Jim Neilson
The 19th Century Novel Podcast
Episode 22

A 19th Century Miscellany: Women and Marriage

Near the beginning of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* which is the beginning of this podcast, Anne Bronte presents her leading female character, as observed by the novel's male protagonist:

> And there I beheld a tall, lady-like figure, clad in black. Her face was towards me, and there was something in it which, once seen, invited me to look again. Her hair was raven black, and disposed in long glossy ringlets, a style of coiffure rather unusual in those days, but always graceful and becoming; her complexion was clear and pale; her eyes I could not see, for, being bent upon her prayer-book, they were concealed by their drooping lids and long black lashes, but the brows above were expressive and well defined; the forehead was lofty and intellectual, the nose, a perfect aquiline and the features, in general, unexceptionable—only there was a slight hollowness about the cheeks and eyes, and the lips, though finely formed, were a little too thin, a little too firmly compressed, and had something about them that betokened, I thought, no very soft or amiable temper; and I said in my heart—"I would rather admire you from this distance, fair lady, than be the partner of your home."
>
> Just then she happened to raise her eyes, and they met mine; I did not choose to withdraw my gaze, and she turned again to her book, but with a momentary, indefinable expression of quiet scorn, that was inexpressibly provoking to me. (16)

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* begins with the sudden appearance of a mysterious woman on a city street late at night, as recounted by a male narrator:

> . . . in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me.
>
> I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.
>
> There, in the middle of the broad bright high-road—there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her.
>
> I was far too seriously startled by the suddenness with which this extraordinary apparition stood before me, in the dead of night and in that lonely place, to ask what she wanted. The strange woman spoke first.
>
> "Is that the road to London?" she said.

> I looked attentively at her, as she put that singular question to me. It was then nearly one o'clock. All I could discern distinctly by the moonlight was a colourless, youthful face, meagre and sharp to look at about the cheeks and chin; large, grave, wistfully attentive eyes; nervous, uncertain lips; and light hair of a pale, brownish-yellow hue. There was nothing wild, nothing immodest in her manner: it was quiet and self-controlled, a little melancholy and a little touched by suspicion; not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life. The voice, little as I had yet heard of it, had something curiously still and mechanical in its tones, and the utterance was remarkably rapid. She held a small bag in her hand: and her dress—bonnet, shawl, and gown all of white—was, so far as I could guess, certainly not composed of very delicate or very expensive materials. Her figure was slight, and rather above the average height—her gait and actions free from the slightest approach to extravagance. This was all that I could observe of her in the dim light and under the perplexingly strange circumstances of our meeting. What sort of a woman she was, and how she came to be out alone in the high-road, an hour after midnight, I altogether failed to guess. (6-7)

This figure, a woman who for some reason stands apart from other women, a woman who seems clothed in mystery, was common enough in Victorian fiction that John Fowles used it in a key early scene in his influential postmodern refashioning of the Victorian novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

> For one terrible moment, he thought he had stumbled on a corpse. But it was a woman asleep. She had chosen the strangest position, a broad, sloping ledge of grass some five feet beneath the level of the plateau, and which hid her from the view of any but one who came . . . to the very edge. . . . Its outer edge gave onto a sheer drop of some thirty or forty feet into an ugly tangle of brambles. A little beyond them the real cliff plunged down to the beach. . . .
>
> The girl lay in the complete abandonment of deep sleep, on her back. Her coat had fallen open over her indigo dress, ... The sleeper's face was turned away from him, her right arm thrown back, bent in a childlike way. . . . There was something intensely tender and yet sexual in the way she lay. . . .
>
> Part of her hair had become loose and half covered her cheek. . . . he saw that it had red tints, a rich warmth, and without the then indispensable gloss of feminine hair oil The skin below seemed very brown, almost ruddy, in that light, as if the girl cared more for health than a fashionably pale languid-cheeked complexion. . . . He stood unable to do anything but stare down, tranced by this unexpected encounter, and overcome by an equally strange feeling—not sexual, but fraternal, perhaps paternal, a certainty of the innocence of this creature, of her being unfairly outcast, and which was in turn a factor of his intuition of her appalling loneliness. (70)

While the image of a beautiful young woman whose features and expression and actions mark her as separate from other women, and from conventional society, derives from the haunted heroine of the Gothic novel, its use in the 19th century novel—that is, this carrying an image from the Gothic into the realist novel—serves a less supernatural and a more secular purpose. The use of such

figures in the Gothic did suggest the threat to female liberty posed by an ages-old patriarchy. But this threat, rooted in the supernatural, made these women into a horror convention which didn't raise the same response as a mysterious woman in the pew of a country church or on a rocky coastal outcropping. The Gothic female raised the terror of the uncanny, this Victorian female the terror (and attraction) of violated social taboos There's something about this woman that can't be incorporated into the standard model Victorian heroine, something about her appearance that suggests her independence, secrecy, loneliness, temptation, and, perhaps, terror. The fact that these women are unaccompanied by either husband or chaperone reinforces their independence, which is at odds with the dominant view of women as weak and dependent. For the males viewing them, these characteristics, this mystery, is inescapably alluring.

Education

Before making these dramatic appearances, these women—like most middle and upper-class women in Victorian England—received an education which reinforced, through instruction manuals, didactic literature, and bible readings, a status quo-reaffirming belief in women and marriage. "The most important element in this equation for social stability," writes Judith Rowbotham, Research Fellow at Plymouth University, "was the Family—the most universally admired and reported social unit of the century and the context in which the feminine stereotype throughout this period was . . . presented to girls for their admiration and emulation" (18). If they were lucky enough to have well-educated fathers, as did Anne Bronte and Ellen Wood, this education might be more liberal and inclusive: they might have access to a personal library and teacher, as I note in the following excerpts, the first from Episode 1, the second from Episode 4.

In the case of the Brontës, the creation of Angria and Gondal came about partly through their isolation. Until their teens, they were what we would now call "home-schooled" by their father and aunt. Their father, Patrick, the local vicar, although from modest beginnings, was Oxford-educated and an author, having published a volume of poems and a religious novella. The children had access to his library with titles such as *Paradise Lost* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, in addition to classical texts by Homer and Virgil. (The many literary allusions in Anne's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are evidence of her voluminous reading; she alludes to biblical passages more than 40 times, alludes to a dozen Shakespeare plays [*The Merchant of Venice, Macbeth, As You Like It, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet, Much Ado about Nothing, Twelfth Night, King Lear, Julius Caesar, Henry IV*, Part One, *and Henry VI*, Part Two], and alludes to a motley of other writers, from the well-known—William Wordsworth, Walter Scott, Alexander Pope—to the now forgotten—Edward Young and George Wither.)

As children of the local parson, the Brontës were far better educated than most other children their age. On the other hand, their modest economic circumstances meant they could not associate with the children of the wealthy. The town of Haworth, population 4668 in 1821, was growing and becoming more industrial. But there was little in the way of entertainment for the children. No internet. No TV. No movies. No phones. No recorded music. The children had to entertain themselves. Another factor in the creation of their fantasy lands was the losses they'd suffered. Their mother had died in 1821 when the children were quite young. Four years later, their two eldest sisters died of tuberculosis contracted at the school they attended—scenes memorably depicted in Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*. Isolated, traumatized, living

together in a home with access to books and periodicals, they created vast alternative worlds that would eventually lead to published poems and novels.

After her grandfather's death, Ellen returned to her parents' home and developed a close relationship with her father who Ellen's son Charles describes as indifferent to the world of business but "remarkable for intellect and refinement, a gentleman and a scholar." At age 13, Ellen developed a serious and debilitating curvature of the spine (Wood 33), which, writes her son, forced her to spend "her days . . . on a reclining board or couch, from which she seldom moved" (34). Charles Wood goes on to record that "most of her life [for the next four years was] spent upon the reclining couch" (36). One benefit of this confinement was that she was removed from the shallow education middle- and upper-class girls received as preparation for their entry into society. She was not socialized into the ways of the debutante and coquette. Instead, she perused her father's many volumes and benefited from his close tutoring. (Episode 4)

The standard education for girls, alluded to here, was meant to prepare them for marriage by giving them skills they could show off during courtship, could use to productively fill their hours after marriage, and which would demonstrate their sociability and class-appropriate comportment, traits required of an upper-middle or upper-class wife who must navigate through a complex world of manners, learning in particular how to socialize with her betters, helping her husband and family prosper, improving their reputation and status, and just reinforcing the notion that they belong in a world of privilege. In the excerpts that follow, the first about Anne Bronte's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, the second about her Agnes Grey, from Episodes 1 and 3 respectively, I detailed the training adolescent girls underwent to gain a husband and climb the social ladder, as detailed by Ann Bronte in *Agnes Grey*, in Episode 3.

As girls, Annabella and Helen would have learned to sing and play the piano. (Likewise, the Brontës owned a piano, which both Anne and Emily learned to play. Because of her poor eyesight, Charlotte was discouraged from doing so [Barker 247]). Singing and piano-playing were important skills for attracting and keeping a husband, the ultimate goal of women's education in Victorian England. As the British Library explains, "In the upper classes it was assumed that a girl would marry and that therefore she had no need of a formal education, as long as she could look beautiful, entertain her husband's guests, and produce a reasonable number of children. 'Accomplishments' such as playing the piano, singing and flower-arranging were all-important" (Picard). After marriage, piano-playing was seen as way to soothe husbands stressed by daily life. Before marriage, it offered women a stage where they could perform, demonstrating their womanly charms. As one anonymous Viennese writer explained in 1800, "Every well-bred girl, whether she has talent or not, must learn to play the piano or sing; first of all it's fashionable; secondly, it's the most convenient way for her to put herself forward in society and thereby, if she is lucky, make an advantageous matrimonial alliance, particularly a moneyed one" (qtd. in Ruth Solie, "music in other words" "girling at the parlor piano" 90). Piano playing also allowed physical intimacy between man and woman, sharing the same piano bench, or the man standing close to and above the woman, as Helen describes Annabella and Huntingdon around the piano: "she had ended her song, but still she sat at the instrument; and he stood leaning on the back of her chair, conversing in scarcely audible tones with his face in very close proximity with hers" (196).

Since their expression of emotion was restricted, Victorian women found music a means of emotional release. As the clergyman H.R. Haweis wrote in 1876, "As a woman's life is often a life of feeling. . . .

and if society . . . frequently calls upon her to repress her feelings, we should not deny her. . . the healthy outlet for emotion which music supplies. . . . A good play on the piano has not unfrequently taken the place of a good cry up-stairs" (qtd. in Solie 93-4). Given the repression of female sexuality in this culture, piano playing and singing offered women an outlet, within the constraints of 19th century parlour music, to express their passion. Laura Vorachek, English professor at the University of Dayton, makes this argument quite explicitly: a woman's desire "is displaced onto the piano. The piano functions as a fetish, a location for her sex expression that allows her to remain innocent, her body chaste, yet her desire communicated or mediated through playing" (27, "The Instrument of the Century"). If, as Vorachek argues, "The piano can be metaphor for healthy female sexuality" (397), Annabella's superior performance is not limited to the keyboard. Brontë conveys her eroticism through her description of one such performance, during which even Helen can't resist the allure of Annabella's playing: I "listened with a sort of gloomy pleasure to the skillful modulations of her full-toned and powerful voice, so judiciously aided by her rounded and spirited touch; and while my ears drank in the sound, my eyes rested on the face of [Huntingdon] . . . . that eye and brow lighted up with keen enthusiasm. . . . No wonder he should hunger and thirst to hear her sing. . . . 'There now!' said she, playfully running her fingers over the keys. . . . 'What shall I give you next?'" (140).

Rosalie is an embodiment of this education, of what upper class adolescent girls are taught to believe about themselves and their role in society. Rosalie's mother, "whose chief enjoyments were . . . in giving or frequenting parties, and in dressing at the very top of the fashion" (55), seeks the same life for her daughters: "she was," Brontë writes, "anxious only to render them as superficially attractive, and showily accomplished, as they could possibly be made. . . . [Agnes's job] was to amuse and oblige, instruct, refine, and polish" (56). Agnes generally gets along with the beautiful Rosalie. But she laments Rosalie's superficiality. "Her mind," Agnes explains, "had never been cultivated: her intellect at best was somewhat shallow; she possessed considerable vivacity, some quickness of perception, and some talent for music and the acquisition of languages, but at fifteen she had troubled herself to acquire nothing" (58). Rosalie applies herself only to those skills expected of a debutante, skills that will make her stand out in public, what Brontë labels "showy accomplishments": "French, German, music, singing, dancing, fancy-work, and a little drawing" (58). These are the skills middle and upper-class women are expected to possess as they, Agnes says of the eighteen year-old Rosalie, "emerge from their quiet obscurity . . . into the full blaze of the fashionable world" (64), skills needed to attract and entertain a mate: to play the piano and sing, to dance gracefully, to converse in French (useful for a likely trip to Paris after the wedding).

Of course, not all women could adapt to and adopt the role of coquette as a means of marrying. Some, like Rosalie's sister, resisted, however unsuccessfully, the imposition of these socially constructed gender roles.

Rosalie's sister Matilda is quite different. She is subject to the same limited education and confining gender rules. Yet she does not embrace the role of coquette, is not interested in "the acquisition of ornamental accomplishments" (59), partly to create an identity separate from her sister but more because she is interested in "unwomanly" things. Mathilda almost completely violates the appearance and behavior expected of an upper-class teenaged girl. She is "a strapping hoyden of about fourteen, with a short frock and trousers" (53). "A veritable hoyden," according to Agnes, "she was far too big-boned and

awkward ever to be called a pretty girl" (59). Brontë's repetition within a few pages of the word "hoyden" may just reflect its more common usage in the 19th century, a "hoyden" being, according to the O.E.D., "a rude, or ill-bred girl; a boisterous girl." It's worth noting, though, that one of the roots of "hoyden" is "heathen." To be a mother—which should be Mathilda's goal—is to be angel of the house, the moral force that binds a family with Christian love. To be a hoyden, then, is to violate expected female behavior and thus be unchristian. And violate Mathilda gleefully does. She "had learnt to swear like a trooper" (60). She is interested not in womanly things but in horseback riding. When Agnes returns from a stay with her family, Rosalie and Mathilda compete to tell of their exploits, Rosalie about the ball she'd attended, Mathilda about her new mare, asserting that "she could clear a five-barrel gate . . . and that her [father] said she might hunt next time the hounds met" (68).

The essence of Mathilda is seen in her reply to her sister's wishing she would be more lady-like and alleging that Mathilda learned to swear from hanging around the stables: "'I learnt it from papa, you ass! And his jolly friends,' said the young lady, vigorously cracking a hunting-whip, which she habitually carried in her hand. 'I'm as good a judge of horseflesh as the best of them'" (69). Mathilda's cracking whip should remind us of Agnes's former pupil Tom's saying "how manfully he used his whip and spurs." And while Mathilda doesn't seek to torture little birds, she does "become tired of so helpless and troublesome a nursling" as her dog Snap and so lets Agnes take charge of it. When the dog shows Agnes more affection, it receives "many a spiteful kick and pinch from" Mathilda—and is danger of being "put away" (102). This cruelty toward animals, we have seen, is viewed as a masculine trait. Thus, Mathilda's behavior is one more example of her violation of Victorian gender codes. To employ a phrase in common use in the 19th century (though not by Brontë), Mathilda is a tomboy. As Mary Elliott asserts about their appearance in American post-Civil War fiction, tomboys "challenged the limits of prevailing domestic conventions and principles. . . . Their intrusions are . . . always disruptive to rigid taxonomies of gender identity and to prevailing notions of appropriate private and public conduct for women" (92). Whereas her sister gained power by playing the coquette, Mathilda finds power in being a tomboy, in swearing and horse-jumping and hunting and otherwise defying gender conventions.

Brontë expresses some admiration for Mathida. "As an animal," she writes, Mathilda is "full of life, vigour and activity." But she laments Mathilda's lack of intellect: "as an intelligent being, she was barbarously ignorant, indocile, careless, and irrational" (59). In later fiction, tomboys were sometimes depicted as compulsive readers, finding alternatives to their society's gender conventions and release from social pressures in the solitary act of reading, as seen in the character Jo March in *Little Women*. Brontë, though, denies Mathilda any such intellectual capacity. If she so greatly disrupts Victorian gender conventions, it seems, she cannot be smart. Brontë does not contemplate the possibility that Mathilda aggressively dismisses her education because its goal is to transform her, to refashion her natural inclinations so that she will fit the model of a proper English gentlewoman. Or as Agnes describes the goals of her instruction: "cultivating her understanding, reforming her manners, and aiding her to acquire those ornamental attainments which, unlike her sister, she despised" (59).

Marriage

The marriage girls like Rosalie and Mathilda are being prepared for most frequently was at least as much—and often much more—based on wealth and position rather than on emotional sympathy and physical attraction. Marriage in Victorian England denied women essential rights, enshrined their husbands as their legal rulers, if not owners. Rosalie enjoys her days as a coquette because she knows what is likely to

follow: marriage to a husband she doesn't love and a life controlled by him. It's only the days of coquetry and courtship when she, temporarily, has power over men. She relishes this power the more because it soon will be gone, as you can hear in this excerpt from Episode 1.

Rosalie's only pleasure derives from being seen and admired. She attends church twice on Sundays because "she so loved admiration that she could not bear to lose a single opportunity of obtaining it" and "there was certain to be somebody present who would not be insensible to her charms" (94). Living in the country, though, she has almost no opportunity to practice these charms other than on the village's young, unmarried rector, Mr. Hatfield. Rosalie regularly meets him outdoors, causing her mother to fear that she might accept his hand in marriage. But Rosalie tells Agnes this notion is preposterous, that she would never consider marrying a man who has no fortune. And when he does propose, Rosalie not only turns him down but relishes doing so.

She gleefully recounts his suffering: "You should have seen how his countenance fell. . . . He went perfectly white in the face. . . . Oh, if you had seen how dreadfully mortified he was—how crushed to the earth by his disappointment. . . . There was he, suffering so unspeakably, and there was I, the pitiless cause of it all, so utterly impenetrable to all the artillery of his looks and words, so calmly cold and proud" (107). She even imagines Hatfield's despair as he "shut[s] himself up in his study and cr[ies]—if he doesn't burst into tears before he gets there" (109). Brontë condemns this callous indifference and cruelty. However, she is not merely pointing to the foibles of one foolish young girl but is denouncing a system that entraps women in this narrow vision of themselves and their lives. This system is so destructive of genuine human impulses that Rosalie prides herself on being "calmly cold" while denouncing the very concept of love: "It is quite beneath the dignity of a woman to do such a thing [as falling in love]," she explains, "Love! I detest the word! as applied to one of our sex, I think it is a perfect insult" (103). Although she is a victim of this system, in Brontë's view, Rosalie is not a dupe. Her behavior is a rational response to an oppressive system. We learn the reasons for her cruelty in how she reacts to having tormented and rejected Hatfield: "I am delighted with myself," she claims, "for my prudence, my self-control, my *heartlessness*. . . . he evidently idolized me; and yet. . . . I had the wisdom, and the pride, and the strength to refuse him—and scornfully and coolly as I did: I have good reason to be proud of that!" (110). What strange words to describe stringing a man along and then coldly turning him away: delight, prudence, self-control, wisdom, pride, strength—and heartlessness.

At eighteen, Rosalie is being pushed into marriage. She has disparaging things to say about all of her suitors: Sir Hugh Melvin is an "old codger," Sir Thomas "an ugly beast," Harry Meltham a younger son (hence not heir to his family's fortune), Mr. Green "of no family" and "a great stupid fellow," and Mr. Hatfield of no money (70). About these men, she concludes, "I really do detest them all" (71). And yet Rosalie cherishes playing the role of coquette. She declares, "if I could be always young, I would be always single. I should like to enjoy myself thoroughly, and coquet with all the world . . . having made ten thousand conquests" (71). That is, Rosalie dreams of lingering in this moment, being a perpetual object of desire, forever wanted and forever out of reach. But she knows she must marry and marry well.

Like most Victorian women of her class, she has no options, no education she can gain nor career pursue. She is trapped. Although being a coquette is trivial and unrewarding, it's all she has. Denied love, education, and a profession, denied the chance to find her own way in the world, denied an independent identity, and forced at a young age to marry and bear the children of a man she is not attracted to, Rosalie relishes the role of coquette because it's the only thing that gives her power. As she plainly admits about

her flirtation with the curate Edward Weston, "I intend him to feel my power . . . he shall *acknowledge* it too" (120). For Rosalie, love is a battlefield where she is "impenetrable to all the artillery of [a man's] looks and words." It is a landscape she hopes will be strewn with her conquests. In this context, we can understand the words she used to describe her feelings about abusing Hatfield. She feels *delight* in overcoming men. She *prides* herself on having the *self-control* and *strength* and *wisdom* to rule her emotions. It is Hatfield, she imagines, who, like a woman, cries, while she, like a man, remains cool and emotionless. Ultimately, she prides herself on her *heartlessness* because it is the key to dominating men, a domination that will disappear the instant she is married.

When marriage arrives, the power women like Rosalie have is surrendered. They are almost always younger—and often much younger—than their husbands, and they most likely are virgins (if from middle upper class families) who may have married an older and much more experienced man, are unprepared and may be incapable of pleasing him sexually. And he may have married her merely to bear his children, to flatter his ego, to gain wealth, and to give him someone he can easily control.

Admittedly, drawing conclusions about the intimate details of marriage in the 19th century based on a handful of novels (and on my overall knowledge of this period) is precarious. It's hard enough to understand private behaviors and feelings from a piecemeal record of personal and historical documents, let alone to base it on books that had to pass censorious publishers and were aimed at pleasing the tastes of a broad reading public. In fact, if we were to consider the dominant myth—that women should be married, raise children, and confine themselves to the domestic realm—the lives of the authors we've looked at would offer contrary evidence. By writing these novels, female authors were entering a male domain. Thus, Anne Bronte published her first novel under a gender-neutral pseudonym and Ellen Wood published as Mrs. Henry Wood.

In addition, in their personal lives several of these writers did not follow the customary rules of marriage and domesticity. Bronte died too young to consider, and Ellen Wood was married for 30 years and had four children. But Rhoda Broughton never married. Mary Elizabeth Braddon lived with a married man for fifteen years, raising his five and their six children, all the while her husband's wife was confined to an asylum. Honore de Balzac didn't marry until the end of his life, had multiple affairs (often with married ladies), and may have fathered an illegitimate child. Their cultures seemed to recognize the eccentric nature of artists and to sometimes turn a blind eye to their unconventional arrangements. George Eliot, for example, had a long relationship with a married man, and for 20 years Wilkie Collins, in what was a well-known arrangement divided his time between two women. And yet for the most part the fiction writer by these authors reinforces conventional views about marriage and women. It can be argued, though, that in this work the obstacles along the way to a happy marriage, the suffering that women, innocent of any moral crimes endure, which point to all sorts of problems with the nature of marriage and the proper role of women as then established, an attempt at realism actually undercut the customs these novels ultimately seem to endorse.

Because of the moral strictures on 19th century literature, the sexual details of these marriages between experienced husbands and innocent wives are at best vaguely alluded to, as in Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which I discuss in Episode 1:

After her October 22nd diary entry, Helen records no new entries until February 18th when she tells us, "I have had eight weeks' experience of matrimony" (171). What does this new bride record about these two months of marriage? She complains that Huntingdon is not the man she thought he was, though, a good Victorian wife, she declares, "my duty, now, is plainly to love him and to cleave to him" (171). Anne Brontë does not show us the wedding night or any other night of sexual pleasure the newlyweds experienced. Proper Victorian culture prohibited descriptions of such scenes. However, Anne does have Helen allude to her sexual relations with Huntingdon: "He is very fond of me—almost too fond. I could do with less caressing and more rationality: I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend. . . . I am only afraid his affection loses in depth where it gains in ardour." She compares their relationship to a very bright and hot fire that, she worries, may "burn itself out and leave nothing but ashes behind" (171). Translated for a modern audience, Helen is complaining that her husband is too passionate. He is too interested in Helen as sexual object, as a pet, and not interested enough in Helen as a person.

The sexual pleasure Helen's husband Arthur Huntingdon experiences is not shared by his young wife Helen (due to her inexperience or his indifference), which is one of the reasons, I presume, that he soon thereafter leaves her for long stretches of debauchery in London. It's the same circumstance faced by Adeline Hulot, whose husband Baron Hulot leaves her for a series of mistresses. With little sexual experience and a Madonna-like purity, but with a desperate wish to keep him from pursuing courtesans, she implores him to tell her what she can do to please him in language that's much more frankly than would appear in a Victorian novel. As I recount in Episode 19,

Just as he had when spurned by Josépha, Hulot returns home, "sobbing like a child whose toy has been taken from him," to the ever-sympathetic, ever-hopeful, ever-deluded Adeline who "saw her husband settled for good in the bosom of his family" (297). Believing her husband's habitual adultery must be due to her deficient sexual skills, she says she's willing to learn to please him. "Tell me," she implores, "how these women behave so that they bind you to them so firmly. I'll try . . . Why haven't you taught me to be what you want? . . . Men still think I'm beautiful enough to be courted" (298). Her husband doesn't respond. But Balzac does, explaining that "Love . . . the manly, serious pleasure of great hearts, and sensual pleasure, the vulgar commodity sold on the marketplace, are two different aspects of the same thing." It's rare for a woman to be able to "satisfy those two great appetites of the two sides of human nature. . . . Men . . . feel the need both of the ideal and of sensual pleasure" (298).

Later in the novel, Adeline is told by one of her husband's mistresses that her husband has sought other women because she does not please him sexually.

Josépha upbraids Adeline for failing to satisfy her husband. "If you'd had a little of our savvy," she remarks, "you'd have stopped him gallivanting; for you'd have been what we know how to be: all kinds of woman to a man." She goes on, presumably echoing Balzac's own views, that this problem—the failure of marriages due to wives' sexual ignorance—is a persistent one that might be corrected with proper sex education. "The government ought to set up," she proposes, "a training school for respectable women. But governments are so prudish" (385).

Adultery

The nature of marriage in the 19th century, its emphasis upon marrying for wealth and status, would seem almost inevitably to lead to dissatisfaction with one's spouse and to, in a violation of all that's right and sacred, to women seeking comfort and pleasure through adulterous relationships with other men. We see this in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

Throughout the novel, marital relationships are shown to be based not on mutual desire but on individual need—for money, for title, for control, for public approval. Marriage, as Brontë depicts it, is inescapably compromised by individual needs and societal demands. We've already seen that Annabella marries Lord Lowborough for his title. But *he* marries *her*, it seems, out of true affection—and the need for a helpmate, someone he can lean on in his struggles against addiction. His weaknesses, however, are not something that Annabella helps him overcome; rather, they are a means for her to gain control. "She knows her power," writes Helen, "and she uses it too . . . she judiciously tempers her despotism with flattery and blandishments enough to make him deem himself a favoured and a happy man" (193). Annabella torments her husband (and Helen), playing piano and singing and "openly but not too glaringly coquetting with Mr. Huntingdon, who is quite willing to be her partner in the game" (193). Helen dismisses these scenes. They must be due to Huntingdon's desire to make her jealous and to Annabella's pleasure in tormenting Lord Lowborough. Helen pretends not to be bothered, "preserving a cheerful, undisturbed serenity throughout" and showing "the fullest confidence in [her] husband and the greatest indifference to the arts of [her] attractive guest" (192) Maintaining this confidence in her husband and indifference to the arts of Annabella become impossible when Helen catches her husband "ardently press[ing] [Annabella's] unresisting hand to his lips" (197). Huntingdon dismisses Helen's criticism of his behavior, declaring it inconsequential. To which Helen asks, what would he do if a man had acted with her just as he had with Annabella? Huntingdon's response? "I would blow his brains out" (199). He goes on to explain the difference between women and men: "It is a woman's nature to be constant—to love one and one only, blindly, tenderly, and forever," whereas men's fancies are fleeting and inconstant.

In *East Lynne*, Ellen Wood shows how a combination of frustration with marriage, husbandly neglect, jealousy, the predatory nature of males who

sense a woman's dissatisfaction, and—seemingly—sexual desire can lead to adultery.

Like many a Victorian heroine, Isabel is torn between duty and desire: "She was aware that a sensation all too warm . . . was working within her; not a voluntary one; she could no more repress it than she could repress her own sense of being; and, mixed with it, was the stern voice of conscience, overwhelming her with the most lively terror" (211-12). When Archibald returns to England, Isabel tries to avoid Levison by taking unfamiliar routes and going out at odd hours. To no avail. Levison is too experienced a stalker to be so easily thrown off the scent. But he miscalculates, frightening his prey by telling her, "I knew not how passionately I loved you, until you became the wife of another" (215). Isabel knows the danger she is in: "The symptoms of sinful happiness throbbing at her heart while Francis Levison told her of his love, spoke plainly to [her]of the expediency of withdrawing entirely from his society and his dangerous sophistries" (216-17). When Archibald returns to France, she convinces him to take her back to East Lynne, without explaining why. Archibald tells her that this desire to return must be evidence that at last she has come to love him. Upon hearing him say that she must be in love, "her face flushed nearly to tears . . . a bright, glowing, all too conscious flush" (218). . . .

Before she had left for France, in her depressed state, Isabel had renewed her suspicions about her husband and Barbara Hare, suspicions exacerbated by his diminished passion after several years of marriage. Explains Wood, "Lady Isabel did not understand the even manner, the quiet calmness into which her husband's once passionate love had subsided, and in her fanciful jealousy she attributed it to the influence Barbara held upon his memory" (198). Although she admires her husband and thinks even "a princess might have deemed it an honour to be the chosen of such a man" (199), Isabel has never truly loved him. Upon her return, her jealousy—and her depression—resume, worsened by her separation from Levison. His form "was ever present to her, not a minute of the day but it gave the colouring to her thoughts, and at night it made the subject of her dreams" (220). . . .

During this time, Barbara and Carlyle meet frequently to share information, to plot strategies, to arrange Richard's temporary return, to speculate about the identity of the murderer. Intent on seducing Isabel, Levison sees how suspicious Isabel is of the relationship between Barbara and her husband and does all he can to exploit her fears and increase her jealousy, a jealousy, writes Wood, "kept up . . . by Barbara's frequent meetings with Mr. Carlyle, and by Captain Levison's exaggerated whispers of them. Discontented, ill at ease with herself and with everybody about her, Isabel was living now in a state of excitement, a dangerous resentment against her husband beginning to rise up in her heart" (252). At one point, Carlyle's sister Corny, referring obliquely to the murder, asks him if that "old affair" is being renewed. Isabel, knowing nothing of the murder inquiries, assumes "that any 'old affair' could but have reference to the bygone lives of her husband and Barbara" (257). Ultimately, Levison arranges to be in a carriage with Isabel as it passes where he knows Barbara and her husband are meeting. Wood describes the scene: "There, in the bright moonlight, all too bright and clear, slowly paced, arm in arm, and drawn close to each other, her husband and Barbara." Isabel chokes back a sob, while Levison, "that bold bad man, dared to put his arm round her; to draw her to his side; to whisper that *his* love was left to her, if another's was withdrawn" (271). Lonely, angry, jealous, deceived, Isabel commits the worst possible sin: she, a married woman, leaves her husband and children for another man.

The destructive effects of marrying for money—and the consequent resorting to adulterous romances—are shown by Anne Bronte in *Agnes Grey*:

When Agnes visits Rosalie after her marriage, the inevitable results of this pecuniary betrothal are apparent in Rosalie's greeting: "I'm Lady Ashby! . . . It's done! My fate is sealed . . . there's no drawing back now!" (131). This marriage has even degraded Rosalie's appearance: in twelve months, she has changed as much as one might expect in twelve years. The marriage has reduced "the plumpness of her form, the freshness of complexion, the vivacity of her movements, and the exuberance of her spirits" (153). She bewails these changes, telling Agnes, "It is . . . bad to feel life, health and beauty wasting away, unfelt and unenjoyed, for such a brute as [her husband]" (161). Rosalie despises Sir Thomas and his wicked ways: his gambling, drinking, and spending time with "his opera girls, and his Lady this and Mrs. That" (161). In a culmination of the book's animal imagery, he is, Rosalie declares, "a wild beast" (161). Beginning with Master Tom and ending with Sir Thomas, Brontë shows the moral, intellectual, and physical damage generated from class privilege and male superiority. This insight is confirmed for Agnes when she encounters Sir Thomas while walking the Ashby estate: "He was tall, thin, and wasted . . . somewhat blotchy, and disagreeably red about the eye-lids . . . a general appearance of languor and flatness, relieved by a sinister expression about the mouth and the dull, soulless eyes" (160).

In many of these details, Brontë could be describing her brother Branwell, who more or less drank himself to death after the demise of his affair with his employer's wife. The dissolution Brontë briefly describes here is expanded in her portrayal of the drunken and debauched Arthur Huntington in her second—and last—novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Similarly, Rosalie anticipates the character Annabella Lowborough, who reluctantly marries to gain a title and who has an adulterous affair with Huntingdon. Brontë hints that Rosalie, too, commits adultery. Her degraded appearance is blamed on "the influence of fashionable dissipation" (153)—that is, an excessive indulgence of pleasure, often sexual pleasure, associated with the upper class.

This perception is reinforced when Rosalie tells Agnes that her husband had accused her "of coquetry and extravagance" with Harry Meltham, the only suitor she seemed once to have been attracted to and whom she had described as "rather good-looking, and a pleasant fellow to flirt with," but who had had the disadvantage of being a younger son. As punishment, Sir Thomas confines her to their estate, in Rosalie's words, like "a prisoner and a slave" forced to "lead the life of a nun" so that she won't "dishonor him or bring him to ruin" (161). We see here the predictable sexual double standard and male fear of female sexuality. Rosalie seems to admit having an affair with Meltham when she declares her husband's behavior was "ten times worse in every way" (161), which would seem to grossly understate—only ten times worse?—the difference between her flirting and his habitual adultery. In other words, she seems to be saying that her one affair can't compare with her husband's repeated flagrant adulteries. This is only supposition, though, based on Sir Thomas's fear of being dishonored, on the convention of oblique sexual references in Victorian fiction and on the more overt behavior of Lady Lowborough in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.

In Balzac's Cousin Bette, we meet a woman, Valerie, who, the illegitimate teenaged daughter of a high-ranking military officer, has, for financial security, married a 40-something bureaucrat. Their marriage is predictably loveless. And she, perceiving the value of her beauty and her astonishing love-making talent, embraces and exploits multiple sexual partners.

Valérie opens up about her own life. Balzac has already told us that she was the daughter of a Lieutenant-General who had been awarded the title of Count. With a dowry of twenty thousand francs, she had married "a minor official at the War Ministry" whose career had advanced due to her father's influence, until, writes Balzac, "this pen-pusher had reached the unhoped for position of head-clerk in his office. But on the point of being made assistant-manager" (60), her father died, dashing the couple's hopes and

trapping them in a life of penury and overwhelming debt. Just like today, a government job was seen as providing a reliable if modest income. “Government employment,” Pinkney writes, “had the appeal of conferring a measure of security and many from the middle class sought it as refuge against the threat of proletarianization.” Such jobs, though, offered security without prosperity. “The mass of civil servants,” according to Pinkney, “were ill paid, bound to long hours and tedious work, unsustained by hopes for advancement, and they lacked the prestige of office that their forbears had enjoyed” (77-8). Bette’s well aware of these circumstances. “It’s barbarous of the Government,” she says, “to expect an official who has a wife and family to live on” an assistant-manager’s salary.

Bette and Valérie are bound by more than pity and poverty. Valérie tells Bette that once her father married out of ambition, he “almost forgot about her [his illegitimate daughter], after idolizing [her] and bringing [her] up like a queen’s daughter” (113), a narrative that resonates with Bette’s own parental abandonment. Valérie ’s mother, “who [had] lulled [her] with the loftiest dreams from the cradle, died of grief when she saw [her daughter] married to a petty official . . . a cold-blooded rake at 39, as corrupt as a gallery of convicts, a man who saw in [her] only . . . a means of advancement” (113). Valérie also declares ironically that her husband is “the best of husbands. Since he prefers the filthy street-corner sluts to me, he leaves me free. If he spends all his salary on himself, he never asks me how I got my income” (113). Forsaken by men and parents and struggling to support themselves, Bette and Valérie have grown bitter and resourceful, recognizing the hardness of life, Valérie declaring that “One must only try to get all the hay one can for oneself from the hayrack. That’s life in Paris. . . . one must get as much as one can out of it and use others for one’s own advantage” (112). Twenty-three years old, the mother of a child we barely see, wife of a minor bureaucrat wasting away from syphilis, Madame Marneffe is an able schemer, a woman who recognizes the unique advantages Baron Hulot offers, a woman “who spends her time lying on a sofa, turning the lantern of her observation on all the dark corners of human hearts, feelings, and intrigues” (Episode).

Since marriage so often was a financial arrangement, women without money and without extreme beauty could find themselves with few options to support themselves. The character Agnes Grey (like her creator Anne Bronte) finds herself in just this situation and therefore signs on as a governess, a particularly unrewarding position, both intellectually and financially, but a necessary one to support oneself or one’s family, as I discuss in Episode 3.

Without beauty or wealth, many women were unable to marry. Educated women who needed to support themselves or their family—with no financial support from a husband—during a time when jobs for women were scarce, turned to the profession of governess, the strange and alienating demands of which Anne Bronte discusses in Agnes Grey and which I discuss in Episode 3.

As the middle class increased in the growing capitalist economy of early 19th century England, so too did its inevitable “creative destruction,” causing fortunes to be lost and daughters to seek employment, a fate blamed not on the economic system but on the follies of fathers. As the *Governesses’ Benevolent*

Institution Report of 1847 claimed, "the imprudencies, extravagancies, mistakes, or crimes of a certain number of fathers [were needed] to sow that seed from which we reap the harvest of governesses" (qtd. in Ewbank, 60). What was the "plight" of these formerly middle-class women? That the supply of eligible governesses greatly exceeded demand, that, although genteel, they were forced to work for wages, and that these wages were notoriously low. As many scholars have noted, this plight became something of a cultural obsession in the 1840s, even though there were far more women working as domestic servants and millhands (750,000 versus about 25,000 governesses in 1851) (Peterson 8)—and even though the work conditions and wages of domestics and industrial workers were far worse than what governesses had to endure. This cultural preoccupation with governesses can be explained by their curious class position—once middle-class women now working for wages and residing in middle and upper-class homes. The preoccupation with governesses was also shaped by their taking over some of the child-rearing roles in a culture that prized motherhood above all. In other words, the governess embodied a threat to the correctness and stability of the class system and to the ideology of womanhood. Of course, a more insightful critique of these matters would center on working class men and women. The governess figure served to obscure these more destabilizing fears by displacing them onto a far less threatening population. Or as Kathryn Hughes, Director of Creative Non-Fiction at the University of East Anglia, puts it: "Rather than ponder the disturbing implications of a hungry and disaffected workforce, contemporaries preferred to think about the more manageable problem of 25,000 unhappy middle-class women" (148). . . .

Women like Agnes Grey, no matter how intelligent, cannot join the upper class—or even be made visible to them. In her 1865 guidebook *Principles of Education, drawn from Nature and Revelation, and applied to Female Education in the Upper Classes*, Elizabeth Missing Sewell explains the cause of Agnes's and other governesses frustration: "the real discomfort of a governess's position in a private family arises from the fact that it is undefined. She is not a relation, not a guest, not a mistress, not a servant—but something made up of all. No one knows exactly how to treat her" (412). Agnes experiences what sociologists call "status incongruence." By habit and self-perception, she identifies with the Murrays. But by employment and others' perceptions, she is a servant. Fitting into neither category, she has no friends, other than the girls she tutors and the curate Weston, with whom she shares only brief conversations. Agnes bemoans her lonely state: "the weary monotony, the lonely drudgery . . . never did I see one creature to whom I could open my heart, or freely speak my thoughts . . . [or] enjoy a single moment of real social intercourse" (87). This lack of engagement with others, she fears, is destroying both her mind and her spirit: "I seemed to feel my intellect deteriorating, my heart petrifying, my soul contracting . . . and all my better faculties be sunk, at last, beneath the baleful influence of such a mode of life" (88). Agnes' lament surely mirrors Anne's feelings and those of many other governesses and it explains Lady Elizabeth Eastlake's observation that "the lunatic asylums of this country are supplied with a larger proportion of their inmates from the ranks of young governesses than from any other class of life" (qtd in Hughes 163). But a savior will appear to Agnes. "Thus, it was," she explains, "that Mr. Weston rose at length upon me, appearing like the morning star in my horizon, to save me from the fear of utter darkness" (88).

The very real fear of destitution, with few means of self-support, explains the behavior of Helen Maldon (aka Lady Audley) in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. Abandoned by her husband who has left for Australia and with a child to support, dissatisfied with her income as an instructress, desirous of a greater life for herself, and recognizing the power of her great beauty, she understands that her best alternative is to marry into money. And so she creates a false identity, working briefly as a governess, in order to marry a wealthy older man, pretending to love him. Her attempt to preserve this

position and maintain her false identity (specifically, to disguise the fact that she had previously been married and that her husband is still alive) leads to her many acts of duplicity and even to attempted murder. Late in the novel, she reveals the truth and narrates the desperation that had caused her fabrications.

Poor, abandoned, afraid of her own descent into madness, and entering her teens, Lucy, told is repeatedly that she is "pretty-beautiful-lovely-bewitching" and concludes, reasonably enough, that only one thing can lead her out of her miserable poverty: her beauty.

She tells Robert and Sir Michael about the arrival of her means of escape, "the wandering prince" George Talboys, tells them of their marriage three months after she turned seventeen, of their being disowned by his father, of the birth of her son, which didn't lead to madness but to something more like post-partum depression: "I was more irritable . . after my recovery," she explains, "less inclined to fight the hard battle of the world; more disposed to complain of poverty and neglect" (300). It's this complaining, this blaming George "for his cruelty in having allied a helpless girl to poverty and misery" (300) that sends him to Australia. . . .

Despite her evil ways and lack of empathy, as noted earlier, it's hard not to sympathize with Lady Audley. Her narcissism, her appreciation for her own beauty and preoccupation with social status, was generated by her circumstances. A poor woman like Helen Maldon had no other way to escape poverty, to become something, to in essence have a life of her own. It's also hard not to admire her cunning. All that Helen does to become Lady Audley—and to remain Lady Audley—reveals a steely determination and a fierce intelligence. Until Robert gets off his couch and focuses on finding George, she is the only character who seems to possess any agency. The Audleys and the Harcourts are safely ensconced in their county manors, living off their inherited wealth, enjoying lives of privilege, doing nothing other than hunting foxes and holding dinner parties. Helen is also by far the smartest character in the novel, having insight into the psyches and motivations of others and using this knowledge to her advantage. In fact, if Robert hadn't switched rooms at the Inn, she would likely have succeeded in her nefarious plot and retained her identity as Lady Audley.

Women Beware Women

Unable to directly address the cause of their frustrations and disappointments–their husbands and lovers and the institution of marriage (or to put it more simply individual men and the patriarchal system) women in these novels often direct their anger at those they can reach: other women. For instance, wishing to maintain a comfortable life, in a declining noble family, Dolly, in Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower*, pushes her sister Nell toward an unattractive but wealthy suitor, Hugh, and away from Dick, the attractive but unwealthy soldier she loves, even intercepting the correspondence he sends from overseas, where he is stationed, making her sister believe he has broken his promise to marry her and leading her instead to marry the unloved Hugh.

Nell knows she needs to reconcile with Dick, so the next day, uncharacteristically assertive, desiring to "retrieve last night's disaster," she puts her hand on his arm, calls him "Dick" for the first time, and asks him to "drive her in the dogcart . . . because she cannot ride" (174) on horseback like the rest of the party who are going on a picnic excursion. For a young Victorian girl, this assertiveness, a gross violation of proper behavior, causes her great upset: "As I make this indecently forward proposal," Nell tells us, "my voice shakes, and my heart thumps like a team ram" (174), that is, like an iron-clad ship of the kind used in the American Civil War to ram wooden naval vessels. But this effort, this shouting voice and thumping heart, is worth it: wounded pride healed and the previous night's flirtations forgotten, Dick agrees to drive Nell to the picnic.

Until sister Dolly intervenes.

Standing nearby while "holding her habit up delicately with one hand, and slashing a small [laced up ankle] boot with her whip" (175), Dolly overhears Hugh tell Dick that one of the carriage horses can be unruly. This picture encapsulates Dolly: proper yet sensual ("holding her habit up delicately"), confident and controlling (slashing her boot with a whip), and conniving (listening to Hugh and Dick's conversation). Unbeknownst to her sister, Dolly tells Dick Nell is afraid of this unruly horse and that she would, therefore, rather have the more experienced Hugh as her driver. And so for the picnic Nell joins Hugh, while Dolly joins Dick. Forced to share a picnic lunch with the insufferable Hugh, Nell watches Dolly flirt with Dick and imagines his being made captive by her sister's charm: Dolly wakes "Dick's devil. . . . The great velvet orbs passionate, passion rousing seek his again; seem unable to tear themselves away. What man can stand it? Dick cannot. . . ." (182). And Broughton adds what seems—to this post-Freud, post-Georgia O'Keefe reader—an overtly sexual image: "[Dolly] plays with the wide-open iris flowers, with the stiff, wet iris stems that lie in her lap" (182). No wonder Dick seems entranced. I don't know if these stiff wet irises were inserted into the text unconsciously or if Broughton did so intentionally. Certainly, in not excising this description, these flowers that cometh up, the book's editors and publisher didn't perceive its sexual suggestiveness.

However sensual Dolly's behavior and appearance, she has no interest in a man so poor as Dick. She flirts with him because she enjoys exerting her power over men (the only power a woman like Dolly possesses)—and in so doing sends a message to her sister: Dick can't truly love you if so easily attracted to me. . . .

After her horrible experiences with a conniving sister, a spoiled picnic, a runaway carriage, a lower-class pub and a besotted suitor, Nell is awakened by and instantly angry at Dolly for having 1) contrived to place her with Hugh, thereby setting on its course her nightmarish ordeal and 2) having fastened her seductive glance on Dick. In confronting Dolly, Nell asks a question that's difficult not to read sexually: "Did you want to ride with him yourself?" A question whose double entendre Dolly, if not Nell, seems to comprehend as "she smiles again; a little amused compassionate smile" (201). Dolly explains that she has no interest in the impoverished Dick. Rather, her goal is to see that Nell "should drive through life with [Hugh] . . . and to see [her] as Lady Lancaster" (202). After Nell tells her this will never happen, Dolly draws a bleak picture of what marriage to Dick would look like: "riding in the baggage wagon . . . with several little M'Gregors, male and female, clinging about your skirts" (202). Clearly, Dolly is the villain of the piece, uninterested in love or in any of a potential husband's traits other than his wealth. And she sees raising children as tedious and restrictive. While the novel depicts her as vain, cynical, mercenary, and duplicitous, she, not Nell, truly understands the plight of an upper-class woman with great beauty but little money. Her refusal to give in to domestic cant and her ability to exploit a system rigged against her are admirable. Perceiving marriage as a commercial transaction, she pierces through the gauzy romanticizing of motherhood. Likely, Broughton

shared these views, remaining unmarried not due to a broken heart but to an understanding that marriage would restrict her—as a writer and a woman who wished to retain her independence.

In her attempt to push Nell into Hugh's arms, Dolly goes on to falsely claim that Dick, in Pamela Gilbert's words, "likes the expensive and decadent habits of upper-class bachelor life: gambling on billiards, drinking expensive wine, and keeping pricey mistresses" (203n2). By sullying Dick's reputation and encouraging marriage to Hugh, Dolly is pursuing her own agenda, for should Nell marry Dick, she "will drag down [their] family, and [Dolly] of course with it, even lower than it has already fallen, though it seems pretty nearly at the bottom" (203). Dolly, speaking of a potential wealthy suitor, reveals how completely she is ruled by mercenary desires: "I'd swear to love, honor, and obey not him . . . but his £12,000 a year, his French cook and his opera box. . . . is there any lord between the three seas, so old, so mumbling, so wicked, that I would not joyfully throw myself into his horrid palsied arms, if he had but money; money! Money! Money is power; money is a god" (204).

The unfairness of a woman's condition, especially if this woman lacks both wealth and beauty, is personified in Balzac's title character, Cousin Bette. Living alone in a squalid Paris neighborhood and working as a seamstress, she obsesses about avenging herself against her fortunate, beautiful, and wealthy sister Adeline.

Balzac contrasts the beautiful 21-year-old Hortense with the spinsterish 43-year-old Bette. Hortense's "youthful animation, her fresh vitality, her abundant good health," writes Balzac, "all seemed to vibrate and to radiate electric waves around her. . . . When her deep-blue eyes, with their pure, innocent look, fell on a passer-by, he would feel an involuntary thrill" (33). Bette, in comparison, wore a dress that "turned her into an old maid from head to foot" (39); she was "a dried up old maid who . . . looked exactly like a daily sewing-woman" (7). This contrast repeats the novel's formative episode, when the young Bette Fischer is marginalized in favor of her cousin Adeline Fischer—the future Madame Hulot. Balzac describes the sixteen-year-old Adeline:

> She was one of those perfect, dazzling beauties . . . whom Nature fashions with particular care, giving them her most precious gifts, distinction, nobility grace, refinement, elegance, an incomparable physique. . . . [she] had the willowy figure, the seductive fabric of those women born to be queens . . . the bearing of an empress, an aristocratic air, a majestically contoured profile, and the modesty of a village girl [which made men stop and look at her] charmed as art-lovers are before a Raphael. (27)

Few women could compare with this goddess, let alone Bette, "a peasant woman from the Vosges in the full meaning of those words, thin, dark, with shiny black hair, thick eyebrows joined by a tuft of hair, long, strong arms, large feet, one or two warts on her long, monkey-like face" (34) who was called "Nanny Goat" by Hulot. Vosges, by the way, is a region in northeastern France near the German border from where the three Fischer brothers, including Bette and Adeline's fathers, had been conscripted by the post-Revolution Republic to serve in the Army of the Rhine against the Austrians and Prussians. In 1799, Adeline's father continued his service in the French Army under Napoleon, while Bette's father, wounded in an unspecified battle in 1797, remained behind, raising both his and his brother's daughters. Recognizing the superior beauty and thus greater monetary value of Adeline, Bette's "family, who lived as one household, . . . sacrificed the plain girl to the pretty one, the sharp fruit to the brilliant flower. [Bette] worked in the fields while her cousin was spoiled" (34). Bette understandably fought with her

privileged cousin and attempted to spoil both her beautiful face and beautiful wardrobe. This rejection, this preference for her cousin by her own parents, permanently deformed Bette's character: "Jealousy," Balzac writes, "was the fundamental feature of her character" (34), and it is the driving force for much of the narrative.

Even when her partner in crime Valerie Marneffe, on her death-bed, repents for her sins and urges Bette to do the same, Bette cannot surrender this desire to avenge herself against her cousin, a cousin who has treated her well and who is not responsible for Bette's ignominious fate. Bette is incapable of this understanding or to see that the fault is not the fault of her cousin but of a system that offered no other options to a poor and unattractive woman.

She implores Bette to follow her example, saying, "I'd like to undo all the harm I've done so that I could receive mercy. . . . If you love me, follow my example and repent! . . . give up all idea of revenge" (439-40). Bette's reaction to this deathbed confession is not to learn and repent but instead to deny, to believe that such cant is evidence that "her mind has gone" (439), that "she's delirious" (440). Bette has built her life on avenging herself against her cousin and the Hulot family, a desire she sees as entirely natural. "I've seen vengeance everywhere in nature," she explains, "Insects die to satisfy their need for vengeance when they're attacked" (440). The knowledge that Valérie's death is the result of Montès's revenge in no way modifies Bette's vengeful nature. On the contrary, it's Christian charity and sacrifice and humility that, to Bette, are unnatural; they have no place in her life, even when she's confronted with the death of her closest friend.

Just as Bette cannot see an enemy other than her beautiful sister, so the female characters in Ellen Wood's East Lynne, jealous of the success of Isabel Vane, attack her, perceiving her marriage and social climbing, which were innocently achieved, must be due to deception. A system that promotes such deceit encourages women to believe that all success must be tainted, that even the innocent must be guilty.

For a novel that looks at the various ways women's lives are constrained and contorted by patriarchal rule, there's little direct criticism of the patriarchal system which has determined their fates. On the contrary, Wood suggests that women themselves are largely responsible for such woes. Isabel suffers because of the abuse she receives from a trio of women: Barbara, Corny, and Emma. Their mistreatment of her derives from an identical cause: jealousy. From the time she first sees Isabel, Barbara is jealous of her beauty and self-possession. This jealousy becomes rancorous once Isabel marries Mr. Carlyle. Corny has contempt for what she sees as Isabel's frivolous nature and she, too, develops a deep jealousy once Isabel marries her brother. Emma likewise is jealous of Isabel's ability to attract a man, in this case, Captain Levison. There's a mean-girls quality to all of this. Isabel does little to attract Carlyle or Levison other than be her beautiful innocent self. It's precisely these qualities—her beauty and class and character—that infuriate the three women. Hence, they poke at her appearance, Corny seeing the fine clothes she wears to a rustic concert as inappropriate and vain, Emma seeing her lack of display as disingenuous. It's striking that someone who seems to embody the essential traits of Victorian womanhood is criticized by other women. Isabel is too angelic, too perfect, and so the three women must

pick at her, must find her flaws. It's as if Wood is saying that this standard of womanhood, perfectly pure and innocently charming, can't exist in the real world of self-interest and individual desire. These women, of course, are products of their culture. To understand why they respond so egregiously to the blameless Isabel, then, we need to consider their own histories.

We know little of Emma's upbringing, other than that her mother is dead. Unlike Isabel, she has no title. But she has pretensions of being a lady. "She had," Wood writes, "the greatest horror of soiling her hands or her gloves [and] had a particular antipathy to doing anything useful" (14). She has married a considerably older man, the presumptive heir to an earldom, presumably to luxuriate in his wealth while hoping for a title. She wishes she were not encumbered by this marriage and could be free to enjoy a life of pleasure with Captain Levison. The animus she feels for Isabel, therefore, is an expression of her own frustration. She cannot attack the real source of her anger, the male-defined class system that has kept her from pursuing her genuine desires, and so she attacks a convenient foil, the young and pretty Isabel.

Although strongly anti-Victorian in her repudiation of marriage, Corny is in other ways a model Victorian. She has devoted her life to caring for a surrogate son. He has even called her Mummy. She is prudent and self-sacrificing and religious. And she possesses many domestic skills. Her intemperance toward her suitors and her angry response to her brother's marriage, though, suggest a different reading of her character. To respond so disproportionately to these offenses suggests that at some level she is aware of all that she has sacrificed to be the dutiful brother-protecting surrogate mom. She has denied herself true companionship, let alone romance. She seems to have little if any interior life. And for all the work she put into raising her brother, she was not rewarded financially. The family inheritance went overwhelmingly to Archibald. No surprise, then, that she enjoys announcing her brother's marriage to the heartsick Barbara. At least she can experience the pleasure of watching another suffer. And by physically injecting herself into the newlyweds' home and managing its many domestic demands, Corny supplants Isabel as mistress of the home, forcing her to turn inward for solace. Although more devil than angel in the house, Corny nonetheless is of the house and is thus adhering, however perversely, to the Victorian gender code.

Barbara Hare has grown up in a secure, upper-middle class family with a domineering father. Her mother was cripplingly passive: "she had never dared express a will" and "scarcely, on her own responsibility, to give an order." In fact, "her life had been one long yielding of her will to his . . . she had no will; his, was all in all." Barbara alone among the three Hare children "had inherited this will" (21). Because she does not have the tempering feminine influence of a mother, Barbara, like her father, seeks to impose her will, especially to fulfill her one desire: to marry Mr. Carlyle. But this desire is impossibly frustrated by Isabel's appearance in East Lynne. And her appearance in general: Isabel "looked inexpressibly beautiful," writes Wood, "and Barbara turned from her with a feeling of sickening jealousy; from her beauty, from her attire, even from the fine, soft handkerchief, which displayed the badge of her rank" (158-9). Barbara has, it seems, an aggressive, male temperament that Victorian conventions have made her repress. But her anger and frustration boil over one night when she is alone with Carlyle. Wood sets the scene: "There are moments in a woman's life when she is betrayed into forgetting the ordinary rules of conduct and propriety. . . . Barbara's temper was not under strict control. Her love, her jealousy, the never-dying pain always preying on her heart-strings since the marriage took place, her keen sense of the humiliation which had come home to her, were all rising fiercely, bubbling up with fiery heat" (163). And so, at last, her love for him long assumed, never expressed, and now rendered impossible, Barbara confronts the oblivious Carlyle: "What is my misery to you?" she asks, "I would rather be in my grave, Archibald Carlyle, than endure the life I lead. My pain is greater than I know how to bear. . . . All West Lynne had coupled us together in their prying gossip, and they have only pity to cast to me now. I would far rather you had killed me" (164).

The persistent jealousy of these characters might be read as a comment on women, that it is in their nature to be possessive of the men they love and to be jealous of anyone who threatens this relationship. On this

reading, Wood is merely reinforcing familiar stereotypes about overly emotional women fighting other women for the men they love. In other words, they are standing by their man. However, when placed within its Victorian context, this behavior takes on a different cast. Denied independence, pressured to marry, taught to surrender their own interests, many Victorian women defined themselves by their ties to their husband. The idea that their lover or brother or husband was emotionally committed to another inspired strong jealousy because these women's sense of self was threatened. To put it another way, because they identified with their husband, his being attracted to another was perceived as an assault on their own identity.

Jealousy occurs when a person wants something she can't have. Women in Victorian culture were deprived of much. Consequently, jealousy—of what men could do or own or control or say—was an understandable response to an unfair system, and it was a habit of mind that could easily shift into jealousy of other women. Isabel's and the other women's jealousy was not an innately female emotion but was a feeling generated by a culture of denial. For Wood, "There never was a passion in this world, there never will be one, so fantastic, so delusive, so powerful as jealousy" (182). In Isabel, we see this passion at its most destructive. With little to do but live in her imagination, Isabel becomes more and more convinced that her husband loves—and seeks to be with—the neighboring Barbara Hare. Isabel is also pregnant, and thus further confined to the house. "Weak, feverish, and in a state of partial delirium" (180), she overhears a servant say she has seen Barbara and Carlyle meet at night, evidence, she presumes, of their romantic involvement. And so Isabel "took up the idea that Archibald Carlyle had never loved her, that he had admired her and made her his wife in his ambition, but that his heart had been given to Barbara Hare" (180). Isabel is projecting her own feelings and situation onto her husband. She is married because of convenience and is attracted to another, so must he be. She feels she is incapable of attracting a man as noble and decent as Archibald Carlyle because of her poverty, her pregnancy, and her lack of domestic skills. Thus, jealousy overwhelms Isabel's reason until "Barbara Hare dwelt on her heart like an incubus" (183). As he strolls the grounds of East Lynne with Barbara, deep in conversation, Carlyle "is quite unconscious that Lady Isabel's jealous eyes were watching them from her dressing-room window" (190).

Based on the novels we've looked at, marriage for young women was a crucible, a shattering of ideals and an initiation into the real world of deception and self-interest. It was both a means of escape and something they frequently wished to escape from. Their husbands were (choose one or more) controlling, manipulative, deceitful, contemptuous, jealous, and violent; they're whore-mongers, drunkards, gamblers, adulterers, and near-pedophiles. Often husbands turn out to be nothing like what they appeared to be before marriage—and certainly nothing like a young woman's dream vision of a spouse. They are, then, real people failing at life and flailing at their life's obstacles, which they frequently perceive are their wives. The institution of marriage as portrayed in these novels, demeaning, disillusioning but necessary, corrupts husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and cousins—just about anyone touched by it.

The criticism of marital relations in these books seems a slow chipping away at the inequities of this established and entrapping social institution. Contemporary novelists continue this preoccupation, frequently writing about failed marriages, abusive and cheating spouses, the damage done to children (a plight overlooked by 19th century novelists), and just the everyday banalities and sameness of monogamous relationships. Although the institution of marriage has become much fairer and although wives have many more options, the central dilemma of male-female relations—

that there's some kind of inherent antagonism and disappointment in these relationships—persists to the detriment of married couples but to the benefit of contemporary novelists.

To avoid ending on too sour a note, it's worth pointing out that most of these novels conclude harmoniously with a happy marriage, as can be seen in these excerpts from multiple episodes.

In a sentence that sums up Brontë's view of marriage, and expresses one of the novel's main themes, Helen declares, "the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies of rank, birth, and fortune are as dust in the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing hearts and souls" (413). In the closing of Gilbert's long letter, we learn that he and Helen have had such a marriage of sympathetic hearts and souls. He goes on to declare, "how happily my Helen and I have lived and loved together, and how blessed we still are in each other's society." And he closes by expressing his eagerness to see his correspondent, now his brother-in-law, and his sister when they make their annual visit, when they will "leave your dusty, smoky, noisy, toiling, striving city for a season of invigorating relaxation and social retirement with us" (417). If much of the novel consists of bad marriages, warring families, and a country home that served as a prison, it ends with a story-book marriage, intimate family bonds, and a call to enjoy life in the country (Episode 2).

One day, as she strolls on the beach, Agnes encounters a familiar dog. It's Snap, Mathilda's pet terrier. Before she knows it, she meets again the dog's new owner, Edward Weston, who has moved to a new parish because he "had too much influence with the common people, and because he was not sufficiently tractable and submissive to" Hatfield (157). Weston has been wandering the streets for months, hoping to bump into Agnes. And now, at last, Agnes writes, "He looked at me . . . and the flash of his dark eyes seemed to set my face on fire" (167). When the man and dog depart, Agnes returns home "full of gratitude to Heaven for so much bliss, and praying that [her] hopes might not again be crushed" (169). And they won't be. From here, Brontë charts the stages of courtship and proposal, ending by revealing that at the time she is composing this narrative Agnes is married to Weston and is the mother of three children. Agnes and Weston have only a modest income, unlike the wealthy Rosalie and Sir Thomas. But they married for love and, therefore, have a genuine connection. Brontë ends the novel where it began. Like Agnes's family before its financial disaster, the Westons live modestly and by economizing are able to save. "We manage not only to enjoy comfort and contentment ourselves," Agnes writes, "but to have every year something to lay by for our children, and something to give to those who need it" (174). Unlike all of the upper-class women she met, Agnes loves her husband and children, seeks no great wealth or title, and gladly practices Christian charity. She has a happy ending (Episode 3).

The mistreatment of Isabel raises another question: why in Victorian culture was a woman's adultery such an unpardonable sin? The conventional answer is that a class-system based on male primogeniture could not exist without controlling female sexual desire. Upper-class husbands needed to be certain that those who would inherit their wealth and title were truly their offspring, or as a Lord Cranworth opined before Parliament in 1854, female adultery "might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband" (qtd. in Shanley 364). Adultery also raised the possibility that women were sexual beings. And this perception threatened the Angel in the House mythology upon which bourgeois English values and practices were based. Hence the novel ends with a conventional tableau, a week emotional woman supported by a strong confident man: Barbara "leaning on [Archibald's] breast, sobbing gently, her repentant face turned towards him. He held her there in his strong protection, his enduring tenderness" (623). Just as Isabel had once enjoyed the same paternalistic embrace, "a strong arm of shelter round her,

a powerful pillar of protection, him upon whom she leaned" (225), so now the once aggressive Barbara has—as a wife—surrendered her will and identity to her husband.

For the novel's last chapter, Braddon takes us forward two years. We learn nothing of the fate of the husbandless Phoebe, left without a public house to run or a lady to companion. The last we hear of her she "came up-stairs . . . ready to take her place at [Luke's] sick-bed, and Robert Audley went away." Castle Inn, presumably remains in ruins, and Audley Court is now shut up, its residents only a "grim old housekeeper and gathering "blue mould" (379), unlike Robert and Clara's thriving home, "a fantastical dwelling-place of rustic woodwork, whose latticed windows look out upon [a] river," "amid a little forest of foliage," atop a "smooth lawn that slopes down to the water's brink" (378-379). In this bucolic setting live the menage of married Robert and Clara, their newborn child, and Clara's brother and Robert's friend, George. Little Georgey frequently visits on breaks from school. Alicia, we learn, is to wed Sir Harry Towers, the suitor she had rejected when still frustratingly enthralled by Robert. And George may, writes Braddon, "find someone who will be able to console him for the past. That dark story of the past fades little by little every day, and there may come a time in which the shadow of my lady's wickedness has cast upon the young's man life, will utterly vanish away" (380) (Episode 16).

What distinguishes these successful relationships is that the couples meet by chance; that they marry for love, not for financial gain or class position; that there seems a genuine respect for each other; and that both husband and wife are of the same social status. And, of course, they're in love.

Before I close this episode, a few notes. I'll be adding material and otherwise modifying some already posted episode transcripts—but I won't make concurrent changes to podcast recordings. I've highlighted these changes by literally highlighting them in the transcripts. Text that's highlighted, in other words, was added after the episode was recorded. Here, for instance, is a passage from the German philosopher August Wilhelm von Schlegel on the Gothic, which I've added to the Episode __ transcript:

> The zealots of this new taste [for Renaissance architecture] passed a sweeping sentence of condemnation on the Gothic, which they reprobated as tasteless, gloomy, and barbarous. This was in some degree pardonable in the Italians, among whom a love for ancient architecture, from the remains of classical edifices which they inherited, and the similarity of their climate to that of the Greeks, might in some sort be said to be innate. But . . . inhabitants of the North. . . . [feel] that the Gothic architecture not only displays an extraordinary degree of mechanical dexterity, but also an astonishing power of invention." (49)

And here's a passage from Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, which I'll be adding to Episode ___. This compelling description of the dramatic changes that occurred in women's lives from the late Victorian period to the onset of the modern following the first world war is also an appropriate way to conclude this episode on the depiction of women and marriage in the 19th century novel. Writes Vera Brittain,

> Sophisticated present-day girls, free immediately after leaving school to come and go as they wish, or living, as independent professional women, in their own rooms or flats, have no conception of the difficulties under which courtships were conducted by provincial young ladies in 1915. There was no privacy for a boy and girl whose mutual feelings had reached their most delicate and bewildering stage; the whole series of complicated relationships leading from acquaintance to engagement had to be conducted in public or not at all.
>
> Before the War, the occupations, interests and most private emotions of a young woman living in a small town ere supervised from each day's beginning to its end, and openly discussed in the family circle. Letters were observed and commented on with a lack of compunction only to be prevented by lying in wait for the postman with an assiduity that could not be permanently maintained under a system of four posts a day. The parental habit—then almost universally accepted as "correct" where daughters were concerned –of inquisition into each day's proceedings made private encounters, even with young men in the same town, almost impossible without a whose series of intrigues and subterfuges which robbed love of all its dignity.
>
> With men living in other places, unobserved meetings were hardly feasible at all. The shortest railway journey to an unspecified destination for an unrevealed purpose was outside the bounds of possibility. . . . On all my longer journeys I was seen off at the station, had my ticket purchased for me, and was expected to send a telegram home immediately on arrival, the time of which was carefully looked up beforehand. In these requirements my parents were not exceptional; they merely subscribed to a universal middle-class tradition. (120-21).

In this context, it's no wonder that a woman in white accosting a gentleman on a city street in the dark of night or an unfamiliar and unaccompanied young woman attending services at a small country church should arouse speculation and suspicion, should be depicted by 19th century novelists as both a threatening and an alluring violator of propriety, a danger to all things properly feminine and domestic.

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TENANT. Bored with country life and monogamy, four months into their marriage, Huntingdon leaves Helen for a four-month sojourn in London. Helen believes that his friends "induced him to remain week after week, and to plunge into all manner of excesses to avoid being laughed at for a wife-ridden fool" (192). When Huntingdon eventually returns, the signs of his debauched life are all too apparent: "how altered," Helen writes, "flushed and feverish, listless and languid, his beauty strangely diminished, his vigour and vivacity quite departed" (190). This will be the pattern of their life, even after Helen gives birth to their son, Arthur. Huntingdon will go on binges, will disappear for months at a time to be with his friends, and upon return will feel oppressed by Helen's reproaches and attempts to improve him.

Almost all of the marriages in the novel are flawed and destructive. Helen's friend Milicent Hargrave, for example, marries a man she doesn't love. She tells Helen, "the further he is from me the better I like him." Why, then, has she accepted his offer of marriage? Milicent replies: "I didn't know I had accepted him; but mamma tells me I have, and he seems to think so too. . . . I did not like to give him a flat refusal for fear mamma should be grieved and angry" (187). Just as Huntingdon married Helen for money, so Milicent will marry Ralph Hattersley. She explains: "Mr. Hattersley . . . is the son of a rich banker and as [we] . . . have no fortunes . . . our dear mamma is very anxious to see us all well married" (188). Marrying well was often a means of survival in a culture that offered women little opportunity to achieve success, or even just to support themselves, without a husband.

Throughout the novel, marital relationships are shown to be based not on mutual desire but on individual need—for money, for title, for control, for public approval. Marriage, as Brontë depicts it, is inescapably compromised by individual needs and societal demands. We've already seen that Annabella marries Lord Lowborough for his title. But *he* marries *her*, it seems, out of true affection—and the need for a helpmate, someone he can lean on in his struggles against addiction. His weaknesses, however, are not something that Annabella helps him overcome; rather, they are a means for her to gain control. "She knows her power," writes Helen, "and she uses it too . . . she judiciously tempers her despotism with flattery and blandishments enough to make him deem himself a favoured and a happy man" (193). Annabella torments her husband (and Helen), playing piano and singing and "openly but not too glaringly coquetting with Mr. Huntingdon, who is quite willing to be her partner in the game" (193). Helen dismisses these scenes. They must be due to Huntingdon's desire to make her jealous and to Annabella's pleasure in tormenting Lord

Lowborough. Helen pretends not to be bothered, "preserving a cheerful, undisturbed serenity throughout" and showing "the fullest confidence in [her] husband and the greatest indifference to the arts of [her] attractive guest" (192) Maintaining this confidence in her husband and indifference to the arts of Annabella become impossible when Helen catches her husband "ardently press[ing] [Annabella's] unresisting hand to his lips" (197). Huntingdon dismisses Helen's criticism of his behavior, declaring it inconsequential. To which Helen asks, what would he do if a man had acted with her just as he had with Annabella? Huntingdon's response? "I would blow his brains out" (199). He goes on to explain the difference between women and men: "It is a woman's nature to be constant—to love one and one only, blindly, tenderly, and forever," whereas men's fancies are fleeting and inconstant.

ADULTERY CONT'D

TENANT. Having seen her husband behave properly for two weeks, with no signs of excess drinking or misbehaving, Helen perceives "a marked difference in his general temper and appearance" and hopes this will continue. Happy about her husband's changed behavior, Helen follows him outside one night. She describes the scene: "I sprang upon him and clasped him in my arms. This startling conduct had a singular effect upon him: first, he murmured, 'Bless you darling!' and returned my close embrace with a fervour like old times, and then he started and in a tone of absolute terror, exclaimed—'Helen!—what the devil is this!'" As a consequence of this pleasant interlude, Helen becomes overjoyed. She is the life of the party later that night. Milicent even tells her "she had never seen [her] seem so brilliant" (251). But a shadow looms over her, the shadow of a magnificent creature with a finely developed figure. Earlier, one of Huntingdon's friends, Walter Hargrave had hinted at a secret, some bad tidings, he hoped to reveal to her. After the party, Helen's maid Rachel warns her about servants' gossip concerning Lady Lowborough. And the next day Hargrave suggests Huntingdon has arranged to meet in secret outdoors with Annabella.

Helen recalls what happened next:

> "'I must know the truth at once. I flew to the shrubbery. Scarcely had I reached it, when a sound of voices arrested my breathless speed.
>
> 'We have lingered too long; he will be back,' said Lady Lowborough's voice.
>
> 'Surely not, dearest!' was his reply. . .
>
> My knees trembled under me; my brain swam round; I was ready to faint. . . .
>
> 'Ah, Huntingdon!' said she reproachfully, pausing where I had stood with him the night before—'it was here you kissed that woman!' . . .
>
> 'Well, dearest, I couldn't help it. You know I must keep straight with her as long as I can. Haven't I seen you kiss your dolt of a husband, scores of times?—and do I ever complain?'

'But tell me, don't you love her still—a little?' said she placing her hand on his arm and looking earnestly in his face. . . .

'Not one bit, by all that's sacred!' he replied kissing her glowing cheek" (257-8).

Thus, Helen discovers her husband and Annabella in intimate embrace. She learns that her husband's passionate kiss of the previous day, which had so overjoyed her, was actually intended for Annabella. As Helen explains, "I could now see the reason for Arthur's strange reception of me in the shrubbery: the burst of kindness was for his paramour, the start of horror for his wife" (259). She learns that her husband does not care for her. And she learns that his illicit relationship with Annabella has been ongoing.

Some of the novel's most memorable scenes are those between the husband-stealing paramour Annabella and the aggrieved wife Helen. Annabella proudly shows that she, not Helen, has won Huntingdon's affection. Writes Helen, she "is particularly fond of displaying her interest in his health and welfare, or anything that concerns him, as if for the purpose of contrasting her kind solicitude with my cold indifference. And he rewards her by such smiles and glances, such whispered words—or boldly spoken insinuations, indicative of his sense of her goodness and my neglect" (267). At another point, Annabella declares to Helen, "I love him more ever than you could do" (268) and describes Huntingdon as "dearer than life" (265). When she commands Annabella to leave her house as soon as possible, Helen notes the "malicious smile of triumph on her face," tells her she can have Huntingdon but nonetheless must leave because it is too painful to disguise her true sentiments and keep up an appearance of civility and respect toward a person for whom she has "not the most distant shadow of esteem" (266).

From the beginning of their competition for Huntingdon, Helen felt threatened by Annabella's superior charms, particularly her greater musical skills. As girls, Annabella and Helen would have learned to sing and play the piano. (Likewise, the Brontës owned a piano, which both Anne and Emily learned to play. Because of her poor eyesight, Charlotte was discouraged from doing so [Barker 247]). Singing and piano-playing were important skills for attracting and keeping a husband, the ultimate goal of women's education in Victorian England. As the British Library explains, "In the upper classes it was assumed that a girl would marry and that therefore she had no need of a formal education, as long as she could look beautiful, entertain her husband's guests, and produce a reasonable number of children. 'Accomplishments' such as playing the piano, singing and flower-arranging were all-important" (Picard). After marriage, piano-playing was seen as way to soothe husbands stressed by daily life. Before marriage, it offered women a stage where they could perform, demonstrating their womanly charms. As one anonymous Viennese writer explained in 1800, "Every well-bred girl, whether she has talent or not, must learn to play the piano or sing; first of all it's fashionable; secondly, it's the most convenient way for her to put herself forward in society and thereby, if she is lucky, make an advantageous matrimonial alliance, particularly a moneyed one" (qtd. in Ruth Solie, "music in other words" "girling at the parlor piano" 90). Piano playing also allowed physical intimacy between man and woman, sharing the same piano bench, or the man standing close to and above the woman, as Helen describes Annabella and Huntingdon around the piano: "she had ended her song, but still she sat at the

instrument; and he stood leaning on the back of her chair, conversing in scarcely audible tones with his face in very close proximity with hers" (196).

Since their expression of emotion was restricted, Victorian women found music a means of emotional release. As the clergyman H.R. Haweis wrote in 1876, "As a woman's life is often a life of feeling. . . . and if society . . . frequently calls upon her to repress her feelings, we should not deny her. . . the healthy outlet for emotion which music supplies. . . . A good play on the piano has not unfrequently taken the place of a good cry up-stairs" (qtd. in Solie 93-4). Given the repression of female sexuality in this culture, piano playing and singing offered women an outlet, within the constraints of 19th century parlour music, to express their passion. Laura Vorachek, English professor at the University of Dayton, makes this argument quite explicitly: a woman's desire "is displaced onto the piano. The piano functions as a fetish, a location for her sex expression that allows her to remain innocent, her body chaste, yet her desire communicated or mediated through playing" (27, "The Instrument of the Century"). If, as Vorachek argues, "The piano can be metaphor for healthy female sexuality" (397), Annabella's superior performance is not limited to the keyboard. Brontë conveys her eroticism through her description of one such performance, during which even Helen can't resist the allure of Annabella's playing: I "listened with a sort of gloomy pleasure to the skillful modulations of her full-toned and powerful voice, so judiciously aided by her rounded and spirited touch; and while my ears drank in the sound, my eyes rested on the face of [Huntingdon] . . . . that eye and brow lighted up with keen enthusiasm. . . . No wonder he should hunger and thirst to hear her sing. . . . 'There now!' said she, playfully running her fingers over the keys. . . . 'What shall I give you next?'" (140).

Her husband's affair with Annabella lasts two years, until Lord Lowborough discovers the truth. Huntingdon is cavalier about its ending, saying, "She was so deuced imperious and exacting . . . now I shall be my own man again, and feel rather more at ease" (295). Annabella and Lord Lowborough split up: "they keep entirely separate establishments," Helen writes, "she leads a gay, dashing life in town and country, while he lives in strict seclusion. . . . There are two children, both of whom he keeps under his own protection" (295). (The younger of her two children, Helen implies, was fathered not by Lord Lowborough but by Huntingdon.) Annabella is satisfied with her new living arrangements, Helen writes, because she "never loved children and has so little natural affection for her own that . . . she will . . . regard it as a relief to be thus entirely separated from them" (295). That a husband should care for his children—and the wife care not at all—to the Victorians, was unnatural, even monstrous.

For Victorian readers, there is little to redeem a character as heartless and unnatural as Annabella, Lady Lowborough. Brontë does not draw her sympathetically or do much to help us understand why she is the way she is. Yet two brief quotes may provide some insight into Annabella's character. When she first meets Helen, the 25 year-old Annabella says she has yet to marry because she is "too great a flirt" (121). Later, she explains to Huntingdon, "if I waited for someone capable of eliciting my esteem and affection, I should have to pass my life in single blessedness, for I detest you all" (167-8). In these passages, Annabella seems to express her frustration with being forced, through social pressure, to marry. At twenty-five, she is late to marry by Victorian standards, as is suggested by an article,"The Spinster's Numeration Table," from an 1837 edition of *New Monthly Magazine*, which listed traits of unmarried women by age. The article describes

an unmarried twenty-five year-old woman as "surprised at being still single, and beginning to count the conquests of the season." Why has Annabella found herself in this situation? Why has someone so rich and attractive been unable to find a husband? Only 25, this wealthy, confident, independent woman prefers not to be tied down by the unequal laws and unfair customs of Victorian marriage. When she says to Huntingdon, "I detest you all," she is referring to him and his debauched friends, to Lord Lowborough, and to a whole patriarchal system designed to curtail her freedom and break her spirit.

Another possibility is that something about her marks her as unmarriageable. Perhaps her reference to being a great flirt alludes to her having a past, to having lost her virginity. If so, Helen's description of Annabella as someone "greatly admired by the gentlemen, who universally pronounced her a splendid woman" (121) takes on an entirely different cast. Is the naïve Helen deaf to the true discourse here? And is Anne Brontë presenting this notion with a subtlety that escapes the notice of a modern reader? To support this interpretation, we would expect characters to have gossiped about her past. None do. We might also expect to learn something about Annabella's childhood or family background. We know virtually nothing. But if her uncle is representative of her family, we may get a sense of what has shaped her values. Mr. Wilmot is described as "a worthless old reprobate" (116). One of Helen's suitors, he pursues her, despite her disgust, because of his confidence "in his wealth or his remaining powers of attraction [and his] . . . conviction [in] feminine weakness." It's possible that his values influenced Annabella's. His debauched nature (as well as Annabella's) is further suggested by the name "Wilmot," surely an allusion to the Restoration poet, John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, a notorious rake who died at the age of 33 from venereal disease. Still another reason to suspect Annabella has been sexually active is the easy way she enters into (and eventually exits) her affair with Huntingdon. At one point, she even asserts to Helen that his becoming more sober and temperate is due to her threat to withhold sexual favors. "I told him," she declares, "that I could not bear to see him degrade himself so, and that I should cease to—no matter what I told him—but you see the reformation I have wrought" (271). Here is evidence either of Annabella's sexual experience or of her heightened sexual nature.

Helen—and Brontë—seem to have little sympathy for or understanding of Annabella, overwhelmed as they are by their contempt for her arrogance and adultery, her willingness to violate Victorian moral codes and gender expectations. Her ultimate fate in this moral tale furthers this perception. Annabella remarries, living "in reckless gaiety and dissipation," until quarreling and separating from her second husband. Thereafter, she sank into "debt, disgrace and misery; and died . . . in penury, neglect and utter wretchedness" (388). Helen adds a final coda: Annabella may in fact still be alive since her relatives and former acquaintances "have all lost sight of her long years ago, and would as thoroughly forget her if they could" (388). There's no sympathy expressed here, merely cold comeuppance. Poor and alone, Annabella receives the fate she deserves.

And yet. While Helen and Brontë repudiate her, one can detect, however hidden, an inkling of admiration. For her beauty. Her musical skills. Her self-confidence. Her domination of men, both Lord Lowborough and Arthur Huntingdon. And her sexual boldness. Much of Gilbert's attraction to Helen, in fact, is due to her Annabella-like traits. She is aloof and shows little respect for men. She has a scandalous past. She is confident and independent. She is sexually experienced. The parallels between these two women are evident in their descriptions: Annabella stands with "glossy

dark hair, slightly and not ungracefully disordered by the breezy ride . . . black eyes sparkling with unwonted brilliance" (169); Helen appears, "her neck uncovered, her black locks streaming in the wind," with "large, luminous, dark eyes" (22). While Helen is sexually modest and a devoted mother, she seems to have taken on some of the traits and appearance of Annabella. Also, like Annabella, she is violating Victorian gender norms, is according to this view a fallen woman.

But for this transformation to occur, she must first confront her husband. After discovering his affair, angered, ashamed, and appalled, Helen demands that he let her leave with her son. But Huntingdon denies this request. "Do you think I'm going to be made the talk of the country," he asks, "for your fastidious caprices?" (260). Here is the crux of the novel, the aim of Brontë's critique: Helen has no choice. Her husband controls her, according to the law. As Nick Holland explains in his biography of Anne Brontë, "the wife became the property of her husband upon marriage, and any possessions, money, land or inheritance she had also became his to do with as he pleased" (192). As is further explained by Bettina Bradbury, history professor at York University in Toronto, "Marriage law . . . served as a powerful instrument of male accumulation. Furthermore, men gained more than ownership of their wives' earnings and property at marriage: the law made them owners of their wives' bodies—and hence gave them the right to all that those bodies produced, including domestic labour, sex, and children" (137).

WOMEN'S FATE--MARRIAGE

FEMALE SEXUAL DESIRE

EAST LYNNE. Victorian fiction was notably shy about depicting sexual intimacy—often making such scenes depend on the interpretation of subtle signs and codes that are easily missed by modern readers. What, for instance, does it mean that Emma Vane is repeatedly accused of and enjoys to the point of jealousy *flirting* with Captain Levison? Is she sleeping with him? Hoping to sleep with him? Does she take pleasure in mere flirting, in being chased (and chaste) but never caught? To be sure, we don't read *East Lynne*—or other Victorian novels—for arousing descriptions of sexual couplings. But there's a difference between reticence and omission. Wood could give us a peak—however blinkered—into the boudoir. Yet we see no finely turned ankle, no hand brush a stray lock from the nape of a woman's neck. Part of the reason for this omission is that Wood, writing her first commercial novel, did not want to upset conventional middle-class moral sentiment. Publishers, too, were aware of the need to censor the untoward and unrefined. As Altick notes, "Editorial squeamishness . . . seems to have reached its peak in the sixties and seventies" (*Victorian* 195). And, of course, a Victorian herself, Wood might quite naturally agree with this reticence.

By comparison, it's instructive to look at a 19th century novel published nearly a decade earlier, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Although Emma Bovary is married to a much less interesting and attractive man and lives in much more constrained and isolated circumstances, she, like Isabel,

married young for financial security and falls for an arch gentleman seducer, Rodolphe Boulanger. Flaubert's description of their first intimate encounter, though hardly the stuff of erotic fiction, is worth quoting at length:

> They dismounted. Rodolphe fastened up the horses. She walked on in front on the moss between the paths. But her long habit got in her way, although she held it up by the skirt; and Rodolphe, walking behind her, saw between the black cloth and the black shoe the fineness of her white stocking, that seemed to him as if it were a part of her nakedness.
>
> She stopped. "I am tired," she said.
>
> "Come, try again," he went on. "Courage!"
>
> Then some hundred paces farther on she again stopped, and through her veil, that fell sideways from her man's hat over her hips, her face appeared in a bluish transparency as if she were floating under azure waves.
>
> "But where are we going?"
>
> He did not answer. She was breathing irregularly. Rodolphe looked round him biting his moustache. They came to a larger space where the coppice had been cut. They sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree, and Rodolphe began speaking to her of his love. He did not begin by frightening her with compliments. He was calm, serious, melancholy.
>
> Emma listened to him with bowed head, and stirred the bits of wood on the ground with the tip of her foot. But at the words, "Are not our destinies now one?"
>
> "Oh, no!" she replied. "You know that well. It is impossible!" She rose to go. He seized her by the wrist. She stopped. Then, having gazed at him for a few moments with an amorous and humid look, she said hurriedly—
>
> "Ah! do not speak of it again! Where are the horses? Let us go back."
>
> He made a gesture of anger and annoyance. She repeated:
>
> "Where are the horses? Where are the horses?"
>
> Then smiling a strange smile, his pupil fixed, his teeth set, he advanced with outstretched arms. She recoiled trembling. She stammered:
>
> "Oh, you frighten me! You hurt me! Let me go!"
>
> "If it must be," he went on, his face changing; and he again became respectful, caressing, timid. She gave him her arm. They went back. He said—
>
> "What was the matter with you? Why? I do not understand. You were mistaken, no doubt. In my soul you are as a Madonna on a pedestal, in a place lofty, secure, immaculate. But I need you to live! I must have your eyes, your voice, your thought! Be my friend, my sister, my angel!"
>
> And he put out his arm round her waist. She feebly tried to disengage herself. He supported her thus as they walked along.

> But they heard the two horses browsing on the leaves.
>
> "Oh! one moment!" said Rodolphe. "Do not let us go! Stay!"
>
> He drew her farther on to a small pool where duckweeds made a greenness on the water. Faded water lilies lay motionless between the reeds. At the noise of their steps in the grass, frogs jumped away to hide themselves.
>
> "I am wrong! I am wrong!" she said. "I am mad to listen to you!"
>
> "Why? Emma! Emma!"
>
> "Oh, Rodolphe!" said the young woman slowly, leaning on his shoulder.
>
> The cloth of her habit caught against the velvet of his coat. She threw back her white neck, swelling with a sigh, and faltering, in tears, with a long shudder and hiding her face, she gave herself up to him— (129-30).

For Isabel Vane, there are no long or short—or medium length—shudders. Unlike Wood, Flaubert not only describes the passionate encounter between these lovers but vividly describes Emma's excited reaction to this affair:

> when she saw herself in the glass she wondered at her face. Never had her eyes been so large, so black, of so profound a depth. Something subtle about her being transfigured her. She repeated, "I have a lover! a lover!" delighting at the idea as if a second puberty had come to her. So at last she was to know those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired! She was entering upon marvels where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium. (130)

Why doesn't Wood give us something comparable? Admittedly, standards were looser in Second Empire France than in Victorian England. (It would be twenty years before an English language version of *Madame Bovary* appeared, translated by Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor Marx Aveling. Ironically, after discovering that her long-time partner and fellow member of the Socialist League, Edward Aveling, had secretly married another woman, Marx committed suicide by poison, just as Emma Bovary did.) That *Madame Bovary* had been published two decades earlier, shouldn't be read as a sign of its widespread acceptance in France. For even there, Flaubert's novel created a scandal. Flaubert faced criminal charges of obscenity. Still, Wood could give us more. She suggests Isabel's desire beforehand—she had "a sensation all too warm," a "sensation of ecstasy," a "sinful happiness"—but does not suggest this desire was ever satisfied, does not describe Isabel's pleasure—however short-lived it might have been—because it would in a small way justify her actions. Better to jump immediately to guilt and suffering. Whatever ephemeral pleasure she might have enjoyed is so overwhelmed by the sin of adultery, of violating the sacred bonds of matrimony and her wifely duties that it's not even worth mentioning.

Another reason for this omission is that, as some scholars have suggested, Victorian culture denied the very existence of female sexual desire. The prominent Victorian physician William Acton, for instance, in his *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life: Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations*, argues that "the majority of women . . . are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. . . . As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions" (qtd. in Marcus 31). This view of female sexuality was associated especially with women of the upper classes. A Lady like Isabel Vane, according to Jeanne Elliott, a Professor in Victorian literature at San Jose State University, "was supposed to be sexually neuter: not only ignorant of physiology (at least before marriage) but also largely devoid of sexual drives. She was expected to love her chosen husband, but it must be assumed that it was a selfless and disinterested love capable of persuading her to overlook, for his sake, the distasteful nature of the act of procreation (333). On the other hand, recent scholars have argued that such views are unrepresentative and that Victorian sexual prudishness is a 20th century conceit which distorts actual sexual practices in 19th century England

ENGLISH VS. FRENCH

COUSIN BETTE. In these scenes, in the acknowledgment of Valérie's lively sexuality (she's sleeping with Baron Hulot, with Crevel, and with her husband; soon, she'll be sleeping with two more men), in the complete absence of any domestic impulses (she has a child we never see her with), in Crevel's and Baron Hulot's degradation, and her husband's degeneracy, we are far from the world of the respectable Victorian novel. Balzac's reference to Englishwomen's virtuous respectability presupposes a distinctly English prudery and points to a common criticism of French novels: they were immoral. The perception that there was a fundamental difference between French and English views on vice, that the English view was superior (and the French view a threat to the social order), that as a result French novels were immoral, and that these should be kept from impressionable Englishwomen were familiar refrains in early-to-mid Victorian literary culture.

In the most notorious criticism of French novels, published in 1836 in *Quarterly Review,* its author, John Wilson Croker, claimed these novels revealed a "moral degeneration" which began in the French Revolution and was revived in the July Monarchy by a generation educated during and with values shaped by the Revolution. (Such generational blame is reminiscent of American conservatives' perpetual demonizing of the 60s generation and the younger generations taught by these tenured radicals. (This anti-60s ideology now flourishes as anti-wokism and anti-critical race theory.) For Croker, the July Monarchy and the French novels of this period revived the radical ideologies and immorality of the Revolution (and thus like the Revolution itself was a threat to Britain).

This perception was similar to Balzac's own, Ronnie Butler asserting that "What essentially interested him are [the Revolution's] effects on French society in the first half of the nineteenth century. . . . It is against the background of this continuing historical analysis, with its starting-point in the Revolution, that Balzac's judgment of each successive regime is made" (167). Ironically, as Croker saw it, Balzac, who hated the July Monarchy and its continuation of Revolutionary ideologies, profited from its moral permissiveness. In particular, Croker complained about "the extreme laxity of female morals which [the French novel] exhibits; and, secondly, the extreme grossness with which such instances are detailed" (129). Croker sounded the alarm about the moral ruin these books impended, worrying about the consequences if they fell "into the hands of persons wholly or partially ignorant of their real character—nay, into ladies book clubs" and alerted those who do not read "what they consider as mere harmless trash" not to allow "these

conductors of moral corruption to infect their dwellings" (66). Not limited to corrupting women, the French novel, Croker feared, "threatens the whole fabric of European society" (66). Croker criticized popular French novelists such Eugene Sue, Alexandre Dumas, George Sand, and Paul de Kock, while directing especial ire at Balzac. Acknowledging that he is "the cleverest, the most prolific, and the most popular of all these novelists, (95), "a baser, meaner, filthier scoundrel," Croker wrote, "never polluted society" (69).

While in accord with other Victorian voices, Croker's assault on the French novel was so excessive that it led to criticism by some members of the British literary establishment. It should be noted, too, that Croker was an extremely conservative member of Parliament who resigned his seat rather than serve in a government that modestly expanded the franchise with passage of the 1832 Reform Act. A notoriously belligerent critic, the fittingly named Croker was, alleged by both Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, to have been responsible for the death of the poet John Keats. Shelly compared Croker to a poisonous snake, a "deaf and viperous murderer" and "nameless worm" ("Adonais," lines 317-19). Or as Byron put it in his epic satire *Don Juan*, "John Keats, who was killed off by one critique, / Just as he really promised something great, / . . . / Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate:– / 'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article" (LX, p. 329). Less fatally, Croker's review, titled "Hang, draw, and quarterly," of Arthur Tennyson's first volume of poetry seems to have traumatized the poet, who wouldn't publish another volume of poems for nine years. If Croker's attacks were extreme, his criticism did reflect a commonly held view among the British cultural elite, University College London English professor Juliette Atkinson asserting that "Victorian critics . . . denounced French novels in the most hysterical terms and clung to the notion that such works would never be tolerated in England" (6).

Eight years after Croker's attacks, similar criticism of Balzac and the French novel appeared in an anonymously published article in *The Monthly Review* whose author acknowledged the problem of English prudery but saw a much greater threat posed by French immorality: "From the standing point of public morality, all we can reproach the English with is their too reserved manners and coldness, which they carry, perhaps, rather to excess; while the French frivolity leads to something worse, to corruption of innocence, fancy, manners, and even the heart" ("Novels" 548). French novelists, according to this reviewer, demonstrated an "inclination towards obscene scenes, the amalgamation of voluptuousness and cruelty. . . . Balzac, Sue . . . and the whole host of their own imitators, all vied in the representation of human vices and torments in their worst aspect." These writers sought to display "abominations, tyranny, despotism, and cruelties of the worst kind. Neither did they forget to interlard them with . . . free-thinking, and ridicule of marriage and other sacred morals," opening up, "In the midst of peace, and the blessings of civilization . . . [an] abyss of corruption and demoralization hardly to be conceived" ("Novels" 549). Expressing a view common among Victorian readers and critics, this reviewer accused writers such as Balzac of too realistically depicting human vices, while ridiculing the sanctity of marriage, thereby threatening the foundation of the very civilization in which they thrived and from which they profited.

Another reviewer writing in 1848, George Henry Lewes, common-law-husband to the novelist George Eliot, complained similarly that Balzac was too benign in his depiction of adultery: in Balzac's works it seemed that "all wives are unfaithful and their fidelity is looked upon as only an insult to their husbands, never as a crime against society. . . . he has written scarcely a story in which love forms the principal element, in which adultery is not introduced. . . . He never betrays the least consciousness that his hero or heroine are guilty" (147). Lewes concluded that "Balazc, on the whole, is a very dangerous writer. . . . [his novels] are all dangerously insidious. They want delicacy, both of taste and feeling. They imply that natural manners and natural ideas are ridiculous; and that Parisian refinement alone can make a human being estimable. . . . he corrupts the taste of his admiring reader. He should be strictly forbidden to young women" (149).
Several years later, writing in *Bentley's Magazine*, an anonymous reviewer claimed that Balzac's works would "never become popular in England . . . for the doctrines they generally inculcate are quite subversive of those ideas of morality" held by the English. "Every work written by . . . Balzac," this writer asserted, "gave one more blow to French morality and . . . the deplorable condition of society in that country is in

great measure owing to the success of the school of which he was the arch teacher. . . . the terrible influences his pernicious doctrines exercised upon society" would persist as long as people continue to read his books ("Honore" 156).

We will explore this debate and try to better understand Victorian sexuality in future episodes. For now, we can say that Ellen Wood hints at Isabel's sexual desire in the run-up to her affair but gives no indication that this desire was ever satisfied. When explaining why Isabel left East Lynne to be with Levison, Wood almost completely ignores her sexual longing, attributing her departure instead to jealousy and to the emotional distress caused by her husband's rejection of her and his betrayal of their marriage. Wood does not want to complicate this simple morality tale with notions of sexual desire and fulfillment. To show that Isabel had real desire and experienced genuine passion—and that these caused her to leave her husband and children—would make her seem a monster to a Victorian audience, a heroine who could not be redeemed, who could be no heroine at all.

Contrary to Wood's portrayal of Isabel, one of the charges laid against Flaubert in his obscenity trial was that his portrayal of Emma Bovary focused too much on her desire, not enough on her other traits. The prosecution asked, "did [Monsieur Flaubert] try to emphasize her intelligence? Never. Her heart? Even less so. Her spirit? No. Her physical beauty? Not even. . . . the painting is first and foremost lascivious, the poses are voluptuous, and the beauty of [Madame] Bovary is the beauty of provocation" (Pinard 323). Flaubert's painting of Emma is flawed, in other words, because it emphasizes her sensuality and does not consider those other, more important female virtues: intelligence, heart, spirit, and beauty. The prosecution also found obscene the notion that a woman could have an affair and not feel, as does Isabel Vane, instant remorse. When "she returned to her home and hearth," the prosecution asks, "after having shaken off the tiring effects of sensual pleasure, to that home where she would find a husband that adored her; . . . after that first adultery . . . does she experience remorse . . . at the sight of that cheated husband that adored her? No! She returns her head held high while she glorifies adultery" (Pinard 323). Flaubert's sin was not to acknowledge Emma's sin, both the sin of adultery and the sin of not seeing this sin as sinful.

Flaubert shows a woman experiencing sexual pleasure without remorse. Wood depicts a woman experiencing remorse without sexual pleasure. Wood is remorseless in depicting Isabel's remorse, describing "its adder stings" and "dark course of gnawing retribution." And she offers platitudinous encomiums to bourgeois values, explaining that Isabel "had sacrificed husband, children, reputation, home, all that makes life of value to woman. She had forfeited her duty to God, had deliberately broken his commandments, for the one poor miserable mistake of flying with Francis Levison" (283). At this point, Isabel's desire is not to enjoy life with the dashing Levison but to marry him and thereby save her child from the infamy of an illegitimate birth. Thus, she awaits word of her divorce. She doesn't know that the divorce has been granted and that Levison has kept this notice from her to avoid revealing that he has no intention of marrying her and that her child will be illegitimate.

ALTERNATIVES: GOVERNESS

AGNES GREY. Anne Brontë's first novel, *Agnes Grey* (published in 1847 under the pseudonym Acton Bell), is a short, semi-autobiographical account of a young woman's experience as governess for two wealthy families. English novels featuring governesses had grown increasingly popular in the 19th century. One scholar, Sarah Hughes, calculated that 230 fictional works published between 1749 and 1930 included governess characters (Wadsö-Lecaros 26), with more than half, 140 such novels, published in the fifty-year period between 1814 and 1865 (Hughes 2). The popularity of the governess novel peaked between the 1840s and 1860s (Wadsö-Lecaros 30). Among the more well-known titles featuring governesses are Jane Austen's *Emma*, published in 1815, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, and William Thackery's *Vanity Fair*, serially published in 1847 and 1848. Governess stories, though, remain popular, especially among female readers. A search for "governess" on Amazon reveals many contemporary romance variations on the governess tale: *The Cinderella Governess*, *A Governess for the Brooding Duke*, *When a Duke Loves a Governess*, *Octavius and the Perfect Governess*, *The Governess and the Sheikh*, and for the adventurous reader, *The Governess's Examination: A Victorian Medical BDSM Tale*.

Thus, Anne Brontë decided to write about a governess not just because she had worked as one. Likewise, her sister Charlotte's decision was not just because she saw the potential in Anne's book or because she herself had worked as a governess. Having earlier published a volume of their poetry that sold only two copies, the three Brontë sisters each agreed to write a novel. They are likely, then, to have considered the literary marketplace and to have recognized the popularity of governess novels. This popularity reflected a larger cultural preoccupation with the plight of governesses. The rise of the middle class in early 19th Century Britain led to an increased demand for governesses who could teach children—especially daughters—the skills and habits needed to succeed within their social class. These governesses, therefore, needed a genteel background and thus tended to be either the daughters of middle-class fathers who had lost their fortunes or, like the Brontë sisters, the daughters of clergymen who, though far from rich, were well-educated.

As the middle class increased in the growing capitalist economy of early 19th century England, so too did its inevitable "creative destruction," causing fortunes to be lost and daughters to seek employment, a fate blamed not on the economic system but on the follies of fathers. As the *Governesses' Benevolent Institution Report of 1847* claimed, "the imprudencies, extravagancies, mistakes, or crimes of a certain number of fathers [were needed] to sow that seed from which we reap the harvest of governesses" (qtd. in Ewbank, 60). What was the "plight" of these formerly middle-class women? That the supply of eligible governesses greatly exceeded demand, that, although genteel, they were forced to work for wages, and that these wages were notoriously low. As many scholars have noted, this plight became something of a cultural obsession in the 1840s, even though there were far more women working as domestic servants and millhands (750,000 versus about 25,000 governesses in 1851) (Peterson 8)—and even though the work conditions and wages of domestics and industrial workers were far worse than what governesses had to endure. This cultural preoccupation with governesses can be explained by their curious class position—

once middle-class women now working for wages and residing in middle and upper-class homes. The preoccupation with governesses was also shaped by their taking over some of the child-rearing roles in a culture that prized motherhood above all. In other words, the governess embodied a threat to the correctness and stability of the class system and to the ideology of womanhood. Of course, a more insightful critique of these matters would center on working class men and women. The governess figure served to obscure these more destabilizing fears by displacing them onto a far less threatening population. Or as Kathryn Hughes, Director of Creative Non-Fiction at the University of East Anglia, puts it: "Rather than ponder the disturbing implications of a hungry and disaffected workforce, contemporaries preferred to think about the more manageable problem of 25,000 unhappy middle-class women" (148).

In his reconstruction of the Victorian novel, John Fowles solves the problem of the false happy union by writing two conclusions. In the first, he presents the Victorian version, the male protagonist at least happily reunited with the woman he'd seen on a rocky precipice in the novel's opening pages:

> At last she looked up at him. Her eyes were full of tears, and her look unbearably naked. Such looks we have all once or twice in our lives received and shared; they are those in which worls melt, pasts dissolve, moments when we know, in the resolution of profoundest need, that the rock of ages can never be anything else but love, here, ,now, in these two hands' joining, in this blind silence in which one head comes to rest beneath the other. (459-60).