

## Chapter II

### A Woman's 'True Mission'

*"It is the role of ideology to construct people as subjects." As a result of ideological influence, people "adopt the subject-positions necessary to their participation in the social formation" (Catherine Belsey 356-8).*

#### The Angel and the Monster

##### *Feminine Antecedents*

In his study, The Family, Sex and Marriage In England 1500-1800, Lawrence Stone quotes the Homily on Marriage which, according to Stone, "was the eighteenth of the many from which all parsons were ordered by the Crown to read in church every Sunday from 1562 onwards" (138). The roots of the Victorian conception of woman as too frail and gentle for her own safety and health are reflected in the Homily: "the woman is a weak creature not endued [sic] with like [to a man's] strength and constancy of mind; therefore, they be the sooner disquieted, and they be the more prone to all weak affections and dispositions of mind" (qtd. in Stone 138). Stone goes on to say that "the ideal woman of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was weak, submissive, charitable, virtuous and modest . . . . Her function was housekeeping, and the breeding and rearing of children" (138). This domestic conception of women was reflected in the Victorian

idealization of the angel in the house and the correlative women's sphere. However, that same Homily goes on to denounce the innate lack of morality in women. This appears to be a contradiction of its own logic, and marks a seemingly vast difference from the later Victorian perception of women which posited them as the moral core of the family and the nation. Françoise Basch explains this contradiction in part, saying that "until the seventeenth century, the Pauline conception of the tempting and sinful woman, a permanent threat to spirituality and mysticism, was more or less universal. [However] it was to be definitively abandoned in nineteenth-century England" (4).

I would disagree with Basch's assessment. Rather than abandoning the perception of women as a threat to England, I believe that the opposite occurred. As women were invested with more implicit and explicit forms of power, they gained more autonomy and authority within the domestic sphere. This expansion of influence only intensified the cultural anxiety raised by the risk inherent in enfranchising women with domestic power, the same anxiety underlying the ideology of woman-as-threat.<sup>1</sup> The same strengths which qualified a woman for the management of the domestic sphere, also, and paradoxically, disqualified her to hold so much power. Robin Gilmour argues that "women were felt to be at the mercy of their biology; menstruation, pregnancy, child-rearing, and the menopause were unsettling (and little understood) female phenomena, likely to make women unreliable. . . and there was no lack of prestigious, conservative doctors willing to say so in public" (191). Such heightened fears, corroborated as they were by science, served hegemonically as justification in circumscribing this feminine power, containing it within set limits, and consequently

precluding any possibility for hegemonic subversion or rupture. I discuss those systems of containment in detail in Chapter 3.

*Between Patriarchy and Imperialism*

Because the dominant discourse cells which constituted hegemony emerged out of the needs of the masculine constituency—women having little or no legal or political power—it can be argued that the imperial hegemony was also patriarchal in nature. Not only must the needs of imperialism be met, but also there must be preservation and support for the maintenance of patriarchal culture.

During the Victorian era, the family served as the bastion of patriarchy, one naturalized and protected by the patriarchal institutions of law and religion. As Joan Perkin argues in her study of Victorian women:

the traditional patriarchal family [was] dominated by the father and bolstered by law. . . . Marriage sanctified by religion was a sacrament . . . . The man was protector, chief breadwinner and head of the household. The wife and children were expected to be obedient and submissive to his rules. By marriage, husband and wife became one person in law—and that person was he. He had almost complete control over her body, and their children belonged to him. Unless a marriage settlement arranged things differently, the husband was entitled to all his wife's property, and he could claim any money she earned. (73)

Women's roles were constructed around the socially venerated characteristics of women which Victorians recognized as both ideal and paradigmatic, and which contributed to the perpetuation of the patriarchal family structure—self-effacement, self-sacrifice, moral purity, generosity, obedience, duty and service, particularly to male authority, be it brother, father, husband, or uncle. These characteristics of the 'true woman' or the domestic angel reinforced the patriarchal ideologies permeating the culture. Pat Jalland writes in Women, Marriage and Politics 1860-1914, "Victorian social thought emphasized the 'natural' separation of the spheres between the sexes . . . . It was widely accepted, even by many suffragists, that physiological and intellectual differences between the sexes fitted males for the public sphere and females for their domestic world" (7). The domestic sphere, while ostensibly given completely to woman's governance, was contained within the ruling province of the male family head. So long as the woman managed the household or performed her duties appropriately, he need not interfere in the day-to-day regimen. However, his role as "the head of the family, and the corresponding physical and mental inferiority of the woman" established a burden of responsibility on the man to care for the woman's needs, sometimes in spite of herself (Basch 16). A woman had few rights and could not gainsay her husband who it was believed behaved in accordance with her own good, and the good of his family, and by implication, the good of society and the nation.<sup>2</sup> She was subject to his approval at all times, as she was made completely dependent on his good will—no matter their specific relationship: mother to son, daughter to father, wife to husband, and so on.

We see an extraordinary case of masculine domestic power played out in East Lynne. Both Mrs. Hare and her daughter Barbara are subject to the autocratic and often arbitrary strictures of Mr. Hare.<sup>3</sup> He has encroached on the feminine domestic sphere, which, though not considered his province, is his right as the owner of the household and patriarchal head of the family. His comprehensive dominance is revealed early in the novel, when Mrs. Hare complains of terrible thirst. She fears ordering tea even a moment early and thereby incurring her husband's wrath. In spite of the fact that he is not at home, and that he would not know if she took her tea some minutes earlier than his schedule dictates, her deeply ingrained obedience to him prevents her from even considering breaking such a minor rule without his permission:

It may occur to the reader that a lady in her own house, 'dying for her tea,' might surely order it brought in, although the customary hour had not struck. Not so Mrs. Hare. Since her husband had first brought her home to that house, four-and-twenty years ago, she had never dared to express a will in it; scarcely, on her own responsibility, to give an order. Justice Hare was stern, imperative, obstinate, and self-conceited; she, timid, gentle, and submissive. She had loved him with all her heart, and her life had been one long yielding of her will to his: in fact, she had no will; his, was all in all. (Wood 17)

On the other end of the spectrum, Mr. Douglas in Emily Eden's The Semi-attached Couple rarely interferes with his wife, despite her failure to properly discharge her domestic responsibilities, as revealed in her spitefulness and snobbery. However,

even he is moved to reprimand her when she fails to aid a young woman in need of her advice and influence. She responds with contrition, aware that she has neglected her culturally assigned feminine role: “Mr. Douglas was so seldom roused to anger that a lecture from him had a startling effect on his wife” (183). She apologizes to him and promises to alter her behavior. While she does not undergo a personality change—there is no expectation that she will suddenly lose her acerbic tongue—she does protect the younger, more helpless women from the unnatural and vindictive Lady Portmore.

These two opposing examples of the domestic sphere provide us a view into the hierarchy of patriarchy and the function of women within it. Women who either seek to traverse beyond the domestic sphere or who neglect the duties thereof challenge the patriarchy fundamental to the institutional foundation of Victorian Britain: from Parliament to education, from church to business. As we will see, the hegemonically approved feminine roles within mid-Victorian Britain served both imperialist and patriarchal ideologies. And though both were often compatible, they at times clashed. The site of such turbulence exposed to scrutiny the structure of hegemony and its component ideologies, offering the opportunity to challenge cultural habits and traditions which contained and disempowered women. This incompatibility is fundamental to understanding how women were able to step outside of controlling ideologies and undermine the mechanisms of containment, a point I take up in more depth later in this book. The limits then imposed on women in an effort to circumscribe the power of the domestic sphere not only furthered the imperialist agenda, but also supported and furthered the patriarchal regime.

*Sensationalism and Domestic Realism*

Those limits were demarcated by ideologies which defined the ideal woman in terms of selfless sacrifice, self-effacement, humility, morality, virtue and docility. Her realm of influence was the domestic sphere. According to Elaine Harnell in her essay “‘Nothing but Sweet and Womanly’: A Hagiography of Patmore’s Angel,” the ideal woman had “no existence outside the context of her home and . . . [her] whole window on the world [was] her husband” (460). This ideal became the object of Coventry Patmore’s “The Angel in the House” (1854-1862). In this landmark poem, Patmore succeeded in codifying this ideal into a paradigm of the feminine domestic norm. For the proper Victorian woman, the domestic norm and the feminine ideal merged, the demands and limits of which left little room to subvert either hegemony or patriarchy.<sup>4</sup>

This construction of femininity which postulated formerly ideal characteristics as typical resulted in gaps between expectation and application. The domestic angel ideology demanded perfection from inherently flawed subjects.<sup>5</sup> In Miss Marjoribanks, Margaret Oliphant pointedly calls attention to the discrepancies intrinsic to the domestic angel ideology. When Doctor Marjoribanks discusses marriage with his daughter Lucilla, the narrator says “he was a wordly man himself, and he thought his daughter a wordly woman; and yet, though he thoroughly approved of it, he still despised Lucilla a little for her prudence, which is a paradoxical state of mind not very unusual in the world” (397). The doctor both values and “despises” his daughter’s prudence—one of the most lauded characteristics of the domestic angel. Oliphant’s assertion that such a point of view was culturally common in 1866 when the novel was first published, gives a sense of the

conflicting expectations which women must attempt to meet, and how difficult it was to become a domestic angel when even a woman's father might disapprove of the very qualities which she works hardest to cultivate. Yet as Hartnell argues, the domestic angel "ultimately became an a priori assumption, embedded into the domestic discourses of the mid- to late-nineteenth century and beyond. The fictional woman behind the . . . angel rapidly became unremarkable as the discourses that constructed her were absorbed into the greater fabric of the dominant [i.e. hegemony]" (473). According to Frances Power Cobbe in her 1869 essay "The Final Cause of Woman,"

we are driven to conclude, both that a woman is a more mysterious creature than a man, and also that it is the general impression that she is made of some more plastic material, which can be advantageously manipulated to fit our theory about her nature and office, whenever we have come to a conclusion as to what that nature and office may be. 'Let us fix our own Ideal in the first place,' seems to be the popular notion, 'and then the real Woman in accordance thereto will appear in due course of time. We have nothing to do but to make round holes, and women will grow round to fill them; or square holes, and they will become square. Men grow like trees, and the most we can do is to lop or clip them. But women run in moulds, like candles, and we can make them long-threes or short-sixes, whichever we please.' (1-2)

In this satirical passage, Cobbe points to the fabricated nature of the domestic angel, likening women to commodities which can and have been manufactured for hegemonic



purposes. In her study on representations of fallen women in Victorian literature, Sally Mitchell argues that Victorian women

were . . . property. The father of an unmarried woman could sue her seducer for the loss of her services. A woman who married disappeared as a legal entity. Her husband owned all she possessed and everything she might earn. He could restrain and chastise her—lock her up, keep her from seeing her children, beat her at will. . . . She couldn't sue him or charge him with battery because, in the eyes of the courts, she had no separate existence. . . . For a woman to control her own body—to dispose of it or authorize its use as she saw fit—interfered with the property rights of her husband or father. (Fallen xi)

Like any other commodity, women had particular use-value in Victorian culture. For Cobbe, the feminine ideal emerged previous to the reality in the context of that use-value, and was then imposed on women, just as candle-molds are constructed and then filled with wax to formulate candles of predetermined specifications.

Both the domestic realist novel and the sensation novel address the difficulty and often impossibility of conforming to roles premised on the angelic ideal. Both these genres are anchored in the ordinary domestic situation. This setting of everyday, middle-class life and customs is what sets the sensation novel apart from the gothic novel. However, as Amy Kaplan argues, realism serves as means to impose order on a chaotic social situation; “it is a fictional conceit, or deceit, packaging and naturalizing an official version of the ordinary” (1).<sup>6</sup> Kaplan maintains that realism failed its function for two

primary reasons. First, she argues that no dense social fabric could be captured linguistically. It is equally unfeasible that any one version of reality can account for the variant versions proffered by the competing discourse cells of mid-Victorian Britain, all of which sought to maintain themselves in the growing political, social, and technological disorder which had become particularly intense in the decade of the 1860s (1-2).<sup>7</sup> For Kaplan, realist novels impose order on chaos, “actively constructing the coherent social world they represent” (9). She contends that realism is a “strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change” (10). For Kaplan, realist novels, and I would argue sensation novels, “do more than juggle competing visions of social reality; they encompass conflicting forms and narratives which shape that reality” (13). For example, East Lynne offers both the sensationalized scandal of Isabel Vane and the subplot of the murder mystery, while at the same dramatizing the ordinary domesticity of the middle class home and society. The novel challenges traditional perceptions of ‘proper’ womanhood, while at the same time proffering hegemonically approved conceptions of class and patriarchy. It is Mr. Carlyle’s failure in his role as the head of the family, allowing the encroachment of his domineering sister Miss Carlyle into his wife’s domain, that propels Isabel into running away. At the same time, Wood underscores the unsuitability of a marriage which crosses class lines. Even Mr. Carlyle acknowledges that until his spur-of-the-moment proposal after discovering the abuse Isabel had suffered from her aunt: “the idea of making her my wife had not previously occurred to me as practicable . . . [because] I deemed her rank incompatible wity [sic] my own” (117). Sally Mitchell writes that “the book exemplifies middle-class values yet subverts the

authoritarianism of a patriarchal father; it takes up issues of perfect ladyhood, feminine individuality, divorce, sexuality, repression and revenge” (Introduction vii).

I am interested in how the novels served hegemony in promoting particular roles for women based on the domestic angel norm/ideal, as well as what modes of resistance and subversion were reflected within the novels. As Edith Honig point out, “it is questionable how closely women adhered to this ideal picture, but it is certainly the standard by which middle- and upper-class women were judged.<sup>8</sup> True Womanhood was strenuously promoted in the women’s magazines of the period, as well as the religious literature and books devoted to self-improvement” (12). These novels, written nearly contemporaneously, offer competing and complementary versions of proper womanhood opposed against ‘unnatural’ women. In doing so, they expose the unstable and unsettled ontological and ideological constructions of Victorian femininity.

### *The Feminine Subject*

Thomas Boyle argues that the sensation novel arose largely in response to the “deep confusion which existed . . . over the relationship between the real and the ideal” (93). In particular, “though women were lauded as men’s conscience and as repositories of virtue, they were also held to be easily corruptible. Eve, not Adam, had been tempted by the serpent, and this showed that women were innately sinful” (Perkin 229).

Women, seeking to conform to the societal domestic angel norm, continuously battled with that interior sinful nature. Specifically, they confronted the feminine subject: that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions,

rules” (Kristeva 4). In Anne McClintock’s useful discussion of the abject, she states that the “abject is everything that the subject seeks to expunge in order to become social . . . . [An individual must] expunge certain elements that society deems impure” (71). For Victorian women, those elements of their nature—the feminine abject—which they sought to ‘expunge’ included sexuality, male-associated behavior and speech, vanity, artifice, passionate emotions and any appearance of discontent. Yet the abject cannot be removed, nor completely contained.<sup>9</sup> McClintock draws on the work of Julia Kristeva, explaining that:

these expelled elements can never be fully obliterated; they haunt the edges of the subject’s identity with the threat of disruption or even dissolution . . . . Defying sacrosanct borders, abjection testifies to society’s precarious hold over the fluid and unkempt aspects of psyche and body. . . . [Abjection] imperils social order with the force of delirium and disintegration. (McClintock 71).

Thus the feminine abject cannot be destroyed or even far banished. It remains hidden, but readily available and eager to return. It is particularly dangerous in weaker willed women who are not able to resist their darker sides without constant discipline and the threat of punishment for transgression.

The abject is particularly menacing because it shrouds itself in the appearance of the acceptable:

He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law—rebellious,

liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you . . . . (Kristeva 4)

This concept of abjection—the active concealment of culturally prohibited behavior and traits—highlights the foundation upon which Victorian culture was built, upon which all systems of power depended: appearances. Elaine Showalter argues that “secrecy . . . [was] a condition of middle-class life” and more than that, “secrecy was basic in the lives of *all* respectable women” (“Desperate” 2). What hegemony feared was feminine abjection and the consequent threat imposed by locating women in categories essential to the maintenance of empire and patriarchy, and assigning them the quality of superior morality over men.

For example, Lady Audley’s menace exists not in her machinations and murder plots, but in her plausible public veneer of normalcy, the outward appearance of the domestic angel hiding a rotten core of abjection: conniving (and murderous) machinations to promote her own survival at the expense of both her husband and family:

Wherever she went she seemed to take joy and brightness with her. In the cottages of the poor her fair face shone like a sunbeam. She would sit for a quarter of an hour talking to some old woman, and apparently as pleased with the admiration of a toothless crone as if she had been listening to the compliments of a marquis; and when she tripped away . . . the old woman would burst out into senile raptures with her grace, her beauty, and her

kindliness, such as she never bestowed upon the vicar's wife . . . .

Everyone loved, admired, and praised her. (6)

And yet this angelic appearance hides a monstrous interior. Later in the novel, while playing the shy, innocent wife to her husband Sir Michael Audley, Lady Audley smiles, thinking "I can twist him which way I like. I can put black before him, and if I say it is white, he will believe me" (282). In taking on the guise of innocence, Lady Audley clearly recognizes that she must not publicly reveal any abject or monstrous qualities; instead she accepts them, seeking to improve her situation through manipulation and subterfuge. What in the end is so detestable about her behavior (for the rest of the book's characters, and for the readers as well) is her deft ability to disguise her monstrous nature. In doing so, she not only appears to be a domestic angel, but she becomes representative, even stereotypical.<sup>10</sup> Lady Audley's successful deception exposes the cultural anxiety attached to investing so much trust in women. The disguised demon in the midst is to be most feared because she is not subject to punishment or discipline so long as she maintains an acceptable facade. And so long as she remains hidden, the more damage she may do, particularly in her position of authority which lends her enormous influence over her community.

Yet even a paragon of virtue such as Margaret Oliphant's Lucilla Marjoribanks might be tempted to take advantage of misconception, flattery and deception.<sup>11</sup> Her lauded social success depends on her ability to quickly capitalize on any given situation, though for the good of the community rather than selfish reasons. For example, when she aids in the political campaign of Mr. Ashburton, she convinces Major Brown that he

influenced Mr. Ashburton into running for the local Member of Parliament position. She pretends that the Major, rather than she herself, said the fateful words which set Mr. Ashburton to run. By convincing him, she obligates the Major to serve on the candidate's committee and publicly support him. She says:

I am sure it was that as much as anything that influenced Mr. Ashburton. He was turning it all over in his mind, you know, and was afraid the people he most esteemed in Carlingford would not agree with him, and did not know what to do; and then you said, What did it matter about opinions, if it was a good man?—that was what decided him . . . (379)

Major Brown replies that he is sure it was Lucilla who made the inspiring comment, which is in fact the case. Even so, the Major is willing to be convinced, flattered that he has had such an influence on someone. He thus gives his support to Mr. Ashburton, in spite of his original intent to back Mr. Cavendish. While Lucilla certainly believes that Mr. Ashburton is the better man for the job and thus for the Carlingford Community, she accomplishes her campaign on his behalf through manipulation and even outright lies.

Thus we can see that the monster continued to pose a threat, as nature cannot completely be conquered, but only tamed. As Gilbert and Gubar note, “every angel in the house . . . is really, perhaps, a monster” (29). Therefore, for both their own safety, and the security and preservation of the nation, women must not only be taught to suppress that terrible nature, but must also be subject to cultural surveillance and punishment in order to guarantee that they maintain their proper subject roles. That women continued to be identified as dangerous resulted in the pervasive perception of feminine cultural

menace. Victorian hegemony protected itself through a promotion of the status quo, weaving a web of ideologies which reinforced the cultural belief that feminine transgression was not only dangerous to the maintenance of the nation and the welfare of the culture, but it also violated the divinely constituted natural order of things.<sup>12</sup> The patriarchal family became the fundamental social mechanism in the management and legislation of women for the preservation of hegemony. According to Lyn Pykett, “the improper feminine could only be contained within the patriarchal family, an institution which it also constantly threatened to dissolve or destroy [through the abject]. This discourse of containment and threat . . . was used to reinforce masculine control of both women and the family” (Improper Feminine 56).

### *The Angel in the House*

While women as monsters threatened hegemony, women as angels served it in an invaluable and irreplaceable way. In 1865 in Sesame and Lilies, John Ruskin offered this definition of the domestic angel:

She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service. (87-8)



Ruskin's description indicates a vision of womanhood which is incorruptible, gentle, self-effacing, pure, selfless, modest, and devoted to the service of her husband and family. He couches his description in terms of a woman's service to her husband, revealing the pervasive cultural association of true womanhood with the patriarchal family.

Victorian scholars have focused on this concept of womanhood in recent years, including such landmark scholarship as produced by Sally Mitchell, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter, and Mary Poovey. Here the angel is traditionally discussed in relation to women's oppression by a patriarchal system, particularly in terms of diffusing her threat of feminine sexuality. But such explorations often suggest a generally linear progression of women's oppression and resistance over time. This does not adequately account for the richness and depth of the social fabric, the web of ideologies and competing discourses which comprised the Victorian world. Nor does this scholarship sufficiently problematize the concept of the angel, which is commonly perceived merely as a method of patriarchal control, rather than as an integral cog in the machinery of hegemony.<sup>13</sup> The angel certainly served as a means of containment and control because women were trapped in a true paradox of unachievability and normalization. Women were constantly pushed to become the impossible, constantly forced to acknowledge their failures and flaws, thus they were contained within a cycle consisting of an endless quest for impossible perfection. At the same time, this concept of women also served specific hegemonic needs. In her discussion of how women functioned as "boundary markers of empire," Anne McClintock contends that "women served as mediating and threshold figures by means of which men oriented themselves in

space, as agents of power and agents of knowledge” (24). Women as domestic angels epitomized England to its colonies, providing a signifier of the maternal nurturer, caretaker, and moral leader.<sup>14</sup> McClintock writes that “the cult of domesticity . . . became central to British imperial identity. . . . colonialism took shape around the Victorian invention of domesticity and the idea of the home” (36), to which the angel in the house was a fundamental component. Domestically, the angel formed the nucleus of the Victorian family, the bedrock of Victorian culture and the imperial enterprise. Thus the domestic angel ideology not only contained women, but served a larger purpose within Victorian culture.

The continuing belief in woman’s innate weakness and her inclination toward evil is repeatedly referenced in the conduct books, fiction, poetry and prose of the period, but most significantly, and with probably the most culturally profound influence, in Patmore’s poem, “The Angel in the House.” In this poem, Patmore characterizes the Victorian feminine ideal in the persona of the pure and virtuous Honoria, acknowledging woman’s unseen monstrous nature, saying “To the sweet folly of the dove . . . she joins the cunning of the snake” (“Angel” 161).<sup>15</sup> The narrator continues complain that

Her Mode of candour is deceit;  
 And what she thinks from what she’ll say  
 (Although I’ll never call her cheat)  
 Lies far as Scotland from Cathay. (“Angel” 161)

In their landmark feminist study of Victorian woman writers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write that Patmore “is here acknowledging his beloved’s . . . stubborn autonomy

and unknowable subjectivity, meaning the ineradicable selfishness that underlies even her angelic renunciation of self” (27). Patmore accepts as natural the monstrous abject within even the most idealized woman, for in this passage Honoria uses her “wiles” to “forg[e] chain and trap” so as to discharge her divine duties of keeping her fiancé “devout,” even “against his nature” (161). Patmore does not criticize his love here, but acknowledges the abject portion of her nature, revealing the underlying ontological truth of the Angel role: that even the best women, like their primeval mother Eve, are fundamentally tainted and therefore dangerous.

Among the characteristics Patmore considers unfeminine or abject are rationality, worldly knowledge, sexuality, and outspoken or “male” behaviors (Hartnell 464-66). This conception both reiterates and documents widely held conceptions of woman, codifying not only the positive ontological characteristics of the Victorian feminine which would later become the angel ideal and norm, but also the feminine abject, which would continue to circulate within cultural awareness, thus creating a ready knowledge base from which to recognize identifying signifiers. For neither Lady Audley’s nor Ruth’s nor Isabel Vane’s disguises defy all scrutiny. In the end, the surveillance structure of the Victorian system of power prevails. While the power structure encourages complicity amongst the populace, it makes allowances for possible failures of compliance, engaging a policing system of surveillance, discipline and punishment which permeates every level of society. The hegemonic gaze relentlessly pries even into the private sphere, carried by authorized representatives which include everyone from servants—think of Joyce

recognizing Isabel Vane, in spite of the other's disfigurements—to guests and trusted family members.

Patmore stresses that the monstrous potential inherent within women, a defect passed down from the primeval mother Eve, was manageable rather than inevitable. A woman, rather than existing in complete subjection to her monstrous nature, and therefore worthless except as a vessel of procreation, could choose to suppress her corrupt tendencies, and rise to the position of the domestic angel.<sup>16</sup> The nature of that role is to serve the masculine head of her household.<sup>17</sup> Patmore says:

Man must be pleased; but him to please  
 Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
 Of his condoled necessities  
 She casts her best, she flings herself.  
 How often flings for nought, and yokes  
 Her heart to an icicle or whim,  
 Whose each impatient word provokes  
 Another, not from her, but him;  
 While she, too gentle even to force  
 His penitence by kind replies,  
 Waits by, expecting his remorse,  
 With pardon in her pitying eyes;  
 And if he once, by shame oppress'd,  
 A comfortable word confers,

She leans and weeps against his breast,  
 And seems to think the sin was hers . . .  
 She loves with love that cannot tire;  
 And when, ah woe, she loves alone,  
 through passionate duty love springs higher . . . . (“Angel” 83)

The construction of the domestic angel around the imperative of service generates its own safeguards against the feminine abject and its potential dangerous effects. For the abject is immediately relegated to the realm of non-service, and thus becomes punishable.

### *Internal Battles*

In the women’s novels of the 1850-60s, female characters are often portrayed as tempted by their monstrous natures, with the option of succumbing or rising above them. For instance, in East Lynne, Isabel Vane yields to jealousy and, though married, participates in an affair with Francis Levinson, who turns out to be a murderer. Ellen Wood, the author, stresses the lack of intention on Isabel’s part, pointing to the power of the monstrous side of woman’s nature: “Oh, reader! Never doubt the principles of poor Lady Isabel, her rectitude of mind, her wish and endeavour to do right, her abhorrence of wrong; her spirit was earnest and true, her intentions were pure” (183). Yet Isabel cannot stave off the innate evil of woman’s nature: “She was aware that a sensation all too warm, a feeling of attraction towards Francis Levinson, was working within her; not a voluntary one; she could no more repress it than she could repress her own sense of being” (177). Ultimately she endangers the reputation of her husband (who must sue for

divorce) and abandons her children (enjoining a mere servant to take over her motherly role) and later gives birth to an illegitimate child—the final proof of her monstrosity.

Similarly Ruth, of Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth, gives in to a seducer who appeals to her vanity and discontent. In the course of attempting to raise her illegitimate child and fill the role of the angel, her lies corrupt her benefactors, Mr. Benson and Faith, as well as one of her charges when she turns governess. Jemima, the eldest of the Bradshaw girls for whom Ruth becomes responsible as the governess, allows the charade to continue rather than reveal Ruth's background, and thus participates in the lie.

In fact, most of the female characters of woman-authored novels are seen to battle with this inherent evil component of their natures, many times failing as do Isabel Vane and Lady Audley, though not always so fatally. Barbara Hale, the nearest representative to an angel figure in East Lynne, confesses her love and resentment of Archibald Carlyle in a hysterical scene after she has worked herself "up to that state of nervous excitement when temper, tongue, and imagination fly off at a mad tangent" (137). Following his chastisement, she becomes kinder, more caring of her ailing mother. The memory of her hysterics serve to curb her emotions so that she may behave as a woman is supposed to, so that she may better serve her family, and later, better raise her children and function as a wife: "Barbara had grown more gentle and tender of late years, the bitterness of her pain had passed away, leaving all that had been good in her love to mellow and fertilize her nature. Her character had been greatly improved by sorrow" (192).

## Middle-class Subject Roles for Women

### *Angel and Nation*

Before embarking on any discussion of the specific roles considered appropriate for women in the Victorian period, it is essential to understand the function of the various female roles within the Victorian hegemony, specifically, their importance to the maintenance and deployment of empire and patriarchy.<sup>18</sup> Mary Poovey stresses that the ability to perceive “that the national character was a domestic character” occurred only “because women made it so by making the home moral, [and] tidy” (*Uneven* 161). The British domestic family had come to serve as a microcosm of empire: “this patriarchal family was regarded by many people as the essential building block of a civilized society. The Victorian family—by which was meant the affluent middle-class family . . . won for itself a reputation as a noble institution upon whose continuance depended all that was fine and stable in Britain” (Perkin 74). Empire structured itself in a hierarchical configuration similar to that of the British middle class family, requiring of the colonized subject a that kind of loyalty, devotion, and unquestioning obedience that was expected within the family.<sup>19</sup>

If the family served as a microcosm of empire, the mother symbolized the British national conception of itself as the motherland—a nurturing, morally superior, civilizing entity which must administer to her children, the colonies. This image was cemented by the motherly Queen Victoria who represented publicly the domestic angel ideal: “Victoria achieves a domestic situation which she consciously opposes to the licentiousness of the court and which her era and our own have considered the ideal of

mid-century domesticity” (Helsing 66). According to James Adams in The British Empire 1784-1939, with Victoria came the end of Hanover line and

the British crown was freed from its last Continental possession and connection . . . . More than that, the despicable, dissolute, disliked and even hated line of monarchs had given place to a simple, virtuous and beautiful girl whom the nation could idolize and idealize. At that moment when reform was in the air at home and the Empire could be linked together only through the Crown, the wearer of that Crown had become an innocent but well-trained girl, who won all hearts and could portray all the qualities most revered by the middle class . . . and could also symbolize in the growing and increasingly self-governing Empire the glory of a common link and destiny. (116-117)

Representing the imperial project in terms of a loving mother defused the perception of Britain as a greedy conqueror, which might have resulted in domestic resistance by an increasingly moralistic population, as well as the unpalatable and inescapable comparison between Britain’s traditional enemies and competitors: the Spanish conquistadors of the Elizabethan period, and more recently and potentially more devastating to the imperial project, Napoleon. Instead, the conception of Britain as mother and the colonies as children created an iconography of the imperial mission as one of divine benevolence and dutiful responsibility.

The British nation as mother was advertised in the same terms as the domestic angel: self-effacing, self-sacrificing, pure, dutiful, submissive, and morally superior.



Much of this description might seem ludicrously contradictory to actual colonial tactics. However an imperial ideology based on the purest motives of moral necessity, divine duty, and respectful submission to the commands of God functioned domestically to generate a wellspring of public support and a national spirit which insisted on the imperative of persisting in the imperial project. Women as domestic angels were fundamental to the success of this project.

In Sesame and Lilies, John Ruskin argues for the separate sphere of women. Significantly, he posits women as domestic angels, protected from the external world by men:

By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial:—to him, therefore, the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued, often misled, and *always* hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home— it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division . . . it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth. (86-7)

Having divided the spheres, Ruskin then makes a claim for women—specifically wives—as having central importance as signifiers of civilization within the imperial mission:

wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glow-worm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermilion, shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless. (87)

Women here are more than symbolic of civilization, they physically embody it. Ruskin goes so far as to say that women are not only the cornerstone of the home, of the family, but they *are* the home. Without a woman, a domestic angel specifically, there can be no home, no civilizing light. Anne McClintock correlates this embodiment of civilization within women with the imperial project. She argues that the imperial structure situates “women . . . as the visible markers of national homogeneity, [and thus] they become subjected to especially vigilant and violent discipline” (365). Homogeneity here can be defined as Britishness—homogenous in so much as it presents itself to its colonies as a unified hegemony: motherly, superior, and civilized. Because the ideal of the domestic angel was vertically integrated through every dimension of the hegemony’s discourse cells, the cultural metaphor of Britain as a mother to her colonies became possible. As Rowbotham states:

Without women, the middle-class ideal of family would collapse; without the family unit England could not continue to hold the position of moral pre-eminence on which her worldly success was founded . . . . If England was the Mother Country, the pivot on which the welfare of her offspring

colonies depended, then the professional mother . . . was the pivot on which England herself depended. (196)

Thus during the mid-Victorian period, empire and the patriarchal family, with the domestic angel as the keystone, mutually reinforced each other, each necessitating the other. Both institutions functioned together not only as the primary generative catalysts for the Victorian hegemony, but both also functioned to deploy and preserve hegemony.

### *Redundant Women*

The fundamental importance to hegemony of the patriarchal family made the issue of the so-called redundant women in Britain worrisome. William Greg's famous essay "Why Are Women Redundant?" which appeared in 1862 in the National Review underscores how problematic the overabundance of women, particularly middle class women, had become. He says:

there is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong. (436)

Greg's rhetoric is inflammatory, indicative of the magnitude of the problem and the danger it presented to hegemony, particularly in terms of the patriarchal family. He posits these single women as contributing to "abnormal" and "unwholesome" social conditions, their mere presence inevitably leading to "wretchedness and wrong." Greg further

comments that these women, because they do not have “the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers . . . are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own” (436).<sup>20</sup> These redundant women were perceived as symptomatic of the failure of the middle class family, and thus of the eventual degeneration of the Empire and patriarchy. Such harsh realities as the surplus of marriageable women “brought up to regard marriage and the maintaining of an establishment as the highest female ambition” (Trollope 24) compounded circulating hegemonic fears about the destruction of the patriarchal family and the consequent danger to the Empire caused by the political and social agitation of feminists.<sup>21</sup> Thus the domestic angel ideology must be reinforced to secure the safety of the nation.

During the 1860s then, hegemonic ideologies began to give extra emphasis to the importance of family and to the woman’s role at the center of the domestic sphere in the face of the rising feminist movements which were perceived as making women unfit for that same domestic sphere. Margaret Oliphant’s description of the reality of a single woman’s independence strips away the romantic glamour of such a state as idealized by feminists of the period, reinforcing traditional female roles.<sup>22</sup> In Miss Marjoribanks, while Oliphant realistically presents marriage as often difficult and limiting for women, by comparison the single state is even more so, “unless they are awfully rich” of course (398). When Lucilla’s father dies and she believes herself to be a moderate heiress, she imagines her future, thinking she “could go wherever she liked, and had no limit, except what was right and proper and becoming, to what she might please to do” (406). However, upon discovering that shortly before his death her father had suffered enormous

financial losses, leaving her very limited means, the reality of the single woman's situation is revealed. She wonders whether, now "that she was . . . only a single woman," she should "sink into a private life" (404) which would involve a complete divestiture of her former lifestyle and interests, based solely upon her new status of having 'no ties'. In her new role, she may legitimately involve herself in working with the poor, as the Rector suggests, again based solely upon being a single woman without male relatives: "the Rector, who, though he did not purpose in so many words a House of Mercy, made no secret of his conviction that parish-work was the only thing that could be of any service to Lucilla; and that, in short, such was the inevitable and providential destination of a woman who had "no ties" (434).

The fact that Lucilla is not entirely without family ties makes no difference to her potential as a single woman. She does not have the protection of a father or uncle, nor does she have a husband. As a single woman, she may no longer socialize as she had previously as hostess under the borrowed sovereignty of her father's home:

it would be almost as bad for Miss Marjoribanks as if she were her father's widow instead of his daughter. To keep up a position of social importance in a single woman's house . . . would be next to impossible. All that gave importance to the centre of society—the hospitable table, the open house—had come to an end with the Doctor. (405)

In the end Lucilla does marry, giving the novel a happy ending. Despite her recognition of the plight of single women, Oliphant offer no real criticism of the social codes which marginalize them. Rather she presents Lucilla with multiple opportunities for matrimony,

even with her loss of wealth and community stature. In doing so, she avoids the social ramifications of feminine spinsterhood, going so far as to suggest that being single is a matter of choice.

*Woman as Nurse*

Poovey characterizes the perceived responsibilities of the British nation both domestically and in foreign lands in the iconography of the benevolent nurse: “the patient (read: India, the poor) is really a brute (a native, a working class man) who must be cured (colonized, civilized) by an efficient head nurse cum bourgeois mother (England, middle-class women)” (Uneven 196). The “housewifely . . . woman presides” (196) over both foreign and domestic missions of civilization and the discourses associated with them: morality, manners, duty and service. In the capacity of mother/nurse, the domestic angel becomes the moral guide of the nation, disseminating and reinforcing hegemonic structures and ideologies. “The change of emphasis is significant: we pass from religious and family restraints upon the freedom of a fundamentally dangerous nature to [the] framework for the accomplishment of a mission. Mary is superimposed on Eve” (Brasch 4). In his essay “The Social Position of Women,” Coventry Patmore argues that women are granted a more privileged status in “circumstances which render the services that she is best fitted to perform unusually necessary . . . that is to say, her rank has been raised, when its elevation has happened to recommend itself obviously to the selfishness of man” (518). In the case of the family and the imperial project, women were granted a great deal of power within a limited domestic sphere, so long as they provided the services which made women so valuable to hegemony and patriarchy.

The motif of the domestic angel as nurse is popularized in the woman authored fiction of the period. For instance, Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth redeems herself through her nursing service to the community, becoming something of a civilizing force in the sick

wards as a typhus epidemic sweeps the town. She arrives following the death of one of the physicians and after “the nurses belonging to the Infirmary had shrunk from being drafted into the pestilential fever-ward—when high wages had failed to tempt any to what, in their panic, they considered as certain death” (424). Once in the ward, she is described in terms of the domestic angel: “her face was ever calm and bright, except when clouded by sorrow as she gave the accounts of the deaths which occurred in spite of every care . . . . [Her face had never been] so fair and gentle as it was now, when she was living in the midst of disease and woe” (428). The real-life Florence Nightingale and her publicized self-sacrifice in service to her nation as a nurse and thus a kind of martyr and savior (very much the same kind of portrayal of Ruth) resonates with the novelized iconography of the domestic angel as nurse, lending the ideal a glamour of normality and attainability for the common middle class woman.

In Emily Eden’s the Semi-attached Couple, Helen’s marriage serves as the catalyst for her evolution into a domestic angel, realized only after she takes on the obligations of a nurse. Prior to this she had been merely a child, self-involved, with all the romantic ignorance and passion of a schoolgirl rather than a wife. She is represented as a dormant rose waiting for sun and water and careful tending to allow her to blossom into the woman she was meant to be. Teviot, though a bit blundering as a husband at first, provides her with all of the above. When he becomes ill, she has an epiphany. She believes Teviot’s illness to be punishment for failing in her marital responsibilities. As a result, Helen rushes to perform them with all the emotional dedication expected of a wife to her husband, repenting her previous monstrous selfishness and lack of feeling. Her



nursing actualizes her as an angel, as noted by her brother who says “my darling Helen! it kills me to look at that angel; she will wear herself out, and she looks so miserable, and yes is so calm and self-possessed” (251). Afterwards she is the epitome of the domestic angel, having flowered into true womanhood. This ascension to true womanhood is rewarded by expositions of romantic love with Teviot confessing his undying love in the flowery phrases of the best romance: “My treasure above all other treasures, whatever happens, I am not to be pitied. I have what I have longed for all my life—a real, true love to depend on” (266). Thus, much like Lucilla and Rachel, Helen achieves romantic true love by first proving herself as a domestic angel—quite an incentive for any woman, or any prospective husband as well.

The role of the nurse is delineated by characteristics of emotional control, self sacrifice, generosity, and feminine nurturing. Helen is only permitted to nurse Teviot following the doctor’s recognition that “she had power of herself” in spite of her husband’s horrifically diseased appearance (248). Thus, while women were expected to be given to emotional upheavals, evidenced by swift changes in facial color and expression, vocal outbursts and fainting, the duties of caretaking were expected to supersede such emotional weakness and women must rise to the challenge, as does Helen in her domestic sphere: “by the light of open day she saw the battle of life lying before her, and she roused herself for the encounter” (249). Similarly, Lucilla Marjoribanks in her larger, societal sphere, rises above feminine weaknesses and flaws to rescue her ailing community.

On a larger scale, Margaret Oliphant's Lucilla serves as a nurse to her sickly town. She provides social nurturing to a community which is fragmented and disintegrating. Her feminine influence draws first Grange Lane and then all of Carlingford together, creating a community fellowship where previously there had been merely a collection of houses and neighbors who were often bickering or criticizing one another. Lucilla is described as a "public-spirited young woman . . . doing so much for Carlingford" (104). She "puts her finger on the pulse of the community" (120) "accomplish[es] a great public duty" with no "selfish desire for personal pleasure, nor any scheme of worldly ambition" (124). Her social nursing is a product of being a domestic angel and involves personal sacrifice for the greater good of her overall project. In the second of her Thursday Evenings, she must—at least temporarily, though she has no way of knowing that—sacrifice the promising budding relationship with Mr. Cavendish, throwing him in the company of a very ambitious Barbara Lake who has turned out to be disruptive of the social gathering. In doing so, she "prove[s] herself capable of preferring her great work to her personal sentiments, which is generally considered next to impossible for a woman . . . . It was the Lamp of sacrifice which Lucilla had now to employ, and she proved herself capable of the exertion" (120-1).

Throughout the novel, the narrator remarks on Lucilla's emotional control. It is her ability to subsume her personal feelings to the greater good that allows her to succeed in her endeavors to heal the community. Even in those rare moments when she gives in to her emotions, as when her father dies, she maintains herself properly. At first, she is overcome with emotion: "the blood seemed to be running a race in her veins, and the

strangest noises hummed in her ears. She felt ashamed of her weakness, but she could not help it” (412). However, instead of wallowing in her grief, Lucilla puts it aside, deciding “it was best to go down to the drawing-room for tea. . . . On the whole she took tea very quietly with Aunt Jemima, who kept breaking into continual snatches of lamentation, but was always checked by Lucilla’s composed looks” (412). Lucilla permits herself a certain amount of grief, but typical of her behavior throughout the novel, she refuses to make a public display of her emotions. She serves as a model for her society, and for her readers, resisting the abject rather than indulging in passions. An even greater testimony to her emotional self-control comes when Lucilla learns that her Aunt Jemima nearly successfully plotted against an engagement between Tom and Lucilla. Rather than revealing his mother’s perfidy to Tom and exterminating his “esteem and confidence” in his mother, and thereby destroying their small family, Lucilla responds as the forgiving domestic angel, as the nurturing nurse, kissing her Aunt with “a kiss freely bestowed, and [with] a vow of protection and guidance from the strong to the weak, though the last was only uttered in the protectress’s liberal heart” (481). By suppressing her indignation and hurt, Lucilla preserves her family and serves as an example of self-sacrifice to her readers.

Lucilla’s commonsensical reasoning and dispassionate behavior in emotionally fraught situations not only serve her personally, but also help her to prevent the self-destruction of Carlingford society when it appears that the Archdeacon Beverley will publicly castigate Mr. Cavendish as an adventurer. That revelation would undermine the authority of all those who designated Mr. Cavendish as a worthy man, honorable and

well-bred, which would in turn lead to a shattering of the social foundation of Carlingford. Lucilla coolly formulates a plan and then proceeds with it, even while “conscious that in all this she might be preparing the most dread discomfiture and downfall for herself” (300). Her plan succeeds, but only through her careful management and controlled emotions: “Lucilla’s heart beat quicker, and she put down her tea, though she had so much need of it. She could not swallow the cordial at such a moment of excitement. But she never once turned her head, nor left off her conversation, nor betrayed the anxiety she felt” (314). At last the conflict is happily resolved without upsetting the delicate internal social balance of trust and credibility upon which the community is based.

Following her term as social nurse, Lucilla feels able to enter into marriage. It is important to note that Oliphant, while gently making fun of some of the cultural strictures and codes pertaining to women, still accords with the basic tenets of the domestic angel. Lucilla, upon marrying, must no longer serve as the public caretaker, but turns instead to her own family. Frances Power Cobbe explains that, “so immense are the claims of a mother, physical claims on her bodily and brainly vigor, and moral claims on her heart and thoughts, that she cannot, I believe, meet them all and find any large margin beyond for other cares and work” (qtd. in Honig 12). Thus while certainly Lucilla, as any domestic angel would, will continue to assist in the building of her community and its relationships, she will do so in the capacity of a participant wife and mother, and only after her domestic duties at her new home at Marchbank have been accomplished. Thus she has cured the town, and yielded over the maintenance of its health back to its

denizens, who, having now learned how, will have to depend on themselves to keep their community strong and healthy.

*Wife and Mother*

According to Hartnell, Patmore's "The Angel in the House" "heralded a change of direction in representation of the domestic sphere, especially in terms of creating a pivotal role for the wife/homemaker" (473). This shift, which can be traced to the rise of the imperial hegemony in Britain, had begun much earlier, and was institutionalized by the coronation of the young Queen Victoria.<sup>23</sup> Edith Honig, in Breaking the Angelic Image, argues that Victoria's role as mother was socially more valuable than that of queen. Honig says "so exalted was the role of the mother that when queen Victoria celebrated fifty years of her reign, the public saluted her with banners proclaiming: *Fifty Years, Mother, Wife and Queen*. "Mother" played the primary role, with "Queen" finishing a poor third (11).

Shirley Forster points out that "because so much importance was attached to the roles of wifehood and motherhood, marriage was deemed the apotheosis of womanly fulfillment, alternatives to which were regarded as pitiable or unnatural. Emotional and psychological pressures on women to marry were thus added to the social and economic ones of earlier periods" (6). Forster goes on to say that in spite of feminist challenges to marriage as the ultimate fulfillment of womanhood, "even the most thorough-going feminists felt that wifehood and motherhood were the most important aspect of female experience" (11).<sup>24</sup> Marriage was a vocation, the only truly respectable one for middle-class women. In each of these five novels, marriage is the central focus,

highlighting the cultural importance of not only becoming a wife and mother, but of doing so ‘properly’.

All five novels explore the social position of both married and single women. For instance, Yonge’s The Clever Woman of the Family offers a range of examples of women: the weak-willed Mrs. Curtis, who selfishly puts her desires and fears ahead of the real needs of her daughter Rachel, particularly during the latter’s illness; Fanny, who though at first appears an incompetent mother, turns out to be a model mother, though she refuses to remarry and again take up marital duties; Ermine, who, though an invalid, serves as a model domestic angel; Bessie, who is young and thoughtless, using her facade of goodness to manipulate others and who serves as the example of the remorseless unchecked monstrous, the revealed abject; and finally, Rachel, the eponymous ‘clever woman of the family’ who learns humility and who, after identifying the dangerous elements of her own abject, seeks to repress them and eventually evolves into a domestic angel.

From the first, Rachel is represented as a modern feminist who is unsatisfied within the limitations of her domestic sphere. She repeatedly complains of the limits of being a single woman, though she has no inclination to marry:

I have potted about cottages and taught at schools in the *dilettante* way of the young lady who thinks it her duty to be charitable; and I am told that it is my duty, and that I may be satisfied. Satisfied, when I see children cramped in soul, destroyed in body, that fine ladies may wear lace trimmings! Satisfied with the blight of the most promising buds!

Satisfied, when I know that every alley and lane of town or country reeks with vice and corruption, and that there is one cry for workers with brains and with purses [sic]! And here am I, able and willing, only longing to task myself to the uttermost, yet tethered down to the merest mockery of usefulness by conventionalities. I am a young lady forsooth!—I must not be out late; I must not put forth my views; I must not choose my acquaintance; I must be a mere helpless, useless being, growing old in a ridiculous fiction of prolonged childhood, affecting those graces of so-called sweet  
 seventeen . . . . (3)

Rachel's diatribe against the constrictions on single women is, significantly, couched in the language of the domestic angel. Though the abject is revealed in her forcefulness, her strong opinions and her dissatisfaction with the social role of women, she still seeks to be useful, to aid and uplift society, particularly the women and children who work locally in the lace manufacturing sweatshops. Unlike Bessie, who appears angelic but lies and manipulates to achieve her ends, Rachel speaks "real truth" and even when she is conned by Mauleverer/Maddox with the resulting tragedy of Lovedy's death, she "never shift[s] the blame from herself" (273). Yet in her zeal to do good, Rachel 'un-womans' herself. She becomes something of a zealot, manly in her insistence on the rightness of her opinions and in her judgment of others.<sup>25</sup> Alick Keith, whom she eventually marries, recalls his first meeting with her: "I liked her that first evening, when she was manfully chasing us off for frivolous dangles round her cousin" (273).

Rather than offering the quiet unobtrusive service expected of the domestic angel, she is domineering, controlling and headstrong, all of which is attributed to the lack of a male influence in her life. According to the Major, Rachel “battle[s] every suggestion with principles picked up from every catch-penny periodical, things she does not half understand, and enunciates as if no one had even heard of them before” (95). A subsequent comparison to the admirable and angelic Ermine reveals the detrimental effects of the lack of a masculine influence in Rachel’s upbringing. In fact, Ermine serves as a foil to Rachel. Her opinions have been tempered by superior male intellect, and now she serves both as a model to society through her anonymously published writings, and as a model of the domestic angel: grateful, forgiving, compliant, moral and eager to serve. The following scene between the Major and Ermine foreshadows the enlightenment which Rachel will receive at the hands of the Major and Alick. The Major says:

One reason why she is so intolerable to me is that she is a grotesque caricature of what you used to be.

Ermine replies:

You have hit it! . . . she is just what I should have been without papa and Edward to keep me down, and without the civilizing atmosphere at the park (95).

Without losing her urge to be “useful,” Rachel becomes more feminine, first, in conversation with Major Keith, who exposes the narrow bias of her opinions, and then later under the care of her husband and his minister uncle, Mr. Clare, who similarly



expose and correct the errors in her thinking which stem from her unfeminine ways.

According to Ermine:

I believe that all that is unpleasing in her arises from her being considered as the clever woman of the family; having no man nearly connected enough to keep her in check, and living in society that does not fairly meet her. I want you to talk to her, and take her in hand. (96).

And indeed later Rachel comes to understand that “a woman’s tone of thought is commonly moulded by the masculine intellect, which, under one form or another, becomes the master of her soul” (337).

Rachel’s conversion comes shortly after Alick proposes. She believes that she will destroy his life and career: “So happy, so bright and free, and capable, his life seems now

. . . . I can’t understand his joining it to mine; and if people shunned and disliked him for my sake!” (283). She goes on to retract her earlier views on marriage: “I used to think it so poor and weak to be in love, or want any one to take care of one. I thought marriage such ordinary drudgery, and ordinary opinions so contemptible, and had such schemes for myself” (283). But now she recognizes that in her forays into independence, departing from the true duties of women, she has caused irreparable harm, not only to the children of her small school, but also to her family and friends. Ermine comforts her, saying that Rachel will be “much more really useful and effective than ever [she] could have been alone,” for women need that masculine hand of guidance in their lives: “we are not the strongest creatures in the world, so we must resign ourselves to our fate, and make the

best of it. They must judge how many imperfections they choose to endure, and we can only make the said drawbacks as little troublesome as may be” (283).

But while her conversion begins with the contemplation of her marriage, she must still learn to control herself, to take her feminine place. When she attempts to demonstrate her scholarly prowess by reading St. Augustine from the original Latin to the blind Mr. Clare, she discovers her inadequacies.

On her offer of her services, she was thanked, and directed with great precision to the right volume of the Library of the Father; but spying a real St. Augustine, she could not be satisfied without a flight at the original. It was not, however, easy to find the place; she was then forced to account for her delay by confessing her attempt, and then to profit by Mr. Clare’s directions; and, after all, her false quantities, though most tenderly and apologetically corrected, must have been dreadful to the scholarly ear, for she was obliged to get Alick to read the passage over to him before he arrived at the sense, and Rachel felt her flight of clever womanhood had fallen short. It was quite new to her to be living with people who knew more of, and went deeper into, everything than she did, and her husband’s powers especially amazed her. (293)

This incident is but the first lesson in her education on the proper feminine, particularly in terms of her relationship to her masculine superiors. She becomes aware of her own natural dependence, saying to Bessie “I have learnt not to despise advice” (297). In the company of Alick and Mr. Clare, she “was constantly feeling how shallow were her

acquirements, how inaccurate her knowledge, how devoid of force and solidity her reasonings compared” to the masculine depth of their knowledge (300), though on occasion, “here and there a spark of the old conceit . . . lighted itself, and lured her into pretensions where she thought herself proficient” (301). At last however, Rachel achieves a sense of peace with herself as a woman and willingly takes on the role of the domestic angel. She says to Mr. Clare, “[I] feel as I used when I was a young girl, with only an ugly dream between. I don’t like to look at it, and yet that dream was my real life that I made for myself” (322). She recognizes here that the difficulties of her previous life as ‘the clever woman of the family’ were caused by her own faults, her unsuppressed abject. In marrying, in submitting to the tutelage of her husband and his uncle, she has returned to a state of innocence, a state of femininity—she has become Eve prior to biting into the apple. She has become of “far more positive use in the world at the present moment than ever she had been in her most assuming maiden days” (345).

In each of these novels the various women encounter the prospect of marriage in one form or another, demonstrating the central importance marriage held for women within Victorian culture. Women were defined in the world according to their relationships with men, particularly according to how they married, or their prospects for attaining a good husband.<sup>26</sup> The woman’s sphere was predicated on marriage, on the patriarchal family construct, where the man was the “the protector, chief breadwinner and head of the household” (Perkin 73).

As wives and mothers, these women were also housekeepers, keepers of morals, and hostesses—roles associated with marriage and the domestic sphere. Daughters were

wives and mothers in training. The remaining available roles, not nearly as acceptable as marriage, were for spinsters and childless widows. These women could serve as companions, governesses, teachers, chaperones, hostesses, but without the endorsement of marriage, these women could never achieve the status that married women could. In East Lynne for instance, though Cornelia Carlyle is given a great deal of respect by the town, she nevertheless is dependent on her brother for much of her social power. The usurpation of her place as the woman in his life—the woman who arranges and maintains his domestic space—leaves her without recourse. Certainly she could marry, but she prefers her independence. However, the price of that independence is a loss of social stature and the ability to connect socially in the manner she had become accustomed to while attached to her brother's household. When he informs her of his prospective second marriage, her reaction is telling, for she has a great deal to lose in his remarriage: “Miss Corny gathered her knitting together; he had picked up her box. Her hands trembled, and the lines of her face were working. It was a blow to her as keen as the other [his first marriage] had been” (312). And Miss Carlyle is not wrong, for immediately upon the heels of his announcement her losses begin. Mr. Carlyle tells her, “You will go back, I presume, to your own home.” Miss Carlyle is stunned. “Go back to mine own home! . . . I shall do nothing of the sort. I shall stop at East Lynne. What's to hinder me?” (313). But Mr. Carlyle adamantly refuses to allow her to stay. He will have a wife and therefore there will be no room for his sister. He says “You have been mistress of a house for many years, and you naturally look to be so; it is right you should.

But two mistresses in a house do not answer, Cornelia: they never did and they never will” (313-14).

Within Victorian hegemony, the only truly legitimate position for women was marriage. In the following chapters, I will explore the hegemonically legitimized feminine roles and behaviors promoted and discouraged by these five novels, and the systems of power and reprisal which encouraged complicity and cooperation with the domestic angel ideology. Containing both competing and complementary versions of ‘proper’ or ‘true’ womanhood, these novels provide a rich tapestry of Victorian ideologies concerning women, revealing turbulence and ruptures in the logic and consistency of those ideologies—particularly those surrounding the angel ideal/norm—as well as dramatizing those which continued to be maintained and promoted with few challenges.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A great many Victorian critics have discussed the cultural fears inherent in authorizing women to hold power. The following is a limited list of important texts for further reading on the subject. Mary Poovey, Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988; Elizabeth Langland, Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995; Joan Perkin, Victorian Woman, Washington Square, NY: New York UP, 1993; Judith Rowbotham, Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989; Eric Trudgill, Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes, New York: Homes & Meier, 1976; Martha Vicinus, ed. A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977; Nancy Fix Anderson, Woman Against Women in Victorian England: A Life of Eliza Lynn Linton. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987; Josephine Butler, ed. Woman's Work and Woman's Culture: A Series of Essays. London: 1869; Susan Hamilton, 'Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors': Victorian Writing by Women on Women. Ontario: Broadview P, 1996; Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850." Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society. 4 (Winter 1978): 219-236; Deborah Gorham, The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Though, as Basch notes, the powerlessness and subjugation of married women began to undergo legal challenges in the 1850s, it was not until later in the century that women

achieved any real freedoms (16-17). By the 1860s, the rights of married women had become a hotly debated subject of contention.

<sup>3</sup> In this case, Mr. Hare's actions are not typical, but rather reveal the extent to which he may dominate over the domestic sphere, though ostensibly that physical and moral space has been culturally assigned to the feminine.

<sup>4</sup> There is some difficulty in defining the norm versus the ideal in this instance. The ideal would generally be a standard for which all should strive, rarely achievable. The norm would be what the bulk of women would ordinarily be. However, in this case, hegemony assigned a norm separate from empirical evidence. That norm coincided with the qualities associated with the domestic angel ideal. Thus the standard for which women should strive, was also the median by which they were judged. Hence my understanding of Victorian femininity as formulating the ideal as the norm.

<sup>5</sup> Women, as emotional beings, incapable of intellectual pursuits and rational thought, were at the mercy of their emotions, and therefore liable to act inappropriately.

<sup>6</sup> While Kaplan's book is focused on the emergence of the American realist novel, her theory on the realist novel is useful in discussing the British realist novel as well.

<sup>7</sup> Progress, originally a positive term, becomes something to be feared. It was happening too fast, and with a great deal of chaotic change. Robert Browning, Mathew Arnold, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and many others explored the adverse ramifications of turbulent change in their overtly political works. The novels dealt with here do not, as a rule, explore social ills, but deal more with domesticity and issues of middle-class women.

<sup>8</sup> Joan Perkin argues that there were two “very different middle-class ideals of ‘the perfect wife’ or ‘true womanhood’ . One was held by men, the other by women, and they were incompatible. Yet both ideals continued side by side down the century, with most women pretending to be as men wished them to be” (86). Perkin argues, as does Anne McClintock in Imperial Leather, that while middle-class men desired a “decoratively idle, sexually passive woman, pure of heart, religious and self-sacrificing,” the reality was that the family finances usually precluded such idleness and leisure. Thus women worked to erase evidence of work, creating an illusion of idleness. The ideological construction of the domestic angel was continuously shifting, making it an even more impossible ‘mold’ to fill.

<sup>9</sup> See also Julia Kristeva’s Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, Trans. Leon Roudiez, New York: Columbia UP, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> One critic compared Lady Audley to the “half unsexed” Lady Macbeth, saying that it would be impossible for the “timid, gentle, innocent creature Lady Audley is represented as being” to “meet unmoved the friend of the man she had murdered” (Rae 186). The critic goes on to complain that “whenever she [Lady Audley] is meditating the commission of something inexpressibly horrible, she is described as being unusually charming. Her manner and her appearance are always in contrast with her conduct . . . [which] is . . . very unnatural” (Rae 186-7). Such a portrayal of womankind makes this novel “one of the most noxious books of modern times” (Rae 187).

<sup>11</sup> Though again, even in this example of positive influence, the question arises whether Lucilla, as a woman, is qualified to make the decisions she does. The lack of male



influence on her planning and social manipulations gives her something of a *carte blanche*. Without that masculine guidance, she becomes a loose cannon. At any moment elements of the inherent feminine abject could overcome her, resulting in enormous community destruction. No woman is ever completely innocent or inculpable; the abject remains part of her character, and thus she remains always a lurking menace.

<sup>12</sup> Feminists such as Josephine Butler, Barbara Smith Bodichon, Caroline Norton, Maria Rye, Bessie Parkes and Emily Faithfull, who pushed for expanded economic, marital, and political rights for women had garnered some support from such influential men as John Stuart Mill and Lord Brougham, head of the Law Amendment Society, among others. A very loud and public debate developed. Following the passing of the Divorce Act in 1857 which made divorce both more obtainable and which granted divorced and separated women far more rights than previously allowed under the law, feminists began agitating for the Married Woman's Property Act which, after long debate, passed in 1870, followed in the next decades by more reforms. These two political reforms for women, combined with the agitation for suffrage, establish the context within which these women novelists wrote their books. At the same time, the empire had suffered an enormous setback in prestige and complacency with the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion, causing a hegemonic push to shore up the British sense of nationalism and superiority. McClintock argues that after the 1850s "The cult of domesticity became indispensable to the consolidation of British national identity" which was facing "deepening imperial competition and colonial resistance" (209). Fundamental to this shoring up was an

emphasis on women as the moral center of the nation, as the bedrock upon which the fortunes of England rose or fell. Feminist agitation therefore could be construed as undermining the bedrock of the nation, creating weakness in a time of crisis.

Adherence to the Angel norm was perceived as sustaining the nation, even as patriotic, though as stated earlier, impossible to manage. For further discussion of Victorian women and the law, see Lee Holcombe's essay "Victorian Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law, 1857-1882," in A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women. Ed. by Martha Vicinus, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977.

<sup>13</sup> Though Elizabeth Langland acknowledges the importance of women's roles in class politics, she limits her discussion to class and patriarchal distributions of power rather than exploring larger hegemonic influences. See Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995.

Likewise, though Deborah Gorham examines the function of the domestic angel within the middle class household, her argument is limited to women's specific roles within the household, rather than how that function served the larger hegemonic structure. See The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982. Elaine Showalter, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also formulate their theories of femininity in relation to patriarchal limitations and masculine literary traditions. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, New Haven: Yale UP, 1979; and Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977.

- <sup>14</sup> McClintock goes on to argue that advertisements “figure[d] imperialism as coming into being through *domesticity*” (32). That England in the guise of the global domestic angel spread civilization through domesticity. Further, McClintock argues that “the colonies . . . became a theater for exhibiting the Victorian cult of domesticity” (34).
- <sup>15</sup> While the poem was very popular in its day, becoming, according to Jerome Buckley and George Woods “a conspicuous bestseller” (994), the term coined by Patmore came to represent the subjection of women to not only feminist critics of the Victorian period, but to later feminists as well. Virginia Woolf, in her landmark essay “Professions for Women,” uses the angel in the house metaphor to dramatize her own oppression.
- <sup>16</sup> A perspective typified particularly in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century when upper class women had more freedoms: those freedoms that come with wealth. Indeed, these women were in hindsight viewed through the lens of middle class morality which conceived of the upper class as having loose morals at best.
- <sup>17</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s lengthy collection of sonnets entitled “The House of Life” reflects how ingrained within hegemony the ideology of the domestic angel continued to be into the 1880s. He offers an enraptured vision of the domestic angel under the stanza heading “True Woman—I. Herself.” He says “Heaven’s own screen/ Hides her soul’s purest depth and loveliest glow” (537). The next sonnet “True Woman—2. Her Love” continues on, saying “her infinite soul is Love,’ And he her lodestar . . . . Lo! They are one. With wifely breast to breast/ and circling arms, she welcomes all command” (537). From Poetry of the Victorian Period. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Ed. Jerome Hamilton Buckley and George Benjamin Woods. Harper Collins, 1965.

- <sup>18</sup> Woman—Nation—State, Ed. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989, presents a significant collection of essays which discuss the magnitude of the family unit and women's reproductive function in the promotion and preservation of empire and race. See also The Incorporated Wife, edited by Hilary Callan and Shirley Ardener, London: Croom Helm, 1984.
- <sup>19</sup> Anne McClintock discusses Frantz Fanon's rejection of the "Western metaphor of the nation as family," saying that Fanon challenges the conception of the "naturalness of nationalism as a domestic genealogy" (360). For both Fanon and McClintock, the metaphor of the patriarchal family was the foundation for empire: "military violence and the authority of a centralized state borrow and enlarge the domestication of gender power within the family" (McClintock 360).
- <sup>20</sup> Greg's solution to the problem is to transport these women to the colonies to become wives to British colonists who need women to build civilized British homes in the frontiers.
- <sup>21</sup> Nancy Fix Anderson writes in Woman Against Women in Victorian England: A Life of Eliza Lynn Linton,

The only work for middle-class "redundant women" . . . was as governesses. To provide better training for governesses and to improve the standards of teaching, Queen's College was founded in 1848 and Bedford College in 1849. A Society for the Employment of Women was established in 1857 to open new avenues of work for women. In the same year, the English Woman's Journal, edited by Bessie Parkes and . . .

Matilda Hays, was founded as a forum to discuss the changing role of women, and to campaign for improvements in women's status and opportunities. (96)

The efforts to solve the problem of redundant women only exacerbated the subversion of the domestic angel ideal by creating schools and increasing employment opportunities to further take them out of the home and the domestic sphere.

<sup>22</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton satirizes the inherent selfishness of the girls who admire romanticized independence in her essay "The Girl of the Period." Linton criticizes the trend of selfish independence in young girls. She says "the girl of the period does not please men. She pleases them as little as she elevates them; and how little she does that, the class of women she has taken as her models of itself testifies" (173). Frances Power Cobbe, while acknowledging the prevailing sentiment that "marriage is, indeed, the happiest and best condition for mankind," immediately argues that since unhappy marriages are deleterious to society, that women should not be expected to enter into loveless marriages. Instead she suggests female independence as a means to create marriages and decrease the number of redundant women in English society:

let the employments of women be raised and multiplied as much as possible, let their labour be as fairly remunerated, let their education be pushed as high, let their whole position be made as healthy and happy as possible, and there will come out once more, here as in every other department of life, the triumph of the Divine laws of our nature. (87)

Or in other words, an increase in happy marriages, solving the problem of redundant women. “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?” 1862. ‘Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors’: Victorian Writing by Women on Women. Ed. Susan Hamilton. Ontario: Broadview P, 1996. 85-107.

<sup>23</sup> While the metamorphosis of this perception of women probably began in the eighteenth century as the usefulness of women in the angelic subject role began to become apparent, once Victoria ascended the throne, it was no longer hegemonically prudent to discredit the female sex.

<sup>24</sup> Joan Perkin makes a similar assertion, saying

Many women who left a record of their feelings actually welcomed marriage as an emotionally satisfying and indeed emancipating experience. Even those we would call feminists were often ambivalent in their attitudes. Freedom is a relative concept, and for many women marriage meant release from a childlike and humiliating dependence on parents. It offered the possibility, on however unequal terms, to create a home and family of one’s own and, surprisingly, the chance to go about and make separate friends, even ones of the opposite sex. (75)

<sup>25</sup> The characteristics most often associated with Victorian manliness include the ability to argue and reason, forceful opinions, independent thinking, and dispassionate logic.

<sup>26</sup> At the same time, there was growing political agitation to make wives less financially dependent on their husbands, and to allow them separate property under the law. At that time, if a woman’s purse was stolen, her husband was considered the victim as the

owner of the stolen property. Women were not entitled to their own earnings. If her husband deserted her, he was still entitled to all her money. For further discussion of women and their legal position within society, see Joan Perkin, Victorian Women, New York: New York UP, 1993; Mary Lyndon Shanley, Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895, London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1989; and Maeve E. Doggett, Marriage, Wife-Beating and the Law in Victorian England, Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1993.