and the epic poem are innately different, and the opportunities for examination are many, there is not enough room within the boundaries of a single thesis to thoroughly explore the dissimilarities and the effects on the text. However, it is easy to recognize that the format of an essay, in this case, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," deals with these basic questions of female authorship in a direct manner, while *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh* contemplate the subject in a less clear, more implicit way.

The Nineteenth Century saw a significant number of women writers publish anonymously or with a pseudonym, particularly at the beginning of their career, and the power and benefits of doing so is apparent; they could avoid assaults on character, protect their private lives, ensure that society respected their texts, and write on progressive or atypical subjects. To publish one's work was to risk accusations of unwomanliness and radicalism, as well as exposure to abrasive criticism. Many women, including George Eliot, Currer Bell, George Sand, Fanny Fern, and the many others published anonymously, understood the significance of this. At the same time, however, perhaps revealing one's real name gave rise to greater confidence for



the woman writer because the popularity of a text with an unknown author could later prove to society, after the disclosure of its female originator, that the men and women writers shared the same literary capabilities.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Charlotte Bronte each represent the image of the talented, independent woman, though Aurora Leigh epitomizes more explicitly the role of the successful poetess, and Bronte demonstrates Jane's independence through her position as a governess while more implicitly suggesting her skill as an autobiographer who confidently narrates the tale of her life. One realization that the authors seem to come to in their respective texts, through the illustration of their literary heroines, is that the role of the female writer is not to shun love and femininity to achieve true art, professionalism, fame, success, or even self-sufficiency, particularly in Jane's case. The protagonists' romantic relationships validate the fact that these literary goals coexist and are only strengthened with the power of affection and intimacy. Both Browning and Bronte recognize anxieties and their perception of female authorial identity through the characterization of two writers who welcome womanhood and love as an accessory to career and writing.

The seeking of a distinct literary tradition serves as the third point that women writers made in acknowledging the stresses of their period, and Browning and Eliot seemed to come to the conclusion that though the Nineteenth-Century lacked a female textual heritage (although outliers existed), a new one could be realized through the inclusion of both masculine and feminine qualities. This melding of the two styles suggests the reality that values cannot, in actual fact, be strictly male or female, and that both men and women have the ability to utilize forms and attributes that seem to "belong" to the other. The urge to create a unique and earnest feminine written heritage derives from the combined factors and subsequent anxieties of the

"Woman Question," criticism, and Nineteenth-Century prejudice, as does the desire to employ a pseudonym and construct fictional women artists.

## **2. The Woman Question, Criticism, and Preconceived Notions about the Abilities and Talent of Women Writers**

The “Woman Question” was a powerful influence on the anxieties of female authors, and the cognizance of their distinctive role in society. A common misconception among the general public of the twenty-first century concerning Nineteenth-Century society, and particularly Victorian England, is the prevailing notion that women had next to no rights or freedoms, were kept confined within the household, and were charged with nothing more strenuous or absorbing than domestic duties and marital concerns. While in some cases this idea may have been accurate, as evinced by the realities that women could not vote or own property if married, millions of women worked all over Europe, and the stereotype that all Victorian women, for example, were plagued with immoderate leisure must be remedied (Pinchbeck v). The Nineteenth-Century saw a great rise in the discussion of feminism, women’s rights, and women’s writing, and society was of course divided.

In fact, the period is perhaps remembered with such conceptions *because* it was one of the first times in which the predicament of women, a historically complicated issue, was acknowledged, studied, and questioned. Scholars consider the period to be, in general, an era of observation and questioning, from developments in ideology surrounding Charles Darwin’s evolutionary findings, to the advancements in urban industrialization, to the widespread questioning of long-held religious beliefs. It was, truly, the “riddle of history . . . with its universal activity and universal restlessness, currents and counter currents, progress and reaction; now assailing old faiths, and now patching their venerable battlements to make itself a den there;

now proclaiming the religion of science, now prone before the Vatican” (Parkman 303). This spirit of challenging, merged with other developmental factors, led to the increase of attention placed on gender issues; Sangeeta Dutta calls it the “widespread reassessment of women’s role and relationship” (2311). Radical societal shifts included the spread of early feminism through the middle and upper classes, an expansion in educational opportunities for wealthier women, a rash of prostitution (the “Great Social Evil”), and the anxieties surrounding female workers during the Industrial Revolution. These various factors shed light on the ongoing debate surrounding women.

Justin M’Carthy writes in the *Westminster Review* (July 1864), “The greatest social difficulty . . . is the relationship between men and women. The principal difference between ourselves and our ancestors is that they took society as they found it while we are self conscious and perplexed . . . marriage might almost seem just now to be upon trial” (qtd. in Greenblatt 653). The Woman Question became one of the key debates of the century, and had essentially two main arguments, though it encompassed many smaller “questions.” One side advocated for an increase in opportunities for women, whether educational, political, or economic, and the other supported the idea of the domestic wife, mother, and daughter. Kate Millet writes in 1970, “the struggle was carried out between two opposing camps, rational and chivalrous, and each of them claimed to have at heart the best interests of both sexes and the larger benefit of society” (63).

John Stuart Mill’s controversial and indispensable text *The Subjection of Women* (1869), developed along with the ideas of his wife Harriet Taylor Mill, also seeks “the larger benefit of society,” and he argues that “the legal subordination of one sex to the other . . . is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement . . . it ought to be replaced by a

principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, not disability on the other” (Mill 5). He maintains that men’s power comes only from the “law of the strongest” (11) or their physical strength, and that no natural ability for rule or supremacy exists to elevate men, while relegating women to the singular, near-powerless role they occupied for much of history. Mill’s convictions were progressive to the extent that he supported women’s voting as well as their political involvement, and he believed that repressed, indoctrinated women deserved to be disillusioned with the reality of their inferior status, querying, “women are beginning to protest, more or less collectively, against the disabilities under which they labour . . . How many more women there are who silently cherish similar aspirations, no one can possibly know; but there are abundant tokens how many *would* cherish them, were they not so strenuously taught to repress them as contrary to the proprieties of their sex” (Mills 22).

Unfortunately, it would be impossible for everyone to agree with Mill’s tolerance or his inflammatory ideas. One of the primary sources of contention in this climate was the perception of the domestic versus public sphere, and how women would taint themselves by entering the public world, either through writing, the workforce, or any other capacity. A cause for this separation between the sexes, and the subsequent conception that the “weaker sex” should naturally be prevented from involvement in politics or the economy, was the conviction that women needed protection from men and were governed not by reason but by some other power entirely (Poovey 11). This query reappears often in literature and in newspapers and greatly fascinated the public; according to Christine Crouse-Dick, “the notion of the domestic sphere provided a convenient backdrop for the ‘Angel in the House’ narrative, which was subsequently developed in nineteenth-century popular literature, domestic advice texts, and early women’s magazines” (444).

The “Angel in the House” refers to the title of Coventry Patmore’s 1862 poem, dedicated to his first wife Emily. The poem unites a common sentiment that encompassed one side of the Woman Question and created an ideal for the Nineteenth-Century woman. It must be noted, that though the poem was lauded by many, Patmore’s contemporaries almost disregarded it at its publication, though the poem experienced “renewed popularity at the end of the nineteenth-century” (Moore 57). As Natasha Moore claims, “[the poem] would long since have sunk into obscurity if not for the unforeseen appropriation [primarily by feminists criticizing the Victorians] of its title as a repository for the prevailing Victorian conception of womanhood; as a text it belongs more properly to the domain of cultural history or gender studies than literature” (41). The poem, using dramatic words to celebrate abstract femininity, enforces the image of the virtuous, devoted Victorian wife and mother, and promotes obedience, meekness, and docility even as it congratulates men on having their own private and dependent “goddess” in the home. Importantly, Patmore stresses woman as the moral purifier of the home, and the part of humanity that feels; “Her, the most excellent of all, / The best half of creation’s best, / It’s heart to feel, its eye to see” (660). It was the responsibility of the wife and mother to melt away the stresses of working out in the world, and provide stability to the nuclear family. In England’s case, the nation depended on this image of the domestic angel and her duties to her husband, children, and household. Crouse-Dick cites “the three central expectations for the ideal domestic Victorian woman” as “practical domestic administration, tending carefully to the creation of an atmosphere of comfort, and managing household funds with shrewd economy” (452). Patmore even suggests that the world revolves around marriage; “The nuptial contrasts are the poles / On which the heavenly spheres revolve” (660). Because of the influence of such a pure and humble standard, it

is clear that in such an environment, the cultivation of skills or thought beyond socially acceptable accomplishments like painting or music was an infringement on traditional values.

John Ruskin's 1864 lecture "Of Queen's Gardens," published later in *Sesame and Lilies*, functions in a similar manner to Patmore's poem in that it epitomizes the conservative Victorian paragon of womanhood and differentiates between the roles of men and women; "The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender . . . But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle, - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision" (77). The lecture has been met with extensive controversy, of course, and the argument survives today; David Sonstroem claims that Victorian women were not displeased by Ruskin's argument, and defends the lecture in 1977, writing "although it would misleading to call Ruskin's lecture a feminist tract, it does advocate fullest exercise of women's influence and authority - indeed the dominion of women over men" (297). Mary Poovey also writes of this moralizing influence; "maternal instinct was credited not only with making women nurture their children, but also with conferring upon them extraordinary power over men. Women may have been considered physically unfit to vote or compete for work, but . . . the power of their moral influence amply compensated them for whatever disadvantages they suffered" (8).

Modern feminists like Kate Millet adamantly oppose Ruskin's ideas. Millet expounds sardonically in 1970, "assuring us at the outset that he is no crude chauvinist, Ruskin asserts that he is steering a middle course . . . women are loved and honored, have nothing to complain of and are even treated as royalty, so long as they stay at home" (65). She considers Ruskin's creed of the "separate spheres" to be the "period's most ingenious mechanism for restraining insurgent women" (Millet 65). Like many others, Millet sees the inherent danger, and opportunity for

control, in separating men and women on the grounds of difference. But in arguing staunchly against Millet, Sonstroem writes, “the quality correspondent to male activity is hardly female passiveness or acquiescence, but the intellectual and ethical activity involved in rulership” (287). It is clear that many readers saw Ruskin’s support of domestic values not as a negative distinction between men and women, but as a respectful, chivalrous disparity between sexes, with each role equally important. This opinion reflects sentiments stretching from the Bible to twenty-first-century society, with, in just one example, the promise many brides still make at the altar to *obey* their husbands, while the latter vows to *love* their wives. The debate between the two ideologies becomes especially more complicated when one considers that Ruskin himself, in letters to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, called her novel in verse *Aurora Leigh* “the greatest poem in the English language” (Gaillet 115). That he could claim women’s intellect as being perfect for “sweet ordering” and then praise with the highest approbation a text about a public, accomplished poetess seems remarkable. And on this strange, contradictory stage, the battle around gender takes place.

Francis Parkman’s 1879 article “The Woman Question,” written around thirty years after the publication of Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, also examines this Nineteenth-Century exploration of thought. Though Parkman is in some ways in favor of women’s advancement, many of his views of the constitutions, morality, and duties of women are sexist by contemporary standards, and he takes a firm stance against women in politics. He refers to suffrage as “this most unnatural and pestilent revolution” and affirms, “in the full and normal development of womanhood lie the best interests of the world” (321).

In regard to the concept of women writers, Parkman states interestingly that women can, even more than men, “create and maintain higher standards of thought and purpose, raise the



whole tone of national life” (310). This idea relates to Patmore and Ruskin’s insinuation of women as the moral purifier of men. But, as stated, to turn away from such a virtuous role is to turn away from nature, and Joanna Russ writes of the way society sought to “pollute the agency [of women]— that is, to promulgate the idea that women make themselves ridiculous by creating art, or that writing or painting is immodest . . . and hence impossible for any decent woman” (25). Her statement that “creating art shows a woman up as abnormal, neurotic, unpleasant and hence unlovable” (25) is particularly telling and even tragic, and makes it no mystery why turning to the public sphere was a challenge.

Nevertheless, there were many who disagreed with such conservative conventions and prejudices. Harriet Martineau critiques her culture in Volume II of “Society in America” (1837), writing, “the sum and substance of female education in America, as in England, is training women to consider marriage as the sole object in life, and to pretend that they do not *think* so” (my italics 229). Others, both men and women alike, stood at the forefront of challenging opinions like those held by Sarah Stickney Ellis, who wrote in 1839, “Gentle, inoffensive, delicate, and passively amiable as many young ladies are, it seems an ungracious task to attempt to rouse them from their summer dream . . . this state of listless indifference, my sisters, must not be. You have deep responsibilities, you have urgent claims; a nation's moral wealth is in your keeping” (12). One must not ignore the irony that Mrs. Ellis employs her own intellect and freedom to write in order to publish her denunciation of education and accomplishment, and her support of submission and moral guidance. Though she proclaims ideas such as modesty and obedience, her own role as a writer of feminine conduct texts in itself places her in a position of power and visibility. As Mrs. Ellis exercises her writing abilities and her own sense of credibility and competence at guiding others, she partakes in the same behavior she instructs young women

to avoid. This belief in her right to direct others is not only an example of her hypocrisy, but also proof that women like herself could write successfully. Women could do so regardless of their actual *stance* on writing, even if that attitude resisted the education and accomplishment necessary to compose anything.

Nonetheless, as Dutta attests, writers like “the Brontes, Gaskell, Harriet Martineau, and George Eliot” resisted these conventions, and “their social coevals were Florence Nightingale, Mary Carpenter, Angela Burdett. Pioneer professionals- they were female role innovators breaking new ground and creating new 'feminine' possibilities. These women tried to struggle free from social and literary confinement, through strategic redefinitions of self, art and society” (2311). To write in a time in which society had a penchant to “perceive women writers as virtually unimaginable quirks of nature like singing mice and card playing pigs, to use George Eliot’s phrase” (Strommer 20), was remarkable. But, as Eliot argues in “Silly Novels” it is not the fact that women write that makes them remarkable; instead, their ambition of being taken seriously as authors, their womanhood concealed or discounted, makes the feat of authorship exceptional.

Despite the counterarguments to both sides of the debate, one cannot discount the power of the Nineteenth-Century questioning of established values on the mindset of female authors at the time, and this era saw women begin to take on a dominant role in literature. The period is indisputably important in the women’s literary tradition, particularly due to the Women Question. As Hawthorne writes, “Women writers were to be found in every field of literature: they both edited and wrote plays, novels, poetry, and periodical essays intended for the general public as well as works directed solely at a feminine audience” (Hawthorne 725).

An additional cause of this awareness within the group of Nineteenth-Century female writers of their position was the nature of criticism they received. Whether unduly harsh or excessively indulgent, or hailing from male or female critics, the period's criticism is inherently complex, with one of the primary sources of interest being *why* men criticized the work of women, and why they refused to make room in the literary field. Disapproval arose for many reasons; male writers often felt threatened by the amount and popularity of literature written by women, and were so "piqued by the female invasion of their turf" that they "dismissed popular fiction by women as 'trash'" (McCandless 669). Many credited self-absorption as the reason why female authors wrote, and assumed that all women "published out of vanity, to show off their accomplishments to their friends" (Haworth 727), or to destroy traditionally feminine roles in an attack on traditional values. Interestingly, critics only excused female authors from much of this reproval if they wrote badly, or if they made an appeal of financial necessity. Haworth asserts that "women who did write and publish could justify such behavior if they could plead financial necessity" (726), as the pressure to provide for families legitimized the impropriety of being in the public eye and working for money. George Eliot objects to this excuse on the grounds of its inaccuracy in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," professing, "Empty writing was excused by an empty stomach, and twaddle was consecrated by tears. But no! This theory of ours . . . has had to give way before observation . . . The fair writers have evidently never talked to a tradesman except from a carriage window . . . [and are] inexperienced in every form of poverty except poverty of brains" (79). Eliot makes clear her stance against tolerance for unskilled, inane writing, especially when authored often by bored, wealthy women and not those who appreciate the art, or rely on its revenue. She explains that "bad" women writers were often judged with leniency, indicating that men were pleased with unskilled writing by women as it offered no real

threat to the literary realm. According to Haworth, “If it was ‘unladylike’ to publish, it was also ‘ungentlemanly’ to attack women for bad writing in the same way that male writers were criticized” (729). That is unless, of course, the writing was actually good, and in that case criticism could be almost cruel; “No sooner does a woman show that she has genius or effective talent, than she receives the tribute of being moderately praised and severely criticised” (90). Eliot continues scathingly,

. . . the average intellect of women is unfairly represented by the mass of feminine literature, and that while the few women who write well are very far above the ordinary intellectual level of their sex, the many women who write ill are very far below it . . . the severer critics are fulfilling a chivalrous duty in depriving the mere fact of feminine authorship of any false prestige which may give it a delusive attraction, and in recommending women of mediocre faculties—as at least a negative service they can render their sex—to abstain from writing (90).

Authors sought judgment as writers, not as women, and Bronte, Eliot, and Barrett Browning all express this desire, despite the fact that “even when female writers were praised, they were generally perceived as a race apart, and different values applied to their work” (Haworth 727). Female authors, the writers whom Eliot speaks of with pride, merited real criticism, while the “lady novelists” deserved to hear the truth concerning their work rather than lies about how “their pictures of life are brilliant, their characters well drawn, their style fascinating, and their sentiments lofty” (90). Yet society found it nearly impossible to ignore that a text was authored by a woman, and “most critics took the same gallant air they no doubt had when complimenting a woman on the cut of her gown . . . delighted in spotting the ‘treble of a fine melodious voice’

or the ‘delicate hand of a lady’ in a work. Others were clearly uncomfortable with the fact that women wrote at all” (Strommer 20).

This discomfort, needless to say, led to the sort of derision and harsh male criticism which engendered apprehension in women’s writing, as women felt they had to not only prove their skill and fight for their place in the literary sphere, but defend their reputations. Though the April 1857 review of *Aurora Leigh* in the *Dublin University Magazine* compliments aspects of the epic poem, and claims that Browning is “all that the highest feminine intellect can attain to,” the author also critiques,

Indeed in the effort to stand, not on a pedestal beside man, but actually to occupy his place, we see Mrs. Browning commit grave errors. She assumes as it were the gait and the garb of man, but the stride and the strut betray her. She is occasionally coarse in expression and unfeminine in thought; and utters what, if they be even truths, are so conveyed that we would hesitate to present them to the eye of the readers of her own sex. There is nothing that detracts so much from the pleasure which the perusal of this poem has given us, as this conviction, that the authoress has written a book which is almost a closed volume for her own sex . . . Woman must be ever true to her womanly instincts if she would be the meet helper as well as companion of man. We grieve to find such a woman as Elizabeth Barrett Browning . . . forgetful of that nature (“Review of *Aurora Leigh*”)

This magazine’s accusation that Browning wishes to occupy man’s place seems based on their misinterpretation of the epic poem, and their lack of understanding that the representation, and the very existence, of the female poet, is not inherently a competition with the male artist. They make an argument that the epic poem imitates “the gait and the garb of man,” and suggest that

she has in some way insulted women and femininity. Instead of recognizing that the manner in which she attempts this literary “insurrection” is by writing an excellent epic poem (which would indicate that their requirement is that female authors write substandard poetry) they emphasize the idea that she has tried to write as a man, and in doing so, “betrayed” herself. The review fixates on Browning’s gender, and accuses her of forgetting that she must write as a woman.

Critics vilified female writers such as the famous American humorist Fanny Fern for being unwomanly and vulgar, and her cold reception is the quintessence of the Nineteenth-Century’s concern for women writers; some called “her writings ‘abominable,’ ‘monstrous,’ ‘evil,’ and the *New York Times* warned young girls to beware of Fern's novel *Ruth Hall*” (Warren 17). In this case, however, it must be noted that critics branded Fern’s writing so severely because of her bold and incendiary subjects, as there is a distinction between texts that they considered to be a negative or scandalous influence on society in terms of content, and texts that were highly praised as literature (such as *Aurora Leigh*), but criticized as the work of women.

In her 1857 essay “Male Criticism on Ladies' Books,” Fern lectures critics for their groundless evaluation of women’s writing. The brief essay comments on a quotation from the *New York Times* that reads, “Courtship and marriage, servants and children, these are the great objects of a woman’s thoughts, and they necessarily form the staple topics of their writings and their conversation. We have no right to expect anything else in a woman’s book” (Fern). She responds bitinglly, “When I see such a narrow, snarling criticism as the above, I always say to myself, the writer is some unhappy man . . . who knows as much about reviewing a woman's book, as I do about navigating a ship” (Fern). She blames such shallow criticism on “male spleen” or the reaction to being “snubbed by some lady authoress,” and importantly enforces the sentiment that even if women’s writing does indeed revolve around marriage, it is no less

deserving of interest, or capable of talent. As Diane Strommer sardonically taunts in 1979, “chronicling a male fishing trip is serious business; chronicling a woman’s perception of marriage isn’t” (20). Fanny Fern closes her reprimand by teasing,

Whether ladies can write novels or not, is a question I do not intend to discuss; but that some of them have no difficulty in finding either publishers or readers, is a matter of history . . . Granting that lady-novels are not all that they should be—is such shallow, unfair, wholesome, sneering criticism (?) the way to reform them? Would it not be better and more manly to point out a better way kindly, justly, *and, above all, respectfully?* or—what would be a much harder task for such critics—write a better book! (Fern).

The Nineteenth-Century’s opinions on women writers were undoubtedly complex. Fanny Fern felt the effects of criticism and prejudice even within her family, as her brother was “ashamed to have any editor know that a sister of his had written such things” and claimed “that her articles were unpublishable because of their ‘vulgarity’ and ‘indecenty’” (Warren 18). The fact that he, a publisher with the ability to help his sister out of poverty by printing her work, feared public outcry, illustrates the extent to which society’s admonishments of women’s work (particularly Fern’s brand of humor) affected authors.

One critic wrote in *The Leader’s* 'A Gentle Hint to Writing Women' (1850), “It will never do. We are overrun . . . the group of female authors is becoming every year more multitudinous and more successful. . . . Women's proper sphere of activity is elsewhere . . . Are there no stockings to darn, no purses to make, no braces to embroider? My idea of a perfect woman is one who can write but won’t” (qtd. in Strommer 20). Kathryn R. King reports along the same vein, “throughout the Victorian period a young lady with literary aspirations could depend upon some

kindly gentleman recommending for her proper use the needle with which the errant female pen was habitually opposed” (78).

In “Mrs. Hutchinson,” Nathaniel Hawthorne dreads the eventual fame and success of female writers, which may surpass that of men, bemoans the abandonment of the domestic sphere even if such relinquishment of household bliss is in the name of literary genius, and wonders whether or not such fame will be appropriate or good for women. He also, like Eliot, advocates for stricter criticism of women’s writing, rather than indulgence, writing, “criticism should examine with a stricter . . . eye, the merits of females at its bar, because they are to justify themselves for an irregularity which men do not commit in appearing there; and woman, when she feels the impulse of genius like a command of Heaven within her, should be aware that she is relinquishing a part of the loveliness of her sex, and obey the inward voice with sorrowing reluctance” (Hawthorne). This quotation demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between women and writing, for Hawthorne acknowledges that a woman can also feel the “impulse of genius” and he also suggests that such urges are heaven-sent; yet Hawthorne laments the loss of femininity, revealing his inability to reconcile the art of writing with womanhood, even if the instinct is veritably celestial.

Stephanie Davis-Kahl examines the long-standing tradition of denouncing literature written by and for women, a tradition that affected writers and women as a whole in the nineteenth century as well as contemporary society. This subject, the derision of the interests of women, was brought into a new light by scholars in the late twentieth-century due to the inherently sexist term “chick-lit,” used primarily for media like film and literature, and her article demonstrates the continuity of mockery towards feminine passions, as well as the idea that things targeted towards women are somehow lesser. Davis-Kahl writes,



The argument over the legitimacy of the genre remains alive and well, reflecting the long-standing derision towards women's writing. Literary figures George Eliot, who called women's writing "frothy, prosy, pious, pedantic" in her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" and Nathaniel Hawthorne with his infamous quote "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women" are perhaps the two best examples of the antagonism towards women's writing (2-3).

While this comment is interesting, Kahl's inclusion of the former quotation, with the implication that George Eliot sought to insult all women's writing, misinterprets almost completely the essay's explicit content. Eliot both comments importantly on the criticism of women in the period even as she herself critiques *certain* female writers and their novels. And even Hawthorne addresses a specific rather than general class of "scribbling women," for he does recognize the abilities of female authors in "Mrs. Hutchinson." It seems conceivable that both Eliot and Hawthorne may have had an inclination for intellectual, morally serious, and high-quality literature, which blinded and deprived them from the worth and joys of "frothy" writing; however, perhaps no one would seek to redeem texts of a "prosy, pious, pedantic" nature.

"Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" addresses the "silly," ridiculous, fanciful novels written by women, whom Eliot believes should not call themselves "writers," and describes the effect that their shallow texts have on the reputation of the woman writer. She classes them with considerable attention, and makes a distinction between those who take the craft seriously, and those who work from vanity and indolence; "In all labor there is profit; but ladies' silly novels, we imagine, are less the result of labor than of busy idleness" (Eliot 91).

Firstly, these “frivolous” texts are separate entirely from what Kahl characterizes as modern-day “chick-lit.” They are not Victorian versions of “compelling stories . . . about modern women struggling and succeeding with work, relationships, motherhood, infertility, finances and yes, the right shoes to wear with the right dress” (Kahl 1) but rather, as Eliot expresses in meticulous, extended detail, a “trashy and rotten kind of feminine literature” (90). Eliot’s criticism lay with recurrent tales of sickly sweet, morally perfect heroines for whom everything works out perfectly and romantically in the end. She criticizes the repeated appearance of “the ideal woman in feelings, faculties, and flounces” (79), and castigates these excessively religious, moral, or philosophical novels for their shortcomings in everything from style and plot to inflated choices of diction. Silly novels are not, as Kahl suggests, interesting stories about diverting women, written by women, but a different grade entirely. They are formulaic, ill-written texts with haughty yet vacant heroines, bombastic language, and elevated styles in which “the slightest matters have their vulgarity fumigated out of them” (84). The content is subpar, and as Eliot critiques, “to judge from their writings, there are certain ladies who think that an amazing ignorance, both of science and of life, is the best possible qualification for forming an opinion on the knottiest moral and speculative questions” (83).

Despite this strong example of criticism, Eliot’s point is not to shame women who write such books, though she certainly satirizes them, but to argue that these silly novels reinforce the sentiment that women cannot write, as such narratives please male audiences and present no threat to the male-dominated literary realm. Women must write *well*, she implies, so that male leadership recognizes women’s equality in literature. Such unskilled writing by certain female authors worsened the image of the woman as a creator and took away from writers who sought respect from men as well as recognition of their talent. The third source of anxiety for the woman

writer naturally follows this discussion: the prejudice that women who did write could only write frivolous, unskilled texts, and not very well. This stereotype of course gave rise to the sort of criticism described above, as well as making the process of writing a difficult one for those who carried “a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer's art” (Eliot 90). Eliot summarizes this point succinctly, writing, “the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women” (86). For many reasons, she delineates, both the authors and fictional heroines of such novels influenced negatively the query of whether or not women needed education beyond an understanding of French and the pianoforte, and whether or not they could actually write.

Eliot warns that a sense of superiority and capability, as well as a supercilious attitude, can damage the image of the educated woman; for when educated, the heroine of a silly novel acquires only “a feverish consciousness of her attainments; she keeps a sort of mental pocket-mirror, and is continually looking in it at her own ‘intellectuality’” (87). While a “really cultured woman, like a really cultured man, is all the simpler and the less obtrusive for her knowledge” the protagonists of these novels do not share the foresight to understand that arguing with men at the dinner table or quoting poetry unprompted is not “edifying or graceful” (87) but frankly enough to leave some men thinking, “No-the average nature of women is too shallow and feeble a soil to bear much tillage; it is only fit for the very lightest crops” (87). Though Eliot grants that a man who becomes convinced of the stupidity of all women by reading a lady’s novel is not a wise one, she believes such prejudice is “unconsciously encouraged” by benighted women who present themselves as representatives of the general female intellect.

The books that lady novelists produce do nothing to further the image of skilled women writers, and Eliot quips, “Apparently, their recipe for solving all such difficulties is something like this: Take a woman's head, stuff it with a smattering of philosophy and literature chopped small, and with false notions of society baked hard, let it hang over a desk a few hours every day, and serve up hot in feeble English when not required” (83). Instead of true comprehension of literature, poetry, and philosophy, or even a humbling “into modesty and simplicity by a larger acquaintance with thought and fact” (87), the superficial education of these ladies produces both an excess of over-confidence, and the impression that all women either *behave* like the arrogant heroines, or are only capable of *writing* such characters. Contemporary feminists, on the other hand, would argue that it is not the role of women to educate men. To bring in a historical argument many decades after Eliot’s death and a world apart, there is an extent to which this discourse parallels the conflict between African American activists and leaders Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois stood very much against the conciliatory Washington’s championing of the temporary forbearance of discrimination; he recommended that black people withstand prejudice with patience and advance educationally and economically in order to eventually gain the respect of whites (Thorpe 39-40). Of course, Eliot does not request that women *accept* discrimination, but like Washington, she seems to believe that they must earn the respect of men for their intellectual abilities, by never sinking below the intellectual and moral standards she sets.

Francis Parkman, in referencing the woman’s role as the moral purifier of the family, recognizes that women can impact society but “will not do it [“raise the whole tone of national life”] by frothy declamation on platforms, or flooding the bookstalls with sensation stories, any more than by those other trivialities which professional female reformers denounce” (310). In

this way he also understands the “silliness” of some writing by women, and implicitly the damage they could inflict on the image of the educated, writing woman or the state of the country. Eliot asserts that writing is an art susceptible to mediocre practitioners, a craft that anyone can attempt and claim their own greatness; “every art which had its absolute technique is, to a certain extent, guarded from the intrusions of mere left-handed imbecility. But in novel-writing there are no barriers for incapacity to stumble against, no external criteria to prevent a writer from mistaking foolish facility for mastery” (91). In such an occupation, then, it is easy for the image of the woman writer to suffer at the hands of unskilled authors who lack talent, but certainly feel no want of conceit or self-importance.

In her book *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, Joanna Russ claims that these prejudices led to a denial of agency, writing, “what to do when a woman has written something? The first line of defense is to deny that she wrote it. Since women cannot write, someone else (a man) must have written it” (20). She describes the “impossibility” of a woman having authored a masterpiece, and the ways society and critics sought to avoid the truth; they presumed a man wrote it, or it wrote itself, or perhaps the man *within her*, her masculine streak, wrote it (Russ 22). For example, Edwin Percy Whipple in the *North American Review* argues that *Jane Eyre* must have been written in a collaborative effort between men and women, “from the masculine tone of *Jane Eyre*, it might pass altogether as the composition of a man, were it not for some unconscious feminine peculiarities, which the strongest-minded woman that ever aspired after manhood cannot suppress . . . the leading characteristic of the novel, however, and the secret of its charm . . . this continually suggests a male mind” (qtd. in C. Levine 280). He attributes “clarity, decisiveness, profanity, brutality, heat, passion, animal appetite, and slang” (C. Levine 280) indisputably to a male mind, for the female intellect is not equipped to understand or write

of such values. This stereotype that a woman could not have written something great pervades reviews of the nineteenth-century and even beyond. According to Russ, G. H. Lewes was said to have influenced his partner George Eliot's writing; Mary Shelley could not have *really* created *Frankenstein* without the impact of the "ideas" around her; and "as late as the 1930s Stella Gibbons could parody [in her novel *Cold Comfort Farm*] male insistence that Branwell Bronte was the real author of his sisters' works" (22-4). The Nineteenth-Century's prejudice towards women, and the stereotype that they could not write or do so with skill and talent, flooded the psyche of every serious, female author.

Overcoming the obstacles of public opinion, criticism, and stereotypes was no easy feat, and the female writers who published despite these factors did a great service to their fellow women. As Susan Hamilton writes in reference to the press, "For a woman to write regularly for the respectable press then does not simply mean that she has overcome a workaday problem with access. She also, in the very act of writing, helps to establish the legitimacy and authority of women's participation and perspective on public issues, and helps to produce a public, professional identity for women as social and political critics" (xiv). In fiction, too, their role was just as important, and though they express in many ways the anxieties of their unique position, the decision to continue publishing allowed the following generations of women to work as well. Despite critics, women's writing was impactful, important, and read widely; the "unfeminine" Fanny Fern "spoke to the powerless and the voiceless among her contemporaries. Her principal audience was the ordinary women of her day . . . men who were themselves oppressed . . . who shared her disgust with hypocrisy and pretension, or her anger at the abuse of power. Her work was read across class lines" (Warren 17). George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett

Browning, and many more female writers were incredibly influential, in the accomplishment of their authorship and the commencement of a literary tradition.

### 3. The Use of Pseudonyms in Nineteenth-Century Women's

#### Writing

The amalgamation of criticism, prejudice, and the pressure of writing as a woman made the desire for anonymity or a pseudonym particularly acute, and its value rested in its potential to offer writers freedom, the ability to take risks while maintaining a private life, and the chance to avoid accusations of unfeminine, unwomanly radicalness. In an infamous letter to Charlotte Bronte in 1837, poet laureate Robert Southey wrote, "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: & it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment & a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, & when you are you will be less eager for celebrity" (qtd. in Rosane). Despite this pronouncement, Southey did indeed compliment her poetry, and Bronte even responded with thankful excitement that the poet laureate had answered; but the bluntness of his statement that marriage will and should erase literary aspirations makes evident the reasons why women chose to conceal their identities behind a stamp of anonymity or a nom de plume. The teenage Mary Shelley, for instance, originally published *Frankenstein* (1818) anonymously, and Maria Edgeworth did the same with her first published novel. Marian Evans, whose pseudonym, George Eliot, persists today, and Charlotte Bronte, who wrote under the pen name Currer Bell, both understood the advantages of publishing pseudonymously, as did Sara Payson Willis, or Fanny Fern, and Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, better known as George Sand. Virginia Woolf argues in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that these women sought to avoid publicity, and to elude accusations of excessive pride; "Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner



strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus they did homage to the convention, which if not implanted by the other sex was liberally encouraged by them (the chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of, said Pericles, himself a much-talked-of man) that publicity in women is detestable” (24). Woolf’s interpretation of their concealment of womanhood is likely true (because shows of pride from a woman were met often with hostility), as is the argument that they attempted to have their writing judged on its own merit. Nonetheless, the complexity of the period’s attitude toward women existing in the public eye leaves no room for doubt; being a female author was not without its trials.

The society of the Nineteenth-Century did not look always favorably, then, upon women writers, and harsh attacks on character were a possibility. Publishing anonymously or with a pseudonym “helped preserve a woman's position in private life, keeping her in the mainstream of society” (Van Horn 38). George Eliot, for instance, felt this need for privacy, for the “scandalous irregularity of her extramarital liaison” with her literary agent G.H. Lewes was not appropriate in the eyes of Victorian society (Harris 133). Elaine Showalter writes, “while she was finishing *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot became so anxious and sensitive (due to ‘possible moral outrage’ at her union with Lewes) that she wrote to Blackwood's, asking if they wished to remain her publisher, since her identity became known. (They did)” (qtd. in Russ 28). Eliot's determined use of the name was so insistent that “Marian Evans,” rather than her nom de plume, has faded to the background of common knowledge. Such was her resolution to conceal her identity that she had to be forced to disclose the truth, and she “revealed her real name . . . only because a man, a Mr. Liggins, claimed-and others believed him when he claimed-to be George Eliot” (Gary 535). George Sand, too, possibly hoped to shield some of her private life from society, despite the reality that her use of a male pseudonym may have been made public

knowledge. Penny Brown reports interestingly that “a certain piquancy was added to the debate where her novels were concerned by the fact that these often passionate and unconventional works were written by a married woman who was separated from her husband, had open affairs with a series of well-known men (Musset, Mérimée, and Chopin amongst them), appeared to reject the Catholic faith, and signed her works with a male pseudonym” (203). In the case of a cross-dressing, cigarette-smoking, and atypically radical woman, a pen name could be necessary to gain a semblance of privacy, particularly because it “seems clear that [Sand's] sex and way of life exacerbated much of the adverse criticism” (Brown 220). At the same time, however, its adoption rather added to her controversy and mystique.

Another incentive for anonymity was the ability to “write radical or ‘unfeminine’ pieces without having to justify them” (Van Horn 38). With a pseudonym, subversive work could find more success, for, as Brown states, “women who spoke openly of indelicate subjects could expect to receive often vitriolic criticism” (209). In *A Literature of their Own*, Elaine Showalter asserts that one mark demonstrating that women viewed writing “as a vocation in direct conflict with their status as women is the appearance of the male pseudonym. Like Eve's fig leaf, the male pseudonym signals the loss of innocence. In its radical understanding of the role-playing required by women's effort to participate in the mainstream of literary culture, the pseudonym is a strong marker of the historical shift” (qtd. in Laird 114). Showalter suggests that the use of a male pseudonym is a sort of renunciation of restriction, an agreement to “role-playing.” For poets and lovers Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who published under the pseudonym Michael Field, “the act of role-playing lent itself to radicalism of a more joyous sort” (Laird 115). They found freedom in the use of a pen name, especially because of the erotic nature of much of their work, and their sexual relationship. Even when their identities, as well as the fact of their dual

authorship, were revealed, “the pseudonym of Michael Field clearly enabled them to play a game with sexual as well as literary and gender identities . . . it became a sign that pointed to even as it concealed their transgressions” (Laird 115). George Sand, too, may have employed her pseudonym to avoid accusations that her animated and unorthodox work was “immoral and pernicious” (Brown 203), attacks that Fanny Fern could relate to, as her work was viewed by many as wicked or vile. Of course, one must recognize the distinction of motives in these cases, for authors who wrote erotic, controversial, or otherwise scandalous texts, such as Field and Sand, naturally had a different incentive for the use of a pseudonym than writers like Charlotte Bronte or George Eliot, who strove for unbiased criticism regardless of gender. Though the Nineteenth-Century held complicated views and assumptions for women writers in general, those who deviated even further from the path of normalcy, in writing things of an unseemly or shocking nature, received harsher judgments. Even with the sort of stubborn confidence and assuredness that Fanny Fern and George Sand appeared to possess in abundance, such negative publicity and vilification were, most likely, not easily sustained by the psyche. Of course, one could argue that the bracket of female authors who wrote inflammatory content thrived on defying social conventions, and dealt well with condemnation, but the prevalence of pseudonyms and anonymity suggests that even writers of this strain may have needed a reprieve from constant denunciation.

Moreover, female authors often gravitated towards a pseudonym or anonymity because the employment of either prevented “readers from forming a stereotyped expectation of an author . . . especially when writing something controversial or ‘unwomanly’” (Van Horn 38). Women writers had a constant awareness of the concern that societal prejudice would negatively influence the reception of a text. Bradley and Cooper felt this pressure to eschew associations

with femininity; Holly Laird reports that the male name “served better to disguise them and gain them a ‘name’ in the publishing world. They were anxious that exposure of their actual identities would restrict their freedom as writers” (114). In a letter to Robert Browning, Bradley feared that someone had exposed the truth, and she complained that “the report of lady authorship will dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn” (qtd. in Laird 115). And indeed their fear was very real, because when their identities were exposed “the large potential audience that had seemed theirs to cultivate was damaged” (Laird 115).

According to Margaret Harris, “the traditional explanation for a woman's use of a male pseudonym, that she needed not only to protect her feminine virtue, but also to guard against the stigma of being judged as a ‘lady novelist,’ was adduced by G. H. Lewes in his dual role as protector of George Eliot and of Marian Evans Lewes” (132). “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” also makes plain the additional reason why George Eliot chose to publish under the assumed name, other than seeking to screen her personal life. Understanding the powerful stereotype concerning woman writers, and, too, acknowledging the reality that much of frivolous women’s fiction deserved no approbation, she sought reviews on the merit of her work and avoided altogether the likelihood of her novels being disregarded as ridiculous by using a male pen name. George Sand, too, adopted her nom de plume in part to distance herself from what Dominique Laporte calls, “le mépris réservé aux femmes de lettres” or “the contempt for women writers” (248). She separated herself from literature considered vapid and feminine, writing, “Ne m'appelez donc jamais *femme auteur*” (“never call me woman author”) (qtd. in D. Laporte 248).

Franklin Gary argues that Charlotte Bronte also “had made every effort to have her novels judged as novels, not as the products of a Victorian woman's mind” (533). According to Dutta, “the Bronte sisters had a dozen male alter egos in the Angrian chronicles and later

assumed the names of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell because authoresses were liable to be looked on with prejudice” (2311). After the deaths of her two sisters, Charlotte wrote the forward for *Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey* (1850), which she considered a “sacred duty to wipe the dust off their gravestones, and leave their dear names free from soil” (qtd. in Orel 139). In it, she dispelled the rumor from the 1849 *North British Review* that claimed that the three Bells were one and the same and explained the use of pen names:

Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because-without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called “feminine” we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery which is not true praise (qtd. in Orel 135).

G.H. Lewes, interestingly, had a long correspondence with Bronte after the publication of *Jane Eyre*; they wrote about her novels, and he both complimented and criticized them. Unfortunately, he discovered her identity through a school friend with the publication of *Shirley* and did not understand her horror at discovery. She expressly told him in no uncertain terms of her anxiety of being judged as a woman, writing in an 1849 letter,

I wish you did not think me a woman. I wish all reviewers believed “Currer Bell” to be a man; they would be more just to him. You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex; where I am not what

you consider graceful you will condemn me . . . Come what will, I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and of what is elegant and charming in femininity; it is not on those terms, or with such ideas, I ever took pen in hand (qtd. in Gary 533).

She makes plain her dismay, both with being discovered as well as with a society that castigates women for forgetting their sex, and writing of what is not "elegant and charming." Yet, ironic considering his later fierce protection of George Eliot's identity, Lewes deceived his friend and did exactly what she feared, criticizing her work as female literature, revealing her identity as a woman, and treating her desires superciliously. His review in *The Edinburgh Review* addresses the inferiority of female creativity, concluding that "the grand function of woman . . . is, and ever must be, Maternity" (qtd. in Michie 50). Harris writes, "he again declared the author to be female, but in an unpleasant way, objecting to the novel as masculine and coarse, as well as improbable; and declaring that women should keep their biological place" (Harris 135).

In a letter to her publisher William Smith Williams in January of 1850, Bronte wrote, "I have received and perused the 'Edinburgh Review' . . . it is very brutal and savage. I am not angry with Lewes -- but I wish in future he would let me alone -- and not write again what makes me feel so cold and sick as I am feeling just now" (Barker 261). In response to this *Edinburgh* review, she sent Lewes the brief yet forceful note, "I can be on my guard against my enemies, but God deliver me from my friends!" (qtd. in Gary 534). It was in her seventh letter to Lewes that she expresses directly her agitation with him and acknowledges the reason for her anger, "I was so hurt by that review in the *Edinburgh*-not because its criticism was keen or its blame sometimes severe; not because its praise was stinted . . . but because after I had said earnestly

that I wished critics would judge me as an author, not as a woman, you so roughly-I even thought so cruelly-handled the question of sex . . . grieved I was, and indignant too” (qtd. in Gary 536).

Bronte would forgive him, the two meeting amicably in person in 1850, and one must note that despite his original prejudices, G.H. Lewes did indeed change, a feat unachieved by many other critics. His opinion on women writers shifted, without a doubt, as he grew and worked with Eliot, and while exemplifying “his selfless devotion to Eliot by encouraging her to begin and continue writing fiction; by fostering the mystery of her authorship; by managing her finances; by negotiating her publishing contracts . . . and by staying close by her side for twenty-four years until death parted them” (Rilett 3). To all appearances her greatest champion, one cannot argue that Lewes went to his grave disparaging women for writing, or dismissing female talent. The capacity to change one’s opinion and admit a wrong is an ability not possessed by all, and certainly not by many of the Nineteenth-Century’s critics, both men and women, who could not understand or recognize the reality of women’s literary prowess.

Regardless, Bronte’s relationship with Lewes, and her torment at the idea of the world knowing the true identity of Currer Bell, illustrates the anxieties of the woman writer who sought unbiased judgment. Caroline Levine, however, implies that the initial use of a nom de plume could restrict progress, and argues that the revelation of the Brontes' identity in 1850 by Charlotte "discredited a whole array of assumptions about women's writing. Women, she proved, could write with the clarity and passion of men; they could represent fearful brutality and sensuality; and . . . respectable women could write about highly irregular relationships without sacrificing their virtue" (280). This statement suggests that the use of the pseudonym, when combined with its eventual abandonment, allowed for advancement in the relationship between society and the concept of women writing professionally; “by veiling her own gender, Charlotte

had successfully provoked the world to speculate, and in speculating, to venture strong opinions about masculine and feminine writing. Then, in unveiling herself as a decent Yorkshire woman, she proved a great many of these convictions simply and emphatically wrong” (C. Levine 280).

But at the heart of this issue of pseudonyms and disguised womanhood lies emotion, though this aspect of history is often forgotten or disregarded. It has become common, or perhaps has always been common, for society to forget the pains it has imparted upon people in the past. In this case, the stinging discomfort that women writers experienced should never be discounted, and the triumph of their authorship and publication deserves approbation for the treatment they suffered in trying to do more than what was expected of their sex. Today, public figures cause us to recollect those tenacious authors who wrote in the Nineteenth-Century, for they share the near-unvarying identity of women in the public domain, a role that necessarily endures constant observation, judgment, and ridicule. Whether someone photographs an actress unfavorably at an exposed moment, or a newspaper mocks a female author for her style or gender, the discomfort of being scrutinized, assessed, and scorned is poignant.

Society, for example, perhaps unable to attack George Eliot on the grounds of her indisputably powerful writing, consistently referred to her physical appearance instead. Eliot was not an attractive woman, by all accounts, and never denied it. In a letter, Henry James described her as “magnificently ugly — deliciously hideous,” though he admitted that “in this vast ugliness resides a most powerful beauty which, in a very few minutes steals forth and charms the mind, so that you end as I ended, in falling in love with her . . . Yes behold me literally in love with this great horse-faced bluestocking” (qtd in. Legro). Though James’s illustration is as honest as it is oddly flattering, such consistent references to her homeliness must have wounded Eliot, and many sources touch upon her countenance. Eliot often jested about her appearance, but Barbara



Hardy calls her humor, “an unpleasant self-deprecation of her plainness . . . she laughs so that she may not weep, but the laugh is defensive, strident, and bitterly self-humiliating” (75).

Despite the fact of her skill, or her apparently very loving, long-term relationship, people often focused on this unfortunate attribute, and to write as a woman was to invite attacks on everything from one’s choice of partner, in Eliot’s case, to the features of a face. Apprehension of serious judgment is an anxiety that most will experience in their lives, though usually not on the same scale that those in the public domain must naturally sustain. The relationship of these writers with their identities teach scholars that society could harbor great resentment for talented, unconventional women, and that the use of a pseudonym could undoubtedly shield female authors from much of this pain, a sensation intrinsic to publishing as a woman in this period.

The Nineteenth-Century saw a significant number of women writers publish anonymously or with a pseudonym, particularly at the beginning of their career, and the power and benefits of doing so are apparent. At the same time, however, perhaps relinquishing the safety of a pen name gave rise to greater confidence for the woman writer, as the popularity of a novel with an unknown writer could later prove, with the divulgence of the existence of a female author, that the distance between men and women writers was not so great.

#### **4. The Representation of the Female Author and Artist in the Work of Nineteenth-Century Women Writers: *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh***

The compounded factors of the Woman Question, male criticism, and the prejudice that women were unskilled writers engendered an awareness within the group of female authors of their unique position, and some anxieties arose around the concept of this visibility in the public eye. Notions of traditional femininity, from domestic docility to selflessness, clashed with the practice of authorship, and “the self-centredness implicit in the act of writing made it an especially threatening one- it required a concern with the ego and therefore writers like Charlotte [Bronte]. . . her sisters, [and] Elizabeth Barrett Browning . . . had to face deepseated guilt about authorship” (Dutta 2311). The tangible perception and anxieties express themselves interestingly in the publications of the Nineteenth-Century, two of the manifestations being the presentation in the text of the successful female writer or poet in order to combat criticism and stereotypes, and the acknowledgment of gender realities and disparities within the text. Both Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett Browning each illustrate these notions.

*Aurora Leigh*, more than *Jane Eyre*, puts before the audience the clear and indisputable representation of the talented artist, while Bronte’s bildungsroman does so in a more subtle manner. The protagonist’s role as a female autobiographer is quite significant, and its relevance rests in the fact that Jane embodies, essentially, a fictional writer. While the identity of Browning’s *Aurora* revolves almost entirely around her pursuit of art, Jane’s sense of self and

ambitions lie less importantly on her authorial abilities. Yet as a writer, Jane pointedly shows a complete lack of hesitation or anxiety in her role as a storyteller by addressing her audience directly and never questioning her right to write. Famously, she declares, “Reader, I married him” (685). The phrase not only shows, content-wise, the heroine's sense of agency and independence as a woman, but also offers evidence of her confidence as a writer, since she assumes she will have a readership and knows her story is worthy of being told. She also makes the assumption that her competence as a narrator will persuade her readers to support her marriage to Rochester at the end (despite his moral transgressions, all the trials they have been through, and the fact that he is now blind and impoverished), and will tolerate her rejection of St. John Rivers (who would have appeared to some of Bronte’s readership as the more suitable choice because of his occupation, and perhaps their familial connection).

The novel itself also challenges Nineteenth-Century conceptions of acceptable female behavior and characteristics and has much to do with the Woman Question. Many critics dreaded *Jane Eyre* almost as an attempt to overthrow the social order because of the way it renegotiates women’s roles. *The Quarterly Review*, for example, writes in 1848: “Jane Eyre, in spite of some grand things about her, is a being totally uncongenial to our feelings from beginning to end . . . a decidedly vulgar-minded woman—one whom we should not care for as an acquaintance, whom we should not seek as a friend . . . whom we should scrupulously avoid for a governess” (Rigby). Jane is an assertive heroine against both male and female figures, and she has a strong voice, as a narrator and a character.

Jane consistently prompts her audience to remember that she is in control of the telling of her story, though she did not always have control of the many trials she endures. Carla Kaplan asserts that “with the childhood declaration, ‘Speak I must’ Jane resolves to narrate her own

story, to explain and vindicate her life, [and] to exercise her voice” (5). Lines like, “I was excited more than I had ever been; and whether what followed was the effect of excitement the reader shall judge” (Bronte 639) or “I had not intended to love [Mr. Rochester]; the reader knows I had wrought hard to extirpate from my soul the germs of love there detected” (265) remind the audience that they are actively involved with a confident narrator. Jane's strong opinions throughout the novel influence the audience greatly, as readers rarely sense any unreliability, and the narrator recalls events decades in the past with clarity, description, and certainty. Although “an interest in the public sphere is utterly unfeminine” (Fest 50) and writing was indeed very public exposure, Jane either lacks or does not show the self-consciousness of her position as an autobiographer. The absence of doubt appears to exhibit Bronte's conviction that women writers should show no hesitation or shame, and her stance on the professional, working women, which will be analyzed later, is favorable.

But it is not only through Jane's role as an autobiographer that Bronte reveals fierce sentiments about the role of women in society or her familiarity with criticism of female authorship and professionalism. She manifests “the desire for dependence and love as well as feminist desires for autonomy and independence” (Dutta 2312) even as she investigates new possibilities for women and the Woman Question, through Jane's character as an astute, conscientious, and self-sufficient governess.

Bronte represents the struggle of being an honest and intelligent woman, an outsider in the eyes of society. The orphaned and lonely Jane is not undamaged by her courage and her deviation from the norm. In the first pages of the novel, her nonconformity and its subsequent isolating effects are apparent. Her aunt refuses to allow her to join the family until Jane ventures “to acquire a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner—

something lighter, franker, more natural,” and she excludes Jane from the “privileges intended only for contented, happy, little children” (6). Jane seems to lack entirely the selflessness, beauty, and calm that Sarah Stickney Ellis required of young girls of the Nineteenth-Century, nor does she fit the image of a future Angel in the House. This loveless upbringing, attributed not only to Mrs. Reed's coldness and envy but also to Jane's dissimilarity, engenders the protagonist's solitary, angry nature. She is not as beautiful or outwardly well-behaved as her cousins, and her alienation from those around her is biting. Bronte reveals, again and again, the suffering incurred by those who disobey societal standards of femininity, suffering and guilt that portends the real experience of female writers in her century. Later, after an argument with her aunt, Jane is almost sick with conflicting feelings;

I was left there alone—winner of the field. It was the hardest battle I had fought, and the first victory I had gained . . . I enjoyed my conqueror's solitude. First, I smiled to myself and felt elate; but this fierce pleasure subsided in me as fast as did the accelerated throb of my pulses. A child cannot quarrel with its elders, as I had done; cannot give its furious feelings uncontrolled play, as I had given mine, without experiencing afterwards the pang of remorse and the chill of reaction (54).

Her accusations against Mrs. Reed leave her with a “sensation as if [she] had been poisoned” (54). Her childhood trauma foreshadows not only the pain she will undergo later as an adult, but also the self-consciousness and difficulties experienced by women writers who succeeded in creating works of literary art but did so in a society that often failed to look seriously upon, or congratulate, such accomplishment.

According to Dutta, "independence is a keynote in [Bronte's] thinking [and] a central theme in all her novels. Inseparable from her emphasis on the importance of career is her strong exhortation of the ideal of independence to the unmarried woman" (2312). The common metaphor of birds and cages for unconventional women who yearn for independence and more choice than society grants appears in this novel. Just before proposing to her, Mr. Rochester implores Jane, "don't struggle so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation" and she replies, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (386). Her words, though they protest that she is no trapped bird, will find parallel in Aurora Leigh's from Book 1 of the epic poem, "[My aunt] had lived / a cage-bird sort of life . . . accounting that to leap from perch to perch / Was act and joy enough for any bird . . . I, alas, / a wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage" (Browning, lines 304-10). Earlier in the novel, Mr. Rochester describes the restraining effect Lowood school has had on his governess; "I see at intervals the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage: a vivid, restless, resolute captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud high" (212). Convention, societal pressures, and stiff upbringings form the cages that entrap passionate, independent women who seek to live outside of the existing conditions of society, and "the conflict between individual development and marriage and reproduction became acute for women who thought that their own self-development was important" (Dutta 2312). Jane, though not opposed to marriage, is first and foremost concerned with her own independence. With nothing but her integrity, the strength of her character, and the pursuit of freedom, she gains the position in life in which she seeks, a position including not only marriage but family, financial security, and self-esteem.

Bronte examines work, specifically Jane's profession as a governess, as an extension of independence. Though the position of governess was a precarious one in the Nineteenth-Century, with Jane anticipating "only coldness and stiffness" when she arrives at Thornfield (she remarks at her warm reception, "this is not like what I have heard of the treatment of governesses" (146)), Bronte suggests that the role is significant, as is the idea of women working for themselves. (The fact that there were very few ways for a woman in Jane's position to earn her living seems to be an even bigger problem, for England feared its problem of unmarried women, and the swelling "demographic imbalance between the sexes during the course of the nineteenth century was viewed with alarm by contemporary commentators . . . The belief in wifedom as women's 'natural' occupation only served to intensify that concern. Women who did not marry-those . . . dubbed 'surplus women' - were seen as doomed" (P. Levine 151)). Kerstin Fest reports, "tales of women in the workplace are also tales about what it means to be a woman. A constant negotiation between the private and the public sphere takes place as the working woman transgresses boundaries. She leaves the private domestic sphere for the public realm of labor" (43). Bronte brings to life "the independent female who insists on her own self-respect despite her vulnerable social position and undistinguished appearance" (Dutta 2313). Work preserves Jane's freedom, self-sufficiency, and dignity. To Mr. Rochester's lavish offers of gifts and gowns, she responds with resistance, telling him she plans on earning room and board by continuing to act as Adele's governess, and desiring nothing but his regard. Her discomfort at their disparity in class and wealth Bronte makes apparent with strong, evocative diction; Jane "thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (409). Her role in the household maintains her integrity and sense of self. Although her work at that point is teaching a young girl rather than writing her autobiography,

the sentiment is the same; providing for one's self through effort and intelligence is tantamount to freedom. In the same manner in which Aurora supports herself with her poetry, Jane's perseverance and occupation as a governess carry her along, and when she flees Thornfield with nothing, it is her demeanor and self-respect derived from being a professional woman ("I am no beggar" (518) she declares) that convinces the Rivers to allow her inside from the cold.

Bronte does include moments of clear feminist sentiment against the conventions that disapproved of the professional woman. In one of the most famous passages of *Jane Eyre*, the frustrated heroine protests her lack of opportunities, her society which castigates women who strive for more than marriage, and the dullness of traditionally feminine activities:

It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot . . .

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex (167).

This speech aligns with Aurora's resentment of her aunt's tutelage and nearly encompasses the concerns of many professional women in the Nineteenth-Century. Despite the effusions of feminist attitudes and independence, the novel's heroine does not avoid aspirations



of love and affection, and Jane often finds herself lonely without it. The success she finds in romantic love proves, as Browning too suggests, that personal freedom, whether that entails writing or something else entirely, can exist alongside marriage. Jane adores and values Mr. Rochester's company, and he offers her the sort of conversation and attention she lacks.

Although she marries and has a son, she still maintains autonomy, writing her autobiography as a wife and mother, and thereby making the point again that nothing can or should stop women from developing their minds and creating literature, even if society is not prepared for such conclusions.

As in the end of *Aurora Leigh*, *Jane Eyre* also sees its heroine fall deeply in love and nurse a blind, injured man; "my time and cares were now required by another—my husband needed them all" (Bronte 687). Even before marrying Mr. Rochester, Jane vows, "I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion—to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you" (664). These words convey classic sentiments of the Nineteenth-Century ideal of womanhood, from servility to selflessness, yet the audience does not gather the sense that she has submitted herself to anyone else's control. On the contrary, she seems to wield the influence in her relationship with the maimed Mr. Rochester, as she sees and writes for him. Her promise to love and care for the man she loves does not detract from her independence; at this point in the novel, Jane is not, as she once called herself in *Portrait of a Governess*, "disconnected, poor, and plain" (244). She has money enough to live independently, enough even to offer to build her own house next to Ferndean Manor, and she has finally found a family in the Rivers. And though she marries Mr. Rochester (both fulfilling a loving relationship and the hopes of traditional society for women) in a period that upheld domesticity and moral guidance as the highest form of womanhood, she

maintains her power, sense of self, and literary skills. In all of these ways, Bronte has illustrated her anxieties for the professional woman, and her conviction in its importance.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in constructing her titular character Aurora, took inspiration from Madame de Stael's *Corinne ou L'italie* (1807). According to Kari E Lokke, "Stael's significance for nineteenth-century British women writers far outweighs Shakespeare's admittedly huge influence on men's literary production in Romantic and Victorian culture. Women writers across Europe and in America recognized in the cosmopolitan Stael and her character Corinne the original model of female genius" (73). Corinne's depiction in the novel as a beautiful, talented, and accomplished "goddess" seems a great compliment to the woman writer, though the truth is more complicated, and Browning's poetess Aurora Leigh, who shares much more with Corrine than British-Italian heritage, follows suit. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi agrees with de Stael's significance, writing, "The borrowings from Madame de Stael, George Sand, Charlotte Bronte . . . and others give Barrett Browning the opportunity to comment, positively and negatively, on the responses of these writers to various aspects of Victorian society, including "the woman question," and to define her own ideas" (35). The concept of the female genius had a strong precedent in literature, one that Browning built her epic poem upon.

A female writer with the ability and prowess to support herself with her pen was both a rarity and a notion that many critics belittled, and Browning explores the existence of professional women through her protagonist, but also through her own identity as a writer. According to Joyce W. Warren, the public sphere, or the domain of writing, was an "arena . . . controlled by the dominant white male culture" (19). Women were not at the forefront of society, and they "could not speak in religious or political meetings . . . could not own property independently of their husbands or bring suit in court; and when they attempted to speak on

social issues, they were reviled as scandalous, vulgar, hysterical, and/or sexually promiscuous" (Warren 19). "Legal restrictions . . . convention, and social pressure" (19), Warren explains, coalesced to make the period a hostile environment for women authors. Some writers, such as the American humorist Fanny Fern, showed their defiance through public personas. Just as influential was the existence of fictional characters who wrote and therefore exposed themselves to the public sphere. Such characterization serves as a sort of declaration on part of the author. Browning's partly autobiographical *Aurora Leigh* (1856), follows the life of a woman who truly and triumphantly embodies the spirit of a female writer and supports herself through poetry. There is added realism and weight to the tale because, as LaPorte writes, Browning's "title character expresses artistic and cultural views indistinguishable from those of her author and . . . she enjoys in some respects a parallel career" ("Aurora Leigh" 833). Aspects of Aurora's education, choices, and success all manifest the abilities of women, as well as the justification of their deserved esteem. The representation of her life also demonstrates the rampant societal issues concerning gender.

The education for women was much debated in the period, and Aurora's childhood instruction is intertwined with the perception of the female genius who defies societal expectations. After the heroine is orphaned, she is sent to be educated by her father's sister in England. Aurora's rather austere aunt, in withholding certain knowledge from her niece on the claim of its unsuitability for girls, reflects sentiments similar to those expressed by the aforementioned Sarah Stickney Ellis, who advocated the neglect of learning and accomplishment for women in favor of moral guidance, selflessness, and benevolence; Mrs. Ellis writes in her 1839 book *The Women of England*, "I still cling fondly to the hope, that, ere long, some system of female instruction will be discovered, by which the young women of England may be sent

home from school . . . habituated to be on the watch for every opportunity of doing good to others; making it the first and the last inquiry of every day, ‘What can I do to make my parents, my brothers, or my sisters, more happy?’” (90). Self-sacrifice, then, takes precedence over subjects like scientific knowledge, or the enjoyment of the classics. Aurora’s aunt, like Mrs. Ellis, prefers “a general insight into useful facts” and the ability to spin glass or model wax flowers over any topic deemed unladylike, and Aurora suffers under the doctrine of a guardian who “liked a woman to be womanly, / And English women, she thanked God . . . were models to the universe” (443-6). This line particularly encapsulates one side of the debate around the Woman Question and demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of being a woman writer in a time that prized complacency over talent, especially in a country whose citizens consider their women to be “models to the universe.”

Aurora’s clandestine study of Latin and Greek in her father’s library and her knowledge of texts comes directly from Browning’s own rare and extensive education. The inclusion of these studies in the epic poem is a sort of direct engagement with the Woman Question, and Aurora speaks of her childhood under the tutelage of her aunt with a sense of acknowledgment of the period’s shortfalls in regards to women. Mrs. Ellis wrote, “what man is there in existence who would not rather his wife should be free from selfishness, than be able to read Virgil without the use of a dictionary” (71), and Aurora’s oppressively traditional aunt too deems such “unfeminine” knowledge unnecessary. But this is the same variety of knowledge that formed Browning into the author and poet she was. Aurora was made, instead, to “read a score of books on womanhood / To prove, if women do not think at all, / They may teach thinking . . . books that boldly assert / Their right of comprehending husband’s talk / When not too deep” (426-32). Once again, the sort of education that leads to greatness and accomplishment is shunned in favor

of training in the art of womanhood, though more specifically the skill of appeasing men, and of keeping silent by the hearth and never dissenting. Her father imprints upon her the desire for knowledge. Gelpi also suggests that Aurora, in one of the indications that she initially associated writing and education with masculinity (and pointedly not womanhood), purposefully alludes to the Greek myth of Achilles being hidden by his mother among the court maidens; "Thus, my father gave; And thus, as did the women formerly / By young Achilles, when they pinned the veil / Across the boy's audacious front . . . He wrapt his little daughter in his large Man's doublet, careless did it fit or no" (722-8). The heroine's derision and avoidance of the ideals of femininity and women in general shift drastically throughout the epic poem, but initially evince her complicated relationship with her own identity. Isobel Hurst, in commenting on Browning's education, so like Aurora's, mentions "the study of 'masculine' subjects such as Latin and Greek, largely undertaken at home" (449). She continues, "for Barrett Browning and other Victorian women writers, such separation from the typical concerns of their female peers was part of a literary training" (Hurst 449). Browning possibly shared, at one point, Aurora's learned disdain for womanhood because of the manner in which society posed writing and education as masculine, and all things frivolous, aesthetic, or moral, as feminine. At some point she even remarks on the pitfalls of being an emotional, female writer.

Meanwhile, in the Second Book of the epic poem, a twenty-year-old Aurora rejects her cousin Romney's marriage proposal because he, like many critics of the era, is skeptical about her literary abilities and considers her ambitions insignificant compared to his social reform and charities. He informs her that women do not have the dedication or intellectual abilities to be true artists; "Women as you are, / Mere women, personal and passionate, / You give us doating mothers and chaste wives. / Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints! / We get no Christ from

you, and verily / We shall not get a poet, in my mind" (220-225). Interestingly, Browning ensures that all of Romney's philanthropic attempts dissolve, while Aurora succeeds in her endeavors to create true art, in order to emphasize the importance of women's writing. Browning intentionally destroys his ventures through his failed marriage to a poor woman, blindness, and even arson; his preoccupation with charities and social work, elevated at the expense of Aurora's dreams and considered by him to be vastly more important, must end to prove that women's concerns equal those of men in weight and significance.

Gelpi argues that the scene of contention between the two shows not only societal conventions and the anxiety of being a woman writer, but also the inner self-doubt that naturally surfaces in the climate of the Nineteenth-Century; "Romney's questioning of her powers is in fact only an expression, a projection of her own divided feelings about herself" (42). Such doubt legitimizes the concept of the tenuous, almost precarious, identity of a woman writer, a woman proud to crown herself in a laurel wreath in emulation of Corrine's presentation in Rome, but also feeling the effects of the sexist arrangement of Nineteenth-Century society.

Aurora angrily refuses her cousin's proposal of marriage and decides to go to London and support herself. She pointedly references society's doubts about her artistic ability, claiming in the Second Book, "if indeed / A woman's soul, like man's, be wide enough / To carry the whole octave" (1183-5). Her choice to place writing and the determination to make her living as a poet over love, family, and security (as Romney will inherit the estate and leave her nothing if they do not marry) was the fear of many who discussed the Woman Question. Here Browning too directly acknowledges the male criticism of the Nineteenth-Century, as Romney represents their views, and the standards of figures like Ruskin or Mrs. Ellis, who placed domestic powers in the

hands of women. Aurora, in valuing her craft over love, and as Gelpi argues, deriding feminization because of her self-doubt, does the opposite of the model of Victorian womanhood.

The audience witnesses Aurora's success in writing in London, and over the next few books, observes her struggle to create what she considers a true work of art, as nothing she writes seems worthy of her aspirations. She laments in the Third Book that despite her apartment in London, the successful manuscript sold to fund her travels to Italy, and her string of critics and young, romantic followers, "the very love they lavished so, / Proved me inferior. The strong loved me not, / And he . . . my cousin Romney . . . did not write" (231-33). These lines demonstrate again her "masculine" ambition to be greater, as well as the unfortunate lack of criticism of quality for literature written by female writers who hoped to receive genuine commentary. George Eliot describes this disparity of criticism so eloquently in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists;" "By a peculiar thermometric adjustment, when a woman's talent is at zero, journalistic approbation is at the boiling pitch; when she attains mediocrity, it is already at no more than summer heat; and if ever she reaches excellence, critical enthusiasm drops to the freezing point" (90). Like all serious women authors with actual skill and a lack of that "foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print" (Eliot 90), Aurora seeks genuine criticism, or "love from the strong." Her lack of inspiration to write poetry, which she only has time to compose at night because her days are spent writing for magazines and weekly papers, Browning will attribute to her dearth of love for her true muse Romney, which will be explained in greater depth later. However, despite Aurora's dissatisfaction with her work, and her insufficiency of inspiration, Browning still proves that women can make a living out of writing, even if it is not their best (and Aurora will, eventually, obtain her finest poetry). Despite her feelings of inferiority, she perseveres, pointedly detailing the struggle and joys of working, and there is inherent pride and

independence in her statements, the pride of providing for one's self without the backing from men or marriage.

On a separate note, Aurora's young, admiring acquaintances, and her letters of commendation from her following, are many, and every week she receives pretty letters from young people. The adoration Aurora receives (though she laments that is not from sophisticated minds), George Eliot also was subject to, and many revered her as a sort of lay saint. This acclaim also seems to mirror Corinne's crowning in the Capitol, although without the same sort of pomp and fervor. The wonder attributed to Corinne, the way "all her movements had a charm which aroused interest and curiosity, wonder and affection" (de Stael 23), as well as her loving reception from the people of Rome, make it clear in the same way that Browning echoes, the achievable reality of woman's capacity for genius, and the glorious welcome they deserve. However, the issue is multi-faceted. Charles LaPorte writes in "'Aurora Leigh, A Life-Drama', and Victorian Poetic Autobiography;" "contemporary criticism exacted a higher degree of modesty from [female poets] than from their male peers" (830), and a prideful woman was generally looked down upon. As he attends her crowning at the Capitol, de Stael's Lord Nelvil reflects how "in England he would have judged such a woman [Corinne] very severely . . . it was the first time he had witnessed the honor done to a woman, to a woman renowned only for the gifts of genius" (22-3). de Stael contemplates the reality that Nineteenth-Century society, particularly England, did not value the female genius, or her pride. "A woman was," as Joyce W. Warren claims, "culturally defined as subordinate and self-effacing; any assertion of self was considered an aberration" (20). Browning considers these ideas also through characters like Aurora's aunt, or Romney, who play into the notions and stereotypes of women's inferiority concerning professional writing or accomplishment. Aurora's eventual move to Florence, where



Browning eloped with her husband in the autumn of 1846, demonstrates stiff English society and its denigration of the public women writer, which clashes, of course, with the interior domestic ideal of womanhood. Isobel Hurst references Browning's interest and involvement with politics in Italy, writing, "If women could write on behalf of Italy's liberation from foreign oppression, they might also liberate themselves from an apolitical, purely domestic existence" (466). Women like Corrine or Aurora thrived in Italy's environment, and it follows that Browning's heroine would liberate herself from a life wanting art and accomplishment, an existence which her aunt lived and considered virtuous, and that Aurora calls in the First Book, "A quiet life, which was not life at all" (289).

In the Ninth Book, the unwed mother Marian chooses to focus her attention on raising her child over marrying Romney, while for years Aurora, in deriding anything "womanly" in favor of masculine ideas (represented, Gelpi claims, through her use of metaphor and instances of "womanly hardness of spirit toward other women" (39)) avoids her true feelings for her cousin. This parallelism between the two women implies that Aurora treasures her craft as one would a child, which as a matter of course epitomizes the fears of a society in which the professional woman writer and changing role of women saw much debate. Yet, as Gelpi argues, Browning includes the inherent anxieties for the female writer in her attempt to accommodate their different roles; "Central to their paradoxes is the thought that if as woman she is to be an artist, she will betray her role as mother; yet the mother in her will also in turn betray and transfix the artist" (38). And just as "women recognized in . . . Corinne a victim of a prototypical nineteenth-century conflict between private and public, domesticity and artistry, innocence and knowledge, love and ambition" (Lokke 74), Aurora too constitutes these warring ideas, and is nearly a victim to their friction. Her ruminations in the Second Book, after refusing Romney, exemplify this

struggle, and she wonders if she would have had children, or been a happier woman. However, as she accepts the complexity and duality of womanhood, she is able to acknowledge her affection for Romney.

In the end, when the poem closes with Aurora Leigh and Romney finally embracing, Browning seemingly suggests that the pursuit of writing and art actually *cannot* offer the same satisfaction that love or marriage brings, but such love serves as inspiration for art. (Of course, Browning has written about the subject of intense love and woman's intellect before, in her celebrated *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). In the celebrated collection of poetry, she investigates the marriage of souls from the perspective of an intellectual woman).

Some critics have considered this ending, however, a sort of betrayal of the notion of the independent, professional woman, and other works, such as Felicia Heman's poem "Corinne at the Capitol" (1830) appear to suggest that contentment rests not in success and fame but in domesticity. However, Lokke attests that in Heman's and others' cases, such seemingly straightforward conclusions "fail to convince" (76). She asserts that "women writers, while ostensibly warning other women of the dangers of literary celebrity, often used the accepted and 'safe' thematics of fame as a platform from which to launch risky explorations that challenged the boundaries of female propriety and carved out new realms for women's creativity" (Lokke 74). Corrine's tragic death, and Aurora's romantic ending, should not be read as an acceptance of the status quo but rather as a way in which to question society and create a space for women writers. The epic poem recognizes the sexism of the period, the concerns surrounding the Woman Question, and preconceptions about untalented female writers, but the issue in itself is complex, and Browning indicates with her ending that the two veins of thought are not mutually exclusive. One cannot succeed in one aspect if neglecting the other, and happiness requires love and art; as

Romney tells his cousin at the end of the Ninth Book, "Our work shall still be better for our love,  
/ And still our love be sweeter for our work" (925-926).

Perhaps, in Browning's view, the true representation of the woman author in literature is the abandonment of insecurity and doubt in her abilities (a doubt irrefutably connected to society's preconceived notions about women and their duties) and a reconciliation with her womanhood, and the capacity to embody the artist, genius, and writer. Browning illustrates Aurora's doubt in herself as a female poet through her desire to view Romney solely as a critic, neglect her true feelings, and regard womanhood negatively because she suspects internally (due to external factors like her society and stereotypes) that women cannot be true artists. Yet this doubt, Browning indicates through Aurora's eventual embrace with Romney, is the main impediment between women and their professional and artistic accomplishments. As reported by Gelpi, "as Aurora comes to love and trust her own womanhood, Romney, no longer a critic, becomes a Muse . . . the dramatic projection of that faith in self - blind faith if you will - and self-acceptance which underlie all true creativity . . . Aurora and Romney, are the united spirit of a creative woman at last trustful of her power" (48). There is an added power in this case, as his role as Muse destroys any previous claims on his part that women cannot make proper poets; "Aurora must first overcome Romney's inhibiting gaze . . . who can silence and objectify the woman poet seeking to claim and speak her own subjectivity" (Zonana 242). The reversal of usual gender roles here is striking indeed, as male poets had a tradition of placing women atop a pedestal and viewing them as an inspiration for art, yet not regarding them as capable of producing art themselves; Zonana offers the argument that "Browning challenges patriarchal poetry's vision of the muse as the passive female object of the active male poet's quest" (242). Critics latched onto this idea of gender reversal with indignation, perhaps unused to the concept

that a woman could contemplate a man as her Muse. They branded Romney as weak because of Browning's inversion, and her assertion of female artistry and power; an 1857 review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, though calling *Aurora Leigh* a "remarkable poem," complains,

The extreme independence of Aurora detracts from the feminine charm and mars the interest which we otherwise might have felt in so intellectual a heroine . . . in Romney we fail to take any kind of interest. Though honorable and generous, he is such a very decided noodle that we grudge him his prominence in the poem, do not feel much sympathy for his misfortunes, and cannot help wondering that Aurora should have entertained one spark of affection for so deplorable a milkop ("Mrs. Barrett" 32).

Part of the anxiety of the woman writer is the constant internal battle between the Nineteenth-Century ideal of womanhood and the desire to be a famed, successful, and skilled professional writer. Browning, in illustrating a poetic genius, much like herself, who finds acclaim and revels in it yet yearns for more in her personal life, negotiates the intricacy of the female writer's identity even as she concludes that both may be fulfilled without sacrifice. Even as she adores her work, Aurora laments the fact that she must forgo love to write about it in the Fifth Book,

To have our books  
Appraised by love, associated with love,  
While we sit loveless! is it hard, you think?  
At least 'tis mournful. Fame, indeed, 'twas said,  
Means simply love. It was a man said that.

And then there's love and love: the love of all

(To risk, in turn, a woman's paradox,)

Is but a small thing to the love of one (473-80).

To finally find her love for Romney, then, is a great achievement, especially because it does not mean she must relinquish her passion for poetry. Browning elucidates her awareness of being a female author in the environment of the Nineteenth-Century, an environment that judged women and particularly their choice to be anything other than an Angel in the House, through her depiction of Aurora Leigh's self-education, choices, skill as an artist, internal conflicts with poetry and womanhood, and hesitance to accept love as a necessary element of the true genius. As LaPorte writes, "If we take into account the unequal standards which midcentury poetesses were measured by male-dominated literary culture, then *Aurora Leigh* may well stand out as the period's supreme example of how to navigate the perils of poetic autobiography" ("Aurora Leigh" 829).

The occupation of the woman writer is not to eschew love and affection in order to pursue lonely professionalism and the fruits of fame and success. The latter achievements are goals, to be sure--accomplishments that deserve acclaim, acceptance, and genuine criticism on par with that received by male authors. But they are only strengthened with the unions of great love, and the two objectives can coexist. In fact, one could argue that some of our modern ideas that women cannot have both aspects of life, that they must abandon love in favor of a career, is in itself on par with the Victorian men who claimed women could only occupy one role; either notion of restriction attempts to essentially command the will of those who seek more in life than black and white choices. Both Browning and Bronte acknowledge the stresses of the period and

their awareness of female authorial identity through the characterization of two brilliant writers who accept womanhood as a double-edged sword.

## **5. The Seeking of a Distinct, Sophisticated Feminine Voice and Tradition: George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning**

George Eliot's differentiation between the Nineteenth-Century women's writing is crucial to understand: there were the female novelists who she believed wrote out of ennui or vanity, and writers who truly sought accomplishment and recognition based on merit, real criticism, and the forging of a new and distinct feminine tradition. Nonetheless, one must consider from a standpoint of the Twenty first-Century the contextual conditions that these women criticized by Eliot were operating under, given the impediments to their education and opportunities for professionalization; it is unjust to judge them morally, or dismissively, especially without contemplating their complex situation. For the sake of this critical argument, however, the distinction remains, and Eliot, rather than mortifying such women or their simplistic plots, sought to differentiate herself and combat the stereotypical view that all women wrote with the same skill as the "shallow" lady novelists. The pressure of the "Woman Question," the nature of the period's criticism, and prejudiced notions that women could not write well made the search for a distinguished voice in women's writing more urgent; Eliot seems to identify this female written tradition as the absence of artificiality, the proud acceptance of womanhood, and the integration of masculine and feminine qualities. Importantly, female authors such as Browning and Eliot were steadily working to identify and confront the binary dynamic and evaluate whether or not the difference between femininity and masculinity was indeed foundational. These women writers made provisions for later writers to move forward

toward self-representation, all in connection with the intricacies of female authorship in the period.

Women writers of a “serious” attitude, or a perspective marked by the moral responsibility Eliot saw as necessary to write and not by “a composite order of feminine fatuity” (Eliot 78), lamented the small number of female literary predecessors, and subsequently, the relative lack of an established women’s tradition. According to Kathleen Blake, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was “highly aware of her literary heritage, with a ‘filial spirit,’ ‘a reverent love of the grandfathers,’ but regretful to find no poetic grandmothers . . . While Wordsworth speaks of the lineage from ‘father to son’ amongst poets, Barrett Browning knew that her gender precluded so direct an inheritance” (387). Though women writers of course existed, the respect they gained was inferior to that of male authors in the period, and they were isolated cases outside of an inherited tradition. In “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” George Eliot alludes to this lack of many female forerunners, though she does admit that “a cluster of great names, both living and dead, rush to our memories in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest-novels” (90). However, though she commends the work of French women, and cites Harriet Martineau, Currer Bell, and Mrs. Gaskell as possessors of the “moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence-patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer's art” (90), she dedicates almost the entirety of her essay to criticism of the opposite type of writer, and deplores the fact that “lady novelists” outnumber true artists. In her 1854 essay “Women in France,” she contends mockingly, “with a few remarkable exceptions, our own feminine literature is made up of books which could have been better written by men . . . when not a feeble imitation, they are usually an absurd exaggeration of the masculine style, like the swaggering gait of a bad actress in male



attire” (Eliot 91). Her displeasure at the amount and frequency of bad writing and cheap novels by women suggests the rarity of those “great names,” and therefore the singularity of texts that would belong to a feminine literary tradition, a heritage that Eliot may categorize simply as good writing, with “the right elements-genuine observation, humor, and passion” (Eliot 91). Her highbrow disdain, importantly, is not with women or with femininity, but with those who she views as creating inferior literature, especially tawdry work that attempts to imitate manly characteristics. Though she makes clear her distaste for masculine exaggeration or emulation, other citations (which will be discussed later) prove that Eliot prized writing with an unforced, genuine masculine bearing, and she suggests in “Women in France” that perfect writing by women is done without the sterile imitation of manliness, “without proposing any model to themselves, without any intention to prove that women could write as well as men, without affecting manly views or suppressing womanly ones” (Eliot 92). Her use of the term “affecting” indicates a dislike for the fabricated, feigned use of “manly views,” especially when done in accordance with a smothered sense of womanhood. But it would seem Eliot valued the combination of manly and womanly values if used sincerely, and naturally; as Linda H. Peterson argues, though Eliot could occasionally show contempt for female literature, her “poetic goal” was actually “the melding of feminine sensibility with masculine power” (36).

Charles LaPorte argues that Eliot’s stance is not all that it seems, despite her “well-known ambivalence toward ‘feminine’ writing,” (“Poetess” 159) evidenced by her repeated suggestions of effeminate weakness in various essays, her above comment about “feminine fatuity,” and the “antifeminist thrust” (“Poetess” 159) of the quotation from “Women in France” (in which she writes, “our own feminine literature is made up of books which could have been better written by men”). LaPorte claims that “the very antifeminism of [“Women in France”]

derives from Eliot's conviction that English letters lacked a distinctive and powerful feminine influence, and from her impatience for one to arise. Anyone reading Eliot's lyric collections will be struck that, by 1874, this impatience has turned to hope" ("Poetess" 159). Eliot, despite her "ambivalence" when it comes to feminine literature, indeed sought a level of mastery that reflected impactful, womanly ideas. Her disdain, then, represents her "complex position on the feminine in art" ("Poetess"159). She scorned the false shows of masculinity that some women writers performed, most likely done self-consciously in order to have their works taken seriously, for she desired the sincere conciliation of the masculine and the feminine, and held an aversion for dishonesty or artificiality. The distinctive female literary tradition she hoped to see developed was the marriage of the masculine and the feminine, and the loss of overtly conscious or self-aware writing.

George Eliot's position is complex and encompasses psychological aspects of the period, as well as social and cultural ones. Her society operated under such shifting and conflicting ideals concerning women, their role, and their occupations, that there is not much to conjecture about why her very opinion on femininity is difficult to interpret fully. Eliot experienced much controversy and witnessed the dissension surrounding other women around her, so the near-impossibility of clearly defining her disposition towards womanly attributes in literature seems an inevitable consequence of the cultural circumstances she worked in.

Her reaction to *Aurora Leigh* in the "Belles Lettres" illustrates this intricacy; she applauds Mrs. Browning as "the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex; which superadds to masculine vigour, breadth, and culture, feminine subtlety of perception, feminine quickness of sensibility, and feminine tenderness" (qtd. in Peterson 36). The favorable review, in which Eliot essentially commends

*Aurora Leigh* as “the best of both gendered worlds” (LaPorte, “‘Aurora Leigh’” 847) corroborates Peterson’s aforementioned statement that Eliot’s aim for the new literary tradition was the combination of masculine and feminine values. According to LaPorte, “in her criticism, Eliot appropriates for the poetess . . . the cultural weight of a supposedly male tradition without jettisoning the figure as one of tenderness, domesticity, and sentimentality. In her opinion, *Aurora Leigh* ‘superadds’ one discourse to another” (“Poetess” 161). Eliot believed adamantly that the occupation of the poetess, and therefore of the female literary tradition, should be, as stated by LaPorte, “both intellectually challenging and unapologetically feminine” (“Poetess” 161).

As suggested by many of the provided quotations, and by Eliot’s assertions that perfect writing merges manly and womanly ideals, there are many differences between men’s and women’s literary traditions, which makes the combination of such values in literature particularly powerful. Eliot emphasizes these differences and extols the feminine, declaring that women’s “finest novels . . . have a precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience” (Eliot 91). In “Women in France,” she asserts the same idea, stating,

. . . in art and literature, which imply the action of the entire being, in which every fibre of the nature is engaged, in which every peculiar modification of the individual makes itself felt, woman has something specific to contribute. Under every imaginable social condition, she will necessarily have a class of sensations and emotions—the maternal ones—which must remain unknown to man; and the fact of her comparative physical weakness . . . introduces a distinctively feminine condition into the wondrous chemistry of the affections and sentiments, which inevitably gives rise to distinctive forms and combinations (Eliot 91).

Browning, too, experienced this contrast between men's and women's writing, as shown by the manner in which she deals with love in *Aurora Leigh*. Kathleen Blake argues the existence of a discrepancy between the work of the female and the male artist, referring to *Aurora Leigh* and poet laureate William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*; "[Browning] does ultimately diverge from him, but not by repudiating a Romantic aesthetic. Rather the divergence comes when it is a woman instead of a man who seeks to become a Romantic poet. This is the case in *Aurora Leigh*, which, by comparison with *The Prelude*, reveals how a Wordsworthian project turns out very differently because of sexual difference" (389-90). Blake cites the way each author treats the concept and conflicts of love, claiming that the "critical difference" between the two is the way Wordsworth negotiates the clash between man and nature, while Browning's epic poem discovers "its final faith in poetry by tracing the plot of the separation and ultimate marriage of lovers" (391). The final conviction of Browning's work indeed is the union of love and art, while in men's poetry, specifically Wordsworth's, love is important, yet lacking the significance that women writers like Browning gave it.

As detailed in Chapter III of this thesis, Browning discerned the familiar pain that persists in culture even today; an impossibility of reconciliation between love and career, marriage and writing, submission and expression. This problem, according to Blake, was "never even a matter of question in *The Prelude*" (397), for male poets did not, and still do not, seem to trouble themselves with the idea. Men's characters also failed to experience the stress and difficulties that female characters (and their real-life counterparts) suffered when it came to balancing love and art, as men of the period perceived no hindrances to having a wife and working at the same time. So while some female authors abjured love and traditionally feminine ideals because of the perception that womanliness made success unfeasible, male writers, then, did not distinguish a

conflict. The question of viability of love against desires for creative achievement finds purchase, of course, in *Aurora Leigh*. Blake makes plain the truth that men did not harbor the same anxiety, because “up until the end of the poem Aurora finds love conflicting with her art. What romantic doctrine makes a means to poetic development in the case of men, social convention makes an alternative in the case of women” (395). Aurora maintains, like many women did, “that love affects the sexes differently, that a woman in love is more likely than a man to sacrifice other purposes” (Blake 395). These concepts associate, naturally, with the idea of feminine literary traditions differing from that of the established male heritage. After all, “while the male poet, like Wordsworth, builds his work upon a double bonding with those he loves and with nature, the female poet, like Aurora Leigh, thinks of work and love as mutually exclusive alternatives, with either choice threatening to silence her” (Blake 397). The discrepancy that constrained women to shun aspects of their femininity, (including the desire to marry) was multifaceted, and Barbara Gelpi cites Browning’s use of metaphors as an indicator of this hesitation to behave in a “womanly” manner. However, “because [Aurora’s] womanhood can never be completely denied or forgotten, the metaphors also blend and blur masculinity and feminine” (Gelpi 41). This argument parallels Eliot’s affirmation of the necessity of a “distinctively feminine condition,” one that cannot and should not be avoided even when one fears, as Blake states, the threat of silence. Concealing one’s womanhood not only creates an artificiality that Eliot disdains; for, according to Gelpi, Aurora’s “sense of herself as masculine, which she feels she needs in order to think seriously of herself as a poet, becomes the sense also which eats into the flesh of her self-esteem” (42). The belief that she must disguise femininity and suppress her womanhood to write must be resolved by the end of the epic poem, for the alternative is the wearing down of one’s dignity and self-regard, and this resolution Browning

makes quite clear through Aurora's feelings of contentment when she accepts womanhood, and the way she becomes "empowered by her acknowledgment of her love for her cousin Romney" (Zonana 241). Aurora's love for Romney, and her embrace of femininity, does not prevent her from creating art, nor does it make her the perfect, Victorian wife and mother; she "is not a transcendent, disembodied, heavenly figure . . . nor is she a Victorian Angel in the House . . . Instead, she is an immanent, embodied, earthly woman" (Zonana 244), a poetess in control of her work. And Browning's use of feminine attributes such as her interest in love or "sensibility," did not terminate her employment of the opposite sort of qualities; Mellor reports that Browning affirmed the manly traits of "revolutionary energy, of imagination, of that life-force in nature and the mind which Percy Shelley called 'Power'" (qtd. in Stone 52).

In this distinction, Eliot and Browning are similar in that they argue against the shrouding of femininity; Eliot cites the dangers of insincerity and bad writing, while Browning warns of the detriment to self-esteem, and the inability to create true art and find independence. It is intriguing indeed that Eliot concealed her identity as a woman through her insistent use of a pseudonym to avoid prejudice and yield real criticism, yet prized the qualities of femininity (such as "affections and sentiments") in literature regardless of whether or not she could reveal her own name. Importantly, Eliot valued these qualities in the writing of men, too.

Conversely, despite the arguments above, some believed that there were not many striking differences in the work of men and women and that the perception of a great disparity was due only to male insecurity for women writers' popularity. Mary Hiatt's study of Nineteenth-Century writing styles, which references Hawthorne's complaint of "domestic scribblers," is concerned with "structural and lexical aspects of written style, such as sentence length and complexity, the frequency of parallelism and rhetorical devices of repetition, and the use of

similes and adverbs, as well of certain adjectives” (qtd. in McCandless 670). Hiatt randomly selected passages from men's and women's writing and used software to compare them, discovering that when patterns of expression were balanced, there was not much dissimilarity between the styles and techniques of men and women; “if nineteenth-century women writers ‘scribbled,’ so, too, did their male counterparts” (McCandless 670). As reports Amy Thomas McCandless, “it is difficult to justify the exclusion of domestic novelists from the literary canon on the basis of style, Hiatt concludes, since the canon includes nineteenth-century men with essentially identical patterns of expression” (670). Though this argument does not change the fact that in other terms, women authors still sought to create a distinct literary tradition, it does indeed support the fact that the notion of masculine or feminine qualities may not have a strong foundation in reality.

An intriguing note on variations of male and female texts is Peterson’s comment on poetic forms; she writes, “as Eliot recognized, the burden of Barrett Browning's novel-epic was to demonstrate that the woman poet need not limit herself solely to feminine forms (the sonnet, Sapphic lament, or domestic idyl), but could perform within the career pattern of the great English male poets - from pastoral to georgic to epic” (Peterson 40). Some may have considered the sonnet, the lament, and the idyl forms to be feminine perhaps because of their often sentimental or romantic nature. But the near-absurdity of labeling poetic forms in such a way provokes the eventual realization within women writers that there is no such thing as masculine or feminine writing. The question of why society would consider an agricultural georgic manly, or a pastoral depicting idealized life masculine, is a strange query indeed. Yet many poets subscribed to these almost mystifying beliefs before discovering in time that such claims have no substantial footing. However, at this time, female authors were only beginning to formulate such

ideas, starting with notions that they could, too, utilize “masculine” qualities as well as those belonging to womanhood. Peterson comments on Eliot’s position within this discourse, referring to *A Spanish Tragedy* (1868); “Eliot has formulated her heroine's predicament . . . a clash of poetic modes: the sentimental tradition of the English poetess versus the masculine tradition of classical epic. Tragedy occurs when the masculine eradicates the feminine” (Peterson 38). This quotation emphasizes again Eliot’s cognizance of such divisions, as well as her determination in furthering the cause of duality, for disaster ensues when the masculine suppresses the feminine. Her choice to incite calamity in *A Spanish Tragedy* when femininity falls beneath masculinity relates to her scorn for insincerity, the sort of artificiality that caused the female authors of whom she complains in “Silly Novels” to exaggerate manliness at the expense of womanhood’s sensibilities and affections.

Even in poetic structures, society applied gender-based standards and traditions, and Browning’s use of the “masculine” epic, which necessitated a heroine who would seek “to achieve great ends” (Peterson 40), shows her dedication to surpassing norms and traditional values in order to make her own new, feminine literary voice. Marjorie Stone argues that because Browning’s “primary medium is poetry and because she was familiar with classical models, her formal practices are . . . closely associated with ‘masculine Romanticism’” (Stone 52). Browning seems to have utilized both male and female forms throughout her career, blending the two in her own manner to work within the tradition of the new female literary domain.

Moreover, as evidence of Eliot’s acceptance of femininity and the desire for a poetess and literary tradition, LaPorte cites her use of “domestic and sentimental . . . terms that the Victorians associated with femininity” (“Poetess” 162) rather than masculine heroic terms in her 1867 lyric “Oh may I Join the Choir Invisible.” Eliot’s phrases in this hymn, such as “enkindle



generous ardour, feed pure love,” “sweet purity,” and “meeting harmonies” (qtd. in LaPorte, “Poetess” 162-3) prove that she attempted to write within a new, feminine literary tradition, a tradition that combines the “masculine” desire for immortality and “poetic salvation” with femininity. Her acceptance of these sentimental terms demonstrates again her desire to applaud the values of the realm of the female in literature, and Peterson, referencing Eliot’s *A Spanish Tragedy*, suggests that a “heroine in the poetess tradition . . . expresses her belief in the redemptive power of a woman’s love” (38). Citing not only the work of Eliot but also of women such as Barrett Browning, Emily Bronte, Felicia Hemans, and Christina Rossetti, LaPorte points to this mix of both masculine power and femininity in the Nineteenth-Century literary and poetess tradition; “English poetesses often turned to Biblical subjects for their verses because the Bible afforded them examples of female prophetic authority, an authority made particularly compelling by the quasi-divine moral perspective credited to many women in nineteenth-century culture” (“Poetess” 166). LaPorte presents here the existence of the poetess tradition: a voice wielding authority and power even while maintaining womanhood. These references to powerful Biblical women in the poetical tradition are similar in some ways to the image of Angel in the House, who Patmore likens to a domestic goddess of a lesser nature, because like the angel, they are not viewed necessarily as inferior to the prophets, apostles, and disciples in the scriptures. Victorian men placed faith in and investigated the seeming differences between men and women, but as John Ruskin implies, did not consider them menial. The two ideals are different, of course, in that Biblical figures are strong and powerful in their own right, as well as the fact that they are not always mothers, nor goddesses. And Patmore’s angel, unlike Biblical women, belongs to and is subject to the authority of the husband and caters to his moral and practical needs, whether that means lending a gentle, virtuous presence to the home, running the household, or imparting

honest values to children. Despite the fact that this almost divine status was a limitation for women to a specific, motherly role in many ways, poetesses like the aforementioned women considered these Biblical figures, and their responsibilities, a kind of power.

Isobel Hurst also writes of the women's literary tradition, which combined supposedly male and female attributes; she notes Margaret Fuller's similarities with Browning and Eliot, claiming that the three women saw both George Sand and Germaine de Staël's heroine Corinne as a "potent inspiration" (450). Hurst reports, "in seeking models for a life which might allow her to exercise the intelligence and energy her contemporaries characterized as masculine, and yet to establish her distinctively feminine genius, Fuller looked to the same European examples as did Elizabeth Barrett and . . . George Eliot" (450). Hurst makes clear the divide that Nineteenth-Century society placed between masculine "intelligence and energy" and the "distinctively feminine genius." This distinction is of the same category that determined much of life in the period, from acceptable behaviors and occupations for women to suppositions about the content of male-oriented literature. The fact that this culture, and even the female writers themselves, subscribed such values to men or women is incredibly interesting, as it is uncommon today to designate a text as masculine simply because of Browning's "vigor, breadth, and culture" or, as Anne Mozley noted in her 1848 review of *Jane Eyre* in *Christian Remembrancer*; "masculine power, breath, and shrewdness" (qtd. in Brennan 99). A quotation from Chapter I of this thesis comes to mind; Edwin Percy Whipple of the *North American Review* ascribes the "clarity, decisiveness, profanity, brutality, heat, passion, animal appetite, and slang" (C. Levine 280) of *Jane Eyre* to a male writer and vision. The urge to label, then, was a strong impulse throughout the minds of Nineteenth-Century critics.

But, as LaPorte extrapolates, “whether women's poetry . . . actually tends to show ‘subtlety of perception,’ ‘quickness of sensibility,’ and ‘tenderness’ is irrelevant: these traits were expected of it, just as men's poetry was expected to show ‘vigor, breadth, and culture.’ Such expectations governed Victorian poetical categories whether or not they were realized by poets themselves” (“Poetess” 160). In fact, according to this argument, finding such a combination of specific, conjectured traits in men's poetry was unlikely; these presumptions about literature were not always realistic, and yet “Victorian models for women’s and men’s verse . . . conditioned the production and reception of poetry even while they seemed to be (at least for the hapless men) nowhere instantiated in nineteenth century practice” (“Poetess” 161).

Even women who would not necessarily benefit from these expected values of men and women in literature endured them with presumed compliance. George Eliot astutely recognized the advantages of concealing her womanhood behind a pseudonym to receive unbiased criticism, yet still drew lines between literary standards, sometimes seemingly generalizing and reprimanding feminine literature for its pretenses, and at other times celebrating Browning for uniting such principles successfully, “reclaiming . . . her female identity” (Zonana 249), and representing femininity as both a strength and a difference.

The entire argument is complex, too elaborate and complicated to make blanket statements, but it is clear that ideals of masculinity and femininity tunneled deeply beneath Nineteenth-Century society as well as the literary traditions of men and women. At this time, however, the women writers of the Nineteenth-Century were in many ways only beginning to separate from this understanding of the distinction between men and women, and they are the reason we can now see beyond this dichotomy. Eliot and Bronte understood, nevertheless, the importance of including both “genders” in their work for the greatest success. Though they

named certain strains of intelligence as male, or sensibility as female, they prized each and sought in their work to prove that a woman or man could possess the two proficiently, that “any writer, ‘male or female,’ can occupy either subject position” (Stone 52). One could argue that their certainty in the duality indicates, even more, their eventual understanding that such variances between the work of men and women do not exist, or at least do not exist as prominently as the period’s culture believed.

This idea of the imagined values of men and women’s influence on writing may find conformation in the theories of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, in which she essentially argues that gender is an act, a performance, determined by societal and cultural constructions or structures of power. Butler’s theory can be connected to the Nineteenth-Century’s creation of women’s identity for she deconstructs the idea of commonality, just as there did not exist an exclusive role for women, nor did every woman universally agree upon cultural standards. One can also link the theory to the concepts that women have embodied qualities that men do not possess, or vice versa. As Butler offers, “the view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts . . . what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures” (Butler xv). Victorian society, for example, emphasized the idea that women could depict affections, while men could illustrate intellect and power. Because of these speculations and the workings of cultural fashioning, society “internalized” and made real these imagined ideals of gender in relation to art.

Either way, the inclusion of the two styles in the writing of some women indicates the reality that values cannot, in actual fact, be strictly male or female, for there are no *true* manly or

womanly traits in literature, only diverse classifications of values that scholars, writers, and society can speculate about, and then categorize as having a masculine or feminine ambience. Some female authors, because of the state of their environment, believed in the existence of these codes, and tried to mold a new literary voice and tradition that took into account both sides; importantly, “by the nineteenth century there was a rich and clearly defined female subculture, a community in which women read and consciously related to each other’s work” (Gilbert *xii*). The desire to create a unique and serious feminine written heritage originates from the combined factors and subsequent anxieties of the "Woman Question," criticism, and prejudice.

## 6. Conclusions

This argument is inherently complex, with so many conflicting ideas and sentiments that one should not make broad statements, especially considering the intricacies of human opinion as well as the intrinsic differences between the genres of the essay, the novel, and the epic poem. However, it is clear that the environment of Nineteenth-Century society and its ensuing debates generated interesting developments in the work and choices of female authors. The combination of the climate created by the “Woman Question” with the complicated nature of criticism of female literature and the harmful prejudices against women writers brought about general anxieties surrounding writing and the awareness, within the class of female authors, of their distinct and perhaps even unprecedented position. This knowledge, realized concurrently with the clashing perspectives of supporters and opponents of women’s work in the public eye, caused these authors to seek recognition of their abilities, and they did so in three ways.

Women writers employed pseudonyms or anonymity to maintain privacy and avoid attacks on character, to write “unfeminine” or progressive texts without feeling the need to justify them, and to prevent audiences from allowing prejudices and stereotypes to influence their opinion of a text authored by a woman. Nevertheless, there was the possibility that when an author disclosed her identity as a woman to the public, after the unbiased reception of her text, the divulgence attested to the capabilities of the female writer, a potential that could rival the competence of male authors.

Secondly, they constructed fictional female characters to represent the artist and author in literature. These manifestations of the real concerns and ideas about the identity of a woman

novelist or poet in the public domain helped authors to delve into their thoughts and doubts, put onto paper the triumphant image of a successful artist, and negotiate the conflicting realms of masculinity and femininity. The Nineteenth-Century's cultural turmoil concerning qualities associated with men and women compelled certain female authors to deride femininity and the possibility of love, deeming such values frivolous, unintelligent, or impossible of being realized concurrently with writing. Some, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, attempted in their literature to illustrate this internal debate and the eventual, necessary resolution; that one must reconcile marriage and career, or romance and ambition. Both she and Charlotte Bronte end their works with their heroines secure in the knowledge that they can possess both love and literary prowess, and that being a woman writer should not warrant the abandonment of femininity in order to be taken seriously, or *feel* serious, when writing.

Lastly, female authors sought to generate a new, female literary tradition, and bring together the so-called "masculine" and "feminine" disciplines in their texts. Importantly, through the convergence of these supposedly manly or womanly qualities, these writers were beginning the first steps of understanding that both men and women can utilize any quality, from sensibility and intuition to vigor and passion, regardless of gender. Though Eliot and Browning ascribed truth to these values, their belief that a woman could possess masculine traits upon the page suggests that they had begun to appreciate the truth.

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