

## Chapter V

### Accounting for the Gaps

*I read a score of books on womanhood  
To prove, if women do not think at all,  
They may teach thinking, (to a maiden aunt  
Or else the author)—books demonstrating  
Their right of comprehending husband's talk  
When not too deep, and even of answering  
With pretty 'may it please you,' or 'so it is,'—  
Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,  
Particular worth and general missionariness,  
As long as they keep quiet by the fire  
And never say 'no' when the world says 'ay,'  
For that is fatal—their angelic reach  
Of virtue, Chiefly used to sit and darn,  
And fatten household sinners,—their, in brief,  
Potential faculty in everything  
Of abdicating power in it: she [Aurora's aunt] owned  
She liked a woman to be womanly,  
And English women, She thanked God and sighed,  
(Some people always sigh in thanking God)  
Were models to the universe.  
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh 14-15)*

#### *Elements of Resistance*

In the previous chapter, I posed the question: did these five novels tend to serve hegemonic goals of feminine construction or did they function as resistance? I have shown that these novels did in fact encourage cooperation and compliance with hegemonic codes of womanhood. All three of the women characters who were revealed

to be unredeemably monstrous, whose transgressions threaten their various discourse cells, are permanently removed. The deaths of Isabel Vane Carlyle, Bessie Keith and Lady Audley serve not only as cautionary signifiers of absolute retribution, but also their removal from their individual situations results in discursive stability and tranquillity. Meanwhile, the women represented as angelic are richly rewarded in domestic specie: Rachel, Helen, Barbara, Clara, and Alicia are all happily married, their families and communities prospering as a result of their adherence to hegemonic standards of true femininity. Thus monsters and angels are presented in oppositional terms; female readers are encouraged to emulate and identify with the angelic characters, while the monstrous women function as deterrents to abject behavior. In an overall reading, these novels support and deploy hegemonic standards of femininity.

Yet as Lyn Pycket notes, “nineteenth-century discourses on woman were deeply contradictory,” a point corroborated by all five of the novels which comprise this study (Improper 19). To categorize these novels in such black and white terms—hegemonically supportive or resistant—denies both the rich texture of the novels, and the nature of the novel, a genre which infiltrates culture transdiscursively, and therefore cannot support all available ideological constructions. Each of these novels acknowledges mounting cultural concerns surrounding women and the contradictions inherent in the domestic angel ideology. In the characters of Lady Portmore and Mrs. Douglas, Eden reveals that monstrous women may prosper within the panoptical power pyramid structure, accruing power and extending influence despite exhibitions of unfeminine behavior. Nor is she alone in acknowledging the existence of such women. Certainly Woods’ Miss Corny

falls into a similar category, as does Mrs. Hare and Yonge's Mrs. Curtis. Though Lady Portmore is by far the most egregious and unsympathetic offender, each of the other women characters reveal in themselves shades of monstrosity, ranging from Miss Corny's overbearing interference with Isabel's home to gentle Mrs. Curtis' unmotherly pleasure in Rachel's 'come-uppance': "since her daughter was to have the shock, [Mrs. Curtis was] rather glad to have a witness to the surprise it caused her" (264). Mrs. Douglas spends much of her time in sarcastic contemplation of "almost all her acquaintance," her "mortified vanity curdl[ing] into malevolence" (Eden 21). Lady Mount Severn physically attacks Isabel, forcing her into marriage in order to escape. She is also "vain to her fingers' ends" (Wood 10). She flirts with men, despite being married; Levison's attentions to Isabel "driving her wild" with jealousy (Wood 94). Similarly, Braddon's Alicia has bouts of uncontrollable anger and jealousy, her passions driving her to unfeminine behavior: "She set her face with a sulky determination against any intimacy between herself and the baronet's [her father] young wife; and amiable as that lady was, she found it quite impossible to overcome Miss Alicia's prejudices and dislike; or to convince the spoilt girl that she had not done her a cruel injury in marrying Sir Michael Audley" (5). Alicia gives vent to her passions, ranting about Robert's dilettante approach to life, and finally succumbing to a fit of hysterical tears over her unrequited love for Robert.

Yet despite their monstrous qualities, these women suffer no real punishment. Lady Portmore continues her social escapades, though she is no longer allowed entrance into the Teviot/Eskdale domain. Mrs. Douglas becomes more docile under the influence

of her son-in-law, but is merely “tamed,” her sharp-nature curbed but not cured (284). Miss Corny remains as stubborn, independent, overbearing and forceful at the end as at the beginning of the novel; her only punishment lies in losing her hold over Carlyle, though she continues to have great influence on the community of West Lynne. Lady Mount Severn, though scolded by her husband now and again, nevertheless maintains her life of vanity and flirtation. She continues to engage in the aristocratic social rounds with no apparent loss of stature or reputation for her ties to Levison or her behavior toward Isabel. Mrs. Curtis becomes a happy grandmother, continuing in her reclusive lifestyle with her daughter Grace for company. Alicia becomes engaged to Sir Henry Towers and will soon become influential in his community and household.

These women, who in some cases transgress hegemony in equal measure to those women who are subjected to punitive social measures, continue their habits unmolested and undamaged. The fact of the matter is that these authors recognize a reality which the panoptical power structure seeks to efface. Put simply, in a world where the durability of the social fabric depends on people fulfilling the obligations of their various positions, punishment is a luxury that society cannot really afford. For punishment to be useful, there must be more hegemonic benefit than loss in acknowledging transgression. Excessive punishment undermines the public’s belief in its total domination. Hegemony maintains itself by encouraging the willing participation of its constituent populace and by promoting itself as ontological, which in turn creates a population of “docile bodies” which can “be subjected, used, transformed and improved” to increase each individual’s use-value (136).<sup>1</sup> The prudent application of punishment allows hegemony to reinforce a

public consciousness of panoptical surveillance which in turn generates a pervasive program of self-patrol amongst its constituent population.<sup>2</sup> Ideally, because members participate in self-patrol, there would therefore be no need for punishment “because it is possible to intervene at any moment and because the constant pressure acts even before the offences, mistakes or crimes have been committed” (Foucault, Discipline 206).

However the mid-Victorian hegemony was not a closed system and was thus subject to outside influences (i.e., intrusive ideologies from other hegemonic structures) as well as chance.<sup>3</sup> Some punishment, judiciously administered, was therefore necessary.

Foucault articulates the importance of assigning punishments in relation to their consequences to society, saying “what has to be arranged and calculated are the return effects of punishment on the punishing authority” (Discipline 91). He goes on to expand this statement, saying that “the injury that a crime inflicts upon the social body is the disorder that it introduces into it: the scandal that it gives rise to, the example that it gives, the incitement to repeat it if it is not punished, the possibility of becoming widespread that it bears within it” (Discipline 92). If, for instance, Lady Portmore were punished, perhaps ostracized, her family, friends and the rest of her community would certainly suffer. The taint of scandal and gossip makes women ineligible to marry, and destroys economic and social relationships fundamental to the stability of local and larger discourse cells. In small communities, no one can afford to even associate with the families and friends of the offenders. At the same time, maintaining that sort of ostracism would cause schism and the ecology of the community would be forever crippled, if not destroyed completely. Thus the consequent damage in punishing her would far outweigh

the possible benefits. It is enough that the other characters in the novel recognize and disapprove of her vain self-importance. Because no one seems inclined to follow her example, Lady Portmore's improprieties can be overlooked. This is only possible because her transgressions against hegemony have not resulted in imitation by other women, and because she maintains a general appearance of conformity to the bounds of acceptable behavior.

The same could be said for the rest of the listed women. The quality and influence of their monstrous behavior has not proved to have 'infected' other women, and the stability of their communities depends on continuing social trust in them, in the believed integrity of the network of authorized agency. It is no coincidence that Mrs. Curtis, Mrs. Douglas, Lady Portmore and Miss Corny are older and have established themselves as authorized agents of their various communities. Any punishment inflicted on them would ripple out into the community causing social upheaval. Unlike Isabel or Lady Audley, the nature of whose transgressions already threaten to destroy their families and communities, and therefore disqualify them from holding agency positions, these other women continue to serve hegemony in important ways. Thus they are to a certain extent protected by their social standing and assigned pyramidal agency. This protection reveals the critical and effaced element of class which underlies hegemonic systems of containment and control. Most authorized agents are members of the wealthy and/or social elite of their communities. Their wealth and status corroborate their power and authority in the public consciousness, lending them credibility. Certainly if they were poor, and by implication with negligible status on the power pyramid, their punishment

would not undermine hegemony and they would be subject to exemplary punishment.<sup>4</sup>

Their rank, both social and pyramidal, insulates them from punishment and allows them a certain range of transgression.

Yonge's and Braddon's emphasis on the lack of opportunities available to single women also challenges the domestic angel ideology. Both Yonge's Rachel and Braddon's Lucy Audley begin their novels complaining about the limitations placed upon single middle class women.<sup>5</sup> Neither have husbands to support them, and Lucy has a son and profligate father for whom she must provide. Marriage is an unlikely prospect for both of them; therefore, given the domestic angel ideology establishing marriage as fundamental to femininity, both find themselves marginalized with negligible cultural worth. Rachel, unmarried at twenty-five years old, considers herself an old maid: redundant. She tells her sister that they are "the maiden sisters of Avonmouth, husband and wife to one another" (1). Believing that her twenty-fifth birthday will mark a "turning-point when this submissive girlhood ought to close, and the privileges of acting as well as thinking for herself ought to be assumed," Rachel is soon disappointed (7). What she discovers is that a proper single woman has no real opportunities for work, and her attempts at social reform prove both ridiculous and disastrous, from her essays on curatolary to her children's school.<sup>6</sup> But for local "prejudice" against her as a single woman (15), she claims she might have done more good for her community with her homeopathy, her superior leadership skills, and teaching abilities. She finds herself impeded and mocked, with no delegated authority to take charge, to lead or to care for others.

Yet despite Yonge's criticisms of Rachel, she sympathizes not only with her objects of social reform, but also with a single woman's limitations. Ermine earns her living through writing essays for the same *Traveller* magazine to which Rachel submits her essays, revealing Yonge's sympathy for and awareness of the plight of women who have neither traditional means of support, nor any real hope of marriage. At the same time, though Rachel and Ermine in the end find love, marriage and motherhood, neither Grace nor Alison ever do. They fade into the background, Grace remaining a companion to her mother, while Alison serves out her days as a governess, a profession which Rachel decries as abusive. She says "Is it not flagrant abuse . . . that whether she have a vocation or not, every woman of a certain rank [middle-class or above], who wishes to gain her own livelihood, must needs become a governess? A nursery-maid must have a vocation, but an educated or half-educated woman has no choice; and [sic] educator she must become, to her own detriment, and that of her victims" (16).<sup>7</sup> Even as she promotes the traditional roles of femininity in her portrayal of Rachel and Ermine, Yonge recognizes the harm which befalls both women and society when women are forced into roles for which they may not be suited or desire, but which they must take up as the only available means of self-support. Indeed Alison "had to turn governess" to support Ermine, herself, and their niece Rose (38). And though she demonstrates a 'natural talent' for the job, Rachel's inept attempt to manage Fanny's children only emphasizes Yonge's assertion that not all women are qualified to fill such a role.

Braddon condemns the governess profession with equal vehemence. Though Lucy Graham is introduced to the reader as appearing "as if she had not higher aspiration



in the world than” to act as a governess “all the rest of her life” (5), it is soon made clear that she despises the job. Yet she has no other legitimate work options available to her; her survival depends on becoming a governess. Her life has consisted of nothing but “poverty, poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations” (10-11). Leaving her “heir to her father’s poverty,” George Talboys abandons his wife to an impossible situation (19). Lucy’s desperate solution was “to run away from this wretched home which [her] slavery supported” (353). She then turns to governess work. That she finds the work intolerable becomes evident when she triumphantly says to herself after accepting Michael Audley’s proposal, “no more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations” (12). Her attempts at murder and arson stem more from a desire to escape the constrictive life of a single woman than from the wealth and position she has achieved.<sup>8</sup>

Braddon’s portrayal of Lady Audley is largely sympathetic. Her legitimate options are destroyed, leaving only criminal options. She is driven by social circumstances to commit bigamy, murder, and arson. Lyn Pycket writes that “the irony is that all of Lucy’s actions are aimed at those ends which were recommended to all middle-class girls: achieving and maintaining a socially acceptable and financially secure marriage, and keeping up appearances” (*Sensation Novel* 53-4). Braddon challenges the feminine ideal, creating in Lady Audley both a “charitable, childlike, genteel” angel, and a “cold, calculating, resourceful” monster (*Sensation Novel* 53). Lucy Audley is a woman devoted to fulfilling the hegemonic obligations of marriage, no matter what obstacles are put in her way, acting in “rational self-interest to protect her livelihood” (Cvetkovich 48).

Elaine Showalter states that Lady Audley's "career and the careers of other sensation heroines of the 1860s make a strong statement about the way women confined to the home would take out their frustrations upon the family itself" ("Desperate 5). I would argue that it was not the frustrations of the home which created these heroines, but rather the oppressive limitations of the domestic angel ideology which led to their marginalization, like that of many women who did not fit the narrow definition of true womanhood. Lady Audley's lack of remorse or repentance for her actions seem horrific to Robert Audley, but perfectly understandable to a woman reader who knows how easy it would be to lose her position and family and to become Helen Talboys: a woman burdened with a child, abandoned by her husband, enslaved by her father, without money nor means to make any. Lady Audley's attraction for women readers lies in the control she takes of her life, control denied to respectable or proper women. Domestic angels are completely dependent creatures by definition, and so, like Clara Talboys, they must wait for others to act on their behalf. But as Lady Audley's predicament shows, there is precious little recourse available to the domestic angel who has no one else to act for her, whose father and husband renege on their duties to her.

Cvetkovich argues that East Lynne's challenge to the domestic angel ideology comes in Wood's underlying assertion that "patriarchal culture does violence to women by forcing them to hide their feelings, and that the expression of those feelings will alleviate their suffering" (98). Because hegemony equates passions and feelings with the monstrous abject, constructing true femininity around a fundamental essence of passionlessness, Wood's portrayal of the feminine repression of natural feminine feeling

reveals “a world of psychic pain” inherent in women’s daily lives (Cvetkovich 98). As with Braddon’s Lady’s Audley’s Secret, women readers identify with Wood’s characters, seeing their own emotional experiences reflected back from the novel’s pages. In Isabel, Wood articulates female dependence as the source of emotional disturbance and all of its consequences: “Isabel is depicted as a woman who can only respond emotionally to the conditions of her life because she is prevented from overt action. . . . Isabel’s powerlessness stems from her economic dependence first on her father [then on Lord Mount Severn and his wife] and then on her husband” (Cvetkovich 101). Uniting with the cultural conspiracy of feminine passionlessness is the hegemonic legislation against female selfishness. Thus Isabel’s emotions are doubly monstrous: that she has them at all, and that they are self-centered. For instance, when Miss Corny takes control of her household, her complaint to Carlyle rings of selfish personal concern and emotional trespass: “Isabel had then hinted to her husband that they might be happier if they lived alone, hinted it with a changing cheek and beating heart, as if she were committing a wrong upon Miss Carlyle” (141). Her “changing cheek and beating heart” indicate a loss of emotional control as a result of a selfish desire to rid her home of her husband’s sister. Though justified in her desire to get rid of Miss Corny and the “galling subjection” (141) imposed on her by the other woman, her request that Miss Corny leave reveals a monstrous self-concern transcending what should be her first priority: the welfare and happiness of her husband. She makes her complaint believing that the departure of Miss Corny will result in economic injury to her husband. Isabel believes herself to be an “incubus” to Carlyle, a “ruinous expense . . . entailed upon the family,” an expense which

Miss Cornelia's presence offsets since "that lady contributed a liberal share to the maintenance of the household" (141). By seeking Miss Corny's removal, Isabel knowingly puts her husband at further economic risk rather than tolerate a difficult situation.

Because a woman's emotions are categorized as abnormal, they do not qualify for examination or consideration, thus reinforcing the ideology of normative feminine passionlessness. Yet by focusing on Isabel's emotional motivation for abandoning her husband and children and then returning to their home in disguise, Wood suggests that emotions merit consideration, refusing to dismiss them as unimportant or nonexistent. The drama and detail devoted to exploring her emotional state indicates its relevance to Wood in her portrayal of Isabel's fall. Cvetkovich explains that "the reader is presented with the spectacle of her interior life, gaining access to the private and invisible drama that goes unnoticed by those around her" (101). In fact that drama not only goes unnoticed, but is culturally effaced as nonexistent, or when finally revealed, is deemed monstrous and aberrant. Cvetkovich goes on to argue that "her position dramatizes for the reader the emotional costs of women's economic dependence, which forces them to accept hardships without complaint" (101). Such a dramatization allows women readers to recognize themselves, to identify in Isabel's circumstances aspects of their own lives and sufferings. In doing so, they learn to acknowledge the reality and validity of their suppressed emotional lives: "by identifying with Isabel, the reader can express the pain she might feel about the necessity of her own silent endurance" (Cvetkovich 103).

Though eventually Cvetkovich argues that East Lynne and Isabel's story reinforce true femininity by shifting the blame for her actions onto "a series of unfortunate 'circumstances,' . . . [and thus] avoid the extent to which her problems are caused by her social position as a woman" (104), the novel's acceptance and validation of feminine feelings and passions undermine the domestic angel ideology, suggesting to its readers that such emotions are, if not normal, then at least widely shared, rather than anomalous (and monstrous).

In these novels then, we have elements of resistance and challenge to the domestic angel ideology, even as the authors support and deploy that ideology. These writers manifest a critical awareness of the gaps between the domestic angel ideology and reality, yet ultimately work to preserve this narrow, constrictive definition of true femininity. To understand better the contradiction inherent in this, we turn finally to Margaret Oliphant's Miss Marjoribanks. This novel exhibits an unique meta-awareness of the function of women within the power pyramid while similarly criticizing and supporting the domestic angel ideology. Such a meta-awareness highlights the rationale behind her endorsement. Though she acknowledges the artificiality and limitations of the hegemonically constructed female role, at the same time she dismisses them as inconsequential against the greater needs of society. More overtly than the other novelists of this study, Oliphant locates the domestic angel ideology as a function of hegemonic exigency, establishing society's priority over individual feminine considerations, and accounting for the continued strength of the domestic angel ideology within Victorian culture despite multiple challenges to its oppressive restrictions.



*Putting on a Costume*

Margaret Oliphant's Miss Marjoribanks (1866) ostensibly falls into the realm of domestic realism, as might be expected from her harsh condemnations of sensational fiction. Oliphant castigates sensation novels as "worthless" ("Novels" 260). She says they require only a "very small amount of literary skill" to write and show hardly "any real inventive genius . . . good taste, or elegance, or perception of character" ("Novels" 261). However, though a domestic realist writer, like Yonge, Oliphant introduces elements associated with sensationalism such as fraud, disguise and revelation, and romantic intrigue, though always with the aim of character development and her moral message. That message might be best summed up as follows: every person in a community, but most particularly women, must devote themselves to fulfilling their socially mandated roles; to do otherwise not only invites, but ensures social decay and eventual destruction.

Miss Marjoribanks begins with the death of Lucilla Marjoribanks' mother, whom her husband Dr. Marjoribanks termed "an incapable bride" (67). An invalid for many years, she finally succumbs to illness. Thus, at the age of fifteen, Lucilla returns home from school to attend her mother's funeral, fully intending to take over the care of her father's home and see to his comfort and well being: she "was going home to be a comfort to her widowed father, and meant to sacrifice herself to his happiness" (27). In a tearful declaration of purpose, she tells him:

I was only a silly girl the other day, but *this* has made me a women.

Though I can never, never hope to take dear mamma's place, and be—

all—that she was to you, still I feel I can be a comfort to you if you will let me. You shall not see me cry anymore . . . . I will never give way to my feelings. I will ask for no companions—nor—nor anything. As for pleasure, that is all over. Oh, papa, you shall never see me regret anything, or wish for anything. I will give up everything in the world to be a comfort to you. (30-1)

Despite the melodramatic sentiment and childish affectation of her self-abnegation, Lucilla reveals here the foundation for the domestic angel role she will adopt in her future life. She wishes to remain in her father's household and 'be a comfort' to him, and is willing to forget her own pleasures, feelings and social life toward that service. That willingness to sacrifice herself personally for the good of others becomes the hallmark of her social influence as the novel develops. Lucilla chooses personal sacrifice in service to the greater good. Of particular importance here is that Oliphant emphasizes the element of choice over ontological impetus. Lucilla, as we will see, *chooses* to adopt the role of the domestic angel. She does not become one by virtue of inherent feminine traits, or because she is driven by social constraints. Rather, she recognizes not only the importance of the domestic angel's social function, but also the desperate need within her own community for someone to fill that position. Thus she claims duty as her motivational impetus in taking on the "reorganisation" of Carlingford, as its "affairs [are] in an utterly chaotic state" (41).

After her dramatically poignant declaration, Lucilla's father packs her back to school, saying "I am not prepared to say that the responsibility of having you here without



a mother to take care of you, and all your lessons interrupted, would not neutralise any comfort you might be” (32). Nor is he willing to sacrifice his own newfound freedom to his daughter who, in her emotional application to stay, reveals:

the same qualities which had wearied his life out [in his wife], and brought his youthful affections to an untimely end. Lucilla, was, it is true, as different from her mother as summer from winter; but Dr. Marjoribanks had no means of knowing that his daughter was only doing her duty by him in his widowhood, according to a programme of filial devotion resolved upon, in accordance with the best models, some days before. (31).

Even at fifteen years old, Lucilla resolves upon a strategic plan of action which coheres with the ideology of the domestic angel. Elizabeth Jay comments in a literary biography of Oliphant that “the ‘principles’ by which Lucilla guides her life are in fact pragmatic strategies rather than ethical convictions” (Oliphant 70). That Oliphant couches Lucilla’s decision in terms of strategic planning and not feminine instinct or hegemonic coercion reveals her position on the ‘woman question.’ For Oliphant, it does not matter whether women are by nature domestic angels, or whether they adopt the role self-consciously. What is important is that women adhere to the hegemonically constructed model of true femininity in service to her community and by implication, nation.<sup>9</sup> In her 1858 essay, “The Condition of Women” in which she rejects the feminist assertion that “one-half of the English women of the present time” will not be able to marry, but must find a means of supporting themselves (212), Oliphant argues that there is “one sphere and kind of

work for a man and another for a woman. He [God] has given them different constitutions, different organisations,” each suited to his or her own sphere (217). She goes on to say that “every human creature is bound to do his or her duty . . . whether it has the solace of love to sweeten it or no. It may seem a frightful doctrine, yet it is the merest dictate of ordinary sense and wisdom” (220). For Oliphant, separate spheres not only exist, but are the proper way of the world. At the same time, there are particular duties attached to each sphere, specific roles for each person to fill within society, which she argues must be filled, even if the role proves difficult. Her portrayal of Lucilla and her assumption of her domestic duties reflects this conviction.

Four years after her mother’s death, Lucilla returns from school and a subsequent grand tour of Europe. She has devoted her education to preparing to assume the domestic angel role in her father’s household and her community, taking a course in political economy which provides her with domestic management skills. Aside from providing a comfort to her father, her goal is to “revolutionise society in Carlingford” (36), which was in an “entirely disorganised condition” (41). To Lucilla, once she accepts the role of the domestic angel and the duties attached to that role, “even her own prospects . . . [are] as nothing to her in comparison with the good of society” (175). She explains to Rose Lake that there is “perfect reasonableness, and indeed necessity, of sacrificing herself to the public interests of the community” though “enjoying it . . . is quite a different matter” (179). And her community needs her talents for social organization. As the narrator explains, “affairs [in Carlingford] were in an utterly chaotic state at the period when this record commences. There was nothing which could be properly called a centre in the

entire town. To be sure, Grange Lane was inhabited, as at present, by the best families in Carlingford; but then, without organisation, what good does it do to have a number of people together?" (41-2). The reader is given to understand that the society of Carlingford is aimless, lacking cohesion and direction.<sup>10</sup> Lucilla intends to correct that.

Immediately upon her return, Lucilla begins upon her "great mission" (45), setting about uniting the disparate peoples of her community into a harmonious whole. She first takes control of her father's household, though without any indication of avarice or selfishness which might be categorized as monstrous. On her first morning back home, she usurps his position at the breakfast table in order to serve him, as is appropriate for to do as the new mistress of the house. Her father, though "stricken dumb by this unparalleled audacity," allows her do so, becoming "aware all the same that he had abdicated, without knowing it, and that the reins of state had been smilingly withdrawn from his unconscious hands" (50). Moments later she commandeers the rest of the household tasks, asserting her feminine duty, preempting her father's objections by declaring that "he is not to be troubled about anything" in their home (51). She quickly learns to entertain her father, pointedly seeking his physical and emotional comfort. She tells the cook that "he must have been very desolate, with no one to talk to, though he has been so good and kind and self-sacrificing in leaving me to get every advantage [during the previous four years of her schooling]; but I mean to make it up to him, now I've come home" (52). Though Lucilla understands that Dr. Marjoribanks might be inclined to refuse her help, it does not matter. She says "it is the worse for him if he does not understand; but that does not make any difference to my duty" to him (93). She has

chosen to accept the role of the domestic angel in all its facets as a means of serving her father and community, and she will cohere to that role, no matter what resistance her father might make. Yet as a result of her desire to create a pleasant home and relieve him of domestic care, he soon begins to participate in the traditional domestic life which he had avoided since his wife died. In fact, by the third night of her return, Dr. Marjoribanks has for the third time joined Lucilla upstairs for tea following their evening meal, rather than remaining downstairs to smoke cigars and drink his liquor in bachelor fashion (89). Thus Lucilla begins to domesticate her father's household even as she sets her sights on Carlingford.

Her campaign begins by instigating a regular social gathering for the people of Grange Lane. Her Thursday evening festivities are designed to encourage social relationships, with Lucilla carefully managing the situation. Though these evenings might be viewed by a larger world as trivial, in terms of stabilizing and integrating the community of Carlingford they are essential. There are no other avenues for social interaction on this scale, and thus through Lucilla's Thursday evening gatherings, "the limits of society . . . [are] extended miraculously beyond the magic circle of Grange lane" (124). She strengthens individual and communal relationships, invigorating community participation and interest in one another and eventually in politics. Before long, her "Thursday evening" become "an institution in Carlingford" (125). Her home and careful social management become the "centre of society" (405). She brings "light and progress" to the "chaos" of Carlingford society, engendering vitality and stability in the stagnant and decaying community (498-9).

One fact that indicates the level of decay which had permeated through the community comes in the revelation of Mr. Cavendish's deception (and though little is made of it, of Mrs. Woodburn, his sister). Mr. Cavendish and Mrs. Woodburn have long claimed kinship to the Cavendishes, an influential family in British society. As a result, they are considered people "of great consideration in Grange Lane," enough so that it is assumed that he will shortly become the local Member of Parliament once the current Member retires. Yet as attendance of important local figures increases at Lucilla's Thursday evening gatherings, it is revealed that Mr. Cavendish has rather a sordid skeleton in his closet: he has very low social connections and is not related to the Cavendishes at all.

Mr. Beverley, an Archdeacon, delivers a story which implicates Mr. Cavendish in fraud, robbery and murder. Though he does not reveal the particulars, and no one besides Lucilla suspects that he refers to Mr. Cavendish, the possibility that it might be the town's favorite son generates the menace of terrible repercussions to the social economy. Quickly Lucilla drives to the heart of the issue: "if it could by any possibility turn out that the man of whom Mr. Beverley was speaking had ever been received in society in Carlingford, then it would be a dreadful blow to the community, and destroy public confidence forever in the social leaders" (171). And indeed, while much of the story proves untrue, in reality Mr. Cavendish has perpetrated a fraud of his name and social standing on the community, a fraud for which he cannot be forgiven. or ever again be allowed to achieve any measure of authorized agency within the community. Lucilla sums up the situation in terms of community stability and hegemonic preservation: "if it

should come to pass that an adventurer had been received into the best society of Carlingford, and that the best judges had not been able to discriminate between the false and true, how could any one expect that Grange Lane would continue to confide its most important arrangements to such incompetent hands?" (172). The Carlingford discourse cell depends upon the integrity and competence of their authorized agents, those who comprise "the best society of Carlingford." They have been designated authorized agents because they have proven themselves, earning the trust of their constituency. But with the revelation of Mr. Cavendish's deception, the question arises: if these elite, these authorized agents of hegemony, these "best judges," could not discern that Mr. Cavendish was lying; if they accepted his word (as obviously they did) when "describing himself, no doubt, very truthfully, as one of the Cavendishes" (44), then could their judgment of *anything* be trusted?

Thus, like Michael Audley with Lucy Graham, like Rachel with Mr. Mauleverer, like Mr. Carlyle with his wife Isabel, the ruling agents of Carlingford reveal themselves to be inadequate and incompetent to perform their basic duties. In fact, Cavendish acknowledges that he used their gullibility as a means of foisting himself on a better class of society, of accruing social capital: "when Carlingford signed his patent of gentility, and acknowledged and prized him, it did an infinite deal more than it had any intention of doing" (285). It elevated him in the power pyramid, crediting him with more social capital than he had earned, and thus authorized him to a level of authority which he was qualified neither to hold nor wield. His incompetence is revealed in his obsessive fascination for Barbara Lake, a lower class woman who, had his agency been authentic,

he would never have considered worthy of his attention. He exposes his true self in his attentions to her, and in his consequent snubs to Lucilla who is a far more appropriate and socially acceptable match for him.

It is a confirmation of his true self, his actual place on the power pyramid, when Lucilla acknowledges that, having been discovered, he can now aspire no higher than Barbara Lake, the daughter of the local drawing-master: “Lucilla became regretfully conscious that now no fate higher than Barbara was possible for the unfortunate man who might once, and with hope, have aspired to herself” (296). At the same time, Lucilla will work to protect her community from his romantic scheming: “Miss Marjoribanks was too well aware of her duty to her friends, and to her position in society, to have given her consent to his marriage with anybody’s daughter in Grange Lane” (297). Yet in her effort to preserve the stability of the community and limit the damage Mr. Beverley seeks to do in denouncing Mr. Cavendish, Lucilla, knowing that “she might possibly be going to harm herself in benefiting others” (298), insinuates a romantic attachment between herself and Mr. Cavendish to Mr. Beverley, who “could not publicly expose the man who had just received this mark of confidence from his young hostess” (309). Using her authority as a domestic angel, Lucilla prevents Mr. Beverley’s “Berserker madness” from destroying what she has built (312). He “dared not follow his natural impulses, nor even do what he felt to be his duty, for fear of Miss Marjoribanks, which was about the highest testimony to the value of social influence that could be given” (312). Lucilla is aware that the information concerning Mr. Cavendish’s background must be revealed; however

she manipulates the situation in order to defuse as much of the danger as she can, all in service to the preservation of the discourse cell.

Throughout the novel, Lucilla performs her duties according to the ideological code of the domestic angel. Yet Oliphant makes it clear in the language she uses to describe Lucilla that her heroine makes a conscious choice to adhere to the proper feminine. After Mr. Cavendish's secret is revealed (without damage to the local ecology of power and authority), the narrator sums up Lucilla's actions in the matter:

She had made a sacrifice, and nobody appreciated it. Instead of choosing a position which pleased her imagination, and suited her energies, and did not go against her heart, Lucilla, moved by the wisest discretion, had decided, not without regret, to give it up. She had sacrificed her own inclination, and a sphere in which her abilities would have had the fullest scope, to what she believed to be the general good. (332).

The language of the description reveals a woman driven not by instinctive self-sacrifice, humility, morality and passionlessness, but a woman who chooses to perform according to those standards for the "general good," adopting a pattern of behavior and appearance for a purpose. In the earlier course of her Thursday evening gatherings, when she had originally considered Mr. Cavendish a possible match, he began his obsession with Barbara Lake, much to the indignation of Lucilla's friends who found him to be "flirting in an inexcusable manner with Miss Lake" (121). Yet Lucilla, aware that fostering that burgeoning relationship could very well lead to her own loss of a suitor, chose to "prefer . . . her great work to her personal sentiments . . . [and] sent away the gentleman



who was paying attention to her, in company with the girl who was paying attention to him,” for the greater good (120).

At the same time, Lucilla adjusts her behavior according to “the prejudices of society” (76). She tells her father that she “must have a chaperone” because society requires one, and she “always make[s] it a point to give in to the prejudices of society” (72). According to Lucilla, this conformity to social expectations is at the root of her domestic successes. Yet once again, this adherence to hegemonically mandated codes of behavior is not a result of ontological femininity, but of Lucilla’s conscious adoption of the domestic angel role. Likewise, she makes conscious efforts to “make an example” (62), and thus when she first meets Mrs. Woodburn, a woman who mocks her friends through mimicry, Lucilla refuses to allow the other woman to attack the gentle and elderly Mrs. Chiley. Later, during a visit to Mrs. Woodburn, when the other woman repeats the offense, this time mimicking Lucilla’s neighbor Miss Brown, Lucilla responds similarly: “she felt in her heart that, representing public interest as she did, it was her duty to avoid all complicity in any attack upon an individual; and consequently, to a certain extent, it was her duty also to put Mrs. Woodburn down” (111).

In the end, Lucilla’s awareness of not only the power, but more importantly, the responsibility of the domestic angel within a community drives her to consciously adopt the role as though she were putting on a costume. As she says, “they might be ungrateful, or even unaware of all she was doing for them, but they had the supreme claim of Need upon Strength; and Miss Marjoribanks. . . was loyal to that appeal” (266). The domestic angel then, is fundamental to the stability and preservation of family, community and

hegemony. Despite Merryn Williams' claim that "what [Lucilla] really wants . . . is a power base in her father's house from which she can dominate her neighbours," Oliphant's consistent repetition of the importance of duty, sacrifice, and service belie any assertion of selfishness for Lucilla (161). Rather Oliphant sees the domestic angel in terms of her responsibilities, Lucilla "doing what they [the matrons of Carlingford] ought to have done" (118). Her strength is a reflection of her willingness to perform her duties appropriately. She accepts that "the wives and mothers . . . [have] charge of Their [male relatives] morality" and should "[strive] hard to keep them in the right way" (158). Oliphant applauds Lucilla's initiative in serving her family and community, the combination of her strength and boldness in taking up her chosen "career," and her dedication to giving the community the "ruling spirit" which will energize and heal its tattered fabric. As she points out in her "Novels" essay, "there can be no possible doubt that the wickedness of man is less ruinous, less disastrous to the world in general, than the wickedness of woman. That is the climax of all misfortunes to the race" (275). A woman's failure to take up her hegemonically assigned duties can only lead to racial destruction. Thus for Oliphant, Lucilla's energy and drive to actively pursue her duties and obligations serves society—hegemony—best.

Yet despite Oliphant's obvious support for the domestic angel—even though she resists the ideology which postulates a woman's ontological angelic characteristics, choosing instead to make the role a choice of public duty, a rational choice for any 'good' woman—she articulates a concern for the single woman in society, particularly the single woman without money.

After her father's death, Lucilla discovers that she has been left destitute, a financial crash ruining her father just prior to his death. As a result, she finds herself without the means to perform the duties of her chosen role. Without an attachment to a masculine authorized agent, without the personal authorization which comes with marriage, Lucilla suddenly becomes a redundant woman. Indeed the Rector recommends to her "parish work . . . as 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). Her aunt recommends that she take in boarders, while Rose encourages her to turn her home into a "House of Mercy" (433). After all, in social terms, she "was now *only* [my italics] a single woman" (404). Moving from social savior to something of very little social worth in the matter of a single night, Lucilla loses all authorized agency. She has not changed; her sense of duty and obligations remain as strong as ever. Thus Oliphant comments ironically on a society which would dismiss one of its best and brightest over her lack of a masculine appendage.

### *The Victorian Angel*

Joan Perkin writes in her study Victorian Women, that

the ideal of most middle-class wives was to organize their households as efficiently as their husbands organized their businesses, thus making a substantial contribution to the family's well-being . . . and also to become the morally superior partner in the marriage. . . . [Women] needed to guard the citadel of respectability. . . . they had also to establish peace,

love and unselfishness, not only for themselves and their children, but also for [society]. . . . In short, women (particularly middle-class women) were to regenerate society. (87)

Oliphant's characterization of Lucilla coincides with Perkin's description of the feminine role, particularly in its sense of a woman's active assertion of herself within her hegemonically allotted domestic domain: she must "guard," "establish," "regenerate," and "organize." On the other hand, the distinctly masculine initiative and leadership qualities exhibited by Lucilla which Oliphant promotes as feminine, are described as monstrous in the characters of Lady Audley, Rachel Curtis, and Miss Corny. Those qualities are relegated to the feminine abject because women do not have the intellectual capacity use them safely and appropriately, and because women are susceptible to their emotions. Mary Poovey writes that Victorian ideology suggested that this susceptibility to the feminine abject resulted in the need for "the control that was the other face of [masculine] protection [and which was] integral to the separation of spheres and everything that followed from it. . . . [since] women were governed not by reason (like men), but by something else, then they could hardly be expected (or allowed)" to be trusted with unregulated power (11). Thus ironically, Lucilla Marjoribanks, for all her conformity to the tenets of the domestic angel ideology, symbolizes the kind of independent woman which feminists hailed as antithetical to the hegemonically coded feminine ideal. Rather, in her independence, rationality, leadership, and superiority, she becomes the adverse of the submissive, self-effacing, dependent woman promoted by conservative traditionalists.<sup>11</sup>

Oliphant portrays Lucilla with gentle satire. Her tone is slightly mocking, narrating Lucilla's social nurturing in the language of a mock epic. Lucilla's social plans become a "campaign" (99). She is a "revolutionary," challenging the stagnation and decay of her community (100). She is a "conqueror" (109). Her two spinster neighbors become "dangerous" as Lucilla worries about them taking pictures of her newly redecorated drawing-room (99). Barbara, Lucilla's 'enemy,' is described in equally lavish terms: "Barbara was the soldier of fortune who had to open the oyster with her sword" (103). When Barbara tempts Mr. Cavendish from Lucilla's side, the narrator describes the scene in the heroic language of political intrigue:

Just then, when she [Lucilla] could not put on a new ribbon, or do her hair in a different style, without all Carlingford knowing of it—at that epoch of intoxication and triumph the danger came, sudden, appalling, and unlooked for. If Lucilla was staggered by the encounter, she never showed it, but met the difficulty like a woman of mettle, and scorned to flinch. It had come to be summer weather when the final day arrived upon which Mr Cavendish forgot himself altogether, and went over to the insidious enemy [Barbara] whom Miss Marjoribanks had been nourishing in her bosom. Fifty eyes were upon Lucilla watching her conduct at that critical moment. . . . (134)

The heroically sentimental language of this kind of description permeates through the novel and contrasts sharply with Lucilla's own emotional equilibrium.<sup>12</sup> The irony emphasizes Lucilla's pragmatism in adopting her feminine role. Elisabeth Jay writes that

“Lucilla consciously embraces the ideal of womanhood and determines to embody that ‘picture of angelic sweetness and goodness’ ” (Oliphant 69). Further, Jay writes that Oliphant believed “many girls derived their expectations of life and their role models from fiction. Working on this assumption Mrs Oliphant decided that it would be the business of her fiction to provide role models that did not glamorize a woman’s lot” (Oliphant 55). Lucilla’s pragmatism, despite the heroic language of the novel, provides a model of femininity which represents Oliphant’s ideal of true womanhood. Further, Jay explains that the irony of Oliphant’s narrative tone highlights “the discrepancy between the idealized vision of life, which occupies a portion of most people’s thinking, and the compromises, accommodations, and failures that characterize awkward reality” (220). Deploring sentimental novels which leads girls astray, Oliphant creates her own version of the sentimental novel in which the heroine remains pragmatic and practical in the midst of dramatically romanticized plot twists.<sup>13</sup>

Merryn Williams argues that Oliphant “makes the serious point that no talented young woman can go on amusing herself with dinner parties forever” (“Feminist” 170). Indeed, after ten years in her role as Carlingford’s social leader, Lucilla discovers that “she had outlived the occupations that were sufficient for her youth,” and has “become conscious that her capabilities [are] greater than her work” (395). Having accomplished her goals and nursed the community back to health, Lucilla is left without sufficient challenge for her abilities. Yet rather than agitating for greater opportunities for women in the public sphere as William’s contends, Oliphant locates Lucilla’s limitations in her yet-unfulfilled femininity. Shortly after this passage, Lucilla begins to contemplate

marriage, a step she has been unwilling to take for ten years. Once engaged, she realizes a new horizon of opportunities, “carry[ing] light and progress” to her new home at Marchbank and the surrounding county (499). These new opportunities involve similar domestic services to those she has long provided to Carlingford, and become available only with marriage, indicating that Oliphant continues to promote and encourage the ideology of the domestic angel. Q.D. Leavis writes that “we have reason to conclude that Mrs Oliphant’s purpose in writing this novel was to campaign against false Victorian values where women are concerned” (150). Leavis goes on to say that even though Oliphant did not support the “kind of emancipation of women that John Stuart Mill stood for” (150), she, like Yonge, supported a version of the domestic angel ideology which promoted usefulness and practicality for women—*within the domestic sphere*. Jay confirms this when she writes “ [Oliphant] remained of the opinion that women were most fulfilled in marriage, family responsibilities, or, when needs must, in the types of employment which most nearly replicated these condition” (49). In other words, for Oliphant, women were most happy (and most useful) when fulfilling the role of the domestic angel.

Taken together, these five novels strongly support the domestic angel ideology, reinforcing the connection between the safety and preservation of the community and nation, and with the stability and perpetuation of the domestic sphere. Despite elements of resistance, despite clear concerns about the limitations of the role and the lack of options available for unmarried women or so-called redundant women, these novels

privilege the needs of the larger society over “special instances” (Oliphant “Condition” 211).



### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Discipline and Punish, Foucault discusses how methods of discipline created docile bodies in both 18<sup>th</sup> century French military and political settings. He articulates four methods of approach to discipline: distribution, control of activity, organization of geneses, and composition of forces (135-169). Foucault stresses that these methods of discipline were forms of domination, differentiated from other forms of discipline (vassalage, monastic, service) because they increase “the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (138). The “exercise of discipline” and the creation of docile bodies depends on “a mechanism that coerces by means of observation” (170).
- <sup>2</sup> “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault, Discipline 202-3).
- <sup>3</sup> In the appendix to Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault discusses “chance as a category in the production of events” (231).
- <sup>4</sup> Terry Eagleton argues that “the function of ideology, also, is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society; . . . the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class” (5). In the case of Victorian hegemony, the ruling class held the highest agency position on the power pyramid.
- <sup>5</sup> Though Lucy (as Helen Talboys) is certainly already married, as Lucy she masquerades as a single woman. Because, until Michael Audley proposes marriage, she clearly has

no intent to commit bigamy, her situation at the beginning of the novel is very much akin to Rachel's. She faces a future of spinsterhood..

<sup>6</sup> Rachel defines curatolatry rather sententiously and vaguely as “that sickly mixture of flirtation and hero worship, with a religious daub as a salve to the conscience” (50). She reveals a suspicion of religion (a suspicion which keeps her from accepting Alick's proposal since she knows his beliefs are firm).

<sup>7</sup> Rachel's sentiments echo those of Florence Nightingale in “Cassandra.”

<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that Lucy does not enjoy or desire her newfound wealth and position. Indeed she does, spending liberal amounts of money on clothing, jewelry, perfumes, household decorations and other things she could not previously afford.

<sup>9</sup> In “The Condition of Women,” Oliphant argues that the what affects women in Britain, “affect[s] generally the whole race,” specifically both men and women—all of society (218).

<sup>10</sup> In terms of middle class values which promote social usefulness and active service, Carlingford is an example of indolence and lethargy, and rather than maintaining hegemony, it will provide grounds for social disease to take root, as will be discussed further in this chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Critics of Oliphant's Miss Marjoribanks, like Merryyn Williams cited in this text, adamantly argue that Oliphant was an ardent feminist whose novels promoted an enlightened femininity. Williams says that thought it “would be a mistake to typecast her as a forerunner of present-day Women's Liberationists” (166), in Oliphant's writings, there “is a strong undertow of deep personal feeling” which challenged

patriarchal oppression of women (“Feminist” 171). Williams points to Oliphant’s Kirsteen (1890), a novel in which the heroine “remains a spinster” and “makes the family’s fortune, fulfilling the pattern of success normally reserved for men” (“Feminist” 176-7).

<sup>12</sup> As Q.D Leavis remarks, Lucilla is not without feeling, but her emotions are well-contained (141-43).

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Tom’s initial proposal, Lucilla’s first party, Mrs. Mortimer’s fainting attack, the public revelation of Mr. Cavendish’s deception, and Tom’s return to Carlingford in the nick of time (despite his mother’s attempt to prevent it)