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# Happily Ever After? Redefining Womanhood and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century Novels

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HAPPILY EVER AFTER?  
REDEFINING WOMANHOOD AND MARRIAGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVELS

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?  
REDEFINING WOMANHOOD AND MARRIAGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVELS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts in English

BY

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Ouachita Baptist University  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2009

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University of Arkansas

## ABSTRACT

Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, and Henry James challenged patriarchal conventions and assumptions by redefining womanhood and marriage in their novels, particularly by breaking from the traditional marriage ending. While *Pride and Prejudice*, *North and South*, and *Jane Eyre* end in marriage, these novels depict a freely chosen companionate marriage based on equality; *Villette* replaces the typical marriage ending with complete independence; and *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady* both portray the decisive rejection of the marriage ideal for a life of renunciation. This thesis analyzes the ways in which these novels challenge nineteenth-century society, as well as the ways they fail to break free from the confines of patriarchy. It looks at the ways in which each novel portrays womanhood and marriage and questions whether the novel presents a realistic alternative for women struggling to attain independence in an oppressive society.

This thesis is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who have supported me through every step of my education and instilled in me a desire to learn and grow.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth-century society was deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideology. Women were generally perceived as inactive, submissive, and inferior, and marriage was a well-established institution severely limiting female freedom. However, during the nineteenth century, reformers challenged these patriarchal concepts of womanhood and marriage. The increasingly popular discourses of gender and marriage, the growing feminist movement, new legislation granting women more rights (as individuals and in marriage), the rise of women writers, and the rise of the novel all impacted how womanhood and marriage were culturally defined. Nineteenth-century writers Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, and Henry James were actively engaged in shaping these newly emerging concepts of womanhood and marriage. While each of these authors was certainly influenced by the set conventions and assumptions of their patriarchal society, they challenged established models of womanhood and marriage through their female protagonists and their depictions of marriage, particularly by rewriting the traditional marriage ending. In this way, these authors simultaneously conform to and subvert patriarchal structures. In this process of authorial subversion of patriarchy, novels redefined models of womanhood and the institute of marriage in nineteenth-century society.

Deriving from Coventry Patmore's enormously popular poem published in 1854, the term "angel in the house" became synonymous with the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood: a woman who is perfectly moral, selfless, submissive to her husband, and devoted to her feminine duties of domesticity and marriage. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify the "eternal feminine" qualities of the "angel in the house" as "virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness," all of which are modes of "angelic innocence" (23). Not only were women expected to exemplify this long list of

feminine qualities, they were expected to possess them innately. As John Ruskin claims in “Of Queen’s Gardens,” women and men by nature possess entirely separate characters (59). A woman must “as far as one can use such terms of a human creature—be incapable of error.” Ruskin goes on to say that a woman “must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation” (60). As “angels,” women were held to an impossible standard of infallible morality and perfect goodness, feminine gender traits inseparably tied to sex.

Prescriptive writing and public discourse propagated this ideal during the eighteenth century. As Nancy Armstrong points out in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, there was a dramatic increase in conduct books during the eighteenth century that were devoted to telling women how to behave (258). Prior to the rise of conduct books, there existed varying ideas of what makes a woman desirable, but by the second half of the eighteenth century, these books were so popular that the conduct book model of womanhood became common knowledge, therefore defining the ideal woman (Armstrong 63). Gilbert and Gubar claim that conduct books for women furthered the image of angel, dictating that women should be submissive, modest, and selfless or, in other words, angelic. (23) In *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, arguably one of the most popular conduct books during this time, Sarah Stickney Ellis upholds the angelic model of purity, domesticity, and submission. Exalting women as the moralizing influence in their husbands’ lives, Ellis stresses the importance of a wife’s duty to provide a comfortable domestic space and put the desires of all others above her own (1584-1585). In “The Girl of the Period,” Eliza Lynn Linton terms this ideal of womanhood as the “fair young English girl,” a woman of “innate purity” and “dignity,” who is “neither bold in bearing nor masculine in mind; a girl who, when she married, would be

her husband's friend and companion, but never his rival" (91). Only through possessing these qualities of the "angel of the house," could women fulfill society's expectations and please men. Susan Okin claims that these prescriptive texts were molded for "deliberately propagandistic purposes," reinforcing "patriarchal relations by constructing women's nature as sentimental and domestic" and emphasizing the "virtues of separate spheres and their assumptions of husbands' supreme authority" (qtd . in Hammerton 75). As propaganda, conduct books shaped the model of the ideal woman and defined female desirability.

By the nineteenth century, the "angel in the house" ideal of womanhood was firmly established; however, the rise of the novel challenged this ideal. Depicting new models of womanhood through their female characters, authors critiqued the old models while simultaneously suggesting various alternatives. This was due in part to the rise of women writers that coincided with the rise of the novel. Virginia Woolf cites middle-class women beginning to write as a major moment in history as women earned the right to speak their mind (70-71). These women began to question what men are supposed to desire and what women are supposed to desire to be. In order to replace existing patriarchal models of womanhood, Gilbert and Gubar claim that authors must first "shatter the mirror that has so long reflected what every woman was supposed to be," "assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing" the image of woman (76). As Gilbert and Gubar's violent diction suggests, authors must decidedly and forcibly reject society's patriarchal assumptions before presenting a viable alternative. Only after "killing" the "angel in the house," as Woolf puts it, can new models of womanhood emerge. By depicting various stereotypical examples of the feminine ideal through ancillary characters, or, at times, their protagonists, Austen, Gaskell, Brontë, and James critique and reject these models of womanhood and the patriarchal system that defines female desirability. Suggesting new models,

depicted through strong, independent female characters, these authors began to redefine concepts of femininity, male authority, and women's independence. While conduct books presented an "imaginary construct" that was an impossible ideal, novels presented an ideal of womanhood that was more true to life (Armstrong 252). In subverting the established ideal and suggesting new models of womanhood, these novels redefined gender roles and feminine desirability.

As novels redefined womanhood, they also redefined marriage. During the nineteenth century, marriage shifted from an entirely private affair into the public eye; this generated an increasingly popular public discourse on marriage, the marriage debate. New publicity exposed marital conflict, which led to an examination of marriage by reformers and writers and generated new matrimonial legislation. While the initial blame of any marital conflict in the early nineteenth century was generally placed on the failings of women (hence the numerous conduct books and other prescriptive writings encouraging submission), the focus began, during the mid-nineteenth century, to shift to men's marital misconduct (Hammerton 149). In *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life*, A. James Hammerton claims the marriage debate initially began due to "the rising concern to protect wives from the violence of their husbands" (17), but the reform went beyond simply preventing violence. Concepts of masculinity began to change from a focus on power to the virtues of "tenderness, love, and care, the protection of the weak, especially women" (Hammerton 150). While men's power was maintained, it was not to be abused. By the mid-nineteenth century, reformers and court rulings began to move away from conduct book models of a woman's duty of absolute submission and subordination in marriage, instead advocating a companionate model of marriage. New divorce legislation gave women greater rights and increased public discussion of marriage reform. Hammerton cites the new Divorce Court after 1857 as a "vital factor stimulating changes in

attitudes to marriage by the end of the century” (102). As women gained greater legal rights, expectations of a woman’s role and treatment in marriage rose, which, in turn, spurred an increase in women’s legal rights.

Despite these reforms, this companionate view of marriage was still rooted in patriarchal dominance and gender difference. While reformers began to question men’s authority, patriarchal structures remained firmly in place. That is to say that the public began to question and limit the level of men’s authority to what was deemed reasonable, but the authority of men itself was still upheld. Women were still viewed as domestic and subordinate to their husbands. Although a husband’s authority was limited when it came to violence or emotional abuse, women still did not have legal equality in marriage. In *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869, John Stuart Mill challenges the current conditions of marriage for women, arguing for legal equality between the sexes and pointing out that in its current state marriage is not desirable. He writes that marriage “should be on equal conditions; lest all women of spirit and capacity should prefer doing almost anything else, not in their own eyes degrading, rather than marry, when marrying is giving themselves a master, and a master too of all their earthly possession” (28). As Mill points out, husbands still maintained almost complete legal authority over their wives. Published in 1869, the same year in which Mill wrote *The Subjection of Women*, Barbara Bodichon’s “A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws of England Concerning Women” states, “a man and wife are one person in the law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is, as it were absorbed in that of her husband.” Her body belongs to him, all of her property before marriage becomes his, any money she earns is his, and the legal custody of children belongs entirely to her husband (89). Despite

marriage reforms in the mid-nineteenth century granting women greater rights in marriage, women still remained firmly under the legal authority of their husbands.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, reformers began to call for greater legal equality in marriage. Claiming that true equality can only exist with legal equality (6), Mill advocates “perfect equality” between the sexes that admits “no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (3). Writing in 1878, feminist reformer Frances Power Cobb states the “only effective model for a loving marriage is a miniature republic, where voluntary yielding would take the place of arbitrary command” (qtd. in Hammerton 152). Advocating equality in marriage, these reformers argue that the existing model of companionate marriage falls short of a true marriage ideal.

Influenced by and influencing this feminist discourse on marriage, the novels of Austen, Gaskell, Brontë, and James critically question their society’s current conception of marriage. By depicting various, undesirable marriages, these authors clearly illustrate the failings of existing models; their protagonists critique the representative marriages in their social circles and reject offers of marriage. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *North and South* (1855), and *Jane Eyre* (1847) suggest a new companionate marriage ideal, one based on mutual equality and love. As Gilbert and Gubar claim, writers such as these were “not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised” (44). Within these fictional worlds, these authors critique patriarchal depictions of marriage and present new models of marriage that overturn patriarchal assumptions. However, *Villette* (1853), *Washington Square* (1880), and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) suggest such models are overly optimistic and cannot exist in reality. These novels portray marriage and female independence as mutually exclusive, and suggest one must be sacrificed in order for the other to exist.

Throughout the public marriage debate, the current cultural and legal inequalities of marriage were challenged, but marriage itself was still upheld as the ideal for both men and women. Even as he advocates equality for women in marriage, Mill writes of marriage as “the destination appointed by society for women, the prospect they are brought up to, and the object which it is intended should be sought by all of them” (30). In her discussion on novelistic endings, Alison Booth states many nineteenth-century novelists, like Mill, viewed marriage as the ultimate goal of all women. She claims that few offer “anything more than double or binary choices for most female characters—seldom as various as the middles of novels” (2). Indeed, she claims, most nineteenth-century novels end in either the marriage or death of the female protagonist (2). In fact, the majority of domestic novels during this time ended in marriage, which was the anticipated closure to the heroine’s quest throughout the novel.

Novels that break this traditional marriage ending suggest new possibilities for women outside of the nineteenth-century model of marriage. While *Pride and Prejudice*, *North and South*, and *Jane Eyre* end in marriage (whether portrayed or implied), these novels depict a freely chosen companionate marriage based on equality; *Villette* replaces the typical marriage ending with complete independence; and *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady* both portray the decisive rejection of the marriage ideal for a life of renunciation and suffering. Breaking from the typical “happily ever after” marriage ending, these novels question current cultural perceptions of the institution of marriage and how marriage defines women’s independence. Throughout these novels, the authors challenge the traditional feminine ideal; at the novels’ close, these authors rewrite the marriage ending and question whether a new ideal is possible.

## CHAPTER I: Austen's Limited Rebellion in *Pride and Prejudice*

Opening with the line, "It is universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (Austen 5), *Pride and Prejudice* announces itself as a novel about marriage. Although Austen begins with this belief that marriage is the ultimate goal of every wealthy man in her society, she questions it with an underlying hint of sarcasm. Indeed, as the novel unfolds this truth seems to be universally acknowledged more so by mothers and their eligible daughters than by single men. Throughout the novel, Austen critiques society's construct of marriage: questioning stereotypical gender roles, portraying various negative models of marriage, and suggesting a new model in the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy. While Austen undermines patriarchal assumptions about marriage throughout the novel, she does not radically break with social conventions. By focusing the novel's plot around marriage and marrying off every major character by the novel's close, Austen reinforces the importance of marriage even as she questions it. In this way, Austen does not undermine the ideal of marriage itself; rather, she critiques the current practice and understanding of marriage in her society. She suggests a new model must be brought forth to replace the existing models that fail to promote the happiness of either sex and severely limit women's freedom.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen challenges the established ideal of womanhood, suggesting a new model through her strong, independent female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennett. Elizabeth subverts traditional gender traits as she possesses qualities typically deemed masculine in nineteenth-century society. Rather than exemplifying the feminine qualities valued in nineteenth-century conduct books, she is active, rationally intelligent, decided in her opinions, and witty and outspoken in her speech. Elizabeth is not bound by convention, clearly evidenced in her decision to walk three miles alone to visit her sick sister Jane. Arriving "with her petticoat,

six inches deep in mud” (Austen 32), Elizabeth proves her ability to act on her own volition and without being influenced by others’ disapproval. Not only does Elizabeth act independently, she speaks her mind freely and with wit that Mr. Bennett deems “quickness” (Austen 7). She tells Darcy, “There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me” (Austen 148). As John Hardy states, “Elizabeth does not permit her ‘will’ to be dictated to by another, and she will never admit the submissive role traditionally ascribed to women” (47). Indeed, repeatedly throughout the novel, Elizabeth follows her own will with stubborn courage that refuses to bow to socially dictated gender roles. She is certainly not intimidated by wealth or status; she does not play the supplicant to Mr. Darcy, as Miss Bingley does, and she firmly resists Lady Catherine’s dominance. Elizabeth tells Lady Catherine, “I am only resolved to act in that manner which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me” (Austen 298). Leroy Smith claims that Elizabeth “is expected to subordinate her will, needs, and interests to those of the superior male sex, to accept a life of passivity and dependency;” yet, she “rejects both the feminine stereotype and the feminine role. She can think for herself and intends to make her own decisions. She insists that she be treated and judged as an individual” (90). By possessing these qualities, Elizabeth suggests that women can break free from feminine stereotypes, for gender roles are not innately dependent on sex.

Elizabeth’s words and behavior stand in sharp contrast to those of many of the female characters in the novel, who appear foolish, overly emotional, and helpless. In these characters, Austen critiques gender assumptions and the effects of patriarchy on the development of womanhood. Mrs. Bennett, Lydia, and Kitty clearly embody expectations of the feminine as innately tied to irrationality and sensibility, and their foolish, passionate speeches and behavior

serve as a constant embarrassment to Elizabeth. Mrs. Bennett complains often of her nerves and is thrown from exuberant delight to despair with the smallest change of circumstances. Her behavior alone is cause enough for Mr. Darcy to withdraw Bingley from Jane's company. Lydia's and Kitty's concerns appear limited to men in red coats, balls, pretty clothing, and gossip. Elizabeth describes Lydia to her father as "the most determined flirt" and "vain, ignorant, idle, and absolutely uncontrolled" (Austen 194). While these women are responsible for such behavior, they are deeply influenced by the society they inhabit. As Smith claims, many of Austen's "secondary characters seem almost entirely creations of the patriarchal culture" (28). Their interests and concerns are limited to foolish, inconsequential affairs because these are the socially acceptable interests and concerns of their sex, and they are uneducated and excluded from more important matters, which fall entirely in the masculine sphere. Having been conditioned to believe that dependence, vulnerability, and ignorance are desirable feminine qualities, these women embody these qualities fully. In these characters, Austen portrays the deleterious effects of patriarchy on women as these women succumb to the faults attributed to their sex.

While these women represent the feminine faults, Mary represents a woman molded by feminine education. In Mary, Austen critiques the conduct book ideal of feminine thought and behavior. Mary's moralizing gives voice to conduct book clichés, which Austen assuredly mocks through Mary's grand speeches that are affected and emotionally disconnected from reality.

Upon Lydia's affair, Mary tells Elizabeth:

Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson: that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable—that one false step involves her in endless

ruin—that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful—and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behavior toward the undeserving of the other sex (Austen 240).

Elizabeth is amazed as Mary consoles herself “with such kind of moral extractions from the evil before them” (Austen 240). Here Austen shows the conduct book model of femininity to be both impractical and undesirable.

Elizabeth refuses to conform to these feminine stereotypes, suggesting new possibilities of female desirability. Gilbert and Gubar claim that possessing such masculine traits as Elizabeth exhibits would identify a woman during this time period with the monstrous (28), the “angel in the house’s” opposite. While these qualities would seem to impede Elizabeth’s chances of marriage, in fact, these are the very qualities Mr. Darcy values in Elizabeth. Elizabeth does not excel in the traditional female achievements typically valued in a wife; she is not particularly gifted at drawing, playing the piano, or singing. Furthermore, she does not fit the submissive role of the “angel in the house.” In *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (1797), Erasmus Darwin describes the ideal young lady as one “whose temper and disposition should appear to be pliant rather than robust; to be ready to take impressions rather than to be decidedly marked; as great apparent strength of character, however excellent, is liable to alarm both her own and the other sex” (qtd. in Armstrong 80). Rather than being alarmed by Elizabeth’s strength of character and stubborn will, Mr. Darcy is attracted to these qualities that set Elizabeth apart from other women. Elizabeth tells Mr. Darcy, “The fact is that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking and thinking for your approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike them” (Austen 317). Certainly not submissive, Elizabeth suggests that Mr. Darcy respects her intelligence and independence because she challenges him, rather

than submitting in false flattery. Mr. Darcy confirms that he is not attracted to her for her beauty, feminine accomplishments, or submissive nature, but rather “for the liveliness” of her mind (Austen 317). Hardy claims, “Darcy is bound to redefine the conventional view of female ‘accomplishments’ by what so interests him in Elizabeth” (37). Indeed, Mr. Darcy values qualities in Elizabeth that would not have been deemed desirable by society’s standards of the feminine ideal; he values Elizabeth as an individual, rather than a product of her society, and can therefore appreciate her personal strengths and charms. By admiring these qualities in Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy suggests that these masculine gender traits are not monstrous in women, but rather more desirable than the feminine stereotypes to which society expects women to conform. Mr. Darcy’s desire for Elizabeth implies that the established patriarchal system of defining women’s value is corrupt. A woman’s worth is not solely defined by her ability to conform to the conduct book ideal; rather, her value is found in her individual strengths, even if these strengths challenge the traditional understanding of gender. In subverting the established ideal and suggesting a new model of womanhood, Austen redefines gender and feminine desirability.

Further undermining patriarchal assumptions, Austen critiques the current state of marriage in her society. The Bennets, the Collins, and the Wickhams marry based on a traditional understanding of gender roles and the desire to meet pragmatic needs; each of these marriages, in varying degrees, falls short of an ideal marriage, a mutually beneficial relationship based on equality and love. By portraying these marriages as products of patriarchal society, Austen asks her protagonist, and her readers, to question what makes an ideal marriage, rejecting these existing examples for a new ideal.

In *Mr. and Mrs. Bennett*, Austen depicts a stereotypical marriage based on traditional gender roles: Mr. Bennett marries for youth and beauty, and Mrs. Bennett marries for wealth and

the security and social position wealth offers. Mrs. Bennett sees marriage as a necessity for survival. She obsesses over marrying off her daughters, concerned not for their happiness in love so much as their financial provision and social situation. This is certainly a product of her patriarchal society. As Gilbert and Gubar claim, “Patriarchal control depends on women being denied the right to earn or even inherit their own money” (136). Unable to earn or inherit money, women must marry. Understandably, Mrs. Bennett wishes for her daughters to be taken care of after she and Mr. Bennett are gone, and the entail prevents them from properly providing for their daughters. Her pragmatic view of marriage as nothing more than a contractual relationship is most clearly demonstrated through her attempt to force Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins, but it seems the same motives led to her own marriage to Mr. Bennett. The marital happiness promoted by this model is short lived. For Mr. Bennett, Mrs. Bennett’s “weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished forever” (Austen 198). Mrs. Bennett is foolish, nervous, and difficult to live with—certainly not an ideal wife. Mr. Bennett, on the other hand, offers little emotional support to his wife. He finds her, and her concerns, amusing and openly mocks her, teasingly, in front of her children, which Elizabeth finds reprehensible (Austen 198). Mr. and Mrs. Bennett’s marriage portrays the failings of a marriage built on traditional gender roles. Indeed, “had Elizabeth’s opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort” (Austen 198). This model of marriage shows how temporary happiness is when it is based on beauty and wealth, suggesting these gender-oriented “accomplishments” are not the proper incentives for marriage.

Austen further critiques her society’s view of marriage through Charlotte and Mr. Collins, whose marriage is based on convenience and practicality. Mr. Collins marries because

he feels it is proper to have a wife, Lady Catherine tells him to take a wife, and he wants a wife to mind his home. His choice of wife switches from Jane to Elizabeth to Charlotte within the course of a few days, clearly showing that finding *a* wife is more important than who that wife is. However, she must meet his requirements; he expects an “angel in the house” to perform the necessary domestic and wifely duties. Mr. Collins’s view of marriage conforms fully to typical gender roles, as he values a wife not for her own character but for her ability to meet his needs. His patriarchal society pressures him to marry and dictates the standard by which he measures female value. Charlotte too displays a conventional view of marriage based on traditional gender roles in valuing a husband simply for his ability to provide. Charlotte is willing to marry Mr. Collins, knowing full well he does not love her and she could never love him. Charlotte explains her decision to marry to Elizabeth, stating, “I am not romantic, you know, I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state” (Austen 108). Like Mrs. Bennett, Charlotte sees marriage as a contractual relationship necessary for women to have a place in life and financial security. This type of marriage is not desirable. Upon quitting her visit to the newlywed Collins, Elizabeth pities her friend, thinking, “Poor Charlotte!—it was melancholy to leave her to such society!” (Austen 182). Elizabeth acknowledges Charlotte’s delight in her domestic concerns has not yet worn out but also sees that comfort could only exist for her “when Mr. Collins could be forgotten” (Austen 135). Basing Charlotte’s contentment on the newness of the situation, Elizabeth suggests that her limited happiness in marriage, like Elizabeth’s parents’, will not last long.

Similar to the Collins, Lydia and Mr. Wickham marry in view of what marriage can offer them personally, and their marriage is one based on selfish desires. Mr. Wickham does not love Lydia or desire to marry her. Viewing women as inferior and easily manipulated, he initially intends to simply use her, but he is eventually persuaded to marry her in exchange for money. Mr. Wickham's ease in ingratiating himself with women (Miss Darcy, Elizabeth, and then Lydia) shows the value society places on appearance and polite manners. However, Mr. Wickham proves that these qualities are overvalued as he marries Lydia only to pay off his debts and gain a source of income to continue his lifestyle. Lydia, on the other hand, does desire to marry Wickham. But, her desire to be his wife is based in part on his red coat and even more so on her desire to attain the recognition that comes from marriage. She is thrilled to be married so young and before her older sisters. She flaunts her marriage, seemingly unaware of the social shame attached to her engagement. Happier to be a wife than to be Wickham's wife, Lydia delights in her new role. In this, Lydia shows the importance and prestige society places on marriage, which blinds women to the true nature of the relationship they enter into in marriage. Based on these poor motives, the happiness of both is fleeting indeed, for "his affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer; and in spite of her youth and her manners, she retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her" (Austen 323). The money Wickham gains through the marriage is soon spent, as is any affection he felt for his wife. Lydia's benefits from the marriage stemmed solely from the reputation it gave her. While she initially believes this reputation to be beneficial, the narrator implies the reputation was in fact degrading and impossible to redeem. Again, any initial happiness in marriage does not last when marriage is based on such selfish motives. In the Wickhams, Austen proves that the emphasis and importance placed on marriage can give men excessive power and blind women to injurious

consequences. Depicting these marriages in order to critique the state of marriage in her society, Austen suggests the current motivations for and conceptions of marriage are deeply rooted in patriarchy and are simply not desirable.

In contrast to these marriages, Austen presents a new ideal in the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy. Elizabeth's view of marriage is not trapped within the confines of patriarchy. She does not view women as inferior and dependent on a husband; consequently, she does not feel the same pressure to marry as Charlotte does, despite Mrs. Bennett's urgings. Elizabeth shows freedom in her choice of marriage by rejecting Mr. Collins's marriage proposal. Elizabeth critiques Charlotte's view of marriage for "she had always felt that Charlotte's opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own, but she could not have supposed it possible that when called into action, she would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage" (Austen 109). Unlike Charlotte, Elizabeth refuses to marry without love, despite what "worldly advantages" marriage offers. As heir to Mr. Bennett's estate, Mr. Collins is capable of providing for Elizabeth, and he views his plan to marry one of his cousins as proper "atonement" for the entail (Austen 61). This marriage would allow Elizabeth to benefit from her father's estate despite the entail, and Mrs. Bennett fully approves of the plan, greatly encouraging Mr. Collins's proposal. Elizabeth's rejection of this marriage offer proves she is not interested in marrying simply to ensure her future financial security or social position. While her refusal shows Elizabeth to be capable of following her own thoughts and desires rather than society's expectations or her mother's orders, it is not surprising. Mr. Collins is, as Elizabeth tells Jane, "a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man" (Austen 117).

Elizabeth's rejection of Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, shows much more determination and independence, further proving her ability to act counter-culturally and choose freely. While

women such as Elizabeth were under great pressure to marry and marry well, a man in Mr. Darcy's position enjoyed much greater freedom. While the opening line of the novel claims a "single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" as a universal truth (Austen 5), in fact, Mr. Darcy is free to marry *if* and when he chooses. As a wealthy, handsome young man, Mr. Darcy does not need to marry for financial reasons, he is free to pursue a marriage of his own choosing rather than waiting for offers, and he is not under the same time constraints to marry quickly as a woman is, who would be considered past her prime in her late twenties. Mr. Darcy proposes to Elizabeth based on his own desire, not societal pressures. Mr. Darcy's proposal shows his freedom to act independently; Elizabeth's refusal shows her ability to act independently. Although Elizabeth claims, "He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal," Mr. Darcy is socially and economically Elizabeth's superior. Despite the social and financial advantages such a marriage would give her, Elizabeth refuses to accept based on these motivations alone, thereby rejecting her society's standards of acceptable marriage. This refusal certainly goes against social norms, as marrying Mr. Darcy would undoubtedly be viewed as quite an accomplishment in a society that openly discusses how much a man is worth upon his arrival into the neighborhood. Fully aware of this system of value, Mr. Darcy is confident in Elizabeth's ready acceptance of his offer. He assumes Elizabeth views marriage according to accepted social conventions; therefore, knowing his wealth and his social status make him a highly desirable husband, Mr. Darcy proposes "without a doubt of [his] reception" (Austen 308). Elizabeth, however, is not induced by these advantages, and she firmly rejects his offer of marriage. Smith claims that "Elizabeth's rejection of his proposal is the most courageous act of her independent spirit and her boldest challenge of the view of marriage in her

society” (93). By refusing to marry Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth refuses to submit to a man’s will or society’s expectations.

Rather than viewing marriage as a contractual relationship and being drawn into competition with other women for the most eligible bachelors, Elizabeth desires a companionate marriage based on equality and love. Like Austen, Elizabeth is not opposed to the institution of marriage itself, rather to her society’s construct of marriage. Elizabeth decidedly rejects these first two proposals because she does not wish to marry Mr. Collins or Mr. Darcy and cannot imagine marrying against her will. However, by Mr. Darcy’s second proposal, Elizabeth’s feelings have changed. At that point, she is able to willfully enter into marriage because the relationship is one of mutual respect and mutual love.

By the point of Mr. Darcy’s second proposal, he and Elizabeth have both grown to deeply respect each other. Mr. Darcy’s respect for Elizabeth grows throughout the course of the novel. Early on Mr. Darcy admires Elizabeth for her intelligence, wit, and independence, but his respect increases after Elizabeth refuses his first proposal. Although he admits he was angry at first, Mr. Darcy claims that Elizabeth taught him a valuable lesson: how insufficient his efforts were “to please a woman worthy of being pleased” (Austen 308). Taking offense at the pompous nature of his proposal, Elizabeth firmly rejects him, speaking her mind fully and freely. In doing so, Elizabeth asserts herself as an individual and, as Hardy claims, “ she forces Darcy to converse with her as an equal” (37). Mr. Darcy recognizes Elizabeth as such, which sets her apart from other women and causes his respect for her to deepen. Elizabeth’s respect for Mr. Darcy first begins to grow after reading the letter in which he addresses her criticisms of him. Her respect continues to grow at Pemberley, where she learns of the deep admiration his staff and sister have for him and receives his kind attention to her and the Gardiners. Elizabeth’s respect is made

complete upon learning of Mr. Darcy's aid in Lydia's marriage affair. She is shocked by Mr. Darcy's generosity and kindness in "the restoration of Lydia," and she is "proud of him" (Austen 272). By the time Elizabeth accepts Mr. Darcy's proposal, she greatly respects her future husband. Mr. Bennett tells Elizabeth, "Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child, let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life" (Austen 314). Mr. Bennett fears that Elizabeth's quick wit and independence will put her in danger of being unable to respect her husband, but Elizabeth assures him that Mr. Darcy has gained and is worthy of her respect. Mutual respect between the two is essential in this marriage, as it creates equality. This allows Elizabeth to maintain her selfhood instead of being forced into conforming to the traditional role of a submissive wife.

As mutual respect creates equality between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, so too does mutual love. Despite struggling against his feelings, Mr. Darcy expresses ardent admiration and love for Elizabeth. His love for her is so great that it is "impossible to conquer" despite the numerous objections he raises (Austen 160). While Elizabeth's love for Mr. Darcy comes later in the novel, it appears to be just as ardent. Mr. Bennett tells Elizabeth, "do anything rather than marry without affection. Are you quite sure that you feel what you ought to do?" She replies, "only think I feel *more* than I ought to do" (Austen 311). For Elizabeth, love is a slow process built on rational understanding and appreciation, rather than initial passion. Elizabeth tells her father of the "gradual change" her feelings undergo (Austen 314). This concept of love is, as Susan Weisser puts it, "defined by a growth into mature self-development as well as sober recognition of and esteem for the other" (95). In this depiction of love, Austen suggests that affection based on character that is discovered in time far exceeds initial attraction or lust. The narrator claims:

If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth's change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged, nothing can be said in her defense, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method, in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill-success might perhaps authorize her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment. (Austen 231-232)

Here Austen challenges the more romantic notions of passionate love, instead advocating a more practical model of love that develops over time. While many, such as Mrs. Bennett and Charlotte, viewed marriage as “the pragmatic exchange of women's attractiveness and domestic labor for the man's economic provision and social power,” marriage for love was increasingly popular during the early nineteenth century (Weisser 95). This change led to a growing acceptance of marriage based on individual choice, but it also increased the value of emotion and passion over calm and rational affection. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen attempts to negotiate between these two extremes. Austen values love and individual choice over pragmatic, contractual marriages, but she also seems to view passion as of less importance than rational judgment and affection.

By sharing such a love, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth enter into a companionate marriage. Rather than having a passionate, love-at-first-sight relationship, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth grow to love each other over time as they learn more about each other and their admiration and respect for one another deepens. In their marriage, Austen portrays “an alternative to the dominant-submissive model for marriage” by showing a relationship between equals (Smith 100). By

depicting their relationship as one of mutual respect and love, Austen suggests these are the key foundations for a happy and successful companionate marriage.

However, some critics doubt that this marriage is one of true equality. These critics believe that although Elizabeth begins the novel as an independent woman, she eventually submits to the role of a submissive wife. Gilbert and Gubar claim that the novel dramatizes “the necessity of female submission for female survival; Austen’s story is especially flattering to male readers because it describes the taming not just of any woman but specifically of a rebellious, imaginative girl who is amorously mastered by a sensible man” (154). Here Gilbert and Gubar claim that the marriage ending is dependent on Elizabeth renouncing her independence and submitting to Mr. Darcy and that in depicting such an ending Austen suggests this is the only option for women. In addition, Gilbert and Gubar believe that Elizabeth must renounce her masculine traits and adopt the typical feminine role in order to marry, stating Elizabeth Darcy never exists “except in the slightly malevolent futurity of all happily-ever-afters; surely [she] would have learned the intricate gestures of subordination” (163). Although Elizabeth’s submission in marriage is not depicted in the novel, Gilbert and Gubar assert that it is understood and assumed. Armstrong agrees, claiming, “Although she wins Darcy’s heart on the basis of what amounts to a direct violation of the female ideal, Elizabeth renounces all her pertness the instant she agrees to marry him. Her ‘liveliness of mind’ loses its cutting edge, and from then on she will exert a softening influence in the world projected at the end of the novel” (51). In accepting Mr. Darcy’s marriage proposal, Elizabeth does give up an element of her power: the power of rejection, one of the few powers women held over men during this time. These critics claim that by giving up this power and marrying, Elizabeth necessarily submits to Mr. Darcy and traditional gender roles.

Indeed, Elizabeth does soften her judgments and opinions; however, she does not do so in order to conform to her new role as wife, as these critics suggest. Instead, Elizabeth's change is due to her realization of her own errors in judgment and her subsequent awakening to a new sense of reality. In fact, Elizabeth and Darcy must both soften in judgment and opinion, renouncing previous prejudices and admitting their past mistakes. In order to reach the point of mutual respect and love portrayed at the end of the novel, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth must completely alter their perspectives of each other, society's rules, and their own desires.

Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth's perceptions of each other change drastically in the course of the novel. Mr. Darcy initially rejects dancing with Elizabeth and attempts to repress his growing attraction. Elizabeth's pride being injured on this initial meeting, she finds Mr. Darcy proud and unpleasant to the point of hating him. Only when both gain greater insight into the other's character, do they both realize their own mistakes in judgment, which, in turn, leads to self-growth. Elizabeth's decided opinion forms quickly against Mr. Darcy and remains unchanged until she reads his letter explaining his involvement in Jane's disappointment and his history with Wickham. For the first time, Elizabeth begins to doubt her own opinion as she realizes she has misjudged Mr. Darcy. As further events unfold, Elizabeth becomes more aware of her own ignorance in judgment. She is able to set aside her biases and see Mr. Darcy from a clear perspective, completely renouncing her past prejudices against him and realizing he is not the man she believed him to be. Elizabeth must not only realize her lack of knowledge of Mr. Darcy, she must realize her own lack of knowledge of herself. Fully convinced of her own opinion at the beginning of the novel, Elizabeth later realizes that she is not infallible and judgments quickly made are often inaccurate. Through her suffering, Elizabeth learns to soften her judgments of others. Mr. Darcy too must gain a deeper knowledge of both Elizabeth and himself. When

Elizabeth rejects his first proposal, Mr. Darcy realizes his own arrogance in assuming an affirmative reply. He later tells Elizabeth, “You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you I was properly humbled” (Austen 308). Mr. Darcy’s prideful proposal is a consequence of his inaccurate perception of Elizabeth and himself. He realizes he has misjudged his own position and Elizabeth’s feelings towards him, and, like Elizabeth, he must soften his opinions and replace quick judgment with judgments based on experience and time.

These false judgments have definite gender dimensions as both initially perceive the other based on stereotypical gender roles. Elizabeth expects Mr. Darcy to be proud and domineering. She therefore judges him to be so after very limited interaction, basing this judgment in large part on patriarchal assumptions about powerful, wealthy men. Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, assumes Elizabeth holds traditional views of marriage and will certainly accept his proposal based on society’s endorsement of marriage and female submission. They each see the other in the role society dictates to them. Smith claims, “each is deeply influenced by the concept of roles, which leads one individual to judge another primarily as society thinks that person ought to be” (100). Only when they both humble each other do they come to a new understanding of gender, realizing that gender traits are not absolute and exclusive. After recognizing that stereotypical gender roles are misleading, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy move towards a greater understanding of each other. With this greater understanding comes greater equality, as neither individual is valued as superior simply based on his or her sex. In rejecting gender assumptions, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy open up the possibility of a companionate marriage, for, as Smith claims, “a lasting, mutually satisfying relationship cannot exist without an equilibrium in the power relationships of the sexes” (36). Admitting past errors in judgment and redefining gender roles, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy come to a greater understanding of

themselves, each other, and reality. They are then able to break free from society's rules and expectations and follow their own desires. This marks a significant change in both characters. Rather than signifying Elizabeth is conforming to her society, this change signifies that Elizabeth does not have to adapt to the "angel in the house" model of wifely submission in order to marry.

While Austen challenges patriarchal assumptions and expectations in marriage and suggests a new marriage ideal in Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, some critics doubt whether the companionate model of marriage presented in the final chapter of the novel is realistic. Margaret Kirkham claims, "Elizabeth's extreme, and improbable, good luck in marriage is acceptable only if it is properly distanced from life by the formal requirements of plot and part" (92). Believing that Elizabeth's marriage is only believable in the context of the novel, Kirkham suggests that such a marriage is unattainable in Austen's society. Gilbert and Gubar express a similar view of the novel's marriage ending, claiming:

Many critics have already noticed the duplicity in the 'happy endings' of Austen's novels in which she brings her couples to the brink of bliss in such haste, or with such unlikely coincidences, or with such sarcasm that the entire message seems undercut: the implication remains that a girl without the aid of a benevolent narrator would never find a way out of either her mortifications or her parents' house. (169)

Here Gilbert and Gubar seem to compare Elizabeth to Cinderella and the narrator to Cinderella's fairy godmother, suggesting that Elizabeth's marriage to Mr. Darcy is the stuff of fairy tales, unrealistic and unable to exist in reality. According to these critics, Elizabeth loses all sense of agency and is instead dependent on outside sources to grant her happiness. This view undermines Austen's critique of patriarchy, instead suggesting the marriage ending is contrived and serves to strengthen patriarchal views of women's dependency.

Adding further doubt to the reality of this ideal marriage, the novel does not take the reader past the point of marriage. While the final chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* suggests marital bliss, the terms in which the marriage is described are very vague, such as Elizabeth having “every other source of happiness” (Austen 321). Yet, Austen indicates that Elizabeth does not conform to the role of submissive wife after marriage. At the close of the novel, Elizabeth persuades Mr. Darcy to reconcile with his aunt, proving her influence over him does not end with marriage (Austen 324). In addition, Miss Darcy feels “astonishment bordering on alarm at [Elizabeth’s] lively, sporting manner of talking to her brother” (Austen 323), proving Elizabeth’s speech and behavior does not change significantly when she becomes Mr. Darcy’s wife. However, the fact that the novel does not follow the newlyweds far casts some doubt on this model of marriage. By not depicting the interactions between the protagonist and lover after their marriage has taken place, Austen leaves the reader questioning whether the companionate marriage implied can only be suggested and not written into existence. Can such a marriage only exist as a “happily ever after” ending?

Even if Austen does present a viable alternative to female subordination in marriage, she continues to uphold marriage as the ultimate goal. As Smith claims, “Austen does not offer women the alternative of a fulfilled existence outside of marriage” (27). While Elizabeth rejects multiple offers of marriage and asserts her independence, the seemingly inevitable conclusion to her story is marriage. By not exploring any positive alternatives to wifedom, Austen seems to suggest that the only happy ending is marriage. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf writes, “One has the profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness” (107). Austen mirrors this

sentiment by creating Elizabeth's happiness in a marriage ending. In this way, Austen reinforces the social norms of her society.

However, Austen does critique her society's patriarchal assumptions throughout the novel. She redefines gender roles and female desirability, she challenges traditional views of marriage, and she suggests a new model of companionate marriage in Mr. and Mrs. Darcy. While completely breaking with social conventions would be fairly unrealistic, Austen challenges social norms not by rejecting marriage, but rather presenting a new model of marriage, one of equality. Smith claims Austen is "engaged in 'limited' rebellion" for she does not break with society but rather looks "for a plausible way to release women from their position of sexual inferiority and emotional vulnerability" (25). By portraying equality between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, Austen attempts to present a companionate marriage model as a viable alternative to less desirable forms of marriage. While this ideal marriage seems unlikely to occur in her world, Austen depicts what could be and advocates social change. As Kirkham explains, Austen "suggests how we might live, and criticizes the way we actually live, in a world where women, however marked their abilities, are not thought of (except by a few, mostly *heroes*) as equals and 'partners in life'" (84). Mirroring Mona Caird in her approach, who claimed, "The time has come, not for violent overturning of established institutions before people admit that they are evil, but for a gradual alteration of opinion which will rebuild them from the very foundation" (1604), Austen challenges the current institution of marriage, attempting to redefine it in terms that offer women greater freedom in a patriarchal society.

## CHAPTER II: Radical Reversals in Gaskell's *North and South* and Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Writing after Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë further Austen's effort to redefine female desirability and marriage in order to offer women greater freedom in a continuing patriarchal society. In *North and South* and *Jane Eyre*, Gaskell and Brontë challenge gender stereotypes and traditional models of marriage, advocating companionate marriage as the new ideal. Like Austen, Gaskell and Brontë suggest that certain changes must necessarily take place before a man and woman can enter into a companionate marriage; however, these authors emphasize the nearly insurmountable challenges men and women face in achieving gender equality.

While Austen implies that both men and women must alter their perceptions of gender, social rules, and desire, Gaskell and Brontë imply even greater changes are necessary. Like Elizabeth's and Mr. Darcy's, Margaret's and Thornton's perceptions are altered in the course of the novel. They redefine how they view each other, themselves, and their society. However, their economic circumstances are greatly altered by the end of the novel as well, suggesting material changes must take place in addition to new understandings. Jane's and Rochester's perceptions are also altered in the course of the novel; however, social, economic, and physical alterations occur as well. In both novels, gender roles are reversed as the women take on the masculine roles in their relationship and the men are reduced to dependent states. Although their female protagonists do marry at the end of each novel and both marriages are touted as a marriage of mutual equality and love, *North and South* and *Jane Eyre* suggest such a marriage can only occur in the wake of a drastic overturning of gender roles and the loss of masculine power. The fact that such considerable changes in circumstances must take place in order for a companionate marriage to exist suggests that such a marriage is highly unlikely in a society so entrenched in

patriarchy; gender equality in marriage is an ideal but improbable solution to female oppression. Gaskell and Brontë challenge Austen's happy ending in *Pride and Prejudice*, implying such an ending can exist only in fiction. However, Gaskell and Brontë ultimately reaffirm some of the same patriarchal assumptions as Austen, for they do not write beyond the marriage ending.

Like Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*, Gaskell challenges the established ideal of womanhood in *North and South*, suggesting a new model through her strong, independent female protagonist. Margaret is intelligent, confident, verbal in her opinions, and courageous in her actions. While Margaret is valued for her beauty, high moral standard, and selflessness (in which she conforms to the conduct book ideal), her desirability is not limited to these aspects. Thornton's feelings for her arise due to her ability to think and act independently, her ability to openly speak her mind among men, most notably Thornton, and her ability to act in the public sphere. As each of these attributes is typically viewed as masculine in nineteenth-century society, Margaret, like Elizabeth Bennett, subverts traditional gender roles. Margaret's masculine qualities and behavior are clearly depicted in her first meeting with Thornton. Elodie Neuville claims Margaret "is given most of the traditional male prerogatives" as she takes control of space by entering in the door and telling Thornton to take a seat. Neuville goes on to state that Margaret is defined by words denoting "masculine qualities: 'straight,' 'fearless,' 'frank,' 'unabashed,' while being somewhat deficient in the feminine ones resulting in her feeling 'no awkwardness,' not being 'surprised or discomfited,' and most of all totally lacking the 'flush' on her complexion which would at least have intimated some feminine internal turmoil" (277). Indeed throughout the novel, Margaret displays such masculine qualities, confidently arguing the country's economic situation and business matters of the mill, taking on many of her father's and mother's responsibilities, and refusing to bow to social conventions of acceptable behavior.

Although she is well mannered and highly aware of social conventions, Margaret freely breaks these conventions when she believes them to be wrong. Her interactions with Bessy, and other mill workers, break the bounds of the class system. Thomas Fair argues that although Margaret “emerges in a seemingly stereotypic role of caregiver...the context in which Margaret operates as caregiver challenges a reading of her acts as conventional and, instead, proves her bravery, independence, strength, and determination” (224). Indeed, though she begins this interaction as a patroness, she soon learns from Higgins that such an attitude is insulting to the self-reliant workers, and her role changes from patroness to friend. By refusing to be bound by social conventions and gender stereotypes, Margaret proves her independence and strength.

Both Elizabeth’s and Margaret’s refusal to conform to their society sets them apart from the conduct book ideal of womanhood; however, Gaskell takes her protagonist’s independence a step further than Austen by empowering Margaret to interact in the public sphere, a conventionally masculine realm. Most notably, Margaret violates the public sphere in the riot scene, when she physically protects Thornton with her body from the angry mob. Publically saving Thornton, Margaret reverses conventional understanding of gender relations and prompts Thornton’s subsequent proposal. Fair claims that “Margaret’s impulsive defense of Thornton in their confrontation with the mob locates Margaret solidly outside the common expectations of a woman of her class and background (223-224). In this act, Margaret shows her courage and her ability to act outside the bounds of traditional gender roles. Barbara Harman argues, “Gaskell both challenges the conventional boundaries between private and public and legitimizes public action for women” (361). Breaking into the public sphere in a very public way, Margaret suggests a new ideal of female desirability that is not bound by the conduct book ideal or social restrictions that limit women to the private sphere.

Likewise challenging the established ideal of womanhood, Brontë suggests a new model of female desirability in *Jane Eyre*. As an orphan, Jane must make her own way in the world without the financial or emotional support of a loving family. She earns her own keep: first as a teacher at Lowood, then as a governess at Thornfield, and finally as a teacher at Morton. Though she suffers throughout her life journey, she is self-reliant and makes her own decisions, refusing to be seduced by outside influences. Like Elizabeth Bennett and Margaret Hale, Jane openly voices her opinions, rejecting conventional standards of feminine behavior. While women were expected to be acquiescent and submissive, Jane is steady in her convictions and blunt in her speech. As a young girl, Jane shocks her aunt with her sharp tongue. At Thornfield, Jane garners Rochester's respect through her blunt honesty. St John, too, is surprised at Jane's honest communication for he "had not imagined that a woman would dare to speak so to a man" (Brontë, *Eyre* 530). Furthermore, Jane longs for freedom in a way that sets her apart from the stereotypical nineteenth-century woman, who was supposed to find her value in service and self-abnegation. At Lowood, Jane states, "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer" (Brontë, *Eyre* 115). At Thornfield, Jane claims, "I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen" (Brontë, *Eyre* 149). Jane recognizes these longings are not deemed feminine by her society, and she states:

Women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on piano and embroidering bags. It is

thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounce necessary for their sex. (Brontë, *Eyre* 150)

In this monologue, Jane shows her feminist sentiments, as she criticizes the confining nature of nineteenth-century gender roles. She longs to break free from these expectations, and does so through her refusal to submit her own independence (most notably in her decision to flee Thornfield).

Jane further breaks the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood as she is not beautiful. In the nineteenth century (as today), female desirability was greatly dependent on beauty, and, as Jen Cadwallader points out, the conduct book ideal associated virtue with physical beauty (238). Yet, Jane is both desirable and highly moral despite her plain appearance. Brontë repeatedly reminds the reader of Jane's plain features, emphasizing that Jane's value is not dependent on beauty. Cadwallader argues that "Brontë uses Jane's plainness to condemn an upper-class system of values which, by emphasizing the importance of a woman's appearance, limited her ability to develop selfhood and achieve autonomous action" (234). By emphasizing Jane's plainness, Brontë frees Jane from this conventional system of values, allowing Jane to achieve worth beyond the distinctly economic value of beauty. Although Jane's worth is based on a new system of values, her worth is recognizable even to those who are deeply influenced by the patriarchal system of female desirability. When Bessie is reunited with Jane, she initially is disappointed due to Jane's lack of beauty; however, after she witnesses Jane's talents, she is impressed by her accomplishments and exclaims, "Oh! You are quite a lady, Miss Jane! (Brontë, *Eyre* 124). Here Brontë proves that Jane's identity as defined by others is not founded on beauty. Both Rochester and St John value Jane for her talents, her mind, and her moral standards. Brontë raises this system of value over the value of physical beauty, so that Jane represents a new standard of

female desirability. As Weisser states, “No longer were manners, appearance and submissive conformity the ideal. Charlotte believed in a heroine’s inner strength, her moral integrity, and her intellectual qualities” (93). In Jane, Brontë redefines the patriarchal system of desirability.

In addition to challenging the established ideal of womanhood, both Gaskell and Brontë also challenge their society’s understanding of marriage. In contrast to the marriages around them, which conform to gender stereotypes, Margaret’s and Jane’s views of marriage are certainly countercultural. *North and South* opens with wedding preparations for Margaret’s cousin Edith, who conforms to the conventional female stereotype of the “angel in the house,” as she is beautiful, shallow, and passive. Fair claims this opening scene is “an ironically critical examination of marriage, conventional female stereotypes, and the social values connected to marriage as an expected, accepted, and defining source of female identity” (223). While Edith represents the “angel in the house,” Margaret’s mother conforms to the female stereotype of a “child wife,” for she is entirely dependent on her husband and physically and emotionally fragile. Mr. Hale’s fear of telling his wife his decision to move and the fact that he makes this decision without consulting her whatsoever proves their marriage to be far from the companionate ideal. Depicting the faults in these marriages, Gaskell critiques her society’s view of marriage as a social obligation that enforces traditional gender roles.

Margaret rejects this view of marriage by refusing two marriage proposals, proving her independence from social expectations. First, Margaret rejects Mr. Lennox’s proposal. Such a union would certainly be viewed as wise and beneficial since Mr. Lennox is closely related to her family and able to provide financially for Margaret; however, Margaret is of her own mind. She views Mr. Lennox as no more than a friend and is not interested in marrying without love. Had she married Mr. Lennox, Margaret would most surely have lost her own will. By refusing to

marry him (even at the end of the novel when she fears she will never marry), Margaret proves that maintaining her own independence outweighs social pressures and incentives to marry. The same can be said for Margaret's refusal of Mr. Thornton's proposal. Margaret maintains her own opinion of Thornton, despite the fact that her judgments of him go against his reputation in the town and her own father's high opinion of him; she remains uninfluenced by her patriarchal society's valuation of Thornton as a worthy and eligible bachelor. While Thornton treats Margaret with respect, it seems unlikely their marriage would put them on equal terms. Thornton values Margaret's thoughts and opinions, even when they disagree with his own, he argues with her rather than simply dismissing her ideas, and he changes his actions and his decisions based on her influence. Thornton's treatment of Higgins, and his workers in general, is deeply influenced by Margaret, and it is notable that Margaret, as a woman, plays such a role in Thornton's business life. However, Thornton is master at the mill and, as such, is used to being in a position of authority and control. He hopes as he proposes that Margaret will "droop and flush, and flutter to his arms, as to her natural home and resting-place" (Gaskell 191). While Thornton certainly respects Margaret and views her as his moral superior, there is no clear indication at this point in the novel that Thornton would set aside traditional gender roles in marriage and view Margaret as his equal partner. Again, Margaret refuses to sacrifice her own will to marriage, and her refusal serves as a social protest against marriage without love and equality. As Fair claims, "Refusing Thornton's unexpected proposal and rejecting conformity to gender and class expectations, Margaret again privileges her emotions above the overt economic and social advantages a marriage to Thornton could provide" (224). In refusing Mr. Lennox and Mr. Thornton, both highly eligible bachelors, Margaret proves her ability to act counter-culturally and assert her own freedom.

In much the same way, Brontë critiques her society's views of marriage and proves Jane's ability to act outside of social expectations by rejecting two marriage proposals in the course of *Jane Eyre*. In rejecting St John's offer of marriage, Jane asserts her independence from St John's dominance and her society's rules and expectations. Rochester's opposite in many ways, St John is attractive, moral, and very self-controlled, acting based on rational thought rather than emotional desires. However, like Rochester, St John is an authority figure to Jane and is very controlling. As St John saved Jane from his doorstep and gave her a job at the Morton school, Jane is indebted to him. She desires to please him, but she fears that in order to do so she must disown herself (Brontë, *Eyre* 565). Despite the power St John exerts over Jane, she repeatedly refuses his demand of marriage. While St John's view of marriage is not out of line with his society, Jane believes marriage should only exist in the context of love. St John proposes to Jane not out of love but out of spiritual duty, telling her, "I claim you—not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service" (Brontë, *Eyre* 571). This concept of marriage is not based on a companionate model, but rather the view of marriage as a contract. St John defines a wife as "the sole helpmeet I can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely in death" (Brontë, *Eyre* 576). Jane knows that he "prizes" her "as a soldier would a good weapon, and that is all" (Brontë, *Eyre* 574). She shudders at this conduct book ideal of a wife as helpmate, possession, and useful tool, insisting that marriage should never exist for this purpose alone. Jane rejects his offer, and this view of marriage, claiming, "we did not love each other as man and wife should: and therefore it inferred we ought not to marry" (Brontë, *Eyre* 575). While women in Jane's society were expected to marry and view marriage as highly desirable, Jane implies that she would rather never marry than marry without love. She claims, "if I am not formed for love, it

follows that I am not formed for marriage” (Brontë, *Eyre* 590). Such a view was certainly countercultural and defines Jane as independent from the views of her society.

In addition to Jane’s rejection of St John’s loveless proposal, Brontë critiques her society’s understanding of marriage as a contractual relationship through Rochester and Bertha’s marriage. Marrying for money and social status, Rochester claims, “Oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act! – an agony of inner contempt masters me. I never loved, never esteemed, I did not even know her (Brontë, *Eyre* 430). Rochester values Bertha based on her fortune, beauty, and social position, but he does not take the time to get to know her character. After his marriage, he finds “her nature wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me, her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher” (Brontë, *Eyre* 431). She is “intemperate and unchaste” and puts Rochester through “hideous and degrading agonies” (Brontë, *Eyre* 432). Even before Bertha is insane, she is not a desirable wife. In depicting the utter failure and horror of this marriage, Brontë warns against marrying for selfish motives and without love and mutual respect. Bertha is quite literally the madwoman in the attic, and much has been said regarding how Bertha contrasts or even represents Jane.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Bertha sheds light on Jane’s character and struggles; moreover, Bertha’s marriage to Rochester sheds light on Jane’s subsequent marriage. Through Bertha’s monstrous marriage, Brontë stresses the necessity of a new model of marriage, as represented in Rochester’s marriage to Jane.

Brontë further critiques the model of marriage as a contractual relationship in Rochester’s flirtation with Blanche Ingram. Jane thinks that Rochester will marry Miss Ingram “for family,

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Madwoman in the Attic* for Gilbert and Gubar’s understanding that Bertha is “Jane’s truest and darkest double,” representing suppressed anger and confinement (360).

perhaps political reasons; because her rank and connections suited him” (Brontë, *Eyre* 259). Certainly, Rochester and Miss Ingram are well matched for marriage, and their social circles believe a proposal is imminent. However, to marry Miss Ingram would be to repeat his marriage to Miss Mason, a contractual marriage based on economic and social motivations, and devoid of love. While Jane firmly believes love is the only basis for marriage, she claims “the longer I considered the position, education, etc, of the parties, the less I felt justified in judging and blaming either him or Miss Ingram for acting in conformity to ideas and principles instilled into them, doubtless, from their childhood” (Brontë, *Eyre* 261). Jane recognizes the social pressures to marry for money and power are deeply engrained. While marriage based on such motivations was socially acceptable and expected, Rochester rejects Miss Ingram for he has learned that such incentives do not make for a happy marriage.

In addition to critiquing contractual marriages, Brontë also critiques relationships based purely on passion in Rochester’s time spent with “the companionship of mistresses” (Brontë, *Eyre* 439). These relationships are based on lust and desire, rather than love and respect; they do not last because there is no equality between the partners. Rochester tells Jane, “Hiring a mistress is the next worst thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading. I now hate the recollection of the time I passed with Céline, Giacinta, and Clara” (Brontë, *Eyre* 439). Hiring women to fulfill his sexual needs, Rochester conforms to a patriarchal society in which women are viewed as commodities. Brontë points out that such a mentality is degrading to both women *and* men. Through Rochester’s failed marriage and relationships, Brontë proves the value of equality between partners. Rochester must reject these relationships for a new alternative and overcome his gender biases in order to view Jane as an equal. By portraying the shortcomings of relationships based

on patriarchal ideology, Brontë sets the stage for a new relationship based on gender equality and love.

While Jane deeply loves Mr. Rochester, she cannot marry him as an equal until they are reunited at Ferndean. While a certain level of equality exists initially in Rochester and Jane's relationship, they are not truly equals prior to the close of the novel. As Jane's master, Rochester is in a position of authority, and he is controlling and accustomed to giving orders that are to be obeyed without question. As long as she remains a governess in his house, she is financially dependent on him and under his command. He is also more experienced than Jane; he has traveled the world and has a complicated sexual past while Jane has never traveled and has no experience with men. In addition, he is socially superior to Jane. While it was public knowledge in Victorian England that many men might choose to take a governess as a mistress, it was highly unlikely that a governess would transcend the social class system to become a gentleman's wife. Jane recognizes the inequalities existing between them that prevent them from being equal matches in marriage. Angry with her feelings for a man out of her reach, Jane tells herself, "It does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her" (Brontë, *Eyre* 222).

Despite the social and economic inequalities existing between them, Jane and Rochester claim to be equals. Gilbert and Gubar state that "Jane's and Rochester's mutual sense of equality" begins upon their initial meeting when Rochester acknowledges Jane's power by remarking that he half believed she had bewitched his horse. Gilbert and Gubar point out that this remark shows Jane and Rochester to begin their relationship as "spiritual equals" (352-353). As they interact in conversation, Rochester further displays his perception of Jane not as a servant but an equal. He tells her, "The fact is, once for all, I don't wish to treat you like an

inferior...I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years difference in age and a century's advance in experience" (Brontë, *Eyre* 184). Jane and Rochester communicate openly and on equal grounds, so much so that Rochester forgets he is paying her a salary (Brontë, *Eyre* 186). Jane answers Rochester honestly, and Rochester shares his past with such openness that Victorian readers deemed it improper (Gilbert 353). Their mode of communication is so open that Jane claims, "The ease of his manner freed me from painful restraint; the friendly frankness...with which he treated me, drew me to him. I felt at times as if he were my relation rather than my master" (Brontë, *Eyre* 203). This openness seems to negate the master-servant dynamic. The equality generated by this open mode of communication is most clearly evidenced in the first proposal scene when Jane verbally claims equality with Rochester by saying, "I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!" (Brontë, *Eyre* 356). Here Jane claims spiritual equality with Rochester through her mode of communicating with him. Despite her lack of beauty, fortune, and social position, Rochester recognizes the legitimacy of Jane's claim, saying, "my bride is here... because my equal is here, and my likeness" (Brontë, *Eyre* 357). Rochester recognizes that only as his equal can Jane be his bride.

Although both Jane and Rochester verbally assert that they are equals, their gender biases prevent them from true equality following their engagement. As her perception of marriage is informed by her patriarchal society, Jane doubts Rochester's sincerity and believes his love for her will not last after marriage. She claims, "I suppose your love will effervesce in six months or less. I have observed in books written by men, that period assigned as the furthest to which a husband's ardor extends" (Brontë, *Eyre* 365). She goes on to say that many gentlemen once

married would “no doubt by their severity as husbands have made up for their softness as suitors; and so will you, I fear” (Brontë, *Eyre* 367). Jane’s cynical view of marriage clearly displays the inequalities between husband and wife that are inherent in her society. As Gilbert and Gubar state, “Though she loves Rochester the man, Jane has doubts about Rochester the husband even before she learns about Bertha. In her world, she senses, even the equality of love between true minds leads to the inequalities and minor despotisms of marriage” (256). Since husband and wife are not equals in nineteenth-century society, Jane fears that once married she and Rochester will no longer interact as equals.

Jane’s fears are justified when Rochester’s treatment of her during their courtship begins to conform to patriarchal gender roles. First, Rochester begins to praise Jane as if she were his “angel in the house.” Indeed, he calls Jane his “angel” and “comforter” (Brontë, *Eyre* 365). Jane resents this title, as it falsely identifies her as something she is not and can never be. She replies, “I am not an angel, and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself” (Brontë, *Eyre* 365). Later, she says, “I had rather be a *thing* than an angel” (Brontë, *Eyre* 368). Rather than an honest assessment of her values, Rochester’s praise is an empty echo of the conduct book ideal. In a similar speech, Rochester praises Jane for her beauty, calling her “truly pretty” and commenting on her “radiant hazel eyes” (Brontë, *Eyre* 363). Loving Jane despite her plain appearance before, Rochester now abandons honest communication for false flattery. In fact, Jane tells the reader, her eyes are green (Brontë, *Eyre* 363). This breakdown in honest communication is particularly troubling as Jane and Rochester’s claim as equals is founded on their previous honest communication.

Even more troubling, Rochester begins to treat Jane as a mistress, desiring to possess her rather than viewing her as his equal. Rochester lavishes gifts upon Jane, which she feels to be a

“degradation” as such treatment likens her to Rochester’s former mistresses. She tells him, “Do you remember what you said of Céline Varens? – of the diamonds, the cashmeres you gave her? I will not be your English Céline Varens” (Brontë, *Eyre* 377-379). Jane claims Rochester smiles at her as a sultan might a slave, and Rochester compares her to “the Grand Turk’s whole seraglio” (Brontë, *Eyre* 379). Such language equates Jane with an object of sexual pleasure rather than a spouse of equal value. Gilbert and Gubar state that after she accepts his proposal, Rochester begins to treat her “as an inferior, a plaything, a virginal possession” (255). Indeed, Rochester seems to view marriage as a means of binding Jane to himself and securing power over her. When Jane refuses to give up her position as governess (so as to maintain her sense of independence in the courtship), Rochester tells her, “It is your time now, little tyrant, but it will be mine presently; and when once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I’ll just – figuratively speaking – attach you to a chain” (Brontë, *Eyre* 381). As Cadwallader points out, Rochester’s language in these scenes “centers on images of imprisonment” (243). Such language proves Rochester’s inability to break from patriarchal gender stereotypes. As Rochester attempts to possess her, Jane maintains her independence by keeping her distance from him. She does so not in fear of his sexuality, as some critics have suggested, but to assert her own identity and her refusal to be objectified. As Gilbert and Gubar claim, Jane’s retreats “are political rather than sexual statements, attempts at finding emotional strength rather than expressions of weakness” (355). Jane seems to realize the danger she is in of losing her own identity and succumbing to the “angel in the house.” By refusing to submit to Rochester’s advances, she rejects Rochester’s gender assumptions and maintains her independence.

Rochester’s attempt to assert his power over Jane and Jane’s fight to maintain her autonomy is characteristic of gender power struggles. However, Jane does not bow to

Rochester's strength and sense of authority and become his mistress; instead, she flees him to avoid inevitable degradation and confinement. Certainly, this decision is based on the fact that Rochester is already married to the madwoman in the attic and bigamy is illegal in Victorian England. Yet even before Jane learns of Bertha Mason's existence, Rochester treats her as his mistress, and such treatment precludes a companionate marriage. If Jane and Rochester were not prevented from marrying at this point in the novel by Rochester's previous marriage, could they have a companionate marriage? Could both reject gender assumptions and enter into a marriage of equality? Based on the relationship that exists between Jane and Rochester after their first engagement, such a marriage seems impossible. Rather, both must undergo significant changes before they can join together at Ferndean as equals.

In fact, Gaskell and Brontë both suggest that certain changes must necessarily take place before a man and woman can enter into a companionate marriage based on gender equality. Not only must the man and woman change their perceptions of themselves, each other, and society, changes in circumstance must occur that empower the woman and reduce the man to a state of dependence. Separating their protagonists and lovers before a marriage can take place, both authors allow the opportunity for these necessary and drastic changes. Only then can they depict a new model of marriage that values equality between the sexes.

Margaret and Thornton must both soften their opinions before they can view each other as equals. Margaret initially describes Thornton to her mother as "nothing remarkable—not a gentleman, but that was hardly to be expected" (Gaskell 65), and later tells her father, "personally I don't like him at all" (Gaskell 88). Margaret believes Thornton to be socially inferior to her as a tradesman and is put off by his talk of money. Once her opinion is stubbornly formed, it takes the entire novel for her to fully change it. She explains her difficulty in accepting

Thornton as a gentleman to her father, saying, “He is the first specimen of a manufacturer—of a person engaged in trade—that I have ever the opportunity of studying, papa. He is my first olive: let me make a face while I swallow it. I know he is good of his kind, and by and by I shall like the kind, I rather think I am already beginning to do so” (Gaskell 165-166). Margaret realizes her own prejudices against Thornton are unjust, but it takes time for her to set aside her quickly formed judgments of him in order to see him as he is and claim him as her equal. Thornton, likewise, initially views Margaret in a negative light. After Margaret snubs his offered handshake as he departs one of their first meetings, Thornton thinks to himself, “A more proud, disagreeable girl I never saw. Even her great beauty is blotted out of one’s memory by her scornful ways” (Gaskell 86). However, with time, both come to see each other as equals. As previously discussed, Thornton comes to admire Margaret’s confidence and boldness in speech and action, and Margaret realizes her own misjudgments. She comes to appreciate Thornton’s hard work and strength and his role as master of the mill. Although she slowly begins to soften her opinion of Thornton throughout the course of the novel, Margaret does not realize her feelings for Thornton until she realizes she is “degraded and abased in Mr. Thornton’s sight” (Gaskell 279). Harman claims that this experience of being lowered in Thornton’s eyes “reduces Margaret’s excessive sense of moral superiority, eradicates her snobbishness (class and otherwise), and makes her able truly to connect with others” (372). Only when Margaret acknowledges her own faults and sees herself clearly can she see Thornton in a new light. Like Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, Margaret and Thornton both, in varying degrees, learn the errors of their past judgments, redefine the way they view themselves and each other, and come to love the other as an equal.

In addition to these changes in perspective, Margaret and Thornton experience drastic changes in circumstances before they come together at the end of the novel. On Mr. Bell’s death,

Margaret is the residuary legatee of two thousand pounds and forty thousand pounds in property in Milton (Gaskell 403). No longer financially dependent on others, Margaret is free to live as an independent woman and does not need to marry for financial security. Thornton, on the other hand, suffers from the strike and the fall of the market and is in financial ruin. While once “his name was to be regarded, and his wishes to be fulfilled, and his word pass like gold” (Gaskell 409), Thornton now has given up his position as master and is seeking for employment (420). Not only has Thornton lost his fortune, he has lost his identity as master and his respectable name. It is in this state that Margaret and Thornton meet at the end of the novel, and Margaret offers Thornton a loan of eighteen thousand and fifty-seven pounds to continue his work at Marlborough Mills (Gaskell 424). Margaret takes on a masculine role in instigating this business transaction, which in turn instigates the implied marriage proposal that follows. While Margaret “was most anxious to have it all looked upon in the light of a mere business arrangement, in which the principal advantage would be on her side” (Gaskell 424), her proposal is an offer to save Thornton. She is clearly in the position of power in their relationship. Fair claims that “although Margaret and Thornton have until this point been restricted by conventional courting assumptions... the shift in economic and social status redefines the nature of their relationship and imbues Margaret with power” (225). She asserts her independence in choosing how to spend her money, and Thornton is indebted to her as she is his landlord, his financial lender, and, ultimately, his savior. Deirdre David claims that Thornton “loses something of his conventional masculine identity in his financial humiliation and acceptance of a woman’s inheritance as restitution” (39). Certainly, gender roles are reversed as Margaret assumes the masculine role of provider and Thornton becomes the dependant.

Similar to Margaret, Jane has achieved a new state of independence by the time she is reunited with Rochester at Ferndean, through her experience surviving on her own and her inheritance from her uncle. Jane decisively asserts her own free will in her choice to leave Rochester rather than become his mistress. Her will and strict sense of morality outweigh Rochester's desires and demands, thereby proving her own independence and strength. In this act, Jane defies gender stereotypes as she does not conform to the submitting wife or mistress. Furthermore, Jane proves that she is not dependent on Rochester's physical or financial protection. Leaving Thornfield with only a few possessions and little money, Jane struggles but ultimately survives. Although this experience causes her great suffering and nearly kills her, it also liberates her. Having lived on her own, Jane freely chooses to return to Rochester. This decision is not based on fear or dependence, but Jane's own desire and will. Jane, not Rochester, is in the position of power; it is she that controls the future of their relationship and she that orchestrates their reunion and marriage.

By the time she returns to Thornfield and Rochester, Jane is not only independent in spirit but financially independent as well. Having inherited twenty thousand pounds from her uncle, Jane is fully capable of supporting herself for the rest of her life. This is significant as many women during this time were dependent on marriage as a means of securing financial protection. Without the means to support themselves, women were induced to marry based on a man's economic worth. While Margaret is set free through her inheritance, she was always provided for financially and never in a position of desperate need. On the other hand, Jane, as an orphan, has always struggled to survive on her own and knows the suffering of being penniless and hungry. Such experience would be prime motivation to marry for money. However, Jane does not succumb to this temptation. Championing a new model of marriage, Caird writes that in "order

for a woman to enter into a free marriage, the woman must be economically independent so that she is not induced to marry for money” (1602). As long as money is a heavy incentive for marriage, a woman cannot freely choose a husband. Once these financial obstacles that stand in the way of a companionate marriage are removed, Jane can return to Rochester as a free woman. Armstrong claims that “it is the endowment from Jane’s wealthy uncle that makes her happiness possible” (47). Indeed, this element is essential to Jane achieving a companionate marriage with Rochester. Only when she is financially free can Jane independently choose to marry Rochester and do so as an equal.

While Jane has become more independent in this time of separation, Rochester has become more dependent. In Jane’s absence, Rochester has lost Thornfield to a fire and lives in Ferndean, a place he previously did not see fit to house Bertha. What is more, he is stricken blind and lame in one arm in the fire. These physical handicaps make Rochester dependent on a caretaker; he cannot survive on his own. When Jane reenters his life, he needs her in a way he did not before. Although Jane saves Rochester repeatedly throughout the novel (in their initial meeting when he is thrown from his horse and later from his burning bed), at Ferndean Rochester is in need of an emotional savoir as well as a physical savior. Physically handicapped and deeply depressed, Rochester is no longer Jane’s master. Jane tells him, “I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector” (Brontë, *Eyre* 633). Gender roles are reversed as Jane becomes the giver and protector, literally leading Rochester and serving as his eyes and his prop.

Some critics claim that these changes are irrelevant to the subsequent marriage. James Phillips states, “Does he need to be physically humbled so that he and Jane can marry as equals?”

Against such an interpretation it is enough to observe that it was not Rochester's physical superiority that earlier constituted the obstacle to their union" (209). However, Rochester's physical dependence is necessary in order to combat the patriarchal ideology so deeply engrained in him that he treats Jane as his mistress following their first proposal. In order for Rochester to truly view Jane as an equal, these power relations must be upset. Margaret and Thornton and Rochester and Jane can only achieve companionate marriages at the end of these novels because of the changes both couples have undergone in their time apart. They are equals at the close of these novels only because Margaret and Jane have become more independent and Thornton and Rochester have become more dependent.

Other critics believe Rochester's physical dependence at the close of the novel precludes a companionate marriage, arguing that Rochester's condition raises Jane to the position of his superior and therefore the two cannot marry as equals. Madeleine Wood claims, "The novel ends with a potentially distorted image of love: Jane's marriage is based not on spiritual equality but on Rochester's dependence" (108). Indeed, Rochester's blindness places him under the care and control of Jane. Wood argues that Jane takes on a maternal role in tending to Rochester's needs (108), which suggests an even greater disparity in the power relations between the two.

Armstrong also argues that such conditions prevent the two from being viewed as equals at the close of the novel. She states, "many readers have seen Jane's ascendancy in the final chapters, not as a mutually enhancing exchange, but as the symbolic castration of Rochester" (53). These critics claim that by taking away Rochester's power and making him subservient to Jane, Brontë prevents the two from entering into a companionate marriage.

However, these critics fail to consider that this exchange of power must occur in order to balance out a culture in which men held a position of absolute power over women. Gaskell and

Brontë attempt to level the playing field between women and men, and doing so requires drastic changes in their characters' perspectives and circumstances. Only in his physically and emotionally dependent state can Rochester be Jane's equal. In this way, Gaskell's and Brontë's depictions of a companionate marriage serve as strong critiques against their patriarchal culture. Armstrong claims, "male and female so clearly represent competing forces in the mid-century novels that a contractual exchange empowers the female at the expense of exhausting the male" (55). Gaskell and Brontë suggests the only companionate marriage that can exist in nineteenth-century society is one in which the woman is raised to a heightened state of complete independence and the man is lowered to a varying state of dependence.

While both authors depict their female protagonist's financial ascendancy as necessary for a companionate marriage to exist, Brontë emphasizes Rochester's fall to dependence as he has not only lost a good bit of his fortune but is also severely physically handicapped. Although Rochester eventually recovers sight in one eye and is no longer as physically dependent on Jane, such drastic conditions must exist initially in order for Jane and Rochester to interact as equals. By implying drastic changes must take place, both authors suggest companionate marriage is an unlikely conclusion. Jane's inheritance and Rochester's loss of sight are so drastic that they cast doubt on the likelihood of an equal marriage existing under normal circumstances. Although Gaskell portrays less extreme circumstances in Margaret's inheritance and Thornton's financial ruin, this reversal of gender roles and power still seems improbable. The conclusions of both novels suggest that while a companionate marriage is possible, it is highly unlikely.

Moreover, Brontë suggests that a companionate marriage not only requires inverted gender roles and power relations, but also a removal from society. Jane and Rochester can exist as equals only outside of their society. Gilbert and Gubar note that:

Ferndean is notably stripped and asocial, so that the physical isolation of the lovers suggests their spiritual isolation in a world where such equalitarian marriages as theirs are rare, if not impossible. True minds, Charlotte Brontë seems to be saying, must withdraw into a remote forest, a wilderness even, in order to circumvent the strictures of a hierarchal society (369).

By isolating Jane and Rochester from society, Brontë suggests a companionate model of marriage is not probable within her society and generates doubt as to whether this model is truly a viable option. Wood argues that “Brontë’s decision to detach her protagonists from both social and familial structures means that their marriage becomes disturbingly utopian... an impossible ‘no-place,’ rather than idyllic” (109). In addition to presenting companionate marriage as an improbable ideal, Brontë confines companionate marriage to the private sphere at a time when the marriage debate was bringing marriage into the public eye. Gilbert and Gubar ask, “Does Brontë’s rebellious feminism—that ‘irreligious’ dissatisfaction with the social order ...—comprise itself in this withdrawal?” (369) While reformers believed making marriage more public would generate reforms and greater rights for women, Brontë suggests instead a removal from society as the only solution. The public sphere remains decidedly masculine, prohibited to women, whether married or not.

Adding further doubt to the reality of such a marriage, Gaskell and Brontë do not take the reader past the point of marriage. Brontë sums up Jane and Rochester’s marital bliss in a brief summary of their life together told from Jane’s perspective. Jane tells the reader in vague terms that the past ten years of marriage have served to draw the two lovers closer together and that “no woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am” (Brontë, *Eyre* 640). The reader is unable to judge the marriage, however, as Jane’s claims are the only source of information. Like Austen in

*Pride and Prejudice*, Brontë gives little insight into what follows the marriage proposal, neglecting to depict the actual experience of marriage. Not only does *North and South* not take the reader past the proposal, the proposal is never explicitly stated but only implied. While the conventional marriage ending leaves the reader at the point of the marriage ceremony, *North and South* ends in the middle of the proposal scene. The reader is left to assume Margaret and Thornton's marriage. By leaving the ending a bit ambiguous, Gaskell suggests that marriage is the obvious ending to the story but it cannot be fully depicted or defined. While both novels suggest an optimistic, happily-ever-after ending for their protagonists, the novels' conclusions generate doubt as to whether such an ending can exist in reality, or even in fiction itself.

While Margaret and Jane both reject marriage proposals and prove their independence from traditional gender expectations, their rebellion is not against marriage itself, but rather the social expectations of marriage. As Fair claims, Margaret's rebellion "is not against marriage as much as it is against assumptions that material and social advantages are acceptable or even adequate reasons for a woman's acquiescence" (223). Margaret views marriage as highly desirable and fulfilling. Towards the end of the novel, Margaret claims, "the hopes of womanhood have closed for me—for I shall never marry" (Gaskell 315). In this statement, Margaret acknowledges marriage to be the desire of women and suggests womanhood is only fully achieved through marriage. She does see any other alternative to marriage than to live a simple life with her cousin. She claims, "Only as I have neither husband nor child to give me natural duties, I must make myself some, in addition to ordering my gowns" (Gaskell 407). Although Margaret makes this statement to Edith and it is underlined with sarcasm, Margaret claims wifehood and motherhood as her natural duties. Since she can have neither without marriage, Margaret implies a single life is lacking. Jane, too, finds her purpose in serving Mr.

Rochester. Her sense of duty is blissfully heightened by the fact that he is so very dependent on her to be his “vision” and his “right hand” (Brontë, *Eyre* 640). While Jane refuses to marry for duty alone, as clearly evidenced in her refusal of St John, her duties of love to Mr. Rochester prove to be the height of her happiness and the ultimate fulfillment of her purpose as a woman. For both Jane and Margaret, wifedom is the ambition of womanhood. Once this union with man is achieved, the woman’s story can happily end. Depicting marriage as the only happy ending for their protagonists, Gaskell and Brontë refuse to write beyond a marriage ending.

Austen, Gaskell, and Brontë each challenge their patriarchal society’s view of women and marriage. They critique the conduct book ideal and present a new model of female desirability that overturns gender assumptions. They also critique their society’s view of marriage and present a new marriage ideal, a companionate relationship based on equality and love. Each author acknowledges that certain changes must take place in order for this type of relationship to exist in a society rooted in patriarchy. While Austen suggests both husband and wife must reject prejudices and gender assumptions, Gaskell and Brontë suggest more extreme changes are necessary in order for women and men to marry as equals. Implying that Austen’s marriage ending is much too simplistic to be realistic, Gaskell and Brontë argue that circumstances must be radically altered for a man and woman to stand as equals. Gender roles must be inverted, and power must decidedly shift from the man to the woman. In portraying the conditions necessary for a companionate marriage, both *North and South* and *Jane Eyre* raise doubts as to whether gender equality is possible in a patriarchal society. Suggesting that a companionate marriage can exist only in fictionalized worlds, both novels conclude with an untraditional marriage, but still succumb to many of the same patriarchal assumptions found in a traditional marriage ending.

While Gaskell's and Brontë's novels constitute more radical breaks from society than Austen's, their marriage endings still conform to patriarchal assumptions. Both authors redefine women's roles in marriage and portray a positive (if unlikely) alternative to oppressive marriages, but they do not present their female protagonists with an alternative to marriage itself. The marriage ending seems inevitable, much as marriage was viewed as the inevitable fate for women during this time. Consequently, while they suggest greater freedom for women, that freedom is limited. Gilbert and Gubar claim that Brontë's ending suggests "that she herself was unable to clearly envision viable solutions to the problem of patriarchal oppression... Brontë grasps for freedom in spite of social restraints, but she never achieves such freedom" (369). Indeed, like Austen, Gaskell and Brontë do not look beyond the traditional marriage ending to envision greater modes of female freedom that go beyond marriage; instead, they choose to reform marriage values in order to grant women greater freedoms within the institution. These novels suggest that until greater social changes take place, Margaret's and Jane's story will always end in marriage; their freedom then depends on the form of that marriage relationship. While challenging their society's views of both women and marriage, in the end, these novels exist as compromises between traditional gender stereotypes and gender liberation. As Fair claims, Gaskell "rejects working from a position of destructive confrontation, opting instead for a subtler approach of negotiation rather than open conflict" (219). Indeed, both Gaskell and Brontë attempt to subtly negotiate women's equality, pushing against oppressive ideologies with greater force than Austen, but stopping short of completely rewriting the traditional marriage ending.

### CHAPTER 3: Revising *Jane Eyre*: Sacrificing Marriage for Independence in Brontë's *Villette*

In *Villette*, Brontë revises the conclusions reached in *Jane Eyre*, insisting on a more realistic depiction of the controlling influence of patriarchy on her society. While in *Jane Eyre* Brontë challenges her society by depicting a strong protagonist who redefines female desirability, in *Villette*, Brontë challenges her society by depicting an entrapped protagonist who suffers due to her refusal to conform to her society's models of womanhood. Certainly not as optimistic as Jane's success in overcoming patriarchal limitations, Lucy's struggle depicts the harsh reality for women living in an oppressive society. *Villette* suggests that, in reality, breaking from traditional gender stereotypes leads to hardships and suffering, while society rewards conformity. The effects of patriarchy are far reaching, not only shaping women's roles and experiences but also their identities. In contrast to Ginervra and Paulina, who sacrifice their selfhood in order to passively conform to gender stereotypes, Lucy refuses to conform to traditional models of female desirability. As a result, Lucy's identity is threatened, as she is unable to fully exist within society.

Brontë paints a dark picture for women in her society, but she does offer hope for change. Lucy suffers throughout the majority of the novel, but she ultimately overcomes the limitations of her society and is able to exist free and independent. Lucy's happy ending stands in sharp contrast to Jane's. While Jane's story ends in marriage, Lucy's story ends in a tragic death. Again, Brontë rejects her previous optimism in order to depict a more accurate reality. As in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë does question companionate marriage as an alternative to female oppression in Lucy's relationship with Emanuel, and, like Jane and Rochester, Lucy and Emanuel both undergo a series of changes which allow them to interact on a plane of greater equality. However, these changes are subtler than those in *Jane Eyre*. Lucy and Emanuel both awaken buried

passions and exert a positive influence over one another, Emanuel's influence causing Lucy to be more assertive and Lucy's influence causing Emanuel to soften, but these changes are not drastic enough to create true equality. While Emanuel plays a key role in Lucy's liberation, Brontë suggests true equality between the sexes is too idealistic for her realistic novel and instead presents a new alternative to marriage: female independence. Although Lucy does not marry, she is successful, free, and happy. By reversing the marriage ending in the tragic death of Emanuel, Brontë offers Lucy new life and presents women with a more realistic alternative than companionate marriage to the problem of female oppression.

While *Pride and Prejudice*, *North and South*, and *Jane Eyre* redefine female desirability so that their independent female protagonists can remain themselves and remain desirable, in *Villette*, Brontë rejects the system of female desirability entirely. Such a system is socially constructed and oppressive. Rather than attempting to redefine the system, Brontë shows the system's flaws. Acknowledging that such a system rewards women who conform to gender stereotypes, Brontë portrays the happy marriages of Ginervra and Paulina. While both of these women do achieve happiness in traditional feminine roles, they sacrifice their sense of self and their independence. Consequently, they are unable to exist actively and independently in society, instead passively conforming to masculine expectations. Lucy, on the other hand, refuses to conform to the models of female desirability portrayed in the novel and, therefore, does not fit into her society; she is an outcast, undesirable, and overlooked. While Elizabeth, Margaret, and Jane display unconventional qualities that are valued by men and result in several marriage proposals, Lucy is not viewed as desirable by the characters in the novel (with the sole exception of Emanuel) or, for the most part, the reader. Brontë portrays Lucy's story much more realistically than Jane's, implying that *Jane Eyre*, as well as *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and*

*South*, was overly optimistic in subverting gender stereotypes. Rather than redefining female desirability, *Villette* shows how destructive this patriarchal system of value is to women.

Lucy clearly demonstrates her refusal to conform to gender stereotypes when she visits the museum and contemplates the various paintings depicting female desirability. The first, titled “Cleopatra,” depicts a voluptuous, sensual queen reclining on a couch; the others, a set of four titled “La vie d’une femme” depict a maiden, wife, young mother, and widow. Lucy is impressed by neither depiction of womanhood, calling the first “a very ugly picture” and the others “flat, dead, pale, and formal” (Brontë, *Villette* 225-226). Lucy does not attempt to conform to either role, neither the sensual goddess nor the dutiful angel, claiming that both are “bad in their way” and recognizing in each the patriarchal expectations forced onto women. “Of course,” Gilbert and Gubar state, “the paintings are meant to examine the ridiculous roles men assign women” (420). As no woman can live up to either standard, the paintings represent the impossible ideal to which women are expected to conform.

While Lucy recognizes both models of female desirability as unattractive and unachievable, Brontë depicts two women who conform to these contrasting gender stereotypes. Ginervra and Paulina are both products of their society. Ginervra, like Cleopatra, is the model of passion and beauty without substance. She is sensual and self-indulgent; she sees men as play things and shows no qualms in using men to fulfill her desires. Desirability is Ginervra’s currency, and Ginervra plays into the patriarchal system in order to achieve a beneficial marriage. When she first meets Lucy, Ginervra tells her that she and her sisters are “by and by...to marry—rather elderly gentlemen, I suppose, with cash” (Brontë, *Villette* 60). Believing marriage is her only means of supporting herself and obtaining happiness, Ginervra exchanges her independence, and her very identity, in order to fit herself to the masculine gaze and thereby

raise her value. Forfeiting her selfhood in order to conform to a desirable role, Ginervra clearly depicts masculine society's ability to shape female identity.

In fact, Ginervra is defined by the masculine gaze throughout the novel; Dr. Bretton and Alfred de Hamal each see her as she represents their differing conceptions of the female ideal. While Ginervra is certainly no "angel in the house," Dr. Bretton chooses to see her as such, perceiving Ginervra as he wishes her to be and thereby trading reality for his patriarchal ideal. Rather than loving Ginervra, Dr. Bretton loves his conception of Ginervra, praising her almost solely for her physical beauty and innocence. He calls Lucy's "beautiful, young friend...a simple, innocent, girlish fairy" (Brontë, *Villette* 167) and cannot imagine such a lovely girl, "so spotless, so good, so unspeakably beautiful" as capable of illusions (138). As Dr. Bretton's conception is mostly based on Ginervra's physical appearance and not her actions, he blindly pictures her as an "angel in the house" when she is in fact merely mortal. He calls her "graceful angel" (Brontë, *Villette* 167), "my divinity," and "the angel of my career" (244). Yet once he learns that she is not as innocent as he believed, he gives her up, telling Lucy, "Ginervra is neither a pure angel nor a pure-minded woman" (245). Dr. Bretton projects the conduct book ideal of femininity onto Ginervra and is disappointed when she does not live up to this impossible standard. Alfred de Hamal, on the other hand, is attracted to Ginervra for her sensual beauty. It is not surprising that Lucy sees de Hamal gazing upon the Cleopatra painting with much admiration. While Dr. Bretton looks upon Cleopatra with a cool eye, implying to Lucy that it is not in his taste, de Hamal is "exceedingly taken with this dusk and portly Venus of the Nile" (Brontë, *Villette* 230). Although their ideals are very different, both men view women as stereotypes, exaggerating the opposite extremes of feminine desirability.

While Ginervra attempts to embody the Cleopatra ideal, Paulina certainly represents the “La vie d’une femme” paintings. Conforming fully to the “angel in the house,” Paulina is the model of submission and tradition. Her role is to obey and serve, which she does wholeheartedly throughout the novel, initially under the rule of her father, Mr. Home, and later under her friend and then husband, Dr. Bretton. Paulina fully conforms to the selfless, passive conduct book ideal as she devotes herself entirely to the man in her life. As a result, Paulina can only exist through a man, for her identity is dependent on her relationship to men, as a daughter and later a wife. Lucy notes Paulina’s selfless devotion to her father is replaced in his absence with a selfless devotion to Graham, the young Dr. Bretton, and Lucy claims, “one would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another: now that her father was taken from her, she nestled to Graham, and seemed to feel by his feelings: to exist in his existence” (Brontë, *Villette* 26). This dependence negates Paulina’s selfhood; she is an object of possession, belonging first to her father and then to her husband. When he learns that Dr. Bretton intends to marry his daughter, Mr. Home calls it a “robbery” of “my little treasure” (Brontë, *Villette* 487). Dr. Bretton acknowledges Mr. Home’s ownership of Paulina, claiming “I did truly regard you as the possessor of the most valuable thing the world owns for me” (Brontë, *Villette* 494). Both men commodify Paulina, valuing her as a treasure they desire to possess, and she passively conforms to this role, belonging to, defined by, and completely dependent on men.

Representing contrasting models of female desirability, Ginervra and Paulina conform to gender stereotypes and are properly rewarded. While in *Jane Eyre* Brontë shows the failure of traditional models of marriage, rejecting these models for a new ideal, in *Villette*, Ginervra and Paulina both find happiness in their conventional marriages. Ginervra and Alfred de Hamal’s

marriage is contractual, as both marry to fill their own, selfish desires. Ginervra is attracted to the young, handsome de Hamal, as he is attracted to the sensuous, beautiful Ginervra. She marries him based on this physical attraction, his title, and, as she tells Lucy, “partly to spite that minx, Paulina, and that bear, Dr. John” (Brontë, *Villette* 537). Although her reasons for marriage are based on lust and personal gain, Ginervra does not suffer negative consequences from her selfish elopement. Lucy states, “The reader will no doubt expect to hear that she came finally to bitter expiation of her youthful levities” (Brontë, *Villette* 539); however, Lucy goes on to say that in fact Ginervra suffers “as little as any human being I have ever seen” (540). John Maynard points out that the “reader who looks for simple moral judgments to be enacted by the plot” will be disappointed (169). Brontë does not portray Ginervra’s marriage to de Hamal as a tragic failure; instead, she portrays the realistic outcome of a socially acceptable marriage.

Likewise, the traditional marriage of Dr. Bretton and Paulina ends in happiness. Although there is most certainly affection on both sides, Paulina’s marriage to Dr. Bretton is not one of equality but subordination. Paulina passively conforms to the traditional ideal of wifedom, and, like Ginervra, Paulina achieves happiness as a result of her conformity. Lucy claims, “Some real lives do... actually anticipate the happiness of heaven... there are some human beings so born, so reared, so guided from a soft cradle to a calm and late grave, that no excessive suffering penetrates their lot, and no tempestuous blackness overcasts their journey” (Brontë, *Villette* 494-495). Born, reared, and guided by her society, Paulina is duly rewarded with a happy marriage. In both of these marriages, Brontë portrays her reality, a reality in which society rewards adherence to social constructs of gender. Although Brontë describes Ginervra’s and Paulina’s happiness, she does not advocate conformity and traditional marriage. Rather, she questions whether this happiness is worth the sacrifice of one’s identity and personal autonomy. Margaret

Lenta points out that such happiness is “contentment which suspends thought” (430). Indeed, Ginervra and Paulina both exchange their free thought for passive conformity. While these women gain socially acceptable modes of happiness, in the process they forfeit their independence and their selfhood.

Lucy, on the other hand, refuses to forfeit her identity, rejecting conformity as an acceptable means of gaining happiness. While Ginervra and Paulina are rewarded for their adherence to social conventions, Lucy suffers throughout the majority of the novel. Lucy’s refusal to conform threatens her happiness and, in many ways, her very existence, as she is unable to actively participate in society. In fact, many critics find Lucy to be passive and weak. Gilbert and Gubar describe Lucy as “silent, invisible, at best an inoffensive shadow” (400). Indeed, Lucy is unable to act and speak without fear. She considers herself unworthy of happiness, and is extremely private, to the point of existing almost entirely within herself. She says, “I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I could feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical; about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead” (Brontë, *Villette* 120-121). Seeing no hope for her future, Lucy represses her feelings, hiding her thoughts and emotions from those around her, the reader, and, at times, even herself. As a result, she suffers silently, even to the point of having a mental breakdown when left alone at the school during a holiday.

Lucy’s repression and silent suffering throughout the majority of the novel is a direct result of her refusal to conform to her society. She is not inherently weak; in fact, Lucy shows unconventional strength in several instances throughout the course of the novel. Gretchen Braun notes that Lucy’s story begins not with “the novelistic convention of entry into the marriage market,” but rather her entry into the labor market (205). Forced to make her own way in the

world, Lucy supports herself financially, surviving without the aid of others. When Mr. Home charitably offers Lucy a role as Paulina's companion, a more socially acceptable and lucrative position than Lucy's teaching position, Lucy refuses, thinking, "Rather than being a companion, I would have made shirts, and starved. I was no bright lady's shadow" (Brontë, *Villette* 337). This refusal proves Lucy's desire for independence and, as Lenta points out, proves Lucy's ability to defy "her society, which holds that comfortable dependence must always be preferred by a woman to gainful employment" (427). In addition to supporting herself financially, Lucy proves her independence by not allowing others to influence her way of thinking. Lucy holds strong opinions, although she rarely speaks them, which often contradict the ideas of those around her. She openly criticizes Ginervra, occasionally challenges Dr. Bretton's perception of Ginervra, and silently ignores Madame Beck's directions. Lucy never wavers in her Protestant faith, despite living in Catholic Villette, and Lucy frequently quarrels with Paul Emanuel, despite the fear and intimidation he inspires in his students. While not as outspoken as Elizabeth, Margaret, or Jane, Lucy is strong and stubborn, refusing to conform to the expectations of others.

Lucy's repression and suffering, then, is not a result of a character flaw, but instead the result of an oppressive society. *Villette* suggests that women who do not fit into man-made molds are unable to fully exist. Kate Millett claims that Lucy "is no one, because she lacks any trait that might render her visible: beauty, money, conformity" (140). Conform or disappear, society tells her. Ruth Robbins agrees, arguing that Lucy is invisible because she is not recognized by her masculine society as desirable. Robbins claims "Lucy sees herself as the object of no-one's desire and understands that she has no value as a subject as a consequence" (217). Unable to fit herself to the masculine gaze, Lucy remains unseen and therefore without value. This suggests there is no other value system within patriarchy for acceptable femininity outside of being seen

and approved by men. Furthermore, Lucy is unable to see herself outside of this system of value, thereby making her invisible even to her own gaze. Perhaps this is why Lucy dissembles and disguises herself to not only those around her, but also the reader and herself. Unable to fully exist outside of society and unwilling to conform, Lucy is in danger of disappearing entirely. Braun states, “both Lucy’s inability or unwillingness to assert herself and her withholding and misdirection as narrator are indicative of her socioeconomic subjugation” (195). Lucy’s repression is a response to her society that insists upon women conforming to gender stereotypes; therefore, Brontë’s depiction of Lucy suggests Brontë’s disparaging view of her patriarchal society. While Gilbert and Gubar call Lucy a “progressive deterioration” from Brontë’s previous protagonists, including Jane Eyre (400), in fact, Lucy is a more realistic depiction of the hardships women endure in challenging patriarchy.

While Brontë certainly portrays the difficulties facing women in an oppressive society, she does offer some hope for female liberation. Throughout the course of the novel, Brontë questions whether equality in marriage can be a viable alternative to female oppression. Initially, Lucy and Emanuel’s relationship seems to suggest the possibility of companionate marriage. As in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *North and South*, Lucy and Emanuel both change in order for their relationship to work, which leads to greater equality between them. While Lucy gains independence as she learns to stand up to Emanuel and defy him, she transforms Emanuel from a harsh dictator to a softened lover. Lucy’s perception of Emanuel changes drastically throughout the course of the novel, and both experience emotions and passion they have long repressed. These changes instigate a new sense of equality between Lucy and Emanuel, which at first seems to suggest a companionate marriage as the novel’s likely conclusion. However, the changes the two undergo are not drastic enough to create true equality in marriage.

As Emanuel and Lucy's relationship develops, Emanuel causes Lucy to be more active and assertive. This is most clearly evidence when he persuades Lucy to participate in the school theater performance, which Gilbert and Gubar claim to be the "principal sign of Lucy's desire to exist actively" (413) Emanuel gives Lucy little choice in the matter, but Lucy's acceptance of the role proves her strength and her ability to enter into the public sphere. Lucy further proves her strength in her refusal to don the costume given to her. She says, "To be dressed like a man did not please...No. I would keep my own dress; come what might. M. Paul might storm, might rage: I would keep my own dress" (Brontë, *Villette* 153). Lucy is resolute, and does not submit her will to Emanuel's instruction, proving her ability to stand up to Emanuel. Furthermore, this act has definite gender dimensions, as Lucy refuses to dress like a man and therefore take on a masculine identity, even in the imaginary realm of the stage. Lucy maintains her own, separate identity, and, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, "by refusing to dress completely like a man onstage and by choosing only certain items to signify her male character, Lucy makes the part her own" (413). As Lucy's relationship with Emanuel develops, she further exhibits her inner strength and her voice. Lucy is no longer a shadow: she dreams and plans for starting her own school, she forms a deepening relationship with Emanuel, she stands up to Père Silas and Madame Beck with they attempt to interfere in this relationship, and she defends her faith against Père Silas and Emanuel. Certainly, Lucy is transformed from a silent, isolated outcast into a vocal, active woman.

Lucy, on the other hand, causes Emanuel to soften. Initially, Lucy finds Emanuel to be a harsh, unforgiving dictator. She claims that Emanuel is intolerant of insubordination (Brontë, *Villette* 225) and that "a more despotic little man than M. Paul never filled a professor's chair" (227). Indeed, Emanuel lives up to this assessment, striking fear into his students, locking Lucy

in the attic to practice her lines until he chooses to free her (149), and acting out in bursts of anger against anyone who opposes his will. Although Lucy is not a “madwoman in the attic,” Emanuel’s act of locking her in the attic echoes Rochester’s confinement of Bertha Mason as an act of repression and control. Throughout the course of the novel, Lucy’s friendship changes Emanuel. Not only does she bring out a passion in him that he has long repressed, she softens his nature. This change is clearly evidenced when Lucy breaks Emanuel’s glasses, “his treasures.” He claims, “Ah, traitress! Traitress! You are resolved to have me quite blind and helpless in your hands” (Brontë, *Villette* 371). Although Lucy’s blinding of Emanuel is an accident, it is deeply symbolic. Like Rochester in his blindness, Emanuel loses his sense of authority and softens in his attitude towards Lucy. He declares that “he dared not but obey one who had given such an instance of her dangerous prowess” and acquiesces to Lucy’s request that only moments before he had vehemently refused (Brontë, *Villette* 371). Although Emanuel acts graciously in a spirit of forgiveness, not fear, his behavior demonstrates his break from his normative behavior of stubborn, authoritative control. Rather than stand firm in his refusal, he publicly submits to Lucy.

In addition to changing each other in these ways, Lucy and Emanuel both awaken in each other repressed passion. Initially, both are shut off from emotional attachments. Both are capable of passion, but both have buried their emotions and desires. While her previous desire for Dr. Bretton is evident through her interactions with him and her idolization of his letters, Lucy never expresses her feelings verbally to Dr. Bretton or her reader. Instead, she remains silent and passive. When Dr. Bretton’s attentions turn to Paulina, Lucy cries once, “heavy and brief” (Brontë, *Villette* 332), then shuts herself off emotionally, burying Dr. Bretton’s letters in an act of repression. Indeed, Lucy admits that in this act she was “not only going to hide a

treasure...[but] also to bury a grief” (Brontë, *Villette* 335). Just as Lucy literally buried her passion for Dr. Bretton along with his letters, Emanuel’s passion “died in the past—in the present it lies buried—its grave is deep-dug, well-heaped, and many winters old” (Brontë, *Villette* 391). Both having experienced loss, Lucy and Emanuel repress their feelings.

However, as their relationship begins to develop, both are able to open up and truly begin to feel again. As Lucy comes to know Emanuel better and allows herself to open up emotionally, she realizes she loves him. She claims, “Once—unknown, and unloved, I held him harsh and strange...Now, penetrated with his influence, and living by his affection, having his worth by intellect, and his goodness by heart—I preferred him before all humanity” (Brontë, *Villette* 555). Lucy’s opinion changes in part because she comes to understand Emanuel’s nature and appreciate the gentleness that few see in him. Lucy comes to realize that though Emanuel’s “passions are strong...it was an error to fear him.” For one to see his positive attributes, however, “required a thorough comprehension of his nature; and his nature was of an order rarely comprehended” (Brontë, *Villette* 228). As Lucy spends time with Emanuel and comes to comprehend his nature, Lucy sees in Emanuel a kindness others do not. She notes his smile changed his visage “from a mask to a face” (Brontë, *Villette* 363). Emanuel is no longer a stereotype or caricature to Lucy; she comes to see him as a human being, with all his faults and all his advantages.

Lucy repeatedly compares her relationship with Emanuel to her previous relationship with Dr. Bretton, recognizing the warmth Emanuel exudes in contrast to the coldness she felt with the doctor. This warmth allows Lucy to open up in ways she was never able to do in her relationship with Dr. Bretton. She claims Emanuel’s “friendship was not a doubtful, wavering benefit—a cold, distant hope—a sentiment so brittle as not to bear the weight of a finger: I at

once felt (or *thought* I felt) its support like that of some rock” (Brontë, *Villette* 461). While her relationship with the doctor was cold and fragile, the warmth and stability of her relationship with Emanuel allows Lucy to be more emotionally vulnerable. Never openly acknowledging her feelings for Dr. Bretton, Lucy tells the reader of her love for Emanuel, claiming, “I loved him so well!” (Brontë, *Villette* 542) She also openly displays her feelings for Emanuel when she begs him not to leave without saying goodbye. Overcome with emotion, Lucy lets down her guard in front of Emanuel and Madame Beck as she exclaims, “My heart will break!” (Brontë, *Villette* 543) While she withdrew and denied her feelings for Dr. Bretton, she does not do so with Emanuel. Lucy acknowledges her love for Emanuel as “unflawed completeness,” far superior to the coldness of unrequited love (Brontë, *Villette* 530). It is this love that causes Lucy to exclaim, “The tone of his voice, the light of his now affectionate eye, gave me such a pleasure as, certainly, I had never felt. I envied no girl her lover, no bride her bridegroom, no wife her husband” (Brontë, *Villette* 461). Again alluding to her previous relationship with Dr. Bretton, Lucy assures the reader that her love for Emanuel far exceeds anything she has felt before. In her relationship with Emanuel, Lucy experiences the warmth and security of love, which allows her to publically acknowledge emotions she previously repressed.

Lucy journeys from dislike to love, openly expressing her feelings to herself, the reader, and Emanuel. No longer viewing Emanuel as a harsh dictator, she calls him instead, “my king” and a “magnificent-minded, grand-hearted, dear, faulty little man!” (Brontë, *Villette* 550-552) Maynard claims that Paul’s surname “suggests the role he plays in helping save Lucy from the death in life to which she had at one time consigned herself” (199). Indeed, Emanuel saves Lucy from a life of isolation and repression by drawing her out emotionally and allowing her to express herself fully for the first time. In this way, Lucy’s surname is also symbolic, suggesting

the melting and revealing process she undergoes in her relationship with Emanuel. While Emanuel certainly saves Lucy, Lucy saves Emanuel in the same way, causing him to feel the passion that he buried long ago and believed he would never experience again on this earth.

The changes both undergo in their relationship lead to a sense of equality between the two lovers. Lucy's relationship with Emanuel suggests the companionate marriage ideal in which men value intellect, accomplishment, and assertiveness over submission and beauty. Emanuel recognizes value in Lucy that others do not see; he tells her, "Other people in this house see you pass, and think that a colorless shadow has gone by. As for me, I scrutinized your face once, and it sufficed" (Brontë, *Villette* 172). Emanuel sees beyond Lucy's outward appearance, finding worth outside of traditional standards of female desirability. He admires her intelligence, challenging to her to learn and accusing her of knowing more than she admits. He listens to her opinions and ideas, and as Maynard points out, "M. Paul, unlike Rochester, has never really threatened Lucy's sense of independence or desire for a career. He has listened to her dreams of a school and now provides her the schoolroom...And it is merely rented for her so she need not consider herself bought" (208). Emanuel encourages Lucy to succeed, desiring a partner rather than a "child wife."

He also admires what he calls her "passionate ardor for triumph" (Brontë, *Villette* 172). Rather than desiring Lucy to be submissive, Emanuel desires her based in part on her ability to stand up to him. Lucy is not afraid to argue with Emanuel. They often quarrel, and the passion and warmth of their disagreements attests to their feelings for one another and, more importantly, their equality. Gilbert and Gubar claim, "Their relationship, we soon realize, is combative because they are equals, because they are so much alike" (428). Neither has to hide behind a mask of social conformity, but rather both are able to express themselves fully, even in

disagreement. In several cases, these disagreements rise in response to feelings of jealousy. As Lucy comes to know Emanuel better, she begins to enjoy inciting his temper. She claims, "I liked, for instance, to see M. Emanuel jealous; it lit up his nature, and woke his spirit" (Brontë, *Villette* 172). Emanuel first shows signs of jealousy at the theater when he sees Lucy with Dr. Bretton (Brontë, *Villette* 249), and again when he delivers to Lucy Dr. Bretton's first letter (270). Lucy's ability to provoke such passion clearly depicts the growing feelings between them, as well as Lucy's more active role in the relationship. Braun points out that "Paul's misinterpretations ascribe activity, competence, and self-assertion" to Lucy. She "certainly does not play the coquette to Graham Bretton, but by reacting to Lucy as if she were in a position of power, Paul helps her imagine herself in a position of power" (206). Lucy's ability to provoke Emanuel does endow her with a sense of power over him. In turn, Emanuel incites similar feelings in Lucy as well, as Lucy feels jealousy when she witnesses Emanuel with his goddaughter and overhears talk that insinuates she is to be his future wife. The heat of their jealousy and their quarrels attests to the passion both feel and their ability to interact as equals. Lucy certainly is not submissive in her relationship with Emanuel, and he loves her all the more for her unconventional strength.

Lucy's relationship with Emanuel stands in sharp contrast to her relationship with Dr. Bretton, which is certainly not one of equality. While Lucy quarrels with Emanuel, she remains mostly silent on points of disagreement with Dr. Bretton. When they do disagree, their disagreements are not heated and passionate like Lucy's quarrels with Emanuel. Rather, Dr. Bretton's disapprobation makes Lucy feel cold and isolated. After Lucy critiques Dr. Bretton's opinion of Ginervra for the first time, she leaves him feeling "very chill;" later, after their greatest disagreement over Ginervra, Lucy claims, "An invisible, but a cold something, very

slight, very transparent, but very chill: a sort of screen of ice had hitherto, all through our two lives, glazed the medium through which we exchanged intercourse” (Brontë, *Villette* 215). Although a few warm words begin to dissolve that “frail frostwork of reserve” (Brontë, *Villette* 215), Lucy is never fully herself with Dr. Bretton. She is cold and reserved, unable to express herself as an equal. Consequently, Dr. Bretton does not know Lucy’s true self, calling her his “quiet Lucy Snow” and his “inoffensive shadow.” In response to these epithets, Lucy feels “the coldness and the pressure of lead” (Brontë, *Villette* 358). The cold nature of this relationship suggests a lack of passion as well as a lack of equality between the couple; to marry Dr. Bretton would likely reduce Lucy to a similar wife as Paulina, submissive and subservient. Lenta references Brontë’s claim that “Lucy must not marry Dr. Bretton,” stating that Brontë’s insistence against this marriage is due to the fact that to marry Dr. Bretton would be accepting a “woman’s lot at its most comfortable, but also its most conventional” (217).

Instead, Brontë gives Lucy a very unconventional ending. Although at first it seems that Lucy will get her happily-ever-after with Emanuel, Brontë refuses to write the typical marriage ending. The novel ends in Emanuel’s implied death at sea, concluding not in the midst of wedding festivities, but with Lucy left alone. A marriage ending would certainly have been more pleasing to her Victorian readers; in fact, it is for her reader’s sake that Brontë leaves the ending a bit ambiguous. However, marrying Emanuel would have reduced Lucy’s independence. Although Emanuel’s need for power and absolute control certainly lessens throughout the course of his relationship with Lucy, it is unlikely that he and Lucy could ever achieve true equality in marriage. Even as Lucy and Emanuel’s relationship grows and Emanuel’s behavior towards her begins to soften, Lucy is quick to correct any misconceptions that Emanuel is entirely changed. She says, “the reader is advised not to be in any hurry with his kindly conclusions, or to suppose,

with an overhasty charity, that from that day M. Paul became a changed character—easy to live with, and no longer apt to flash danger and discomfort round him” (Brontë, *Villette* 395).

Although Emanuel softens, he retains his quick temper and authoritative attitude. Lucy goes on to describe Emanuel as “naturally a man of unreasonable moods,” comparing him to Napoleon Bonaparte and claiming that he would quarrel with anyone who opposed him (395-396). While Lucy stands up to Emanuel, she still recognizes his “love of power” and his “eager grasp after supremacy;” so much so that she claims at times “his absolutism verged on tyranny” (Brontë, *Villette* 397). Assumedly, marriage will not change this aspect of Emanuel’s character; he would likely still insist on being in the position of authority, the traditional role of a husband.

In addition, Emanuel continues to uphold traditional gender assumptions even as his relationship with Lucy progresses. This is clearly evidenced in his role as Lucy’s teacher. Emanuel is a kind and patient teacher to Lucy as long as she is struggling in her studies; yet, as soon as she begins to succeed, he is stern and difficult. Lucy claims he threatens her if she “passed the limit proper to my sex, and conceived a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge” (Brontë, *Villette* 399). Emanuel encourages Lucy to success, but only so much so as allows him to remain her teacher and her superior. As the male in the relationship, he views such authority as his right. He exhibits this sense of masculine authority when he censors the books he gives Lucy and attempts to prevent her from viewing the Cleopatra painting at the museum. Although Emanuel sees no need for such censorship for men, he reads these books and stands viewing the painting, he deems such activities as inappropriate for the female gender. In this way, Emanuel conveys his sexist gender assumptions. Such behavior suggests Emanuel would not view a wife as an equal, but instead maintain traditional gender hierarchy in marriage. Therefore, Lucy cannot have an equal marriage with Emanuel. Rather than running her new

school and being solely responsible for the business decisions, Lucy would be reduced to simply teaching in the school under Emanuel's direction. She would remain under his authority and never be given the opportunity to prove herself and grow into an independent, successful woman.

By allowing Lucy to establish herself outside of marriage, Brontë opens up new possibilities of freedom to Lucy. Rather than following a typically feminine plot that concludes in marriage, Brontë writes a typically masculine plot by tracing Lucy's journey from being alone and penniless to establishing herself successfully in the world. Lucy does not gain her financial security in marriage, "by far the most sure and respectable way for a woman to provide for herself" (Braun 207); Lucy earns hers through establishing and running her business. Although Lucy does not get a romantic end to her story, she does gain complete independence. In Emanuel's absence, Lucy achieves her dream of successfully starting and running her own school. Gilbert and Gubar claim, "When he leaves, Lucy is ready for independence...she emerges to intervene in the world in a role which she has chosen for herself" (429). No longer under the supervision of Madame Beck, Lucy is entirely her own master. For the first time in her life, she has a space of her own, and she thrives under her own direction. After receiving a hundred pounds from Miss Marchmont's cousin on behalf of Miss Marchmont, Lucy purchases the adjoining house and turns her day school into a boarding school, which further prospers (Brontë, *Villette* 557). Lucy's success anticipates Woolf's claim in *A Room of One's Own* that "a woman must have money and a room of her own" in order to be truly independent (2). Her success after obtaining these two necessities attests to the fact that Lucy is capable of living independently when given the chance, and, moreover, that she thrives most fully on her own. The Lucy at the end of the novel, the successful, joyful, confident woman, stands in sharp contrast to the passive, silent shadow from the novel's previous pages. Although Lucy attributes

the secret of her success not to herself but Emanuel's love, it is in Emanuel's absence that Lucy finally comes to embody her full potential. While certainly not the typical happy ending, Lucy does gain happiness at the novel's close, not in marriage but in personal success and freedom.

Some critics disagree with this interpretation of the novel's ending, claiming that Emanuel's death precludes a happy ending. Certainly, Lucy's independence comes at a high price. Lucy does not willfully choose to reject marriage for independence; rather, her fiancé is killed in a shipwreck. The tragedy of Emanuel's death cannot be denied. Ian Emberson compares Lucy's loss of Emanuel to Maria Marchmont's loss of her fiancé, Frank (90). Miss Marchmont tells Lucy, "I was condemned, after twelve months of bliss, to undergo thirty years of sorrow" (42). By claiming Lucy is left in the same position as Miss Marchmont, Emberson suggests that Lucy's brief happiness with Emanuel will certainly be followed by intense sorrow, leaving Lucy, like Miss Marchmont, a suffering, "woe-struck" woman (Brontë, *Villette* 44). Lenta agrees, stating that while Lucy gains her freedom, she does not achieve happiness. Lenta claims, "Lucy gains much of what she has striven for, much more than she could have hoped. It would be a betrayal of what her author saw as the truth of her case to allow her to gain everything by marrying Paul (430). Lenta suggests that Lucy achieves the greatest happiness she possibly can; to marry Emanuel would have been a happy ending beyond Lucy's grasp.

However, these critics wrongly assume that marriage would be the happier alternative for Lucy. Brontë does not lessen Lucy's happiness to a more realistic degree; instead, she gives Lucy the happiest ending possible. Lucy is not withdrawn or depressed in Emanuel's absence. She does not describe her suffering and gives no indication that she is repressing silent suffering. Instead, she is the most active and cheerful she has ever been. Free from every influence in her life and satisfied in her work, Lucy describes the three years of Emanuel's absence as the "three

happiest years of my life.” She recognizes the paradox of statement, but she maintains its truth (Brontë, *Villette* 556). This suggests she is happier successfully building up her work than she was with Emanuel, in both her role as his student and his lover. Although during these three years Lucy holds the hope of Emanuel’s return, she writes from a time long after his death, when no hope can possibly remain. Even as she reflects on her past, she maintains her happiness, which strongly suggests her ending is not a tragedy but rather a positive alternative to the traditional marriage ending.

By replacing the traditional marriage ending with a life of success and fulfillment in work, Brontë suggests women do not have to marry to gain worth and happiness. Lucy’s ending could easily have been different; she could have married Emanuel to spend a life of happiness together as equals, like Jane and Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. By rejecting this ending, Brontë suggests companionate marriage is an ideal that cannot exist in reality and independence can only occur outside the confines of marriage. Millett claims, “Free is alone...Brontë is hard-minded enough to know that there was no man in Lucy’s society with whom she could have lived and still be free” (146). Millett goes on to claim that Brontë’s novels that do end in marriage are “fraudulent” happy endings, for they promote a solution that is not available. Indeed, *Jane Eyre*’s happy ending seems forced and unrealistic. In contrast, Lucy’s independence offers a more viable solution: life outside of marriage. Gilbert and Gubar agree, claiming “*Jane Eyre*, though rebelliously feminist in its implications, used a sort of fairy tale structure to enable the novelist to conceal even from herself her deepening pessimism about woman’s place in man’s society” (399). In *Villette*, Brontë openly acknowledges the challenges women face and does not compromise by solving these challenges with a marriage ending. Recognizing the inevitable conflict between female independence and marriage, Brontë

sacrifices the marriage ending for Lucy's freedom, thereby advocating female independence at any cost.

#### CHAPTER IV: The Limits of Female Independence in James's *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady*

Like Brontë in *Villette*, Henry James recognizes the inevitable conflict between female independence and marriage. In *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, James explores this conflict through the journeys of his female protagonists: Catherine Sloper and Isabel Archer. Like Lucy Snowe, both Catherine and Isabel are deeply influenced by the effects of patriarchy, and the objectification of both of these women is evident throughout the novels. While both women are clearly products of their society, they attempt to assert their independence after becoming conscious of the influences of manipulation in their lives. By rejecting the traditional ideal of marriage, separating themselves from outside influences, and choosing their own futures, Catherine and Isabel demonstrate newfound independence. However, their independence is severely limited, as it is only achieved through repression and self-control; in the end, both women forgo happiness and conform to gender stereotypes.

Writing nearly thirty years after Brontë, James presents a less optimistic ending than his predecessor. As Brontë sacrifices the marriage ending for Lucy's freedom, James too rejects the traditional marriage ending in lieu of a more realistic conclusion. However, while Lucy finds personal fulfillment and happiness in her work, Catherine and Isabel both suffer in relative isolation. In this, James seems to suggest that rejecting marriage is the equivalent to rejecting a happy and fulfilling life. Catherine's story centers on her marriage proposal. When she refuses to marry, there is nothing left for her to do but live a joyless life of charity and solitude. Although Catherine freely rejects marriage, she does so for the quiet, ascetic life of a spinster. Isabel begins the novel questioning whether to marry, but the question quickly becomes whom she will marry. Although she is allowed to choose her fate, marriage is the only option. At the novel's close, Isabel freely chooses to return to Rome; yet, in this choice, she conforms to the role of a

submissive wife. While his protagonists prove their self-determination, they ultimately succumb to gender stereotypes. The focus on marriage as the only real option for Catherine and Isabel to live successful, happy lives shows James's limitations in portraying female freedom in the late nineteenth century. In depicting their journeys to selfhood and rejecting the traditional marriage ending, James challenges patriarchal limitations on women's independence, yet he is unable to imagine a positive alternative. Failing to fully liberate his female protagonists, James casts doubt as to whether female independence can truly exist in a patriarchal society.

Rather than suggesting a new model of womanhood in his female protagonist, James presents Catherine as a product of patriarchal society. Like Lucy, Catherine does not conform to traditional models of female desirability and, therefore, is deemed undesirable and insignificant. Much the same as Brontë in *Villette*, James suggests that redefining female desirability is unrealistic; rather, he attacks the system itself, showing its destructive nature on women who cannot measure up. While Catherine is not viewed as desirable by any of the characters in the novel, the narrator, or even the reader, her identity is almost entirely shaped by the opinions of her father. Indeed, the first half of the novel provides almost exclusively the thoughts and judgments of Dr. Sloper, suggesting Catherine's own thoughts are insignificant. Her mother having died a week after giving birth, Catherine is left under the guardianship of her father, who is embarrassed and disappointed to have produced such a "commonplace child" (James, *Washington* 14). The narrator states, "Dr. Sloper would have liked to be proud of his daughter; but there was nothing to be proud of in poor Catherine" (James, *Washington* 14). Desiring his daughter to epitomize the conduct book ideal, Dr. Sloper wishes Catherine was "pretty and graceful, intelligent and distinguished," but Catherine is "without a trace of her mother's beauty" and "decidedly not clever" (James, *Washington* 13-14). Dr. Sloper's disappointment in Catherine

has a definite gender dimension. His son held “extraordinary promise” and died at age three, and Dr. Sloper finds Catherine “an inadequate substitute for his lamented first-born, of whom he had promised himself to make an admirable man” (James, *Washington* 8). Throughout the novel he calls Catherine “decidedly not brilliant” (40), “absolutely unattractive” (43), “a weak-minded woman” (55), and “as intelligent as a bundle of shawls” (James, *Washington* 145). As Catherine is unable to conform to the traditional models of female desirability, she is not valued, even by her own father.

Although the majority of Catherine’s characterization early in the novel comes from her father’s perspective, the reader’s impression of Catherine is not solely dependent on Dr. Sloper’s opinions. The narrator reinforces Catherine’s dullness and slowness, stating, “She was not ugly; she had simply a plain, dull, gentle countenance... Catherine was decidedly not clever; she was not quick with her book nor, indeed, with anything else... [she] had no desire to shine, and on most social occasions, as they are called, you would have found her lurking in the background” (James, *Washington* 13-14). Even her professed suitor Morris Townsend exclaims to himself, “Gracious Heaven, what a dull woman” (James, *Washington* 141). In addition, the narrator supplies the general public’s opinions of Catherine, stating, “people who expressed themselves roughly called her stolid” (16) and “a dull, plain girl she was called by rigorous critics” (James, *Washington* 17). The fact that Catherine’s father’s opinions are generally supported by the narrator and other characters suggests that Catherine has become as inferior, unintelligent, and insignificant as her father claims her to be. Dr. Sloper’s judgments not only shape how Catherine is perceived, but her true identity.

Consequently, Catherine’s inability to conform to gender stereotypes threatens her selfhood. Her identity being defined by patriarchal society, Catherine is unable to participate

actively in her own life; instead, she is acted upon by outside forces, most notably Dr. Sloper and Townsend. Despite her father's negative opinion of her, Catherine's self-worth is based solely on pleasing him. In fact, "her deepest desire was to please him, and her conception of happiness was to know that she had succeeded in pleasing him" (James, *Washington* 14). Catherine's dependence on her father's approval for her self-esteem prevents her from developing her own personality and will. As Susan Moore claims, his intimidating treatment of her "leaves her little room to develop either personal independence or a sense of her own worth, and it prevents her from expressing her ideas and impulses freely" (26). Instead, Catherine submits to her father's will unquestionably. That is, until Townsend enters her life, and she substitutes him for her father. Catherine's dependence on a masculine authority figure makes her highly susceptible to manipulation. Unable to determine her own will and act independently, Catherine is objectified and manipulated by both of the men in her life throughout the novel.

Catherine's passivity and dependency on her father's approval make her an easy target for her father's manipulation. Dr. Sloper views Townsend's proposal as an attempt to undermine his possession of Catherine, and an intense power struggle ensues. Initially believing the struggle to hold "the prospect of entertainment," (James, *Washington* 116), Dr. Sloper is confident in his ability to manipulate Catherine into obedience by playing on her respect and allegiance to him as her father. When Mrs. Almond asks Dr. Sloper if he believes Catherine will give up Townsend, he replies, "I count upon it. She has such an admiration for her father" (James, *Washington* 80). However, as the novel progresses, Dr. Sloper becomes increasingly cruel and calculating in his efforts, using "the salutary terror" he inspires (James, *Washington* 81) and willing to do whatever it takes to win. He tells Mrs. Almond:

I have tried everything upon her; I really have been quite merciless. But it is of no use whatever; she is absolutely *glued*. I have passed, in consequence, into the exasperated stage. At first I had a good deal of a certain genial curiosity about it; I wanted to see if she really would stick. But, good Lord, one's curiosity is satisfied! (James, *Washington* 166)

By viewing his efforts as an entertaining experiment to test his own influence, Dr. Sloper clearly displays his conception of his daughter as an object to be manipulated and controlled at will. Throughout the novel, Dr. Sloper behaves cruelly and seemingly without any regard for Catherine's feelings. He tells her he will never forgive her if she chooses to marry Townsend and claims she will eagerly anticipate his death so that she can do so (James, *Washington* 113). In Europe, he takes her up alone in the Alps just as night is beginning to fall and threatens her, asking, "should you like to be left in a place like this, to starve?" (James, *Washington* 148). Even when he is near death, he demands that Catherine promise not to marry Townsend. When she refuses, he alters his will and leaves her nothing. As Winfried Fluck claims, Dr. Sloper "must be one of the most stubborn and strong-willed guardian-figures in the work of James" (82). While his suspicions of Townsend are well founded, Dr. Sloper's manipulation and cruel treatment of Catherine proves his patriarchal sense of innate power and authority over his daughter.

Although not nearly as aggressive as Dr. Sloper, Townsend is also guilty of participating in the objectification and manipulation of Catherine. Like Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, Townsend sees marriage as a means of acquiring wealth, and he cunningly manipulates Catherine into falling in love with him through the use of charm and professed love. Finding nothing of value in Catherine besides her future inheritance, Townsend maneuvers his way into her heart with no thought but his own selfish ambition. Townsend commodifies Catherine,

valuing her only for her prospective fortune, and, as Fluck puts it, “worth is replaced by market value” (83). After Catherine assents to marry Townsend whenever he pleases, he looks down at “his prize” (James, *Washington* 127), further evidencing Townsend’s struggle with Dr. Sloper as a fight over an object. Clearly, Townsend does not view Catherine as an equal, and their marriage would only further this inequality, leading Catherine to an even greater state of dependence. Whatever doubts the reader may have of Townsend being solely a fortune hunter are dispelled when he chooses to give Catherine up after learning that she will never possess her father’s inheritance. Admitting defeat, Townsend leaves Catherine with little regard for her feelings. Dr. Sloper and Townsend’s battle for possession of Catherine clearly demonstrates Catherine’s inability to dictate her own life, as she is the passive victim of both men’s cruel treatment and manipulation.

Isabel, on the other hand, is presented in a much different light than Catherine, yet she too is an object of manipulation. Initially, Isabel appears beautiful, clever, and free. Highly desirable, Isabel receives multiple marriage proposals throughout the course of the novel and is generally admired by those around her. As Isabel is deemed valuable by patriarchal standards of female desirability, she possesses greater freedom and self-expression than Catherine. In fact, Isabel prides herself on her independence. Mrs. Touchett’s telegram describes Isabel as “quite independent,” which raises questions for Mr. Touchett and Ralph (and the reader) as to what exactly that means. Ralph puzzles, “In a moral or financial sense?...that they wish to be under no obligations? Or does it simply mean that they are fond of their own way? (James, *Portrait* 12). Indeed, Isabel’s independence is ambiguous. She believes herself to be free; “it was one of her theories that Isabel Archer was very fortunate in being independent” (James, *Portrait* 52), and she acts freely. Isabel’s rejection of two marriage proposals (both multiple times) supports this

illusion of absolute independence. Isabel's rejection of Lord Warburton's proposal is not, as some critic suggest, a choice of willful suffering. She does not reject the happiness he offers but instead rejects the safe, comfortable life he represents. She wants to be free to fully experience life. She also rejects Goodwood to preserve her sense of freedom. She tells him, "I like my liberty too much. If there is a thing in the world that I am fond of, it is my personal independence" (James, *Portrait* 163). In addition, Isabel's inheritance from her uncle, at Ralph's insistence, makes her financially free. Isabel also views her choice to marry Osmond as an act of independence. The fact that the majority of her family and friends oppose the marriage seems to encourage her in her choice, for this opposition "served mainly to throw into higher relief the fact, in every way so honorable, that she married to please herself" (James, *Portrait* 58). Isabel desires to be free and believes herself to be so throughout the majority of the novel.

However, this illusion of freedom proves to be but a product of Isabel's lack of self-awareness. Although Isabel believes she is acting based on an accurate sense of self and reality, she is in fact innocent and naïve. Therefore, Isabel does not represent a new model of female independence, but rather conforms to traditional feminine stereotypes. The narrator acknowledges Isabel's weak mind, claiming:

Her errors and delusions were frequently such as a biographer interested in preserving the dignity of his subject must shrink from specifying. Her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgment of people speaking from authority. In matters of opinion, she had had her own way, and it had led her into a thousand ridiculous zigzags. (James, *Portrait* 50)

Isabel's innocence is the result of her lack of experience. Ralph Touchett tells Isabel that in order to see the ghost of Gardencourt, "You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have

gained some miserable knowledge” (James, *Portrait* 48). Having lived a sheltered life appropriate for a young lady, Isabel does not qualify. It is this lack of experience combined with what the Countess Gemini refers to as Isabel’s “bestly pure mind” that prevents her from seeing the base motives of her manipulators (James, *Portrait* 555). Yet despite her inability to judge accurately, Isabel “had an unquenchable desire to think well of herself” (James, *Portrait* 50). Wishing to form her own opinions and make her own choices, Isabel believes herself to be independent and nearly infallible. Moore points out, “One of the novel’s greatest ironies is that although Isabel recognizes the danger of trusting too completely other people’s judgments, she is not sufficiently aware of her own fallibility as a judge” (49). Robert Phipps agrees, claiming Catherine knows “very little and, more dangerously, does not know what she does not know” (131).

Isabel’s naiveté makes her highly susceptible to manipulation. While Isabel initially appears to have much greater freedom than Catherine, Isabel is certainly not as free as she believes herself to be. Mrs. Touchett, Ralph, Madame Merle, and Osmond all commodify and manipulate Isabel, and each play a role in inciting her marriage to Osmond. Although Isabel claims, “I don’t wish to marry” and “I shall probably never do so” (James, *Portrait* 160), marriage is her seemingly inevitable conclusion, and Isabel has less freedom in her choice than she believes. Priscilla Walton points out that Isabel is likened to a portrait throughout the novel. She is expected to be decorative; “these images draw attention to her immobility and to her passivity; she does not act, but is acted upon by social forces” (59). Indeed, these social forces act upon Isabel throughout the novel, shaping her identity and orchestrating her marriage to Osmond.

The first force that acts upon Isabel is Mrs. Touchett. After discovering Isabel in Albany, Mrs. Touchett decides to introduce her to the world. She does so as much, if not more, for her own benefit as for Isabel's. "If you want to know," she tells Ralph, "I thought she would do me credit. I like to be well thought of, and for a woman of my age there's no more becoming ornament than an attractive niece" (James, *Portrait* 42). Using Isabel for her own personal gain, Mrs. Touchett turns Isabel into a decorative commodity. Juliet McMaster claims, "For Mrs. Touchett she is hardly more than a fine piece of lace, some personal appurtenance that enhances the appearance" (58). Furthermore, it is Mrs. Touchett's desire to benefit from Isabel that introduces Isabel into the world of Madame Merle and Osmond, the more sinister of Isabel's manipulators.

Ralph also sees Isabel as a commodity and manipulates her for his own entertainment. He asks his mother what she intends to do with Isabel, to which Mrs. Touchett replies, "Do with her? You talk as if she were a yard of calico" (James, *Portrait* 44). In fact, Ralph sees Isabel as a piece of art. He is fascinated by her and desires to see what she will do with her life. For Ralph, "she was entertainment of a high order" (James, *Portrait* 63). McMaster claims, "Ralph sees [Isabel's life] as drama, a production to which he has contributed and at which he is to have a front seat" (59). Indeed, the narrator states, "this was only the first act of the drama, and he was determined to sit out the performance" (James, *Portrait* 405). But, Ralph is not simply a spectator. By giving Isabel such a large inheritance, Ralph assumes the role of director in her life's drama. It is this money, in part, that induces her to marry. As the narrator claims, "But for her money...she wouldn't have done it" (James, *Portrait* 437). While receiving an inheritance grants Margaret Hale and Jane Eyre the freedom to choose to marry, receiving an inheritance pressures Isabel to marry. James reverses the financial independence portrayed in *North and*

*South* and *Jane Eyre*; Isabel's inheritance is not a source of greater freedom but another means of confinement. Isabel chooses to marry Osmond in order to alleviate her feelings of guilt and put her money to a distinct purpose. In this way, Ralph's choice to make Isabel financially independent is partially responsible for Isabel's marriage.

While Mrs. Touchett and Ralph certainly commodify and manipulate Isabel, their acts pale in comparison to the manipulations of Madame Merle and Osmond. Madame Merle admits to using Isabel. "I don't pretend to know what people are meant for," she says, "I only know what I can do with them" (James, *Portrait* 246). While Madame Merle's specific motives are ambiguous,<sup>2</sup> she clearly manipulates Isabel into marrying Osmond. Madame Merle deceives Isabel regarding her relationship to Osmond, Osmond's true nature, the benefits of marrying such a man, and Pansy's identity as her daughter. Leading Isabel into the trap that is to be her marriage, Madame Merle shows no regard for Isabel's feelings or welfare. Isabel tells Mrs. Touchett Madame Merle's offense against her is that "she made a convenience of me" (James, *Portrait* 586). Indeed, Madame Merle sees Isabel as a tool to be used for her own purposes and successfully manipulates Isabel into doing her will.

Likewise, Osmond uses Isabel for his own purposes. Annette Niemtzwow claims that Osmond personifies the collector (399). Isabel is not only valuable for her income, but also as a work of art to add to his collection. He lists his requirements to Madame Merle asking, "Is she beautiful, clever, rich, splendid, universally intelligent and unprecedentedly virtuous?... You know I asked you some time ago never to speak to me of a creature who shouldn't correspond to that description" (James, *Portrait* 245). Osmond demands Isabel conform perfectly to the

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<sup>2</sup>McMaster suggests two possibilities: Madame Merle is acting out of love for Osmond or she is simply providing for her daughter Pansy (42).

impossible “angel in the house” ideal, and, as Niemtow argues, the overabundant use of adjectives reveals Osmond as “a connoisseur in quest of a precious object” (399). He manipulates Isabel into marrying him so that he might possess her. After making her acquaintance, he is charming, subtle, and affects an almost shy manner towards Isabel. He plays the role of the seducer and claims it “makes one work” (James, *Portrait* 291). Even as he pursues Isabel, the most he can say for her is that she is “not disagreeable...[but] she has too many ideas...they must be sacrificed” (James, *Portrait* 291-292). Wishing his wife to be silent and passive, Osmond clearly values the negative aspects of the conduct book ideal. After their marriage, Osmond’s true character is revealed as he attempts to mold her into his greatest possession: a beautiful, submissive wife with no thoughts of her own.

As both women become conscious of their manipulators, they attempt to assert their independence from these outside influences. Catherine’s realization of the forces of manipulation in her life enables her to assert her independence by separating from her father and, subsequently, Townsend. At the beginning of the novel, Catherine’s self-esteem is based solely on her father. As she experiences his cruel treatment, Catherine turns to Townsend. Dr. Sloper miscalculates in his attempt to subjugate Catherine, and his tyrannical efforts push her away. After feeling his contempt, she has the idea “that now she was absolved from penance, and might do what she chose... she felt in every way at present more free and more resolute” (James, *Washington* 140). Gaining self-determination, Catherine embarks for Europe, where Dr. Sloper tries his most drastic tactic yet. The scene on the mountain when Dr. Sloper threatens to abandon her further determines Catherine in her choice of Townsend. She tells Townsend it was then that she realized her father is not very fond of her. This realization attests to Catherine’s move towards self-consciousness. Being able to perceive her father’s true judgment for the first time,

Catherine returns from Europe resolute, telling Townsend, “I feel differently; I feel separated from my father” (James, *Washington* 161). By separating from her father, she is liberated from her dependence on him.

Catherine’s ultimate discovery is her father’s true feelings towards her, but her previous experiences of realization, which James Gargano deems “preparatory discoveries” (360), lead up to this climax of awakening. As Catherine becomes subconsciously aware of her father’s manipulation she begins to have a series of firsts, including the development of both an inner self and a deeper sensibility. After Townsend enters her life, Catherine becomes aware of the need to protect her thoughts. In order to empower herself, Catherine must separate her inner self from her social self (Fluck 88). The narrator notes Catherine “dissembling for the first time in her life” when her cousin asks her what she thinks of Townsend and she replies, “Oh, nothing particular,” (James, *Washington* 26). Later that night, the narrator explicitly states, “for the second time in her life she made an indirect answer: and the beginning of the period of dissimulation is certainly a significant date” (James, *Washington* 28). Certainly significant to Catherine’s move towards independence from her father, the development of a private self attests to the beginning of Catherine’s separation from outside influences. Gargano agrees, claiming this birth of private thought signals a “nascent sense of selfhood” (357). As she gains self-awareness, Catherine is able to view herself more objectively and realize her own free will. Seriously considering going against her father’s commands, she discovers an independent self. “She watched herself as she would have watched another person... It was as if this other person, who was both herself and not herself, had suddenly sprung into being, inspiring her with a natural curiosity as to the performance of untested functions” (James, *Washington* 93). Fluck points out that by creating distance, this other person allows for self-observation and therefore the possibility of self-

awareness and self-determination (84). Catherine sees her ability to act independently, separately from her father, and realizes the choice to marry Townsend is hers to make. This new inner self marks the beginnings of independence from her father.

In addition to experiencing a new inner self, Catherine also begins to experience new emotions for the first time. As she gradually becomes aware of the forces of manipulation acting upon her, she experiences anger and violence. Gargano claims, “With rare explicitness, James marks each stage of Catherine’s expanding consciousness, almost obtrusively cataloguing her ‘new’ emotions as she experiences them” (356). After discovering Mrs. Penniman’s secret meeting with Townsend, Catherine “felt angry for the moment... it was almost the first time she had ever felt angry” (James, *Washington* 105). When Dr. Sloper accuses her of bad taste after she suggests moving out of his house, “for the first time...there was a spark of anger in her grief” (James, *Washington* 140). While standing up to her father in Europe, her heart beat “with the excitement of having for the first time spoken to him in violence” (James, *Washington* 148). These new emotions play an important role in Catherine’s separation from her father as being able to feel and act on her emotions prompts Catherine to assert her independence.

Although Catherine separates herself from her domineering father, she immediately submits herself to Townsend. Catherine is only able to end her dependence on her father by replacing it with her dependence on another. When Townsend gives her up upon realizing he will never possess her father’s inheritance, Catherine realizes he, like her father, does not love her. It is then that “a sudden fear came over her: it was like the solid conjunction of a dozen disembodied doubts, and her imagination, at a single bound, had traversed an enormous distance” (James, *Washington* 179). Realizing she has been manipulated, Catherine sees Townsend for who he is, as if “a mask had suddenly fallen from his face” (James, *Washington*

181). This realization causes great suffering, but it also liberates Catherine from her final possessor. Realizing her father has been cruel to her and Townsend is only interested in her for her money, Catherine awakens to reality. She comprehends for the first time that she has been an object both men desired to possess but neither truly loved, and she refuses to be manipulated any longer. Once aware of the manipulation in her life, Catherine is able to renounce her dependence on others and emerge with a new sense of selfhood and independence.

Isabel experiences a similar awakening as she realizes how much of her life is the result of manipulation. Her awakening unfolds throughout several scenes in the final part of the novel, culminating in the climactic kiss with Goodwood. The first scene takes place as Isabel sits alone near the fire contemplating her suffering and Osmond's true nature. "Suffering, with Isabel, was an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure" (James, *Portrait* 435). Well aware of her own suffering and the misery that her marriage to Osmond has caused in her life, she feels trapped in "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (James, *Portrait* 439). Catherine realizes that she is trapped in an oppressive marriage; marrying Osmond was the equivalent of forfeiting all freedom, both real and imagined. She also realizes Osmond's true nature and admits that she had misjudged him before. "She saw the full moon now—she saw the whole man" (James, *Portrait* 436). Osmond's selfishness, his manipulation, his frightening power, and his hatred comprise Isabel's new knowledge of him. This knowledge "had come gradually—it was not till the first year of her marriage had closed that she took the alarm. Then the shadows began to gather; it was as if Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, had put the lights out one by one... she simply believed that he hated her" (James, *Portrait* 435). Through her suffering and contemplation, Isabel comes to realize the true state of her marriage and her

husband's character are both much different than she initially perceived, dispelling any illusions of independence.

Isabel's next realization comes from Countess Gemini, who reveals Osmond and Madame Merle's secret love affair and lovechild, Pansy. Having long suspected a deeper connection between her husband and Madame Merle, Isabel's "pure mind" prevented her from seeing the truth. As Countess Gemini exclaims, "I never saw a woman with such a pure mind" (James, *Portrait* 555). With this revelation, Isabel becomes conscious of Madame Merle's manipulation. "She saw, in the crude light of revelation...the dry staring fact that she had been a dull unreverenced tool" (James, *Portrait* 565). This revelation is followed by yet another; Madame Merle tells Catherine that Ralph was responsible for her great fortune. Madame Merle says, "He imparted that extra luster which was required to make you a brilliant match. At bottom, it is him that you have to thank" (James, *Portrait* 572). Like Catherine, Isabel finally recognizes that she has been prized primarily for her market value. These revelations leads to an act of separation: Isabel journeys to visit Ralph, despite Osmond's severe disapproval. Fearing his violence and knowing "marriage meant that a woman should abide with her husband," Isabel still chooses to act, distancing herself from Osmond both physically and emotionally (James, *Portrait* 554).

Realizing the forces of manipulation that worked to enact her marriage to Osmond greatly alters Isabel's perception of reality and herself. McMaster states, "A large part of Isabel's growth in self-knowledge is her final recognition that she has not been as free an agent as she had intended to be, that in fact she had been instrument rather than agent" (58). On the train to visit Ralph, Isabel considers her new knowledge. "Now that she was in the secret...the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her

with a kind of architectural vastness” (James, *Portrait* 573). Only now is Isabel able to fully comprehend the truth for the first time. Further testifying to Isabel’s new knowledge, Isabel sees the ghost of Gardencourt on the night of Ralph’s death. With this new knowledge Isabel gains the ability to perceive things which were once invisible to her, not only the ghost but also the motivations, actions, and effects of her manipulators.

Isabel’s awakening is completed when she meets Goodwood in the gardens of Gardencourt and he offers her an alternative to returning to her unhappy marriage: a life with him. Representing the possibility of a different future, Goodwood tells her, “We can do absolutely as we please” (James, *Portrait* 603). Goodwood’s offer of freedom is a chance to escape from her suffering. Feeling as though she is being swept out to sea, Isabel is momentarily overcome and tempted to succumb to him. When Goodwood kisses Isabel the narrator claims, “His kiss was like a flash of lightning; when it was dark again she was free...She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path” (James, *Portrait* 604). By loving Isabel and revealing to her an alternative possibility to her marriage to Osmond, Goodwood completes Isabel’s awakening. Only by realizing this alternative can Isabel freely make the decision to return to Osmond.

Although both women attempt to assert their independence, James questions whether women can truly be independent in a patriarchal society. While Brontë offers hope for female independence in *Villette*, James casts doubt on whether Lucy’s ending is a realistic conclusion. Catherine and Isabel exert their independence from their manipulators, but they still conform to female stereotypes, and their independence at the novels’ close is ambiguous at best. Lucy’s story concludes with her own personal success and happiness while both Catherine and Isabel choose a life of suffering and renunciation. Their stories seem to suggest that outside of the

traditional marriage ending there can be no happy ending; attempts at female independence can only end in suffering.

In order to maintain her newly acquired sense of self and protect against further manipulation, Catherine isolates herself from the world. After Townsend abandons her, Catherine withdraws into herself and puts up a wall to protect herself from others. She no longer shows outward emotions. In fact, her grief over Townsend leaving “was almost the last outbreak of passion of her life; at least, she never indulged in another that the world knew anything about” (James, *Washington* 181). As she suffers her loss, she hides her thoughts and tears from both her father and Mrs. Penniman. When Mrs. Penniman surprises Catherine years later by bringing up the subject of Townsend, Catherine does not let her see her emotion but sits in perfect stillness and turns away to hide her tears. By hiding her emotions, Catherine separates her inner self from the world. In addition, she physically isolates herself from society. She spends the rest of her life in Washington Square; Fluck notes that the title *Washington Square* is fitting, as the entire scope of Catherine’s life is limited to this narrow world (75). Retreating into herself and renouncing happiness, Catherine attempts to find freedom through renunciation and isolation.

Some critics claim Catherine gains freedom through renunciation. Fluck states, “For James...renunciation creates freedom;” Catherine is no longer dependent on outside sources of recognition, and the power relations between her and Townsend are inverted (87). Gargano agrees, stating, “I must confess that the dreary tone of the conclusion of the novel tends to water down the impression of Catherine’s fulfillment. Still... when she says goodbye to Townsend, she may seem to be entering a tomb, but, in reality, she is ‘free’” (362). Certainly, Catherine gains new perspective. She is better able to perceive reality as well as herself. In addition, Catherine separates herself from others and is therefore no longer dependent on them. Although this is

tested when Townsend returns, she rejects him to protect herself from possible manipulation. Catherine effectively maintains her isolation throughout the rest of the novel; she does not fall in love again and refuses two additional offers of marriage. By closing herself off to strong affections and relations, she effectively protects against manipulation. Furthermore, Catherine gains control by regulating her life to avoid future risks and suffering. “She formed habits, regulated her days upon a system of her own...her habits, once formed, were rather stiffly maintained” (James, *Washington* 202). Catherine’s life is one of quiet habit and little change, and the novel ends with her taking up a piece of fancywork. Without risk, there is no possibility of again experiencing the suffering she endured after Townsend’s betrayal. It is evident that Catherine gains new perspective, is no longer dependent on others, and maintains strict control over her life, all in an attempt to assert her own independence.

However, whatever independence Catherine gains is severely limited by her isolated, disciplined lifestyle. While Lucy thrives in her newfound independence, Catherine sacrifices happiness and human interaction, which causes the reader to question the full extent of her freedom. Gargano claims, “the emphasis on Catherine’s spinsterishness and mechanical life suggests that her later years will be a vigil for death” (362). Indeed, the narrator states, “there was something dead in her life” (James, *Washington* 202). In rejecting marriage, Catherine’s only option is to give up all possibility of future happiness and resign herself to wait quietly and patiently for death. Although Catherine does reject marriage entirely, Catherine’s renunciation of marriage is portrayed as a renunciation of happiness.

In addition, Catherine’s life as an old maid conforms to patriarchal gender stereotypes. Catherine’s life takes on an acetic, nun-like quality. In contrast to Lucy starting and successfully running a school, Catherine invests her years “in charitable institutions, asylums, hospitals, and

aid societies; and went generally, with an even and noiseless step, about the rigid business of her life” (James, *Washington* 202). In this work, Catherine performs the prescribed duties of an unmarried woman, never dreaming of or striving for anything more than a quiet life serving others. Catherine does not challenge gender stereotypes; she does not exert independence through action, but rather conforms in her inaction. Although achieving greater freedom and self-determination, Catherine does so only through renunciation and isolation, and in the end, she continues to conform to gender stereotypes. Therefore, Catherine does not gain true independence.

Isabel, like Catherine, attempts to assert her independence through repression and self-control; however, rather than separating herself from every source of potential manipulation, she chooses to return to her unhappy marriage. Although clearly attracted to Goodwood, Isabel represses her sexual desire in order to maintain her sense of freedom. Believing “that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to dying” (James, *Portrait* 604), Isabel renounces the temptation to flee from reality. Elizabeth Allen states that succumbing to Goodwood “would be a blacking out of the vision she has so lately won” (81). Rather than forfeiting her consciousness to a state of comfortable numbness or an escape from reality, Isabel embraces the knowledge and truth she has acquired. Having realized her freedom up to this point has been corrupted by unseen forces of manipulation, Isabel refuses to sacrifice her freedom to Goodwood. Instead, Isabel returns to Osmond.

Although her method of self-determination differs from Catherine’s, Isabel, like Catherine, represses her own desires and sacrifices happiness in her attempt at freedom. Isabel certainly asserts her free will, but does she gain true independence? In returning to Osmond, does Isabel assert her freedom or surrender it? The meaning of the ending of *The Portrait of a Lady* is

highly debated. Some critics claim that by renouncing other alternatives and returning to Rome, Isabel asserts her freedom to choose. Citing Isabel's "proud determination to be right," McMaster claims that returning to Osmond shows Isabel's own self-determination to hold to her previous promises (65). Moore supports this claim, stating that Isabel refuses to forsake what she has chosen and ultimately chooses to return to Osmond based on "her sense of honor and responsibility" (52). Niemtow agrees, stating that James "seems to define freedom as a willful entrance into the flow of conventions which themselves might be incarcerating" (388). According to these critics, Isabel asserts her freedom by choosing to surrender it to a fixed morality. Indeed, it can be argued that with her new self-awareness and ability to perceive reality, Isabel freely makes the choice to return to Osmond.

However, other critics disagree, claiming that Isabel's return to Rome discredits any freedom she is said to have gained. Pippen claims, "her rejection of Goodwood's proposal turns out not to be a 'renunciation of a life that cannot be or is too frightening to be lived' but the rejection of the fantasy of independence and will that sealed her fate in the first place" (143). Oscar Cargill agrees, stating that she returns to Rome because "all that she has learned about the folly of complete feminine liberty rushes in on her." Cargill goes on to claim that Isabel learns that meaning is found in duty, not liberty (qtd in Walton, 50-51). Walton supports this reading, stating that the text proves that Isabel's freedom is a myth (53). According to these critics, Isabel's awakening includes not only a realization of her past limited freedom but also the realization that female independence is an impossibility.

Indeed, Isabel fails to achieve independence. While she does prove her own self-determination in choosing to return to Osmond, this choice clearly demonstrates the limitations of her freedom. Like Catherine, Isabel attempts to assert her independence through inaction, not

action. Rather than publically challenging her fate, she suffers quietly in private renunciation. In returning to Italy, Isabel resigns herself to a life of suffering. On the train to Gardencourt, Isabel thinks, “To live only to suffer—only to feel the injury of life repeated and enlarged—it seemed to her that she was too vulnerable, too capable, for that. Then she wondered whether it were vain and stupid to think so well of herself... Was not all history full of the destruction of precious things?... She should not escape” (James, *Portrait* 574). In the end, Isabel succumbs to these feelings by choosing to return to her unhappy marriage. Pippin claims that the ideal of freedom is “presented with an air of paradox by James, and that is certainly appropriate since somehow the consequence of Isabel’s aspiration for a ‘free exploration of life’ will be her stepping freely into the gilded cage of Gilbert Osmond’s villa and life” (132). Valuing her false sense of freedom throughout the novel, Isabel uses her newly realized freedom to return to a life of marital slavery.

Once again, James grants his protagonist a sense of freedom, only to succumb to gender stereotypes in the end. In returning to Osmond, Isabel conforms to the role of the submissive wife. Regardless of the reason for her decision, she does not strive for a role outside of the confines of her marriage. James Fowler claims that Isabel’s fate “may in fact have resulted from James’s discovery that it was impossible to make Isabel Archer over into a man ... Isabel’s tragedy cannot be averted... For her, as for most women of the nineteenth century, such an escape from marriage was impossible” (69). Indeed, James does not envision, as Brontë does, a life for Isabel outside of traditional gender roles. Isabel cannot live independently, making her own way in the world; instead, she must choose between a life with Goodwood or a life with Osmond, existing as either a mistress or a dutiful wife.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, *North and South*, and *Jane Eyre*, marriage ends time. James challenges this tradition by following Catherine and Isabel past their marriage proposals. While

marriage is presented as the only option for happiness, it is not the final word. Catherine rejects marriage entirely, choosing instead to live a quiet life alone. Asking why she never married, Townsend answers his own question, stating, “you had nothing to gain” (James, *Washington* 218). Catherine’s renunciation of marriage, though portrayed as a renunciation of happiness, does not end her life or conclude her story. Likewise, Isabel’s story does not end with her marriage to Osmond. By depicting the harsh realities of their unhappy marriage, James suggests the implied happiness in traditional marriage endings is oversimplified and idealistic.

Furthermore, Isabel is presented with the option of fleeing her marriage. Although she returns to Osmond in the end, some critics argue that the possibility remains that she will leave him. In fact, the novel shocked some of James’s contemporaries, who saw a prediction of adultery between Isabel and Goodwood (Niemtzow 393). While this possibility seems highly unlikely, the fact that James ends the novel without commenting on Isabel’s future with Osmond leaves some room for optimistic speculation. By portraying his heroine’s stories past their marriage proposals and giving them the option of rejecting marriage, James grants his female protagonists more freedom than many of his contemporaries do.

Despite suggesting new possibilities to the traditional marriage ending, James continues to uphold a conventional view of women. His female protagonists experience similar journeys of discovery and growth, and both achieve self-awareness and a new perception of reality. However, their awakenings do not lead to independence. While displaying self-determination, both protagonists fail to achieve true freedom, as their choices are limited to gender stereotypes. Instead of championing female independence, both novels conclude with a tragic depiction of sacrificing life and happiness for renunciation and self-control. Suggesting that any attempts to break from the traditional marriage ending inevitably end in suffering, James casts doubt on

novels, by authors such as Gaskell and Brontë, that suggest less conventional endings as realistic alternatives to female oppression. Instead, he presents a much more pessimistic view of women's liberation. Trapped in patriarchal societies, his heroines strive for something that James presents as just out of reach.

CONCLUSION

While each of these authors challenge their society's concepts of womanhood and marriage, they are still deeply influenced by the conventions and assumptions of their patriarchal society. To a modern-day reader, these attempts to challenge patriarchy may seem feeble and certainly seem limited. However, readers must remember that these authors are working within the confines of a patriarchal society. These authors must not step entirely outside of their world in order to imagine a world of gender equality. Doing so would be idealistic and unproductive. Instead, these authors must attempt to imagine modes for bringing greater equality into the world they inhabit. In order for these authors to challenge gender stereotypes and conventional models of marriage in their society, they must present realistic alternatives in their novels that are possible in their world; they must find a way to work within their society to generate change.

Austen certainly challenges patriarchal assumptions about gender and marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth does not conform to gender stereotypes, and yet she is portrayed as more desirable than the female characters who do conform. Austen critiques the patriarchal system of female desirability, suggesting a new alternative in her strong, independent female protagonist. In addition, Austen critiques her society's concept of marriage. Criticizing various conventional marriage models, Austen presents a new model of companionate marriage in Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. Refusing to succumb to social pressures to marry, Elizabeth freely chooses to marry Mr. Darcy based on mutual love and respect, and both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy reject gender assumptions in order to enter into a marriage of equality. However, Austen does not radically break from her society. Marriage is still presented as the only happy ending, and the novel's conclusion seems a bit too hasty and vague to be realistic. While Austen attempts to redefine the marriage ending by presenting companionate marriage as a positive alternative to female oppression, this ideal seems unlikely to occur in reality.

In *North and South* and *Jane Eyre*, Gaskell and Brontë cast doubt on Austen's ending, suggesting such a conclusion is over-simplified and unrealistic. While Gaskell and Brontë still suggest gender equality in marriage as the ideal solution to female oppression, they portray the improbability of this ideal. Like Austen, Gaskell and Brontë redefine female desirability, presenting strong, independent female protagonists who subvert gender roles and reject their society's concept of marriage. And, like Austen, Gaskell and Brontë reject conventional models of marriage, promoting instead a companionate model of marriage. Just as Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy must both change in order to marry as equals, Gaskell and Brontë suggest that certain changes must necessarily take place before a man and woman can enter into a companionate marriage. However, these authors portray much more drastic changes than Austen, suggesting the only companionate marriage that can exist in nineteenth-century society is one in which the woman is raised to a heightened state of complete independence and the man is lowered to a state of dependence. As such considerable reversals in circumstances must take place in order for a companionate marriage to exist, Gaskell and Brontë suggest such a marriage is highly unlikely. While challenging their patriarchal society and attempting to redefine the marriage ending, Gaskell and Brontë fail to portray companionate marriage as a realistic alternative to conventional marriages and continue to depict marriage as the only possibility for a happy ending.

Six years later, Brontë seems to question the conclusions reached in her previous novel; in *Villette*, Brontë insists on a more realistic depiction of her patriarchal society. While in *Jane Eyre* Brontë attempts to redefine female desirability, in *Villette*, Brontë rejects the system entirely, showing its ill effects on Lucy, as well as Ginervra and Paulina. Ginervra and Paulina sacrifice their selfhood in order to passively conform to gender stereotypes. Lucy, on the other

hand, refuses to conform, and as a result she suffers in silent isolation and her identity is threatened. Although Brontë depicts the harsh realities women face in a patriarchal society, she presents an optimistic ending. Implying companionate marriage is not possible, Brontë instead grants Lucy complete independence. Rejecting equality between the sexes in marriage as too optimistic to be realistic, Brontë clearly views marriage and female independence as mutually exclusive. As Lucy cannot attain both, Brontë prizes independence, sacrificing Lucy's marriage to Emanuel in order for Lucy to live a happy, independent life on her own.

James too views marriage and female independence as unable to exist simultaneously. However, he suggests Lucy's independence at the close of *Villette* is much too optimistic, raising the question as to whether female independence can exist at all. In *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, both female protagonists come to realize how limited their independence is when they become aware of the influences of manipulation in their lives. With this new knowledge, both Catherine and Isabel attempt to assert their independence by rejecting false marriage ideals, distancing themselves from their manipulators, and choosing their own futures. However, their independence is limited, as they are only able to assert their independence through renunciation and the self-sacrifice of basic freedoms and happiness. In the end, both women are unable to gain true freedom, and each conforms to gender stereotypes. Such an ending calls into question the works of Austen, Gaskell, and Brontë. Is James overly cynical in drawing such conclusions, or is female independence an impossible ideal?

Certainly the struggle for independence is central in each of these novels. Each protagonist comes an awareness of the effects of patriarchy in shaping her life and her identity; yet, each protagonist's struggle to break free takes a different form. Realizing her previous misconceptions, Elizabeth definitely rejects gender assumptions and asserts her independence by

choosing a happy, companionate marriage. Margaret and Jane both feel the pressures to conform to their society, but refuse to do so. In the end, both choose companionate marriage as a means for continued independence. Elizabeth, Margaret, and Jane each achieve independence by redefining the system: they refuse to conform and marry on their own terms. While these women attain happiness and independence, their stories seem a bit too idealistic to be realistic.

Therefore, these novels present female independence as a fiction rather than a possible reality. In *Villette*, Brontë implements a different tactic. Lucy does not redefine the system in order to succeed. Within the system she suffers; only when she rejects the system entirely is she able to gain her independence. While Lucy's story ends happily, the reader is left to wonder if she is an exception rather than a new alternative. Indeed, James's novels question the realism of Lucy's end. His protagonists, like Lucy, attempt to reject the system, but they simply cannot escape.

As each of these authors fail, in varying degrees, to present female independence as a realistic possibility, their novels suggest that female independence cannot exist in a patriarchal society. In order for women to achieve freedom and equality, society, not simply the individual herself, must change. In fact, these novels anticipate the changes that would take place in Victorian society. While these novels do not effectively solve the problems they portray, they constitute an essential part of the dialogue that eventually led to change. They raise important questions: How is womanhood socially defined? Can gender equality exist in marriage? Is marriage the only acceptable ending for women? In this way, these novels were deeply influential in shaping their society and instrumental in leading to greater independence for women. In challenging their society's concepts of womanhood and marriage and rewriting the traditional marriage ending, these novels helped usher in a new era of women's rights. In

rejecting the “happily ever after” ending, these novels offer something more: not an escape into a fairy tale, but significant steps towards a changed reality.

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