DEMONSTRATIONS OF POWER IN THE MARRIAGE

PLOTS OF DANIEL DERONDA, THE EUSTACE DIAMONDS, AND PHOEBE JUNIOR

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by
Carol M. Lane
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ABSTRACT

DEMONSTRATIONS OF POWER IN THE MARRIAGE PLOTS OF DANIEL DERONDA, THE EUSTACE DIAMONDS, AND PHOEBE JUNIOR

by

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Master of Arts in English

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This thesis will explore and analyze expressions of power in the courtship and marriage plots of three Victorian novels: George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda (1876), Anthony Trollope’s The Eustace Diamonds (1873), and Margaret Oliphant’s Phoebe Junior (1876). Analysis will focus on the ways the female protagonists attempt to find and maintain positions of power within the context of a patriarchal society and Victorian cultural expectations. Each chapter will reveal the resistance and interplay of power relations with a sustained power eventually resulting in psychological, economic and political mastery. Because the Victorian novel is both a molder and mirror of Victorian life, all three authors express ambivalence about the contradictory nature of the role of women. Each presents cultural stereotypes of femininity and subverts them in their
narratives, but ultimately falls short of providing viable alternatives. Despite the challenges, Eliot, Trollope and Oliphant suggest the options and their consequences, reflecting the growing tension in Victorian England to establish female agency in a male-dominated society. The final chapter reveals Oliphant’s heroine as a model of femininity that achieves a political mastery denied to most Victorian women, when she practices self-mastery as a prerequisite to mastering others. Her quality of self-possession successfully earns her the respect and influence to bridge social and religious barriers.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The issue of power and the need to challenge established authority have been with us for centuries. From an historical perspective, the two most influential political events of the eighteenth century, the American Revolution in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789, marked the collapse of two kinds of powerful empires: in England, the colonial empire, and in France, the hereditary monarchies which had ruled in Europe since the Middle Ages. These events precipitated a gradual attack on political mastery and with that the erosion of the traditional basis of political life in the West. Though Jean-Jacques Rousseau may have influenced both of these revolutions, he further attempted to resolve an issue that divided Western philosophers for centuries: the nature of man. He essentially rejected both definitions of human nature (essentially selfish vs. essentially good) and created a new one: men are by nature isolated and solitary (Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* 7). He argued that, because they are isolated, men are basically selfish, though naturally good, needing an agreement, a social obligation between one another to preserve each one’s freedom. Suddenly, there was a challenge to established authority in the name of the “rights of man” (25). These rights were demanded as a prerequisite to human progress.

When Jean-Jacques Rousseau first espoused in 1762 that “man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains,” he did so at a time when established traditions were
already under question in every area. He earned a reputation as an advocate of revolution based on his earlier work, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men*, in 1735. Recognizing that a despot is in power “only so long as he remains the strongest,” he concludes that the inevitable remedy must be insurrection (qtd. in Rousseau 13). When legitimate power changes to arbitrary tyranny, government in any form operates by the ‘law of the strongest’ and man’s nature is defrauded. This is the premise on which Rousseau built his classic text in Western political thought: *The Social Contract* (1762).

The famous opening of Book 1 gives a summary of his political teaching. Rousseau says: “*L’homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers.*” Translated from the French text, this can be read two different ways. The first, “Man *was* born free,” is pessimistic in that it implies there were no civil societies, no laws, no obligations binding the first men, but there has been an irreversible evolution *from* the natural freedom of the state of nature *to* the slavery of civilized society. The second reading, “Man *is* born free,” is revolutionary and optimistic because it implies that all humans now living are naturally free and no longer need to bear the “chains” of control “everywhere” (11). Unfortunately, the trend of history is toward corruption and despotism. Man *is* born free, and everywhere he is *in chains*. These chains can be transformed into legitimate institutions in a society granting power to some and enslavement to others. Is it possible for human beings to establish a better form of government on earth, or are all changes of regime simply transfers of power from one group to another? In other words, is all government merely the “advantage of the stronger” so that every form of government benefits some individuals or groups at the expense of the others? Rousseau tried to answer his own
question by creating a theory that would preserve liberty. Instead, his theory served only to justify the existence of government.

This theory impacts the sexes in two ways: in its recognition of the physical superiority of the male and in its definition and recognition of the individual. Carole Pateman argues convincingly for the contradictory nature of this word *individual*. With the exception of Hobbes, she argues, contract theorists insist that men alone have the attributes of free and equal ‘individuals’ (41). They also insist that man’s right over woman has a natural basis—men are physically superior; women are thus born into subjection. Interestingly enough, the ‘individuals’ spoken of in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* are all of the same sex, though this detail often gets overlooked; attention thus focuses on the masculine individual. Women are not included in the phrase “free and equal individuals.” Instead, she argues, they are considered natural subjects by virtue of the man’s physical strength and his ability to rule (53). Political right originates in sex-right or conjugal right. Men can conquer and master women because they are physically stronger. They can usurp women politically because of their recognized status as individual property owners.

With this backdrop, I will be addressing three Victorian novels: George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Anthony Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* (1873), and Margaret Oliphant’s *Phoebe Junior* (1876). Each novel demonstrates expressions of power within the courtship/marriage plot in the context of a patriarchal society that found its roots in Rousseau’s theory of social contract. Though Rousseau’s theory was a political fiction, its influence in nineteenth-century cultural attitudes was extensive, permeating every area of Victorian life and literature. My analysis will include women
who present very different strategies to achieve the power they desire and deserve. These novels are representative, though not exhaustive, of some of the options and strategies available to Victorian women. Some of the protagonists become powerful through their goodness and compliance with cultural norms; others become powerful through stepping outside of convention in order to creatively use their limited resources to exert influence, wield control, gain autonomy, and in some cases, usurp power. They all reveal that with the proper resources, talent, ingenuity, and courage, the scales can indeed be tipped in their favor, resulting in a shift of power, even if this power is temporary. Each novel exposes the psychological and social forces—the reality—which stereotypes deny.

From Social to Sexual Contract

The original social contract developed by Rousseau is only half the story. According to Carole Pateman, this contract is more of a sexual-social pact, and the sexual portion of the contract is what has been repressed (1). The story of what she calls the sexual contract is the story of the development of a political right that men exercise over women that is patriarchal in nature, creating a new social order for the nineteenth century. The original intention of the social contract was to promote and protect individual freedom; however, the sexual contract promotes and protects the subjection of women. And this chasm between freedom and subjection rests in the fact that women were not granted equal individual status with men. How does a woman earn the right to be called an individual?

According to Rousseau, an individual is an owner of property. And from this assumption, John Locke declares his now-famous maxim that “every Man has a Property
in his own Person” (qtd. in Pateman 13). Everyone owns the property in their capacities and attributes, so more than physical protection is at stake. A necessity of such protection is that each individual in a social contract must recognize the others as property owners just like himself. This mutual recognition as both persons and property owners ensures equality. If one party is in an inferior position there can be no mutual exchange. Instead, the inferior one will appear to the other individual(s) as mere (potential) property, not as an owner of property. Since exchange is at the heart of contract, we must then realize that regarding husbands and wives, the property that is exchanged in marriage is not simply a matter of possessions, but property in the person. This concept is elaborated more fully in my analysis of The Eustace Diamonds where the women become objects—circulated and possessed—without regard for their personhood.

This holds serious implications for the marriage contract. Why are women, who lack the status of civil individuals unable to make other contracts, allowed, or better yet required, to enter into the marriage contract? Perhaps it is because it is only in the marriage contract that women gain access to any privileges at all. Though women only reach the status of servants, as natural (not free) subjects, they do gain physical protection. Carole Pateman argues that the assumption made by most contract theorists is that a woman will always agree to subordinate herself as a wife, because she recognizes the man’s superior strength; this alone grants him the superiority of his sex (51). But the fact remains that any human being who must always contract to subordinate himself or herself to another who enjoys natural superiority, cannot stand as a free equal. The obvious concern here is with the status of conjugal or sex-right. Since all absolute power in civil society is recognized as illegitimate, why is sex-right not seen as an example of
political power? Two of the protagonists in our discussion, Gwendolen Harleth and Lizzie Eustace, demonstrate that their ‘feminine nature’ and ‘surface value’ characterize them as *natural* subjects, without political power or respect. Thus, marriage is their only hope for an elevated and permanent standing within their society.

Pateman reminds us that it is only the affirmation of natural equality that can prevent the original social contract from becoming an explicit slave contract. If women are property and not persons, then what agreement is voluntary? Men, by virtue of their physical strength, are able to coerce a woman into a contract built on self-interest alone. However, any coercion invalidates the ‘agreement’ and thus it is no contract at all. Usually there is a caveat included, an incentive available in conditions of inequality to ensure that the ‘weaker’ parties enter into contracts (62). In marriage contracts, the husband gains property in the person of his wife and subsequently gains political right through conjugal right. In exchange, he provides protection for his wife. Margaret Oliphant surprisingly reverses this pattern. Her heroine, Phoebe Beecham, demonstrates superiority as subject and thus earns political power in lieu of her husband.

Contract theory was intended to secure and enhance individual freedom, but instead it robs freedom from those excluded from ‘individual’ status. As Pateman asserts, this ‘fictional theory’ may work for traders, entrepreneurs, and capitalists, but not for children, servants, indentured wives, and slaves (62). And it is largely responsible for the then-ongoing debate in slavery ideology disputing the humanity of the slave. Slave-masters find themselves in somewhat of a precarious position. A slave is legally the property of a master; he ceases to be a person and becomes a thing, a commodity that can be bought and sold like any other piece of property. According to Orlando Patterson, a
slave is a ‘socially dead person’ forced into a secular excommunication so that he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order (4, 10). Slavery originated not in contract but in war and conquest. Though captured as a human, he is turned into property and forced to labor. In this way, slave-masters are forced to both deny and affirm the slave’s status as both property and person.

Subjugation of categories of human beings is a human invention. Gerder Lerner argues that slavery came about because an example of subordination and ‘otherness’ had already developed (qtd. in Pateman 65). Women were already subordinated to the men of their social groups. They easily became socially marginal if they were deprived of protection or no longer needed for sexual use. Men learned that differences can be used to separate and divide one group of humans from another. Soon a system developed to make this separation into permanent slavery. In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Lerner emphasizes something that is not often mentioned: the first slaves were women (65). Women, like slaves, are marked as powerless, but in different ways. Because contract is central to free labor, women face this same paradox as slaves in social contract theory: they both possess and lack the capacities required for contract for, like slaves, their personhood is both denied and affirmed.

In addition to contract theory, scientists, psychologists, philosophers and early feminists in the nineteenth century proposed a myriad of conflicting and overlapping theories regarding the development of social relationships between men and women. These were rooted in everything from Darwin’s evolutionary theory and Herbert Spencer’s patriarchal theory to those originating from Marxism, kinship studies (Lévi-Strauss), and the Biblical story of creation. Each one contributed to the pervasive
Victorian ideology of male dominance and female subjection. Any attempt to change the mindset of society would require a change in the marriage laws, however. This requires overcoming the greatest social obstacle inherent in the marriage contract and the prevailing issue at that time: *couverter.*¹ Practically speaking, what is lost in coverture is more than simply the legal identity of the woman; coverture makes genuine harmony and sympathy nearly impossible. It promotes competition, rather than cooperation, contention instead of compassion.

**Separate Spheres**

In addition to coverture, the other dominant attitude regarding marriage was the doctrine of *separate spheres.* The separation between the male public sphere and the female private sphere took on new meaning in the nineteenth century because the distance between these two worlds grew. Women at home were expected to be specialists in emotional and spiritual life, protecting tradition and providing a stable refuge from the harsh, impersonal public sphere that men entered in increasing numbers. Coventry Patmore’s poem “Angel in the House” (1854-56) led to a philosophy of Victorian domesticity that idealized womanhood; this was central to the theory about woman’s separate domestic sphere. The poem describes the courtship and marriage of a young couple, with the ‘angelic woman’ introduced as purer than Eve. Erna Hellerstein suggests that this ‘angel’ is more than just innocent; she exercises power in secret and subtle ways

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¹ Though it was a ‘legal fiction’ used mainly to identify households, coverture presents a contradiction that begins in the marriage ceremony itself. The wife loses all rights as a single woman; her existence is completely absorbed into her husband’s. Early nineteenth-century feminist, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon details the implications of coverture in Erna Hellerstein’s edition of *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France, and the United States* (164). Mary Shanley also notes that in marriage, the husband and wife legally become “one person;” that ‘one’ was the husband (8).
Though the phrase became more famous than the poem, the dream of the “angel in the house” gave stability to a world that was changing rapidly. Unfortunately, the private sphere did not provide either refuge or domestic ideal for many women. Instead, it held contradictions and conflicts for women, such as deciding whether and whom to marry, how to live with husbands and children, and even negotiating friendships with her own sex. And this private sphere where women apparently ruled gradually lost its autonomy as professionals like doctors and educators became the authorities on subjects such as childbirth, sexuality, and raising children.

The decision about marrying took on additional pressure as the patterns and the meaning of marriage began to change. Though eighty-eight percent of the women in England were married by the end of the century, they soon experienced a life less than blissful (121). The realities of coping with a household and husband required more than they could supply in terms of strength, skill and creativity (121). Marriage vows reflecting the ideal of romantic love promoted the image of a partnership and mutual trust, yet a woman had none of the legal and economic rights that her husband had. Despite this, many women did find personal happiness in marriage, though documents reveal that those who did have loving partnerships lived in families where the “separate spheres overlapped” (123). With marriage came the right and duty of sexual access. Victorian sexual ideology was riddled with conflicting advice. Bestselling manuals warned that insanity, disease, and even death could result from either sexual excess or abstinence (124). Consequently, the issue of how women experienced their own sexuality has been controversial. And women were not in control of their reproductive lives either.
The most common form of birth control was coitus interruptus, which depends entirely on the male’s cooperation, and that can be performed without female consent.

Additionally, though love was the expressed motivation, most marriages were financially based. Jenni Calder asserts that there was little to suggest either a positive or personal attitude towards marriage; it was simply assumed to be a part of one’s progress in the world (32). Motives other than money, property and the acceptance of convention did not seem relevant. Even though most Victorians would say they did not approve of mercenary marriages, it was simply the way life operated (32). Love or sexual attraction really had very little to do with the choice of a partner. Young women were told they would ‘grow to love’ their husbands after marriage, and the way courtship was conducted, there was very little opportunity to know one’s future spouse very well before marriage. Men chose wives for their value, whether it was economic, moral or decorative or, and if very lucky, all three (33). Suddenly, women emerge as marketable. If they chose to submit rather than rebel, their husbands would value their ‘goods’ and not go out at night looking for pleasure elsewhere. The question of value was always present with the unspoken assumption that a woman was only loved in the proportion that she made those around her happy. Her virtue became a saleable commodity, with her love, good works and submission as goods to be bartered. This theme will be more fully explored in the discussion of Lucy Morris, Trollope’s virtuous ‘angel of the house’ model of femininity. In The Eustace Diamonds, she trades her autonomy for a safe and secure place as Frank’s possession.

By the nineteenth century, one thing was certain: prevailing cultural attitudes created much ambivalence toward women. For those who were married or soon to be,
women’s magazines and manuals gave advice on everything from budgeting to child-rearing. A woman needed the skills and strength of many professionals yet was considered an inferior in every way. Common knowledge, reinforced by manuals and scientific studies, reminded her that she lacked the physical, intellectual and moral strength of a man. She was also considered a risk if she lost her sexual innocence; in fact, she was usually seen as void of sexual desire. Instead, her role as the ‘angel’ was to help a man control his sexual impulses. As Susan Gorsky aptly describes, societal attitudes created a “cocoon” in which to live, but unlike the butterfly, the woman was expected to remain forever a chrysalis (27). The ideal of the ‘angel’ was a myth, but like all myths, it drew its strength from reality and made its way into literature.

Because the sexual contract is an unequal one, marriage reflects an imbalance of power, a struggle for mastery, a source for ongoing contention in the relationship. But the nature of power is that it can change hands frequently, creating a competitive rather than companionate marriage. This is why John Stuart Mill argued so vehemently in his *Subjection of Women* (1869) for respect for women as equal partners, calling the family “a school of despotism, where male children learn that simply by virtue of being born male they are the superiors of one half of the human race” (Mill 86-7). Mill calls the nature of women “artificial,” the result of forced repression. As the issue of power filtered its way into literature, novelists faced the difficult challenge to establish a separate sphere of “authentic” female values and relations because of this historical and cultural conditioning.
The Victorian Novel

The politics of the New Woman in the late nineteenth century produced a powerful desire not only to reform marriage law and practices but to give greater play of possibilities within marriage plots. It was the novel that provided the structure to explore a woman’s plight between a conventional marriage and the radical possibility that she could become an independent equal. However, most Victorian novels contain distortion, contradiction, and evasion when it comes to being critical of cultural values. The Victorian novel, then, became both mirror and molder of the changing ideals of femininity and consequently power relations. Richard Barickman contends that courtship and marriage plots presented issues of identity, freedom and power as they actually confronted most Victorian women of the period (7). Courtship and marriage was the primary place to highlight the social disorder and the sexual relationship as the central arena for crisis and change. Two tensions were continually present: the pressure to reaffirm the Victorian ideal of womanhood and the pressure to reveal the conflicts that result from the oppression inherent in the patriarchal system. The ambivalence that came as a result of this tension only complicated and intensified the narrators’ involvement with the novels’ female characters. And female characters were often reduced to two expressions of power: either brute force, or a quiet endurance that compromises and survives, tackling tyranny through perseverance and compassion. More often than not, women exercised power from within their assigned female roles rather than by usurping male roles. The female characters in Daniel Deronda, The Eustace Diamonds, and Phoebe Junior demonstrate varied responses to the imbalance of power inherent in their relationships, ranging from rebellion to resignation. Early on, Gwendolen Harleth, in
Daniel Deronda, rebels, then eventually succumbs to her husband’s tyranny. Lizzie Eustace, in *The Eustace Diamonds*, begins to manipulate men for attention and advancement, then ultimately settles for an unhappy marriage. Lucy Morris, in *The Eustace Diamonds*, experiences an early taste of economic agency as an independent wage earner, then sacrifices personal fulfillment for security in a traditional marriage. Lucinda Roanoke, in *The Eustace Diamonds*, tries to ‘fit’ into a prescribed feminine role but it leads her to madness; she eventually trades her reputation for autonomy. All these women try to reconcile their ideal with reality, resulting in a broken will, a crushed spirit, and unfulfilled desires.

Additionally, because some of the most creative and powerful Victorian women (e.g., Florence Nightingale, George Eliot) were influenced by traditional ideas of feminine roles, novelists felt greater pressure to conform to the stereotypes. Barickman addresses this in *Corrupt Relations*, noting that it was enough of an achievement for a novelist to simply expose the stereotypes without feeling a need to find a real alternative (12). At the same time, authorial rebellion was also concealed within the novels. Most were caught in a bind to reveal the ways a patriarchal system destroys individuals and their relations but not able to present a good solution to this problem. Thus, concealed rebellion coexists with the limited options available to women. Most novels inevitably pull back from openly acknowledging the systemic crisis that confronted Victorian sexual relations. As a result, the reader is left with a mixture of what Barickman calls “wishful thinking, the perception that women do exercise considerable power covertly, and a desire to change some of the more destructive features of male power” in Victorian culture (16). Caught in the web of cultural contradictions, the novelist tried
simultaneously to suppress and explore, assert and negate the Victorian patriarchal value
system by presenting plots with variations on sexual stereotypes, suggesting repressed
conflicts, and presenting contradictory behavior. More than anything, this ambivalence
toward women, a primary feature, suggested a somewhat fearful fascination with
women’s power.

Despite cultural limitations, however, powerless women were a recognizable
force both in Victorian life and the novel as representative of that life. They continually
sought ways to demonstrate autonomy and agency within the private and public sphere. It
is true that some forfeited power due to their own impropriety or ignorance about the way
power works in society. This was the case with Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda*. But many
Victorian women successfully wielded a measure of power by taking control of the
family budget, by sheer force of their personality, or by manipulative charm. Others used
anger, meanness, or even sickness; in fact, invalid or hysterical women leverage a great
deal of power. Some even gained power by refusing marital sex so that they could
exercise control over their own fertility, a convention as old as the *Lysistrata* by
Aristophanes. And finally, some women simply found their power in adultery,
experiencing an empowerment that sexual liberation and rebellion brings. Victorian
women were limited, but not without options.

As we look ahead to the marriage plots of *Daniel Deronda*, *Phoebe Junior*,
and *The Eustace Diamonds*, there are conflicts within each narrative that naturally define
the sexes as complementary but unequal partners. Joseph Boone argues in *Tradition
Counter Tradition* that the partners seem linked in a lifelong power struggle that often
masquerades as pleasure (142). The unsettling contradictions in each marriage plot create
a challenge for the novelist. Margaret Oliphant calls this struggle for mastery a “battle which must always be going forward—a balance of power only to be decided by single combat, deadly and uncompromising, where the combatants, so far from being guided by the old punctilios of the duello, make no secret of their ferocity” (qtd. in Boone 143). The opposition inherent in the sexual contract and that underlies the sentimental ‘code of conjugal love’ demands constant negotiation, primarily for the heroines. Franco Moretti contends that narratives of the English Bildungsroman genre, which trace the growth and development of a young protagonist and one in which Phoebe Junior has been identified, often end with heroines not really finding what they seek; instead, they either meet with tragedy or compromise (Moretti 218). The battle they wage is a natural consequence of the social constrictions of sexual roles and power within traditional wedlock. The reality is that most do not succeed simply because they are nineteenth-century women. One protagonist, Oliphant’s heroine, presents a different model of femininity and thus a different expression of power. She is both self-possessed and equipped with male qualities that allow her to succeed in a man’s world. This does not mean it is the only way to maintain power in society. It does remind us, however, that Victorian women did not speak with a single voice or with a continuous discourse.

Since the days of the American and French Revolutions, there continues to be an ongoing political struggle for more than power—mastery—between the sexes, a condition of prevailing dominance or achievement that defines one as being the controller or ruler. The women we meet in these novels were not all rebels, nor were they revolutionaries—that is, unless one becomes a revolutionary out of the belief that she is entitled to freedom rather than subjection. They all speak with different, but not
exhaustive, voices representing the Victorian woman. But they share one thing in common: they have hopes and aspirations beyond the conventional; they want to achieve things for themselves and decide to find a way to do it.

Keeping this difference in mind, our discussion begins with George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. In this novel, power moves from private to public spheres as desperation increases, culminating in a final battle of psychological mastery. Michel Foucault’s theory of power and how it works in society will provide the groundwork for understanding the instability of power between Gwendolen and her husband. Discussion of judicial precedent involving emotional cruelty will shed light on not only the social but the legal limitations for Victorian women. And the phenomenon of the ‘Girl of the Period,’ an outgrowth of the New Woman ideal, suggests a model for Eliot’s strong-willed heroine. Following this analysis, we will look at Anthony Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* with a focus on the dehumanizing effects of objectification. If marriage is a market and women are commodities, then men are the consumers who set the terms of their value. The work of Henry Maine, Friedrich Engels, and Claude Lévi-Strauss will give insight into the social evolution that moves from one of kinship and status to one of contract. Kathy Psomiades and Gayle Rubin will offer contemporary analyses of the pervasive system of capitalism that reduces women to objects that are exchanged and possessed by the men who determine their value. Finally, Margaret Oliphant’s *Phoebe Junior* provides a fresh and hopeful perspective of woman as agent, not victim, but one that is only possible through personal character development. The philosophy of the Stoics lends insight into the cultivation of self-mastery as a prerequisite for the kind of self-possession that will lead to political mastery in society.
CHAPTER II

DOMAINS OF POWER

IN GEORGE ELIOT’S

DANIEL DERONDA

When a woman’s will is as strong as a man’s, half her strength must be concealment.
—George Eliot, Daniel Deronda

_Daniel Deronda_ (1876), George Eliot’s final novel, is the result of twenty years of investigation into the lives of women. While all her novels explore issues of female expectation and oppression, this novel in particular contains a broader political scope. Extending over a period of two years, this story includes multiple settings that reflect a more relevant contemporary world. It also includes multiple forms of power that create a psychological tension between the inner and outer worlds of her protagonist, Gwendolen Harleth. The author created her most rebellious and egoistic heroine to show how serious the problem of women’s needs and duties were in the nineteenth century. According to Bonnie Zimmerman, the prevailing reason for this is because in 1876 George Eliot feared that too many women were making poor choices and needed a clear example of where such unbridled desire might lead (197). This ‘unbridled desire’ might lead to something more than equality. It might lead to a race for supremacy in some areas; most Victorian women are unequal contenders in this race.
In the nineteenth century, propriety set limits on almost every kind of behavior. Expression of power also had its limits; but powerless Victorian women often resorted to desperate measures in order to gain some control over their choices in life. In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot legitimizes covert expressions in the private domain, but discredits any overt attempt for women to resist power from male authorities or regain their own power. Eliot creates a character full of ambition, and then severely limits this character’s ability to achieve power, reflective of the author’s own ambivalence toward female autonomy. This ambivalence, stemming from an ideology of domestic feminism, inevitably leads her to an incomplete ending of the story as well. Before we consider the question, *Where is the proper sphere for rebellion?* it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the issues at stake by reviewing the basic plot progression.

Briefly, this novel contains two main plots, united by the character of Daniel Deronda. For the scope of this thesis, however, the focus of discussion will center primarily on Gwendolen Harleth. This young woman discovers, while gambling in a casino in Germany, that her family is in financial ruin. She returns home to live in a new neighborhood with her mother and sisters, and meets a wealthy baron, Henleigh Grandcourt, who proposes marriage soon after their first encounter. Initially, she encourages his advances, but when she discovers that he has several children with a former mistress, she resists him. Gwendolen despises marriage and attempts to avoid the only other respectable option for a woman to find financial security (becoming a governess) by pursuing a career in singing or acting, but she discovers she has no talent. In order to save herself and her family from poverty, she agrees to marry the wealthy Grandcourt, but only because she believes she can manipulate him and maintain her
freedom to do whatever she likes. She is eventually crushed by her tyrannical husband and consumed with guilt for disinheriting Grandcourt’s children by her marriage to him. As her powerlessness increases, her feelings of dread and terror also increase until a boating accident in Italy takes the life of her husband. This only compounds Gwendolen’s guilt, since she repeatedly wished for his death. Hoping to find a future with Deronda, she finds only comfort and counsel to become a better person, resulting in a resignation—“I will live”—to help others in order to alleviate her own suffering (Eliot 707).

This analysis will begin with a discussion of Michel Foucault’s theory of how power works in society to better understand the general principles we find in Daniel Deronda. Two specific aspects of Foucault’s theory will be addressed throughout the novel: the plurality of resistances and the interplay of power relations. I will argue that the plurality of resistances begins in the private sphere but moves to the public sphere as Gwendolen grows increasingly desperate and Grandcourt grows increasingly determined to master her. Early metaphors of horse-riding and archery suggest the beginning ‘interplay of power’ that continues throughout this narrative. Power changes hands frequently before marriage but ultimately resides permanently with Grandcourt once they marry. I will also address how George Eliot sets up an opposition to the Victorian mindset with the kind of heroine she creates as well as the place she locates her. As Eliot divides power in Daniel Deronda between separate spheres, private and public, she mirrors developments in British legal precedent, but this separation becomes problematic for Gwendolen in establishing her own legitimacy. When subtle attempts fail, the protagonist is left with fewer options and resorts to more inappropriate and drastic measures. Grandcourt himself represents traditional Victorian patriarchal and
imperialistic ideology. His use of psychological cruelty to control Gwendolen will ultimately serve as his demise. It is therefore the scope of this chapter to address the imbalance of power between Gwendolen Harleth and her husband Henleigh Grandcourt, showing the different expressions of female resistance to and desire for power in both private and public domains. I will concentrate on how Eliot uses this split to highlight the limits for women’s agency and power in the Victorian era.

A Theory of Power

Foucault’s ideas of how power works in society and its access to sex provide a necessary context for our understanding of how power functions in Daniel Deronda. In the first volume of The History of Sexuality, Foucault undermines the traditional notion of progress in relation to human sexuality by arguing that as long as we believe that juridical power is the only (or even the main) type of power, we will fail to acknowledge the importance of other forms of control and policing. His alternative construction of power requires a reevaluation of the nature of social control. One aspect of his theory of power relations is that they are both local and unstable—the “multiplicity of force relations, which by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power” (92-93). Thus, for Foucault, power is both positive and negative. This is a process that involves continual struggle and confrontations; it transforms, strengthens, and at times even reverses the present power structure. Present are coexisting processes of destruction and production that are mutually reliant. Referred to as a “moving substrate” Foucault asserts that this is a natural progression among relationships that are unequal. The force relations that define power are constantly active, changing, and can—but do not necessarily—take
the form of structured hierarchical domination. It is permanent, repetitious, and self-reproducing. Since power is not an entity that one can acquire but rather one that exists in its exercise, power relations are everywhere and cannot be avoided (94). Much of what he has to say about power stresses the systematic nature of power and its presence in multiple social relations. He goes on to argue that power comes from below. Rather than viewing power from an assumed position at the center or the top, analysis begins with the ascending movement of power, starting from the “infinitesimal mechanisms” which each person or group has as his/her/its own history. Finally, Foucault’s account of power is unique in that he argues that wherever there is power, there is resistance, in fact a plurality of resistances that continually produce “cleavages in a society that shift about” (95). Foucault fails to give any reasons for resistance, but he does suggest that if resistance succeeded, we would simply be changing one identity for another and in this process create new oppressions. Eliot’s novel foregrounds both this continual shift in power as well as the multiple forms of resistance that work for and against Gwendolen and Grandcourt in their relationship.

Despite feminist criticism of Foucault, if power operates, as Foucault argues, “from many points, sharing a continual interplay of nonegalitarian relations,” it becomes no surprise, then, to see power changing hands frequently throughout this novel.

2 Feminists that question the usefulness of Foucault’s theories include Nancy Hartsock, Jana Sawicki and Kate Soper. These women are concerned primarily with the issue of containment, Foucault’s own position as a dominant subject within patriarchy, and the lack of alternate vision in his work. In her article, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?” Hartsock differentiates between theories of power about women (subjugation) and theories of power for women. Soper finds Foucault’s work self-contradictory, undermining hope for women, offering exposure without transformation; Sawicki attributes Foucault’s lack of possibilities to his desire to maintain openness. Their concerns urge the reader to acknowledge that power should be contested since different theories rest on different assumptions.
Foucault’s principle operates regularly in the characters of Gwendolen and Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda*. And when either one exerts power over the other, the reader can count on resistance, either to defend or usurp this power entirely. This is simply the law of how power works. In *Daniel Deronda*, power gains momentum with each successful act, word, or look of defiance. It feeds on resistance and will find a way to rear its head when it faces the threat of displacement.

In terms of power, it is important to keep in mind the similar, yet oppositional natures of both Gwendolen and Grandcourt. It is no coincidence that Eliot reverses the initials of Gwendolen Harleth and her tyrannical husband, Grandcourt. Susan Weisser, in “Gwendolen’s Hidden Wound,” calls them mirror images of each other: bored, commanding, dependent on admiration, and narcissistic (5). This narrative shows us they also both have obsessions with using each other as they like (Eliot 526). As passionless as she is, he is born to “torture” her with a masculine and perverse version of her own selfhood. This is consistent with Foucault’s suggestion that the sexually pathological adult was one of the nineteenth century’s strategies for defining sexuality and also establishing discourses of power (Weisser 5). According to Dorothea Barrett, both view the other as commodities, one for ornamental value, the other for monetary value; and both maintain a silence about the conflict within their relationship (163). Gwendolen confesses, “He is proud but so am I. We shall match each other” (273). Gwendolen’s singing/acting and Grandcourt’s decision to marry are simultaneous expressions of a will to exert power over others and performances. While Grandcourt’s life is one of “refined negations,” described more by what he is not—ridiculous or disagreeable—than what he is, Gwendolen, too, is a woman of contrariness, preferring to do what is unlikely rather
than what is expected (96). She confesses to her cousin Rex, “I am not fond of what is likely; it is always dull. I do what is unlikely” (59). Both thrive on opposition; they derive enjoyment by having a worthy opponent in each other. They may both see this negativity as a challenge; Gwendolen’s unbroken spirit appeals to Grandcourt’s sense of power, while Grandcourt’s attraction to Gwendolen presents an opportunity for her to reject him. In many ways, Grandcourt is simply the full completion of Gwendolen. Because they are so much alike, power between them is a continual tug of war characterized by an ongoing exchange of assertion and resistance. And both lives demonstrate an unnatural pleasure in deception, conquest, opposition, and loss.

George Eliot’s Oppositional Set-up

George Eliot sets the stage for power encounters in *Daniel Deronda* when she creates a heroine who crosses more boundaries more often than any of her other heroines. Without apology, she defies the Victorian standard of a romantic heroine more than the women in her previous novels. George Eliot proudly asserts in her *Letters* that Gwendolen’s story does not take place in the past but is a story of English Life, “of our own day” (*Letters* 193). She is not buried in obscurity but is meant to be seen everywhere. Thus, Eliot’s creation of Gwendolen was very much influenced by the controversy over the “new woman” in the 1860s and 70s. She took women very seriously; their ‘lot’ was a starting point for her own social analysis and she felt strongly that their fates both reflect and influence the ills of the world.

Soon, this ‘new woman’ developed a name that displaced the ‘angel of the house’ model of womanhood. It began with the 1868 edition of *The Saturday Review,*
when Eliza Lynn Linton published the first in a series of articles, called the ‘Girl of the Period.’ Zimmerman addresses how Linton created a new mindset by introducing a new woman, raising broader concerns of Victorian feminists, including the mercenary marriage and redundant women (200). In these articles, Linton mourns the loss of the ‘angel of the house’ creature so familiar and so valued in Victorian culture. She announces a new mythical creature who is taking her place, someone whose sole aim in life is to have fun and live in luxury. This girl manifests new and dangerous characteristics: selfishness instead of selflessness; worship of Mammon instead of Christian morality; fierce independence, unsentimentality, and sexual freedom (201). Worst of all, the ‘Girl of the Period’ was no longer a truly feminine woman; she had thrown away traditional female virtues of submission, dependency, and maternal love in return for self-assertion and power. Women wanted their power and influence to be acknowledged, even if their practical value declined. Eliot’s comment that Gwendolen’s looks are “really worth some expense . . . her assets ought to bring in at least a few thousand a year on the open market” is a prime example (Eliot 30). Again, Zimmerman suggests that from this conflict of declining material power and rising ideological expectations, then, emerges the rise of feminism, and the ‘Girl of the Period’ becomes the “less socially conscious, more ornamental sister” of the feminist (Zimmerman 203).

Viewed initially as a threat, this ‘sister’ eventually embodies the characters of Becky Sharp (Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*) and Lizzie Eustace (*The Eustace Diamonds*). Gwendolen Harleth, then, is George Eliot’s response to the ‘Girl of the Period.’ Eliot uses the recent phenomenon of the ‘Girl of the Period’ controversy to create a narrative that her readers will recognize. And Gwendolen fits the description
well—she is more than unpleasant, she is dangerous. For Gwendolen, equality is not enough; her drive for dominance demands superiority for her sex and culminates unfortunately in a fateful struggle for mastery with Grandcourt. The narrator cries out, “Ah, piteous equality in the need to dominate!” but Gwendolen has really been outsmarted right from the start (Eliot 265). When her family falls into bankruptcy she gives a response that sounds strangely equal in egoism to that of a man: “Her griefs were feminine; but to her as a woman they were not the less hard to bear, and she felt an equal right to the Promethean tone” (244). Gwendolen, then, represents an emerging female role for the nineteenth-century woman, and Eliot creates this character to shake women out of their ingrown, idle lives and expand to a world outside their own.

After creating her own ‘Girl of the Period,’ Eliot then allows this potentially powerful and dangerous woman character to move in a world that contradicts the ideal qualities in a woman by constructing her as changeable and unknowable. According to Eileen Sypher, Gwendolen is a fragmented character with many contradictions, preventing anyone, including the reader, from “fixing” Gwendolen into the traditional Victorian ideology (509). Eliot deliberately makes it difficult to contain this character, let alone control her. Sypher calls her an enigma, a “shadowy signifier waiting to be a character, a subject” in a new social system (517). Both Deronda and Grandcourt are frustrated because they both want to know her so they can manage and control her. Eliot denies this knowledge to both men, making her a character who resists her subjectivity and maintains a sense of self-possession (Eliot 119). As Sypher notes, she is not available for “insertion into any of their ideologies except in their own fantasies” (517). She is “governed by many shadowy powers” and experiences both astonishment and terror in
the face of “subjection to a possible self, a self not to be absolutely predicted about” (Eliot 516, 121). As a subject, she is inactive, since she is unable to fulfill any of her real desires. And she demonstrates insecurity about Deronda’s perception of her in the casino. But this may be due to the fact that Deronda is not yet sure what to make of her. He questions, “Was she beautiful or not beautiful? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams?” (Eliot 3). It is interesting that she becomes more attractive to him as she becomes more representative of domestic femininity. Under the scrutiny and gaze of both men, this woman remains a mystery, and Eliot seems to want it that way.

As Eliot allows Gwendolen to move about in the world, she then places her in the most unlikely, unexpected place for a woman in the nineteenth century—a casino. Gwendolen enjoys a brief assertion of power over men in this opening gambling scene. It is here Eliot makes her strongest representation of sexual equality in the story. Eileen Sypher notes that when Eliot begins her story with this scene, the roulette table as the centerpiece, she presents an image of social upheaval (516). Critical theorist Walter Benjamin goes so far to suggest that the power of gambling extends beyond social practice; it is also a metaphor for industrial capitalism (Benjamin 179). In Benjamin’s terms, gambling is the “great social leveler”—the wheel juxtaposes and equalizes everyone standing around it, every class, men and women (179). And Eliot places Gwendolen right in the middle, with the accompanying hazy atmosphere that gives an aura of uncertainty. This is the one activity through which Gwendolen can secure money for herself other than pawning things. It is a great diversion for bored and economically trapped women as well as those who long to be in a higher class. With this unique opportunity before her, Gwendolen enters the public sphere, not a popular setting for an
English woman in the mid-nineteenth century. Suddenly, options are available to her, those usually reserved for men (Sypher 516). Eliot reflects her own bias of gambling as an activity reserved for men by describing Gwendolen in traditionally masculine terms: “unaffected [with an] air of firm choice; [concealing an] inward exultation; mood of defiance; enraged resistance; controlled muscles” (Eliot 6-7). Gambling offers Gwendolen the potential freedom of a man. She even goes a step further, making a very independent move economically when she pawns the necklace that her father gave her (14). Unfortunately, Daniel undermines her effort, asserting his own political power when he purchases the necklace and then returns it to her secretly. The casino scene, then, is strategic as it highlights this upheaval of the nineteenth-century ideology where identities are secure, class and gender positions fixed, and the economy stable. In this “world within a world” all boundaries and distinctions are in chaos. It parallels Gwendolen’s greatest gambling loss in her marriage to Grandcourt: first she wins, then she loses, then she resolves to lose “strikingly” (Eliot 7). Eliot gives the ‘Girl of the Period’ a real name, Gwendolen, and allows her to behave unbecomingly in a disreputable place, to set the stage for the plurality of resistances and the interchange of power that will follow.

Covert Power: The Private Domain

There are early examples of assertive power in the private domain with two metaphors that involve sporting events. The first is when Gwendolen joins the Archery Club. Archery gives Gwendolen an activity where she is on equal footing with men. She enjoys nothing more than “taking aim and hitting” her target (28). At first the target is her cousin Rex; her desire is to pierce him before he knows what hit him and declare him her
slave (82). With Grandcourt, the narrator tells us she “can’t help hitting” to prove that he was not to have the slightest power over her (92). For Gwendolen, bows and arrows are the weapons that disguise power with grace. Archery symbolizes focused power that also serves another purpose: to weaken as it penetrates.

A second sporting metaphor, horse-riding, alludes to another private exchange of power between Grandcourt and Gwendolen. One person mounts and holds the reins and the other must be mounted. At the time of their engagement, the two characters ride together, the horses as symbols of “command and luxury” (267). But Gwendolen’s riding style shifts depending on who she is riding with. With her cousin Rex she rides in confidence, even leaving him behind. Her second ride with Grandcourt is more tentative. Instead of riding ahead, she checks her horse and decides not to leap, bringing both Grandcourt and his horse to a halt. F.B. Pinion comments on this notable shift for Gwendolen. He argues that it indicates a changed level of security regarding her control of both men (207). Once Grandcourt and Gwendolen are officially engaged, her style then shifts again. She resolves to act courageously “as if she were on horseback,” and they take a gallop together (Eliot 267). So the horse-riding style seems to shift as each character’s mental state changes. When Gwendolen rides aggressively, she proves she can be any match for any man. Grandcourt, in turn, determines to hold his wife “with bit and bridle” until she reaches the point where she knows for certain that he will have “mastery over her as long as he lives” (597). Both Gwendolen and Grandcourt use these sporting events, archery and horse-riding, to demonstrate to the other each one’s desire to be in control. Eliot’s rhetorical strategy masks subversion in a socially acceptable way.
However, it is silence that separates and eventually disintegrates their relationship. This form of resistance to power raises the larger cultural concern about forms of marital conflict that are not necessarily physical. Silence is a rhetorical device that, according to Andrew Dowling, is a sign of “concealed truth” (322). For the nineteenth century, silence represented a new category of oppression that can be traced on the mind as well as the body. It was often a strong indicator of another form of abuse, one that could not be contested with physical evidence, but just as damaging. George Eliot uses marital conflict and this rhetorical device of silence to both satisfy a reading public that is enamored with marital breakdown and foreground a cultural shift towards marriages that appear to be healthy, while actually being internally pathological. As interest in nonphysical forms of cruelty grew, it began to change first the social atmosphere and then the legal system.

Until the late eighteenth century, physical brutality was the only criterion used in legal discourse to establish matrimonial cruelty. Then the law finally changed with the landmark case of *Evans v. Evans* (1790). In this case, Lord Stowell ruled that “petulance of manners, rudeness of language” may threaten bodily harm; however, both parties were still encouraged to “suffer in silence” as a solution (qtd. in Dowling 325). Robert Griswold informs us that the term “mental feelings” entered legal discourse for the first time through this case, but it could only be expressed through words that threatened “bodily injury” as in an American case of 1841 when a husband threatened his wife with an axe saying, “I swear by God I will put the knife through your head, if they hang me for it” (Griswold 130). Because mental/emotional cruelty lacked legitimacy, then, under this law Grandcourt remains above the law as a respected member of society; Gwendolen
finds no sympathy without physical evidence of any mistreatment. And neither one will disclose the truth of their relationship.

The change in emphasis from “bodily injury” to a more general “injury to health” occurred in 1870 in the case of *Kelly v. Kelly*, which established for the first time that it was not necessary to prove physical violence in order to determine cruelty. The case of *Kelly v. Kelly* demonstrated how a husband’s authority during the mid-Victorian period was becoming more and more dependent on a particular kind of verbal behavior. Mr. Kelly’s behavior toward his wife broke social codes that existed between masters and servants. He “deposed” his wife from her position as mistress of his house and subjected her to a life that, in Mrs. Kelly’s terms, “was little better than an imprisonment” (qtd. in Dowling 326). Though this outraged the court at the time, Mr. Kelly’s neglect and “mere tyranny” were not substantial enough to be included in the legal category of cruelty, and this would remain the rule until 1893. Finally, in the case of *Walmesley v. Walmesley*, behavior that was “solely of neglect, coldness, and insults” could satisfy the legal definition of cruelty (qtd. in Dowling 327). Wifely submission was not questioned in the case of *Kelly v. Kelly*, but it was something to be obtained by the husband’s “conduct and bearing”—a behavior that would, in the end, allow the husband to “secure and retain in his wife the only submission worth having, that which is willingly and cheerfully rendered” (327). Still, acquiring submission was the goal.

The central importance of *Kelly v. Kelly* was that it recognized the more general term of “injury to health,” a ruling that positioned the husband’s authority in a new psychological domain. It also raised the issue of a marital authority that now had to be negotiated rather than simply enforced. Thus, the concept of marital breakdown started
to shift as previously private aspects of personal relationships now came under public scrutiny. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, British courts viewed ‘injury to health’ as a physical fact; mental cruelty was acknowledged, but it had to have physical symptoms (327). But in *Kelly v. Kelly*, the courts finally acknowledged the existence of psychological as well as physical assault. With this landmark decision, Gwendolen has some legal precedent, but cultural bias stands against her.

Despite the 1857 Divorce Act, there remained a clear double standard concerning cruelty within the marriage. Divorce was granted to a husband for his wife’s adultery alone, but to a wife only if her husband’s adultery was aggravated by incest, bigamy, rape in the case of his relationship with the other woman, or by sodomy, bestiality, desertion for two years, or cruelty in the case of his relationship with his wife (326). This law, which essentially sanctioned a husband’s adultery, remained intact until 1923. Cruelty was one of the most ambiguous offenses used by wives (in conjunction with adultery) to obtain a divorce. And it put great pressure on existing and physically defined concepts of cruelty and ‘reasonable’ behavior.

The purpose of the Divorce Court was to maintain the health of the home by dissolving decaying marriages. But who determines marital health? George Eliot’s comment in 1848 on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* refers to this “diabolical law which chains a man soul and body to a putrefying carcase” (qtd. in *Letters* 268). Still, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 and the Divorce Court it created were at least a partial response to a greater interest in the “health” of the family. Andrew Dowling asserts that as more and more broken marriages came before the courts, the law began to recognize that a marriage could become “terminally ill” through actions that did not have physical
signs (328). The idea of ‘incompatibility’ was generally dismissed in the mid-Victorian legal arena. Even though in Dickens’ *Hard Times* (1854) this word is specifically used to explain the disintegration of Mr. Bounderby’s and Louisa Gradgrind’s marriage, Ford points out that the Oxford English Dictionary identifies 1875 as the date when “incompatibility” first came to be used within a legal context (Dickens, *Hard Times* 183).

In the 1853 case of *Hudson v. Hudson*, it was emphasized that the Divorce Court “has neither the power nor the inclination to deal with the mere unhappiness of ill-assorted marriages” (Dowling 331). Incompatibility plays an important role, however, in that it draws attention to the significance of communication in marriage.

The greatest social significance of the Divorce Court was probably that it generated more and more interest in and an audience for stories of marital breakdown. Divorce became cheaper and more accessible to the middle class, and as the number of divorces increased after 1857, the daily relationships between husband and wife moved from the private sphere to a very public one (328). In fact, on the tenth anniversary of the Divorce Court (1867), the London *Times* emphasized the historical significance of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act by claiming that it had “precipitated one of the greatest social revolutions of our time” (*Times* 11). During the 1850s there had been only four divorce acts annually on average, but Roderick Phillips notes that from 1858, the number rose to between two and three hundred a year (Phillips 421). So, while under the guise of protecting marital health, it only created another escape route, and that primarily for the husband.

Gwendolen and Grandcourt share a “well-bred silence” that indicates concealed repression and concealed psychological trauma (Eliot 589). Gwendolen sees
her husband as the one to whom she “sold her truthfulness and sense of justice, so that he held them throttled into silence” (587). The effect of this silence on Grandcourt is one of “a blank uncertainty”—his will cannot be countered (376). Unfortunately, Gwendolen’s silence is a forced submission rather than a demonstration of power. For it is Grandcourt who has the upper hand in both using and imposing silence as a form of psychological cruelty. Eliot uses gothic imagery here in portraying Grandcourt as a tyrannical figure, showing his despotism when she refers to his control over other people’s language. He places all women in a position of silence, his words having the “power of thumbscrews and the cold touch of the rack” for Gwendolen (597). He delights in a verbal power that can impose silence on his victims. This kind of imposed silence brings an unspeakable hidden pain for Gwendolen.

Silence may also suggest sexual cruelty in that legally it means assent. Gwendolen’s enforced silence demands that she submit to her husband’s caresses without objection, a physical as well as verbal smothering. There may very well be a link between Grandcourt’s command for silence and sexual tyranny. This is suggested by Grandcourt’s “using pincers on that white creature” (518). In fact, Gwendolen’s silence may actually enhance Grandcourt’s sexual gratification. After meeting with Lush, he provokes her into a silent rage that is “not disagreeable” to him and “it followed that he turned her chin and kissed her” while she kept her eyelids down (526). Often sexual tyranny is signified by the unspoken acts that linger just below the narrative of silence. Gwendolen’s refusal to wear Grandcourt’s diamonds may show a reluctance to accept a sexual identity, that of a woman who has prostituted herself in marriage. Her jewels are like verbal weapons in her husband’s hands—“poisoned gems” (315). Later, Grandcourt insists that these jewels rest
against her flesh, which may also suggest his own hold on her body. The only time
Gwendolen is able to use silence to her advantage is when her husband is crying out for
help as he is drowning (611). Andrew Dowling suggests that behind this silence is
murder, or at least manslaughter (335). Here there is symbolic value in Gwendolen’s
silence; later her “fits of shrieking” that last throughout the day and into the night may be
a reaction against the silence to which she has been constantly subjected. The reader may
wonder if she is trying to enclose herself with sound instead of silence in order to appease
her guilt over her own silence toward her husband’s drowning. Regardless, Gwendolen
no longer needs to ‘suffer in silence’ and George Eliot’s readers have temporarily
satisfied their appetite for the sordid details of a bad marriage.

Silence is usually seen as a form of resistance, but withholding knowledge is a
form of power. This ‘will to knowledge’ creates anxiety for Grandcourt as knowing gives
him license to manage Gwendolen more effectively. In this way, silence builds a wall
where the one person who should have access is denied entrance. Grandcourt is relegated
to an outside position where he can only make observations since Gwendolen alone can
grant this permission. Both Daniel and Grandcourt are left in the dark much of the time.
The narrator resorts to calling Gwendolen’s silence “vague and yet mastering,” defining
the lack of forthrightness as “unmapped country” within her (Eliot 257). Withholding
information, denied access, is a powerful tool that both Gwendolen and Henleigh use to
control each other.

While silence creates emotional separation, sexual withdrawal is the physical
’silence’ that women can use against a husband’s tyranny. Silence may represent
acquiescence and submission, but sexual withdrawal is a more powerful means of force
against male domination of the body. Susan Weisser offers an interesting assessment of Gwendolen Harleth as a heroine who protects herself from the vulnerability of either loving too much or not being loved in return by not desiring. The logic of her emotional life is that when men use female sexual desire to advance their own power over women, the safest strategy is to empty oneself entirely of desire. The narrator in Daniel Deronda reminds us that “the life of passion had begun negatively in [Gwendolen]” (Eliot 71). Gwendolen is very frank in her desire not for love, but for power and for doing what she likes. In fact, like Daniel’s mother, she seems lacking in this “natural talent” to give and receive love (Eliot 585). She erroneously views marriage as an escape in which power is free of work and duty. She is not repressing her desire as a means of self-sacrifice, or even looking for equality of desire. In her judgment, all relationships are unreliable, untrustworthy, and short-lived. Because she has lived life on the surface, the deeper qualities that promote passion have been severely underdeveloped. Thus, she has no desire for any man or anyone, but herself.

Gwendolen’s sexual withdrawal is rooted in fear. She fears matrimony because it is a state of servitude. She also possesses a “physical repulsion to being directly made love to” (Eliot 61). Perhaps what she really fears is a loss of self-control. Despite her delight in being adored, then, her “fierce maidenhood” comes from her feeling that lovemaking is not so much an overture to the person as a kind of aggression against the will (Eliot 61). Jerome Thale argues that she seeks a virginity of the will, in which the will is as inviolable as the body (130). Her fear of love is strong indication of this feeling about the will. But her fear of death, being alone, and her powerful desire for independence are also indicators of the things the will cannot handle. Though Gwendolen
does not make the connection between fear of sexuality and her desire for dominance, the two are very closely related.

While Gwendolen’s lack of passion and sexual repulsion are an aberration, Grandcourt is all too ready to torture her, by enacting a “masculine” perverse, version of her own selfhood (5). Grandcourt’s sexual power is dangerous because it does not originate from a desire for Gwendolen. He uses his domination over her body as a way to punish her in some way. And she continually fears being alone with him; her worst nightmare is that Grandcourt simply will not leave her alone. Weisser argues that Gwendolen’s desire must be ‘murdered’ if she is to live (6). Whether or not Gwendolen suppresses a desire in order to survive or whether this desire never developed in the first place, the terms of sexual relations between them seem to rest on this principle: either wound or be wounded, ride or be ridden, master or be mastered by another (6). Her sexual withdrawal is a form of self-preservation more than anything.

Without sexual passion, Gwendolen manifests only an artificial femininity; she becomes an androgynous figure. K.M. Newton suggests that early in childhood when Gwendolen strangles the canary, she may be symbolically strangling the woman inside herself, one unfeminine act that leads her to subsequent acts, serving to “unsex” her in her pursuit of mastery (173). Dorothea Barrett argues that her strong, assertive, combative qualities are both her faults and her virtues (Barrett 171). She exhibits male aspirations—hiding the knife under her pillow, wishing to penetrate before she is penetrated, and her desire to protect and provide for her family. Had she been a man of similar intelligence, something could have been done, other than marital prostitution and murder, to redeem her family and give her life direction.
Silence and sexual withdrawal are tools both characters use against each other at different times. They are signs of the tyrannical power of Grandcourt and the murderous impulses that linger in Gwendolen’s mind. But verbal and physical withdrawal gives her only limited agency at best. In a hostile but silent atmosphere, Grandcourt’s will cannot be countered, Gwendolen’s frustration cannot be spoken, and belief in her own power of dominating eventually begins to dissolve.

Overt Power: the Public Domain

As Gwendolen’s marriage deteriorates and her fear of Grandcourt mounts, she must resort to more public expressions of resistance. One of the options available to her is a deliberate escape from reason during a moment of crisis. This maneuver is significant in that performed madness gives Gwendolen two things: a way to understand her situation and a new way she can exert limited but focused power over Grandcourt. Marlene Tromp offers insight into Gwendolen’s use of ‘feigned madness,’ as a tactic that allows her a broader range of tolerated behavior” and helps her to gain some limited autonomy (458). It blurs the boundaries between terror and social propriety, between the real and sensational. If she can dismantle the barrier between the two worlds of reality and fantasy, she can identify Grandcourt’s behavior as cruel (462). In the rational world, she finds no reason to leave Grandcourt. Both the legal system and Victorian code of propriety limit her freedom. She admits that she can find no “plea to justify a plaint . . . nothing she could allege against him in judicious or judicial ears” (Eliot 526, 531). Here she finds it impossible to name in ‘real’ speech the accusations she has against him, because it does not fit with the historical framework she has been given. So she resorts to
the only other means available: sensation, a play of madness (Tromp 462). Her private shield of silence and sexual withdrawal no longer have influence. Now she must move her stage to the public arena for it to have effect.

The first occasion on which Gwendolen strategically performs this ‘madness’ is at a social gathering. She deliberately wears the necklace Daniel gave her despite Grandcourt’s request that she wear his diamonds, more fitting with her position as his wife. She not only defies Grandcourt’s request, but wraps the cheaper necklace around her wrist in a clumsy way that was “necessarily conspicuous” (Eliot 392). When she and Grandcourt return to their room later that evening, Grandcourt tells her to “Oblige me in future by not showing whims like a mad woman in a play” (395). Although Gwendolen gives a successful performance of madness, it leaves her chastised. And her husband warns her “not to make a spectacle of herself” (396). And yet, Gwendolen’s behavior continues to take the form of a spectacle.

Her final performance of madness frees her from Grandcourt for good. Grandcourt forces Gwendolen to sail with him, in an effort to keep her from seeing Daniel as well as prevent Gwendolen any solitude or freedom. Eliot frames this scene as a (mel)drama: “the scene was as good as a theatrical representation for all beholders” (Eliot 508). Soon after Gwendolen wishes that Grandcourt were dead she begins to behave ‘madly again’: “I think we shall go on always, like the Flying Dutchman” (Eliot 599). When Grandcourt soon gets knocked overboard by the sail and drowns, Gwendolen sincerely believes that it is her “sensational” wish for his death that kills him. As she wrestles with the implication of this death wish for Grandcourt, she cannot even speak to Daniel about it. Finally, she concedes and confesses, “I saw my wish outside me” (Eliot
39

611). Eliot both sensationalizes and naturalizes this passage, allowing Gwendolen to perform the most radical act she can against her husband: murder.

This spontaneous eruption of madness foreshadows a pattern that will become Gwendolen’s primary way of challenging his authority. However, despite Gwendolen’s drastic measures, it still fails to restrict Grandcourt’s abusive control of her. Both legal and social conventions make Grandcourt’s behavior possible, keeping Gwendolen always in terror. And since Grandcourt behaves with utmost propriety, refusing to elevate his voice, granting Gwendolen all that she could expect financially—essentially fusing gentility and violence—Gwendolen has no other “natural formula” to calm her fear (453). Again, Marlene Tromp attacks the weak social boundaries that insist on making marital violence/abuse a working-class issue. In the debates surrounding the Divorce Act of 1857, Parliament made it clear their belief that middle-and upper-class men could not be a danger to their wives. Because of this historical context, reason and violence are incompatible terms. Gwendolen, then, is left no reasonable path to follow. She is tyrannized by the ways Grandcourt manipulates and threatens her, holding over her the threat of physical violence. This keeps her in a terrified state of forced submission, unless of course she challenges this through a seemingly mad and sensational performance. And Eliot is ambiguous on this point, calling madness “a strange mixture of acting and reality” (307). Are they performances, actual hysteria, or both?

Nervous illness (i.e., hysteria) without organic causes was a social phenomena growing in awareness but still largely denied by the medical world. Victorian attitudes supported the need for concrete evidence to validate a physical illness. Eliot’s inclusion of this as one of Gwendolen’s strategies suggests her familiarity with this trend. Athena
Vrettos addresses this interesting phenomenon. According to Vrettos’ research, neuroses fell into that middle category between the mind and body because symptoms were vague and changeable, yet physical (553). At that time there was no separation between neurology and psychology. Conflicting definitions of neurosis and the changing status of the body resulted in conflicting theories in classifying, diagnosing and treating those with nervous disorders. The ability of nervous disease to disrupt the normal categories of experience suggests that Victorian thinking about nervous disease reflected broader crises of class, gender, and even religion in Victorian culture, since physicians explored the spiritual connections between physical and mental conditions. In this novel, Eliot portrays Gwendolen’s nerves more as a series of visionary experiences with occasional violent outbursts that reflect an emotional instability. At times it even appears that she suffers from such personal disorder that she loses a sense of personal identity. With each occurrence, her fears have corresponding acts of physical enclosure, such as her obsession with the secret painted panel in her mother’s house that she keeps locked and hides the key in her bedroom. When her sister steals the key, Gwendolen snaps at her and says, “How dare you open things which were meant to be shut up!” (Eliot 56). And it is this sense that some things are meant to be shut up in her psyche that will continue to haunt her throughout the text.

While hysteria was very real for the woman who believed she was ill, it became a ‘catchall’ for the doctor who pretended to know the cause. Michel Foucault, in his *Madness and Civilization*, credits Charles le Pois and Thomas Willis with finally dispelling the myth of uterine displacement as a primary cause (143). Hysteria, they suggest, is the most real but the most deceptive illness because the symptoms imitate a
host of other illnesses depending on the part of the body it lodges in. And women who lead a soft, idle, luxurious, and lax existence are more prone to hysteria than those who are used to a hard and laborious life (149). Attacks are also more common in women when they are suffering from deep sorrow (150). So diseases of the nerves, then, are essentially disorders of sympathy. Since the nervous system makes every organ sympathetic with every other, any drastic change in passions can trigger a disruption in the nervous system. The entire female body possesses many paths of sympathy from one extremity to the other. For those who already have an exaggerated sensibility of the nerves, this presents the perpetual possibility of hysteria. As the nineteenth century advanced, hysteria gradually moved from the physical to the emotional/mental domain. And the world of scientific psychiatry introduced a new concept associated with hysteria: madness.

Gwendolen’s susceptibility to terror is attributed to her “sensitiveness” or the “excitability of her nature,” calling her experiences a “brief remembered madness” (Eliot 55). She is set apart by the quality of her nerves, which at times create such personal disorder that it threatens to undo any sense of personal identity. When Gwendolen responds to her husband with screaming again and again, the narrator calls this outburst “hysterical violence” (Eliot 315). She employs this performative madness in order to gain superiority over Grandcourt only when she realizes “that she had neither devices at her command to determine his will, nor any rational means of escaping it” (Eliot 376). Her fear of him and her sense that “his eyes showed a delight in torturing her” left her no alternative (Eliot 377). This unnerves Grandcourt as he simply watches in silence. He assumes it is madness since there is no other reasonable explanation.
Eliot’s purpose in using this strategy is to bring Gwendolen’s private drama to the public eye. Gwendolen’s neurosis is always on display yet never fully explained in the narrative itself. And marriage, like the stage, clearly reveals the division in Gwendolen’s public and private narratives. Her hysterical response on her wedding night actually mirrors her performance of Hermione earlier in the novel. And Grandcourt’s silent response as she screams again and again indicates his confusion and bewilderment. Her emotional outburst temporarily displaces Grandcourt’s mastery. With this act, Gwendolen’s private ‘furies’ invade the patriarchal ‘threshold’ and threaten to usurp Grandcourt’s power to command.

The ending of Daniel Deronda raises a question of whether or not Gwendolen is eventually cured of her neurosis. Athena Vrettos argues that if indeed Gwendolen suffers from neurosis, she somehow manages to bring it under control. She asserts that with Gwendolen’s moral growth comes psychic health as well (576). Gwendolen’s separation from Deronda and his role as confessor/therapist, as well as her final vow to become one of the best women, is cited as proof of this progression from “selfish neurotic to selfless idealist” (576). However, like the infamous Victorian actress (Rachel), Gwendolen enjoyed a bit of independence and autonomy by defying social boundaries during every performance. Marlene Tromp reminds us that she even encourages her mother to look beyond reality, into performance and the “sensational” for a place where she might become a “poetic criminal” (Tromp 459). Because Gwendolen is a consummate actress, it is natural to assume that she simply moved her performance stage at will and demonstrated a convincing portrayal of madness when she needed. It certainly worked, and one can hardly blame her for finding some platform from which to secure
power. With performance, Gwendolen gains temporary power, yet Grandcourt’s warning “not to make a spectacle of herself” shows that she is on shaky ground (Eliot 396). An overuse of ‘madness’ will justify Grandcourt’s taking more severe measures by placing her in an asylum. His threat that she will behave properly in the future or else “go to the devil” is a serious one. He has the power to do it.

**Grandcourt’s Power Play: Psychological Mastery**

Despite Gwendolen’s attempts at covert demonstrations of power through silence and sexual withdrawal, she soon discovers that they are short-term victories at best. Though Eliot seems to legitimize these strategies as more socially acceptable, Gwendolen finds them ineffective in sustaining any long-term autonomy. As Gwendolen’s desperation increases, she resorts to performed madness or hysteria. But this only diminishes her legitimacy. As it brings embarrassment and frustration to Grandcourt, this strategy threatens to undermine what little respect she has accrued as well as any leverage to negotiate the boundaries of her control. For now her husband cannot trust her; she has grown too unpredictable. It is no wonder, then, that Grandcourt uses the extent of his legal power as husband (couverte) to psychologically control his unruly wife and prevent her expressions of power to move into the public sphere.

This psychological control begins when Gwendolen and Grandcourt marry. When Gwendolen gives herself to Grandcourt in marriage, Gwendolen enters what the novel specifically calls a “contract” where she “sells herself” (Eliot 587). In Victorian society, women were required to enter into a sexual contract—subordination in marriage—for survival or social recognition. Gwendolen’s use of the word contract is
somewhat misleading, because it presumes that the individuals involved are either removed from relations of power or else equal within those relations. But unlike other contracts, this one is not negotiable. Destitute and desperate, she has little to offer at the bargaining table, so she enters marriage from a weak, disadvantaged position.

Initially, Gwendolen does not sense her powerlessness. Instead, she briefly entertains a fantasy of ownership, compares her brief taste of pleasure to Eve in the garden of Eden (Eliot 254). With these thoughts she imagines future possibilities of pleasure with power. However, as soon as Grandcourt finishes speaking, Gwendolen suddenly becomes conscious of a “turning of the ways” (265). In a matter of minutes a cloud of reality descends; she knows full well that the freedom she once tasted will no longer be hers to enjoy (254). Now that Grandcourt has received Gwendolen’s consent for marriage, he has legal sanction to use more durable methods to enforce his mastery. This ‘turning of the ways’ marks a shift in both characters as they enter a new kind of war over who will master whom. Gwendolen’s power will suddenly diminish and her ‘ways’ will take a new direction. Grandcourt will respond to Gwendolen’s resistance and rebellion by increasing his control over her and moving it to the psychological domain.

Sustained mastery for Grandcourt does not come with the acquisition of property, even when those objects are people, but works instead through psychological domination. Jeff Nunokawa describes this shift from constrained claims of possession to ongoing forms of power that take place in the psyche, in *The Afterlife of Property*. He explains that Grandcourt can exert mastery over his property only once, through the power of proprietary will, the freedom to “lend, let out, or sell” inherent in property ownership. But the mastery he can exert over “a creature with a large discourse of
imaginative fears” is ongoing (83). This power, situated in the psychological arena, can go on “pinching and crushing” Gwendolen continuously (Eliot 374). His “white hand” is a sign of his endless regime as a ruler. As his empire moves from his furniture to Gwendolen’s “situation of feeling,” it is a shift from economic to psychic mastery.

This displacement of economic by psychic mastery appears repeatedly with the repetition of “will” throughout the novel (Eliot 298). In fact, will holds a double meaning here: both a legal document for Grandcourt’s estate as well as the grasp of the mind, the “will like that of a crab or a boa-constrictor which goes on pinching and crushing” (374). Property ownership is limited, but the move from ‘will’ to ‘will’ takes on a force that changes its meaning the more it is said. The “mere will” finds satisfaction only in refusing to achieve its goal. The text describes this when Grandcourt feels a “languor of intention” like a “diseased numbness” when an end seemed within easy reach (187). In other words, this ‘will,’ described by the failed grasp of Grandcourt, finds a more secure place in the mind of the one being dominated. A slow mastery, one that is suspended indefinitely, brings more satisfaction to Grandcourt than simply a brief delay in what Nunokawa terms “proprietorial prerogative” (96). It is the delayed exertion of his will onto Gwendolen, the threat of the white hand that promises to throttle her, rather than the actual violence, that brings the psychological control and torment he desires.

This psychological punishment reflects a cultural shift in the nineteenth century, from public forms of punishment of the body to more subtle forms of deprivation, those that take away life without inflicting physical pain. Foucault calls this new era the “age of sobriety in punishment” (Foucault, Discipline 14). Physical pain is replaced by psychological trauma, a torture that does not bear physical markings but
inflicts wounds that affect the heart, the thoughts, the will, and the inclinations. Though
Gwendolen is not deprived of physical needs, she is imprisoned by Grandcourt’s
continual threats of physical harm; and imprisonment in any form always involves a
certain degree of physical pain as well. Psychological abuse neutralizes the one who is
punished, making her incapable of any willful action. This is why she can only wish for
her husband’s death, but not physically carry it out. The effectiveness of psychological
punishment is in its inevitability rather than its visible effects (Foucault, *Discipline 9*). In
other words, it is the certainty and anticipation of being mistreated that brings the greatest
fear.

Grandcourt depends on fear in the feminine psyche to exert his mastery. If the
most intense form of hatred is rooted in fear, then Gwendolen finds no escape, because
fear has her in its grip. Her dreams do not help her, because they only end with a further
exertion of the mastery that they try to abolish. This is the common but unfortunate
experience of anyone who is dominated in this way; she can express her fears in her
dreams, but cannot exhaust the mastery that works through them. Foucault describes this
as a “mechanism irreducible to the representations of law” that fails always to complete;
this kind of story reveals the mastery represented by a power that is centered around
deduction and death” (89). Gillian Beer notes that Eliot strategically places the power of
fear, the capacity for dread, as a specific condition of women’s experience and
potentiality; that fear is, of all emotions, that which most takes its life from the future
(221, 227). Fear begins in the mind and works through the imagination to create fantasies
that, for Gwendolen, move within her like ghosts, fantasies of subjection that plague her
continually. He sustains his power in that he will not let Gwendolen find release: “Every
slow sentence of [Grandcourt’s] speech had a terrific mastery in it for Gwendolen’s nature . . . she could not have been more helpless against the argument that lay in it” (Eliot 523). She is left with no options.

The only way for Gwendolen to find release from this psychological mastery is to kill or be killed. Jeff Nunokawa suggests that this endless story of mastery produces an “imaginary annihilation of the detested object” in Gwendolen’s mind (Nunokawa 96). In the secrecy of her mind, she fantasizes Grandcourt’s demise—her “hidden rite of vengeance” (Eliot 590-1). Yet this introduces a new terror, one that she would die with his fingers on her neck avenging her thoughts (534). Eliot suggests here far more than Gwendolen’s wish for her husband’s death. Grandcourt’s death represents the longing for a death that lodges in the mind of other Victorian women: the death of an ideology that prevails in their world.

Grandcourt’s Representation:
Patriarchy

Henleigh Grandcourt is a figure of the combined systems of patriarchy, aristocracy, and imperialism. He achieved his position in society because of primogeniture, but his control over his land is largely passive (Eliot 514). In the novel his control is confined to his dogs, his long-time servant, Lush, and his women. His control over Gwendolen, after she becomes his wife, is described in terms of colonial domination, a passive aggression (523). Gwendolen links the present illegitimate father with the one from her past when she is on the boat with Grandcourt. With this final connection accompanied by her fantasy of “killing him in her thoughts,” Eliot exposes a
deep-seated rage against the illegitimate control of women (610). It is this system which
must die if women are to be free.

The traditional patriarchal story of God’s intervention in Abraham’s sacrifice
of his son Isaac is a familiar one. Nancy Pell focuses on the “daughter’s story” to give a
more thorough explanation of the unlimited power of a father over his women (Pell 430). The daughter’s story is Aeschylus’s version of the Iphigenia myth in which the father
completes the sacrifice without intervention. In reading Daniel Deronda and other
nineteenth-century novels, the myth of Iphigenia is useful, because it assumes a society in
which the power of the father over his women, especially his daughters, is almost
unlimited and yet resented (430). In patriarchy, the depreciation of daughters results from
the desire for a son, a physical representation, and the status of an heir, continuing the
cultural and historical tradition of primogeniture. Land in England could be inherited
only through the male line. Pell also points out the fact that the inadequacies of patriarchy
are obvious in the lives of the two women who have no inheritance and the greatest social
exposure and vulnerability—Gwendolen and Mirah (440). But the resistance of the other
daughters (Catherine Arrowpoint, Lydia Glasher, and Princess Leonora) to weak,
inadequate, or evil fathers is also clear in this narrative. Criticizing patriarchy in any form
must not have been easy for George Eliot. She was well aware of the inadequacies as
well as the oppressive strength of this system. The irony here is that, in Gwendolen’s
attempts to cope with the failures of previous father figures, she enters into a marriage
with a true “illegitimate” father (442). Eliot here shows a sensitivity to the inadequacy of
patriarchy, a system that leaves daughters unprotected and vulnerable financially and
socially.
Because commercial interest motivates all the authority figures in this novel, the four major women characters—Gwendolen Harleth, Catherine Arrowpoint, Leonora Charisi, and Mirah Lapidoth—confront similar situations, each with male relatives trying to force them into soul-destroying marriages. Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues that the social oppression of their society causes familial oppression; there is a hopeless submission to the political climate of the day (177). Though all four women confront this political oppression represented as duty, it is a stronger influence in Gwendolen, when her uncle considers that Grandcourt “was a match to be accepted on broad general grounds national and ecclesiastical” (122). The authority figures in this novel urge the women to sell themselves through marriage in order to maintain or improve their relatives’ social status. And in each case, the political victims are kept silent. Kubitschek continues her argument by noting that the honest questions raised by both Gwendolen and Catherine are squelched, and they are called ungrateful and undutiful (179). Politics has replaced romance as the higher value in marriage. So, although Daniel Deronda makes clear the objectionable premises about marriage, Eliot offers no replacements. Most of the marriages center on a struggle for absolute power, and Eliot succeeds in showing the destructive elements of both power and possessiveness. She attacks the weapons of marital conflict—power struggle, moral superiority—and lets the reader know that these cannot exist in any marriage that hopes for personal as well as political renewal.

Though this discussion focuses on the marriage plot of Gwendolen and Grandcourt, the reader must not ignore the significance of Gwendolen’s ‘redeemer,’ Daniel Deronda. He too achieves psychological mastery over Gwendolen, by becoming a
part of her conscience. In this unique role, Deronda gains mastery over Gwendolen’s inner thoughts, something Grandcourt never achieves. Roslyn Belkin argues that he too has a passion for power, though it is expressed more subtly (476). His influence is so great that by the end of the novel, Gwendolen becomes the kind of woman he wants her to be (477). Because he also represents patriarchy, he perceives women from the traditional male viewpoint, thus ultimately robbing Gwendolen of her assertiveness and ambition to be independent. When Gwendolen asks him why he disapproves of her gambling, his answer is, “. . . we need that you should be better than we are” (Eliot 295).

Deronda’s emotional and intellectual union with Mordecai is a metaphor for the ideal ‘marriage of souls’ that Eliot endorses. Their relationship contains shifting gender roles, as two men “with as intense a consciousness as if they had been two undeclared lovers” (Eliot 438). The actual marriages in this novel do not suggest that this elevated sort of relationship is possible between men and women. Gwendolen and Grandcourt’s union is mercenary; Deronda and Mirah settle for something less than glorious—one in which Daniel becomes the protective authority figure and Mirah the grateful recipient of his protection. However, marriage, for George Eliot, was that “state which holds the highest possibilities of our mortal lot;” but this is only possible when it is neither mercenary nor exploitative (Letters 9:192). Through the character of Deronda, Eliot modifies the ideology of separate spheres by uniting male and female functions into one person rather than a marriage. Deronda is the androgynous character who integrates the feminine traits of sympathy, beauty, passion and feeling with a masculine destiny. This could be Eliot’s final justification for patriarchy and rejection of feminism—that she
is no longer confident in the ability of women in her own era to provide the kind of balance and leadership necessary for successful relationships.

Conclusion

In this novel, we see how George Eliot assigns separate spheres and expressions of power for women but clearly portrays Gwendolen’s outward attempts negatively. Her initial strategies of silence and sexual withdrawal are undetected by society and thus more acceptable. Because Victorian culture does not value a sharing of spheres, Gwendolen is expected to fulfill one role in one sphere only, the domestic one. Her way of coping with the disparity between her desire and her reality is to rebel in the only way she has been taught. Once silence and sexual withdrawal prove ineffective, she moves to outward demonstrations that temporarily gain her some control. Unfortunately, the performed madness discussed above actually weakens her legitimacy as a woman.

Eliot’s work with George Henry Lewes on Problems of Life and Mind, and her friendship with Herbert Spencer and other intellectuals made her aware of the current issues in the field of nervous sensibility. But her portrayal of neurosis is largely stereotypical of the sensation novel. She represents Gwendolen’s response to power as murderous fantasies that create an emotionally unstable heroine. Eliot seems to suggest that expressions of resistance to psychological cruelty must stay within the confines of the mind. Any outward display only serves to cast doubt on an already questionable character.

Eliot also undermines the potential agency of Victorian women by creating a character who cannot possibly achieve any power due to limitations inherent in her gender and society. Unlike a man, she will be prevented from doing whatever she likes.
She faces inevitable disappointment at the world which limits her possibilities for employment to that of a governess. As Roslyn Belkin asserts, her hopes are unrealistic, but this stems largely from the fact that she is a nineteenth-century woman whose hopes “dwelt among strictly feminine furniture” (481). She is unfortunately deluded in her belief that the outside world will give in to her will in the same way her family of women yields to her will. It is the social and economic realities that work against women in Victorian society and are the prime factors in Gwendolen’s defeat.

And finally, by having Gwendolen enter into a mercenary marriage in which she expects to wield power, Eliot denies her the sort of women’s work in marriage that comes so easily to the other characters. Joanne Demaria suggests that Eliot also denies her the ability to learn womanly behavior and attitudes that might sustain her in her marriage (405). So she enters, unwillingly, the only arena where she hopes to find power—marriage—for within this world was a woman’s only chance for social advancement. Of course by making a mercenary, illegitimate marriage, Gwendolen deprives herself of the satisfaction of both work and marriage, and the result is devastation. Her submission leads to humiliation, because she has done nothing more than enter into legalized prostitution. Clearly, Eliot is criticizing the mercenary marriage, yet at the same time the power relations inherent in marriage itself. By narrowing all of Gwendolen Harleth’s possibilities to this choice between becoming a governess and selling herself to Grandcourt in a mercenary marriage, Eliot emphasizes the plight of the nineteenth-century woman in creating viable options for her future, but she still forces Gwendolen into a life where her only alternatives are to surmount or submit to the lesser
of two evils. But if Gwendolen cannot fit as an ‘angel of the house’ or a wife or mother, what are her alternatives—a prostitute or murderess?

The ambivalence Eliot felt towards the sharing of power is best understood in the ideology of domestic feminism. She supports a traditional female role while pointing women in the direction of exercising their desire for power. For Eliot, this ideology provided an ideal combination of woman’s aspirations with social stability. Although woman’s sphere of activity and influence might be restricted to the home, which is often a scene of oppression in her novels, through love and submission to duty, a woman’s place can become the source of her greatest power. She affirms these ideas strongly in Daniel Deronda. George Eliot took women very seriously, believing their fates both reflect and influence the problems of the world. But she still confined her women to the domestic sphere.

This ambivalence affects the ending of Gwendolen’s story. The reader may wonder why Gwendolen does not learn how to channel her energy into what Eliot might deem a useful activity? And how has someone who is so preoccupied with power learned so little about how it operates, despite all her failures in the world she tried to conquer? George Eliot leaves the story incomplete. Gwendolen never achieves the balance, let alone the supremacy of power in her relationship with either Deronda or Grandcourt. Deronda advises her to become the ‘best of women’ without telling her how to do it. It probably means that she needs to learn the limits of her freedom as a woman and try to adopt a more positive image of womanhood. In order to this, however, she will have to submit to Daniels’s values, which means adopting the patriarchal society he represents. When Daniel leaves, however, Gwendolen sits motionless until her mother enters the
room and asks if she is ill. She tells her mother not to be afraid, then repeats the phrase “I am going to live” four times before the last reassurance, “I shall be better” (Eliot 707). Is this merely resignation? Now that Grandcourt is dead, in other words, are Gwendolen’s prospects for power greater or lesser?

On the other hand, ambivalence may be Eliot’s final and greatest contribution for the reader. The paralysis that seems to take control of Gwendolen at the end might be a symbol of Eliot’s chosen position as a woman whose cautious balancing as, as recorded in the *George Eliot Letters*, denies the efficacy of action in an increasingly complex world (396). It may be George Eliot’s way of handling the disturbing ambiguities of the ‘woman question.’ There is a combination of love, hope and also despair in Gwendolen’s final words. According to Bonnie Zimmerman, her words give a reassurance to her mother that represents both resignation *and* determination—exactly the message Eliot may have wanted to convey (215). Her ‘open future’ symbolizes a turning point in history: the transformation from the long-held tradition of Female Influence and Women’s Mission into the feminism that would soon envelop all of England.

Grandcourt assumes permanent control of Gwendolen because he demonstrates *psychological* mastery over Gwendolen, even in death. Though she may attain physical freedom, she may never achieve psychological freedom, since the residual effects of her emotional abuse can remain for a lifetime. Mastery at this level, through fear, is perhaps the most serious. As a result, Eliot brings Gwendolen’s story to a close in a pastoral retreat setting where she lives with her mother and sisters. Somehow she recognizes that life with a man is no freedom at all. Here, with the important women in her life, she is free of having to perform, put herself in the marriage marketplace, and be
subject to patriarchal possession. She is also free of having to make a living independently in a world where there are few options for women like her.

In the following chapter, we enter the only market available in the new world: the marriage market. Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* shifts to another kind of mastery, an economic one that accompanies the rise of capitalism. In a world dominated by economics, the male consumer sets the value of his desired possession and barters for the best value in a female commodity.
CHAPTER III

EXCHANGE AND POSSESSION

IN ANTHONY TROLLOPE’S

THE EUSTACE DIAMONDS

Doan’t thee marry for munny but goa where munny is.
—Anthony Trollope,
The Eustace Diamonds

What does it mean for a woman to have power in a world in which sex is
connected to money? At the time Anthony Trollope wrote The Eustace Diamonds the
concept of capitalism converting people into commodities was just beginning. The
Victorian world was situated precariously between a world organized by marriage and
kinship and one organized by the market. This novel disguises the challenge society
poses to traditional gender relations, forcing the reader to think through the mindsets
attached to the notion that men and women have different relations to property and thus
to each other. The notion that women circulate in heterosexual exchange the same way
commodities circulate in capitalist exchange affects the way we must read this novel.
Gendered power in The Eustace Diamonds must be negotiated in the realm of exchange.
We begin to recognize the distinctive relationship between human and material
possessions as we briefly examine the plot.

Lizzie Eustace is the 21-year-old widow of Sir Florian Eustace, a sickly
baronet whom she married quickly for all the wrong reasons. Though their marriage
lasted less than a year, it was long enough for Sir Florian to be “soured with the
disappointment she had brought upon him” which probably helped contribute to his death
(*Eustace* 1:9). But he provided well for Lizzie and left her a sum of money—a life estate
in the family castle in Scotland which generated about £4,000 a year, and all his chattels
in the castle. What becomes the issue of dispute in this story is the legal status of the
diamond necklace (valued at £10,000) that Sir Florian gave to Lizzie the day he and
Lizzie returned from their honeymoon. The necklace had been bought by Sir Florian’s
grandfather and declared in his will that the diamonds were an heirloom. As an heirloom,
they should go to his eldest son, and to that son’s eldest son, and so on, forever. When Sir
Florian signed out the necklace from the jewelers on 24 September both jewelers and
Lizzie were in agreement. But later when Lizzie discovers that she is to inherit all of Sir
Florian’s chattels in the castle, she conveniently changes her story, claiming that Sir
Florian had given them to her there. Add to this the fact that the jeweler’s ledger was
smudged, making the entry date impossible to tell whether the necklace was signed out
the 4th (the day *before* the wedding) or the 24th of September (1:149-150). This is
significant in that the earlier date would suggest that Sir Florian intended for Lizzie to
have the necklace as part of his chattels in the castle.

This chapter will argue that, as the Victorian world moved from status to one
of contract, women found economic agency as independent wage earners, but lacked
agency in the ‘marriage market’ simply because their femininity made them objects—
commodities—with their value set by the men who received them as gifts or purchased
them through marriage. I will begin with a history of exchange and possession from the
works of Henry Maine, Friedrich Engels and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Recent theories of
exchange and objectification from Kathy Psomiades, Gayle Rubin, and Martha
Nussbaum lend a contemporary interpretation to the phenomenon of gender
commodification. As we examine *The Eustace Diamonds*, I will argue that Anthony
Trollope uses the controversy over the diamonds—whether they are an heirloom or
paraphernalia—and the language of possession to highlight three different models of
femininity that Victorian women adopted in order to become valuable commodities.
Lizzie Eustace, Lucy Morris, and Lucinda Roanoke represent three different zones of
economic exchange in marriage that reflect Victorian values toward women and their
choices. I will describe the ways each woman responds to the reality of her situation and
finds autonomy. Finally, I will argue that Trollope, as a male novelist, uses realism to
address the failures in Victorian society to create a balance of heterosexual relationships,
but his version of realism, recognized more as pessimism, offers little hope for change.

By its very title, the reader expects this story to be a narrative about family
property and the power it holds over human beings. But it goes beyond the initial debate
and drama of the diamonds to the larger issue of what the diamonds represent and how
their symbolic value is representative of the three women who share the plot. A true
analysis of power must focus on the exchanges they make with their suitors. This affects
their destiny and agency in life. To understand how this drama moves from diamonds to
women, the reader needs an understanding of the controversy that surrounds these jewels.

The controversy of the diamonds develops over whether Sir Florian Eustace
gave his wife the diamonds as a gift and the fact that this piece of information is
inaccessible to everyone in the story but Lizzie. Though the diamonds never really appear
in the story, they are significant in that they parallel the status of the women represented
in the novel. Status of property and the corresponding idea of women as property both determine exchange value. And the issue at hand is in defining the kind of property as well as the limits of circulation for both the women and the jewels. According to legal scholar Alan Roth, the necklace was not an heirloom for the simple reason that it was not tied to the Eustace real estate. The diamonds originally depended on the existence of an eldest son, and when the oldest son died without a son, so did the entailment. Had the grandfather placed an entail on the necklace as an heirloom in favor of whoever held the title and real estate, then the entail would have continued for as long as the family held the property. But the will was not drafted in this way, so the necklace descended to Sir Florian “unencumbered” (Roth 894). In like fashion, Lizzie Eustace circulates throughout the novel as unencumbered as the jewelry she possesses.

If the diamonds are not an heirloom, they may be considered as Lizzie’s personal property, paraphernalia that she can dispose of at will during her lifetime. However, the issue of paraphernalia rests on the (unknown) wishes of Sir Florian, Lizzie’s husband. The lawyers assume Sir Florian would want the necklace to remain in the family because Victorian law generally favors an heir over a widow when there is no written statement of desire, a presumption eventually abolished by the Married Women’s Property Act (1882). But Lizzie has a case on the grounds of the law of paraphernalia, which grants ownership of any jewels or ornaments given by the husband as gifts to his wife. The strength of her claim rests on the fact that the necklace was in her constant possession from the moment Sir Florian gave it to her until he died.

Regardless of the status, the bottom line is that the diamonds are not only physically absent throughout the story but become secondary to the unfolding courtship
plots of Lizzie Eustace, Lucy Morris and Lucinda Roanoke. Two of these women correspond to the values assigned to heirloom and paraphernalia. The woman who holds heirloom value must comply with the patriarchal system of ownership. The woman with paraphernalia value circulates among men, relying on beauty and wealth to sustain her worth. The narrative recognizes no other option if they are to succeed. The one woman who cannot fit into the system of exchange pays dearly for her freedom. It is within the private world of each woman that the issues of power and powerlessness bring the novel’s theme into focus: the inevitable warping of relationships when society gives material dominance and psychological authority exclusively to men. As the diamonds reveal the social fraud that exists in a respectable society, the women reveal the sexual fraud that draws them into deceptions of their own and superimposes itself on society. Both women and diamonds, then, are the unstable objects in the hands of the male consumer who alone has the privilege of setting the price.

Historical Context: From Status to Contract

In order to understand Victorian attitudes toward women, their roles, and the power these roles generate, the reader must first understand that a philosophical shift began in the concept of marriage from one of status to one of contract. It is this shift that resulted in a capitalist ideology that filtered into the marriage relationships in *The Eustace Diamonds*. Henry Maine’s *Ancient Law* (1861) is the best example of the progression that results in this supplanting of one society by another. Written immediately after the Divorce Act of 1857, it details the ways in which marriage and a
market society are incompatible because they describe two mutually exclusive ways of organizing culture.

According to Maine, the primitive world was a stationary one rather than a progressive one. People and goods stayed in one place rather than circulated. It was also a world focused on the group or family rather than the individual. Because there was no such thing as an individual or private property, the father as patriarch held complete authority through an unwritten law (Patria Potestas) over his descendants, which included flocks, herds, slaves, children, and wife (Maine 307). Authority derived from his status as representative of the family unit which was static and primarily immobile. As groups of families grew larger (especially in ancient Rome), some groups claimed blood rights for certain members of the bloodline but not for others. Kathy Psomiades refers to this gradual shift to unincluded members linked by location rather than blood, as a movement from “consanguinity to contiguity” (Psomiades 101). People were tied together less and less by forms of reciprocity in rights and duties that originated in the family and more by “contract” or the “free agreement of individuals” (Maine 163). Status is the word Maine uses to signify the bonds of power linking members of a patriarchal family; contract is the word he uses to describe agreements between individuals linked by physical proximity.

Though John McLennan, Sir John Lubbock, Herbert Spencer and other patriarchal proponents offered their own theories of the development of monogamous marriage, it was Lévi-Strauss, in his Elementary Structures of Kinship, who introduced that the origin of the rules of marriage were rooted in a system of exchange. His theory is based on a system of kinship that binds members of a family into an “organic solidarity”
(Lévi-Strauss 482). In his view, marriage is the “archetype of exchange,” uniting gift and giver, comprising food, objects, and “that most precious category of goods—women” (61). In primitive societies the exchange or gift of women was the only way to establish an alliance. Marriage became a dramatic gesture between nature and culture, between alliance and kinship. It united tribes and cemented a relationship permanently; this exchange acted as arbitration between two loves: parental and conjugal. One man gives a sister or daughter, the other man receives a wife. Women were the supreme gift in primitive kinship structures, having both material and spiritual value (65). This nature of the conjugal bond and the alliance itself emerges from the protocol of the marriage proposal among most primitive societies. Though women were the highest gift, other gifts followed, creating a culture of sexual, economic, legal and social gifts which made up the marriage ritual.

Though kinship systems build solidarity, Gayle Rubin recognizes them as a clear imposition of cultural organization that result in sex oppression of women. Lévi-Strauss sees women the same way as words, which are “misused when they are not communicated and exchanged” (qtd. in Rubin 201). Rubin also notes that he draws attention to the contradiction that women are both “speakers” and “spoken,” both signs and generators of signs. In contrast to words which have become signs, women have remained signs and value. This creates a natural paradox reminiscent of slavery ideology: the contradiction inherent in being both person and property. Lévi-Strauss argues that this dual function has preserved a “richness, ardour, and mystery” that originally permeated the whole universe of human communication (Lévi-Strauss 496). But Rubin legitimately challenges Lévi-Strauss’ attempt to use this reasoning to justify the foundation for
romance. In her analysis of the political economy of sex, Rubin successfully argues that kinship is organization and organization gives power. It is the women who are being transacted and the men who give and take them who are linked to each other. Thus, women in ancient kinship systems possess strong similarities to the nineteenth-century women in *The Eustace Diamonds*. They are simply the conduits of a relationship rather than partners to it (Rubin 174). Their value is arbitrary and set by the men who exchange them.

In addition, women are in no position to realize any of the benefits of their own circulation, for the men are the sole beneficiaries of the product of the exchange—social organization. In order to enter into a gift exchange as a partner, one must have something to give. If women are for men to dispose of, they are in no position to give themselves away. Rubin argues that the exchange of women is a seductive and powerful concept, placing the oppression of women within social systems rather than in biology (175). If men have been sexual subjects (exchangers) and women sexual objects (gifts) throughout much of history, then many of the customs and attitudes of later centuries make a lot of sense (e.g., the father giving away the bride). More restrictions are applied to females in the system of kinship than to males. A woman must become the sexual partner of some man to whom she is owed. If a girl is promised in infancy, her refusal to participate as an adult would disrupt the order of debts and promises (182). Marital debts are settled in female flesh. Thus, men come to have certain rights in their female kin, while the women do not have the same rights either to themselves or their male kin.

Eventually, the gift of exchange disappeared in favor of the exchange for profit. This change in the family unit from social to economic is detailed in Friedrich
Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). Goods that were once directly produced and consumed for use became commodities for exchange and/or sale, the means by which the exploitation of man by man, and the oppression of women, was built (Engels 33). Production took the form of turning money, things, and people into capital. In Engels’ work, sex oppression is part of capitalism’s heritage. Every mode of production involves reproduction (tools, labor, and social relations). The formation of gender identity is an example of production in the realm of the sexual system. The core of Engels’ formulation lies in the intimate connection between the emergence of the family as an economic unit dominated by the male and the development of classes. Engels tried to weave an analysis of the many diverse aspects of social life, relating men and women with kinship and state, forms of property, forms of exchange, and forms of trade into a systematic historical account. He recognized that in order to understand women in a single society, one must take everything into consideration because sexual systems cannot be understood in isolation from the evolution of commodity forms in women, systems of land tenure, political arrangements, and the origin of the state. There is a mutual interdependence on all of these systems.

Still, the greatest political/sexual shift remains an economic one when production, distribution and exchange begin to include certain property forms in people. And the marriage transaction allowed women to circulate as property, giving sexual access and all exclusive rights to the men who bought them. Since capital becomes capital only in certain relations, then, a woman only becomes a wife, a chattel, a prostitute or any other commodity in certain relations as well. Apart from their relationships, the women in *The Eustace Diamonds* retain no capital value. Their
oppression stems from the social system of organization that somehow takes females as raw materials and fashions them into products.

This brings us now back to the question at the opening of this chapter: What does it mean for a woman to have power in this world of exchange? Kathy Psomiades develops a theory of heterosexual exchange that requires a gender-indifferent perspective of society, one that was not yet fully embraced in the Victorian world (94). She argues that “women occupy two zones of circulation and possession in *The Eustace Diamonds*, not because in 1870 married women are still not legally able to own property, but because by 1882, they legally are” (99). Heterosexual exchange makes marriage as an alliance look compatible with the market by creating similar structures, making them equivalents. When reading *The Eustace Diamonds*, then, we see the relation between marriage and capital, the gendered individual and the market individual in an emerging world that clarifies a woman’s position as “circulated sign and commodity” (94). The market in women is a market in goods. Like commodities, bad women occupy the “zone of circulation” and good women remain in the “zone of possession,” much like the inalienable property of a precapitalist past (96). *The Eustace Diamonds* represents this concept of exchange and possession, categorizing forms of femininity for each woman that both limits her agency and determines her ultimate value to society. Using Psomiades’ theory, we can understand how each woman finds her market value and occupies a specific zone.
Three Models of Femininity:
Lizzie, Lucy, and Lucinda

From the first page of this novel the reader can identify Lizzie as someone’s possession, though easily traded—paraphernalia. She is the only child of old Admiral Greystock, who in the later years of his life was “much perplexed by the possession of a daughter” (Eustace 1:1). Though the Admiral had no particular fortune, his daughter, when she was just a child, went about everywhere with jewels on her fingers, red gems hanging round her neck, yellow gems hanging from her ears, and white gems hanging from her hair. Lizzie Eustace grows up to become the “bad girl” of The Eustace Diamonds, and consequently, bad property. The narrator as well as other characters gives plenty of support for her low moral character: she is “not just all that she should be” (1:270); “paste” rather than real stone (2:230); a “selfish, hard-fisted little woman” (1:43); “worldly, hard, and given entirely to evil things” (2:270); “abominable” (1:321); “a dishonest, lying, evil-minded harpy” (1:101); a “nasty, low, scheming, ill-conducted, dishonest little wretch” (2:248); and “about as bad as anybody ever was—false, dishonest, heartless, cruel, irreligious, ungrateful, mean, ignorant, greedy, and vile” (1:311). It is clear even from the first sentence that no one has anything good to say about Lizzie; and when her story is finally done, everyone is relieved. She is, according to Walter M. Kendrick, Anthony Trollope’s first “reprehensible upstart” (136). When she offers herself to Frank Greystock, her “charms of feminine grace” are “tendered openly in the market” (Eustace 2:127). Kathy Psomiades provides insight into this phrase: “Lizzie is bad not only because she openly places her charms on the marriage market, but because she doesn’t have the value that she claims to have” (95). Her value is exchange
value; in other words, it doesn’t come from her, but from the system of exchange in which she operates—supply and demand (95). Like other objects, Lizzie quickly becomes associated with surface and appearance rather than depth. But she weakens her own credibility and perpetuates her own lack of value by her empty expressions, which prove shallow and meaningless.

However, she holds tremendous power over the men in her life simply because, according to Victorian society, she happens to possess the two qualities of highest value: beauty and wealth. She thinks the secret of her beauty is in her eyes. But the narrator informs us that the charm of her face does not lie in her eyes. They are too expressive, too loud in their demands for attention, and they lack tenderness (Eustace 1:18). Her eyes are glaring and they inevitably betray Lizzie’s shallow character. Her beauty and sexuality determine her property value, and like most women in the nineteenth century, beauty and sensuality turn her from a subject to a desirable object. Jane Nardin states that Lizzie’s only real chance for success is to ‘sell’ her beauty by pretending to give it away—an unspoken expectation of Victorian society (Nardin 45). She cannot sell her services without bringing herself completely within a realm of exchange where she must be degraded or subjugated. But she uses what she has to seduce Frank. It isn’t until later in the novel that he begins to see Lizzie for who she really is and admits that “her charm is all gone and even her prettiness lost its value” (Eustace 2:336). And in the end, though Lizzie’s beauty gives her sexual power, it does not sustain that power for long.

Her beauty includes charm, increasing her sexual power; but proves to be false, pointing to what is lacking beneath the surface. In his analysis of Trollope’s use of
charm in his writing, Christopher Herbert reminds us that Trollope defines charm as a quality that can never be successfully counterfeited, that must be spontaneous and unconscious (86). This is evident in the fact that though Lizzie devotes much of her energy to simulating charm, she is completely devoid of it, so unable to deceive anyone for very long. In Herbert’s argument, charm is “dispelled by premeditation” (86). But despite the falseness, she holds temporary power over her cousin Frank Greystock, almost causing him to break his engagement to Lucy Morris. Sexual charm is a compelling force that can cast a bewitching spell over men and eliminate reason altogether. And it is this ‘charm’ that causes the men in her life to temporarily overlook her greater flaw—compulsive lying.

Second to beauty, Lizzie’s diamonds give her temporary economic power. The diamonds attract Lord Fawn, Lord George, Mr. Emilius, and even Frank Greystock to Lizzie because she does not represent good or bad feminine sexuality as much as she represents £10,000 in jewelry and a yearly income of £4000. Lizzie does not offer sex for money, for then she would be no better than a prostitute. Instead, she offers money for sex by putting bids on all her suitors, all of whom have lower incomes than she does herself. Even when women have the money to enter the market as buyers, their status as objects means they always must be for sale. In this way, Lizzie represents paraphernalia—alienable property that can be sold. Since gold is power, every man in this narrative views Lizzie as a commodity worth a certain amount of gold. Unfortunately, her possession of this wealth is tenuous, so her value is insecure. Each man’s level of interest, then, is conditional based on the outcome of the diamonds. And
this is the reason Lizzie must perpetuate the lie about her rightful ownership. If she loses the diamonds, she loses her marriage prospects.

While Lizzie uses sex and money to establish power, her lies allow her to maintain her position of power. After all, she is holding the keys to a mystery which the whole world is trying to solve. As the sole possessor and withholder of valuable information, she sets herself apart from everyone else and has the upper hand in every situation. And lying comes naturally to Lizzie because, as she confesses, it was, “according to the lessons which she had learned, a necessity in woman” (Eustace 2:367). Women were taught to lie as part of their role in society. Like the society she represents, fiction is usually more attractive than truth. Lies bring pleasure because they create an imaginary world much more exciting than the real one. Since her desires dictate every behavior, she lies when it is expedient, when she needs to gain admiration from others. And while everyone objects morally to Lizzie’s behavior, the lies are somehow brushed aside by the narrator in a humorous way with euphemisms—untruths, stories, fibs. Her lies provide amusement for others as a welcome change from the boredom of their lives. Lady Glencora declares, “I call that woman a perfect God-send. What should we have done without her?” (2:375). Lizzie lies to get attention, but continues lying to keep it. As a young woman representative of a society with misplaced values, she is ignorant of the law and the value of money, land, and income; but she has learned early what really counts—beauty more than honesty. Consequently, she and the other characters give only lip service to character values and minimize the lying as simply an accepted part of the human experience.
Both Lizzie and her suitors emphasize material value. When Lord Fawn first comes courting, she decides that, although he doesn’t have a lot of money, he can’t be completely poor since he has a position as a peer. She is fully aware that it is her money he is after. However, she, too, is concerned with his salary (only £5000 a year), calling him a poor creature. One is as mercenary as the other. Soon he proposes marriage, believing that Lizzie’s wealth is secure and will help him in his career. Later, he discovers that her rightful ownership is doubtful. His “golden hope as to the perpetuity of the property” came to an end (1:101). Feeling convinced that she will be forced to give up the diamonds, he tries to renege on the engagement. His justification is that promises are contingent on certain suppositions. If the suppositions are false, then the promise is not binding. He assumes Lizzie will release him from his promise to marry her once the scandal threatens to disgrace his reputation. However, Lizzie does not operate by the same standard of propriety. So she argues, though unsuccessfully, that Lord Fawn should have known she would keep what she believes to be her own property.

Frank Greystock, the next suitor, becomes so enamored by Lizzie’s charm and money that he develops a whole philosophy of dishonesty for Lizzie, believing her to be sincere and genuine when he knows she is false (1:177). Because Frank is in debt, he is tempted with the idea of Lizzie and the necklace securing his future. In one scene, Lizzie throws herself at him at the same time that she throws the diamonds across the table at Frank, making a proposal that he should take it and return his ring to Lucy. Both Lizzie and the diamonds are her bribe for marriage. Her offer of “take it and be made” is followed by an admission that it also comes with encumbrances and a weight of cares (1:286). The narrator tells the reader that many a man will be untrue to his troth, and
leave true love in pursuit of “tinsel, and beauty, and false words, and a large income” (2:317). Frank is following this course because Lizzie represents something that will salvage his financial reputation. He simply can’t afford to marry for love. And despite Lizzie’s obvious bad character traits, he somehow rationalizes her behavior, believing that she was ill-used. The narrator excuses Frank’s lack of common sense because “beauty reclining in a man’s arms” seems to negate proper judgment (2:320). There is no excuse for Frank, despite the narrator’s attempt. He wants Lizzie for two reasons only: to satisfy his sexual appetite and to escape financial ruin.

Next, Lord George de Bruce Carruthers pursues Lizzie because he thinks her masochistic temperament will allow him to control her fortune (2:39). She in turn is drawn to him when he sneers at marriage because her imagination is somehow gripped by his brutality and contempt. Cynically, he denounces marriage and scoffs at female infidelity, asserting that if men and women were really true then no vows would be needed. From his perspective, if the marriage vows are weak, it will be easier for him to have affairs. Though he is unscrupulous, Lord George wants Lizzie’s fortune and admires her beauty, but decides against marrying her because he recognizes that she is not just bad, but dangerous (2:221-2). Her unbound will makes her unpredictable and this is a threat to his need to control. This gives her a power that initially attracts, but later repels him. It is a power that has a brief ‘shelf-life’ because it is based on surface value alone.

Lizzie’s masochistic temperament motivates her to pursue men who threaten to mistreat her. It is only when Lord Fawn finally rejects Lizzie and she grows to detest him that she expresses a desire to marry him. She is drawn to Lord George when he sneers at marriage and her imagination is gripped by his brutality and contempt. She reflects that
he has “eyes that could look love and bloodshed almost at the same time; to be treated sometimes with crushing severity and at others with the tenderest love is the kind of love which would suit her poetical temperament” (2:39). And later she is attracted to the Scotland Yard detective, Major MacKintosh after he tells her that she has committed perjury. According to A.O.J. Cockshut, this masochism shows an “unconsciousness of self,” a self-deception that both defines her and causes her eventual downfall (188). Masochism may be Lizzie’s subconscious attempt to absolve her own guilty behavior. She may somehow rationalize her mistreatment by men as well-deserved justice for her own deception.

When Mr. Emilius finally comes into her life, she is on a quest for the Corsair she reads about in Shelley and Byron’s poetry. But this Corsair fantasy is simply another symptom of Lizzie’s ongoing masochism. Mr. Emilius is nothing but a “nasty, greasy, lying, squinting Jew preacher—an imposter” (Eustace 2:314). Lizzie knows from the outset that the marriage will be disastrous; she openly admits she does not love him. But falseness unites with falseness in this case and produces a twisted version of mutual respect and power. Lizzie seems to crave the thrill of moral revolt. But beyond this, her desire for men who are abusers suggests her own self-assessment. According to Catharine MacKinnon, she “can grasp self only as thing” (MacKinnon, Feminism Unmodified 124). Because she fails to see herself as someone worthy of respect, she will not expect, let alone insist on respect from the men in her life. Without any depth of character, Lizzie’s strength lies in her ability to catch a man, but not keep him for very long.

In Phineas Redux, published one year later, the reader soon discovers that Lizzie’s reign of control over men comes to an abrupt halt. She and her husband
masquerade a marital façade that eventually disintegrates. Though not an Englishman, Mr. Emilius gains a reputation as a preacher in London and moves close enough to fashionable circles to be “brought within reach of Lady Eustace’s charms” (Trollope, Redux 2:46). After they marry, Mr. Emilius finds momentary happiness in his newfound marital authority over Lizzie. But he uses her money for “secret and unlimited” reasons (46). Within a year, Lizzie runs away and pays him half her income to stay away from her. Even though this arrangement is not financially prudent for Lizzie, she confesses that any sacrifice is preferable to being married to him. Mr. Emilius’ absence becomes the precious commodity that Lizzie purchases with her wealth. Their marriage was destined to fail, but since Lizzie is rich, beautiful, and clever, it added “interest” to her career (47). She now must try to prove that her husband is a bigamist and have him locked up so she can regain full ownership of her money. Under English law, her money and property is his, not hers, and he uses his rights to insist that all income from her property will be paid to him. Unfortunately for Lizzie, because she made no precaution in keeping her own money, she must resort to asking for an allowance if she is to separate from him permanently. Many believe that Mr. Emilius is the former Yosef Mealyus, still married to a Jewess in Cracow. But no one is able to find sufficient evidence to convict him of bigamy. Later in the novel, the reader discovers that Mr. Emilius is a murderer as well.

In the midst of her marriage crisis, Lizzie forms a suspiciously romantic relationship with Mr. Bonteen, the man who is investigating the bigamy charge, and it’s no coincidence that Bonteen is the victim of the murder. We are told that the “bright eyes” of Lady Eustace produce quite a wonderful effect on this man (56). As with all of Lizzie’s suitors, however, this is short-lived. The more Mr. Bonteen gets to know Lizzie,
the more he grows sick of her and would gladly send her away if he could. As Lizzie juggles with alternative prospects simultaneously, her goal is to take the best she can get and try to extract her promises of being true from as many men as possible. She finally realizes that holding on to one’s money is preferable to acquiring men with it. As paraphernalia, then, Lizzie circulates, changing hands frequently—a commodity whose value will be continually negotiated.

Lucy Morris is the ‘good girl’ of the narrative, so becomes good property in terms of economic value. She protects the ideals of the Victorian value of women because she gives herself as a gift to Frank. This is a gift he easily recognizes and it also places him under an obligation that he ultimately fulfills, though not without some detours. Lucy represents the concept of gift exchange that predates and opposes commodity culture. As a gift, she remains in the “zone of possession” and will always be for her husband a form of inalienable property, like an heirloom (Psomiades 96). While Lizzie is associated with the world of surfaces, appearances, and shifting values that accompany a commodity culture, Lucy is associated with true value, depth, use, and the real, but also through a language that still links her to objects. But, as Andrew Miller suggests, even though she is figured as an object, her virtue represents the proper attitude towards objects (171). She is referred to as a “treasure,” a “little thing,” and “truth itself” (Eustace 1:23-5,121). She is also “good as gold—real stone” (1:271, 2:230). In fact, she is better than real gold, because she can be permanently possessed in a way that gold cannot. She creates a safe place for a man’s desires. Knowing Lucy, Frank “recognized the treasure, and had greatly desired to possess it” (1:165). Later, Frank asks her to “share” his home; Lucy clearly understands that he owed it to her to share his home, and
that if he evaded his debt he would be a traitor and a miscreant (1:136, 2:174). Lizzie, on the other hand, can never be permanently held because she is always in the process of slipping into the hands of another. If Lizzie puts herself on the market, Lucy gives her heart in order to possess herself, though she calls that possession wearisome and bitter. In one sense, she seems to recognize her own worth, even when she thinks Frank has left her (2:189). And yet she doubts whether she will become useful as a governess or even have the energy to teach the few things that she knew. But one thing she does know: she must at least make the attempt, and go on making it until she dies.

Lucy finds economic agency only when she becomes an independent wage-earner. In this way, she temporarily escapes the pressure to sell herself in marriage. Lucy faces a threatening future when she is forced into the labor market and made to earn her own living like a man. Despite the hardship, however, she does not adopt a victim’s mindset. Instead, she takes pride in the fact that she can buy Frank a ring “purchased out of her own earnings” (1:283). She chooses the undesirable work as a companion to the despicable Lady Linlithgow, rather than use feminine manipulation to catch a rich husband. This independence gives her self-respect and greater leverage when she later negotiates the terms of Frank’s return. She has no home of her own and no family; she only survives by the indulgence of her friends. And she has many admirable character qualities. Unfortunately, Lucy lacks the most important qualities to be a desirable commodity: money, birth, and beauty.

Because she lacks all three, Lucy proves that in reality the submissive angel of the house is powerless. Though she is a treasure, even Frank’s mother tries to convince him to jilt her because she lacks money (2:329). Frank loves Lucy’s character but shares
the attitudes of his society. His obsession with money, rank, and beauty cause him to renege on his engagement and neglect Lucy cruelly while he considers marrying Lizzie. And everyone who knows her concurs that the external advantages she lacks are more important than the internal qualities she possesses (2:183). It is to Lucy’s credit that while she waits for six months without a word of encouragement from anyone, she is still the only person who does not excuse Frank’s mistreatment of her (2:331). When Frank finally returns to her, he comes with a bundle of excuses. According to Bill Overton, it is a sad judgment on society that everyone overlooks them all and gives him a “prodigal’s welcome” after all his bad behavior (177). Lucy deserves happiness but most readers doubt that she really gets it, given Frank’s nature and the values of a sexist society. Her story ends on an ironic note as Lucy, triumphing with “mingled love and happiness” tells the Fawns that Frank’s family has forgiven her for not being rich or beautiful and has accepted her as his bride (*Eustace* 2:350). In her thinking, Frank’s behavior did not even qualify as a sin needing forgiveness. According to Jane Nardin, although Lucy never lies, in this case she has begun to deceive herself (186). The society in which she lives prefers paste to real gold. Men demand women to have beauty and wealth. Lucy has neither and she is naïve enough not to realize that because she lacks these, she faces a difficult challenge ahead. All she knows is that without Frank, her life is a “blank” to her (*Eustace* 2:188). In a world that has reduced all women to items of exchange, angels are likely to finish last. So Lucy becomes an heirloom, permanent property as a gift for Frank to possess.

Lucinda Roanoke does not belong in either the Lizzie or Lucy market model of femininity. In one sense she is also a circulating object—born and educated in New
York, taken to Paris for nine months, and brought to London by her aunt—but circulates in this limited sense of travel. It is interesting to note that Trollope represents Lucinda as a cosmopolitan object, similar to the villain Melmotte in his later novel, *The Way We Live Now*, but with an alternate form of exchange. While the narrator presumes that Lucinda is in want of a husband, he also notes that no girl seems to take less pains to get one. A girl this desirable *ought* to “put herself in the way” of using her charms and merits for some advantage (1:331). But Lucinda stands aloof and despises everybody. Unlike Lizzie who tries to manipulate the marriage market for her own ends, or Lucy who opts for the gift exchange of love, Lucinda becomes more than a reluctant participant in a mercenary marriage that eventually destroys her. She represents a form of social organization different from patriarchy or capitalism: primitive matrilineage.

Because Lucinda’s form of femininity is far from conventional and not easily recognizable, it is important to understand the historical context for this perspective of social organization. Briefly, John McLennan, the central figure who details this theory in *Primitive Marriage*, draws upon new ways of thinking about the past that emerged in the late 1850s, using biological rather than historical models for thinking about man’s movement through time. Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was largely influential in this approach. McLennan proposed that the history of all races began with a world without marriage, without paternity, yet with kinship (McLennan 87). McLennan describes a series of rituals and customs surrounding marriage that he groups under the category “marriage by capture” (23). Through an understanding of supply and demand, property and ownership, he believes men captured other men’s women because they didn’t have enough of their own. He concludes that since a shortage of women would not
occur naturally, men must have killed off women, and that there must have been a systematic, rational, and utilitarian reason for doing so. Women, like other goods, would be held “in common” (92). What separates bad primitive masculine tyranny without fathers from good civilized ordered dominance through patriarchy is this alternate form of bonding—matrilineal kinship—a form of social organization in a world without marriage or property.

Under matrilineage, who a woman’s mother is defines who her child is—she is the link between the woman who produced her, and the child whom she herself produces. Sexual act and sexual object choice are separated from reproduction, since the identity of the child depends on who gave it birth, rather than who was engaged in the egg/sperm exchange. This means that a woman’s identity is rooted in her relations to other women. (This naturally is unthinkable in Henry Maine’s theory of status.) This accounts for the inseparable bond between Lucinda and her ‘aunt,’ Mrs. Carbuncle. Though this theory was rejected in the 1920s, Victorians used it to rationalize the inequality in patriarchal relations in the 1860s, 70s and 80s.

Lucinda Roanoke provides a model for primitive matrilineage in The Eustace Diamonds. By rejecting the marriage she has always hated, on the very day of the wedding, she does, as William Cohen notes, provide a “genuine difference in the representation of female sexuality, an alternative—however psychotic in its depiction—to the heterosexual order that organizes the other women’s desire” (172-73). She defies all accepted notions of feminine sexuality, creating a new approach that surprisingly does not include a man. In fact, she replaces normal desire with disgust.
The initial differentiating feature for Lucinda resides in her body. According to KathyPsomiades, women’s bodies are shaped like commodities, with surfaces that show their value and depths that show their “true value” (108). Lizzie’s flashy surface hides her shallow nature and Lucy’s dull exterior also hides the treasure of her depth. But Lucinda’s body is a copy of Mrs. Carbuncle’s body, and the shared content of their bodies is not value at all, but blood. It is value which turns the body into a commodity in search of a consumer. Female bodies are compared and evaluated through the eyes of the masculine consumer. In The Eustace Diamonds, Frank and the narrator decide on the worth of Lizzie’s and Lucy’s bodies according to their own standard of value. And both women look at their bodies in mirrors during the times they are insecure about their lovers. Lucy “casts a glance at her features in the glass” and determines her valuelessness (Eustace 2:187). Most women, like Lizzie and Lucy, look at their bodies to tell how a man feels toward them. But Lucinda looks to her body to decide how she feels toward a man. The circulation of blood takes the place of the circulation of objects in this market. And blood makes Mrs. Carbuncle’s and Lucinda’s bodies incapable of being circulated.

Lucinda’s body is beautiful but savage and full of murderous intentions. First, she possesses savage-like features: black hair, broad nose, and thick lips (1:329). The word “savage” is applied to her, which serves to racialize, primitivize, and archaize her (Psomiades 109). And the portrait of her that “caused much remark at the Exhibition” compares her to notorious women in history: Brinville, the seventeenth-century French Marquise who murdered her family, the Queen of Sheba, and Cleopatra (Eustace 1:330). Her eyes show that there is no indication of love and those that liken her to Cleopatra believe that this queen’s love had simply been used to assist her ambition. Others who
liken her to Brinvilliers are men so used to flattery from women that they assume a woman who is silent, arrogant, and hard to approach must naturally be contemplating murder. All men agree on one thing, however: she is not the sort of girl with whom a man wants to “stray away through the distant beech-trees” at a picnic (1:330). She is both a heroine and someone who will shoot a fellow as soon as look at him.

Lucinda’s body is unique in that it is a copy of Mrs. Carbuncle’s body—the aunt, whom she later discovers to be her mother. The resemblance between them is the open, yet unspoken sexual scandal of the novel (1:329). Though the reader is not told who Lucinda’s father is, it is certain about who her mother is. The color on her face, the complexion shared by both women that is a “wonder” and “marvelous” is a reference to the common blood (1:329). Their blood value forms a bond that links her more to her aunt/mother than to any other man. She tells Lizzie that Sir Griffin must be the one to break off their marriage because “he is not bound to anybody as I am bound to my aunt” (2:243, 273). There is an attachment between these women that preempts any other.

Because Lucinda’s relationship with Sir Griffin contains a mixture of both traditional romantic and cynical attitudes, there is much confusion about their desires. They seem to always be at cross-purposes with each other. As soon as Lucinda is engaged, her aunt tries to separate them to prevent them from sabotaging their own engagement. Though she hears Lucinda openly admit that she hates Sir Griffin, it doesn’t have any bearing of the marriage plans. Lucinda is harassed by his rudeness, his threats and innuendoes about matrimonial traps. But in spite of it all, the plans for this wedding continue. Sir Griffin is oddly attracted by Lucinda’s beauty and pride, but just as much by her refusal to flatter him. Her coldness attracts him, and then repels him, not unlike
Lizzie’s attraction to abusive men. He appears to relish her opposition toward him, giving him greater motivation to break her spirit and force her to love him. A.O.J. Cockshut comments on this bizarre approach. He argues that Sir Griffin’s failure only increases his determination so that he can later avenge himself for the injury of not being loved (193). If Lucinda had responded to his advances, however, he would have rejected her. This strange combination of anger, aggression, submission, and sexual desire proves that he cannot survive in a romance without the torture to feed it. While he desires to be told he is loved, he would not desire Lucinda if she actually gave it. And Lucinda expresses her own inconsistency in hating and accepting Sir Griffin simultaneously.

Lucinda, then, reflects two sides of feminine agency: desire and disgust. In terms of heterosexual exchange, she ultimately listens to her body’s promptings to break off the marriage, even though she only has a few months to find a husband before her fortune runs out. She chooses to remain true to her own body rather than succumb to the predatory life of the marriage market (Eustace 2:273). In one scene Sir Griffin tries to kiss her. The embrace disgusts her, makes her feel polluted and “odious to herself” (2:24). At this point she worries that if this beginning is so bad, how will she ever be able to “drink the cup to the bitter dregs”—implying sexual union (2:24). Kathy Psomiades argues that Lucinda’s sexual desire takes the form of murderousness toward men; that the fantasy of killing is also a fantasy of the sexual intercourse for which it substitutes (111). In a strange way, then, disgust is not so much the absence of desire, but the reversal. Her promise to “give him a kiss with a vengeance” hints at this dual nature of desire and disgust (Eustace 2:283). It is again a strange blend of masochism and sexual abnormality.
Because Lucinda’s sexual identity is based on a social structure rooted in matrilineage, she refuses marriage and achieves sexual but not economic agency. Her decision results in two consequences: she sacrifices the economic freedom that would have come with marriage and she loses her reputation as a rational being. As she remains true to her personal conviction, the pressure to marry becomes more than she can bear. She collapses under the stress, her sanity snaps, and sadly she ends up in a madhouse. Her love of truth actually destroys her. Her honesty with herself does not survive, because virtues need a supportive environment in order to flourish. Powerless people cannot retain their honesty unimpaired if there is no encouragement from those who control their fate. This suggests that feminine sexual agency is not possible in heterosexual exchange except as refusal. But this option is absolutely necessary if there is to be gender equality.

Object or Subject

As women of circulation, possession, or deviation (aberration) in society, all three in *The Eustace Diamonds* represent different forms of objectification. And while objectification strips women of their humanness, it surrounded Victorian women so much that many times it seemed they derived their very nourishment from it. Martha Nussbaum addresses this familiar concept of sexual objectification in *Sex and Social Justice*. She credits feminist theorists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin with the introduction of this term, now used primarily in a pejorative way. MacKinnon writes of pornography, “Admiration of natural physical beauty becomes objectification . . . harmlessness becomes harm” (MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* 174). She continues to
argue that “all women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water . . . cutting women off from full self-expression and self-determination—in effect, their humanity” (MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory* 124). In what ways does a society reduce women from subjects to objects? Nussbaum creates a list of seven qualifiers involved in the idea of treating a human being as an object. While it is true that we do not treat all persons as objects in all seven ways, the following list provides markers to help the reader recognize this behavior for what it is, and call it by its rightful name: objectification.

1. Instrumentality: Treating the person as a tool for his purposes.
2. Denial of autonomy: Treating the person as lacking in self-determination.
3. Inertness: Treating the person as lacking in agency and/or activity.
4. Fungibility: Treating the person as interchangeable with other ‘objects’ of the same type and/or other types.
5. Violability: Treating the person as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. Ownership: Treating the person as something that is owned, bought or sold.
7. Denial of subjectivity: Treating the person as something whose experience and feelings need not be taken into account (Nussbaum 218).

It would be nice to imagine that marriage will guarantee mutual respect and regard so as to destroy the instrumentality mindset that denies these women their autonomy and subjectivity. Barbara Herman addresses this Kantian notion in an article expounding Kant’s philosophy on sexuality and marriage. According to Herman, Kant recognizes that sexual desire is a very powerful force that can create a treatment of
persons not as ends in themselves but as means or tools for the satisfaction of one’s own desires (Herman 49). But this kind of instrumentalizing denies autonomy—one wishes to dictate how the other person will behave so it will bring satisfaction. It also denies subjectivity—one stops asking how the other person is thinking or feeling, for the same reason. When a woman is denied autonomy, it leaves her so deprived of her humanity that she is ripe for other abuses: refusal of imagination, denial of subjectivity, denial of individuality, and even bodily violation and abuse (223). Instrumentalizing a woman denies what is fundamental to her as a human being, the status of being an end in herself.

Like Kant, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon agree that all human beings deserve respect and this is naturally incompatible with treating them as instruments. But they both argue that the denials of autonomy and subjectivity are not rooted to sexual desire itself. They assert that hierarchy is at the root of the problem. And marriage will not solve the objectification issue, because it is created by “asymmetrical structures of power” (Nussbaum 225). In other words, women learn to eroticize being dominated and being turned into objects. With its historical connotations of ownership and non-autonomy, marriage is one of the structures that actually increased objectification in the nineteenth century. It wasn’t until John Stuart Mill attacked the inequality issue inherent in marriage in his *Subjection of Women* (1869) that Victorian minds began to change.

If women are really jewels and men are the consumers in search of jewels to purchase, then a woman must continue to look to her consumer to assess her value. Their relationship cannot be harmonious because they coexist as unequals. Because they are unequal, they lack mutual respect. In the world of exchange, the women of *The Eustace*
*Diamonds* have limited negotiating power. Lizzie manipulates men because this fits her law of romance. It is the way she has been taught and the only way she knows to get what she desires. Lucy marries and sacrifices her own potential because it is the only respectable option for a woman without beauty and wealth. Lucinda tragically succumbs to madness because she refuses to acquiesce to a society that will not accept her brand of womanhood. This act of resistance is familiar in that Gwendolen, in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, resorts to a similar use of madness in a desperate attempt to gain control.

Though each woman is an object of desire, each woman is not treated the same. Objects come in many forms and some are more precious than others. Lucy earns respect by her noble character; Lizzie’s beauty and wealth earn her recognition, but not respect. Lucinda earns respect from the reader alone who admires her personal integrity that requires personal sacrifice. But in the narrative each one’s value is set by the men with whom they are engaged. All three must compromise if they are to fit in as objects within their society. Yet all three contribute to the values placed upon them. On the one side are the objectifiers—Frank, Lord George, Lord Fawn, Mr. Emilius, Sir Griffin—but on the other side are the women who volunteer for object status. Each woman, then, must take some personal responsibility for her own objectification, since her sexuality is defined by both herself and others. It is a complex system of her own as well as others’ desires, attitudes, roles and norms that ultimately affect her status.
Trollope’s Realism

Anthony Trollope writes in the realist or mimetic tradition. In *The Eustace Diamonds* and the other Palliser novels, the parallel between the political plots and romantic plots becomes the struggle for dominance. Marriage provides greater areas of conflict because the husband is by custom, law, economics, and education, superior to the wife. Richard Barickman notes that the marital conflicts are a microcosm of all the disputes that come out of a patriarchal system where some people automatically count more than others (207). Yet, Trollope also advocates accommodation, tolerance, and adaptation for women if they want to make life easier for themselves. His attitudes toward marriage, then, are somewhat complex and ambivalent.

As a realist, Trollope uses multiple courtship plots to highlight social and sexual fraud in all relations. Barickman contends that Trollope believes that fraudulent relations are the daily practice of respectable society; that the distinction between crime and routine social fraud is simply a question of class rather than virtue. And yet, he implicates himself in the fraud he exposes in that he shares the underlying patriarchal values that generate sexual injustice. But because of his participation in the very culture

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3 According to George Levine, realism belongs to a “middling” condition that defines itself against the excesses of romantic, exotic, or sensational literature (6). This means adapting to the changing notions of not only what is out there, but how best to represent it. This gets complicated by an author’s sense of responsibility to his audience, conventions of propriety, and earlier literary imaginations of what is real. The rules of realism require an artist to take art seriously, something Trollope resists. His first responsibility is to his audience, aiming to teach lessons of virtue while still making himself a “delight to his readers” (*Autobiography* 190). He is more of a professional storyteller than artist. His realism, then, is flexible and remains in the comic tradition. Trollope’s realism also reflects a view of human nature that depends on mixed and compromised motives, seen clearly in the lives of Lizzie, Lucy, and Lucinda. The world Trollope depicts, then, provides a social substitute, helping the reader accept disillusionment when reality changes the ideal. His stories are, what Richard Barickman calls, “apprenticeship novels”, whereby courtship is an apprenticeship to the difficult career of marriage (204-5). For this reason, he often carries characters from one story to another.
he satirizes, he can present sexual and social fraud with accuracy. Since sexuality is a
determining factor in economic and political life, social fraud and sexual fraud are
inseparable. Barickman asserts, and rightly so, that unlike his earlier novels that focus on
one central plot, the multiple plots of his later novels are necessary to reflect the
fragmentation he finds in his society (200). In *The Eustace Diamonds* the unstable sexual
roles clash and seem to resist any resolution. In other words, counterpoint resolves in
unresolved dissonance. This is what makes his realism *more* realistic than other Victorian
realists.

We seem to have, then, two Trollopes when it comes to the issue of women. While his narrators seem to extol the virtues of marriage as a cure for female problems, he consistently highlights the destructive effects of unlimited male power in patriarchal marriage. He is at the same time seemingly hostile of the women’s movement and later sympathetic to this same group. Barickman points out that this kind of evasiveness, as well as the sexual conflicts in his novels, causes some readers to see him as a “bland apologist for orthodox sexual relations” (199). This perception surfaces because his novels lack, according to Barickman, a “synthesizing narrative voice” that we see in Eliot’s work. Instead, the reader is forced to do the exploring and synthesizing for herself. He is both hostile critic and defender of the way things are regarding the interconnected relations of power and powerlessness. This is Trollope’s attempt to realistically portray the tensions of men and women living in a society whose traditional values are breaking down.

In addition to social and sexual realism, Trollope clearly presents heroic realism. This heroic realism reflects his underlying commitment to show all sides of
humanity—both virtues and faults. While validating the reader’s desire to sympathize with a hero or heroine, the narrator simultaneously asks his readers to find the heroes in their own lives and conduct an honest appraisal of their character. He alludes to the chivalric associations underlying the system of heirlooms when he declares, “It is very easy to depict a hero—a man absolutely stainless, perfect as an Arthur—a man honest in all his dealings, equal to all trials, true in all his speech, indifferent to his own prosperity, struggling for the general good, and, above all, faithful in love” (Eustace 1:318). But we all know that such heroes do not exist in real life. If we determine to find them, we will get a false perception of the world and give up our own efforts at self-improvement.

Realism shows ordinary people as they are, sometimes treacherous and false, and other times good and wise. And Trollope presents Lizzie, Lucy and Lucinda as flawed individuals. The reader can more easily identify with heroines who occasionally make wrong choices than consistently good ones. There are no heroes to dine with us; but then, the narrator reminds us that if they existed we would not like them. Trollope gives the truest picture of life as it is when he paints a picture of men and women as they are, rising not to perfection, but one step first, and then another on the ladder of society (1:320). With this, he combines a romantic approach to the law with a realistic approach to writing.

Conclusion

What shall a woman do with her life? The women characters in Trollope’s novels ask this question repeatedly. Through all his explorations of marriage, Trollope consistently emphasizes that a woman’s condition in this patriarchal society is utterly dependent on the males she is associated with, and in such a society, women really have
few options but marriage. Without any secondary forms of power, the only power available to most women is the power to secure a husband, and to do this they must enter the world of exchange and possession, but not as equal partners in the marriage contract. Gender difference and exchange belong to incompatible worlds. Since women lack true agency in the marriage market and become objects circulated among other commodities, they must choose whether they will be treasures and gifts like Lucy—content to live within the confines of coverture and separate spheres—or fakes and purchases like Lizzie. Bad women, like Lizzie, enter the process of circulation and negotiate the demands for power by yielding to it and directing their own commodification. Good women, like Lucy, rarely escape unscathed. Against their will, they must enter the realm of exchange into which they are drawn and lose their identities as subjects. It is only through self-sacrifice (usually in helping the male enter that same realm without loss of subjectivity), that they can “save” themselves. In this way, power negotiation becomes an economic one. It is interesting that in this narrative the diamonds are never recovered. The final owner is a Russian princess, but it is her wealth and her position rather than her gender that makes it impossible to retrieve them from her possession.

The only way to avoid the exchange and possession inherent in the marriage market is to consider whether to marry at all. Though, according to Richard Barickman, female independence was only a tantalizing daydream for most of Trollope’s intelligent heroines, celibacy was becoming more honorable (206). Paradigm shifts meant that old maids were beginning to be called unmarried women. Financial security, which had been such a dominant issue before, was slowly becoming secondary. While many still felt that the better solution for women was still marriage, a growing number felt that
percent of English women were unmarried, the better solution would be to accept this situation, educate them, and allow them to support themselves rather than ship them off to the colonies. The necessity for marriage would no longer exist if women were educated for a profession. At least there would be fewer marriages of interest and more of love. Patricia Thomson notes that though Trollope saw spinsterhood as a “violation of a natural law” public opinion was moving in that direction; as self-respect increased, women became less inclined to condone the practice of having a mercenary value set upon them (112). Bartering for marriage settlements was still the fashion in society, but most novelists were opposed to this practice and created narratives that focused on heroines who were sought for their other qualities.

Because Trollope appears as both critic and advocate of the woman question, it may seem natural to question his credibility as an author of love stories. In fact, his own friends told him that at fifty-five he ought to give up the fabrication of love stories (Trollope, Autobiography 296). However, this novel achieves success not as a love story. Trollope even admits that there is not much love in it; but what there is, is good (297). It is good because it not only examines the real transactions between men and women based on exchange, but exposes the oppression concealed within this system, forming a subversive counterplot. Patricia Thomson cites an insightful quote from an article in the Fortnightly Review of 1869, in which the writer criticizes Anthony Trollope’s love stories because they do not touch the “deep chords in a woman’s nature” that marriage will not satisfy (110-11). As far as Trollope knew, there were no deep chords in a woman that a good marriage couldn’t fix. It was by marriage and marriage only, that he felt women could exercise their supremacy; that only by the sublimation of herself through her
husband and children could a woman ever bring her full powers of influence for good into action (111). Along with the other male novelists of his day, he was locked into a mindset that simply could not imagine women in terms other than their value to men. But it is here, in sexual exploitation and injustice that the greatest economic swindle occurs. Meanwhile, the deep chords in a woman’s nature began to surface and resonate with others: the desire to be valued in a different way. Feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon remind us that women are indeed objects, though some deemed more expensive than others; it is only by asserting one’s humanness every time, in all situations, that one becomes someone as opposed to something (Dworkin 83). When that finally happens, perhaps the deep chords of discontent will begin to fade for women.

As this novel demonstrates, economic mastery belongs to the male consumer as long as men remain in the public work place and women remain in the home. It is only when women enter the public work force that they can become equal contenders in the race for economic mastery. This will grant them full agency not only to negotiate the terms of their own value but the value of the men with whom they work. The final novel, Phoebe Junior, provides an example of a woman who lacks the beauty and wealth of both Gwendolen Harleth and Lizzie Eustace. However, she demonstrates a political mastery that stems from a self-mastery, representing a new kind of woman for the nineteenth century. Without reliance on external advantages, her strength and ultimate success begins with an internal mastery that moves outward, a virtue that finds its reward in expanded boundaries of influence and leadership.
CHAPTER IV

SELF-MASTERY IN

MARGARET OLIHANT’S

PHOEBE JUNIOR

I am myself whatever happens . . .
a lady must always be a lady wherever she is.
—Margaret Oliphant, Phoebe Junior

By the time Margaret Oliphant completed her final volume of the Chronicles of Carlingford in 1876, her readers were already familiar with previous unconventional heroines from Jane Austen, George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë—women who have both integrity and minds of their own (e.g., Jane Eyre). Like Oliphant’s, their heroines also come into conflict with the norms of society that restrict their sphere of influence and deny them full self-realization. However, with Brontë and Austen, their heroines usually end up back in the traditional roles of wife and mother, in the arms of their mentor-lovers, someone they can look up to, an ideal husband and a conventional happy ending. Phoebe Junior suggests that the kind of life that Phoebe wants is not possible within a conventional marriage, yet the happy ending certainly contradicts the idea that the Victorian marriage always leads to unhappiness for capable women like Phoebe. In fact, the reader soon discovers that happiness is not the ultimate goal for Phoebe at all. A brief summary of her life in Carlingford highlights the opportunities that give Phoebe meaning
and purpose. Her happiness is merely a byproduct; it derives from her usefulness to the people around her.

This story brings together Phoebe Beecham and Ursula May, two young women from dramatically opposite classes and religions, and examines the implications of their friendship. Phoebe is the daughter of a middle-class Dissenting clergyman and is sent to her mother’s childhood home town to look after her grandparents, the Tozers, who are ill. Her motivations are mixed—both a sense of familial responsibility as well as a way to gain favor and retain access the Tozer inheritance. Finding herself out of place among the lower class circle of shopkeeping Dissenters she is attracted instead to the middle-class May family. Mr. May is an Anglican clergyman, poorer than Phoebe but higher in class status. Phoebe forms a social circle of friends which includes both Anglicans and Dissenters, rich and poor, crossing barriers of both religion and class. This adds tension to the romantic plot in that both Reginald, a poor Anglican, and Clarence, a rich Dissenter, are in love with Phoebe. The unsettling marriage that results is the primary focus of the novel, though another subplot surfaces involving Mr. May that highlights Phoebe’s heroic efforts to protect his reputation from her grandfather. Throughout the narrative, respect and trust in Phoebe’s good judgment increase as her wise choices bear fruit in dismantling both class and religious differences.

In this chapter, I argue, first, that Margaret Oliphant as a self-possessed domestic ‘drone,’ provides a contrasting model to the domestic ideology of the Victorian woman described in Nancy Armstrong’s groundbreaking *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. As a ‘type’ of Phoebe, her life demonstrates how Victorian women are able to bend the rules, remain autonomous, and influence others, while remaining within the traditional
domestic sphere. This requires embracing new forms of female empowerment, but it results in a power earned, not grasped, and one fully available to the women of her day. Phoebe Beecham, as a new type of woman, earns influence and power primarily because she has first learned to master herself. This ethics of self-mastery as a prerequisite to mastering others finds its roots in first-century stoicism still visible in Victorian thought, ideas that targeted a masculine audience and masculine assumptions of ruling leadership. Thus, Phoebe represents the ‘female male’ with characteristics that uniquely equip her for power. With this quality of self-possession, Phoebe gains both opportunities and the right to expand the boundaries of her control to other men in her life, even those who oppose her socially and theologically. Her self-mastery is the quality that accrues social and cultural capital which yields social mobility. I will argue that though she has been granted some advantages educationally, this is still somewhat limiting for a woman in the nineteenth century. Because Phoebe is self-possessed, she controls what Elizabeth Langland calls the “production of meanings” socially and culturally (Langland, Telling Tales 91). This gives her self-confidence in conversation, dress, social mobility, diplomacy, and confrontation. As her reputation increases, her influence broadens to include members of every social class. Oliphant creates Phoebe as a model that challenges traditional representations of womanhood as well as traditional representations of marriage by turning the doctrines of coverture and separate spheres on their heads.
The Ethics of Self-Mastery: Lessons from the Stoics

When we are introduced to Phoebe in the first chapter, she seems to have already mastered herself in many ways. Even at her young age she has an abundance of self-confidence, intelligence, courage, agency, common sense, and style. From her first entrance at the Copperhead ball to her final exit as a married woman, her influence continues to spread throughout the pages to every other character she meets. Though only twenty years old, she is not emotional, but purposeful and deliberate in her actions. Responding to life in a matter-of-fact way without need of support or advice, she never hesitates to decide for herself and assume responsibility for her own life. Being a natural leader is one thing, but it is her wisdom and self-control at such a young age that earns her respect by those who know her. It isn’t long before we find the first young gentleman, Horace Northcote, confessing, “I have the greatest respect for your opinion,” or the elder Mr. May admiring Phoebe for her self-possession and knowledge of the world (Phoebe 157, 188). Her abilities go beyond the qualities required of capable middle-class women and the most skilled domestic manager. In addition to her social intelligence and her ability to strategize, she has an unfeminine nerve and tenacity. According to Wendy Jones, her understanding of business and public affairs goes beyond the social world in which women’s intelligence normally operates (162). But qualities like these do not develop in a vacuum. She inherited her independent spirit from her mother but also from the small but independent Dissenting congregation of Salem Chapel, which included males. This influence empowered Phoebe and taught her to channel internal power in
socially acceptable ways. She demonstrates self-mastery consistently by her conviction to live by principles rather than pragmatism, even if this means she must stand alone.

We can learn much about self-possession (i.e., self-mastery) from the first century Stoics. Cicero, the Roman orator and political figure of the first century described philosophy as “medicine for the soul” (qtd. in Mac Suibhne 430). Unlike modern philosophy, the ancient philosophers saw their role as determining and teaching the right way to live. Stoic philosophy, often synonymous with ‘repressed’ has negative connotations. But this was very different from what the Stoics actually taught. According to Seamus Mac Suibhne, Zeno of Citium started the Stoic school of philosophy around 301 B.C., teaching in his stoa poikile or ‘painted porch’ of his house in Athens (430). This holistic teaching emphasized, among other things, a view of logic that certainty in knowledge could be achieved through the use of reason. But it is the ethical field that the Stoics are both remembered and misunderstood. One of these misunderstood concepts is that of an emotion-free approach to life, called apatheia, which is usually translated as ‘apathy,’ though very different from our modern use of this word. Apatheia simply means emotionlessness of thought and judgment, a + patheia (pathos/passion), not indifference (431). Mac Suibhne argues that this key component of Stoic philosophy, cultivated and developed through practice, is a prominent characteristic in Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations. This focus on practical ethics, found also in the writings of other Stoics, cultivates not just wisdom but also the inner spiritual life as well.

Foucault explores this area of cultivating the care of the self and the ancient philosophers who developed the techniques for doing this in his third volume of The History of Sexuality (1984). He refers to their techniques as ways that as subjects, we are
continually engaged in defining and producing our own ethical self-understanding (Foucault, *History* 432). Self-improvement through discipline was central to this Stoic practice. So, when Marcus Aurelius writes to himself, “wrestle to be the man philosophy wished to make you,” he is reminding himself again and again to keep following the practices that will make him into a man of virtue (qtd. in Mac Suibhne 433). This provides the framework for another theme in his *Meditations*, the fact that it is possible to live a philosophical life, a life of virtue, even as an Emperor. This resulted in a shift in political thought, challenging former thought that philosophy and politics could not peacefully coexist.

At the beginning of the imperial epoch, then, Roman life experienced changes in political relationships that resulted in two attitudes. On the one hand there existed the emphasis that allowed an individual to define his identity according to his status, noticeable by physical signs such as clothing, spending, gestures—all those things that showed superiority over others. But at the same time another attitude began to surface, that of defining oneself as the subject of one’s own actions, not through a system of signs of power over others, but through something that depends as little as possible on status: the control that one exercises over oneself. These opposing attitudes forced a leader to choose to either increase the signs of status or find a satisfactory relationship with oneself (Foucault, *History* 85). But philosophers such as Seneca and Epictetus endorsed this shift, showing that these two attitudes did not necessarily have to be in opposition, but could be complementary when they asked, “You make it your concern how to live in a palace, how slaves and freedmen are to serve you . . . have you concerned yourself with your own rational self?” (qtd. in Foucault, *History* 86). Self-cultivation is the first priority for
political leaders. It is this same self-cultivation that enhances Phoebe’s political leadership as well.

This control over oneself becomes a principle theme for political action and power over others. Seen in this way, the exercise of power is twofold: one is at the same time both “a ruler and the ruled” (qtd. in Foucault, *History* 87). It became a growing emphasis in Greek political thought that in knowing how to properly conduct himself a ruler would then be able to lead others properly as well. This is what Plutarch explains in *To an Uneducated Ruler*: one will not be able to rule if one is not oneself ruled (qtd. in Foucault, *History* 89). In a political space where laws had lost some of their importance, it was necessary that the art of governing oneself become a crucial political factor. This principle applies to anyone who governs. He or she must attend to himself or herself and establish his or her own *ethos* (89). Finding satisfaction in being self-governed, then, a leader is equipped to govern others with justice and wisdom. The Stoics saw this as a necessary universal principle that works to promote a strong community bond between all individuals. This principle holds true for every person in every station—a Roman knight as well as a slave.

An important feature in Stoic philosophy and one that Phoebe demonstrates consistently is self-denial as part of self-mastery. What the Stoics discovered is that willpower is like muscle power: the more one exercises the muscles, the stronger they get, and the more one exercises the will, the stronger it gets. Thus self-control is something that grows with practice, and increases the likelihood of a person reaching his or her goals in life. This takes enormous effort, but the Stoics will point out that exercising this self-control has benefits that might not be obvious. By bringing oneself
under mastery and discipline, a higher, genuine pleasure can be experienced, though very
different in nature than other common pleasures. Phoebe sacrificed her middle-class
reputation, choosing to identify with her grandparents’ lowly station; she denied herself
personal comfort and pleasure to place the needs of others before her own. But she gained
a deeper satisfaction and fulfillment as she witnessed the dissolving of class and religious
barriers and creation of new friendships (e.g., Northcote and May, Ursula and herself).

Such a model of political work makes a good leader succeed and at the same
time remain detached from status, whether it is an emperor or a twenty year-old woman.
Ability to rule others well is based on an individual’s ability to rule oneself. Plutarch says
this to the prince who is not yet educated, but it is wise counsel to all who aspire to
leadership. This ethics of self-mastery affects how an individual determines which
activities are obligatory and which are optional; natural or conventional; permanent or
provisional; unconditional or recommended only under certain conditions. It also
concerns the rules that one must apply when participating in any activity and the way one
ought to govern oneself in order to take one’s place among others, assert one’s authority,
and situate oneself in the shifting “interplay of relations” of command and subordination
(Foucault, *History* 94). Self-mastery implies a close connection between the superiority
one exercises over oneself, and the power one is permitted to exercise over others. The
superiority over self as an ethical core guarantees the moderate and reasonable use one
could and ought to make in other contexts. A truly wise leader will also recognize that
any position of superiority must somehow be associated with certain forms of reciprocity
and equality in the field of power relations with others.
Phoebe is a nineteenth-century representation of the first century ethics of self-mastery. She is in possession of herself, thus her actions flow from her own authority over herself. Karol Wojtyla argues in *The Acting Person* that only the person who has this self-possession is prepared to live in the real world because it allows little room for “flights of fancy, imaginary utopias, or living in the past or future” (105). When an individual chooses to “not live in the real world” she chooses to abandon responsibility over her actions, which do not accord with reality or truth. Many young Victorian women lived in just such a world, one that was unrealistic. But Phoebe was not like most young Victorian women. And her self-possession prepares her to face reality squarely and courageously.

Although Stoicism teaches the development of self-control and fortitude as a means of overcoming destructive emotions, Phoebe uses her self-control in positive action. Again, Wojtyla argues that the standard belief is that an action presupposes a person. But he suggests a reversal approach: that an action *reveals* the person (11). From this perspective, a reader can look at the Phoebe, analyze her actions, and discover who she is. This is, in essence, what Plato stresses, that you know what someone believes by what they do. This is the best way to understand her more fully, not by what she says, but by what she does. Every time she declares “I will” this is an act of her self-determination and this presupposes her basic structural self-possession. Phoebe makes many significant “I will” decisions that impact others in varying degrees. She steps into areas of responsibility that most young men and women resist.

Because she is self-possessed, she exercises specific power over herself but sets limitations on others. Here she has full agency and creates a network of her own
reasons for her life decisions. Phoebe not only controls herself, but she is capable of
governing herself, that is, to be able to order and monitor her actions as well as judge the
rightness and wrongness of them. In this way she creates a dynamic destiny for herself.
The Stoics stressed a common rule: follow where reason leads. Phoebe adheres to this
implicitly.

She masters her passions and emotions but not, like the Stoics, in order to find
equilibrium in the world or avoid trouble. Her freedom from passion operates in order to
develop clear judgment, objectivity, and an inner calm through her diligent practice of
logic, reflection, and concentration. The Stoic maxim to ‘love all men’ by embracing a
general expression of benevolence may sound impractical and idealistic. With this value
in mind, the Stoics did not necessarily eradicate emotion; instead, they operated from a
primary motivation of duty instead of desire. They were countering self-interest whereby
a man or woman might be tempted to show sympathy or kindness to one and not the
other. Margaret Anderson argues that it is this very sense of duty in Stoicism that
equalizes universal good will by treating everyone with the same benevolence (421). This
places Stoicism and sensibility side by side with Phoebe representing both. In like
fashion, Phoebe’s virtue shifts away from self-interest to address the needs of others,
without sentiment and without partiality, with a “general habit of benevolence, and
readiness of occasional kindness” equally to all (qtd. in Anderson 420-21). This may
seem impossible because it requires impartiality and indifference, a quality foreign to
human nature. Phoebe succeeds because she counters her self-interest with genuine
interest in others. Thus, she bridges the social and religious chasm quite easily, and finds
redeeming qualities in the most unlikely person, Clarence, when others cannot.
The Stoic philosophy was essentially a rule of living to help an individual in the formation of character and doing one’s duty to mankind. Its demands on the personal character were extremely high. William Davidson presents the basic components of the Stoic creed. First, it required an individual to be someone of simplicity and thoroughly convinced of his or her convictions, on rational grounds alone, not just on the authority of another. Next, this individual must show his or her principles in life, have a noble character and consistent walk and conversation. And thirdly, this person must have wide human sympathies, not despising the plain man, but expressing a duty towards the “illiterate and unsophisticated” brother (52-4). In essence, the person of Stoic philosophy must know who and what she is about, with a high idea of her vocation or calling. The goal is not personal praise, but to benefit others. This description of the Stoic fits Phoebe Beecham precisely.

Phoebe Beecham: The Female Male

Because Phoebe Beecham embodies strong Stoic tendencies, she represents a more androgynous character than other Victorian heroines. She is far from being the submissive angel in the house like Lucy Morris or the evil temptress like Lizzie Eustace. Instead, Phoebe Beecham presents a new kind of woman—neither passive nor rebellious. She is a traditional character yet lives at odds with tradition when it contradicts her personal values. She is not ignorant, like most female heroines, but knows exactly what she wants and manages to get it. Margarete Rubik describes her as neither shy nor helpless; confident and sure of herself; not passive, but active; not emotional, but calculating and capable of solving problems rationally (115). And yet, Phoebe is not
perfect. While showing affection for her grandparents, she is still sometimes embarrassed by their behavior. And her willingness to look after her grandparents is both out of a sense of duty and because it would be stupid to allow the inheritance to go to more distant relatives. She, like other Oliphant heroines, is sometimes guided by mixed motives. But this shows that Oliphant refuses to idealize her characters. Even a modern critic like Kathleen Watson calls Phoebe a “less admirable character than a Dorothea Brooke” because at times she displays some selfishness (Watson 418). But it is refreshing to find a character who, as one contemporary reviewer declares, is seen in real life but seldom in literature—with an “earthiness which has no taint in it, a girl who wants to win the best from life, to obtain promotion, and to enjoy herself every day, yet is as completely without badness in her nature as without silliness in her brain” (qtd. in Rubik 124). This down-to-earth quality helps her to accept what is imperfect in life, not make exaggerated moral demands on herself or others, and see flaws and weaknesses in others as natural and human.

Phoebe’s unique advantage is that she has more traditionally male characteristics than female ones. Arlene Young notes that her virtues are not the traditional feminine ones of tenderness and subservience, but masculine ones of action and command (132). She always reacts in a rational, matter-of-fact way. In a crisis, she doesn’t need support or advice; instead, she usually decides for herself and assumes responsibility for her own life. This kind of independent mind was often seen by other writers as dangerous. In fact, Rubik argues that self-reliance is sometimes a protagonist’s greatest flaw (115). While Oliphant admires the self-confidence and independence of her women, she has been criticized because she often allows her heroines to successfully
perform men’s traditional work in estate or bank management or act as breadwinners: “strong, half-masculine, clear-sighted woman, blind to nothing . . . to place her in the position of a man” (Spectator 1661). Near the end of this story, Phoebe hides a forged check from her grandfather in order to cover up for Mr. May (Oliphant, Phoebe 386). Because of this strong-willed act, critics accused Phoebe of being “disobedient” and “unladylike” (Saturday Review 113). She was also accused of meddling in the business affairs of men and not obeying the wishes of her seniors. Reviewers criticize Phoebe because her behavior might set a precedent for other young girls to think they could do as they please. Oliphant goes beyond assigning male characteristics. She creates Phoebe to surpass the other men in this novel in intelligence and also beat them in the very domains (public) that they traditionally consider their own. If intelligence is a questionable virtue for girls in the nineteenth century, a woman that is actually superior to her spouse is totally unacceptable (Rubik 117). According to Jenni Calder, this kind of challenge to male dominance ultimately means criticism of the whole patriarchal system and to the whole social order (14). But though Phoebe is “more astute, more courageous, more dynamic, and has more stamina,” she is still a positive heroine who deserves the success she receives (Rubik 117). She doesn’t merely challenge gender stereotypes; she defies all sexist prejudice and turns the Victorian ideal of womanhood upside down. Oliphant seals Phoebe’s maleness by adding “junior” to her name. By reversing gender roles, Oliphant clearly refutes the stock prejudices of her day and at the same time parodies John Ruskin’s assertion that man is “eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender” (Ruskin 144). Most heroines that possess such ‘maleness’ are shrews or negatively portrayed. But Phoebe is not because she does not try to usurp authority
positions. And because of this, she is rewarded with power and respect. Her secret lies in the opening epigraph of this chapter, the oft-repeated maxim Phoebe asserts in the novel itself: *I am myself, no matter what happens* (Oliphant, *Phoebe* 104).

Phoebe progresses in building social and cultural capital through education, dress, style, conversation and wit. Her educational opportunities provide a beginning foundation for future independence. In that she is an only child, she has a German governess all to herself. Her father believes some of this German influence, a “philosophy which Germans communicate by their very touch,” must have got into her (Oliphant, *Phoebe* 31). In addition to this strong influence, she possesses “theories of her own” in just about every area (31). The London literary magazine, *The Athenaeum* (1828-1921) described Phoebe as a “thoroughly educated girl who has quite left her revelations behind in a social point of view” (*Athenaeum* 851). Her studies include: philosophy, language, and music; lectures at the ladies’ college where eminent men spoke on a great many different subjects; many books—Virgil and Sophocles among them (Oliphant, *Phoebe* 32). In fact, her reading includes a mixture of conventional and unconventional persuasion—both the novels of the antifeminist Charlotte Yonge, who advocates women’s limitations and the ideology of separate spheres, as well as John Stuart Mill’s *Dissertations* (54). Though she laments the fact that there are limits to women acquiring the highest education, at the same time she patronizes Ruskin’s theory that dancing, drawing and cooking were three of the highest arts to be studied by girls (32). And though her parents seem liberal minded by encouraging Phoebe to push the boundaries of traditional female thinking, they are also the ones responsible for some of her limitations. Her father would not allow her to take the Cambridge examinations because he was more
concerned about what others might think than about Phoebe’s advancement. So Phoebe is aware of the prejudice against her as a woman, that her “noble ambition was confined”; this was indeed a “trial” for her (32). However, as Wendy Jones argues, her response to these limits is not the product of feminism, but simply a personal response of a very capable woman to the restrictions imposed on her by society (168). Typical of her other responses to life’s injustices, “she did what she could,” to work within the patriarchal system to be herself, develop her own independent ideology, and do so without loss of zeal or optimism. Some may feel that these contradictions make Phoebe a divided person when it comes to female autonomy. But, like her author, I believe she is wisely tempering her strong personality, and attempting to make the best of a less-than-ideal situation. Her sensibility and good judgment allow her to operate within a traditional framework, keeping both her head and heart under control.

Whereas Phoebe’s education increases her knowledge, it is her artistic taste, her style, that builds her cultural capital. She demonstrates her independence clearly by her attention to and choice of dress. The politics of dress runs continuously throughout this novel. Phoebe uses her ability to dress well to advance herself socially, to distance herself from her lower-middle class grandparents, to gain entry into a middle class home (the Mays), and eventually to marry the son of a wealthy industrialist. Phoebe asserts, “I have never undervalued dress as some girls do; I think it is a very important social influence” (Oliphant, Phoebe 105). And she demonstrates this philosophy when she attends Mr. Copperhead’s ball. As noted earlier, Phoebe has definite “theories of her own” about how to blend style and color to accentuate her individuality in a tasteful manner. She rightly concludes that the thing “that every girl looks well in” is the thing
that no one looks very well in, because it shows no invention or creativity (34). So she
shocks everyone by wearing black, a color not worn by girls under twenty, but one that
she feels will make her look her best. Phoebe is quite comfortable with looking and being
different from other girls her age, even being labeled as the ‘young woman in black’ by
other guests.

As soon as Phoebe is able to do what all the etiquette manuals advise against,
to dress up and look as if she belongs to a class higher than the one to which she was
born, her ability to pass as a member of the upper class is seen as a danger. Some try to
prove that she is unworthy of this status. One busybody observes Phoebe (in a twenty-
guinea dress) with her grandmother, an old washerwoman, walking down the street, and
remarks negatively, “I should have taken her for a lady if I had met her in the street . . .
that was a sight to wake anyone up” (133). Phoebe’s attempts to cross cultural lines are
often met with verbal rebuke or at the least disdainful looks by both lower-middle and
higher-middle classes. When she moves to Carlingford, the community notices the
contrast immediately between her appearance and that of her grandfather. They comment
that it is strange to see her “putting her daintily-gloved hand upon old Tozer’s greasy
sleeve . . . about whose social position no one could make the least mistake” (158). But
Phoebe knows that this discrepancy has no bearing on who she really is. She refuses to
capitulate to the “gesture of exclusion” so prevalent in Victorian culture, the attitude that
“educating people out of their sphere” does more harm than good (132). Phoebe comes
against such strong sentiment because her self-possession, the character within, is a
stronger force than the pressure without.
However, Phoebe is not trying to be deliberately pretentious or rebellious like the other ladies of Salem Chapel. Unfortunately, her grandparents succumb to this pretention that has become the way of life in the community. They want her to follow suit, take more pains with her hair, and wear lace and a brooch, so as to outshine the other ladies and draw attention to herself. They want to show off Phoebe as someone above both her mother and her grandparents. This will increase their own sense of importance. But this goes completely against Phoebe’s principles. She groans under this obvious attempt by her grandparents to use her as an object of display. And yet, she also realizes that in this situation the most sensible response is to comply with their wishes out of respect and honor for their authority. So she swallows her pride, attends the public meeting overdressed, and absorbs the sneers at her attire, though they “went to Phoebe’s heart” (163). She sacrifices her own desire, another Stoic action of self-denial, so as not to offend her elders. Secure in her selfhood, she accepts misrepresentation and consequent misunderstanding of the community with quiet dignity.

Phoebe’s discriminating taste eventually finds acceptance within both middle-class and elite social circles. She may not have the fortune, but she has the signs of cultural capital that everyone recognizes. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this form of cultural capital “presupposes dispositions and competencies which are not distributed universally . . . yielding a profit in legitimacy . . . feeling justified in being what one is, what it is right to be” (228). Phoebe’s taste makes it possible for her to behave with what one contemporary reviewer calls “superhuman self-reliance” (Saturday Review 112). It distinguishes her from the members of her father’s wealthy congregation, ladies who are excluded from genteel society because, as Elizabeth Langland argues in
"Telling Tales, “distinctions of dress licensed exclusion of ‘vulgar’ individuals from the social set” (35). In other words, the emphasis always rests on subtle understatement in apparel. The *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* (1876) cautions, “that it is better to be too plainly dressed than too much dressed . . . Nothing has a more vulgar appearance than being too fine” (qtd. in Langland 35). By choosing to wear black and other understated attire, Phoebe demonstrates that she has internalized what Margaret Oliphant argues in *Dress*, that the educated portion of the community has taught the rest of us that wild combinations of colors in one costume are vulgar and in bad taste (Oliphant, *Dress* 81). It is because Phoebe helps maintain the barrier against vulgarity that she is perceived by the genteel middle-class society as resembling one of their own. Because she is able to pass as a member of the upper-middle classes she is able to move into their world. While Mr. May insists that he will have no “shopkeeping friends,” he makes an exception in Phoebe’s case, because he recognizes “that is a very lady-like young woman . . . One does not often see that style of thing here” (Oliphant, *Phoebe* 188, 201). It is not the intellectual middle-class male who has the artistic eye in this novel, but the educated woman of lower-class origins who demonstrates this ability to make “aesthetic distinctions of refinement” (Bourdieu 1). Phoebe uses her style and taste to make herself “at home among the quality” and loosen the class boundaries in the process (Oliphant, *Phoebe* 205). She is ‘at home’ with every class of society because she is first completely at home with herself. Again, her self-mastery launches her ahead socially, bringing her recognition and favor among every class.

Phoebe earns cultural capital with her style; but she earns social capital with her speech. First, she captivates Clarence with her ability to “talk almost as if she was in
society, as girls talk in novels . . . who had plenty to say for herself” (106). In addition to her earlier encounter with Horace Northcote, Mr. May meets Phoebe and he too is taken in by her many admirable qualities, primarily her “conversational powers . . . woman of the world aspect” (206). Then, Reginald meets Phoebe, and calls her “the cleverest girl I ever met; not like one of you bread-and-butter girls . . . a girl worth talking to” (228). We are told that there were a hundred things he wanted to discuss with her—things which the people about him did not understand much (277). He sees in Phoebe what life was like “in those intellectual professional circles . . . a higher world of culture and knowledge, in which genius, wit, and intellect stood instead of rank and riches” (277-8). What he does not consider, however, is the fact that though he is in love with Phoebe, marrying her will be social suicide for him. Regardless of this class disparity, he knows he wants to be with Phoebe because she is captivating and full of interest; there is no one else within his sphere who can talk so well. One by one, every man is smitten with her ability to converse. She possesses what contemporary readers might recognize as ‘savvyness’ in knowing how to say and do the right thing all the time. Her conversational skill and discriminating style open the gate for social mobility. But it is her character, her self-possession, that will keep her there.

Phoebe’s social mobility reflects an earlier generational progression. Elsie Michie observes this interesting movement as advantageous to Phoebe’s overall ability to maneuver within the established class structure. The first generation, the Tozers, are small shopkeepers who gain a measure of wealth; the second generation, the Beechams, establish themselves in an elevated position in a wealthy congregation in London; then, third generation Phoebe, who is educated well beyond her mother, exhibits her
refinement in her speech, elegant and understated dress, and love of music (Michie, “Dressing Up” 308). This gradual shift in family position is a lengthy process, but it works here primarily because Phoebe’s education helps her to conceive of herself in a more elevated position than she was born into. At first she is very conscious that her education gives her a sense of dislocation when she must return to the country and live with her grandparents. She knows her self-made parents have risen in social status, but she doesn’t know the extent to which they have moved from their original class origins. When she discovers that her grandfather is no more than a local butterman, it is both a shock and a disappointment. But, as Wendy Jones argues, she negotiates this potential threat to her own selfhood and to her standing in the community with skill and grace (Jones 165). She is honest about her grandparents’ identity but at the same time she is honest about herself. Phoebe decides that her own identity will not be determined by history. And she gives herself permission to sever the chain that holds both her parents and grandparents to a prescribed station. Her self-assessment comes from within herself and not from her surroundings. This gives her freedom to be as well as freedom to move.

But Phoebe soon faces the problem created by class mobility—that of fitting in with either class. She argues against the injustice of being confined, implying that this thinking is archaic, not progressive. “To be educated in another sphere and brought down to this is hard . . . and to keep everybody down to the condition they were born, why, that is the old way . . .” (Oliphant, Phoebe 155). Though facing the pressure of accepting the class difference in Carlingford, Phoebe refuses to adopt the town’s attitude. Her oft-repeated declaration is, “I am myself whatever happens” (154). She reasons that even if her grandparents are unrefined, it does not make her unrefined (104). By asserting her
own value and refusing to show any shame or weakness, Phoebe shapes others’ perceptions of herself despite the prejudices of a rigidly stratified social hierarchy. What sets her apart here is the strength and tenacity with which she insists that others accept her own interpretation of herself. She stands her ground and refuses to give in to the shame suggested by her position.

Phoebe loosens class barriers by adopting the role of a princess. She even compares herself to Una, the princess from Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* who symbolizes Truth. With this perspective, she imagines her own place in society as similar to that of a princess among lower-class society. This happens as soon as Phoebe steps off the train and she sees her shabby, greasy grandfather. The narrator tells us that he somehow knew that his own daughter had made some great strides in social elevation, and he calls Phoebe a “princess” who takes his breath away (115). If the criterion for being a princess is merit rather than birth, then it is appropriate that Phoebe thinks of herself in this way. This definition is even more meaningful when we consider John Stuart Mill’s reference to princesses in the *Subjection of Women* as proof that women possess the same capabilities as men. The ladies of reigning families are the only women who are allowed the same range of interests and freedom of development as men; in their case there is no inferiority (Mill, *Subjection* 189). Phoebe’s mobile social status in some ways ensures that she has this same privilege, which helps make her so confident, so self-possessed. And yet this same confidence preserves her from the “uneasy pride which afflicts inferior minds in similar circumstances” (Oliphant, *Phoebe* 117). Her education changes her social view, gives her a new perspective on equality, and motivates her to challenge the social hierarchy whenever she can. With the kind of capital that earns
respect among both upper and lower-middle classes, she then takes another risk, that of forming her own “new society” of friends, one that crosses all class lines and theological barriers. Her self-possession now impacts others, changing their paradigms as well.

Because Phoebe believes in herself, her mind is free to think and work for other people. Her self-possession prepares her to possess others in a way that empowers them. Even though she knows she will face many disagreeable things in Carlingford, she feels confident that nothing can truly humiliate her, or pull her down from her real eminence, so she has no fears (104). Besides Una, the other historical woman Phoebe compares herself to in this narrative is Joan of Arc, the embodiment of courage. This is fitting since the decisions she makes are at times risky. When she becomes embroiled in the forgery crisis, she decides to approach Mr. Cotsdean, plead for mercy on behalf of Mr. May, and negotiate a settlement to save his reputation and further legal action. This blatantly defies all standards of propriety, not to mention legal and financial boundaries. But she refuses to back away from an opportunity to intervene and bring reconciliation. She risks her own welfare for the sake of others. With this personal disregard she earns the trust of the powerless—those like Ursula, her grandparents, and Mr. Cotsdean who know she will do what is right on their behalf, too.

Phoebe’s Mastery of Others:
Negotiation and Confrontation

Phoebe’s ability to negotiate differences between those with opposing philosophies makes her an excellent diplomat. As a consummate negotiator of religious and class animosities, Phoebe successfully breaks down the walls of division by exposing the dogmatism and prejudice that prevails in Carlingford. But she does this with grace
and tact. This unique ability to draw out the best in people while at the same time exposing the fallacies of their beliefs demonstrates that she has all the qualities for a successful public career—except the right gender. This also shows the extent of her self-possession, in that she confidently places herself in the impartial and nonjudgmental role of mediator, and works to find those places of common understanding between two strong-willed individuals.

One early example of negotiation occurs between Horace Northcote, a wealthy Dissenter and Reginald May, a poor Anglican. Earlier, at a public Dissenter meeting, Horace publicly humiliates and denounces the young Anglican, as well as the Church of England. When Phoebe decides to introduce the two, she is partly motivated because of her desire to “manage” challenging situations (233). When their initial conversation turns into an argument, Phoebe interrupts by affirming both men and inviting them to come inside her grandparents’ home to continue their discussion over tea. The men are unaware that they have been brought in to the warmth and light “like stag-beetles to make a little amusement for Phoebe” but she knows very well what will happen if she guides the conversation (236). She uses her own insight into human nature combined with common sense and psychology to disarm both men’s defenses.

Phoebe’s strategy minimizes differences and maximizes similarities, turning enemies into friends. With wisdom, she begins by affirming each man’s knowledge in respective areas. Then she ‘accidentally’ reverses her questions to the two men: asking Reginald for insight about china teacups and Horace advice on literature. This is an obvious tactic to reveal the closed-mindedness of each man to the other’s world. Asking each man for information about an area where they are least knowledgeable is not meant
to embarrass them or highlight their ignorance, but to help them recognize that often
dogmatism grows out of ignorance. As two religious opponents meet together in a
humble dwelling, Phoebe affirms that “poverty is a nice friendly sort of thing, a ground
we can all meet on” (240). She intentionally levels the playing field, putting everyone on
equal turf. Using her grandfather’s wise advice as a point of common agreement dispels a
prejudice they both may have felt toward someone of lower-class stature. They both
discover the sensibility of Mr. Tozer’s statement—that it is possible to “[say] your
opinions in public, yet [bear] no malice” on a personal level. Still, it takes some time for
both men to apply those words personally. But then Phoebe challenges Reginald to
“know him [Northcote] and find out what he means” (240). This is what she calls
“enlarging the mind” (240). Both men realize that their animosity was largely a result of
closed-mindedness. But it took a skilled mediator to dismantle the wall of prejudice
between the two, resulting in a new friendship. The evening ends with music—the
universal language. Her smile and positive demeanor keep the atmosphere light-hearted
and jovial. As a result of Phoebe’s influence, Reginald and Horace realize that they are
more alike than different.

Phoebe’s diplomacy is successful because she stands removed from prejudice
on every level. She embraces a love for mankind that is foundational to Stoic philosophy.
She evaluates each person according to his or her own merits and virtues. When asked
about her ‘side’ of the issue, she responds, “I take everybody’s side . . . for I try to trace
people’s motives. I can sympathize both with you and those who assailed you” (210).
Only someone this objective is able to adequately negotiate between two parties with
integrity and without a personal agenda. Later in the story, Reginald and Horace spend
time together and in good humor call each other the “moral Antipodes” of the other, refer
to Miss Beecham as the one who is responsible for their friendship, and confess they are
much obliged to her for it (260). Phoebe’s neutrality guarantees her trustworthiness and
impartiality in every situation.

However, it is Mr. May’s forgery that puts Phoebe’s diplomatic powers to the
ultimate test. Phoebe places herself between her grandfather and Mr. May, knowing her
power over both (378, 390). Here Phoebe takes great risks to prevent the financial ruin
and subsequent criminal consequences for Mr. May. She may be overstepping her
bounds, but her motive is to salvage a man’s reputation and avert disaster for everyone
involved. Again, Phoebe’s desire is to manage and protect, to be a savior and rescuer.
When her grandfather shakes her in rage, Phoebe is not frightened but rather pale with
indignation, and she continues to stand fast without flinching. This is the first and only
time when she begins to tremble all over and doubt her own power. However, when she
physically destroys the evidence, fortitude and comfort return to her soul, her mind
becomes composed and tranquil once again (386-7). It is as though her actions reinforce
her resolve and confidence returns.

Phoebe appeals to the principle of forgiveness to negotiate all differences.
Though she never discloses her knowledge to her grandfather, she counsels him to
forgive Mr. May for the forgery—a bold request. She makes a hard choice to risk
relationship with her grandfather with this request, for it reveals her deep loyalty to the
Mays. Since they accept Phoebe unconditionally, despite her class and religious
persuasions, she will not betray them (386). And, though forgiveness is a difficult choice,
Phoebe asks for this on behalf of the Mays because she knows in her heart that
forgiveness is the only real solution to all wrongs between human beings. This is the only remedy for every injustice including those that stem from class and religious separation. Forgiveness extends grace and mercy to someone undeserving, but it also creates a revolving door of reciprocity for the future. In a sense, Phoebe manages and protects Mr. May from her grandfather, and her grandfather from himself. She knows that this time Mr. May is the one in need of forgiveness but a day may come when her grandfather may need it in return. This call for forgiveness sets an example for the community; it is only when individuals are able to move beyond justice and live at the higher level of mercy, that they will receive mercy in return. This Biblical principle was not new to Phoebe, raised as a minister’s daughter. And now she uses this opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of this principle: a way to close the gap between all classes and all religions.

While negotiation is proactive diplomacy, confrontation is her reactive diplomacy. Though she does not prefer to become embroiled in heated debate, she will not avoid it if it is necessary, even if her adversary is Mr. Copperhead, the wealthy and arrogant leading member of her father’s congregation. Church and community members cower to his authority, including her own parents; they excuse and indulge him as a spoilt child because of his wealth and power in the church and community. But Phoebe is the only one not intimidated by him. When necessary, she defies society’s standards. Most individuals value approval and acceptance from society; for this, they will conform and avoid confrontation. It is the best way to maintain peace. But Phoebe, as a self-possessed woman, values something greater than peace with ‘the world.’ She must be at peace with herself; to do this requires occasional dissent.
Phoebe sends a clear message that Mr. Copperhead will not control her. Since society generally makes allowances for the rich, she is expected to overlook his bad manners and lack of consideration for other people. But wealth and position mean nothing to Phoebe. She declares more than once that he has no right to be rude; his wealth will not control her as it has the rest of the community. She sees the hypocrisy in this double standard and preferential treatment to the rich and refuses to be a part of it. As an independent thinker, she has a strong belief system contrary to her parents and society. And she is not afraid to say so, even if she stands alone.

Her first encounter at the ball sets the stage for a later, more intense confrontation, this time in Mr. May’s home. It begins when Phoebe deliberately steps into a conversation between Mr. Copperhead and Mr. May on the subject of euthanasia. After both gentlemen each give their own weak and biased opinions, Phoebe delivers a convincing argument that clearly puts the other two to shame. Mr. Copperhead attempts to intimidate Phoebe by threatening to tell her parents that she is “fritting away her chances and attentions” on gaieties. But Phoebe has a timely response: “You cannot tell mamma more about me than she knows already” (342). By this time, everyone at the dinner table is a bit uncomfortable with Phoebe’s rebuttals. The result of this encounter is that this most powerful man (in the eyes of the community) begins to weaken; his power of insolence is cowed, at least for the moment. In a gesture of resignation, he obeys quite docilely a movement made to leave the table. The narrator asks the reader this rhetorical question: “Was it possible that she defied him, this Minister’s daughter, and measured her strength against his?” (345). Yes, this is precisely what happens. Phoebe engages in a battle of the wits and wins. Mr. Copperhead, full of arrogance and ignorance, suffers
defeat at the hands a young woman who is his superior in every way. Her intelligence, wit, and ability to debate cogently give her access to a political world where most women are denied. She is not afraid to debate because she is well-informed. This gives her the self-confidence to defend her own argument sensibly.

Phoebe’s Mastery of Clarence:
Marriage as a Career

Phoebe’s decision to marry Clarence is the most outrageous aspect of Phoebe Junior. He is the most unlikely marriage prospect, a large ‘simpleton’ without much to offer except money. But Phoebe has known him all her life and for some strange reason enjoys amusing this gentle dim-witted creature. After Clarence moves to Carlingford to study with his tutor Mr. May, the evenings are spent fiddling, while Phoebe accompanies him on the piano. These recurring scenes show Clarence’s supreme contentment. And though the arrangement of player and accompanist would seem to put Clarence in control, Oliphant makes it clear that once again, Phoebe directs the action. She helps Clarence through the difficult music, keeping “time with her head” and with her hand when she could take it from the piano, until she had triumphantly tided him over the bad passage (290). While the others cringe in disgust at Clarence’s poor musical performance, Phoebe simply smiles at her friends, shrugs her shoulders, and continues to help Clarence. Linda Peterson notes that this reversal of masculine and feminine roles, with Phoebe directing and leading and Clarence following her lead carries over from their music into their lives (76). Though he proposes, she directs all the action thereafter as well. This recognition (by Clarence) of her ability to lead allows her to move into his sphere, a very public one, and continue to successfully direct the course of his career.
Phoebe may have mixed motives in choosing Clarence as a Career. Some scholars suggest that she has a degree of pleasure in the evident power she has over him. Others wonder if she is subconsciously expressing a basic need to be needed, as a rescuer or savior, that is so common. It is difficult to understand her views at this time, since the narrator indicates she was groping through “paths of uncertain footing,” enjoying herself but not seeing clearly where it might lead. There are certainly “unknown countries in her mind” which she cannot analyze fully (Oliphant, Phoebe 291). But despite the judgments by her ‘new society’ of friends regarding Clarence—his continual lagging behind both physically in their walks and intellectually in their conversation—Phoebe says she chooses him because he is a friend. And Phoebe remains loyal to her friendships.

Phoebe approaches marriage first as a job opportunity. This attitude differs considerably from the heroines in Eliot’s and Trollope’s novels and most Victorian women; they view marriage as a default position, because they are ill-equipped for any other station in life. Ironically, the difference in Phoebe’s view of marriage is not necessarily because of what she has already accomplished. Up until this point, she had no ‘career’ to speak of. Her positive approach probably stems more from her confidence in her own potential than anything else. The narrator tells us she was more like an “applicant for office, uncertain whether she was to have a desirable post or not” (349). She did not dislike Clarence as the others did; she was used to him since they grew up together as children. Her kindly affection toward him was enough to sustain her motivation. Because Phoebe is not a sentimental person, she takes counsel with herself and no one else concerning this decision. And yet, she finds herself in a dilemma because of another discovery: Reginald May is in love with her and about to propose as well. And
Reginald was the more compatible partner. Lest the reader assume that Phoebe lacks all
romance whatsoever, the narrator asks the reader, “Who can say that she was not as
romantic as any girl of twenty could be?” (306). However, Phoebe’s romance took an
unusual form. It was her head that was full of throbbing and pulses, not her heart. So
Phoebe reasons with sheer logic and reason the pros and cons of marrying Clarence—in
typical Stoic fashion. The greatest drawback is that Clarence “is not very wise, nor a man
to be enthusiastic about” (306). She wonders if he will have the fortitude to stand up to
his father, who is against the marriage, and how this might affect her father’s position as
minister. But after examining her moral positions on love, money, religion, social status,
and family, she chooses Clarence because he is a friend. She chooses marriage because it
promises a Career. Her motives become clear:

She was more than willing to take charge of him, to manage and guide, and make a
man of him. She could put him into parliament and keep him there. She could thrust
him forward (she believed) to the front of affairs. He would be as good as a
profession, a position, a great work to Phoebe. He meant wealth . . . and all the
possibilities of future power. (Oliphant, Phoebe Junior 306)

The marriage proposal becomes an intriguing practical proposition, then, one that will
offer her new challenges. By marrying Clarence, she is in a position to take stronger
control of her circumstances and her man. This marriage promises to satisfy Phoebe’s
deepest impulse, shown in her dealings with her grandparents and Mr. May, to protect
and manage. She trades her intellectual prowess for this, but gains financial freedom as a
result.

Phoebe’s choice defies Victorian logic and pattern. In most Victorian novels,
Reginald May is the more natural match. And Phoebe is more naturally drawn to
Reginald because he is more sensitive and refined. But Phoebe has the sense to see where
this will eventually lead—to a domestic situation, not unlike the household Reginald
grew up in, where women are adored as ornaments but subservient, where women feel
but do not think, where women decorate but do not shape or lead. Phoebe sees in
Reginald a future ‘elder’ Mr. May; she comprehends the danger when Reginald talks
about his sister’s romance with Northcote, speaking of it as something “that would never
do” (as if he, the masculine authority, has the power to decide female fates). Knowing
this, and all the other difficulties of marrying into an Anglican family, Phoebe decides to
leave the “romantic” plot to the world of fantasy (which is where Oliphant suggests such
plots belong). Sometimes Phoebe retreats there to enjoy it, but she doesn’t allow foolish
romance to hinder her progress in the real world. Her head rules over her heart and she
chooses Clarence because with him she will have the power to teach and to lead,
intellectually and socially. She chooses ambition over love, but ambition with a
difference. Even though she is aware of the value of what Reginald offers, she prefers
what Clarence has to offer, the profession which, as a woman, she cannot openly have.

Marriage, then, becomes more than a job; it is her career. What does it mean
to marry a Career instead of a husband? Phoebe contrasts Career with Passion; Clarence
is the former but not the latter since she is not in love with him. Like the Stoics, passion
is not a factor in making her decisions. If Phoebe is passionate, she keeps it under control;
like other higher qualities (virtue), this is something cultivated and developed through
practice and discipline. A Career means there will be struggle along the way, a struggle
that *must* be successful or end in ruin to herself and others (308). Phoebe resolves that
there is no option but to ensure that *this* struggle is successful, without a doubt. Arlene
Young argues that a Career for Phoebe means a life of action over domestic retirement.
Oliphant may also be having a bit of fun with Phoebe’s notions of Clarence as Career—as romantically inflated as “living happily ever after” (133). She may be mocking the idea of women aspiring to careers outside of marriage, except that Phoebe so brilliantly succeeds whenever she goes against accepted customs or values, whether by wearing black to a ball or by destroying the evidence of Mr. May’s forgery. It’s not Phoebe who is being mocked here as much as the conventions that contain an unsentimental, energetic, and intelligent heroine within the confines of traditional feminine roles (133). But she has decided what kind of marriage will help her to find a way within her limited scope in society to lead an active, assertive life that will fulfill her. There aren’t many women who would be content to marry a man like Clarence, devoid of intellectual companionship. But as long as Phoebe can have her career, she is content.

Marriage also gives Clarence a career. He gets both inspiration and strength from Phoebe to stand up to his own father and declare, “Here is the one who can make something of me . . . I ain’t clever, but she is. I don’t mind going into parliament if I’ve got her to back me up. But without her I’ll never do anything” (Oliphant, Phoebe 425). When Clarence finishes this speech to his father, he takes the rest of Phoebe’s arm and then her hand into his as a sign of solidarity. The narrator comments that he may be stupid, but he was a man, and Phoebe felt proud of him, probably for the first time in her life. This speech follows Mr. Copperhead’s threat to cut off Clarence’s inheritance if he marries Phoebe. But it is obvious that something has changed in Clarence. He is not as stupid as he appears. He knows Phoebe’s qualities are unparalleled in anyone else. He is fortunate to have her by his side, promoting his career and him as her husband. As a
couple, they both face the opposition of Mr. Copperhead and declare their intention to marry, with or without the inheritance.

Phoebe’s honor awards her a final moral victory. Earlier she wins her battles with her intellect and wit. Now she engages in a different battle where her integrity is at stake. When Mr. Copperhead accuses Phoebe of mercenary motives or tries to blackmail her by threatening to remove her father from his position at the church, she remains steadfast. Her response is clear, “You do not know me . . . your mere good sense will show you that I cannot budge. I have accepted him being rich, and I cannot throw him over when he is poor” (432). When Phoebe reveals that this is what holds her to her promise—honor—Mr. Copperhead is shocked. He retorts, “Honour! That’s for men . . . and folly for them according as you mean it; but for women there’s no such thing, it’s sham and humbug . . .” (433). Through all his rantings, Phoebe remains calm, silent, walks softly and wears the “suspicion of a smile about her mouth” (433). Copperhead interprets this as defiance, but it is not. It is the expression of a self-possessed woman.

Phoebe’s moral victory over Mr. Copperhead also suggests she gains an ideological victory over everything Mr. Copperhead represents, including his marriage. The clearest description of this unfortunate marriage is in chapter two, where we meet Mrs. Copperhead for the first time and begin to sympathize with her difficult life. The narrator tells us the motivation behind Mr. Copperhead’s second marriage: “a desire to have something belonging to him which he could always jeer at” (Oliphant, *Phoebe* 23). Called a “poor, little woman” by the narrator, Mrs. Copperhead is a trembling, deprecating, frightened little wife who provides amusement for her brutish husband by receiving his ridicule without retaliation. She is recognized by others “as good a butt as
could be imagined” (23). With this continual verbal and emotional abuse, it is no wonder that Mrs. Copperhead develops a nervous, anxious demeanor whenever she is in his presence. This woman, the very antithesis of Phoebe, has lost her ‘voice’ completely (26). She responds to her husband’s intimidation by cowering to his demands, catering to his every whim. However, the moment he leaves the room, a transformation occurs: peace and harmony replace discord. And the visible signs of Mrs. Copperhead’s abuse begin to surface. Her eyes are red, but not from tears; they are red with the “inclination to shed tears” (29). She suppresses her emotion for the sake of Clarence, even trying to smile while defending her husband’s abusive control. The closing statement in chapter two, “his mother’s eyes were redder than ever,” seems to suggest a deep-seated anger brewing in her spirit. Mr. Copperhead expects women to be ornamental, not useful. He also expects them to yield to his control. Phoebe usurps his role, demonstrates her own strong will, and punishes Mr. Copperhead when she destroys his expectations for women and marriage.

As a self-possessed woman, Phoebe faces the reality of her situation squarely. Earlier we pointed out that self-possession prepares one to live in the real world, without fantasies or flights of imagination. And now this is put to the test as she faces her options and the bleakness of her future without an income. Since she will not give up the marriage, she regretfully but honestly accepts her lot and resigns herself to a different future than the one she anticipated. Cast off from his inheritance, she assumes she will have to drag Clarence through the world somehow. This will require uphill work since Clarence, who can do nothing useful, is on her hands. But Phoebe clearly views this as her problem, not his, and Clarence himself as her responsibility. She blames no one, but
resolves to face this obstacle as she has done before, to muster up her resources and to find a way for them both. This realization provides an ironic twist to the doctrine of coverture in that Clarence’s identity may now potentially be lost in Phoebe’s.

However, this last trial becomes Phoebe’s greatest triumph. Her declaration of honor and commitment to Clarence causes Copperhead to yield to Phoebe’s control. She is so resolute and calm in her decision that it completely unnerves Copperhead. He is silenced by her strength of character. This is a powerful moment for Phoebe--the very last thing she thought she was capable of. And rather than hide away to mourn the state of her affairs, Phoebe collects her strength heroically and faces her guests as usual because it is her duty to do so (434). Copperhead takes a long walk to reflect on what Phoebe has said and weigh the pros and cons of this unlikely marriage. He realizes what will happen if he follows through with his threats: he will shrink in the opinion of everyone who knows him; all his plans and hopes for Clarence will be destroyed; he will be a failure, laughed at. He realizes he cannot face the humiliation of this prospect. On the other hand, he also recognizes something in Phoebe that he cannot deny: she is clever, will save him the expense of hiring tutors since she is able to teach his son better than any coach can do; she could make speeches for him. He reasons at last that “fortune ain’t worth thinking of in comparison with brains” (435). Economically speaking, she is a better investment into Clarence’s future. It was brains he wanted and he has the opportunity to buy a few of them with Phoebe. So he reverses his decision and gives both his blessing and his money.

It is no surprise that Phoebe’s future is a promising one. Though married to a man of inferior qualities, Phoebe manages to find satisfaction and contentment. The narrator tells us that Phoebe becomes the best of daughters-in-law, composes speeches
for Clarence in Parliament, and possesses a “secret to her style” that neither Clarence nor the reader will ever know (440). Her career enhances Clarence’s career. She could not have this opportunity with an intellectual equal. Her marriage offers Phoebe the best opportunity to act in a world that still forbids women to participate fully. She makes a tough but pragmatic choice, and one that women in the nineteenth century have just begun to accustom themselves to. And though men still have more public access to power, Oliphant creates her own opportunities for Phoebe by putting a capital letter on her life—Career—and giving her access to power in her own way. As the wife of a rich, politically ambitious, but intellectually limited man, she can create a greater outlet for her talents than in marrying someone like Reginald May. Phoebe is clearly a character whose drive and energy need this outlet. She is not the type of woman to be contained within a restrictive domestic sphere. Conventional marriages are, after all, only for conventional women. However, as Victorian conventions began to change, they forced new definitions of femininity, ‘convention,’ and a movement beyond the stereotypes.

After reading this novel, some may suggest that Phoebe Junior fits the familiar Bildungsroman narrative pattern that dominates much of nineteenth-century Victorian writing. If it can be classified in this genre, most scholars distinguish between male and female versions of this form. Linda Peterson makes this differentiation between

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4 Franco Moretti offers a clear explanation of the Bildungsroman genre in The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture (1987). According to Moretti, happiness is the highest value in the English Bildungsroman, but only to the detriment and annulment of freedom (8). He seems to argue that devotion to a profession demands failure to achieve personal satisfaction. However, Phoebe is able to transcend this prediction. While Lydgate sacrifices his vocation for the sake of a life with Rosamond in Eliot’s Middlemarch, Phoebe does not experience this same conflict between vocation and married life. The two ways of life are not at odds, as Moretti contests (220). Instead, Phoebe’s life and profession unite, albeit with compromise. Oliphant reshapes the genre pattern by giving her heroine an open-ended future, with an opportunity to discover the ‘meaning of life’ through ways other than marriage.
the male vocational crisis, an apprenticeship, and the female “voyage in” that involves more self-conscious development, an awakening (66). Our understanding can easily become confused and our definition narrow because, as Peterson argues, we have based our criticism on too few novels (66). We recognize that *Phoebe Junior* is highly unconventional in many ways. Oliphant takes a romantic feminine plot and juxtaposes it against a feminist one, putting a complex development of her heroine against the superficial plot of Clarence. This clearly challenges a traditional mindset of the masculine *bildung*. At best, this novel includes some features of the female *Bildungsroman* but counterpoints the male and female forms. Self-development is a major theme and it is initiated by a domestic duty. But from here Oliphant subverts the conventions, for both Phoebe and Clarence represent two different sets of values. It raises the question whether marriage, the traditional place for female development in the *Bildungsroman*, can remain as the pivotal force of female development, growth, and self-formation.

**Conclusion**

Self-realization for a woman in the nineteenth century was viewed with suspicion since the prevailing attitude was that being a woman alone was profession and vocation enough. Oliphant not only sympathizes but also identifies with self-reliant women, underscoring time and again the need for a woman to find fulfilling work. She despises the “decorative function” given to Victorian women by society and the limited opportunities for acceptable work. Her heroines pride themselves on taking forms of work that give them mobility and freedom normally afforded only to men. Knowing that the reading public shared suspicions against the self-assured woman and that her
heroines’ cravings for freedom might have shocked conservative readers, Oliphant often motivates her heroines’ careers with conventional patterns: the necessity to support a family or the need to protect the money of honest folk. But these are seen as mere gestures, since it is obvious how much the heroines enjoy their vocations. Oliphant shared many of the same attitudes with her female characters. She was the breadwinner and appreciated her own freedom, taking on a “masculine” life after her husband’s death. With her successful work as a journalist and author, she asserted herself in a male domain and never appealed to “feminine handicaps” (Oliphant, Autobiography 46). By giving her heroines exceptional talents, allowing them to find fulfillment in rewarding work and to triumph over biases and constraints, Oliphant empowered women in creative ways. In Phoebe Junior, it seems that Oliphant struggles as much as Phoebe does against the restrictions that limit the acceptable options for fictional heroines. In fact, it is not until late in her career, in Kirsteen: The Story of a Scotch Family Seventy Years Ago (1891) that Oliphant finally allows herself a heroine who stays unmarried and opens a successful business. And she gets away with this by setting the story back in time in a culture foreign to Victorian English readers.

Margaret Oliphant clearly shows that families can be constructed along other lines than what Joseph H. O’Mealy calls “soft paternalism” (137). She portrays families the way real families often are. Life choices can satisfy individual desires for fulfillment and not necessarily be restricted to demands for duty and self-sacrifice. This novel asserts her attempt to represent life differently than either Eliot or Trollope. Her realism reflects her own personal life experience, which is a unique, non-traditional representation of the nineteenth-century English woman. But it presents the ‘other side’ of womanhood that
often gets overlooked or dismissed. In this way, her attitudes toward love, courtship and marriage and her emphasis on class realities and pragmatic choices eliminate some of the fantasy from Victorian fiction in order to give a clearer picture of romance in a woman’s life.

Because self-realization was difficult for women, Oliphant invites us to consider new forms of female empowerment through the character of Phoebe Beecham. Phoebe uses a stereotypical role to give her plans a respectable appearance. Working within the confines of a prescribed role actually helps to reveal the social system that confines women to such a life. She uses social roles to enact her plans and maneuvers. Phoebe is Oliphant’s representative ‘literary drone.’ Her labor is much different than that of the typical domestic woman. She produces speeches while Oliphant produces books—a form of alienated labor. Perhaps for women like Oliphant, who had her independence and the financial responsibility for her children thrust upon her by the untimely death of her husband, work and independence would inevitably become another form of bondage. To a single, younger woman who was more comfortable with the concept of the ‘new woman,’ work and independence might bear a more positive response. Regardless, it calls us to accept the fact that we are never really finished revising the concept of the domestic woman.

Because Oliphant doubts the possibility that men and women will form subtle bonds of respect, *Phoebe Junior* offers a strange and unconventional alternative for marriage. Kathleen Watson argues that men and women of Victorian England limited each other because they believed that their incomes and their appearances determined their identity (416). Because of these class limitations and the impulse toward social
climbing, Oliphant found a theme that would strike a deep chord in all her readers. She presents the issue of self-advancement through marriage as a worthy option, though not without its dangers. It is through subversion and satire that Margaret Oliphant continues to challenge fundamental assumptions about women and uses a heroine like Phoebe to present a different sort of ideal of the Victorian marriage, less pessimistic than Eliot’s or Trollope’s.

This novel demonstrates a *political* mastery rooted in self-mastery. The Stoics taught that self-mastery is something that must be cultivated by practice; it is not something that can be grasped. Marcus Aurelius called this discipline “medicine for the soul” in the same way that physical exercise can cure the body (qtd. in Mac Suibhne 430). Phoebe shows immense wisdom because she focuses on practical ethics. She takes care of the business of understanding herself first. This self-knowledge creates a base of security for how she will operate in her world. Her understanding of others grows out of her self-awareness and extends the boundaries of her influence as she develops by practice the art of reason and logic to make good decisions. Phoebe is a woman who finds agency because she is proactive, not reactive. She maximizes her abilities so they work *for* her, to her advantage, and avoids focusing on her weaknesses. She sustains her power with one good judgment following another, building social and cultural capital in the process. With this mastery of herself, she is a strong and sensible force, capable of contending with all forms of opposition and achieving other forms of mastery.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Victorian culture, like any culture, simultaneously contained plurality and conflict, tradition and subversion, powerful voices, silent voices, and voices that could not speak at all in the public space. Like any other culture, it borrowed both good and bad things from other traditions, establishing a universal mindset that was still temporary at best. When it comes to understanding the injustice in power relations between men and women, primarily in the marriage relationship, it helps to remember that culture and the traditions that form it are not monoliths, but in constant flux. Wendy Jones argues that in the midst of changes in industrialization and mobilization, it was the changing ideas about marriage, from the aristocratic “marriage-for-interest” to the middle-class “marriage-for-love” that created the theoretical ground for conceptualizing women’s rights (5). So in terms of power, the marriage relationship became the breeding ground for both conflict and resolution.

The ethical imperative to marry for love rather than interest provided a new and liberal definition of marriage that conflicted strongly with patriarchal ideals. A companionate ideal of marriage emphasized reciprocity and common interests. If men and women shared common intellectual and moral ground, then how could there be difference between them? Still, though many endorsed married love, they were not necessarily progressive in their ideas about women. Sexual difference was still the basis
of belief in women’s subordination. Again, Jones argues that the Victorian novel became the primary site to show this conflict as well as to show the ways in which married love was implicated in the politics of class as well as gender (64). It used narrative to express beliefs about women, love, courtship and marriage that could not be told openly in non-fiction. Courtship became its primary subject, and the multiplot form a perfect way to deal with the complexities of the changing views towards women and their autonomy. In the eighteenth-century novel, most of the discourse advocates companionate love; the heroine’s instincts are usually correct in the end (e.g., Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*). In the Victorian novel, however, companionate love either disappears or is shown as an inferior option (e.g., *Jane Eyre*, *Middlemarch*). A marriage to St. John Rivers seems like a sensible decision for Jane Eyre, but it is the voice of Rochester who calls her back, despite all the difficulties involved. It is passion rather than friendship that moves Jane to return to Rochester. And Dorothea Brooke marries Casaubon for companionate love, but finds no real friendship there. Her interest in Ladislaw shows that feeling takes precedence over sensibility (Jones 66). As the century progressed, the novels hinted more and more at feelings that authors would not admit to, or with which they disagreed, but which were still part of the progressive cultural logic. George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, and Margaret Oliphant all suggest that married love can challenge female subordination and self-effacement.

If liberal political theory had remained true to its central commitment, the protection of each individual’s spheres of choice, it might have been a different story for Victorian women. Women would be sources of agency and worth in their own right, not merely as reproducers and caregivers. Every society has a responsibility to free its people
to be agents in socially productive ways. And every society has a universal obligation to put each individual into a position of agency and choice, rather than push them into functioning in ways desirable to others. When you give all members of society a sense of agency, they find joy in using their own minds and bodies rather than simply executing the will of others. It seems that choice is the ultimate goal since it instills personal power as each individual assumes control over the fate and direction of her life. Choice gives birth to autonomy, independence, and a flourishing and powerful life.

Historically, social contract theory is understood to rely on both tacit and expressed forms of consent in order to maintain its legitimacy. Contracts as such consist of consent to the terms of the contract by eligible parties, an eligibility determined by markers of rationality, maturity, and freedom from duress. However, contract presumes that the individuals involved are either removed from relations of power or else equal within those relations. Thus, ability to contract is also tied to equality in contract. The truth is that social relations of power and inequality have to be disguised in some way to convince the subordinated party that they are freely consenting to a choice.

Though consent appears voluntary, consent is a response to power; in fact, it marks the very presence of power. The Oxford English Dictionary gives one meaning of consent as “voluntary agreement to or acquiescence in what another proposes or desires; compliance, concurrence, permission.” When a woman agrees to terms she does not create, then consent functions as a sign of legitimate subordination. It adds or withdraws legitimacy, but it is not a form of sharing in power. According to Wendy Brown in States of Injury, since consent is obtained or registered rather than enacted, it is always mediated
by authority (163). This clearly places it at odds with any form of equality and autonomy. So the idea of consent is misleading.

Still, women of the nineteenth century, like women of every century, had a choice: to view themselves as victims or agents. Victims are so called because they see themselves as such, powerless to change their situation, and blaming men for putting them in this position. Women who see themselves as agents take responsibility for what happens to them, and are resourceful in obtaining power. According to Naomi Wolf, victims are often equated with hating men and sex, while agents often love men and are optimistic about partnerships with them (136-8). These labels may seem like an oversimplification of the woman’s plight since women’s lives are highly varied and this can lead to misperceptions. So instead of the labels which carry loaded connotations, I prefer to emphasize the resourcefulness of women who lived under difficult conditions and overcame the greatest obstacles, showing both courage and perseverance. Marginalized people throughout history have overcome intolerance and barriers to freedom of expression in both religious and political realms, despite the restrictions imposed upon them. Women are no different.

In each of the novels discussed in the preceding chapters, each woman has a choice whether to view herself as a victim or agent. Gwendolen Harleth came equipped with plenty of ambitions and goals but wrong ideas about how to reach them because she had the mindset of a female. She extended her grasp beyond what her society would allow. Eliot shows us what can happen when a woman as unprepared and uneducated about how power works seeks autonomy and agency in a society that is committed to denying her this privilege. Consequently, she is forced to succumb to a mercenary
marriage under psychological domination of a tyrannical husband. Despite her eventual release from Henleigh’s psychological mastery, she is too ill-equipped to find satisfaction as an independent, powerful young woman. Her final resignation that “I will do better” suggests that her best chance lies in moral improvement so she can make life easier for everyone around her. Her life represents acquiescence to a system that stifles ambition.

Lizzie Eustace faces the same struggles, because she shares some of the same character flaws as Gwendolen. With surface value alone, she tries to make the best of a poor situation, circulate among male consumers and carve out a life with someone she does not love in order to fit into a world that affirms her brand of femininity. While not adopting a victim’s mindset like Gwendolen’s she adopts self-resignation to a life without love or agency.

Lucy Morris similarly loses her selfhood when she finds her identity in Frank Greystock. Her life is one of missed opportunities for true agency as an independent wage earner. Her self-sacrifice is not only lauded but expected by society. Because she refuses to confront a broken system, she remains a victim but doesn’t know it. Contentment for her comes as she learns to compromise. For these three women, the ongoing pressures inherent with the philosophies of coverture and separate spheres continue to limit any progress toward the independence they desire.

Lucinda and Phoebe, on the other hand, break free of this mindset and develop agency but in different ways. Lucinda finds it through refusal of society’s brand of womanhood, but she loses emotional stability in the process. Her commitment to herself costs her dearly, in health and reputation. And the reader is left dissatisfied. For all three women succumb to one form or another of economic mastery that threatens to destroy
their selfhood. Phoebe Beecham presents a model of femininity based on self-possession that allows her to extend the borders of her agency to include others. Without rebellion or passivity, she simply resists whatever contradicts her own values. This earns her respect even with her opponents and gives her power to serve her community. Her responsibility is first to herself, showing that not all Victorian women put the needs of men before their own.

Though each woman faces her own challenges, she still has choices. Her responses originate in her own belief system of who she is and what she is able to do with her life. This alone determines her behavior. Phoebe Beecham and her author remind us that options were limited but still available in the nineteenth century. There were times Phoebe found autonomy while remaining within the confines of a patriarchal system. At other times, she was able to move outside the system and gain autonomy there. Each time she negotiates the difference successfully. One might argue that Phoebe is successful because she is simply not preoccupied with gender at all, a mindset strongly advocated in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929).

It seems fitting to reflect on one final story, one that precedes Victorian literature and can serve as a model of hope for future generations. It is the story of Penelope and Odysseus in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. After Odysseus’ long absence from home, Penelope remains unsure of Odysseus’ identity when she first encounters him. So she puts him through a test, an archery contest that only he can win. After he passes successfully, she still holds back her heart in “numbing wonder,” sits in silence, and “explores his face” (Homer 458). She vacillates not because she wants to torture him emotionally, but because he is not the man she once knew—only a “huddled mass of
rags.” She further admits that this lack of recognition leaves her powerless. But there is a “secret sign” between them, hidden from the world that she knows will reveal the truth of his identity (459). This secret gives Odysseus the assurance and patience to wait for Penelope to believe in him.

At first Odysseus accuses Penelope of being hard-hearted, strong-willed, and possessing an unbending spirit. He misunderstands her intentions because he expects her to know him as he knows her. As a final ‘test,’ Penelope asks her nursemaid to move her marriage bed out of the bridal chamber. Odysseus immediately reacts, lashing out at his wife and defending why their bed cannot be moved—it was built by Odysseus himself from the trunk of an olive tree around which the house was built. This is the “secret sign” of their life story. So he asks his wife this question: Does the bed, my lady, still stand planted firm? (462). The implication here is that her response will determine their future.

The immovable bed is a beautiful metaphor that extends beyond physical intimacy. It is their marriage that is immovable because Odysseus and Penelope have built a foundation more solid than an olive tree, one that sustained them through a twenty year separation. The poet tells us that after they “reveled in all the longed-for joys of love” they then reveled in each other’s stories, confiding in each other. Odysseus told Penelope all of his adventures and hardships, from beginning to end and she “listened on” (465). Penelope told Odysseus of all that she put up with at home with the crowd of suitors draining her food and energy. The text says that “sleep never sealed her eyes till all was told” (Homer 465). This describes a meeting beyond the physical union: of mind, soul and spirit. As they commune together, they become powerless in each other’s love.
This classic story shows that even in a hierarchical society a man and a woman can create a relationship of equality and mutuality. Their strength is in their concerted effort to establish a commonality of minds. The narrative at the end of the poem (when they embrace for the first time after their separation), begins in his mind, expressing his joy at having escaped so many dangers, and ends up in her mind, expressing her joy at having found him at last. Literally and metaphorically, no one can move their wedding bed. Martha Nussbaum paraphrases a lecture given by classical scholar John J. Winkler in which he argues on the possibilities of heterosexual love. Winkler refers to this scene in the *Odyssey* as evidence that it is possible to find a place where a man and a woman can be equal (qtd. in Nussbaum 14). This implies that it is also possible for a marriage to find mutual security and satisfaction.

*Both* Odysseus and Penelope become vulnerable, surrender their individual power, and instead achieve a ‘conjugal power’ at the end. It is not surprising, then, that once they share all that is in their hearts, sleep takes over, “loosing limbs and slipping the toils of anguish from their minds” (Homer 466). Here is a couple finally at rest with themselves and with each other. Let this remind the reader that from a foundation of mutual trust and respect, equality can grow; from that, peace and rest will follow. Only then will ideas about power relations finally move beyond the familiar tug of war to the kind of shared life most Victorians only dreamed about.
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