Fallen Bodies and Discursive Recoveries in British Women’s Writing of the Long Nineteenth Century

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

My dissertation argues that nineteenth-century British women writers’ understanding of embodied female experience as disabling enabled their feminist interventions in the discourse of women’s “fallenness.” Using insights from feminist disability theory, I consider how throughout the nineteenth century, femininity, disability, and fallenness (a category often understood as indicative of violations of sexual standards, but encompassing a number of transgressive female identities) are discursively constructed as conditions similarly “out of control.” My study focuses upon four women writers of the long nineteenth century (Mary Robinson, Amelia Opie, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Harriet Martineau) who speak for or as fallen women in their texts—a potentially risky choice at a time when women’s professional authorship already carried associations of prostitution. My project connects this textual adoption of fallen subject positions to the writers’ first-hand experiential knowledge of female embodiment as disabling (in terms of both physical impairments and societal barriers), and thus with their own negotiations of potentially “fallen” reputations and identities. Creating, modeling, and advocating for female communities and cooperation between “proper” and “improper” women in their texts is, I argue, a conscious rhetorical strategy through which these writers expose the culturally fabricated scripts that surround the variously “fallen” body. These projects allow women writers to both recover control of personal narratives, and ultimately open up discursive spaces that allow a critique of—and importantly, offer readers ways to
challenge—the limited gender ideologies to which so many other nineteenth-century women are subjected. Through these very means, many of the social conditions that disable women’s bodies are also combated. Thus, I argue, the experience of female embodiment as disability actually enables the possibility of large-scale feminist activism.
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Introduction: Recovering Control

This study begins, in a way, with an end: the death of Mary Wollstonecraft and the rapid posthumous fall of her reputation. On the morning of September 10, 1797, Wollstonecraft died of childbirth complications after giving birth to her second daughter (the future Mary Shelley). She had suffered for ten days from the excruciating effects of puerperal fever before finally succumbing to the infection, leaving behind two children, her widower William Godwin, and an established legacy as a writer, social philosopher, and fairly respectable public personage.¹

This respectability would be shattered, however, just four months later, when Godwin published a biographical account of his wife’s life and work entitled Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman. This text was printed along with the companion edition Posthumous Works, edited by Godwin and featuring selections of Wollstonecraft’s unpublished and unfinished writing. Though intended as a loving memorial of a virtuous life lived according to radical principles, Godwin’s Memoirs had a number of unforeseen consequences. In keeping with his cherished tenet of complete frankness, Godwin revealed a number of facts about his wife that scandalized readers,

¹ Upon their initial publication, Wollstonecraft’s works were met with either general approval or quiet dismissal, depending upon the political leanings of the reviewer; as R.M. Janes writes of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, “Most reviewers took it to be a sensible treatise on female education and ignored those recommendations in the work that might unsettle the relations between the sexes” (294). Only after her death were Wollstonecraft’s texts, and in turn her life and private behaviors, subject to an onslaught of vituperative personal attacks. For an extended discussion of Wollstonecraft’s early respectability and its posthumous reversal, see Janes, “On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft’s: A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” Journal of the History of Ideas 39.2 (1978): 293-302.
including accounts of Wollstonecraft’s romantic pursuit of the married artist Henry Fuseli, her affair with the American revolutionary Gilbert Imlay, the illegitimate birth of her first daughter Fanny, her suicide attempts, the sexual relationship she conducted with Godwin prior to their marriage, and the minute details of her slow and painful death. The content of Posthumous Works did little to appease the shocked audience either, as it included Wollstonecraft’s love letters to Imlay, and, more significantly, the unfinished novel Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman, which featured a heroine who, locked in a madhouse after trying to leave her husband, enters into an extramarital affair with a fellow inmate and befriends a former prostitute. As Claire Tomalin notes, together the Memoirs and Posthumous Works thus appeared to vindicate divorce and excuse adultery through not only Godwin’s words but Wollstonecraft’s own as well (232).

Rather than publicly preserve her legacy as an influential thinker, reformer, and woman worthy of emulation, then, Godwin’s biographical project effectively made Wollstonecraft into a “public” woman of the most notorious kind: a fallen figure of transgressive sexuality and apparent immorality, whose supposed “philosophy” could now be read by detractors as licentiousness and vice in disguise. Robert Southey’s famous complaint that Godwin had succeeded in “stripping his dead wife naked” is fitting, considering that through Memoirs Wollstonecraft’s life and body were exposed

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2 In their introduction to the Broadview edition of the Memoirs, Pamela Clemit and G.L. Walker discuss the ways in which the “unprecedented biographical frankness” Godwin employed throughout Memoirs was “an attempt to enact in the public sphere the revolutionary doctrine of sincerity” he had advocated in all his major philosophical work, particularly 1793’s An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (11). See Clemit and Walker, Introduction, Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman (Peterborough, ON: Broadview 2001) 11-36.

and available to all who wanted to access them, to satisfy either prurient interest or condemnatory impulses; it is in this vein that the *Anti-Jacobin Review* notoriously indexed Wollstonecraft’s name under “Prostitution” in 1798. Further, the very manner of her death appeared distinctly tied to her fallen female body, which had taken on painful and decidedly “monstrous” alterations as it rotted from the inside out in her last agonizing days. Puerperal fever was the common though ambiguous diagnosis for an eighteenth-century childbed infection, caused by the internal mortification of part of the placenta that had failed to deliver. In Wollstonecraft’s case, it developed into fatal septicemia, accompanied by bodily horrors of a distended frame, shaking fits, malodorous discharges, and decaying flesh; in *Memoirs*, Godwin also recounts puppies suckling infected milk from Wollstonecraft’s painfully swollen breasts. The shocking physicality of her demise, with all its contaminating, mutating, and uncontrollable aspects, was cited by many commentators as an appropriate embodiment of Wollstonecraft’s pathological nature.

Richard Polwhele most famously articulated this view in a footnote to his 1798 poem *The Unsex’d Females*, in which he observed of Wollstonecraft:

> I cannot but think, that the Hand of Providence is visible, in her life, her death, and in the Memoirs themselves. As she was given up to her “heart’s lusts,” and let

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5 Physician John Clarke, one of the doctors who attended Wollstonecraft in her last days, outlined the terrifying physiological experiences of women suffering from puerperal fever in one of his medical publications, explaining that “discharges become of a very bad colour, very large in quantity, and abominably offensive to the smell […] the countenance assumes a pale and sallow cast, and the woman loses flesh daily […] and] eyes become glassy [and…] pale, as do also the tongue and lips” (99-100). See Clarke, *Practical essays on the management of pregnancy and labour; and on the inflammatory and febrile diseases of lying-in women. By John Clarke,* … (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1793). For Godwin’s account of “procuring] puppies to draw off the milk” (116) see *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2001).
“to follow her own imaginations,” that the fallacy of her doctrines and the effects of an irreligious conduct, might be manifested to the world; and as she died a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the destiny of women, and the diseases to which they are liable […]. (29-30)

In Polwhele’s estimation, Wollstonecraft’s—and potentially any woman’s—destiny was to become a body out of control, specifically because she failed to adhere to established scripts of socially-acceptable female behavior, and thus reign in her presumably naturally pathological femininity. In an era in which medical and lay discourses maintained that feminine nature was determined by the female reproductive system, which was in turn thought inextricably linked to illness and mental instability, Wollstonecraft’s death appears to make manifest the equation of femaleness with disease and disorder. Vivien Jones has noted that Wollstonecraft’s death is marked by a number of “ideological ironies” (187) and this is surely one; the woman who actively resisted a construction of woman as all body, “born only to procreate and rot” (Wollstonecraft 180), succumbed to this very fate.

Additionally, in the wake of Godwin’s Memoirs, Wollstonecraft’s protofeminist writings were made indistinguishable from the kind of infection that killed her. In a satirical poem printed in 1801, the Anti-Jacobin described her Vindication of the Rights of Woman as a decidedly contaminating text: “Lucky the maid that on her volume pores,/ A scripture, archly fram’d, for propagating w___s” (qtd. in Eberle Chastity 55). Just as she lost control of her body on her deathbed, Wollstonecraft also lost control of her public

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message; the fact that, when published nine years earlier, *Vindication* had included specific advice against indulgence in sexual desire was lost beneath the new insistence that the dissemination of such a work literally produced “whores.” Even Godwin’s well-meaning editorial and biographical efforts also contributed to the distortion and diminishment of Wollstonecraft’s own words, as *Memoirs* generally romanticized Wollstonecraft as a tragic heroine in possession of a uniquely feminine emotionality, thus downplaying her inchoate liberal feminism, her commitment to reason, and her intellectual development.⁷ The fragmented state of *Maria*, framed by Godwin’s preface and concluding suggestions of how the story might have ended, perhaps most sadly literalizes Wollstonecraft’s loss of control. The final pages of the narrative, with its depiction of female oppression and its potential vision of the saving power of female solidarity, breaks off into detached sentences and scattered notes, left incomplete once the author’s body failed her.⁸

And just as a liberated, reformative female community remains unrealized in *Maria*, the backlash surrounding *Memoirs* threatened to thwart its realization among Wollstonecraft’s peers as well. Although Roxanne Eberle has demonstrated that a small group of women writers including Mary Hays, Priscilla Wakefield, and Mary Ann Radcliffe promoted a celebratory response to Wollstonecraft’s life and writings in the years immediately following her death (*Chastity* 56-7), the image of Wollstonecraft as a

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⁸ The published version of *Maria* included five “scattered heads,” to use Godwin’s term, for the continuation of the story; the longest and most fully developed of these ends with the vision of an alternative family composed solely of women (Maria, her companion Jemima, and Maria’s daughter).
fallen sexual transgressor and propagator of “whores” ultimately proved injurious to the possibility of liberal feminist activism in the early years of the nineteenth century. Even women who were inclined to agree with her ideas were forced to distance themselves publicly from her reputation, or risk being labeled with the same fallen associations.⁹

For women who were writers, such distancing would have seemed especially necessary, since by virtue of their profession they already ran the risk of being seen as fallen women. As numerous scholarly accounts of nineteenth-century female authorship have detailed, the associations between a fallen woman like the prostitute (made “public” by unsanctioned exchange of her body) and a professional woman writer (whose intellectual body of work, also exchanged for monetary gain, propelled her out of the private sphere) were never far removed. Both figures troubled the gendered public/private boundaries upon which nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology relied. Since the 1970s, several influential studies have considered the various strategies women writers employed in order to deal with their precarious social standing, from inhibition, to accommodation, to subversion. Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Sandra M. Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) initiated discussions of the professional woman writer’s internalized conflicts. Showalter

⁹ In *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988), Claudia Johnson clarifies that Wollstonecraft’s work did indeed influence women writers well past her death; however, this influence could not be openly avowed, and was even denied outright by women worried they would otherwise be labeled a “treasonous Jacobin,” or worse (xxiii). Johnson writes, “No woman novelist, even among the most progressive, wished to be discredited by association with Mary Wollstonecraft”; women writers who hoped to produce works of protofeminist social criticism could only do so by “various means of indirection” (xxiii-xxiv). Eleanor Ty makes a similar claim in *Unsex’d Revolutionaries*, in which she observes that many 1790s writers developed indirect narrative techniques and methods of representation to explore highly charged political topics without being specifically recognized and thus ridiculed as followers of Wollstonecraft. See Ty, *Unsex’d Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s* (Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1993) 20.
considers how women “worked to atone for their own will to write” by excusing their authorship as part of female self-sacrifice and household duties (undertaken, for instance, to feed one’s children), rather than acts of unfeminine independence (21), while Gilbert and Gubar’s landmark account of the “anxiety of authorship” explores the artistic and personal consequences of the common nineteenth-century assumption that undertaking authorship as a woman potentially meant “becoming an ‘unsexed’ or perversely sexed female” (35). Other foundational works of feminist literary criticism have examined the ways in which women writers negotiated existing expectations of propriety by appearing to conform to and advocate domestic ideology in their texts.  

Mary Poovey’s *The Proper Lady and The Woman Writer* (1984) offers a full-length study of the ideology of feminine propriety in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and of women writers’ responses to it; she demonstrates how by maintaining an apparent adherence to propriety in the content and tone of their works, writers like Jane Austen gained an indirect and therefore acceptable expression of self-assertion. Similarly, Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) argues that women writers working from within bourgeois ideology to produce properly “domestic” or “feminine” fiction effectively ensured the rise and consolidation of the middle class; they were thus empowered by their adherence to propriety, and their production of scripts of cultural hegemony. Catherine Gallagher’s more recent work in *Nobody’s Story* (1994) delves deeper into the rhetorical strategies early women writers employed in consciously constructing particular authorial identities,

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10 And of course, some types of women’s writing were always more socially acceptable than others; women writing texts intended for the education of children, or for the “moral improvement” of female readers, would be less subject to public scrutiny or condemnation than those attempting other modes or genres.
often in order to maintain putative “authentic” selves kept free from “public” contamination (16).

This concern over “contamination”—that a woman might be negatively “tainted” by her participation in the public sphere—also applied to the products of a woman’s pen. Just as Wollstonecraft was accused of “propagating whores” with her protofeminist texts, euphemistically “public” women and professional women writers both appeared to represent monstrous capabilities of literal and metaphoric polluted reproductions. If prostitutes are potential agents of disease, women writers—especially those who dare to articulate and disseminate information that “proper” ladies are not accustomed, or supposed, to know—are potential agents of mental and moral (and thus widespread social) disorder.¹¹ Nineteenth-century descriptions of prostitutes as offensively infectious “publications” reveal the way both fallen women and women writers could be seen as linked causes and effects of cultural contaminations.¹²

¹¹ Ruth Yeazell’s *Fictions of Modesty* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1984) outlines the ways in which eighteenth-century conduct books considered a woman’s “mental virginity” regarding the realities of sex nearly as important as her physical virginity, as “one kind of deflowering would lead by imperceptible stages to the other” (52). In *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995), Jill Matus discusses how Victorian commentators like W.R. Greg insisted that if women did dare write about sexuality, they do so only with “partial” knowledge because the truth of the “science of sexual affections” belongs to the male domain of knowledge; hence, women risk spreading information that is “dangerous and misleading” to their readers (14). The very fact that Greg expresses this concern, however, illustrates a larger point: that female-authored representations of sexuality in literature “could alter and influence the way the way such matters were understood, a fact that clearly provoked some anxiety in Victorian culture” (Matus 13). This central idea—that women could offer a discourse no less constructive of female ideology than that of the discourse propagated by male cultural authorities (e.g., biomedical discourse)—is important to my own argument regarding how women writers work to “rewrite” the fallen body.

¹² In *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*, Amanda Anderson details Victorian commentary against “allowing prostitutes to parade on public streets or appear at public events, lest they exert a corrupting influence on all who see them,” and considers rhetorical links between discussions of “pollution of the page”—obscene advertisements, erotic fiction, etc—with the prostitute’s “offensive publication of herself” (59).
Regardless of the particular strategy that a woman writer of this era may have undertaken, then, to adopt and promote a “respectable” self-representation, it would appear to require presenting oneself as an appropriately feminine inhabitant of the domestic sphere, and explicitly distancing one’s own life and artistic productions from those of “improper” women. My project, however, focuses on those writers who, despite the specter of Wollstonecraft and her maligned reputation, choose to do the opposite. That is, this dissertation considers women writers who rather than distance themselves from their fallen doubles, consciously speak for or as fallen women in their texts, purposely aligning their work and themselves with the very associations they presumably ought to avoid. These authors seek an alternative to championing their own feminine propriety and condemning the perceived moral failings of other members of their sex. Instead, through texts that variously model, create, and advocate for female communities and cooperation between “respectable” and “fallen” women, the writers I examine encourage an identification, rather than rejection, between the “proper woman” and the very women her propriety demands she shun.

In light of the dangerous accusations of impropriety to which all professional women were potentially liable, the question inevitably arises as to why some writers would choose to advocate for figures whose “monstrous” outsider status and multivalent threats of “contagion” ought to automatically preclude them from possible identification or connection with anyone, let alone proper women (the nation’s presumed domestic
protectors). To answer this question, I turn to the issue of embodiment and, as I outline below, the insights of feminist disability theory. By examining various works by four women across the long nineteenth century—namely, Mary Robinson, Amelia Opie, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Harriet Martineau—I consider how women writers’ understanding of their own physical female body potentially contributed to their conscious interventions in the discourse of fallenness. Poovey observes that “the terms in which femininity is publicly formulated dictates, in large measure, the way femaleness is subjectively experienced” (x); for the nineteenth-century woman, I argue, this experience is one of equivalent disability and fallenness.

Although earlier cultural commentary on the female sex described its members as consumed by bodily appetites, throughout the eighteenth century images of inherently libidinous women were paradoxically paired with the conventional dictate that “the well-bred young woman feels no lust at all” (Spacks 46). By the turn of the nineteenth century, middle-class women’s respectability had come about by a decided elision of the body: “proper” women were to be seen as “more nearly spiritual presences than human beings” (Poovey 14). Therefore, in a society in which being a “proper” woman means that one is compelled to deny embodiment, undergoing the very physical experiences by which one

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13 As Poovey (among others) outlines, women’s propriety is aligned with issues of personal and national “security” in nineteenth-century rhetoric; for instance, by remaining “chaste” and consequently ensuring legitimate transmissions of wealth, women “protect the property upon which the destiny of both individuals and an entire society depended” (7). Central to the familiar “Angel of the House” trope is woman’s protective power over the home: a man returns from his (possibly contaminating) labors in the public sphere to be spiritually refreshed by his domestic angel. Likewise, by acting as “superintendents of ‘religious principle’ and exemplars of ‘public morals,’” “proper” women contribute to the protection of “all that is valuable in England,” and help ensure the spread of such values abroad (Poovey 33). In Torrid Zones, Felicity Nussbaum discusses how regulating women’s sexuality was part of a process designed to protect and legislate “racial purity” as well (2).
was defined as female (particularly, those involved in reproduction\textsuperscript{14}) could carry unbidden yet undeniable shades of impropriety. The literal messiness—blood and bodily fluids, physical metamorphoses and unmanageable pain—that often accompanied experiences like childbirth, miscarriage, or gynecological processes forcefully reminded women (and the inevitable witnesses to these “private” scenes) that they possessed not only bodies, but bodies that were sometimes dramatically out of their control.

Furthermore, the fact that these experiences could—and in the lives of several of the authors who feature in the following chapters, did—result in more permanently “disabling” conditions adds yet another level of body consciousness with which women must contend. In multiple ways, disability, as Martha Stoddard Holmes explains, makes visible that which will not (yet for nineteenth-century women, \textit{must}) disappear: “the body and its sensations and needs” (x). Disability also historically carried many of the same associations, and even consequences, as feminine “fallenness.” As critics like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Helen Deutsch, and Felicity Nussbaum have all observed, femininity was regarded since Aristotle’s time as a “natural monstrosity.” In line with this thinking, a “morally monstrous” public woman has perhaps merely succumbed to her “defective”

\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England} (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988), Mary Poovey outlines the ways in which late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical discourse began to represent the differences between male and female bodies as a series of binary oppositions (as opposed to the hierarchical physiological homology of older sex-difference models, like those of Galen) by “foregrounding the role of the reproductive system” (6). Women thus came to be defined by their reproductive processes, and consequently “maternal instinct” came to be considered woman’s definitive characteristic. Importantly, women’s sexual pleasure was (contrary to earlier theories) no longer seen as necessary to reproduction and maternity. For more on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reinterpretation of the female body in relation to that of the male, the treatment of the ovaries and their processes as “the essence of femininity itself” (27), and of the diminished emphasis on female sexual pleasure, see also Thomas Laqueur’s “The Politics of Reproductive Biology” (1-41) in \textit{The Making of The Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century}, Eds. Catherine Gallagher and Laqueur (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987).
Garland-Thomson observes that women who depart from mandates of femininity are also equated to disabled bodies; Victorian medical illustrations of pathologically “love deficient” (that is, physically ugly) women devalue them with the language of abnormality, while women whose bodies betray “too much” femininity (e.g., pronounced sexual characteristics, unusual fertility) are considered “ungovernable, intemperate, or threatening,” and ultimately expendable (80-1). The “contamination” that public women’s bodies threatened to the larger social body, at the level of both improper example and actual disease, also has its echoes in the fears of the “degeneration” or “pollution” that were often linked to disability. The nineteenth-century medical community’s perceived right to examine, exchange, and at times literally own disabled bodies has disturbing similarities to “public” fallen woman’s experience of violation and dispossession as well, in the case of the 1860s Contagious Diseases Acts.16 Moreover, just as Amanda Anderson has demonstrated how nineteenth-century anxieties of “fallenness” were often less about the specific threat posed by transgressive sexuality

15 Aristotle discusses the female body in terms of “improper form” and “mutilated males”; Garland-Thomson observes that Aristotle thus makes women the “primal freaks” (78). See also Helen Deutsch’s and Felicity Nussbaum’s work on eighteenth-century sexual difference and “aberration” in the introduction to Defects: Engendering the Modern Body (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000), especially pp. 10-12. In her own considerations of eighteenth-century notions of transgressive female sexuality (particularly in relation to the perceived “savage” women of the British empire) in Torrid Zones, Nussbaum has also discussed “monstrous” representations of women (especially prostitutes) (100).

16 My discussion of the similar discursive constructions of gender and disability also has obvious applications to the discursive construction of race, as this point about “ownership” of bodies (particularly considering the import of issues of slavery and empire in the nineteenth century) should make clear. For extended discussions the ways in which discourses of gender, disability, and race intersect in the nineteenth century, especially in the experiences of women, see Christine C. Ferguson’s “The Missing Link and the Hairy Belle: Krao and the Victorian Discourses of Evolution, Imperialism, and Primitive Sexuality” (134-154), and Rebecca Stern’s “Our Bear Women, Ourselves: Affiliating with Julia Pastrana” (200-234) in Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Victorian Britain, ed. Marlene Tromp (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2008).
than about “the attenuated autonomy and fractured identity of the fallen figure” (2), disability was (and is) likewise often perceived as a loss of self-control, and an even more uncomfortable augury of inevitable losses of “self” that are to come for us all.

Additionally, even in the absence of a particular bodily trauma or disease, the ostensibly “normal”—even “ideal”—female body itself could be rendered physically and metaphorically disabled. Sally Shuttleworth has discussed the ways in which nineteenth-century medical discourse sought to demonstrate not only “woman’s biological fitness and adaptation to the sacred role of homemaker,” but also her simultaneous subjection to more dangerous bodily forces (76). As one Victorian-era textbook read, “Woman, with her exalted spiritualism, is more forcibly under the control of matter; […] in her, a hysterical predisposition is incessantly predominating from the dawn of puberty” (qtd. in Shuttleworth 76). The same body that makes one fitted to be an angel, then, also constantly threatens to erupt with corruptive energies. Attempts to embody ideal femininity could also physically alter a woman’s body in debilitating ways. In her Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft famously rails against women’s enforced dependency and weakness, claiming that such “unnatural” cultural scripts actually resulted in the very “defective” bodies they purported to originate from. Criticizing everything from the constraining clothes to the fashionable “puny appetites” that keep women weak, Wollstonecraft insists that “false notions of beauty and delicacy

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17 Anderson goes on to explain how “autonomy” is a fraught claim for all women, when only normative masculine identities were seen as capable of “autonomous action, enlightened rationality, and self-control” (13). Therefore, both conceptions of feminine virtue and fallenness share the problematic attribute of diminished selfhood (42).
18 “Disability also makes visible that which must disappear, despite our best efforts: the body that is impermanent and will die” (Holmes x).
stop the growth of [women’s] limbs and produce a sickly soreness, rather than delicacy of organs” (156, 246). These same scripts, she suggests, also work against the propriety they purport to enact, making women more “alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers” (109). In their considerations of common Victorian beauty practices like tight-lacing and vinegar drinking along with general prescriptions of feminine self-renunciation, Gilbert and Gubar expand upon Wollstonecraft’s points by observing that “nineteenth-century culture seems to have actually admonished women to be ill,” and that “the ‘female diseases’ from which Victorian women suffered were not always byproducts of their training in femininity; they were the goals of such training” (54). Such “training” supports Iris Marion Young’s statement that “women in sexist society are physically handicapped” by the very expectations of what constitutes a “normal” woman (42).

Thus we see the particularly discursive character of the nineteenth-century woman’s body and embodied experiences; femininity, disability, and fallenness must be understood as part of complex representational systems rather than localized, personal traits or flaws. However, if these presumed “bodily” qualities are discursively constructed, they might be discursively combated. This, I propose, is what the women writers in my study were especially poised to do. Through novels, short stories, autobiography, biography, letters, and other diverse genres of prose, they intervene in the discourse surrounding female—and hence already fallen, disabled—embodiment, in order to recover control over narratives of their own selves, bodies, and work.

19 Though Young is discussing the contemporary treatment of women, her observations ring true for nineteenth-century British society, particularly as the practices and attitudes toward women that she critiques—the discouragement of women’s athletic abilities, rigid standards of feminine bodily comportment, constant objectification and pressures toward body modification, and the threat of bodily invasion—apply to Western standards of femininity across centuries.
Because for these particular writers, “recovery” becomes an essential, personal point: their writing consistently details first-person experiential knowledge of female embodiment as variously disabled and disabling, by specific physical limitations or impairments, but also as a result of prevailing societal barriers and ideologies of gender.\(^{20}\) Having undergone physical disability, discrimination, or more insidious dangers as a direct result of possessing a female body—or, more accurately, because of the way femaleness is constructed in their society—these women writers turn to the page as a place for recuperation. Sometimes, this recuperation has a literal dimension, as when Robinson publishes witty responses to rumors that she has died from her ailments, or when Martineau recounts the mesmeric recovery of her health in a medical journal. Other times, it involves identifying, challenging, and ultimately rewriting the very societal constructions that disabled them in the first place, as in Gaskell’s revision of “angelic” ideology, or Opie’s choice of virtuous “fallen” heroines in her tales.

The answer to why these writers dare to align themselves (even in sympathy, if not always outright solidarity) publicly with fallen women, then, is that they already understand themselves as such. That is, regardless of their actual sexual conduct, these women writers are also already decidedly “fallen” by virtue of inhabiting bodies that are perceived as fractured, dependent, and incoherent, forever removed from the “autonomy and coherence of the normative masculine subject” that Anderson identifies as the ideal

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\(^{20}\) These writers thereby experience “disability” that would be recognized by both medical and social models of disability (albeit differently). As explained by Tobin Siebers in *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 2008) the medical model defines disability as “a property of the individual that requires medical intervention,” while the social model defines disability “relative to the social and built environment, arguing that disabling environments produce disability in bodies and require interventions at the level of social justice” (25).
The decision to address or even adopt fallen subject positions in their writing is thus reflective of existing affinities, and is often a conscious rhetorical project. Rather than ignore, accept, excuse, or deny their imposed fallenness, the women writers in my study harness their artistic energies in order to expose the culturally fabricated narrative of the fallen body, and thereby recover control over their reputations. As authors whose trade literally involves fabricating narratives and constructing representations through discourse, they need not bow to existing constructs of propriety and fallenness, or of acceptable or outcast female identities. Instead, they rewrite them.

What begin in many cases, though, as narrow projects meant to regain control of personal narratives—to essentially save oneself from a fate like Wollstonecraft’s—I suggest ultimately open up discursive spaces that allow a critique of the limited gender ideologies all women are subject to, whether they are public writers, prostitutes, or proper women at home. By telling (and importantly, defending) fallen women’s stories—rewriting and controlling the “public” selves of otherwise outcasts—these writers lend their strategies of literal self-control to other figures who have been defined by their very lack of such. Perhaps more importantly, they expose the oppressive mechanisms of social control at work in the realities and expectations of all women, proper and improper alike, and offer their readers ways to challenge them. Thus, we can see how the experience of

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21 On a related note, Lennard Davis argues in “Constructing Normalcy” that the very concept of “normalcy” was invented in the nineteenth century. See “Constructing Normalcy” (3-19) in The Disability Studies Reader, ed. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997).
female embodiment as disability actually enables the possibility of large-scale feminist projects, activism, and actual change.

In considering how women writers rewrite the fallen body, my dissertation enters into and builds upon an existing critical conversation about nineteenth-century conceptions of fallenness. In earlier and often Foucauldian analyses of transgressive female sexualities, such as Judith Walkowitz’s *Prostitution in Victorian Society* (1980) and Lynda Nead’s *Myths of Sexuality* (1988), fallenness has been posited as an end-product of mechanistic social control. Amanda Anderson’s *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (1993) turned critical attention to the ways in which fears about fractured selfhood are displaced onto the fallen woman; in her explicitly theoretical study concerned with agency, rhetoric, and intersubjectivity, she reads depictions of fallen women as representative of Victorian anxieties about “the nature of selfhood, character, and society” (1). While Anderson considers depictions of fallenness in male- and female-authored texts, Deborah Anna Logan’s *Fallenness in Victorian Women’s Writing* (1998) offered the first book-length study on the topic of fallen women as presented exclusively from women writers’ perspectives, arguing that thanks to their hegemonic privilege in patriarchal society, nineteenth-century male writers lacked the kind of “experiential perspective” needed to write about fallenness that their female counterparts possessed (11). Logan also complicates previous critics’ more sexually-oriented definitions of fallenness, and instead suggests that the “fallen” category can incorporate any woman who does not manifest the marriage-motherhood ideal. Whereas Anderson and Logan both limit their discussions to mid-Victorian texts,
Roxanne Eberle’s *Chastity and Transgression in Women’s Writing, 1792-1897* (2002) addresses women’s writing from the 1790s through the *fin de siècle* in order to consider how representations of fallenness vary at different moments of political and social unrest across the long nineteenth century. Employing strategies characteristic of narratology, new historicism, and feminist literary criticism, Eberle identifies women writers who “address systemic sexism, moral hypocrisy, and patriarchal privilege” by manipulating the familiar “harlot’s progress” narrative with “interruptive techniques”; she argues that this interruptive discourse ultimately allows these authors “to enter larger public debates about the private versus public function of women” (6-7).

I have drawn from each of these previous studies while writing this dissertation; in conceptualizing and articulating my own argument, Anderson’s equation of fallenness with a feared loss of control, Logan’s case for women’s experiential perspectives on fallenness, and Eberle’s connections between representations of fallen women and early feminist social activism have proven invaluable. My argument is also obviously indebted to critics who have used a Foucauldian lens to consider the disciplinary aspects of the discourses of both fallen and proper femininity. However, my project differs significantly from these other perspectives on fallenness in its specific attention to issues of embodiment—particularly, lived realities of bodies along with representations of and cultural discourse about bodies—and in my use of feminist disability theory. In her important essay “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Garland-

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22 I am interested in how “fallen” bodies (sexually compromised, disabled, female, etc.) are culturally constructed, but also how women writers articulated and/or negotiated the experience of actually living in bodies that have been deemed as such.
Thomson identifies the basic assumptions shared by both feminist and disability theory frameworks (specifically, that the body is invested with socially derived meanings) and the ways the two theories can be used together effectively as a means of critical inquiry. Feminist disability theory, Garland-Thomson explains, goes beyond the explicit disability topics of illness or impairment in order to understand disability “as a pervasive cultural system that stigmatizes certain kinds of bodily variations,” thereby allowing greater inquiry into such “broad feminist concerns as the unity of the category of woman, the status of the lived body, the politics of appearance, the medicalization of the body, privilege of normalcy,” and beyond (75,77).

Feminist disability theory therefore helps us to confront the ways we understand the body as a cultural artifact, produced by various material and discursive “social formations that interpret bodily differences” (Garland-Thomson 75). It provides us with particular conceptual tools with which to analyze how dominant cultural narratives teach women (and men) “what embodiment means, when it is desirable and when it is fearful” (Holmes ix). In this study, I use these and other insights from feminist disability theory in order to consider how the nineteenth-century “fallen” female body was interpreted differently from the “unfallen” one. Some chapters consider the fallen body as material condition. For instance, by analyzing the shared presumed pathology of the fallen and disabled body, I open up new understandings of how the stigma of fallenness could affect otherwise “respectable” and culturally powerful women like Harriet Martineau; this simultaneously offers fresh perspectives on particular writings that have hitherto been judged as anomalies in Martineau’s career. Other chapters explore the meanings
attributed to fallen bodies in literary representations, from Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* to Gaskell’s *Ruth*, and the consequences of those meanings for both the authors and audiences. Throughout, I consider Susan Wendell’s reflections on disability as a valuable form of difference and a source of knowledge. Writing in *The Rejected Body* that “different experiences create the possibility of different perspectives which have epistemic advantages with respect to certain issues” (73), Wendell reveals how those who are “othered” by possessing “out of control” bodies (in societies in which normalcy is associated with the exercise of proper discipline and control over one’s body) can potentially speak back to the narratives that surround them.23

Wendell also warns against the “myth of control” (93); that is, the widespread assumption that a “good” body can and must be controlled. In arguing that writers like Robinson, Opie, Gaskell and Martineau attempt to “recover control,” I do not mean to perpetuate this myth. Nor do I mean to perpetuate dominant conceptions of disability as unequivocal lack or deficiency by saying that women are “disabled” by patriarchal strictures, and risk, as Kim Q. Hall fears, erasing and devaluing the “specificity of disability experiences” (4).24 Instead, I am interested in how these women writers recover the very idea of control, as they seek not to change or discipline their bodies or actions, but instead alter the narrative about those bodies and actions. They rewrite what it means to be a body in or out of control, as we see in Gaskell’s vision of Charlotte Brontë’s disabling self-control. In doing so, they virtually rewrite the notion of “recovery” itself,

23 Here Wendell revises what she sees as problematic aspects of Sandra Harding’s “feminist standpoint epistemologies” (specifically, the assumption that similar experiences always produce similar points of view). For Wendell’s full explanation, see 70-73.
24 Hall finds that “a desire to show that the association of women with disability is unjust to women” means that “justice requires a reclamation and revaluation of woman at the expense of disabled people” (4).
questioning from what one truly needs to recover. In fact, several of the authors featured in this study also redefine disability, re-envisioning bodily conditions that are perceived as experientially restraining and socially devaluing as actually enabling, as when Robinson’s elevates her “invisibility” as an invalid to a privilege, and Martineau identifies the presumed “spoiler” of her life as the impetus for her long career of “usefulness.”

In the following chapters, then, I consider how multiple aspects of the fallen body are written anew, and thus discursively recovered, in work by four women across the span of long nineteenth century. All write in the wake (or during the actual process) of Wollstonecraft’s fall; some knew her personally, even intimately—Robinson and Opie counted themselves among her friends—while others lived in later years when her name had been made synonymous with prostitution. I have chosen to consider this historical period in order to better understand how the discourse of fallenness operated in an era in which the very category of “woman” and questions of women’s rights were under constant debate, as evidenced in the revolutionary-inspired protofeminist rhetoric of the 1790s to the burgeoning women’s suffrage campaign of the late-Victorian period. I also consider a range of prose texts, from formal biographies and memoirs to personal letters, short stories to multivolume novels, political tracts to journalistic pieces. Since I am interested in writers who write for or as fallen women, I have preferred to concentrate either on nonfiction texts that actively discuss fallenness (or express fallen subjectivity), or fiction that attempts to convey an impression of historical reality, often by mimicking the form of biography or memoir. Also, while the nature of my argument—that is, my
interest in how women specifically intervene in discourses about the female body—
requires my concentration on female authors and their texts, I have attempted to avoid the
pitfalls of essentialism by recognizing that for the most part I am considering the social
positions and experiences of a small group of relatively privileged historically-situated
women (that is, white, middle class, British women across nearly a century), and how
these women respond to the dominant social paradigms that affect them, and other
women like them. I also, to paraphrase Martha Stoddard Holmes, understand the female
body not as an “essence” but as a representational effect that helps to constitute the
material bodies in which women live (13). I am interested in the material conditions of
the female body not in the ways that are universalizing, but in the way those conditions
can be construed by discourse as potentially nonnormative and thus isolating.

My dissertation begins with a chapter that demonstrates the complicated
intersections between disabling embodied femininity and literary representations of the
fallen woman. “Invisible Virtue: Mary Robinson’s Transparent Heroines” examines how
Mary Robinson’s 1790s-era fiction represents a unique stage in the author’s own famous
self-fashioning, one in which she works to redefine the very “fallen” exhibitionism she is
so often accused of as evidence of true virtue, thus relocating fallennes in acts of
secrecy, concealment, and constraint. However, while Robinson’s “naturally transparent”
virtuous heroines, like Martha Bradford of The Natural Daughter, pose a challenge to
existing oppressive constructions of fallenness, they are also problematically

25 In this way, my interest in the body differs from that of theorists like Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva, as I
am not claiming a connection between female biology and the production of language, or locating the
inscription of the female body in texts by women. Instead, I am interested in how women’s understanding
of their own embodied experience is affected by rhetorical constructions of gender, and how women
authors respond to these constructions in their writing.
disembodied in their narratives; in fact, the material condition of female bodies emerges as a particular obstacle for the kind of moral transparency Robinson envisions in her texts. I consider these disembodied heroines alongside Robinson’s own autobiographical accounts of disabling embodiment—from early sexual objectification to her later paralysis—and argue that Robinson purposely elevates being “invisible” to a kind of privilege in order to combat equations of her invalidism with negative “obscurity.” Thus Robinson is constantly rewriting her own circumstances and proposed moral systems, working out through her prose intense and interrelated anxieties about embodiment and the necessity for self-display.

The second chapter turns attention to Amelia Opie, whose accepted legacy as a conservative writer and “proper” woman seems a far cry from Robinson’s scandalous reputation. However, much like the first chapter, “Amelia Opie’s Fiction: Contagious and Recuperative Texts” focuses on a woman writer who uses fiction in order to rewrite her own reputation, and in doing so offers a reevaluation of existing definitions of virtue and fallenness. Here I analyze three of Opie’s fictional tales—*The Father and the Daughter*, *Adeline Mowbray*, and *Madeline*—and consider how moral and physical contagion feature repeatedly in these texts. Though stereotypical “fallen” characters initially appear to be the agents of contagion in these narratives, Opie subtly reveals that the actual contaminating forces at work are ideological ones, rooted in society’s constrained and often hypocritical definitions of virtue. Her texts allow for the social and moral recovery of the transgressive woman, and posit that the true need for recuperation lies not in the fallen woman, but in the world that sees her as such. By the very “respectable” works
through which she distances herself from the radical politics of her youth, then, Opie insidiously infects readers with lingering questions about and criticisms of the status quo.

From women writing to recover their own reputations, my third chapter turns to a woman writing to defend the reputation of others. “Such a Strong Wish For Wings’: The Life of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell’s Fallen Angels” reads Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography of her friend and fellow writer Charlotte Brontë in the context of efforts Gaskell made to “rescue” fallen women in her personal philanthropic activities and in her socially-conscious fiction. While Gaskell’s biography has been criticized for depicting Brontë as a stereotypical Victorian “Angel of the House” rather than focusing on her authorship, I argue that Gaskell, conceiving her project as a defense of a fallen woman, models The Life on her previous fictional works like “Lizzie Leigh” and Ruth, in which she works to combat the presumed irrevocable effects of an individual’s “fall” by reinserting the transgressive woman into what she considers an alternative, recuperative discourse of domesticity and home. However, Gaskell’s recuperation of Brontë’s reputation, in which she outlines in detail the mental and physical pain Brontë undergoes in trying to conform to the image of a “proper” woman, also works to reveal the untenability of the “angelic” ideal in real women’s lives. In The Life we thus find Gaskell’s recognition that women may be equally felled by meeting, rather than transgressing, constraining and disabling societal standards of femininity. I argue that the biography can therefore be read not only as an individual defense of a particular fallen woman, but also as defense against the expectations of perfection unfairly thrust upon all women—Gaskell herself included.
Just as the third chapter suggests a new way to read Gaskell’s biography of Brontë, the concluding chapter offers a new way to understand Harriet Martineau’s feminism\(^{26}\) (or, as it is often understood, lack thereof) in the context of the ways in which she controlled narratives of her own embodied experience. “‘The Spoiler of My Life Has Become the Agent of My Usefulness’: Harriet Martineau’s Enabled Feminism” attempts to correct what I see as the scholarly oversight that has prevented Martineau’s writings on mesmerism and her involvement in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s from being considered together, despite the fact that both involve questions of a woman’s rights over her own body and epistemic authority over her own lived experience. I look at how Martineau’s determination to control both the process and the published account of her medical and mesmeric treatments and subsequent recovery led to a public debate in which male medical authorities diagnosed her commitment to self-government as a symptom of a female brain’s dangerous pathology, and promoted an image of Martineau as a fallen woman. I then connect this experience to Martineau’s later

\(^{26}\) In using the term “feminism” here and elsewhere in the dissertation to describe the actions of nineteenth-century women, I am aware I am employing an anachronism, as the first recorded usage of that term in English does not come until the mid-1890s, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*—and even then, it did not have an unambiguous definition. However, I follow the lead of historians like Jane Rendall (*The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France, and the United States, 1780-1860*; London: Macmillan, 1985), Barbara Caine (*English Feminism 1780-1980*), and a number of other scholars of British women’s writing who argue that “feminism” is the most useful word to describe the distinct body of ideas and advocacy concerned with alleviating women’s oppression and expanding their recognized rights that circulated in the long-nineteenth century under other designations like the “condition of women” question. I find the term “feminism” especially appropriate to use when describing how those ideas coalesce into organized social and political action at the end of the Victorian era, as they do in the case of Martineau’s writings for the LNA. I reserve the term “protofeminism” at other points in my introduction particularly to describe the political and philosophical work of Wollstonecraft and its few of her contemporaries, as I agree with Virginia Sapiro that texts like *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* represent “a germinal feminism in process, of a woman struggling with the elements but without the assistance of even a primordial women’s movement” (272). See Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: the Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992).
writings on behalf of the Ladies’ National Association, through which she protested laws regarding the enforced medical examination of prostitutes. This chapter thus outlines how Martineau’s earlier ordeals during the mesmerism debates enabled her to defend the privacy and autonomy of women who were faced with the same kind of excessive, nonconsensual medical scrutiny she had also undergone. In positing private experiences of problematic embodiment as a new lens through which to view of her political writing, I argue for a more expansive understanding of precisely how Martineau’s identity as a disabled woman truly enabled her feminism and authorship overall.

My chapter on Martineau brings to the forefront questions of who has the right to write another’s story, or to speak on behalf of others. These are questions that obviously surround the issue of Wollstonecraft’s legacy as well—why in relating his wife’s story did Godwin fail so spectacularly to anticipate the fallenness with which she would be branded by his portrayal? While there are numerous contributing factors to Godwin’s social myopia, one I want to suggest is that Godwin, writing with the cultural authority and experience of the male writer, did not fully understand the importance of recontextualizing the “fallen” body he was presenting. In looking, as Tilottama Rajan has argued, “to the reader to potentialize the revolutionary idealism in such apparently base occurrences” as Wollstonecraft’s sexual relationships (512), Godwin mistakenly

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27 For example, in explaining Godwin’s “entrenched radicalism, with its high idea of the communicability of the truth” (177), Claire Sheridan writes that “Godwin’s Memoirs are written for a progressive society no longer extant; the text he is engaged in writing is amongst the last of its relics—but he does not know this” (176). See Sheridan, “Being the Last: Widowhood and Outliving the Radical Coteries of the 1790s.”

28 Logan argues that male writers’ comparative privilege (particularly in terms of education, economic status, legal and political representation, and professional acceptance) in relation to their female peers often led to limited recognitions of “the social contexts leading to fallenness in their works” (11). This is not, she points out, an essentialist claim, but rather an observation that “women writers share [a] stigma of fallenness foreign to their male counterparts,” and thus a different perspective from which to write (13).
believes the Wollstonecraft’s body can effectively “speak for itself” in a society in which women, by virtue of their female biology, are not expected or trusted to speak. The only chance to counter the historical subjection of the female body, then, is for women to occupy the subject position actively, (re)writing their own experiences of overlapping femininity, disability, and fallenness, and responding to and revising the cultural scripts that surround them.

Wendell writes of the social deconstruction of disability that “[m]uch, but perhaps not all, of what can be socially constructed can be socially (and not just intellectually) deconstructed, given the means and the will” (45). In keeping with this notion, my dissertation examines how British women of the long nineteenth century, driven by their own experiences of variously disabling female embodiment, utilized the rhetorical means available to them to deconstruct the fallen body. From personal, self-justifying writing like Robinson’s, to Martineau’s works motivated by and towards large-scale legal reform, these writers produce texts that open up possibilities for female communities and activism. Through these very means, many of the social conditions that cast women’s bodies as disabled are also combated. Thus, as I show in my coda, the nineteenth-century woman writer’s will to take back control of the complex discourse of fallenness does not merely recover individual reputations; it enables modern feminism.
Chapter 1:
Invisible Virtue: Mary Robinson’s Transparent Heroines

Perhaps more so than any other late eighteenth-century woman writer, Mary Robinson has the dubious distinction of being conceived by her contemporaries as all body. Despite prolific literary output in nearly every written genre—including poetry, novels, plays, journalism, political tracts, and memoir—over the course of a twenty-five year authorial career, Robinson’s public identity and, later, fame, was consistently and explicitly tied to her corporeal self.

Born Mary Darby in Bristol in the late 1750s, Robinson first garnered public attention not for any discernible talents, but for her mere physical presence: in her posthumously published memoir, she recounts how from her earliest teenaged appearances in public, her “commanding figure” led her to be an object of often unwanted male attention, with “every man a seducer, every hour an hour of accumulating peril” (Memoirs 208). Despite her initial hopes of channeling her attractions into a lucrative career on stage, Robinson’s acting plans were sidetracked by what she would deem the “fatal victory” of her beautiful appearance: her ill-fated marriage to Thomas Robinson in 1773, when she was fifteen years old (Memoirs 208). Like so many other elements of Robinson’s life, the marriage was brought about by the paradoxical

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29 The exact date of Robinson’s birth is disputed; while her Memoirs and tombstone feature 27 November 1758 as her date of birth, baptismal records suggest Robinson was born 27 November 1756. Biographer Paula Byrne argues for a 1757 birth date based upon Robinson’s later letters and statements.
combination of her own body’s perceived strengths and vulnerabilities: Thomas was
drawn to Mary by her personal beauty, but courted her while she lay ill from smallpox,
convincingly insisting upon his “disinterested fondness” even as the “destructive disorder
menaced [her] features” (Memoirs 209), and promising to protect her from the “destined
snares for [her] Honor” that might await her when she recovered (Memoirs 210).

Only three years later, the couple’s extreme financial difficulties—which included
a stay in debtor’s prison, and Robinson’s first attempt to turn to her pen for support with
the publication of a small book of poems—allowed Robinson an excuse to try her stage
debut once more. Beginning as soon as she stepped onto the boards at Drury Lane in
1776 (visibly advanced in her second pregnancy), Robinson would build a reputation for
her bodily exhibitions: for instance, she would appear both on, and more shockingly, off-
stage in “breeches roles,” deliberately exhibiting the otherwise unique public spectacle of
a shapely female leg, and eventually would come to be seen as an arbiter of beau monde
fashion with her deshabille-style garments (a term that notably conveys less the actual
presence of clothing than a lack thereof).30

Any accolades she earned for her various performances in the world of theater
and fashion were, however, dwarfed by her highly public affairs with powerful political
figures, including, first and most famously, the Prince of Wales (later King George IV).
Having gained the Prince’s attention during her performance in David Garrick’s 1779
revival of The Winter’s Tale and living openly as his mistress for the next year, Robinson
was subsequently known in public as “Perdita”—both in reference to the role that caught

30 Byrne’s biographical work on Robinson offers extended discussions of her experimental fashion; see
Perdita pp. 79, 189-191.
the Prince’s eye and, fittingly, her seemingly “lost” state, forever fallen from any semblance of a moral woman or faithful wife. This and her subsequent relationships with prominent men like Charles Fox and Banastre Tarleton led to lasting notoriety and well-documented comparisons between Robinson and the debased figure of that other “public” woman, the prostitute. At the height of such scandals, Robinson’s social identity was nearly inextricable from what Hester Thrale Piozzi so pointedly deemed her “Venereal Indulgencies” (qtd. in Highfill et al. 36).

Attention to Robinson’s “fallen” physicality did not cease even when her scandalous “Perdita” persona, courtesan to the future king, receded behind the rising fame of the presumably more respectable “Mrs. Robinson,” popular poet and novelist. Robinson began writing professionally again in 1788, having retired from acting during the Perdita debacle and later prohibited by compromised health and reputation from ever returning to it. With her first publications of Della Cruscan verse, followed by more ambitious poetry and prose works over the next several years, Robinson generally managed to reinvent herself as a successful writer. However, conservative reviewers continued to attack the author’s growing body of work with direct references to the state of her physical body, as evidenced in William Gifford’s 1795 poem *The Baviad*.

Alongside jibes against other female poets, Gifford singles out the increasing bodily disability Robinson experienced over the course of her life for particularly mean-spirited commentary: “See Robinson forget her state, and move, / On crutches tow’rds the grave” (27-8). Other critics worked references to Robinson’s sexual history into even complimentary reviews of her work, as in the case of *The Monthly Mirror*’s pun-filled
description of one of Robinson’s fictional heroines (embowered in a crumbling estate) as “the pensive Angelina, in her RUIN” (290).

While Robinson protested that poverty, rather than illness, truly forced her away from the public scenes she once graced, detractors were quick to see her as having been ultimately “felled” by her past bodily exploits. After all, the paralysis that Robinson suffered from for the last seventeen years of her life was attributed to rheumatic fever, resulting from either “an imprudent exposure to the night air in travelling […] in a chaise with the windows open” (Memoirs 270), according to Robinson’s own claims, or, as more recent historical work has suggested, streptococcal infection following a secret miscarriage.  

Either way, Robinson had seemingly been met with just punishment for improper, public exertions of a female body, be it a risky night ride or an illicit affair. She appeared irrevocably confined by the very flesh she had once flaunted.

It was in the midst of this apparent confinement, however, that Robinson made her first forays into fiction. She began drafting the novel Vancenza; or, The Dangers of Credulity during a rest cure visit to Bath in 1791, despite having been prescribed not to write (Byrne 266), and would publish six more completed novels (in addition to an extensive array of poems, essays, satirical editorials, political prose, and a play) before her death at the turn of the century. Notably, Robinson’s daughter Maria Elizabeth would later describe this unrelenting creative output as explicitly instigated by her mother’s simultaneous physical frailty, stating that “the powers of her mind, and the elasticity of her spirits, triumphed over the weakness of her frame,” and that the paralysis, “by

31 Byrne offers a convincing argument for the streptococcal infection theory, and offers evidence of Robinson’s acquaintances discussing her miscarriage in personal correspondence; see Perdita pp. 213-4.
depriving her of external resource, led her to the more assiduous cultivation and development of her talents” (*Memoirs* 270). Coming as part of a longer defense of her mother’s life and work—she finished and edited the uncompleted manuscript of *Memoirs* for its 1801 publication—Maria Elizabeth’s description of Robinson’s renewed authorial impetus resulting from her bodily illness offers a more nuanced take on the popular eighteenth-century assumption that Mary Robinson was ultimately creature of the flesh, and little else. Here, Robinson’s presumably fallen body does not confine, define, or negate her mental capabilities, but rather hones and highlights them. Corporeal disability enables the very authorship through which Robinson worked to project an equivalent *incorporeal* self, based in artistic and intellectual output.

This chapter is concerned with the ways in which Mary Robinson’s fiction represents a unique stage in the author’s famous self-fashioning, one particularly involved with complex negotiations of female virtue and fallenness as they were understood in late eighteenth-century Britain. Much has been written on how Robinson’s novels afforded her the opportunity to offer thinly-veiled autobiographical stories to her public in an effort to defend or justify her presumed transgressions. Indeed, critics have shown how Robinson shrewdly controlled her reputation through all genres of literary work, from the earliest stages of her public career. For instance, Anne Mellor demonstrates how Robinson used personal letters and memoirs to construct sympathetic narratives of self that described her in every role from “unprotected” wife to “star-

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32 More practically, Robinson was also deprived of her previous occupations (particularly acting) by her paralysis; disability therefore not only eliminated distractions from her creative genius, but eliminated other forms of income, making a writing career a necessity. Robinson would rarely earn enough money from even her most successful literary works, however, largely because of poor publication deals.
crossed” lover of the Prince (273), while Paula Byrne’s biographical work meticulously outlines Robinson’s ingenious manipulation of the popular press, including strategically “leaked” gossip notices to the Morning Herald that supported her own side of scandalous stories (127). Many have also commented upon Robinson’s employment of multiple poetic personas in order to rehabilitate her public image; she offered her readers nearly a dozen pseudonymous identities to choose from in place of the sullied Perdita moniker. However, it would be the wide-ranging plots and extended exploration of multiple private subjectivities that characterize novels that would prove particularly useful to Robinson’s overall recuperative project. Both modern critics and Robinson’s contemporary readers have recognized the heroines of works like The Widow, Angelina, and The False Friend as idealized versions of the author’s own imagined self: beautiful, self-sacrificing, and often doomed maidens victimized by circumstances rather than personal depravity, and each born of Robinson’s desire, in Sharon Setzer’s words, to “plea[d] her own case as a fallen woman” and “rewrit[e] her life through fiction” (Introduction xv; xx).

I am less interested, however, in mapping exactly how Robinson’s biography plays out on the pages of the seven novels she published between 1792 and 1799, or in suggesting the ways in which her novel’s heroines serve to excuse or mitigate the perceived immorality of her own socially transgressive acts, particularly as major Robinson scholars like Setzer and Julie Shaffer have already offered a number of compelling readings that do precisely that.33 Rather, I argue that through her fiction,

33 Both Setzer and Shaffer offer excellent (and often biographical) readings of Robinson’s treatment of fallenness in her fiction, to which my own analysis is indebted. However, both most often posit that Robinson excuses or defends her heroines’ and her own sexual transgressions, in order to either advocate for women’s increased civil rights (so as to not leave them and their chastity at the mercy of men for
Mary Robinson works to redefine “virtuousness” and “fallenness” in such a way that it is no longer necessary—and in fact, may even be seen as contrary—to excuse and apologize for her past actions. In a subtle and consistent strategy, Robinson aligns the very “sins” she has so often been accused of—of dangerous openness, display, and exhibitionism—with the signs of true virtue, and relocates “fallen” nature in secrecy, concealment, and constraint. In Robinson’s narratives, premarital affairs, illegitimate pregnancy, adultery, and even prostitution do not a “fallen” woman make; only when accompanied by unremitting dissembling do such actions spell the end of virtue.

Thus, I argue that Robinson’s works are consciously rhetorical, but not to the same mitigating or apologetic personal ends that readers often assume. Robinson does not use her writings to deny or downplay the public displays which were thought to be the source of her shame. In Memoirs, she lingers happily over descriptions of all forms of public performances: exact details of the dresses she wore on high-society outings; moments of triumph on the theatrical stage; flattering attentions to her beauty by figures of power and ton (including Marie Antoinette, whose “loudly whispered encomiums” of Robinson’s appearance are recounted with obvious pride [Memoirs 269]). She expresses no wish to have been more private, more contained, or more guarded, and disdains such standard expectations for her fellow women—though she recognizes her life would have been easier had she followed such social dictates. In a letter written in the last months of her life, Robinson proudly states, “whatever I feel, I express;—for I cannot dissemble:

financial and physical safety) and/or to protest the sexualization of women’s participation in the public sphere. My argument differs in suggesting that Robinson rewrites and thereby erases such transgressions in order to call for an entirely different way to read women’s moral character that is separate from physical chastity entirely.
had I this convenient power, I am convinced that I should have more *friends*, and less *misfortunes* (qtd. in Setzer “Original Letters” 313).  

Neither does Robinson present herself as virtuous *despite* her sexual transgressions, or claim her more prudent behaviors morally outweigh her imprudent ones—though if she did, she would not be alone in adopting such a tactic. As Felicity Nussbaum has shown, autobiographies of scandalous eighteenth-century actresses often tried to disentangle their “virtue” from their sexual exploits by instead highlighting such qualities as charity, maternity, or aesthetic taste and talent, all of which were meant to balance out any other moral lapses or misconduct.

But Robinson, I argue, does not present herself as virtuous *in spite* of public displays of self and her storied sexual history; instead, she highlights those very displays as direct evidence of her virtue. By promoting a moral system in her works of fiction that more explicitly equates all forms of “openness” with virtue, Robinson retroactively and powerfully reclaims *all* her assumed exhibitionism—from the briefest glimpse of her legs in “breeches” to her years of professional authorship—as part of a consistent career of honesty worthy of emulation. In a cultural climate in which full disclosure could effectively brand one as fallen (as the reaction surrounding William Godwin’s candid retelling of Mary Wollstonecraft’s history made disastrously evident), this understanding of feminine virtue as not only removed from, but perhaps antithetical to, the strictest

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34 In 2009, Setzer republished a collection of Robinson’s letters, presumably written to William Godwin and long believed lost, that originally appeared in an 1822 issue of *Lady’s Magazine; or, Mirror of the Belles-Lettres, Fashions, Fine Arts, Music, Drama, &c.*

35 For an extended discussion of the ways in which eighteenth-century actresses used memoirs to attempt to redefine personal virtue (in ways differently than those Robinson undertakes), see especially Chapter 3 (“Actresses’ Memoirs: Exceptional Virtue”) of Nussbaum’s *Rival Queens.*
definitions of chastity carried potential ramifications far beyond recuperating Robinson’s own reputation.36

Ultimately, we might think of the figurative goal of Robinson’s most virtuous and simultaneously exhibitionist heroines in terms of “natural transparency”: of action, intent, and belief. Something strangely unnatural, however, happens to (or, more precisely is expected of) the physical bodies of these female characters over the course of their stories. In a move that seems to belie the works’ general commitment to personal “display,” Robinson’s fiction does not in fact celebrate or embrace the explicitly corporeal aspects of her heroines’ existences. Rather, virtuous women achieve a level of metaphoric transparency that translates into actual invisibility; that is, the bodies of Robinson’s most successful heroines are variously denied, erased, or at very least, ignored in their narratives, to the point that any reference to their physical self or experience disappears. There are no “legitimate” female bodily performances, particularly sexualized ones, for her protagonists. For instance, there are no pregnancies or other physical experiences of motherhood (childbirth, nursing) for leading female characters (and almost no depiction of legitimated biological maternity for more minor characters as well), although these figure prominently in Robinson’s personal writing.

36 In The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding (Berkeley: U of California P, 1957), Ian Watt outlines how “the eighteenth century witnessed a tremendous narrowing of the ethical scale, a redefinition of virtue in primarily sexual terms” and how “words such as virtue, propriety, decency, modesty, delicacy, purity, came to have the almost exclusively sexual connotation which they have since very largely retained” (157). Building upon this notion, Ruth Yeazell notes in Fictions of Modesty that late eighteenth-century writers who did not consider expected feminine qualities like modesty “sexual” virtues—ones that should arise “naturally” in a woman, and thus the lack of which would indicate unnatural monstrosity—“clearly represented a minority position” (8). Though this does not mean that women of this era did not ever attempt to reclaim personal virtue after having lost their chastity—as my previous note regarding Nussbaum’s analysis of actresses’ memoirs explains, they did—Robinson’s tactic of suggesting that seemingly “unchaste” or exhibitive behaviors may actually be indicators of virtue seems a novel one.
Agency and sexual desire are also at odds: although illicit sexuality no longer equates fallenness in Robinson’s moral system, the best heroines choose to acknowledge but never act upon desires of the flesh, or else are subjected to disastrously embodied experiences such as fever and death. Moreover, this trend seemingly progresses with each subsequent novel Robinson produced, so that her final completed fictional text, The Natural Daughter, features a heroine whose discernible features receive almost no specific description over the course of the work. Far from being “open” or accepting of female bodily experience, then, Robinson’s novels imagine the most virtuous women as decidedly disembodied.

In the pages that follow, I offer an explanation as to how Robinson understood, and ultimately came to deny, the same corporal dimensions of self that in her own life had shaped even her most cerebral output. Most importantly, however, I will consider why in the radical process of rewriting virtue—a project Robinson undertakes with her own public reputation in mind, but one with far-reaching ramifications for all late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women—Mary Robinson ultimately envisions an ideal that no living woman can achieve.

Natural Transparency in Robinson’s Early Novels: The Widow and Angelina

Before we can fully understand Robinson’s negotiations of corporeality in her life and work, however, we must first consider the standard of virtue she establishes in her early novels—a standard that seemingly has little to do with one’s body, save for the
potential need to expose it. *The Widow; or, A Picture of Modern Times* (1794) and *Angelina; A Novel* (1796) were Robinson’s first fictional productions set in her own society. Her first novel, *Vancenza* (1792) featured a remote fifteenth-century Spanish setting in keeping with its Gothic genre, just as her later Radcliffian *Hubert de Sevrac, A Romance, of the Eighteenth Century* (1796) would depict the misadventures of French aristocrats during the turmoil of the French Revolution. *The Widow* and *Angelina*, therefore, offer Robinson’s earliest novelistic take on contemporary British life and the problematic expectations of propriety at work within it.

Both novels feature similar epistolary narratives (indeed, *Angelina* is, in Setzer’s words, an “ambitious reworking” of the earlier text [Introduction ix]) in which a beautiful and virtuous young woman retires from society under an assumed name after having heard erroneous reports of her husband’s death abroad; similar false information leads the still-living husband to believe the young wife is also dead and begin new bigamous relationships. By a series of complicated plot twists, each couple is eventually reunited and proper names and relationships restored (though not, especially in the case of *The Widow*’s illegitimately remarried Lord Allford, unproblematically).

*The Widow*’s Julia St. Laurence and the eponymous Angelina Sydenham are each presumed by other characters to be “fallen” thanks to their self-imposed exiles and constant allusions to a secreted past, yet Robinson emphasizes repeatedly the actual “unsullied” status of both women. Julia and Angelina are both legally (although clandestinely) married to Lord Allford and Lord Acreland, respectively, and much of the action of their stories hinges upon proving these integral facts. This does not mean,
however, that Robinson extends sympathetic interest only to verifiably “pure” female
characters, or that her early novels are unconcerned with promoting less rigid distinctions
between fallen and unfallen women. In a particularly lengthy passage in *The Widow*, for
instance, Julia eloquently argues that all women are “subject to error,” and that “a woman
may be weak without being vicious; a variety of events may conspire to undermine the
most powerful rectitude” (*TW* 375). In venting her frustration over “how few will
examine with candour, or judge with lenity” the extenuating circumstances behind a
woman’s perceived indiscretions, Julia can been seen as, in the words of Sarah
Gristwood, “one in a long line of heroines who reflected Mary [Robinson] as she wished
to be seen […] giv[ing] voice to a long plea against too narrow and censorious a
definition of virtue and chastity” (272-3).

Critics like Gristwood and Setzer have helpfully recognized that Robinson’s
fiction evinces a “willingness to judge women on the basis of virtues other than chastity”
(Setzer Introduction xv), and posit that this willingness stems from Robinson’s personal
desires to be free of her fallen associations. But what precisely is a more appropriate
definition of virtue, then, in Robinson’s estimation? I argue it is perhaps best exemplified
in these early works of fiction by the actions of the true heroine of *Angelina*, Sophia
Clarendon. Indeed, Sophia’s voice dominates the novel in which, strangely, the
eponymous heroine is given no epistolary say of her own. Sophia is a young woman
about to be forced against her will into marriage with, as readers gradually discern, the

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37 In parenthetical citations, I will refer to Robinson’s novels by a series of abbreviations: TW = *The Widow*,
38 Julia’s insistence on judging based upon circumstance also calls to mind Robinson’s own words about
her reputation: “Alas! Of all created beings I have been the most severely subjugated by circumstances
more than by inclination” (*Memoirs* 225).
secretly still-married Lord Acreland. Instead of yielding to this fate, however, Sophia becomes what Setzer calls “a model of female resistance rather than resignation” (Introduction x). When societal dictates—embodied in her grotesque caricature of a father, the tyrannical social-climbing Sir Edward—go against her innate sense of morality, Sophia openly defies patriarchal authority rather than submit to what she (rightfully) sees as her own destruction.

In enacting this resistance, however, Sophia must elope from her father’s house in the dead of night, seek protection from strangers, and literally walk the streets often with “no other covering than a thin morning-dress” wrapped about her vulnerable body (A 338)—in short, her actions all bespeak evident “fallenness” by late eighteenth-century standards. Her very presence alone and unprotected in urban spaces draws “the most inhuman curiosity,” exacerbated by her wretched appearance: Sophia describes “the paleness and dismay pictured in my face, the disorder of my dress, my shoes worn to tatters, my hair hanging in lank tresses round my shoulders” (168), all of which serve as familiar signifiers of that “ruined” and “public” woman of the London streets, the prostitute.

Robinson’s sympathetic reader is meant to comprehend these actions and appearances in a much different way, however. Rather than evincing her fallenness, Sophia’s unsanctioned flight from her father’s worthless “protection” and even her body’s nearly-indecent exposure to the elements are in fact emblems of her true moral worth and unwavering dedication to virtue. Sophia illustrates the precepts of which her antagonist father complains: “[I]ndependence is a sort of freedom—and freedom is
liberty—and liberty spurns all constraints” (A 29). While Sir Edward continually proposes horrific new constraints to prevent such exertions of mental or bodily “independence” on his daughter’s part—threatening, for instance, to cut her legs off rather than allow her to appear on stage as an actress (129)—Sophia repeatedly asserts the value of perfect “openness” and honesty. Her refusal to marry Lord Acreland when she is actually in love with Charles Belmont is neither motivated by vicious disobedience nor carnal appetite, but rather by her wish to avoid “so dreadful an act of duplicity […] by professing to love an object I despise”; in fact, she determines to hide nothing and “avow [her] sentiments [and] let Lord Acreland reflect with leisure” (38). A rational commitment to truth and transparency is at the heart of Sophia’s most defiant public actions and appearances, and it is only the most deceitful, wicked characters (Sir Edward, Lady Arranford, and the particularly cruel Selina Wantworth, among others) who confuse her openness with abandon. They, Robinson suggests, are simply poor “readers” whose own murky interpretation of and questionable adherence to morality obscure their appropriately sympathetic comprehension of Sophia’s true character and plight. There is also a clear moral component to this equation that extends far beyond the scope of the fictitious narrative: the benevolent member of the real-world novel-reading public, approaching Angelina with appropriate sensibility, is urged to align his or her existing “reading” of and presumptions about female virtue accordingly (lest risk aligning him or herself with the work’s obvious villains instead).

Even more so than Sophia, however, the character of Emily Fitzallen demonstrates Robinson’s challenge to the traditional equation of virtue and physical
chastity. Emily is, by all conventional accounts, unchaste: once known as the graceful and captivating Miss Fitzallen, she had been seduced by the libertine Lord Arranford in her youth and subsequently lived under the false identity “Mrs. Chudleigh” as his unhappy kept mistress. When Sophia nearly falls into the same trap, however, Emily sacrifices her own situation to save her fellow woman; she spirits Sophia away from Lord Arranford’s machinations and promptly loses her home, her livelihood, and the only semblance of human affection she knows. Interestingly, the repentant fallen woman, so often presented as object of pity and sympathy in the sentimental novel (when not presented conversely as monster), is here moved to heroism by her own sympathetic impulses towards an otherwise “proper” woman. With her humanity fully “awakened to pity” by the perceived insults against Sophia, Emily becomes simultaneously fallen and virtuous; Robinson writes that her “virtue was not extinct; the breath of sympathy revived it, and it glowed with redoubled lustre through the tear of sensibility” (A 299).

Sympathy, empathy, and a recommitment to honesty thereby elevate the most debased female figure—an essentially prostituted woman—to the position of savior in Robinson’s text. Furthermore, in recounting her true history to Sophia as their chaise speeds away from the literal trappings of her fallen state (the ill-gotten house, the false identity, and Lord Arranford’s own illicit embraces), Emily indicates she has found a way to save herself through the very virtue of transparency that Sophia has exemplified throughout the text. She decides,

I will avow every error of my life, and shall be more proud of the sincerity that prompts the disclosure, than I could be of carrying on a deception, which would not only keep me in perpetual fear, but at last terminate in the lowest degradation; for I consider even the frailty of our sex less reprehensible, if avowed, than she,
who practices that fraud, that despicable fraud which would impose upon the world by a false affectation of chastity […] there cannot be the smallest doubt, that the woman who counterfeits a reputation which she feels conscious of not deserving, is a more dangerous member of society, than the most abandoned profligate. (A 300)

Robinson’s heroine listens to this speech, in which Emily openly avows her “frailties” and reserves the true “degradation” for hypocritical women like Selina Wantworth, with complete approbation, thereby implying full narrative agreement with the notion that her future truthfulness will expunge her past indiscretions.

In her discussion of Angelina’s debts to 1790s “revolutionary sensibility,” Setzer lists “transparency” as one of the many “revolutionary virtues” that figure in Robinson’s novel. I wish to qualify Setzer’s statement only in terms of emphasis: that is, it appears to me that transparency is the most important virtue, particularly for women, by which all Robinson’s fictional female characters are judged, one which outweighs any conventional considerations like chastity. Transparency was also, according to Lynn Hunt, the most critical value in the republican discourse of the early days of the French Revolution. Hunt has outlined the ways in which the republican concept of virtue was nearly synonymous with “a body that told no lies and kept no secrets” (97). Whereas “the ability to conceal one’s true emotions, to act one way in public and another in private, was repeatedly denounced as the chief characteristic of court life and aristocratic manners in general,” the “unmediated expression of the heart” afforded by transparency offered “the perfect fit between public and private,” and therefore was seen as crucial to the formation and stability of the new egalitarian republic (Hunt 96). In applying this revolutionary transparency to her depiction of British women’s daily lives, Robinson joined the ranks
of other 1790s women writers like Wollstonecraft who, drawn to the rhetoric of the French Revolution, attempted to employ it to challenge gender ideologies at home in England.  

Later, Robinson’s works would acknowledge the horrors that eventually resulted from the Jacobin rise to power (The Natural Daughter, for instance, famously features both Marat and Robespierre as evil characters); however, these later writings also imply that it was only people’s failure to adhere strictly to the revolution’s liberal and democratic principles that brought about destruction from idealism. Rather than relying on transparency of action (or properly extending such a benefit to their fellow citizens), the agents of the Terror in France eventually “accept[ed] rumors as proof of guilt and disallow[ed] any opportunity for a fair trial or explanation” (Setzer “Romancing” 541). Likewise, a similar failure occurs in Robinson’s own novels when otherwise “honest” characters tolerate or perpetuate falsehood and secrecy in place of complete disclosure.

39 “Transparency” was also supposed to be a particularly universalizing virtue that citizens could embrace, after centuries in which frankness was almost solely privilege of the aristocracy, when dependent classes could not risk (nor did they have the right of) speaking their own mind. Interestingly, however, as was the case with so many egalitarian principles of the Revolution, it was not immediately afforded to women in practice even after the Ancién Regime was overthrown. As Joan B. Landes explains of the years immediately following the formation of the new republic in France, “while the norms of publicity, authenticity, transparency, and universal reason may have affirmed men’s participation in the public realm, an emerging code of gender propriety prescribed that women were most in conformity with these norms when their behavior and conduct were least public” (147). See Landes, Women in the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1988) for more details. Thus the kind of literal transparency that Robinson advocates as a female virtue in her fiction—of word, action, and especially of public physical appearance and “exposure”—is a more radical formulation than that suggested by actual revolutionaries.

40 Robinson’s support of the Revolution was never uncomplicated, however; as is evident in her various defenses of Marie Antoinette, including the anonymously-published pamphlet Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France by a Friend to Humanity. Robinson was often torn between sympathy for France’s queen and her affiliation with English supporters of the Revolution. For an extensive discussion of Robinson’s revolutionary sentiments and their relation to her feminist impulses, see Byrne, Setzer’s “Romancing,” and Zunac.
The principle of morality as openness proves not to be the problem, but rather inconstant and incomplete realization of its potential.

In *The Widow* and *Angelina*, for instance, the heroines’ virtue is menaced by even the most well-meaning departures from a strict policy of absolute honesty. Julia and Angelina’s presumed fallenness stems only from the clandestine nature of their marriages, which leave them with little proof they are legal wives and not “ruined” women. Their problems are then exacerbated by their continued failure to present their true names and situations to the world. When the would-be seducer Lord Woodley sarcastically asks Julia, “Why thus avoid the open eye of observation, if you have nothing disgraceful to conceal?” (*TW* 368), he actually voices a legitimate complaint the novel has with its heroine: Julia, if she is truly virtuous, must learn to proclaim openly not only her chastity but *every* part of her identity to world.

In addition, even female characters who refuse to stray from their own commitment to transparency are jeopardized by others’ hesitancy to follow their example. In the case of Sophia Clarendon, her mentor Mrs. Horton knows long before other characters do that Sophia’s intended bridegroom has already been married to Angelina (Angelina, it is ultimately revealed, is Mrs. Horton’s younger sister). However, having been asked by her sister never to disclose the secret of the first marriage, Mrs. Horton refuses to speak the truth, lamenting, “I should betray the confidence of one who was once most dear to me!—I should violate a solemn oath pledged to the gentlest, the loveliest of women!” (*A* 86). While Mrs. Horton fears betrayal and oath-breaking as her potential sins, acute readers understand that the real sin lies in Angelina’s original
injunction against her sister’s truth-telling. This demand, immoral within the novel’s equation of disclosure with virtue, has dire consequences for Sophia, and could result in her literal “fallenness” if she weds a married man. Little does she know that in pleading with Mrs. Horton to “be explicit respecting Lord Acreland [and] give [her] a fair, handsome, and unequivocal plea for decided refusal” (20), Sophia is essentially appealing to Mrs. Horton to save her from committing adultery. Only secrecy, however well-intentioned, threatens this salvation.

We may presume, however, that Robinson’s text would most likely excuse Sophia from her technical adultery, as true “fallenness” in her fiction requires an intent to deceive, and true virtue lies not in physical chastity. For instance, Lord Allford’s actual bigamy is quickly forgiven (and neatly handled by an easy divorce from his decidedly unsympathetic second wife, Clara) in The Widow, as he truly believed Julia was dead. Lest we attribute Lord Allford’s apparent blamelessness to mere gender double-standards, a similar case may be made for Susan’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy in The Natural Daughter (which I discuss in further detail in the next section of this chapter); as Julie Shaffer points out, Susan’s “slip” from propriety is accidental and therefore presented as “excusable,” with Susan “having been forced into marriage [...] and consummating the relationship because believing, at least temporarily, that the marriage was valid” (“Ruined Women” 293). We might also look to Robinson’s treatment of her own famous adultery in her memoirs as another example of this strategy at work: in recalling the events leading up to her relationship with the Prince, Robinson writes, “I knew as little of the world’s deceptions, as though I had been educated in Siberia”
While this statement seems particularly inexplicable coming from a published poet, actress, and mother of two children (as Robinson was at the beginning of her 1779 affair), it allows her to project the acts of deception usually associated with extramarital relationships outward, rather than claim them as resulting from her own agency. It also recalls the repeated deceptions she claims were perpetrated by Thomas Robinson in their own marriage, from his falsehoods during their courtship (he lied about his own illegitimate parenthood and financial prospects) to his early “domestic apostacy [sic]” with “the most abandoned women” (*Memoirs* 257). With Mary Robinson’s marriage proven to be little more than a “lie” perpetrated upon her, her later involvement in the “deceptions” of love consequently appears as no real fault of her own; furthermore, the memoir’s insistence that Robinson could not “have reconciled it to her own feelings to remain under the roof of her husband whose protection she had forfeited,” nor suggest her husband be “to the motives of his royal visitor a little complaisantly blind” (260), deliberately foregrounds Robinson’s honesty, whatever the cost, even in her most scandalous dealings.

While Sophia therefore may have been excused had she unintentionally become Lord Acreland’s mistress, some female characters in Robinson’s fiction are unequivocally presented as culpable in their own victimization. This is perhaps best illustrated by the disturbing case of Amelia Woodford in Robinson’s 1797 novel *Walsingham; or, The Pupil of Nature: A Domestic Story*, a text that explicitly revolves around issues of women’s deception, particularly on bodily matters—one of its primary characters is Sir Sidney Ainsworth, a girl raised surreptitiously by her mother as a male
baronet.  *Walsingham* is narrated by an eponymous male protagonist whose obsessive desire for his childhood companion Isabella Hanbury culminates in an act truly shocking from a novel’s presumptive “hero”: Walsingham, intoxicated and believing he has spied Isabella at a masquerade, kidnaps and rapes her. He admits, “all the claims of unprotected innocence, all the laws of honour were violated—and—I was a villain!” (*W* 290). Only after awaking from his temporary “madness” does Walsingham realize his additional error: he has in fact raped another masked woman entirely, the unfortunate Amelia, whose own unreturned love for Walsingham led her to disguise herself in Isabella’s typical costuming in the hopes of catching his eye.

But this revelation surprisingly serves to assuage Walsingham’s initial guilt: he immediately begins to diminish the magnitude of his crime by describing Amelia as “a victim of her own fatal curiosity,” and “her own destroyer” (*W* 394). He even refuses to marry Amelia—admittedly, the “only compensation which remained for [him] to offer”—out of an unshakeable concern for her future chastity, stating, “The frailty which had rendered her my victim, made me suspect that she would scarcely fulfil, with honour, the duties of a wife” (300).

William Brewer has offered a cogent explanation of Walsingham’s monstrous egoism, particularly as evidenced by his treatment of Amelia, as part of Robinson’s critical exploration of destructive types of sensibility. Much like Godwin’s famously flawed Caleb Williams, Walsingham Ainsforth can be read as “an unreliable narrator and a subject for mental anatomy rather than as [Robinson’s] fictional surrogate” (Brewer x),
and therefore not a figure with whom an ideal reader’s morality is meant to align. While I agree with this interpretation, this reading does little to help explain why Robinson’s narrative shows no mercy to Amelia even after she is out of range of Walsingham’s abnormal psychology. Rather, she is left to beg Walsingham to allow her to accompany him into the army—“I can even disguise my sex!” she promises (W 298)—and, when this is refused, she falls ill, is promptly sent by her mother to a madhouse, marries a man she does not love, and dies from shock the last time she sees Walsingham’s face. The disaster that follows Amelia throughout the novel seems excessive and unusual coming from a writer who does not always automatically condemn a “fallen” character—particularly a wronged one—to a Clarissa-like fate.

Reading Walsingham in light of Robinson’s particular understanding of virtue as transparency of action and appearance, however, may help us reconcile Amelia’s terrible end with her seeming innocence. While she is originally introduced in the text as “wholly unconscious of guile” (W 261), Amelia’s fall is precipitated by progressive and calculated falsehood on her part. She begins by adopting “the outward form of Isabella” for selfish ends (292), and her moral descent continues as she subsequently and unrepentantly takes on (or contemplates) a number of other false guises, from “Miss Montagu,” Walsingham’s supposed sister, to a soldier in Walsingham’s regiment. Her ultimate act of artifice is one of conjugal duplicity—becoming the reluctant wife of Colonel Aubrey, whom she cannot love—and contrasts Sophia Clarendon’s virtuous refusal to wed where her heart would not allow. Amelia Woodford, therefore, may indeed be a victim—of a

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41 Caleb Williams is the protagonist of Godwin’s 1794 novel Things As They Are; or The Adventures of Caleb Williams.
man’s violence and obsession, of the “wrong” kinds of sensibility, of sexual double standards—but according to Robinson’s reformulation of virtue, she is also decidedly fallen. She must then meet the disease and death reserved for ruined, irredeemable women in conventional late eighteenth-century narratives.

Shaffer notes that in Robinson’s fiction, forgiveness is extended to even the most “appetitive sisters, as long as they remain free from hypocrisy” (“Ruined Women” 295);42 for instance, while Amelia dies in Walsingham, the more penitent prostitute Julie de Beaumont marries a duke and successfully reenters polite society.43 Female characters who openly and arrogantly dissemble, however, are portrayed as monsters of immorality. Both The Widow and Angelina feature a series of women (primarily aristocratic ones, calling to mind Hunt’s discussion of republican virtue) who embark upon careers of crime and corruption while maintaining false appearances of integrity and chastity. In The Widow, the manipulative socialites Amelia Vernon and Lady Arranford are shown to be clear in name only, far more interested in hiding their infidelities and preserving superficial “reputation” than cultivating a real sense of virtue. They also expect comparable pretense from the rest of their society, as evidenced by Lady Arranford’s

42 Shaffer’s reading specifically links this disdain of hypocrisy with Robinson’s disappointment with the French revolutionaries who betrayed their original principles during the Reign of Terror; for my purposes, hypocrisy is aligned with falsehood in general, and thus is a crime against Robinson’s new definition of virtue as total openness.

43 Julie, a reformed prostitute, is an interesting case in Robinson’s system of transparent virtue. It is unclear if the Duke knows her illicit background at the point of their marriage, and quite apparent that Julie has no love for him, which would suggest double falsehood (and in Robinson’s system, fallenness) on her part. However, the Duke, a decidedly unsympathetic character, also marries Julie under false pretenses (he requires a quick marriage to settle a bet), and Julie is faithful and devoted to him (despite her lack of affection) until he leaves her. Therefore, the Duke emerges in the text as a libertine not worthy of Julie’s innate value, and she is thankfully abandoned by him and happily “retires on a separate maintenance of six hundred pounds per annum to her native country, after passing a few weeks at Spa for the benefit of the waters” (W 496).
comment that “a woman’s character depends not on her own conduct, but on her husband’s complaisance” (TW 403). Their most egregious crimes lie in their active and hypocritical persecution of other (usually lower-class) women’s sexual indiscretions. The corrupt Mrs. Vernon takes pride, for instance, in “stri[k]ing] my name out of the list of annual subscribers to the lying-in hospital; ‘tis throwing money away, and encouraging folly” (377).

Mrs. Vernon and Lady Arranford are little match, though, for Angelina’s Lady Selina Wantworth, who proves the most dastardly villainess of all Robinson’s early novels with a career of dishonesty that leaves a significant body count in its wake (including, eventually, Selina herself). Lady Selina (whose surname obviously functions as commentary on her own lack of virtue), claims her fondest pursuit is of “tormenting her own sex” (A 245), and does exactly that, implementing the powers afforded her by class privilege and the art of gossip to try to bring about the “falls” of Angelina, Sophie, Emily Fitzallen, and others, with varying degrees of success. Robinson’s primary description of Lady Selina emphasizes practiced treachery as her chief characteristic:

Lost to all refinements of female sensibility; dead to the scrutinizing touches of compunction; brave in infamy, and practised in deceit, she talks of those virtues which she does not exemplify […] Indefatigable in the practice of dissimulation, she is ever on her guard; and experienced in every species of vice, she never betrays herself by the confusion of guilt. She can blacken the fair name of innocence […] and while she soothes [with] the softness of an angel, cherish in her heart the malice of a fiend! (A 280)

A guarded, false, living—“dead” figure, Selina Wantworth is thoroughly unnatural—perhaps nearly supernatural, as Sophia wonders “by what magic power such women preserve their names from public exposure” (126). Described elsewhere as “inhuman,” a
“monster,” and a “devil,” this veritable sorceress of artificiality literally “falls” in a stormy shipwreck on her way to new scenes of dissipation; her body is fittingly “enveloped in universal darkness” (333), in keeping with her career of impenetrable secrets and concealment.

Heroines like Sophia combat immoral figures like Lady Selina by literally bringing truths to light, even truths that the dictates of conventional propriety suggest obscuring. For example, Sophia’s discovery of Lord Acreland’s past—his secret and possibly illegitimate relationship with Angelina that all accountable parties hope to hide for respectability’s sake—delivers her from an unwanted marriage and unintended adultery. Possession of the truth, in the form of a “fallen” woman’s name, offers talismanic powers of protection: “I do not fear to meet [Acreland] now,” Sophia declares, “the name of Angelina will be my safeguard” (A 210).

The open avowal of Angelina’s name will save Sophia from her “fall,” and will later even resurrect Angelina from her fallen state (Sophia’s pursuit of the truth will eventually bring about Acreland and Angelina’s reunion), just as Emily Fitzallen’s public stand prevents an attempt on Sophia’s chastity. Angelina thereby clearly depicts how owning even painful truths may restore and defend, rather than threaten, one’s virtue. Why then, we must ask, does this strategy nonetheless seem to fail for a few of Robinson’s female characters? Emily is a prime example: despite her courageous rescue of Sophia and her determination to “avow every error of [her] life” and be “proud of the sincerity,” the once-fallen woman cannot find the means to save herself completely. Unable to foresee a future as anything but a “wretched, lost, forlorn, and hopeless
outcast, she swallows poison and dies (A 328). Robinson’s text suggests that Emily’s suicide is the result of a long experience of isolation dating from the first public notice of her sexual indiscretions: as soon as Lady Selina propagates the story of Miss Fitzallen’s supposed criminality, “the unhappy victim was instantly stigmatized with reproach, abandoned to poverty, insulted by creditors, and driven, hopeless, on a wide world of persecution” (302). Having only encountered the hypocritical harassment of fellow women and the libertine designs of men, Emily cannot conceive of a community which might look beyond the traditional conflation of sexual and moral innocence and ever accept her new commitment to transparency as evidence of virtuous reform.

And yet, this kind of community is at work in the novel, and is in fact the very thing Robinson hopes to promote in the real world. As Anne Close points out, “Robinson imagines public life as the answer to, not the cause of, the difficult situation of the women in the 1790s” (50). Whereas women’s limited experience within private and often dysfunctional spaces may lead to their ruin—note how Emily’s fall in Angelina is preceded by a period of retirement and seclusion, with only dissipated and false friends to steer her path—full exposure to public life, and openness within it, allows Robinson’s ideal heroine to “mobilize her resources and network with individuals and institutions that have the power to save her” (Close 50). Sophia does exactly that: once expelled from her home, she consistently tells her true story to all those she encounters, and through her persistence finds sympathetic supporters who do not readily read her public “openness” as fallen. Rather, she marshals a number of women who labor on her behalf to bring about the text’s essentially happy ending: Sophia marries her beloved Charles, who is
proven to be Angelina and Acreland’s legitimate son Frederick Wantworth, and fully restores her new family. Both of Angelina’s heroines are also literally elevated out of their perceived “fallen” states to the high societal ranks of “Lady Acreland” and “Viscountess Wantworth.”

Importantly, Sophia’s strongest supporters are, much like Emily Fitzallen, other female characters who are already “public” kinds of women. Sophia’s aunt Juliana Pengwynn, for instance, openly styles herself as a learned Bluestocking, and raises Sophia from infancy with ideals of independence and intelligence. Juliana poses a formidable threat to masculine dominance, as she routinely denounces Sir Edward’s barbarous expectations for his daughter and, as Setzer observes, “repeatedly sanctions Sophia’s resistance” (Introduction xvi); she also possesses considerable financial power, and purposefully names Sophia her sole heir in order to “place [her] above the insults of the world” (A 272). It is perhaps for these very public assertions of self that Juliana, a “venerable virgin” (5), is also mistaken for a traditionally fallen woman at least once in the text by improper “readers,” of sorts; while trying to remove Sophia from Sir Edward’s clutches, she is perceived as a bawd “of the most infamous description” and is nearly attacked by a riotous crowd (282).

The character Mrs. Caroline Delmore proves slightly more successful in preserving both her own and Sophia’s reputation, primarily due to the particular kind of public power she wields: Delmore is an author, and as such demonstrates a deft control of the dissemination and reception of information. While there is only once explicit

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Setzer reads Juliana as indicative of Robinson’s conflicted response to the Bluestocking legacy; see Introduction xvi.
reference in the text indicating she is a professional writer, Delmore’s circulating letters offer the strongest opposition Lady Selina’s malicious storytelling. She writes with the unequivocal intent to protect, rather than destroy, other women’s reputations, as her defenses of Sophia and the equally unprotected Maria Montford make evident. She refuses to accept rumors as fact, and urges others to reject the notion “that a woman can be condemned without mercy” (A 177). Delmore also purposely uses her pen to reveal Selina’s hidden malevolence to others; the previously-quoted catalogue of Selina’s crimes comes directly from Delmore’s epistolary correspondence warning other women to be aware of Lady Wantworth’s deception.

Delmore’s authorship mirrors what Robinson is ultimately trying to do with her own. Both create and encourage a community of readers who recognize the true virtue at work in ostensible exhibitionism, and the purity of heart evidenced by the refusal to hide one’s thoughts, one’s emotions, or one’s self. The caveat, however, is that these exhibitions of self must be both natural and rational; Robinson does not condone the studied and excessive effusions that so often characterized eighteenth-century sensibility. She makes this stance quite clear throughout Walsingham, as both the titular character and the doomed Amelia actively cultivate a mournful, destructive sensibility based on their shared melancholic reading habits and characterized by a “lack of emotional self-

45 Lady Selina asks, “Have you been lately at Mrs. Delmore’s? What do they think of her last publication?” (A 99).
46 Maria Montford is an orphaned young woman left dependent upon a dissipated guardian (much like Sophia’s own situation); Mrs. Delmore eventually takes her under her own protection (A 243).
control [that] leads to disaster for themselves and others” (Brewer xii). Only after agreeing to incorporate his “natural” inclinations and passions with “the calm of returning reason” (W 441, 424) do Walsingham’s prospects rapidly improve, as he learns the truth of Sidney’s birth, marries her, and gains the very fortune and family from which he was once excluded.

Yet a problem emerges with this requirement in Robinson’s later works, as she increasingly depicts the female body as itself irrational. In her novels that follow The Widow and Angelina, the materiality of a woman’s own body appears to stand as an obstacle to complete moral openness she advocates in her early fiction, suggesting that embodied experience must be somehow transcended in the pursuit of true virtue. In fiction, this impossible task can be achieved, as Robinson’s final completed novel features her most steadfastly virtuous and exhibitionist heroine, whose complete moral “transparency” is tied, I argue, to her physical invisibility. However, the unfortunate ends of her more embodied heroines—particularly those whose tragedies are explicitly tied to their corporeal and sexual experiences, as we shall see in The False Friend—suggest that Robinson was herself doubtful as to how her new formulation of virtue could succeed beyond the pages of a novel and in the real world she herself inhabited.

Bodies That Lie: The False Friend and The Natural Daughter

47 Amelia’s offer to bring Walsingham melancholy books in jail calls to mind scenes from Mary Wollstonecraft’s later Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman, in which Maria indulges in destructive sensibility by exchanging books with her fellow madhouse prisoner, Darnford.
Gertrude St. Leger and Martha Bradford, the respective heroines of the 1799 novels *The False Friend: A Domestic Story* and *The Natural Daughter; With Portraits of the Leadenhead Family; A Novel*, are both Robinson’s most “exhibitionistic” heroines; their fates, however, could not be more different. While Martha overcomes an unloving family, a tyrannical husband, and an unjust society to marry her true love and live presumably happily ever after, Gertrude dies from wasting disease after nearly committing incest with her father. Over the course of their narratives, both characters struggle to maintain their inviolate chastity, in keeping with more conventional contemporary notions of honor and virtue, and each also expresses the total commitment to the complete personal “openness” (even in opposition to traditional understandings of propriety) that Robinson advocates in her earlier works. We must question, then, why one woman succeeds, while the other fails so spectacularly.

In the first pages of *The False Friend*, Gertrude appears to have far more affinities with righteous characters like *Angelina*’s Sophia than with the more fallen figures whose fate she eventually shares. The beautiful young ward of the mysterious Lord Denmore, Gertrude has been raised in relative isolation in Ireland until her coming of age at sixteen, when she is sent to live with her aristocratic guardian and his jealous wife, Lady Harriet Denmore. Gertrude’s first impressions of her new home are disappointing, as she interprets Lord Denmore’s inexplicable coldness upon her arrival as evidence of his slavish preference for “cold formalities” and artifice over the open gratitude and affection with which she initially greeted him (*FF* 9). Gertrude, on the other hand, speaks with “the language of Nature,” and insists, “I cannot utter what my heart does not feel” (12). In a
world in which other characters subscribe to the cynical notion that “secrecy is the only bond which holds the breathing race together” (34)—an aphorism voiced by the narrative’s most wicked yet most socially savvy persona, Treville—Gertrude is dedicated to natural, open expression of truth at all personal cost.

In keeping with readings of Robinson’s novels as autobiographical reinventions, many critics have seen Gertrude as part of Robinson’s attack on a culture of gossip and sexual double-standards that leave a woman unable either to protect or defend her own reputation; this theme would also prove central to Robinson’s feminist tract *A Letter to the Woman of England*, published the same year as *The False Friend*. Shaffer writes that Gertrude’s plight demonstrates how “the innocent are unfairly judged because of the untoward circumstances that incriminate them” (Introduction xi), and further argues that *The False Friend* depicts a complete failure of sympathetic female community that might otherwise save women from undeserved ostracism and doom. Essentially orphaned and unable to construct a surrogate family to safeguard her, Gertrude has no one but the highly enigmatic Miss Stanley to support her.\(^{48}\) Because she has been so consistently victimized by “false friends” of her own sex, however, Gertrude cannot conceive of the possibility of a network of supportive women and mistakenly regards Miss Stanley as rival, rather than potential protector (Cross 61).\(^{49}\)

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\(^{48}\) Shaffer discusses Miss Stanley’s enigmatic presence in relation to her inconsistent characterization (she seemingly marries Sir Hector for money and status, but soon is depicted as morally inviolate and disinterested), which is likely the result of Robinson not having enough time to properly revise her work when faced with publication demands. See Introduction xix.

\(^{49}\) Gertrude’s persecution at the hands of other women, and subsequent mistrust, calls to mind Robinson’s own disappointment with the tenuous nature of female friendship. While biographers like Byrne have outlined the sustained and fulfilling relationships Robinson maintained with other women throughout her life, including those with Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, author Eliza Fenwick, and her mother Hester.
In addition to a tragic lack of female support, Gertrude also suffers from a fatal sensibility, that ever-popular ailment of the Romantic heroine.\textsuperscript{50} Indeed, early readers complained in the \textit{Anti-Jacobin Review} that Robinson’s characters were creatures of “a morbid sensibility; a constitution, or state of mind, rarely to be found among the virtuous and wise” which “leads them frequently to the most unwarrantable actions.”\textsuperscript{51} Critics like Shaffer and Ashley Cross have examined how, while valorizing sensibility elsewhere, Robinson uses \textit{The False Friend} to indict (much as she does in \textit{Walsingham}) the destructive self-indulgence and scripts of feminine dependence so central to many popular conceptions of sensibility. Just as Robinson mourned in \textit{Memoirs} that her own life had been “marked by the progressive evils of a too acute sensibility” (196), so too does Gertrude recognize far too late that her extreme emotional susceptibility, unchecked by reason, has led her into danger.

While some of Robinson’s characters cultivate an artificial sensibility (Julia of \textit{The Natural Daughter}, to be discussed below, is a notorious example), Gertrude’s appears, in accordance with her initial eschewal of affectation, purely natural; her

and daughter Maria Elizabeth, Robinson remained deeply troubled by her perceived societal-wide lack of solidarity amongst women, writing “I have almost uniformly found my own sex my most inveterate enemies; I have experienced little kindness from them; though my bosom has often ached with the pang inflicted by their envy, slander, and malevolence” (\textit{Memoirs} 239).\textsuperscript{50} Many of the late-eighteenth century’s fictional depictions of “victims of sensibility” demonstrate complaints made explicit in Wollstonecraft’ earlier \textit{Vindication of the Rights of Woman}. In it, she argues that women have internalized the scripts and expectations of sensibility to the point of creating their own mental and even physical imprisonment. They have become “creatures of sensation,” and allow emotions to overwhelm their reason and even bodily control, until they are quite literally “blown about by every gust of feeling” (\textit{VRW} 177).\textsuperscript{51} This review goes on to say, “Mary Wollstonecraft could plead her feelings in justification of her concubinage and her attempted suicide. Most females who began their career in the same way, and who may have afterwards arrived at a more advanced stage of profligacy, might plead their feelings as a justification of their conduct. We doubt not, that even Newgate has considerable supplies from the \textit{victims of sensibility}; or, in other words, from those who are propelled by present impulse instead of being guided by duty.”See \textit{Anti-Jacobin Review} 3 (May 1799): 39-42.
“sensible” outbursts are the involuntary physical and verbal manifestations of her heart and mind. This is in keeping with the general understanding of the rhetoric of sensibility as, first and foremost, an embodied rhetoric, with a morality and values made evident through what Paul Goring calls “bodily eloquence” (5). One’s sensibility depended upon the capacity for extreme, if also refined, physical responsiveness; indeed, the first discussions of sensibility involved not the moral and spiritual component so commonly associated with the term today, but rather a materialist understanding of the psychoperceptual operations of the nervous system (Barker-Benfield xvii). Ideally, then, sensibility could offer an interface between natural (even, biological) private reaction and public self, very much as the revolutionary “virtue of transparency” promised to do; the two are presumably compatible.

However, *The False Friend* reveals a problem with this analogy: though Gertrude lacks the ability to conceal her true emotions and therefore, presumably, the ability to act one way in public and another in private, she does not possess, to recall Hunt’s previous phrase, the ideal “body that told no lies and kept no secrets.” Rather, secrecy is rooted at the corporal level: Gertrude finds her body obfuscates and conceals far more than it reveals, even to her own understanding. As a woman of exquisite sensibility, Gertrude appears as Robinson’s most highly body-conscious heroine, acutely aware and commenting upon every trembling limb, each surge of blood, and every fevered breath. Her misadventures involve not only the emotional trials that Robinson’s other protagonists face, but physical peril and actual injury as well; a night at the ball, for instance, offers Gertrude both lessons in the intrigues of fashionable society and a
painfully sprained wrist that leaves her “bruised violently” and in “excruciating torture” 
(FF 108). And yet Gertrude’s body-consciousness does not translate into effective bodily 
insight or acuity; she is more often than not baffled by the physical signs of her 
sensibility, recording symptoms and subsequent confusion in the letters that make up the 
novel’s epistolary narrative. Raising, but not answering, such questions as, “Why does 
my hand feel a pulsation doubly quickened?” “Why does the circulation quicken at my 
heart?” and “What can these burning tears, this feverish brain, portend?” Gertrude will 
without fail insist, “I am unconscious of their meaning” (22-3; 47). She is also especially 
troubled by her inability to read her own physiognomy. Believing that something in her 
personal appearance may have repulsed Lord Denmore, she writes:

I have, twenty times, since that hour of humiliation, examined my features. There 
must be some trait which caused disgust so marked and unequivocal. I will 
endeavor to change the fashion of my looks; and yet, I fear that to dissemble, will 
be to make him hate me. I am perplexed, and know not how to please him. (7)

Gertrude is unable to visually locate the “trait” that disgusts her guardian, however, 
because it lies not in her face but flows through her veins. The extraordinary attention she 
pays to her “circulation” and “pulse” is prescient in that her blood bears, unbeknownst to 
er, a terrible secret of consanguinity: she is Lord Denmore’s illegitimate daughter. But 
both her body and her father refuse to disclose this truth, and Gertrude is left to flounder 
for an alternative explanation for her undeniable attraction to Denmore. W. Daniel 
Wilson’s discussion of incest and the “voice of blood” explains the prevalent eighteenth-
century belief that relatives raised apart would feel “innate physical repulsion from sexual 
relations with a close relative, regardless of whether […] they know they are related” 
(254). Unluckily, Gertrude falls into the unfortunate cases of those who misinterpret this
warning “voice” as romantic and erotic stirrings (Wilson 261-3). Her tragic misconception of this attraction as sexual, rather than filial, effectively seals her doom. Shaffer argues that Gertrude becomes irretrievably “fallen” (at least in conventional terms, not in the precise definition I suggest Robinson advocates) the moment she emotionally breaches the incest taboo, despite her having resisted all other opportunities for definitive sexual transgression; there is no recuperation from the articulation of this forbidden desire (Introduction x n.32).

And articulate it she does: by the first pages of the novel’s third volume, Gertrude is publicly proclaiming her feelings for her guardian, stating, “I love Lord Denmore; I avow my folly; I love but him in this vast universe; and on his will depends the happiness or misery of my days” (FF 201). These declarations are not merely verbal; Gertrude also accepts the bodily symptoms of her sexual desire—the “trembling,” “throbbing,” and “burning” that has so confused her in the past—to such an extreme degree that she eventually appears less as a rational being than as a body out of control. She must be physically restrained from harming herself or others in the mad rush of her passions, as evidenced when Mary Ashgrove (herself laboring under the trials of extreme sensibility) must hold a wildly flailing Gertrude “with all her strength” and “conjure [her] to reflect,

52 Julie Shaffer expands upon Wilson’s discussion, arguing that some forms of sensibility do allow certain female characters (particularly in gothic novels) to heed the voice of blood—which she calls “Cri du sang”—and properly interpret it. Gertrude is unable to do this, however, because of the completely excessive, irrational nature of her sensibility. See Shaffer, “Familial love, incest, and female desire in late eighteenth-century British women’s novels,” Criticism 41.1 (Winter 1999): 67-99.
53 Here, Shaffer is working from S.A. Ford’s earlier discussions of incest in The False Friend: “Once the desire has been articulated […] the family structure can only implode, and both fathers and daughters […] have no possibility for relationship, no place in the world, no support for the self” (63). See S.A. Ford, “’A Name More Dear’: Daughters, Fathers, and Desire in A Simple Story, The False Friend, and Mathilda,” in Re-visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers 1776 – 1837, Eds. C.S. Wilson and J.A. Haefner (Philadelphia, PA: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994) 51-71.
[…] to relinquish the frantic idea” of accosting Lord Denmore (293). Later, Gertrude’s suicide is prevented only by Miss Stanley’s and the maidservant Patty’s combined brute efforts, in a passage that illustrates the heroine’s complete subservience to (yet primal power through) her body’s irrational drives:

I felt a female’s arms encircling me, and heard the voice of poor Patty conjuring me to be patient. It was in vain that she exerted all her power to hold me; I felt as though I possessed a lion’s strength, and tearing myself from her, hastened to the brook: Patty followed me with equal swiftness […] My brain was burning, and my lips were parched; I felt the maniac’s fever scorching up the withering fibres of my heart, and I raved distractedly. Before I reached the portico, Miss Stanley overtook me: she snatched my arm, and held me […]. (365-6)

Eventually, Gertrude’s body begins to fail under such constant exertion. She grows progressively weaker, until the revelation of her birth—and Denmore’s simultaneous death—proves too much. She dies, leaving Miss Stanley’s voice to close out the narrative and caution readers against “the miseries attendant on that want of CANDOUR” and the undeniable “OMNIPOTENCE OF TRUTH” (307).

In *The False Friend*, then, the body emerges as a particular obstacle to complete moral transparency. Gertrude’s attentiveness and openness to her body’s signs and desires lead not to rational virtue, but rather to the traditional signifiers of fallenness: that is, increased acts of deception (including, shockingly, Gertrude’s near-murder of Treville, albeit in self-defense, and subsequent assumption of a false name to avoid legal repercussions) and, eventually, entrapment in diseased and dying flesh. Furthermore, Gertrude is not the only character in the novel whose fate suggests that the physiology of the human—particularly, female—body is fatally unknowable and secreted. In an

54 Denmore is shot and killed by William St. Leger, Gertrude’s supposed father, at the moment he confesses the true circumstances of Gertrude’s birth.
especially chilling scene, Lady Denmore is declared dead after falling into a “deep sleep, which bore so strong a resemblance to death” (*FF* 83). Her body literally “lies” against her will, taking on the “the appearance of annihilation” (83) when she is in fact improving in health. Not only is Lady Denmore’s lively consciousness temporarily inside the appearance of a corpse, then, but the horrifying possibility of live burial—that nightmare of concealment and obscurity, Robinson’s ultimate indicators of “fallenness”—lingers over the scene as well.

If *The False Friend* demonstrates the fatal hindrance a woman’s physical body offers to her pursuit of transparent virtue, *The Natural Daughter* solves this problem by removing embodied physicality altogether. Martha Bradford is able to achieve ideal “transparency” by virtue of near invisibility; her body is by and large absent from the text. This claim may at first appear belied by typical critical assessment of Martha as a more sexually informed and active heroine than many of her other contemporary literary peers, or by the general sense of Martha as Robinson’s most exhibitive heroine. She becomes, after all, both a strolling actress and published author over the course of her narrative, a highly “public” woman on display who is often read as Robinson’s most obvious fictional double. However, closer consideration reveals that Robinson strategically renders Martha in intangible terms, and insists her self-displays have little to do with her body at all. Rather, Robinson “refus[es] the logic that locates a woman

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55 Ann Close, for instance, argues that Martha’s narrative success is measured by her financial independence and presumed sexual satisfaction at the close of the novel (39). Close does not, however, specify how exactly this “sexual satisfaction” is depicted, nor what it entails, other than the presumption that Martha will marry Lord Francis (her preferred suitor).
primarily by way of her bodily virginity and her supposedly non-intellectual nature” (Rooney 356), by promoting a heroine who is comprised solely of incorporeal qualities. Martha’s virtuous disembodiment is perhaps best understood in contrast to her sister Julia’s excessive physicality: both Bradford sisters are introduced in the opening pages of The Natural Daughter in noticeably different ways. Whereas Martha’s introductory character sketch features only one fairly nondescript physical attribute—she is “giddy, wild, buxom, good-natured” (ND 93, my emphasis)—Robinson’s text lingers visually on Julia’s pleasing figure and fashionable attire, much as her earlier novels do with their respective heroines. Julia’s description reads:

Julia was small in stature; fair, delicately formed […] Her face was pretty, her features being regular, and her eyes soft and languishing. The romantic tendency of her mind seemed to influence it even in the choice of her habiliments: the most delicate colours added to the transparency of her complexion; and she seemed, like the snow-drop, to droop at every breeze that the soft breath of April wafted through the carriage. (93)

While a cursory reading of this passage might indicate that Julia is The Natural Daughter’s (literally) “transparent” heroine, Robinson’s careful language suggests otherwise: Julia’s “transparency” is described as the explicit product of artifice, an optical illusion rendered by her calculated choice in clothing. The repetition of the word “seemed” underscores Julia’s manipulation of observable signs; she actively works to “seem” a figure of romantic, delicate sensibility, though this impression is far from accurate.

Although Julia initially presents herself as a “model of female excellence” (ND 93), over the course of the novel she emerges as utterly depraved and immoral, the perpetrator of crimes ranging from adultery, theft, gambling, kidnapping, infanticide, and
eventually, suicide. Robinson suggests, however, that these monstrous deeds are in fact logical products of the existing models of “female excellence” in her society, and aligns the presumably “properly” educated Julia with excessive violence in order to reveal the destructive nature at work in her contemporary standards of British femininity (Zunac 112). This is not to say that Julia is a mere “victim” of restrictive scripts of passive femininity, as Eleanor Ty has suggested; rather, I agree with Morgan Rooney’s reading of Julia as actively criminal in her willingly hypocritical performance of traditional cultural expectations of femininity “for ends fundamentally at odds with that script” (367). Julia embraces the faulty, though popular, understanding of propriety being linked solely to appearance—specifically, a shrouding of true character, rather than virtuous openness—that we see in previous villains like Angelina’s Lady Selina, to the point that she loses any semblance of natural humanity. Her last manifestation in the text is as more demon than woman, an “unnatural fiend” and consort to the sanguinary “monster” Robespierre (ND 289).

Julia’s descent into depravity is also tied to her extreme physicality; indeed, Robinson characterizes Julia as little more than an empty vessel, all flesh and no soul. This is not indicative of mere misogynistic commentary on the female sex, however; vicious male characters in The Natural Daughter are also identifiable by the text’s explicit attention to their (often grotesque) bodies. The ridiculous Leadenhead family of the novel’s subtitle, their very name indicative of their solely material nature, offers one such example. Gregory Leadenhead, whom Julia will eventually marry, cuckold, and

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56 For Ty’s discussion of Julia as victim of passive femininity see Empowering the Feminine, p. 75.
divorce, lacks any cerebral or emotional depth; instead, he simply possesses “a
countenance which presented the blank page of uncultivated intellects” (*ND* 272) and “so
ponderous a body” (176) that wreaks brute havoc wherever he goes, as he boxes his
sister’s ears, overturns carriages with raucous riding, and even runs over an old woman
with his coach.

Julia and Martha’s tyrannical father, Peregrine Bradford, is another grotesque
body in the text; he is depicted as a “pompous invalid,” whose gluttonous appetite and
sickly constitution mirror the greed and moral decay that comprise his total personality.
He is synecdochically dismembered and dehumanized, depicted as a “gouty foot” or
“complaining tongue,” and does the same to his own family, seeing them as no more than
“the breathing appendages of his domestic establishment” (*ND* 92). After he eats himself
to death, the affinities between Mr. Bradford and his beloved but “unnatural” Julia are
made more disturbingly explicit. Where Robinson writes, “In twelve hours after the death
of Mr. Bradford, the corpse set out for London,” the sentences immediately following
explicitly describe Julia’s travels, as “four black steeds conveyed her back to London in
every sense of the word a modern girl of fashion” (125). Though both the dead father and
“ruined” daughter are conveyed by the same carriage, then, there is little narrative
distinction as to who is designated the true “corpse.” Julia, having “lost both her peace of
mind and honour” (125) in a seduction scene that occurs at the very moment of her
father’s demise, is a walking-dead figure from that day, an automaton of mere material
desire. She ultimately kills herself at the end of the novel by ingesting poison, and the sight of her rapidly “blackening form” (290) in a blood-stained room offers a fitting externalization of her moral darkness.

From a snowdrop-complected beauty to a putrid black mass of rotting flesh, Julia enters and exits *The Natural Daughter* as highly embodied. Her sister Martha, however, is anything but. Besides the mention of her “buxom” figure and her “face full of dimples” (*ND* 92), there is little further commentary on Martha’s physical attributes. Instead, readers learn much about Martha’s “natural” disposition: that she “talked gaily, laughed heartily […] and [was] bluntly sincere in the tenor of her conversation” (92-3). This sincerity comes to be Martha’s defining characteristic; while her popular family members evince an affected humanity, Martha braves unjust censure in order to console the less fortunate or to point out her family’s own wrongdoings. It is also the trait that fatefully attracts her first husband, Mr. Morley, who sees in Martha “a simplicity of character which would render her the domestic companion, the artless friend” (136). Morley misjudges the profoundly “artless” nature of his young wife, however; while he cherishes the preservation of his nominal reputation over actual good works, Martha’s egalitarian charity and candor continue unabated. Much to his chagrin, the new Mrs. Morley “openly associates with the very dregs of creation” (136), including the unwed mother Susan Sedgley, until this disinterested kindness is misread as evidence of her own moral failings. Susan’s illegitimate child Frances, whom she abandons in a moment of

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57 Notably, Julia’s initial “seduction” can be read both as consensual or, more in keeping with Amelia’s in *Walsingham*, as rape; Robinson writes that, “Julia fainting into the arms of sir Lionel, was conveyed senseless from the scene of calamity,” and states a few lines later that she has lost her “honour” (*ND* 125).
desperation to Martha’s care, is soon rumored to be Martha’s own, and Morley heartlessly turns his wife out of her home.

Martha is not as troubled by this development as a typical eighteenth-century heroine, however, as long before her unwarranted ousting from her home she has chafed under the confines of Morley’s severe authority. Robinson describes how even early in her marriage, “constraint had given [Martha] a zest for roving,” (ND 118), which in turn leads her to discover the desperate Susan, ignominiously concealed in a neighboring hovel with her newborn. Later in the novel, Martha’s wanderings—both forced and willfully undertaken alike—will lead her throughout Britain and the European continent, with climactic moments occurring in France and Switzerland. Critics like Hester Davenport connect the peripatetic plot of The Natural Daughter with its author’s own sense of personal limitation, calling it a “restless novel” indicative of Robinson’s desires to “break out from the constraints placed on her movements” (xi). Martha’s constant mobility is also in keeping with, I argue, her “transparent” virtue: secure in the blamelessness of all her actions, she often resists any opportunity of containment or coverage that could be read as ashamed acknowledgement of wrongdoing. This is particularly evident in a scene in which Morley offers to end Martha’s itinerant days and renew his husbandly protections on the condition that she seclude herself forever on his estate in order to “conceal [her] disgrace” (ND 203). Despite the hardships she has

58 While Davenport, who calls The Natural Daughter a “biography in fiction,” identifies these “constraints” as relating specifically to Robinson’s “lack of money and bodily frailty,” the number of itinerant heroines who appear in other late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels—including Ann Radcliffe’s gothic heroines in The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) or The Italian (1797), or the title character of Frances Burney’s The Wanderer (1814)—suggest that Robinson and many other female authors may have been responding to more general societal constraints placed upon women of this era.
encountered on the road (in fact, Morley has just saved his destitute wife from the wrath of an angry innkeeper moments before this scene), Martha automatically rejects his proposal, as the very semblance of a punitive seclusion would be a falsehood. She has done nothing wrong, and so must remain unconfined if unprotected, a visible emblem of “truth” itself.

Nowhere is Martha’s commitment to virtuous exhibitions of self more evident than in her career as a strolling actress. Performing under the name Mrs. Denison—one of the heroine’s few “falsehoods” in the course of the entire novel, which she adopts with extreme reluctance—Martha becomes a rising star of the stage. Notably, Martha begins acting not solely out of financial necessity, but in order to fulfill a long-cherished desire: Robinson writes that “Mrs. Morley had often meditated a dramatic trial; and in her present forlorn and unprotected situation, the attempt seemed irresistible” (ND 159). Though submission to constricting definitions of propriety has prevented her from making an attempt in the past (an experience Robinson would subsequently recount in her own memoirs), acting appears a perfectly “proper” and logical outlet for a character like Martha, who has already fashioned her life as an open, improvised performance of her every thought and feeling.

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59 Martha agrees to the name change only at the insistence of Mr. Dodson, a kind mentor whose “moral character was unblemished” (ND 146); only her respect for his moral authority persuades Martha make such an uncharacteristic falsehood, and Robinson makes her reluctance explicit.

60 Robinson’s father famously threatened to “annihilate” her mother if she allowed “dishonour” to fall upon Robinson’s reputation, an injunction that Thomas Robinson repeated to dissuade her from the stage. She writes that Thomas “represented to my mother the disapprobation which my Father would not fail to evince at my adopting a theatrical life in preference to engaging in an honorable and prosperous connection” (Memoirs 210).
Lest one might consider professional acting possibly incompatible with Martha’s stance against artifice, Robinson underscores her heroine’s role-playing as in fact an extension of her natural honesty. She writes of Martha:

She was the pupil of Nature; her feelings were spontaneous, her ideas expanded, and her judgment correct. She scorned to avail herself of that factitious mummery, that artificial, disgusting trick, which deludes the senses by exciting laughter at the expense [sic] of understanding. She was lively and unaffected […] she was the thing she seemed, while even the perfection of her art was Nature. (ND 179)

Martha’s acting is not based upon affectation, then, but rather upon the “spontaneous” expression of true emotions. In adopting the trappings of a dramatic role, she becomes, somewhat counter-intuitively, more obviously transparent—“she was the thing she seemed”—in that she perfectly transmits unadulterated natural feeling to a rapt audience who, unlike the hypocritical judges Martha encounters in everyday life off-stage, cannot help but recognize and appreciate her sincerity.

One aspect that is conspicuously absent from The Natural Daughter’s depiction of Martha’s acting career, however, is sexuality: as scholars like Kristina Straub have detailed, the eighteenth-century actress was generally conceived as a highly sexual figure, with her female body necessarily displayed as public spectacle.\textsuperscript{61} Even efforts to

\textsuperscript{61} In Rival Queens, Nussbaum revises Straub’s well-known account of the actress’s victimization beneath the audience’s gaze, and instead suggests that the theater could be a place of power for women in which some star actresses exploited the erotically charged zone of the theater to their advantage, and often raised their social standing through the very sexualized interactions with the audience that other scholars have viewed as uniformely degrading; Nussbaum writes, “In their interactive relationship with the audience, not just as pitied objects or prostitutes but as persons, these women represented new models of subjectivity, alive with potential while fraught with danger, in alluring proximity” (91). While this is an important contribution to our overall understanding of gender and eighteenth-century theater, Nussbaum admittedly focuses upon “exceptional actresses” of great celebrity, who manage to control their public identities and become arbiters of fashion and wit in spite of constant rumor and negative attention. I would suggest that for lesser actresses, inserting their female bodies onto the stage still eroticized them in ways that were often damaging, and out of their personal control; in fact, Robinson’s own account of the sexual advances she was subjected to while acting, and the particularly vicious equations of acting and promiscuity with which
highlight a female performer’s public chastity, a popular strategy used to combat the presumed disreputable personal lives of actresses, problematically put her on unintended sexual display (Straub 96). Robinson does acknowledge the general association of actresses with impropriety, describing how even the modest “Mrs. Denison” is unfairly deemed “an unfit associate for the wives and daughters of the proud, the opulent, and the unenlightened” (ND 181). She also recognizes the stage performer’s treatment as both visual curiosity and material commodity; wealthy families invite both Martha and Susan (who has also become an actress, after Martha takes charge of her daughter Frances) to their homes for the “amusement and the gratification of their friends,” and treat such gatherings “as though they were meditating to exhibit something monstrous and extraordinary” (179-80). However, this curiosity and “gratification” never seems to extend to the prurient. Save one mention of Gregory Leadenhead becoming “enamoured of her attractions” (183), The Natural Daughter makes no mention of Martha receiving any of the unwanted sexual attention that was for many women unavoidable fact of theater life—a fact Robinson’s own memoirs prove she knew well.62 Instead, Martha’s virtuous “transparency” somehow trumps the typical dynamics of specular relations. As opposed to being a sexualized spectacle before an unseen, empowered observer, it is Martha who becomes temporarily “invisible” and powerful on stage, emblematic of she was faced after her relationship with the Prince, is evidence of this point. Additionally, I argue that the invisibility the fictional Martha achieves on stage in The Natural Daughter is not equivalent to the “star” actresses’ highly embodied performances that Nussbaum describes, in which sexual magnetism is one of the very sources of their social power.

62 Robinson obliquely recounts the sexual advances she received during her stage career, writing, “Were I to mention the names of those who held forth the temptations of fortune at this moment of public peril, I might create some reproaches in the families of the fashionable world […] I shall not enter into a minute detail of temptations which assailed my fortitude” (Memoirs 247).
intangible ideals and thereby immune to the untoward advances directed at actual female bodies.  

Martha’s feminine sexuality is not always absent; it is, however, almost always understood as a hindrance, if not absolute hazard. Martha is most secure when she is either unseen or when viewed as potentially asexual, such as when she is dismissed by fashionable onlookers as a “mere masculine hoyden” (ND 93). Furthermore, while Martha’s honest and intuitive nature compels her to recognize any sexual impulses she has, she also actively combats them. Although she has no romantic interest in her husband (in fact, Robinson emphasizes how reason and circumstance, rather than any semblance of love, determines the Morleys’ marriage), Martha does acknowledge her undeniable attraction to Lord Francis Sherville. However, in the face of this attraction, she feels only fear; Robinson writes, “Mrs. Morley trembled.—She felt her danger; she was alarmed” (141). It is important to understand that the “danger” Martha apprehends lies only in her experiencing attraction to Lord Francis, not that the attraction might result in “improper” marital infidelity. As Shaffer notes, Martha’s sympathetic reaction to other characters’ sexual transgressions suggest that she quite progressively considers extra- and premarital sexuality “more as error than sin” (“Illegitimate Sexualities” 49).

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63 Mole locates a comparable moment in Robinson’s own career, in which wearing a transparent veil on stage provided Robinson with a “happy medium” between “both displayed and concealed, or neither quite displayed nor quite concealed” (186).
64 It is also worth noting this “fear” comes long before Martha suspects Lord Francis (incorrectly) of being the father of little Frances; even after assuming that he is the father, she does not view him as a libertine seducer, but rather mourns he could be capable of treating his lover so cruelly and apparently rejecting his child (see ND 246).
65 This lenient attitude of “error” may also be relevant to Martha’s own marriage. Though it is not explicitly addressed, there is a sense that Susan and Morley’s marriage, if valid, invalidates Martha’s own—any consummation of her marriage to Morley, then, is itself extra-marital (much like the situation Sophia narrowly avoided in regards to Acreland in Angelina). Morley refuses to acknowledge a connection based
Additionally Martha, much like Robinson herself, may feel little loyalty to a spouse who has seemingly forfeited the rights of a husband in abandoning the responsibilities of one. It is the fact of sexual arousal alone that alarms Martha in this instance.

Martha’s determined resistance to her own desire makes perfect sense within the context of the novel, though, as female characters who yield to sexual impulses meet often immediately with frightful punishment. Julia’s appearance as a living “corpse” is marked from the moment of her first sexual experience, while Susan, the sole woman to experience any kind of biological maternity in The Natural Daughter, conceives her child while imprisoned in Paris, and only after choosing a “marriage à la Revolution” over a death sentence. Though she falls in love with her “destroyer”—who is eventually revealed to be the hypocritical Morley himself—Susan is abandoned while pregnant, and left sick and despairing until Martha’s intervention. Ironically, it may be her very love for Morley, and thereby the agency she may have in her sexual relationship with him, that actually merits Susan’s punishment in The Natural Daughter, for, as Shaffer has noted, Robinson’s novels tend to suggest that “a ‘good’ woman’s illicit sexuality occurs only through victimization or a culpability that is not sexually criminal, being rooted in credulity or vanity” (“Ruined Women” 297). Female sexuality expressed willingly, like Julia’s or Susan’s, or honestly, like The False Friend’s Gertrude, may not automatically mark a woman as traditionally “fallen” or criminal in these texts, but it is also far from sanctioned.

on such “republican custom,” but Susan nonetheless understands it as valid, all of which complicates Martha’s claims to the legitimacy of her own position as Morley’s wife.
And sexualized or not, Martha’s very body also appears over the course of *The Natural Daughter* as a necessary evil, one that is continually at variance with her plans for transparent virtue. Though very little physical description of Martha is given, a sense of the heroine’s body does intrude in the text in order to locate pain or illness. For instance, on her way to perform her charitable works for Susan, Martha catches a fever that confines her to her bed and thereby fuels the rumors that the “ward” that she produces soon afterwards is her own newborn. Robinson highlights the ways in which Martha’s vulnerable body directly opposes her virtuous plans, noting that the “rain which had penetrated Mrs. Morley’s dress, though her heart was warm, chilled its circulation” (*ND* 121). Mere “chilled circulation” sets off a series of events that contradict Martha’s true warm-hearted actions and intent. Later, when Martha is taken for an heiress and imprisoned in a private madhouse, she is also treated to repeated physical violence: “bled, blistered, menaced and tortured […] her head had been shaved, and her limbs bruised even to the privation of the powers of motion” (224). Robinson refers to similar conditions in *Walsingham* as part of a “mind-mill,” in which bodily abuse is used to overpower women’s intellect. In particular, vicious men utilize these dehumanizing services in order to turn women into *all* body—little more than empty animal vessels—and therefore ostensibly suitable for exploitation or disposal at their pleasure. As Robinson explains: “A husband who wanted to have a troublesome wife *taken care of*—a libertine who wished to *provide for* a mistress, when the edge of passion became blunted by satiety—or a man of refined taste, who sought to *secure* unguarded innocence, found infinite advantages in the subduing atmosphere of the all-potent mind-mill” (*W* 362).
Nonetheless, Martha manages to preserve and assert her reason even under the most appalling conditions, to the point that her captors recognize her as a considerable threat who “will ruin [their] house if she should ever obtain her liberty” (ND 243). While she is fortuitously released from the madhouse after it catches fire, a reader can presume that Martha may have been able to withstand her imprisonment even longer than most. Her disembodied quality throughout the novel, perhaps best exemplified by her powerful experiences of corporeal “invisibility” on stage, confirms the superfluous nature of her physical being. She is thereby, despite all her “natural” associations, able to establish a highly unnatural defensive mind/body divide that is impossible for more embodied characters, like Gertrude—and, problematically, Robinson’s living readers—ever to maintain.

A discussion of Martha’s exhibitive yet bodiless “transparency” could not be complete without consideration of her foray into authorship. Driven by both financial necessity and her natural inclination towards unconfined expression, Martha becomes a published novelist and poet over the course of The Natural Daughter.66 This career fulfils Martha’s two-fold commitment to exhibitionism and honesty: she begins writing for money but also for the “attainment of fame,” and she bases even her fictional productions in truthful “portraits drawn from living characters” (ND 207-8). She also writes in spite of bodily ailment; moreover, her literary efforts seem actually to harm her physical well-being, as Robinson recounts how her heroine “had employed her pen, till her health was

66 In her introduction to the Broadview edition of The Natural Daughter, Sharon Setzer argues that Robinson’s depiction of Martha’s struggles in the literary marketplace demand “a rewriting of literary history that has enshrined Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh (1857) as ‘the first work in English by a woman writer in which the heroine herself is an author’” (28).
visibly declining” (221), and offers a long diatribe about how occupations “of literary toil are most fatiguing” (238). While the idea that the mental exertions of authorship can have a physical toll is a commonplace one, it has particular significance in Martha’s case in that it highlights yet another way embodied experience thwarts Robinson’s proposed system of virtue. Martha’s hopes to disseminate her virtuous “truth” throughout society are frustrated by her bodily failings (including, notably, publishers’ perception of her detrimental “femininity”), rather than her true moral or mental capacity.

Martha is finally most successful in adhering to and spreading the doctrine of virtue through transparency through her sympathetic relationships with other women. For instance, by not immediately dismissing Susan as “fallen” in terms of mere chastity, Martha actually teaches the young mother not to fall into further vice via falsehood. Responding with dismay when Susan asks for assistance in “concealing” Frances, Martha instead offers cheering words on living openly and industriously for the child’s sake. Although Susan initially rejects the lesson in transparency and hides her connection to the infant—a move that results in Martha’s consequent persecution in her stead—she ultimately acknowledges “the maternal longings of a heart […] throbbing with regret” (ND 274), and reclams her deserted daughter. Through Martha’s intervention, Susan comes to understand that only her denial of her child, not the circumstances of her conception, is morally criminal.

Much as it does in her earlier novels like Angelina, open and inclusive female community therefore emerges as Robinson’s answer to insincere and prejudicial fashionable society. The novel ends with Martha, Susan, and little Frances sharing the
estate of the wretched Morley, who dies in agony while confessing his many crimes; they have been aided along the way by other discerning, virtuous women like Louisa Franklin (Lord Francis’s and Susan’s other sister), and the Duchess of Chatsworth, a character intentionally styled after Robinson’s own patroness, the Duchess of Devonshire. While Lord Francis is also part of this community—nominally the head of it, as Martha’s second husband and brother/uncle to the other female members—his presence does not necessarily equate to normative patriarchal authority and expectations. Instead, Setzer has argued that the “androgynous implications of his given name and the feminist implications of his family name [that] conflates the feminine pronouns she and her” suggest that Francis Sherville actually represents “a town or political entity where women enjoy full rights of citizenship”; this possibility is effectively realized in the book’s final scenes of an extended egalitarian family unit with a “natural daughter,” rather than monstrous father, at its ideological center (“Romancing” 548).

This “egalitarian” community, then, recognizes neither sexual difference nor sexual history in determining the power of each member. Martha and Susan, chaste and unchaste yet ultimately virtuous alike, end with equal legal, financial, and even maternal status, as they share Morley’s estate, fortune, and child. Furthermore, many critics have traced the genesis of The Natural Daughter to Robinson’s own sympathetic identification with women who were perceived as equally exhibitionistic and “fallen” as herself, like Mary Wollstonecraft and Georgiana Cavendish. Wollstonecraft, whose sexual history had

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67 Setzer explains that “Chatsworth” was the name of the Devonshire family estate in Derbyshire, a fact by which Robinson’s early readers would have immediately identified “the accomplished Georgiana, duchess of Chatsworth” with the real Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. For an in-depth discussion of the character’s connections with the living woman (along with the ways in which Wollstonecraft serves as another extra-textual sympathetic figure) see Setzer, “Romancing” 549-50.
been disastrously revealed to the public only a year prior to the novel’s publication, was famously the mother of another “natural” Frances, while the Duchess of Devonshire also had a natural daughter who was reared abroad by foster parents, although she raised her husband’s illegitimate children in her own household. Robinson’s plot boldly reminds readers of (rather than conceals) the presumably illicit elements of these women’s lives, but in doing so emphasizes the various virtues that could lie at the heart of each transgression, including trusting natures, maternal devotion, unaffected sensibility, and a rational desire for independence. Thus, Robinson’s fiction links these real women into a network of mutual sympathy and support, extra-textually mimicking the communities formed on the novel’s pages.

Moreover, sexuality matters little in communities striving for disembodiment, as the characters of *The Natural Daughter* seem to do. Over the course of the narrative, the traditional dependence on external signs of sensibility as clear evidence of internal states—the “bodily eloquence” that also fails Gertrude St. Leger—has been proven unreliable, easily faked by characters like Julia or ignored by supercilious ones like Morley or Lady Pen Pryor. Tom Mole has also outlined ways in which Robinson’s later poetry and personal writings speak to “the opacity of the subject and the failure of physiognomy” in determining a person’s interior (197); so too, I would argue, do her later novels. Recognizing these very kinds of failures, and in keeping with its heroine’s “invisibility” through transparency, *The Natural Daughter*’s conclusion depicts a community that relies on language over bodies, and made up of members who were
willing to accept Martha’s “artless story [as] sure passports to a soul” when all appearances were against her (ND 255).

Attempted Escapes from Embodiment: Robinson’s Memoirs and Other Prose

From Robinson’s first to her final completed works of fiction, the body becomes a thing to be escaped rather than embraced by her most virtuous characters—an ideal seemingly at odds with any real-world application of her newly proposed system of exhibitionistic virtue. For indeed, while few statements from Robinson herself explicitly regarding her theories and motivations behind novel writing (aside from economic necessity) survive, there is justification in reading her works and characters as consciously crafted “models” for public emulation. Late eighteenth-century readers generally accepted novels as agents of influence—for better or for worse—and Robinson praised fictional works as important sources of edification and instruction. Yet escape from embodiment obviously proves far more problematic for a living woman—particularly one as acutely aware of her physiological states as Robinson’s health forced her to be—than it is for an imagined heroine. Robinson’s last prose publications therefore speak to her anxieties about the (im)possibilities inherent in real women’s efforts to replicate the transparency she affords her fictional doubles, and how she hoped her own “transparent” virtue might ultimately be understood.

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68 Robinson described novels, particularly those produced by British women, as some of the finest literary productions, “embellished with the interesting events of domestic life, portrayed with all the elegance of phraseology, and all the refinement of sentiment, but with forcible and eloquent, political, theological, and philosophical reasoning”; she also wrote that such works and their authors could not fail but to “excite emulation” (Letter 84-85).
As Adriana Craciun has shown, Robinson is interested in physicality in her nonfiction prose as well as her novels. She explicitly deals with women’s physical “subordination” in her feminist tract, *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, although the corporeal dimension (tellingly left out of her title) of her argument is often overlooked. Throughout *Letter*, Robinson critiques arguments that posit women’s bodies as weaker than men’s; she details the ways in which the daily domestic drudgery expected of women requires significant bodily strength, and, at the other extreme, offers examples of extraordinary women’s physical heroism, including those who “brave the very heat of battle, stand to their gun, amidst the smoak [sic] and din of a navel engagement; conceal the anguish of their wounds; and […] repeatedly hazard their existence” (*Letter* 60). Each of these anecdotes contests the notion that men's oppression of women is understandable given their “natural” superiority in strength. By illustrating that some women are indeed stronger than some men, Robinson argues that “relative strength and weakness are found along a continuum, not necessarily according to sexual difference” (Craciun 117).

And yet, Robinson’s *Letter* paradoxically suggests that women are indeed collectively “weakened” in ways by their sexed bodies. Robinson explicitly invokes Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) as the inspiration for her own feminist tract, and as such was obviously familiar with her predecessor’s discussion of the ways in which feminine conventions literally debilitated women’s bodies.  

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69 See my introduction for a discussion of the ways Wollstonecraft criticized the unnatural cultural scripts surrounding women’s fashion, education, and more, and how such scripts resulted in “defective” female bodies.
Robinson builds upon Wollstonecraft’s argument, not only agreeing that affected femininity is harmful—indeed, as I have demonstrated, it serves in her estimation as the signifier of true moral “fallenness”—but that even presumably “natural” female bodies and processes are also debilitating. A woman, she states, “is exposed by her personal attractions, to more perils” (Letter 43); her feminine beauty, in this sense, is a natural disadvantage, if not an outright disability.

Robinson will illustrate this principle repeatedly in her fiction, such as when the libertine Woodley blames his attempted rape of Julia St. Laurence on her own “fatal attractions” (TW 367). Technically, of course, these “disabling” factors appear to originate extrinsically, in a society based upon contradictory “sensualist doctrines” that locate women’s value in both their sexual attractiveness and chastity, and Robinson’s Letter calls for the very kind of large-scale social reform that could eventually rectify such attitudes. However, elsewhere Robinson also communicates a deep distrust of women’s own sexual desire and agency, as evidenced by the fate of Gertrude St. Leger. A similar case may be made for Sir Sidney Aubrey in Walsingham. Sidney is depicted as a perfect being, both physically and mentally; “handsome, polite, accomplished, engaging, and unaffected,” Sidney is an expert in everything from poetry to science to “all manly exercises” (W 129). And yet, Sidney labors under a “fatal secret” that festers like a cancer over the course of the narrative, and nearly drives the young baronet to madness and

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70 Women’s “responsibility” for their own rape or seduction is a long-standing trope in literature, particularly prominent in the amatory fiction of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century. In The Seduction Narrative in Britain, 1747-1800, Katherine Binhammer discusses that although male responsibility for seduction was increasingly commented upon in literature of the eighteenth century, by the 1790s blame was once more shifted onto women, who were cast paradoxically as inevitable “passive victims” who were also entirely responsible for guarding their own virginity with their life.
death. By the end of the novel, this secret is revealed: he is rather a she, a young woman who has been raised in the guise of a man as part of her mother’s pecuniary schemes, and one who has long been in love with her male cousin (and hitherto rival) Walsingham. Sidney’s story seems to suggest that although forced androgyny has both made her “perfect”—it has erased the allegedly “natural” proofs of sexual dimorphism, melding presumed “masculine” and “feminine” attributes to reveal the often debilitating ideological constructs at work in late eighteenth-century conceptions gender—it is also ultimately untenable. Secrecy and inevitable sexual desire conspire to disable Sidney’s ideally “unsex’d” body.71

But the corporeal clearly troubles Robinson far beyond its sexual dimensions, as other forms of explicitly “female” embodiment are also problematized in her texts. Biological maternity is one such issue: in all five of her novels set in contemporary Britain, Robinson does not depict a single healthy and/or legitimate instance of childbirth and reproduction. While problematic “natural” births abound for victimized or villainous supporting characters, virtuous young heroines remain childless. Although this circumstance could potentially be explained by the fact that the novels conclude soon after their protagonists’ marriages, the secondary female characters—ones who usually serve as mentor figures in the texts—also avoid pregnancy. However, this is not to say they are not mothers; in fact, adoptive families play a powerful and benevolent role in each of Robinson’s texts, from the loving Lord and Lady Watkins who adopt the

71 Craciun offers an interesting discussion of Wollstonecraft and the term “unsex’d,” differentiating between ideal sexlessness, which she sees encouraged by Wollstonecraft, and the kind of lost androgyny idealized by male Romantics, which “cannibaliz[ed] the phantasmatic (female) Other” (132).
(presumably) orphaned Charles Belmont, to Juliana Pengwynn, who protects Sophia from her biological father’s tyranny, to Martha, whose maternal devotion to Frances is undeniable.

Privileging adoption allows Robinson to entirely remove maternity from the bodily—and particularly sexual—associations she finds so problematic. As Nussbaum has outlined in *Torrid Zones*, the eighteenth century often saw erotic and maternal functions of the female body pitted against one another (the breast, for instance, being a particular locus of such a conflict), but Robinson’s nonbiological mothers need utilize neither. Further, this pattern seems to illustrate Ruth Perry’s claim that “a momentous shift in the structure of kinship” occurred in eighteenth-century British society, in which “the biologically given family into which one was born was gradually becoming secondary to the chosen family” (112). While Perry focuses primarily on the growing primacy of conjugal relationships and sees this as potentially problematic for women, in Robinson’s narratives the preference for “chosen” over than consanguineal bonds reads as decided progress. In arguing as she does for a “relational” model based in emotion rather than a strict legalistic family model, to use Elizabeth Fay’s terms (404), Robinson envisions domestic units that more readily adhere to her proposed system of transparent virtue. The ties that bind these alternative families are not secreted, as biological paternity and maternity is proven so often to be in *Angelina, The False Friend*, and *The Natural Daughter*. Rather, they are alliances of choice, made and declared openly, and ones

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72 For an extended discussion of the conflicts between maternity and sexuality in eighteenth-century England and its empire, see especially Chapter 1 (Torrid Mothers: Domesticating the Erotic) in *Torrid Zones*.
which showcase women’s agency. Martha Bradford is not compelled by mere biology to claim Frances, for instance, but willingly takes responsibility for the child out of her own rational desire and sense of morality. In a similar vein, private domestic spaces like the lying-in chamber, the concentrated site of many eighteenth-century women’s physiological experiences, come under Robinson’s suspicion for also too easily promoting the concealment of “truth.” After all, it is the clandestine nature of Lady Aubrey’s childbed experiences in *Walsingham* that gives rise to her corrupt plan to present her daughter as a son.

Keeping in mind Robinson’s individual experience of her own embodiment, particularly as it is recorded in her biographical writing, we can see more clearly how and why all her texts contain their particular blend of anxieties about the body. The twofold understanding of bodily attractions as both empowering and debilitating is at work throughout her memoirs, and evidenced by the attribution of her good looks’ “fatal” role in securing Thomas Robinson as her husband. Commenting upon the pattern of “seduction-coercion-and-escape” that occurs in *Memoirs*, Laura Runge also notes that Robinson’s beauty is “destabilizing rather than reforming or therapeutic,” as “men are inspired by her beauty to covet, conspire, intrigue, and attack rather than to behave on their guard against a breach of decency” (577). Perhaps even more significantly, Robinson’s experience of the biological processes of maternity was also highly fraught, and involved dangerous nursing mishaps, her daughter Sophia’s death in infancy, and at least one near-fatal miscarriage, the likely result of which was her widely-publicized
paralysis. Although known for being “all body,” then, Robinson often understood that very body as confining and/or out of her control.

And by 1799, Robinson’s sense of dissociation from yet entrapment within her own body was perhaps at its peak. Early biographical sketches of Robinson recounted that dating from the fateful attack of “violent rheumatism” in 1783, she “never recovered the entire use of her limbs, […] could never walk nor even stand; and was always carried from one room to another, and to and from her carriage” (qtd. in Byrne 213). Popular newspapers of the time offered only a slightly more restrained analysis, reporting on Robinson’s limited mobility through the use of crutches. In the years immediately following this first bout of paralysis, Robinson often downplayed the severity of her infirmity, describing it in a 1786 letter to the Morning Post as, “a trifling lameness, of which, by the use of the baths at [Aix la Chapelle], I have every reason to hope, I shall recover in a month or six weeks” (“Letters From MR” 300). However, after years of therapeutic mud-baths and pain management through laudanum proved ineffectual, her invalidism, coupled with her dire financial straits, contributed to Robinson’s apparent depression in the last weeks of her life. In a letter written in August of 1800, Robinson recounts, “I find my health still resisting the good effects generally produced by a change of air: I am daily growing more feeble”; in particular, she is frustrated that “the effort of writing is now most painful to me […] and I am absolutely worn out, in powers, before

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73 Fears related to biological elements of motherhood figure prominently in Robinson’s Memoirs. For instance, she recounts how, after nursing the infant Maria Elizabeth “immediately after dancing,” she blamed her seemingly tainted breast milk— “agitated by the violence of exercise and the heat of the ballroom”—for the infant’s near-fatal subsequent convulsions (232). Later, her second daughter Sophia would die in her arms at six weeks of age. Contemporary gossip also claimed Robinson also gave birth to a “distorted and crippled” female child while in debtor’s prison, a circumstance that Byrne believes may be corroborated by several “heavily crossed out” lines in the Memoirs manuscript (Byrne 68-9).
the day is half wasted” (qtd. in Setzer “Original Letters” 311). An especially vitriolic letter from November of the same year expresses more immediate desperation, as Robinson lashes out against her illness and her creditors alike:

To endure the most unexampled bodily pain, with a mind unsoothed by the consolations of society!—I,—I! who have lived in the very zenith of brilliant pleasures, who have been, perhaps undeservedly, beloved even to idolatry,—to be driven from the world—to labor in undelighted solitude; [...] my darkest cloud is the obscurity to which I have been consigned these four months past. (qtd. in Setzer “Original Letters” 328)

In this passage, Robinson rages openly against the confinement she is experiencing, clarifying her reclusive lifestyle not as a personal choice brought on by shame or embarrassment for her previous “pleasures” (as many of her contemporary commentators would have liked to believe), but as the inescapable result of her material—both bodily and financial—conditions. To a proudly “public” woman like Mary Robinson, such obscurity translates as an unjust punishment.

It is little wonder, then, that the fiction Robinson produces in the last years of her life speaks to intense and interrelated anxieties about embodiment and the necessity for self-display. Nor is it surprising that these themes reach a fever pitch in her final prose works, written as they are in the wake of her increasing invalidism and imprisonment, both metaphoric and literal—she was arrested for debt more than once in 1799 and 1800, at times forcibly removed from her sickbed to the point that she suffered violent convulsions (Byrne 354). In her novels, this culminates in Martha Bradford, a “transparent” heroine who “refuse[s] the confines of an identity defined primarily by the body” (Rooney 355), yet still demonstrates how exhibition of self equates evident virtue. Astute and sympathetic readers of Martha’s narrative thereby gain a new way to “read”
Robinson’s history as well. This may have been a particularly pressing concern for the former “Perdita” following Wollstonecraft’s recent posthumous condemnation; strategically publicizing yet rewriting her sins as virtue affords Robinson potential security against a similar backlash.

It is not only virtue that Robinson’s last prose pieces work to redefine, however, but the related concept of (in)visibility as well. As her above letters indicate, Robinson felt her greatest “fall” was not from propriety—in fact, she would insist upon her unchanged respectability to the last—but from the heights of fashion and popularity. Many of her contemporaries would also advance this view; writer Laetitia Hawkins recalled the last public appearance of “the helpless paralytic Perdita” outside the opera in 1800 as one “not noticed except by the eye of pity.” Hawkins goes on to dismiss her even from memory with the pithy statement, “She was known no more” (34). But in defiance of such sanctimonious critics, Robinson’s writings elevate being “unseen” and “unknown” to a kind of privilege, much as she reshaped the meaning of her perceived exhibitionism. In this way, Robinson offers a new way of reading both her present circumstances as well as her past.

This redefinition and promotion of invisibility is perhaps best evidenced by Robinson’s series of “Sylphid” essays, published from October 1799 to February 1800 in the Morning Post, which feature a protean elemental narrator with the “gift of invisibility” and “the power of changing [her] form” (“Sylphid” 165). Robinson imbues her Sylph persona with the freedom of movement she attributed to Martha Bradford—the Sylph “wing[s her] way through the regions of infinite space” (180), flying from London
to Italy to India and beyond—without the problematic physicality that at times encumbers *The Natural Daughter*’s heroine. Setzer describes these essays as part of an “enabling fiction,” through which Robinson experienced an “imaginative escape” from a body that had long been stigmatized as a site of sexual promiscuity and illness; writing as the Sylph, she imagined a world in which she could effectively “refine herself out of bodily existence” (Setzer “Sylphid Self” 503; 506).

Importantly, though both involve not being seen, the Sylph’s invisibility—like Martha’s virtual “transparency”—is quite unlike Robinson’s dreaded “obscurity.” The latter involves a shrouding of self (in Robinson’s case, against her will), while the former is a “gift” that allows its possessor to observe and to “comment, without fear” on the scenes she encounters (“Sylphid” 165, my emphasis). Robinson effectively reverses the usual power dynamics that suggest the “invisible” self is unworthy of being seen, as is assumed in the above passage by Hawkins. Instead, she demonstrates that invisibility is neither pitiable nor stifling, but can rather be the very thing that enables the honesty and self-expression that are foundational to Robinson’s definition of virtue.74

Robinson’s habit of working through a range of personal experiences through her public writing is well documented. She turned to her pen, and her publishers, in efforts to come to terms with everything from her joy and sorrow at specific events—to which poems like “Written on the Recovery of my Daughter from Inoculation” and “Elegiac Ode to the Memory of my Lamented Father” attest—to more lingering issues, like her

74 Mole makes a similar argument, suggesting that Robinson metaphoric strategies of self-effacement speak to her “cultivation of a satiric subject position as a detached observer who is not implicated in the shallow culture she attacks” (201).
tumultuous relationship with Tarleton (“To Him Who Will Understand It”) or her general infirmity (“Written on a Sickbed”). Her novels were also generally understood to be autobiographical, with newspapers hotly debating which of her characters were “drawn from an original” (though “for the honor of human nature,” one publication decried, “we hope the anecdotes are not authentic”) (qtd. in Byrne 342). There is clear justification, then, in considering elements of Robinson’s biography when reading her prose, particularly when trying to determine the intentionality of the patterns of transparency that arise in her later novels and essays. The escapist disembodiment in works like the Sylphid essays may credibly be attributed to Robinson’s desire for a vicarious experience of easy mobility and empowered invisibility, however fleeting. Imaginatively transporting her readers (and herself, in composing the essays) to far-off climes at the very time that her own health precludes even local movement is surely a deliberate move, indicative of both Robinson’s most painful longings and her penchant for ironic humor.\(^75\)

Vicarious identification is also at work in Robinson’s novels, though coupled with philosophical complexities. The obvious “evolution” of transparent characters from The Widow to The Natural Daughter speaks to Robinson’s active engagement with and critical reconsideration of her redefinition of virtue, and her eventual recognition of, and frustrations with, her proposed moral system’s potential flaws. Thus, while Robinson is certainly not the only late eighteenth-century author to create a disembodied

\(^{75}\)Robinson often saw her health troubles as a source of playful humor in public and personal correspondence. Upon hearing reports of her own death, she would write teasing letters to the publications that were falsely advertising her demise, correcting erroneous elements of the obituaries they had featured. On another occasion, after violently striking her head against a low ceiling, she wrote to James Marshall, “Had the adversary my brain encountered, been nearer of its own quality, (of wood or of lead,) I had never lived to write this letter: but lath and plaster were destined to be divided between us” (Letters From MR 324).
protagonist, considering the gradual way she does so—with embodiment becoming a progressive threat over the course of the final texts she produced—greatly enhances our critical understanding of her particular literary corpus, her authorial process, and her approach to her own public reputation. We can see in each of Robinson’s increasingly invisible novelistic heroines their author’s conscious grappling with the realization that her ideal complete openness and exposure, when coupled with human bodies that can harbor secrets against the very people who possess them, was perhaps impossible—a realization surely made more apparent as her own body inexplicably failed her.

Robinson must have been forcefully reminded that she was not an elemental creature of the air, nor a fictional protagonist of the page, each time she was gripped by the recurrent pains that “shook her enfeebled frame nearly to annihilation” (Memoirs 285), or held in custody at debtor’s prison (as she was mere weeks following her last Sylphid essay’s publication in 1800). And yet, Maria Elizabeth Robinson recounts how her mother demonstrated a renewed immersion in mental pursuits in spite of—perhaps, in response to—these reminders of her physical mortality, writing that “her mind seemed to acquire strength in proportion to the weakness of her frame” (Memoirs 289). Even in the final days before her death in late December 1800, while suffering under an oppressive “dropsy in the chest” and the excruciating pain of six gall stones, Robinson’s last

76 Deidre Lynch has noted that many early British novelists attempted to create rather disembodied protagonists who could be seen as separate from physical or social circumstances, and thus become an object of universal sympathetic identification for readers; see Lynch, The Economy of Character (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 82-3. Lynch’s argument is reminiscent to Catherine Gallagher’s discussion of sympathy and the “(no)bodies” of fiction who emerge as “universally engaging subjectivities,” as she writes: “Our conception of the sentiments as appropriate to that rather than this body must be overcome in the process of sympathy” (Nobody’s Story 171).
77 For an account of this final incarceration, see Byrne 365.
conversations with her daughter revolved around her literary legacy. *Memoirs* ends with the report that Robinson, having collected and arranged her poems and autobiographical sketches, gave them to Maria Elizabeth “with an *injunction* that the narrative should be made public; adding, […] ‘Promise me that you will print it!’” (289, original emphasis). Robinson’s intense desire that her story, in her words, be told even after her death is not surprising, considering that through authorship, Robinson came as close as one can to achieving the kind of sustainable exhibitive “transparency” she imagined in her texts.78 A candid and communicative “self” appears released from any physical ties and boundaries—literal “voice,” immobilizing ailments, sexed body, etc.—when it is injected into a freely-circulating narrative, and language replaces unreliable visual signifiers. Furthermore, as Morgan Rooney has recognized, by writing herself into history—by showcasing her presumable transgressions, reinterpreting them as part of propriety, and asserting herself as primarily a moral and intellectual being—Robinson effectively writes herself out of “cultural codes that insist on locating women’s identities primarily by means of their bodies” (364). This is an agentive erasure, much like the Sylph’s invisibility, in that it affords Robinson the opportunity to be at last “unseen” as merely all body, and at last understood as something much more.

Robinson’s injunction to her daughter, then, is literally to (re)make her life into an open book, one that reads very much like her own novels. In fact, early reviewers of *Memoirs* complained that Robinson had “thrown over the present account of herself all

78 Although it has long been thought that Robinson’s autobiographical writing stops with the first volume of her *Memoirs*, and is continued by her daughter’s (and/or another editor’s) words, scholars like Judith Pascoe and M.J. Levy have advanced the theory that many of the later passages of *Memoirs* were indeed written by Robinson, but purposely cast in the third person. For a full discussion of the possible authorship of *Memoirs*, see Setzer and Brewer’s introduction to the Pickering & Chatto edition of the text.
the air of a novel” (Rev. of Memoirs 344), and the questionable veracity of Robinson’s narrative has been recognized even by sympathetic readers from its first publication. Riddled as it is with strategic elisions (the first volume breaks off before recounting the consummation of Robinson’s affair with the Prince), evasions (especially on matters in which Robinson could not have been blameless, like her large personal debt), inconsistencies, and multiple authorship, Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson is indeed difficult to classify as strict autobiography. And yet, the text is completely consistent when read in conjunction with—or more precisely, when read as an addition to—Robinson’s novels about contemporary British women. Just as she does for Julia St. Laurence, Sophia Clarendon, or Martha Bradford, Mary Robinson constructs herself as a “transparent” heroine, whose public displays of private virtues were inevitably misunderstood by an overly-censorious and often dissembling society. Her texts nonetheless speak to a firm belief in the existence of a like-minded community of readers—perhaps comprised of other women whose own “public” exertions have cast unwarranted aspersion on their reputations79—who will recognize the true “transparency” at work in honest, “natural” exhibitionism.

It is ultimately unimportant whether Robinson’s most scandalous actions were truly motivated by angelic virtues like honesty, or by all-too-human opportunistic desires (though her predilection for lavish silver-trimmed carriages and customized pink satin opera-boxes suggests the latter was a distinct possibility). What matters more is her effort to use fiction—a category in which significant portions of Memoirs arguably could be

79 Indeed, as this is the position Robinson occupies in relation to Wollstonecraft’s work, it is no wonder she imagines a similar readership for herself.
included—to redefine the limits of propriety, and in doing so reveal the highly constructed, equally “fictional” nature of supposedly fixed qualities like virtuousness and fallenness. Therefore, although her primary impetus in advancing models of transparent virtue seems to be to better manage her own present and posthumous reputation, Robinson’s depiction of simultaneously public and proper heroines has important recuperative potential for other women at the turn of the nineteenth century. It offers up a new kind of “public” self—“the vocally assertive woman whose self-respect is more valuable than society’s opinion,” as Fay has described Robinson’s heroines (405)—that women might proudly exhibit, in place of the unfulfilling secreted and secretive lives that had seemed to be the “proper” woman’s narrow lot.80

Yet the self-respect advocated by Robinson did not necessarily extend to physical aspects of “self.” In her final works of prose, corporeality appears in opposition to mentality and morality. For all her early successful and deliberate exploitation of her own body on theatrical stages, artists’ canvasses, and the most fashionable arenas of the day,

80 Some have argued that ironically, Robinson’s own daughter failed to understand this point. Ann Mellor, for instance, has built on Linda Peterson’s argument that Maria Elizabeth’s editorial work on her mother’s Memoirs re-confined Robinson’s subjectivity and counteracted her writing’s radical potentials. Mellor writes, “In rewriting her mother’s life as that of a devoted daughter, sister, and mother, as Linda Peterson has suggested, Maria Elizabeth imposed on her mother’s life the new middle-class domestic ideology of nineteenth-century England, in which the ideal woman becomes an angel in the house. Mary Robinson had represented the female artist as both lover and mother […]. Her daughter transformed that narrative into a construction of the female artist as only a devoted mother, a construction which anticipates a later Victorian insistence on confining female subjectivity within a private, safely domesticated sphere” (295). Interestingly, Robinson complained in some of her last letters to friends of being “a prisoner and a slave” of the “tyrannical” Maria Elizabeth (qtd. in Setzer “Original Letters” 321). Although these complaints are most likely the result of Robinson’s general frustrations with the illness, poverty, and loneliness that oppressed her throughout the last months of her life, rather than any real abuse on her daughter’s part, they nonetheless speak to the ways in which Robinson’s plans for her own life and legacy may have been at odds with her more conservative daughter’s vision.
her later writing depicts all forms of embodiment as impediment. This is an understanding clearly informed by her own personal experience of a body that appeared to have endangered and entrapped her—in its beauty, in its disability, in all its infinitely complex processes. But the very same processes that Robinson saw as disabling also enabled her literary output, in both its remarkable volume and its reformist bent. If we accept Maria Elizabeth’s accounts of her mother’s career, Robinson’s invalidism often eliminated other distractions or duties that might have kept her from her writing. It also inspired the themes and tones of her work; the interesting “pensive tendency” that characterized her popular prose and verses was judged by her contemporary readers as an unintended but welcome “consequence of long indisposition” (qtd. in Byrne 266).

Perhaps most importantly, however, Robinson’s desire not to be seen as “all body”—a desire brought about by her understanding of the various bodily disabilities that defined her as such—led her to attempt a courageous and highly public reclamation for all women of a virtue that was not located in mere chastity, and a self not defined by mere biological sex.

Mary Robinson may have come to the disheartening conclusion that a complete transcendence of embodiment—impossible except in her fictional depictions—was the only way to achieve this goal. And yet in crafting her invisible heroines, she became part of a community of writers—three more of whom I feature in the following chapters—

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81 Mellor argues that Robinson “may have been the most often painted woman of her day” (278), as she sat for portraits by such artists as Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Joshua Reynolds, George Romney, and Angelica Kauffman, among many others.
whose interventions in the discourse of fallenness would lay the foundation for the very visible feminist advances of the future.
Chapter 2:
Amelia Opie’s Fiction: Contagious and Recuperative Texts

A short time before her death in 1853, Amelia Alderson Opie, perhaps in a nostalgic frame of mind, recorded a number of recollections about her youth. Apparently during the course of this writing, one particular moment in her young adulthood stood out against all the rest. Opie wrote:

The occurrences of the year 1794 have lately been pressing with such power on my remembrance, demanding from me a decided confession that it was the most interesting period of my long life [...]. How vividly do I often now, in my lone and lonely portion, live over the excitements of those far distant days.\(^2\)

Opie’s use of the word “confession” in this personal reflection is worth noting, as a confession carries with it an implication of guilt. To confess is presumably to disclose one’s most secret weakness, fault, or crime. It is also an act that would appear unnecessary for the aged Opie, who after some eight decades of life, more than half of which had been spent in the public eye, had rarely had her character called into question. Originally noticed as a lively, beautiful, and popular daughter of a prominent Norwich doctor, Opie later gained respect as the wife of famed painter John Opie, and eventually as an acclaimed author of poetry, essays, and fiction in her own right. Scholars like Gary Kelly and Shelley King have offered accounts of how Opie’s reputation for tirelessly

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\(^2\) Cecilia Lucy Brightwell, Opie’s first biographer, reports that this line “written within a short time of her death” was found among “Mrs. Opie’s loose papers.” Brightwell had access to these and other private letters of Opie’s, as she was the daughter of Thomas Brightwell, the executor of Opie’s estate. See Brightwell pp. 49-50.
fulfilling domestic duties—from playing “hostess” to her husband’s portraiture subjects, to caring for her aging father until his death—earned her high praise for both her femininity and her strict sense of propriety; moreover, her authorial endeavors only bolstered this impression. Opie shrewdly managed to cast her writing career as part of her proper womanly duties, as she insisted that her husband John actively endorsed, and even gently compelled, her work, and was the first to suggest she publish under her own name. Opie wrote of John that, “when our marriage took place, he knew that my most favourite amusement was writing; and he always encouraged, instead of checking, my ambition to become an acknowledged author.” She also claimed her only potential disobedience against her husband’s wishes was that she failed to “write more and better,” stating:

[…] and to the last hour of my existence I shall deplore those habits of indolence which made me neglect to write, while it was in my power to profit by his criticisms and advice; and when, by employing myself more regularly in that manner, I should have been sure to receive the proudest and most dearest reward of woman,—the approbation of a husband at once the object of her respect and love. (“Memoirs” 26)

Thus Opie successfully cultivated an image of herself as a “public” woman who was simultaneously a consummate wife, widow, daughter, and friend—indeed, eventually a literal “Friend,” after her 1825 conversion to Quakerism, the result of which would be her ultimate memorialization as a prim, retiring, and charitable religious figure.

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83 Gary Kelly offers an overview of Opie’s public reputation in “Amelia Opie […] : Official and Unofficial Ideology” (5), while Shelley King describes that in fulfilling the duties of “the artist’s wife, Amelia Opie often took on the task of entertaining those who came to have their portraits painted, conversing with aristocrats, politicians, and performers, and perhaps tossing sweets to maintain the focus of his child sitters, as she later mentions doing for her cousin, artist Henry Perronet Briggs” (“Portrait” 38).
Yet Opie had a more unconventional biography than such a seemly legacy suggests. Eleanor Ty points out that John Opie’s status as a divorcé coupled with rumors of Amelia Opie’s own affair with an older man in the days before her marriage implied that she was not immune to, nor immediately repelled by, “what society deems improper conduct” (153). Her most potentially damaging associations, however, had surely been with the radical activist circles of the 1790s, of which she had been an enthusiastic member. As a young woman, Opie was deeply entrenched in “Jacobin” philosophy, politics, and society, becoming a friend and correspondent to such controversial figures as William Godwin, Thomas Holcroft (both of whom had been rumored to be potential husbands for the then-unmarried Miss Alderson), Mary Wollstonecraft, and Elizabeth Inchbald. In fact, the “interesting” events of 1794 that Opie recalls above refer to the treason trials of Holcroft, Horne Tooke, and Thomas Hardy, at which she was a constant attendant. In letters home to her father James Alderson during this period, Opie was so heated in her complaints about “governmental treachery” and her exultations of “radical

84 Ty explains that at least one scholar, Donald Reiman, has claimed that Opie “carried on a ‘lengthy but discreet affair with an older man,’ who was referred to in her letters as ‘B,’ possibly Mr Boddington of Southgate” (153). Opie’s mutual flirtations with the unmarried William Godwin are also well known.

85 In a 1796 letter to her friend Mrs. Taylor, Opie playfully recounted, “Mrs. Inchbald says, the report of the world is, that Mr. Holcroft is in love with her, she with Mr. Godwin, Mr. Godwin with me, and I am in love with Mr. Holcroft! A pretty story indeed!” (qtd. in Brightwell 57). Twentieth-century scholars long believed Godwin had actually proposed marriage to Opie, based on a private journal entry in which he wrote, “Propose to Alderson.” However, it is now generally understood, as William St. Clair has clarified, that this “proposal” refers to a business call Godwin intended to make upon Amelia’s father. For more information see St. Clair, The Godwins and The Shelleys (London: Faber, 1989) 164.

86 In the late 1790s, “Jacobin” was the term applied to a wide range of writers, philosophers, social critics, and radicals who questioned the status quo and advocated for widespread reforms. The journal the Anti-Jacobin: or, Weekly Examiner, founded by the Tory politician George Canning, labeled them as such after the notoriously violent extremist Jacobin Party of the French Revolution. While many English “Jacobins” supported the egalitarian ideals behind the early days of the French Revolution, they did not actively lobby for revolution in Britain. For an extended discussion of this so-called Jacobinism, and the novels of the period that reflected these ideas, see Gary Kelly, The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
‘victories’” that, according to Roxanne Eberle, Alderson nervously destroyed much of their correspondence (121).87

That a man well-known for his own “revolutionary” tendencies, as Alderson was, should take such a precaution is indicative of the increasingly reactionary environment of Britain in the last decade of the eighteenth century, and thus of the danger that Opie’s avowed opinions potentially posed to herself and those around her. Furthermore, Opie not only risked appearing herself politically “treasonous,” but, as a woman, also personally notorious. Julie Shaffer explains how at a time at which attributes like self-effacement and passivity were increasingly considered “natural” feminine qualities, women who expressed protofeminist social, economic, and political stances could be dismissed as “inadequately self-effacing and thus unnatural” (“Ruined” 290); “unnatural” women were consequently more easily identified and condemned as sexually irregular and immoral as well. A demand for increased women’s rights, as was expressed by a number of female “Jacobin” commentators, was often purposely mischaracterized by detractors as an argument for increased sexual promiscuity.88 Opie had surely not helped her own case for propriety when, just a few months before the treason trials, she wrote and delivered a Jacobin-leaning speech at a Norwich political gathering of over 1500 attendees.89

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87 All references to Eberle in this chapter refer to her article “Amelia Opie’s Adeline Mowbray: Diverting the Libertine Gaze; or, The Vindication of a Fallen Woman.”
88 Katherine Binhammer offers an extended analysis of the convergence of sexual and political crises in the 1790s in “The Sex Panic of the 1790s,” Journal of the History of Sexuality 6.3 (1996): 409-434. She particularly outlines the ways in which revolution was cast in British representations as an explicitly sexual danger (413).
89 In her introduction to the Broadview Edition of Anna Plumptre’s Something New, Deborah McLeod recounts Opie’s speech, which Plumptre also attended. McLeod also offers an excerpt of Sarah Scott’s 15 July 1794 letter to her sister Elizabeth Montagu, in which she writes that “a young woman of uncommon talents about 25 years of age made a long speech in the Town Hall to about 1,500 of the Jacobins assembled […] The girl herself is Daughter to a phissician [sic] of Scotch creation lately an Apothecary.”
the period’s tendency to sexualize women’s political and intellectual claims, such a bold appearance, described by observer Sarah Scott as a “a most curious incident,” threatened to efface the perceived distinctions between “proper” Amelia Alderson and that other original class of “public” woman.

Interestingly, however, Opie was effectively cleared from charges of or associations with political and personal radicalism as the years progressed, even as more conservative ideologies triumphed over public opinion and backlash against figures like Godwin and Wollstonecraft grew. Many critics have cited Opie’s 1798 decision to become a “respectable” wife to a painter (rather than to marry—or herself become—a political philosopher) as effecting her removal from the “radical” reformist scene. Additionally, as the year of her marriage was also the same year that Wollstonecraft’s reputation plummeted with the disastrous publication of Godwin’s Memoirs, Opie has been seen as having purposely distanced herself from the sudden perception of her old coterie’s “immoral” lifestyles and the public’s angry reactions “against outspoken ‘philosophical women’” to the point that, as Eberle writes, she “has often been identified as a frightened reactionary, yet another Regency woman writer who abandoned revolutionary philosophy to protect her reputation” (122).

Therefore while so many women who shared Opie’s original political sympathies or social circle were condemned as fallen and/or frightfully “unsex’d” (to quote Richard Polwhele’s infamous poetical attack on presumed “radical” women like Wollstonecraft,

McLeod states that Scott goes on to identify the “young” woman as Amelia Alderson (ix). See: McLeod’s Introduction in Something New; or, Adventures at Campbell-House, By Anna Plumptre (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1996) vii-xxix.

90 See Eberle, 122. Sheridan also outlines—and offers a refutation to—the arguments that marriages like the Opies’ coincided with the fragmentation of radical coteries (75).
Mary Hays, and Charlotte Smith), Opie’s reputation emerged in the early nineteenth
century largely unscathed. In fact, she was purposely compared favorably with her
earlier associates, as contemporaries were quick to laud her for, unlike her former friends,
apparently “honouring her sex and its peculiar virtues too much to wish it unsexed” (S.C. Hall 179). Though she remained passionately involved in reform movements, including
societies for the abolition of slavery and prison reform, her chosen cautious politics were
a far cry from the progressive “rights of (wo)man” philosophies with which she had been
affiliated in the past. By the end of her life, Opie’s earlier “Jacobin” involvement was
generally excused as a fleeting effect of her having been, in the words of Victorian
commentator S.C. Hall, “brought up ultra-liberal” (170), a fluke of education that her
natural virtue and femininity allowed her to overcome. The assessment offered by her
first biographer, Cecilia Lucy Brightwell, is worth quoting at length, as it typifies the
mid-nineteenth-century conception of Opie’s 1790s experiences. After qualifying Opie’s
politics as having only been learned from the example of her beloved father (who himself
“afterwards saw cause to moderate” his revolutionary sentiments [39]), Brightwell writes:

> It is evident that a fellowship in political opinions was the only bond which united
> her to many with whom, at this time, she associated. Her own good sense and firm
> rectitude of principle, happily preserved her from the follies and errors into which
> not a few around her were led, by their extravagant zeal for a liberty which
> speedily degenerated into license. She too, was enthusiastic, ardent, perhaps
> imprudent, at least so she seems to have judged in cooler moments; but there was
> too much of the pure womanly character in her, to suffer her ever to sympathize
> with the assertors of “women’s rights,” (so called;) and she was not to be spoiled
> even though exposed to the influence of Horace Walpole’s “philosophising
> serpents, the Paines, the Tookes, and the Wollstonecrofts” [sic]. (41)

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91 See Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex’d Females: A Poem, Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature* (also discussed in my Introduction). Polwhele’s poem was a notorious attack upon “radical” literary women.
Here, Opie’s politics are made to represent filial devotion rather than treasonous radicalism, while her inherent “pure womanly” nature preserves her from “degeneration” and “spoil,” even after “exposure” to the contaminating influence of the New Philosophers. Rather than damaging her image, then, Opie’s former revolutionary links could paradoxically bolster her reputation as a figure of propriety and femininity. Her experiences in the 1790s could be viewed as a sort of moral inoculation—the very type of preventative medicine favored until the end of the eighteenth century— in which she contracted a mild case of mental “contagion” only to recover all the more resistant to such influences in the future.

It makes sense, then, that Opie would consider it a serious “confession” (specifically in a private paper, left unpublished before her death) to admit that the times upon which she most “look[ed] with pleasure” (qtd. in Brightwell 49) were one and the same with what to the rest of the world looked like a narrow escape from a fatal epidemic. Moreover, her apparent complete “recovery” from such experiences had seemingly formed the basis of much of her authorial career, as her most successful literary productions were extolled for warning young female readers about the dangers of physical and mental seduction; this was particularly the case of her 1805 novel *Adeline Mowbray*, in which the titular heroine is tragically led astray by the anti-marriage publications of a Godwin-like philosopher, who becomes her lover. Nineteenth-century readers generally accepted the novel as, according to Eberle, “an uncompromising

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92 For an overview of the origin and rise of the smallpox inoculation in England, see Samantha Fenno’s “‘An Experiment Practiced Only by a Few Ignorant Women’: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the Smallpox Inoculation, and the Concept of Enlightenment” (85-109) in *Monstrous Dreams of Reason: Body, Self, and Other in the Enlightenment* (Ed. Laura K. Rosenthal and Mita Choudhury, Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2002).
condemnation of Wollstonecraft and Godwin” and a “repudiation of ‘Jacobin’ morality” (124), and The Monthly Review explicitly stated that Opie’s intention had been to “portray the lamentable consequences which would result from an adoption of some lax principles […] which have been inculcated by certain modern writers” (320). The positive reception of her work thus appeared explicitly tied to what was perceived as her profoundly conservative message, and her complete repudiation of her former revolutionary leanings.  

Though readers well into the late twentieth century, including critics like Marilyn Butler, Claire Tomalin, and Matthew Grenby, have continued to describe Opie’s work as Anti-Jacobin, more recently critics like Kelly and Eberle have convincingly argued that novels like Adeline Mowbray are far more ideologically radical than they initially appear. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I am less interested in the specific politics at work in Opie’s texts. Rather, I consider how moral and physical contagion feature repeatedly in Opie’s fiction, and what such plotlines reveal about Opie’s own complicated understanding of, and relation to, issues of female reputation—particularly,

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93 Fittingly, the few negative contemporary reviews of Adeline Mowbray were largely penned by readers who were uncomfortable with the ways in which the plot strayed from clearly conservative messages, particularly in the fact that Adeline seems most genuinely happy in her “illegitimate” relationship with Glenmurray. For a summary of these complaints, see Cooper 28.

94 In Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Butler describes Adeline Mowbray as “a striking example of the insidious spread of reaction […] which demonstrates how fully liberals now came back into the conformist fold” (121). In The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft, Tomalin also reads Adeline Mowbray as Opie’s “direct hit at her old friend’s [Wollstonecraft’s] views,” and writes that “it is hard to forgive Amelia Opie for the cool way in which she thus made use of the woman who had certainly done her no harm and who had left daughters, legitimate and illegitimate, who could have done with some kindness from their mother’s friends” (236). In The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), Matthew Grenby writes that Adeline Mowbray “returns a decisive verdict” that the practicalities of child-rearing and cohabitation require marriage, and that to do so without would be “iniquitous” (89). For arguments that Adeline Mowbray is in fact a “Jacobin” text, see Kelly’s “Amelia Opie […] : Official and Unofficial Ideology” and Eberle (in which she also discusses her objections to Tomalin’s reading of Adeline Mowbray [124]).
its preservation and potential recovery. As if in keeping with her own experience of metaphorical inoculation, many of Opie’s “moral tales”—the term by which she purposefully designated her fictional work—seem to suggest that women who are not inherently strong enough in personal virtue to resist the contaminating influences to which they are exposed will inevitably fall; such falls are followed by physical manifestations of their dangerously permeated characters: pregnancy, disease, and death. Readers might also presume these characters become sites of contagion themselves, as was expected in such trajectories; in her study of nineteenth-century narratives of fallenness, Amanda Anderson acknowledges “just how contaminating fallenness was perceived to be: any distanced view of the fallen woman as victim could easily transmute into an anxious apprehension that she would communicate her condition to others” (16).

However, the equation of fallenness and contagion does not play out quite as expected in the case of Opie’s most well known fallen characters, Agnes of The Father and Daughter (1801) and the eponymous Adeline. While Agnes and Adeline do indeed die by the end of their narratives, they emphatically do not become agents of corruption over the course of their suffering. Rather, they both act as agents of moral and physical healing in their stories, often serving as literal nurses to the sick and dying. Their children survive untainted by their mother’s past, and virtuous “proper” women more often find their lots improved by having come into contact with these fallen peers. In place of disease and indecency, then, Opie’s fallen women transmit health and morality, ultimately leaving their communities better off than before they entered into them.
Opie therefore assigns a new positive use value to women who, in having lost their virginity and thus their marriageability, are typically viewed as having lost all personal and social worth—aside, that is, from serving as terrible warnings. Instead, Opie suggests that chastity has little to do with estimations of goodness, and that even women who have transgressed against society’s norms—whether sexually, intellectually, or politically—can potentially serve as moral exemplars, rather than cautionary examples. Moreover, the actual contaminating forces depicted within Opie’s fiction usually exist outside of the fallen women, and lie in their society’s constrained and often hypocritical definitions of virtue. Characters like Agnes and Adeline “contract,” as one would a disease, false conceptions of their own sinful nature from public opinion and abusive treatment. Though astute nurses to others’ spiritual and bodily pains, they essentially misdiagnose their own cases as hopelessly terminal, and in a tragic psychosomatic result, die.

And just as her heroines act as instruments of healing rather than of contagion, Amelia Opie’s tales may not carry the overtly conservative warnings against transgression and seduction, and the condemnation of her own youthful flirtations with radicalism, as they initially seem to do. Instead, works like *The Father and Daughter* and *Adeline Mowbray* communicate a message of decided sympathy with, if not outright acceptance of, variously fallen female characters, and expose readers to some fairly damning assessments of “the world as it is”—particularly in its treatment of proper and
improper women alike. Furthermore, even the fiction Opie produces at what may be seen as the height of her conservativism—such as 1822’s Madeline, the last novel-length work she would publish before bowing to the Quaker prohibition against fictional compositions as a form of lying—suggest that women can defy conventions to survive and moreover thrive, even when all appearances are against her—much, perhaps, like Opie did herself.

Therefore, while Amelia Opie may seem to have styled herself as a “recovered” radical who (whether through innate virtue, according to her contemporaries, or reactionary cowardice, according to some modern commentators) fought and expelled the germs of dangerous nonconformity from her person, she might more accurately be seen as a carrier of a strain of contagious—if sometimes deceptively dormant—ideas. By means of the very “respectable” works through which she recuperates her own reputation—texts that might be classified as “novels” yet were presented for wary audiences under more wholesome designations—Opie insidiously infects readers with lingering questions about and criticisms of the status quo. Not only do her texts allow for the social and moral recovery of the transgressive woman, but they also question in

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95 Opie employs this phrase throughout Adeline Mowbray to illustrate how Adeline’s ideals (“The world as it should be”) conflict with the realities around her. At other points in the same work, Opie also refers to “things as they are,” an obvious allusion to the title of Godwin’s 1794 novel, Things As They Are, or The Adventures of Caleb Williams, in which Godwin exposed the injustices at work in institutions and ideas his readers were accustomed to take for granted. Though Adeline is initially critical of her lover for succumbing to “things as they are,” she eventually accepts that she must live in the “world as it is,” in which her idealistic principles are untenable. This should not be read as an unequivocal triumph of the status quo, however, as Adeline’s transgressive acts are not depicted inherently destructive; destruction results only from their unjust assessment by the world. As McWhir states, even if Opie does not offer full “vindication” of Adeline and her principles, “there is no doubt that Adeline Mowbray is far from a vindication of ‘things as they are’ in its exposé of cruelty, intolerance, unkindness, and gallantry” (27).
whom the true need for recuperation lies: the fallen woman, or the world that sees her as such?

Tales of Contamination

The first two pieces of fiction to bear Amelia Opie’s name as author were The Father and Daughter and Adeline Mowbray, although they were not her first fictional productions. In 1790 Opie had anonymously published a two-volume work entitled Dangers of Coquetry, the only one of her compositions that proclaimed itself “A Novel” on the title page. Shelley King observes that Opie’s choice to publish her first work anonymously “may reflect anxiety concerning social criticism often levelled at female authors” (44), particularly unmarried female authors asserting their voices publicly. It was a phenomenon upon which Opie would often comment, as she later observed that if a woman “has avowed a wish, and perhaps displayed an ability, to obtain distinction, […] neither the success nor the attempt are ever entirely forgotten or forgiven” (Detraction 156). However, Opie’s marriage, and her ability to point to her husband’s urging as the very reason for her writing, helped ensure some level of this “forgiveness,” allowing the

96 In their introduction to the Broadview edition of The Father and Daughter with Dangers of Coquetry, Shelley King and John B. Pierce note that Dangers of Coquetry offers a more nuanced look at the coquette, usually “a stock figure beyond social redemption and largely outside the reader’s sympathy” (44). It is a similar impulse toward fallen women, themselves “stock” characters largely thought beyond redemption, that I trace in Opie’s other fiction throughout this chapter. Interestingly, Opie herself had been accused of coquetry, including by William Godwin; “I hate you for always throwing Coquette in my teeth,” Opie rebuked Godwin in a letter (qtd. in McWhir 22 n.1).
emergence of her public character as author to appear as part of the proper duties of her new role as wife. 97

Furthermore, following her marriage Opie was careful not to affix her name to “novels” (and retroactively regretted that her anonymous publication had been labeled as such). 98 The novel, as many literary historians have noted, was an oft-maligned genre during the years Opie began writing, subject to censure on grounds both aesthetic and moral. It was thought a particularly dangerous genre for women to read, let alone write, because of novels’ presumably corrupting extended meditations on passion and pleasure, and their tendency to encourage “false expectations” and an “insatiable craving for novelty” that turned women’s minds from properly “serious” subjects (Pearson 83). Jacqueline Pearson notes that in anti-novel literature of the early nineteenth century, words like “poison” and “soften” recur compulsively in descriptions of novel reading’s effects on the female brain, along with comparisons to novels and destructive “habit forming” drugs (196). Considering the cultural paranoia and contaminating associations surrounding these works, then, it is no wonder Opie would resist applying such a term to her fiction. 99 Instead, she and her publishers chose the generic classification of “tale” in order, as Joanne Tong notes, to avoid her texts being judged as “frivolous, romantic, and

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97 Opie would continue to invoke wifely duty as a reason for writing even after her husband’s death. For example, in writing a posthumous biography of John Opie, Amelia Opie adopted an “authorial pose of homely widow, doing a conventional duty,” so that her publications remained “acceptable in the context of mourning.” (Sheridan 180).

98 Opie took issue with The Dangers of Coquetry’s designation as a novel and wrote of it that “if I ever write a collection of tales, I shall correct and re-publish that, as I originally wrote it, not as it now is, in the shape of a novel, in chapters” (qtd. in Brightwell 83, original emphasis).

99 Pearson also notes that other “respectable” writers (particularly women) also experimented with less provocative terms for their fictional works, including Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth (196).
even morally corrupting reading” (465). Opie’s “simple moral tales” were meant to be viewed by readers as having a higher and infinitely more “proper” purpose than those usually attributed to the novel: to teach, rather than titillate.

And yet, the central characters of Opie’s first two avowed tales were not themselves “proper” women, nor necessarily “safe” topics for a female author’s pen. Kelly points out that although Opie’s texts were generally accepted as “preaching conformity to the conventional sexual and family roles,” her plots reveal a “fascination with deviations from those roles” (“Amelia Opie” 5). The narratives of *The Father and Daughter* and *Adeline Mowbray; or the Mother and Daughter* share a number of similarities (as their comparable titles would suggest): both recount the tragic consequences of a young woman’s elopement from her familial home. In *The Father and Daughter*, Agnes Fitzhenry is seduced away from her doting father’s protection by the machinations of libertine George Clifford. After living as his kept mistress and bearing his child, Agnes repents her folly and tries to return to her father’s home, only to learn he has gone mad as a result of her betrayal. Agnes devotes the remaining years of her life to

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100 In her preface to *The Father and Daughter*, Opie defined her particular work against a novel, stating that “it is wholly devoid of those attempts at strong character, comic situation, bustle, and variety of incident, which constitute a NOVEL,” and that its “highest pretension are, to be a SIMPLE, MORAL TALE” (63). Gary Kelly points out the “irony” at work in that many early nineteenth-century readers would feel that a “moral tale” perhaps did have a higher claim on their attention than the kind of writing which most critics dismissed as ‘fashionable,’ or ‘sentimental,’ or ‘mere’ novel” (“Debts” 198). Also, while Kelly suggests that evaluating her tales as “simple” may have constituted a “polemical,” and potentially “Jacobin” act on Opie’s part at a time when “simple” could be seen as “the opposite of that political, religious, and artistic court culture which was associated with kings and aristocrats” (“Debts” 198-9), the radical nature of this term was surely deeply veiled by the stories’ didactic, and apparently conservative, content.

101 By the early decades of the nineteenth century, more commentators were differentiating between “bad” novels and those that contained messages beneficial to society; however, in the early years of Opie’s authorial career, anxieties regarding the term “novel” had not yet abated. Furthermore, Pearson argues that the improving reputation of the novel was intimately connected with the rise of male novelists like Sir Walter Scott “after a period of virtual female hegemony”; thus the “redemption” of novels “depended on the ejection of female” (198).
attempting to restore his sanity, and her own death immediately follows his. Adeline Mowbray likewise features a heroine who flees her mother’s house for the arms of her lover, philosopher Frederic Glenmurray; however, in Adeline’s case, her elopement is predicated upon a loss of safety at home (her neglectful mother has married the libertine Sir Patrick O’Carrol, whose attempted rape of Adeline prompts her flight). Adeline and Glenmurray, in accordance with their radical principles, live as happily unmarried until his untimely death; she then, after experiencing a series of abuses as a “fallen” woman, marries Glenmurray’s cousin Charles Berrendale, only to discover his true vicious nature. Ultimately impregnated and abandoned by a husband who will not admit to their marriage, Adeline reunites with her estranged mother only upon her deathbed, where she bequeaths her daughter Editha to her reformed mother’s care, in the hopes that the same mistakes that led to her own ruin will not be repeated in little Editha’s life.

Opie’s early fictional heroines can both be read as women who fall victim to “contagious” texts, succumbing to lives of vice as one would an illness. Their seduction begins, importantly, in discourse; both Clifford and Glenmurray “infect” their lovers with teachings contrary to their “proper” feminine education, albeit in different ways. Clifford is described as possessing “powers of conversation so fascinating” that women and men fall equally under his spell, “the one to shame, the other to pecuniary difficulties” (FD 66). Like a magician or a serpent of ancient tales—or, indeed, like a disease attacking

102 In parenthetical citations, Opie’s texts will be referred to by the following abbreviations: The Father and Daughter (FD); Adeline Mowbray (AM); and Madeline (M). The text of Adeline Mowbray from which I am working is the original 1805 edition. Subsequent editions appeared in Opie’s lifetime, including heavily revised editions of 1810 and 1844, in which Opie, in keeping with her increasing associations with the Society of Friends, deleted a number of scenes and lines, including the overtly sexual advances of strangers.
an otherwise healthy body—Clifford’s “fascinating” power breaks down his victims’ mental and physical faculties, leaving them helpless in his clutches. His influence carries through the spoken and written word alike, as he manipulates Agnes’s behavior with both flowery speeches and a series of letters (including one that falsely claims her father is remarried, and therefore would not welcome her back into his home). When Agnes is finally faced with the full extent of Clifford’s treachery (after overhearing an account of his impending marriage to another woman), she is forced to recognize his pollutant quality; having flown from his clutches into a dark winter’s night, she exclaims, “Thank Heaven! […] the air which I breathe here is uncontaminated by his breath!” (86, my emphasis).

Glenmurray’s seduction of Adeline is far less intentional than Clifford’s of Agnes, yet just as “contaminating” nonetheless. Adeline is first seduced intellectually by Glenmurray’s published texts long before she meets their author, primarily as a result of her mother’s own inflated sense of personal genius. Mrs. Editha Mowbray dabbles in—without fully understanding or intending to practice—controversial political and philosophical theories, never realizing that “her own child was imbibing, through her means, opinions dangerous to her well-being as a member of any civilized society, and laying, perhaps, the foundation to herself and her mother of future misery and disgrace” (AM 15). By taking up the same course of reading in a far more earnest fashion, Adeline unwittingly prepares “her young and impassioned heart for the practice of vice, by filling her mind, ardent in the love of virtue, with new and singular opinions on the subject of toward Adeline, the endorsement of reading Rousseau, and Dr. Norberry’s verbal oaths. For a discussion of how some of these changes mitigate the moral relativism of the original text, see McWhir pp. 28-34.

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moral duty” (14). The problem lies in Glenmurray’s “bewitching style” (with its shades of Clifford’s “fascinating conversation”) and scandalous content: he attacks, as did the real Godwin (upon whom Glenmurray is thought to be modeled), the institution of marriage, arguing instead for unions “cemented by no ties but those of love and honour” (15).103 Ironically, Adeline is also deprived of a potential “antidote” to these infectious ideas, in the form of “the good sense and sober experience” of rational commentators like family friend Dr. Norberry, because Norberry is in the throes of his own case of “political mania” (15) regarding the events of the American Revolution, of which he is obsessed and supportive.104 Without this necessary intervention (from a medical doctor, no less), Glenmurray’s theories are left to fester within Adeline’s mind, until, when coupled with her eventual realization that the man behind them is “young and handsome too!” (23), they result in a truly fatal condition.

By casting a “New Philosopher” in the role of the seducer, Opie would seem to be signaling to her readers a decided condemnation of and repentance for her own risky flirtations with such characters; as Katherine Binhammer has noted, post-1790s reactionary works often invoked seduction tales in order to “accuse radicals of politically seducing the nation” and threatening the “innocence and virtue” of its people (139). However, Glenmurray’s—or even Godwin’s—political philosophy is not the only

103 Cooper offers a helpful summary of the contemporary reviews that recognized Adeline Mowbray as a roman à clef of Godwin’s and Wollstonecraft’s relationship (4). McWhir, however, explain the actual dissimilarities between the lives of Godwin and Wollstonecraft and Opie’s characters (23). Eberle perhaps offers the most nuanced discussion of Glenmurray’s relationship to Godwin, as she acknowledges the differences between the two figures but reads Opie’s depiction of Glenmurray not as a “biographical treatment” of his life, but as a criticism of the gendered assumptions that marred his radical political theory in practice (127).

104 The historical setting of Adeline Mowbray is somewhat convoluted; as McWhir notes in her introduction to the 2010 Broadview edition of the text, at points Opie seems to deliberately confound the periods of the American and French revolutions in her narrative (12).
contagious text with which *Adeline Mowbray* is concerned. Characters throughout the narrative believe, and take advantage of the fact, that the wrong kind of reading can influence a person to commit vice; indeed, Sir Patrick first attempts to prepare Adeline to willingly receive his advances by entrapping her in a boudoir filled with licentious books, including “profligate tales” and “dangerous French novels.” However, although Adeline’s innate virtue proves resistant to the “poison contained within them” (*AM* 55), she eventually finds herself led astray by her own discovery of another popular fictional work, Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*.  

The first few pages of this epistolary novel, consisting of passionate letters between Julia and her lover, “enchant” Adeline, but her reading is interrupted and subsequently prohibited by her mother (who deems the book “pregnant with mischief”) before she can discover “the sacrifice the guilty but penitent Julia makes to filial affection, and the respectable light in which the institution of marriage is held up to view” (56). Adeline is therefore deprived of any beneficial lessons the book might have to offer (itself an interesting concession Opie’s presumably “conservative” text seems to make regarding novels, particularly controversial ones like *Julie*) and is only affected—perhaps infected—by its attractive account of illicit love.

105 *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* was a text strongly vilified by Opie’s staunchly conservative contemporaries like Hannah More, who in her own didactic writing cited the seductive language and “unchaste” heroine of Rousseau’s novel as contaminating influences on (particularly female) readers.  

106 As this scene appears in the 1805 edition, it asserts the potential value of fiction to educate, and for readers to learn virtue as well as vice through texts; Opie thus seems to be anticipating the growing acceptance of novels as possible vehicles for edification that Jacqueline Pearson locates in the second decade of the nineteenth century (197). However, in the 1844 revised edition, Opie will remove all discussion of Rousseau from the tale, erasing the possibility that Adeline could have changed her fate through reading. Opie makes this and other changes to potentially “offensive” parts of her tale in order that her work might be more reflective of her new Quaker principles; however, she thus problematically undercuts the original text’s implications that a fallen woman can or should be reformed—or, more specifically, can reform themselves.
Throughout these two tales, Opie appears consistently interested in the infectious power of language, particularly the written word. In *The Father and Daughter* and *Adeline Mowbray*, “dangerous” discourse is shown to infiltrate “good” women’s minds, seducing and corrupting upon contact. Moreover, out of such discourse come physical consequences, as women are induced to action by the ideas they contract. As a direct result of these initial mental contaminations, Agnes and Adeline find their bodies’ borders are also made more permeable. Both quickly lose their virginity and become pregnant—a condition that, as Allan Conrad Christensen notes in his discussion of historical representations of pregnancy, “resembles being smitten by a spreading infection” (17). In fact, the sight of Adeline’s pregnant body fills her mother with horrified revulsion. Viewing her daughter’s burgeoning profile as tangible proof of an “infam[ous]” and irreversible contamination of her family line, Editha proceeds to “load [her] with maledictions” (*AM* 105), heaping curses upon Adeline’s newly “monstrous” frame. That Editha—and the rest of the world—finds this child’s potential existence unable to be borne is later literalized in Adeline’s subsequent miscarriage, an event that has been read by numerous critics as the narrative’s condemnation of Adeline’s choices and resulting fallenness.107

Of course, had the child lived, he would have been permanently “tainted” by his illegitimacy, and, as Adeline herself fears, would have most likely recognized his mother.

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107 Eberle writes, “If Adeline’s pregnant body serves as a marker for her sexual relationship with Glenmurray, the stillbirth of her child acts as an indictment of that relationship” (138). Cooper also suggests that, among a number of possibilities, “Adeline’s experience of reproductive failure may indicate the unnaturalness of her pregnancy, the unnaturalness of Adeline and Glenmurray conceiving a child outside the bounds of marriage” (13).
as the source of this social stain. For Adeline is viewed, in keeping with the contemporaneous depictions of fallen women, as an agent of contamination, not only to her own offspring but in her associations with all other “innocents.” For instance, her scheme to set up a school and support herself after Glenmurray’s death is thwarted once local parents learn the truth of her past and immediately withdraw their students; as Christine M. Cooper explains, the townspeople dare not “purchase—hence, sanction—the seemingly inevitable transmission of depravity from Adeline to the town’s children” (16). Similarly in *The Father and Daughter*, Agnes lodges with Fanny, the daughter of her former nurse, but her presence in the home disrupts Fanny’s employment as a teacher, as her pupils quit their studies under the impression that Agnes is “the most wicked woman that ever breathed” (*FD* 126). Additionally, Opie’s fallen heroines are constantly barred from the company of “amiable women” (*AM* 68), and violence nearly erupts whenever this prohibition is not strictly observed. Agnes’s childhood friend Caroline Seymour is physically restrained by her father from embracing or even speaking to Agnes, despite both women’s desperate pleas; likewise, the usually loving Dr. Norberry coldly refuses to acknowledge Adeline when they meet in the street, “for the sake of [his] daughters” (88). Glenmurray is even challenged to a duel after Adeline meets his friend Major Douglas’s female relations; Douglas is enraged at Glenmurray’s “impudence to introduce his harlot to [Douglas’s] wife and sister,” and “insisted upon it that Glenmurray should have led

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108 The same day of her miscarriage, Adeline encounters two different illegitimate boys who are ostracized from their peers on account of their births. One child specifically denigrates his own mother, claiming he does not love her because “they say she is a bad woman, and my papa a bad man, because they are not married” (*AM* 131). For this reason Adeline wavers in her principles and decides she will marry Glenmurray after all, but she delivers “a dead child” soon afterward.
Adeline away instantly, as unworthy to breathe the same air” as such “respectable” women (79).  

What Douglas—and, in their turn, Mr. Seymour and Dr. Norberry—desire is a literal quarantine to physically contain the fallen woman’s perceived moral contagion. Later, even Adeline will come to believe such precautions are necessary, as she blames her own example for her servant Mary Warner’s apparent fall into vice. Adeline initially scoffs at the notion expressed by another character, the concerned Quaker Rachel Pemberton, that “in contemplating [Adeline and Glenmurray’s] union itself, [Mary] has lived in the contemplation of vice”; Rachel insists this is a particularly dangerous situation given the fact that Adeline’s apparent virtue had given such an improper relationship “an air of respectability” (AM 121). However, upon later learning that Mary has become a kept woman who proclaims her former mistress “taught me that marriage was all nonsense” (204), Adeline is dismayed. Opie writes that her heroine, sickened to have become a “practical assistant to the cause of vice,” is physically overwhelmed by the guilt of “having led by her example and precepts an innocent girl into a life of infamy” (221).

109 Interestingly, lower class women do continue to willingly come into contact with these “fallen” women without concern for the moral contamination they might represent; Agnes lives with loyal Fanny (the daughter of a former servant), while Adeline has a devoted companion in the former slave Savanna. That these relationships continue unabated may be indicative of how rules of “propriety” and appropriate feminine behavior were especially instituted by wealthier classes (particularly as the codes dictating feminine sexuality were rooted in controlling the transfer of money and power through the correct patriarchal lines). The presence of Fanny and Savanna also contributes to Opie’s criticism of the hypocritical behavior of upper-class fashionable and gentry society, in which gallantry and coquetry are tolerated and kept secret, but a woman’s actual “fall” is treated as unforgivable. Eberle also discusses how characters like Savanna and Adeline are linked in the challenge they pose to “conventional prescriptions of how a proper British woman should look and behave; they are both persecuted by an ignorant populace which does not recognize their true virtue” (142).
Not only does Adeline eventually consider herself a cause of moral contamination, but she also comes to fear the physical contagion she is capable of spreading. At one point in the narrative (to which I will return to for closer analysis below), Adeline literally cannot go home to her daughter because her clothing is covered in smallpox infection. Working herself into a frenzy, Adeline instead roams the streets disheveled and disoriented, screaming to passersby, “Do you not know, poor babe, that I carry death and pollution about with me!” and lamenting that she has “destroyed” her child. While in this condition she is also physically accosted by young men who, while laughingly identifying her mad, also call her a “pretty girl” and an “actress,” and forcefully insist they will “see [her] home” (AM 207). At this moment late in the text, Adeline has effectively transformed into the archetypal image of the streetwalking prostitute: a wretched agent of disease and death, homeless and unprotected, she wanders only to be abused, used, and abandoned to her certain death.  

And illness and death do invariably seem to follow Opie’s fallen women. Ailments including tuberculosis, smallpox, gout, fevers, and insanity afflict multiple characters around both Agnes and Adeline, and Opie carefully details a variety of medical remedies, from opiate regimens to inoculating procedures, throughout her narratives. Opie’s interest in illness and its treatment can surely be traced to her father’s practice, the facts of which she was not only privy to, but also extremely proud.  

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110 The character who saves her from this situation, Colonel Mordaunt, also takes advantage of this moment to attempt to convince Adeline to become his kept mistress, thus offering to save her from the streets but expecting that she might nevertheless maintain the essential situation of the prostitute.  
111 According to Brightwell, Opie acted as hostess and manager of her father’s home from the time of her mother’s early death; as such, she had intimate knowledge of his daily business. Brightwell writes that Opie was “almost jealous for the credit and good name of the medical profession; and very anxious that its
only is the quantity of medical problems depicted in her fiction notable, however, but the quality of those depictions is significant as well. While other late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century texts commonly offer sentimentalized (or, often in the case of female sufferers, eroticized) images of physical and mental disease, Opie’s work increasingly rejects such conventional portrayals, in their place depicting experiences that are, as David Thame contends, “profoundly unattractive and uncomfortable,” which do “not terminate in an affecting exchange of tears but rather, in the brute medical facts of bleeding and drugs” (313). The diseases that affect her characters are realistically destructive, and their prognosis is rarely good.

Anne McWhir suggests that the “infection” depicted in Opie’s tales appears “to signify moral as well as physical disease” (21 n.1). In the case of Adeline’s and Agnes’s lovers, this certainly seems to hold true; both characters who initially “ruin” the heroines waste away from disease, with Glenmurray experiencing an excruciatingly slow death from consumption, while the once-robust Clifford withers into an “emaciated valetudinarian” (FD 154). Berrendale, whose treatment of Adeline is far more vicious than her original seducer’s, also succumbs to an ignominious end caused by indigestive fits in a “frame debilitated by intemperance” (226). And sadly, though always more repentant and personally virtuous than the men who led them astray, Opie’s heroines also ultimately die, apparently from the “sins” they have contracted. As literal and metaphorical contagion is endlessly blurred in The Father and Daughter and Adeline members should be held in high esteem, and their services liberally remunerated” (348). Later she would demonstrate continued personal interest in the medical field and its practices, as she and Quaker reformer Elizabeth Fry “conceived the idea of reforming the internal management of hospitals and infirmaries” by starting “an institution for the purpose of educating a better class of persons as nurses for the poor” (Hall 170-1).
Mowbray, Agnes and Adeline’s constitutions grow progressively weaker following their sexual falls and, with a suddenness and lack of specific diagnosis that belies Opie’s other depictions of death, both expire in the final pages of their respective narratives.

It would appear, then, that despite portraying her protagonists as more sympathetic victims than active villains, Opie acknowledges that the fallen woman’s existence in society is at last insupportable. Agnes and Adeline are ultimately “doomed and dooming,” the inescapable condition of the literary fallen woman as noted by Nina Auerbach (159). Seen as stripped of all personal value and viewed solely as vehicles for disease and degradation, death appears the only end that such women “deserve”—whether to mercifully end their sufferings after their excruciating period of penitence, or to rid the world of the moral and physical threat they still offer as a result of their still-unforgivable sin. In fact, Opie’s fallen women themselves agree with this severe assessment: Adeline announces she must die rather than “contaminate” little Editha’s future with her presence, claiming, “Nay, if I lived, I should be most probably a dangerous example to her; for I should be […] respected and esteemed; while the society around me would forget my past errors, in the sincerity of my repentance.” In Adeline’s own mind, her “present respectability” serves only to mask the “truth” of her degraded condition, and would serve only to inevitably ensnare her child, for “might she not yield to [temptation] from an idea that ‘one false step may be retrieved,’ and cite her mother as

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112 Auerbach explains that although some nineteenth-century nonfiction, like contemporary reformist reports, could offer a “vision of a flexible, open, nonretributive world” in which fallenness was a fluid state, “no documentation could exorcise the titanic outcast, doomed and dooming” from its place in imaginative literature (159). Though Auerbach’s study Woman and the Demon is subtitled “The Life of a Victorian Myth,” the mid nineteenth-century portrayals of fallenness she analyzes have their roots in the late eighteenth-century patterns Opie follows and to which she contributes.
an example of this truth?” (*AM* 239). As no one else in the text speaks up at this moment to counter Adeline’s argument, Adeline’s death becomes necessary if unpleasant preventative medicine to be swallowed by other characters and their readers alike. Much like the smallpox inoculation that saves the little girl from infection but risks “spoiling [her] pretty face” (212) Adeline’s death deprives Editha of a mother’s love, but is expected to save her from a moral fall; likewise, Adeline’s and Agnes’s stories may pain readers, but teach them that for women a loss of propriety will never be completely reversible, and equates to a loss of life.  

At least, this is the message that we would expect to find in keeping with a conception of Opie as a reactionary writer, who, understanding her own past associations with radical ideas and their proponents as a moral close-call and hoping to distance herself from them, presents the disastrous consequences that come to women who allow themselves to become fully “infected” by “improper” influences. However, ending the analysis here would ignore an importantly contradictory element at work in both *The Father and Daughter*’s and *Adeline Mowbray*’s depictions of their fallen women. That is, although Agnes and Adeline do indeed succumb to disease and death, and even believe

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113 In *The Father and Daughter* Opie takes issue with her contemporaries (like Wollstonecraft) who, in blasting the equation of chastity and virtue, insist that society never accepts women who fall back into the fold. Opie writes that such an assertion “is calculated to deter the victim of seduction from penitence and amendment, by telling her that she would employ them in her favour in vain.” However, she states, this is “as false as it is dangerous,” as she knows “women restored by perseverance in a life of expiatory amendment, to that rank in society which they had forfeited by one false step, while their fault has been forgotten in their exemplary conduct, as wives and mothers.” Such restoration is not possible, however, until women have “undergone a long and painful probation” (139). Interestingly, Adeline’s resolution to die seems to directly defy these sentiments, as she insists that if her fault is “forgotten” in exemplary conduct as a mother, she will be placing her child in terrible danger. Reversing one’s fall may be outwardly possible, then, but the stain remains as insidious as ever. The fact that Agnes also dies without experiencing a full reinstatement to the community, but still undergoing plenty of pains, also defies the restorative promise of these lines.
themselves to be sources of contamination, Opie consistently portrays both women as model nurses of physical and spiritual disorders. Thus it would seem that in Opie’s early tales, the fallen woman is actually assigned a positive social use value, one belying her usual associations with contagious corruption or inhuman emptiness. In a move that appears at odds with the ideologically conservative project seemingly required to fix Opie’s own reputation, her transgressive heroines become, particularly after their falls, recuperative rather than pollutive agents, adept at identifying and healing what ails most everyone—except, unfortunately, themselves.

Unlikely Nurses, Deadly Misdiagnoses

The pages of Opie’s tales feature many a physician character, from *The Father and Daughter*’s Dr. W____ to Adeline Mowbray’s Dr. Norberry. However, they are rarely brought in to treat the fallen women, but instead to consult and collaborate with them. This is because Agnes and Adeline, in defiance of their supposedly contaminating natures, are constantly nursing others, tirelessly relieving if not always removing even the worse of complaints.

In *The Father and Daughter*, Agnes undertakes a particularly involved nursing task, as she attempts to help her father Fitzhenry recover both his health and his sanity. The text offers a glimpse (largely influenced, according to Opie’s own records, by her youthful visits to the local “bedlam”) into various late eighteenth-century approaches to
the treatment of madness, from the inhumane to the generally progressive. Fitzhenry is originally institutionalized in a public asylum for the insane, where he is chained and controlled through physical violence. However, Agnes successfully appeals to the local governors to be allowed to visit and care for her father daily and, after five years, pays for him to be transferred to the private care of a specialized doctor, and ultimately to Agnes’s own home. Though Fitzhenry is deemed incurable by most medical experts, Agnes persists in her belief that her loving attention, coupled with strict “diet, medicine, and management” of her father’s condition, will lead to his recovery (FD 145). In the end, she is proven correct, as Fitzhenry regains his reason a few moments before his death and finally recognizes his daughter as his devoted caretaker.

In their introduction to the Broadview edition of The Father and Daughter, Shelley King and John B. Pierce outline the ways in which the kind of care Agnes seeks out and provides for Fitzhenry reflects therapeutic advances of the 1790s commonly referred to as “moral treatment,” in which mental patients were treated with the “dignity and status” of human beings. Under such programs, corporeal mistreatment was eliminated in order to reestablish “self-restraint in the sufferer through the desire to retain the esteem of those around him” (King and Pierce 27). By affording Agnes an alternative “useful” subject position—not only as penitent daughter, but respected nurse—to the dehumanized and objectified ones most often assigned the woman who has transgressed sexual mores, Opie appears to be advocating a similar “moral treatment” be extended to the fallen woman. In the act of nursing, Agnes reasserts her dignified self-control—the

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\*114 For an extended discussion of Opie’s interactions with the inmates of the Norwich bedlam, see Brightwell pp. 13-17.\*\*\*\*\*\*\*
very thing thought lost to a “ruined” woman—and regains the esteem of those who had once dismissed her as having effectively lost her human station.

Of course, elements of Agnes’s nursing do read as uncomfortably sacrificial; that is, the caretaking she provides for her father simultaneously dignifies and punishes her, as she desires to perform even the most menial tasks in order to make amends for the social and familial transgressions she feels she has committed. Adeline Mowbray’s identity as a nurse, however, cannot be confused with any kind of repentant bondage, as it depicted as instinctive and effortless: she is lauded as a figure of healing both before and after her fall. In fact, she initially offers herself to Glenmurray in that explicit capacity. After fleeing from Sir Patrick’s clutches to Glenmurray’s home, Adeline proposes the particular terms of their relationship:

Glenmurray, I come to you for safety and protection;—I come to seek shelter in your arms from misery and dishonour. You are ill, you are going to a foreign country: and from this moment look on me as your nurse, your companion;—your home shall be my home, your country my country! (AM 62).

Here Adeline designates herself as Glenmurray’s nurse first, with romantic or sexual companionship being merely an outgrowth of that primary role. Additionally, her characterization of Glenmurray’s responsibilities—“safety and protection”—also appear to be the proposed masculine version of the nursing position; he will provide her with a defense from future troubles, just as she heals his existing ailments. That Adeline understands her motivations to pledge herself to Glenmurray in terms of nursing is important, in that it demonstrates to the sympathetic reader the purity of her intentions; after all, Opie has already established that, as a result of her mother’s incessant care during her experience of a severe childhood illness, Adeline equates nursing with pure
Adeline embarks on the relationship that will doom her as “fallen,” then, in the spirit of innocence and feminine devotion, her decision seemingly uncontaminated by lust or other base impulses that her society attributes to the typical “kept miss.”

Later, Adeline’s husband Berrendale will exploit and distort her nursing impulses, just as he does the supposed “‘safety’ of the marriage contract” (Eberle 140) that he and Adeline have entered into. Berrendale first notices Adeline not as a mistress, but as Glenmurray’s nurse; he envies his cousin’s invalidism “when he beheld the constant, skilful, and tender attentions of his nurse, and saw in that nurse every gift of heart, mind, and person, which could make a woman amiable,” and proceeds to imagine her acting as his own caretaker, “warming his flannels, and leaning tenderly over his gouty couch” (*AM* 142-3). This same image of a “gouty couch” will ultimately lead Berrendale to ask for Adeline’s hand in marriage, specifically because:

…that hand, and the arm belonging to it, were so beautiful, and he had so often envied Glenmurray while he saw them tenderly supporting his head, that while a vision of approaching gout, and Adeline bending over his restless couch, floated before him, all his prudent considerations vanished” (174).

Desirous of both her beautiful body and the slavish services it will provide—sexually and medically—and ignorant of or uninterested in any component of her “nursing” besides the physical, Berrendale makes Adeline his wife. Unlike Glenmurray, however, Adeline’s legal husband refuses to provide her any protection in return. Moreover, in a narrative in which nursing equates to love, Berrendale actively undermines his wife’s health; he

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115 Tong explains that the “inexplicable attachment” Adeline evinces toward her mother, despite all Editha Mowbray’s neglect, stems directly from this critical episode in which, while being nursed back to health, she felt “fully assured” of the existence unconditional love. The memory of this pure love “fortifies her devotion her mother and frees her from having to face the succeeding evidence of her mother’s maternal shortcomings” (475).
resents her looking well and eating normally when his own appetites are so expensive, and insists her “less robust health would suit our finances better” (181).

Berrendale is ultimately so vicious that he is beyond the reach of Adeline’s healing (though it is notable that he only succumbs to his illnesses after leaving her care and remarrying bigamously in Jamaica). However, she nevertheless transmits a curative power to other characters, including other libertines. In the case of Colonel Mordaunt, for example, Adeline acts as a moral rather than physical nurse, a role that may appear to be particularly surprising after her fall. When Mordaunt attempts to convince Adeline to become his mistress after she has been abandoned by Berrendale, Adeline not only refuses, but attempts to remedy his dissolute ways. Adeline admits to Mordaunt that, having met him before she encountered Glenmurray, she would have liked to marry the colonel, but he had avowed he was “not a marrying-man” (AM 218). Though Mordaunt, devastated by this vision of the life he could have had, begs her not to torture him with such facts, Adeline insists, “I would not probe where I did not intend to make a cure” (219). And cure him she does; Mordaunt is so distraught over Adeline’s words that he falls ill with a fever—a purifying, rather than putrifying one, it would seem, as he awakens sadder, wiser, and unable to enjoy his former revelries. It is in this state that he meets Emma Douglas, a woman he comes to love for both her resemblance to Adeline and her fierce defense of her lookalike’s inner virtue. Mordaunt is thereby reformed and
Emma effectively “rescued” from an apparently untenable unmarried position, all thanks to the salutary effect of Adeline’s influence.\textsuperscript{116}

The image of the fallen woman as physical and spiritual nurse is one that appears to be incompatible with the more familiar conception of the fallen woman as a source of contagion in her community, and Agnes’s and Adeline’s healing missions obviously conflict with other characters’ assessments of them as pollutant. This is because in truth, they are not pollutant at all; Opie’s narratives ultimately reveal any equations of her heroines and contamination to be decidedly spurious. For instance, while Adeline believes Mary Warner was “corrupted by [her] precept and example,” Rachel Pemberton eventually divulges the servant girl’s long history of impropriety, declaring to Adeline, “I discovered, long before she ever saw thee, that she had been known to have been faulty” (\textit{AM} 266). Additionally, Agnes and Adeline do not carry or transmit biological contagions. While other characters die of fevers, consumption, and smallpox, they appear either resistant to such disorders or recover soon after contracting them. Agnes does not go mad, as everyone expects her to do after constant sorrowful contact with her father’s condition (and as would be in keeping with the familiar literary trope of the “love-mad”

\textsuperscript{116} As Eberle observes, \textit{Adeline Mowbray} suggests that “a social position which is not dependent on a heterosexual relationship” is not immediately available to most female characters (138). While Adeline is surrounded by women who technically appear “single” at the end of the novel, they are all widows: Editha Mowbray O’Carrol, Savanna, and Rachel Pemberton have all been married and lost their husbands. Women without patriarchal protectors in the forms of husbands, fathers, or, in Emma’s case for much of the novel, brothers, are left exposed to abuse and dangers, as Adeline’s experiences throughout the narrative make clear. A similar instance also occurs in \textit{The Father and Daughter}, in which Agnes’s sole defender, the servant Fanny, gains a husband because of her associations with the fallen woman; Opie writes that the young man “thought Fanny looked more lovely while expressing her love for her penitent mistress, and pleading her cause with a cheek flushed with virtuous indignation, and eyes suffused with the tears of artless sensibility” (\textit{FD} 127).
ruined woman). Likewise, while Adeline does experience bouts of illness and even mental disorder, her constitution always rallies, and never endangers others; her quick thinking actually prevents her child from contracting a highly contagious strain of smallpox, as she orders the inoculation that saves Editha’s life.

Opie’s fallen women ultimately prove themselves to be neither infectious nor infecting, transmitting only beneficial influences to others and immune themselves to corruption. But if these tales insist that Agnes and Adeline have not been irrevocably and fatally contaminated by their sexual seductions, why then do both characters weaken and swiftly die by the end of their narratives? The answer appears to lie in what Eberle refers to in her discussion of Adeline Mowbray as the “second and most tragic seduction in the novel”: the heroine’s acceptance of society’s condemnation (137). After absorbing the endless blame, shame, and abuse supposedly deserved by the fallen woman, Agnes and Adeline become “infected” with false conceptions of self that literally destroy their will and ability to live.

Much like a biological contagion, this infection appears initially to be transmitted through the kind of physical contact Agnes and Adeline receive. From the first moments they are perceived as “fallen,” both of Opie’s protagonists find their bodies aggressively and publicly handled in ways unheard of toward “proper” women. A weeping Agnes is violently struck by a man who assumes she is “some intoxicated and abandoned woman” (FD 83). Adeline’s bare skin is repeatedly violated by men’s touch, as when both Colonel Mordaunt and the lawyer Langley forcibly kiss her ungloved hand. When she protests...
such treatment, her abusers believe her indignation must prove that she is someone’s legal wife, not that her body ought be considered inviolable on her own merit. Adeline’s pointed query, “Is it then given to a wife only to be secure from being insulted by offers horrible to the delicacy?” (AM 115) is left unanswered in the text, but lingers resoundingly for readers—particularly after she seeks protection from such insults in a marriage to Berrendale, in which her role as wife consequently subjects her to physical and sexual abuses that are in Opie’s text literally unspeakable.\(^{118}\)

It is not only men, however, who through touch effectively communicate to Agnes and Adeline their fallen identities. In the scene that perhaps most literalizes the transfer of fallen contagion through physical contact, Mary Warner, covered in the germs of a deadly smallpox virus, clings desperately to Adeline moments after (falsely) insisting that Adeline led her astray. Mary hears a report that her own illegitimate baby (whom moments before she callously asserted is “likely to die from convulsive fits, you know” [205]) has died from smallpox, and goes into consciously crafted histrionics, gripping Adeline’s waist and refusing to release her hold. Opie describes Mary, “fresh fraught with the pestilence” that infected her son, as herself a deadly parasite, who “as soon as [she] saw Adeline was eager to leave her, she was the more eager to hold her fast; and protesting she should die if she had the barbarity to leave her alone, she only hugged her the closer.” Adeline eventually breaks free, though not before she has been “worked up to madness” and is certain that she “carried death about her” (206).

\(^{118}\) Many critics have commented on Opie’s depiction of Berrendale’s prodigious sexual appetites, typified in his multiple (illegal) marriages and his sexual predation on servant women. Eberle, for instance, notes that through the constant indigestion and “food-induced stupor” Berrendale experiences, “Opie indirectly alludes to his sexual demands upon Adeline and the brutality of this marriage of convenience” (140).
Adeline does indeed come down with smallpox after this exchange; however, the most fatally infecting element to which she is exposed in this moment is not physiological contagion, but damning discourse. Through Mary’s hateful declaration, “You taught me marriage was all nonsense, […] and so I followed your example” (AM 204), Adeline contracts the conviction that she is herself an agent of corruption. It is only moments after this altercation that, as I discussed above, she rushes disheveled and frenzied into the streets and is taken for a prostitute. And, while she gradually regains her reason and recuperates from smallpox, Adeline will never recover from the false claim that she ruined another woman, and is thus morally ruined herself. In fact, Opie specifies this as the root cause of Adeline’s death. Explaining the rapid deterioration of her heroine’s health, she writes:

The truth was, that Adeline supposed herself to be declining: she thought that she experienced those dreadful languors, those sensations of internal weakness, which, however veiled to the eye of the observer, speak in forcible language to the heart of the conscious sufferer. Indeed, Adeline had long struggled, but in vain, against feelings of a most overwhelming nature; amongst which, remorse and horror, for having led by her example and precepts an innocent girl into a life of infamy, were the most painfully predominant: for, believing Mary Warner’s assertion when she saw her at Mr Langley’s chambers, she looked upon that unhappy girl's guilt as the consequence of her own; and mourned, incessantly mourned, over the fatal errors of her early judgment […]. (AM 221)

Adeline decides she deserves to die for spreading infamy among the innocents (while the far-from-innocent and never-remorseful Mary Warner survives, like a particularly virulent parasite, for the remainder of the tale). Similarly, in The Father and Daughter Agnes effectively works herself to death because she believes herself to be the sole cause
of her father’s madness.\textsuperscript{119} When he at last dies, she does the same almost simultaneously, having lost any reason to live. Not even her son Edward offers Agnes enticement to stay alive, since she has already relinquished much of her parenting—perhaps in the hopes of distancing him from her own potentially contaminating influence—to the loyal Fanny.

And while, like Agnes, Adeline is so desperate to die in order to save her daughter from her own contaminating influence, what she actually bequeaths Editha may be far more dangerous. In her last days, Adeline composes a memoir for her daughter, as do a number of “fallen” female characters in other Romantic-era (and often “Jacobin”) novels, from Wollstonecraft’s \textit{Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman} to Hays’s \textit{The Victim of Prejudice}.\textsuperscript{120} The text Adeline leaves Editha is not, however, a defense of her actions like the one that comprises \textit{Maria}, but rather a condemnation. The purpose of Adeline’s “mournful and eventful history” (to which the reader is never privy) is to offer her daughter a catalog of the “sorrows” and “secret agonies” she has endured, and to teach her that “the woman who feels justly, yet has been led even into the practice of vice, however she may be forgiven by others, can never forgive herself,” and must forever regret her permanent loss of “respect and esteem” (\textit{AM} 239).

\textsuperscript{119} Though Agnes believes her father’s madness is unequivocally her fault, we should be hesitant to read it as such; as Tong convincingly argues, \textit{The Father and the Daughter} presents Fitzhenry’s initial relationship with and treatment of his daughter as itself contaminating, and “tracks the negative and longlasting reverberations that an excessively strong parental attachment has on a young woman’s development.” It is Fitzhenry’s own structuring of his household that creates an environment in which father and daughter become acutely, and destructively, dependent upon one another (Tong 467).

\textsuperscript{120} Much of Wollstonecraft’s novel, left unfinished at her death in 1797, is styled as the main character Maria’s memoir to her infant daughter. In Hay’s 1799 text, the protagonist Mary learns the truth of her illegitimate birth through letters left to her by her mother.
Adeline’s statement here is rather disingenuous, as she has already admitted that she would most likely be “respected and esteemed” in later life, despite her known “fall”—and it is for this very reason that she should die, lest her daughter decide (from empirical proof, rather than empty cultural dictates) that female transgression is not as destructive as society attests. While believing she is offering a recuperative text, then, Adeline is actually teaching Editha the same false lesson she herself has absorbed through the prejudicial words and deeds of others, though all her personal actions and innate feelings continually disprove it: that the woman who fails to conform to dominant ideologies of female propriety, particularly in its equation of chastity with virtue, is worthless at best, and more often actively monstrous. Adeline’s dying gift to her only child is the same deadly discourse that destroyed her own life.

Therefore, while Eberle argues that the overt conventionality of Adeline’s message to her daughter is somewhat undercut by the fact that she “foregrounds her own innate—albeit misunderstood—goodness” and “insists that her daughter know the truth about her life,” rejecting an equation of innocence and naiveté (144), I find Cooper’s less optimistic assessment more convincing, in which she sees Editha’s legacy as merely a mother’s “corpse” transformed into a stultifying text, “a lesson to be learned and avoided” that effectively “erase[s] the possibility of change” (23). Succumbing to society’s insistence that she, rather than the rampant hypocrisies and double standards which she had challenged, was always the problem, Adeline “accepts, and advocates, the very institutional structures and prejudice she earlier rebukes and struggles to reform” (Cooper 27), and actively reinscribes her daughter within them.
Furthermore, the reader is left with a chilling hint that Editha, the product of Adeline’s horrifying yet sanctioned relationship with Berrendale, will be quite comfortable embracing the “conventional” lessons her mother bequeaths her, or at least highly susceptible to them. While Adeline lost Glenmurray’s child due to the “anxiety and agitation” (AM 132) that she was subjected to over its illegitimacy—yet another clue that her “radical” pregnancy was not itself contaminated, but, as Cooper also suggests, inevitably failed only “in the face of society’s unreformed corruptions” (14)—the surviving daughter for whom Adeline will die may potentially resemble her cruel father more than Adeline, or even readers, want to admit. Upon hearing she could live in her grandmother’s “pretty house” only once her mother is in her grave, Editha asks, “And when shall you be there? [..] pray, mamma—pray be there soon!” (AM 223). Though the narration excuses this demand as the “unconscious” prattle of a child, little Editha Berrendale appears already prone to value appearance and wealth over love; the “fallen” mother, despite all her virtues, ought hurry to her grave rather than hinder her daughter’s access to material comfort and status.\(^{121}\) Agnes’s story also ends on a similarly uncomfortable note regarding her child’s future: rather than being allowed to live with Fanny, his devoted if poor adoptive mother, Edward is reclaimed by Clifford (now Lord Mountcarrol) after being lured away from his mother’s funeral by “the extreme elegance” of the lord’s chaise (FD 153).

\(^{121}\) Also, although some critics have cited the alternative (and primarily female) family structure that exists at the end of *Adeline Mowbray* as a positive force that will improve little Editha’s future, there are indications it may not be as strong as such readings insist. Cooper, for instance, argues that the female community that raises Editha does not constitute a celebration of maternal agency, but the denial of that agency, for the “mothers” function as mouthpieces for the cultural conventions Editha’s real mother openly defied (26).
Agnes and Adeline thus bequeath their children to the very society through which the mothers, despite all their inherent merits and initial resolve, imbibed fatal ideas of their own immorality. From this ideological infection, they misread the abusive experiences they undergo, from the physical violations to the social rejection, as justified consequences, rather than causes, of their personal “contamination,” and accept the dehumanizing judgments that proclaim them as no more than diseased bodies. In the process, they misdiagnose themselves as “incurable,” and, in fulfillment of that sad prognosis, die. Though Opie’s narration never wavers in demonstrating that these particular heroines are more virtuous than most of their ostensibly “proper” peers (and offers numerous examples of hypocrites who persecute supposed fallen women while concealing their own transgressions), Agnes and Adeline are unable to believe that they have any personal value or societal place after their fall. Though both boast a lifetime of moral actions that deserve emulation, they ultimately accept their only worth lies in being a warning.

Even if we have established, then, that Opie’s early fictional tales are not meant to denounce fallen women, but rather unmask many of the hypocrisies underlying the social construction of feminine propriety and virtue, readers of The Father and Daughter and

122 While I acknowledge the multiple meanings attached to the term “ideology,” I read Agnes and Adeline as affected by their period’s dominant ideologies of sexuality in the truly Marxist sense of the word, involving issues of true and false cognition, or as Terry Eagleton summarizes in Ideology: An Introduction, “ideology as illusion, distortion, and mystification” (3). Eagleton’s explanation of how a dominate power legitimates itself and perpetuates its own body of ideas matches the process by which Agnes and Adeline come to accept themselves as fallen: “A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and by obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself” (5-6, original emphasis). See Eagleton, Ideology: An Introduction (New York: Verso, 1991). I am also indebted to Logan’s consideration of definitions of ideology and the fallen women (Falleness 2-3).
Adeline Mowbray are left with a rather pessimistic outlook. Though Opie has made clear the disconnect between the perceived crime of a woman’s lost chastity and the excessive punishment society metes out, it appears in both texts to be ultimately impossible to escape this unwarranted fate, particularly if all women inevitably absorb and accept the very ideologies that condemn them. Written as they are by a woman who had experienced—and had successfully escaped—her own associations with impropriety, such messages are particularly confusing. Are implications of fallenness so insidious that they always prove self-fulfilling? Does Opie mean to suggest a fallen identity is one from which there is no recuperation?

The very fact that these same early tales are the means by which Opie solidified her own remove from fallenness reveals the answer to be a resounding no. Though in these stories Agnes and Adeline fail to take back control over the narratives of their identities, Opie suggests in her later fiction—and, as I will demonstrate at the end of this chapter, in her own life—the possibility of a woman reclaiming and recuperating a tainted reputation most fully through the act of writing.

Recuperating Through Writing

Madeline, A Tale (1822) is the last acknowledged piece of fiction Opie published before officially joining the Society of Friends and renouncing imaginative writing.123

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123 Self-Delusion; or Adelaide D’Hauteroche: a Tale (1823) is mentioned by Macgregor as a possible “lost” Opie text (85), as the Ladies Monthly Museum magazine reviewed it as such. Scholars Peter Garside and Rainer Schowerling also contend on the basis of surviving correspondence between Opie and Sir John Gurney that Opie’s oeuvre ought to be extended to include another title published after Madeline, this being
Twenty years after the publication of *The Father and Daughter*, the conservative conventionality of Opie’s tales were so firmly established as to become, according to some of her contemporary readers, quite boring. Her fellow writer Mary Russell Mitford typifies the response to Opie’s later works in her cutting remark that, “We have got Mrs. Opie’s new novel of ‘Madeline’ in the house but I have not yet opened it. One knows the usual ingredients of her tales just as one knows the component parts of a plum-pudding” (qtd. in Macgregor 85). While Mitford is obviously passing aesthetic judgment upon the formulaic “ingredients” Opie employs in her fiction, her comment also speaks to the perceived harmlessness and acceptability of Opie’s works. If one of the aims of Opie’s writing had been to distance herself from radical associations of the 1790s, then she seems three decades later to have succeeded, as a tale comparable to a bit of domestic sweetness like “plum-pudding” appears as appropriate and feminine a production as even the most “proper” lady might safely undertake.

Yet *Madeline* is a far more interesting tale than Mitford’s cold reception and kitchen metaphors suggest. Set in Scotland from 1813 through 1819, the predominately epistolary story concerns the fortunes of Madeline Munro, the daughter of poor cottagers who is raised by English gentry only to return in young adulthood to her uncouth family. With shades of both *Pamela* and *Pride and Prejudice* haunting its early pages, the text details Madeline’s subsequent struggles to reconcile her personal breeding and virtues

*Much to Blame, A Tale*, a work published with attribution to “a Celebrated Author” in 1824. Opie complains in a letter to Gurney of a 3 volume novel “which she intended to publish anonymously but then decided to withdraw on joining the Society of Friends; the publisher however was far advanced in printing, and the work unknown to her was issued as a ‘tale by a celebrated authoress.’” Garside and Schowerling identify *Much to Blame* as the only novel of the period found with the corresponding publication date and attribution. See Garside and Schowerling, *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, Vol. II: 1800-1829 (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2000) 586.
with the lowly expectations of her station, particularly once her beauty catches the eye of a local laird, Mr. Falconer of Glencarron. Though Glencarron is of age and may marry any woman he likes, he is unwilling to publicly take a lowly-born wife and thereby bring embarrassment to his aristocratic family. He therefore convinces Madeline to partake in a “Scotch marriage” and live, despite her secret status as his wife, as in all appearances his kept mistress.

Madeline’s “Scotch marriage” to Glencarron provides an important point of comparison to the relationships Opie depicted in her earlier fiction. While Madeline’s marriage is technically legal, it does not take place under any officially sanctioned authority. Rather, Madeline and Glencarron pledge their vows in the library of his home, with two aged servants observing; when both servants later die, there remain no witnesses to confirm the event. Under the terms of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scottish marriage laws, however, the mutual promise suffices as proof of marriage.\(^{124}\) Therefore, Madeline becomes a legal wife by virtually the exact same means by which Adeline became a fallen woman; like Madeline and Glencarron, Adeline and Glenmurray (whose very names are echoed in the later pair) pledged themselves to one another in private, believing themselves to be joined “in the sight of God […] till death shall separate us” (\(AM\ 117\)).

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\(^{124}\) Until 1940, Scotland still recognized “irregular” marriages. These required only the consent (public or private) of marriage by both parties, or the promise of marriage in the future followed by sexual intercourse. Neither consent of the parents nor presence of official witnesses was required. For a brief overview, see Leah Leneman’s “The Scottish Case That Led to Hardwicke’s Marriage Act,” \(Law \text{ and History Review}\) 17.1 (1999): 161–169; for a full explanation from a mid-nineteenth-century source, see Patrick Fraser, \(Treatise on the Law of Scotland as applicable to The Personal and Domestic Relations\) (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1846) 1: 124-97.
That Madeline becomes a wife in an act identical to the one that brands Adeline a harlot is the result of Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act of 1753, under which England and Wales required a formal ceremony of marriage. This issue of “ceremony” arises in both texts, causing disquiet for both would-be brides; whereas Adeline laments she is treated and insulted as “a woman of vicious inclinations” simply “because an idle ceremony has not been muttered over me at the altar” (AM 116), Madeline feels uncomfortable being accepted as an “honest” wife precisely because no proper ceremony had been performed. Having been raised under the laws and social strictures of England, Madeline understands she will be considered lawfully married in Scotland, but “not as satisfactorily” as she desires (M 2.12, original emphasis); her anxiety lies not in that she will be unfairly outcast or insulted as fallen, as Adeline is, but rather that she might rightfully deserve to be.

Madeline’s ambivalence about her own married status and potential impropriety is, I argue, especially important to the larger project at work in this tale—as in Opie’s others—in which fallenness is revealed to be the product of discourse rather than action. Madeline resists giving readers the satisfaction of being certain whether they are empathizing with a technically “fallen” woman or not, though its heroine never wavers in proclaiming her virtuous intent. By demonstrating the arbitrary nature of the legitimacy of Madeline’s marriage throughout the text—for instance, the marriage is constantly threatened with dissolution by a word from Glencarron, or the possibility that he has already married another woman—Madeline criticizes the notion that a few words (or,
lack thereof) change a woman’s ontological makeup fundamentally, from morally and physically “good” to irrevocably “bad.”

Though Madeline is ambivalent about her own marital status, however, her community is not; the extreme secrecy of her marriage and Glencarron’s unwillingness to affirm it publicly lead most observers to conclude that their relationship is indeed illegitimate. The disconnect that Madeline privately experiences between her legal status and moral identity—her fear that she is fallen, though also a wife—is promptly realized as she elopes without explanation from her family’s house and is established in a cottage on the grounds of Glencarron’s hunting seat. Notably, the cottage is one that previously housed his cousin’s mistresses, though Glencarron insists Madeline’s presence will “purify it” from its earlier associations with vice (M 2.154). Instead, Madeline finds herself gradually becoming tainted with all the hallmarks of fallenness. While Glencarron lives openly as an eligible bachelor, Madeline is plunged into an existence of concealment and lies: she must take a false name, enter Glencarron’s home under “feigned character” (2.158), and is unable to present the son she soon bears as his father’s rightful heir. As the birth of this (presumed illegitimate) child also confirms Madeline’s loss of virginity, the physical integrity and inviolability of her body is subsequently disregarded. In a series of scenes that mirror the treatment of Agnes and Adeline in the earlier texts, Madeline is accosted by strange men who insist upon forcibly embracing her waist or grasping her naked arms. And as with Opie’s previous fallen characters, this unwanted contact threatens to “infect” Madeline mentally and physically; she reports her
“health and constitution so shattered” by the constant insults that she fears she may go mad or die (2.237).125

Yet Glencarron claims Madeline will instead be the death of others, as he insists that avowing their marriage publicly will kill his snobbish sister Lady Benlomen. Madeline is repeatedly told that Lady Benlomen’s “frail health” and “endangered life” would receive a death blow if her brother’s “degrading connexion [sic]” is revealed (M 1.316). Glencarron even cites medical authority to justify his behavior, insisting that his sister’s “physician, who knows her violence of feeling, declares than any great agitation would kill her instantly” (2.53, original emphasis). Like a true fallen woman, then, Madeline is perceived as a deadly contaminate, whose blood will not only adulterate an aristocratic bloodline, but also kill its rightful bearers.

Faced with so much confirmation she may indeed be permanently pollutant, outcast, and unmarriageable (as she is married, but cannot be claimed as a wife), it is little wonder that Madeline finds herself poised at the edge of the familiar downward spiral of the stereotypical fallen woman. She wavers between becoming a villain—as when she realizes her own pleasurable anticipation of “the death of a fellow-creature, and she the sister of my husband!” (M 2.20)—and being a victim, growing ever more ill and unhappy in her social isolation, especially as it becomes clear Glencarron may choose never to acknowledge the marriage at all, but abandon her for a bride of his own station. Much like Agnes and Adeline, Madeline at times longs to end her life in order to spare

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125 Madness (and, indeed, fallenness) seems fated for Madeline by virtue of her very name; a derivative of Magdaleen, Madeline also recalls the popular Bedlamite verses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which featured the character “Mad Maudline.” See Thame 324 n.35.
her son from future shame; “death is deprived of its terrors,” she explains, “when I reflect that if I die Glencarron will acknowledge me as his wife immediately, and declare my child to be his lawful heir, and that my fame, and the credit of my family, will consequently be no longer injured by me” (2.131). In keeping with Opie’s earlier fictions, it appears with every page that Madeline’s fatal wish will eventually be granted, as the infectious conviction of her own fallenness takes root.

However, before becoming completely consumed by this diseased sense of self and losing both her health and will to live, Madeline discovers the curative potential of writing. Much of the narrative of Madeline is comprised of excerpts from the eponymous heroine’s journal, a book that serves a dual purpose as both private memoir and interpersonal (and intercontinental) correspondence. Throughout the course of the story, Madeline mails portions of the journal to her friend Mrs. St. Leger, an Englishwoman living in India. She serializes her work as one would a novel. Madeline even comments upon her composition’s similarity to popular fiction; reading over one “volume” of the journal, Madeline observes, “It is really now as long as a book, yet it contains nothing but the history of a weak woman’s heart” (1.262).

Yet by chronicling this history of the heart, Madeline is actively combating the forces that weaken her. “I should go distracted if I did not try to compose myself by writing,” she notes at the beginning of one entry (M 2.208), aware of the psychic split she is keeping at bay. By maintaining her journal, Madeline is able to organize and rationally reflect upon her thoughts and feelings, particularly after her “fallen” designation begins to break down her coherent sense of self. The original aim of her writing, which
Madeline had initially identified as “a means of leading me to combat erroneous 
opinions, and of strengthening virtuous sentiments” (1.21, original emphasis), becomes 
more imperative than she had ever imagined. Though the world in its “erroneous 
opinions” insists she is unchaste and improper, revisiting her journal and the chain of 
events she records in it reminds Madeline that she most decidedly is not. Additionally, 
writing provides an outlet for the intense emotional distress she must otherwise let burst 
into public mania—as happens to Agnes when she tries to commit suicide in a moment of 
distraught madness, to the horror of onlookers—or fester fatally within, like the 
“incurable wound” Adeline claims she feels in her heart (AM 215).\(^{126}\) Unable to publicly 
refute the accepted evidence that she is a mistress rather than a wife, Madeline is at least 
able to preserve the truth of her experiences and identity—and in turn, her sanity—within 
the private pages of her journal.

Importantly, though, the journal’s “privacy” is also not absolute; Madeline not 
only preserves but also disseminates her “true” self by placing her story in Mrs. St 
Leger’s hands. Therefore even if her immediate community is unaware of the facts of her 
situation, another woman is privy to the details of Madeline’s legitimate marriage and 
subsequent treatment, and could potentially attest to Madeline’s version of events if 
necessary. Though forced after her elopement to adopt the pseudonym “Mrs. Evan” in

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\(^{126}\) David Thame argues that Madeline purposely deploys the “love-mad maid convention” in her text, 
writing herself as “mad” in order to signify her ladylike sensibility to her readers Mrs. St Leger and, later, 
Glencarron himself (320). Madeline’s madness is thus, he claims, all performance, consciously crafted and 
enacted at will, but never a source of any real danger to the heroine. While I find much of Thame’s 
analysis—particularly in relation to the journal writing as a “therapeutic tool” and performative “stage” 
(315)—helpful, I disagree that the threat of Madeline’s madness originates solely on the page. She reports 
nearly identical emotional experiences as the ones that overwhelm and eventually destroy Opie’s earlier 
heroines; however, she is able to use her journal to manage and overcome them (or when deprived of the 
ability to write, grows much worse and nearly dies).
public, Madeline writes letters to Mrs. St Leger defiantly bearing the name “Madeline Falconer” and later, once Glencarron gains yet another title from a relative’s death, “Madeline Dalmany.” She refuses to become infected with a false sense of herself as fallen woman, but records in whatever way she can her legitimate identity as Glencarron’s wife.

This is not to say, however, that Madeline also believes her virtue is completely dependent upon her official marital status. Faced with the certainty that Glencarron is going to abandon her, Madeline boldly decides to leave him first. Returning the only letters that prove they have been married, Madeline leaves her husband a simple note reading, “Thou art free!” and heads to London with her infant son, effectively “freeing” herself from wifehood as well, and voluntarily entering the ranks of the fallen. Surprisingly, though, she is not immediately plunged into despair or even danger. In a sly metafictional moment, Opie’s heroine comments on the relative ease and comfort of traveling alone in a stage-coach, noting, “It is only in novels that ladies cannot travel safely without protection” (M 2.212). Once in London, Madeline rents a clean room, hires a kind maid, collects a sum of money owed to her under a maiden name, and sells a number of her paintings, thus living rather comfortably despite her unwed situation. Though her heart is broken, she informs Mrs. St Leger, “I am tolerably reconciled to my fate,” and avows it was her “right to dishonour myself” by claiming her freedom, rather than remaining in a loveless clandestine marriage (2.213).

If, as Eleanor Ty has argued, Opie seeks in Adeline Mowbray “a female subject position outside the stereotypical mistress or fallen woman” (157) for her socially
disgraced heroine to occupy, in *Madeline* she appears to find it. Secure in the sense of her own righteousness and supporting herself mentally and financially through modes of self-expression (as she writes for her sanity, and paints for her money), Madeline disregards the unsatisfactory available roles of “wife” or “whore” and is instead posed to survive and thrive respectably in an identity of her own making. Her only lingering doubt is whether she also had the “right” to make her son illegitimate, though she hopes that sharing with him the history she has written for Mrs. St Leger will one day provide him with sufficient explanation for her actions. Madeline thus describes her journal as the “most precious legacy” she leaves her child, as it will contain “the solemn assurance of my innocence” (2.213). Unlike the memoir Adeline leaves Editha, Madeline’s journal will defend her choices to her child, bolstering his pride in his mother’s nonconformity rather than infecting him with a vision of her as improper.

There is a power, then, in Madeline’s journal, with which she combats the damning constructions society attempts to force over her identity and her actions. It is a text that makes more conventional characters, like Glencarron, deeply uncomfortable; after realizing how Madeline creates a written record of all his behaviors, he nervously jokes, “I must take care what I look, and say, and do, or my wife will put me in a book! I do not feel quite so safe with you as I did before” (*M* 2.137). The “safety” of Glencarron’s life of patriarchal privilege—in which he is financially and socially secure regardless of his treatment of others, including his secret wife—is threatened by Madeline’s truthful writing, but it is also, more importantly, corrected. After reading the journal and recognizing in it the unsparing portrait of the pains he has caused, Glencarron
gradually modifies his behavior toward his wife. He tracks her down after she has left him, and rewards her daring independence by immediately wedding her “in an English church, at an English altar” as she has long wished, and subsequently presenting her in public as his wife (M 2.226).127 His insistence that Lady Benlomen would die in the face of such family “contamination” is soundly disproven; in fact, Lady Benlomen instantly embraces Madeline, and rebukes her brother as “odious” for having thought that simply because she was prideful, she would not honor “virtue and talent” in whomever she found them (2.267). Though Glencarron had blamed female bodies—Lady Benlomen’s moral and physical weakness, Madeline’s pollutant bloodlines—for his wife’s predicament, the journal (and, in turn, Opie’s tale) shifts the wrongdoing onto Glencarron himself, who perpetuated a false and destructive impression of mutual enmity amongst even those he presumably loved best.

And even after her marriage has been proven, Madeline still uses her writing to obtain the things she wants where wifely submission might demand she demur. As she begins to sink under an unidentifiable malady that baffles even her doctors, Madeline asks her husband to read her journal once more, where he finds she has recorded her desperate wish (one that he has previously ignored when she more timidly voiced it aloud) to be reunited with her lowly family. Glencarron thus uses Madeline’s writing—importantly, at her explicit urging—in order to properly diagnose and remedy what ails

127 Another way of interpreting this “reward” of marriage, of course, may be to see it as veiled punishment; Glencarron declares, “As you are such a slippery person, Madeline, I will never trust you out of my sight again till I have made you mine according to the laws of this country” (2.225). Madeline has longed for this official marriage and has thus gotten what she wanted; however, Glencarron now has legal claims upon her she cannot break.
her, and finds that what ails her has been his own behavior. He immediately brings her parents to his estate and encourages constant contact between the poor Munros and his aristocratic household until Madeline is completely recovered, and at last entirely happy.

At the beginning of her narrative, Madeline claims, “I have also a proud heart and a rebellious spirit, which prevent me from being resigned the fate allotted to me” (*M* 1.93). Throughout the tale, she proves this to be true. Unlike the penitent Magdalens (or even the earlier Adeline) whom her name recalls, Madeline finds a way to recover, and actually improve, her standing in the world on her own terms. Refusing to resign herself the roles of fallen woman or even fully acquiescent wife, she takes back control of the narrative of her life by writing it down. In doing so, she disproves all who little expected, as she notes, “that I had so much *firmness of character*” (2.214, original emphasis). The phrase is appropriate, as it speaks to both the strength of her personal determination, as well as to her steady sense of her own true “character” and rightful reputation, which she fixes in place (and thereby repairs of its ills) on the page.

And by the time she is publishing *Madeline*, Amelia Opie too had firmly “fixed” her own character in her minds of her readership through the act of writing. Opie’s early tales like *The Father and Daughter* and *Adeline Mowbray*, in which her protagonists appear unable to recover or escape from the damaging discourses of fallenness, in fact helped enable their author’s recovery from her own improper associations. In 1801 and 1805, Opie is less than a decade removed from her suspect involvement in radical circles, and writing in the direct wake of the damning revelations of Wollstonecraft’s biography. Using the platform of public authorship in order to promote herself as a more “proper”
woman (a somewhat ironic choice, to be sure), Opie produces texts that appear to preach conventionality while also criticizing her own former “Jacobin” associates. Thanks in part to these tactics, her suspected tendencies toward Wollstonecraftian feminism and revolutionary zeal seem by the early years of the nineteenth century to have been “cured.” Later, the efforts of her Victorian biographers and admiring critics continued this trend. Restoring a reputation by erasing half a life, however, did not sit well with all commentators; once again, Mary Russell Mitford’s commentary reveals some contemporary insights into Opie’s reputation, as she complained of Brightwell’s biography, which primarily emphasized Opie’s later conservative years:

Think of a correspondent of Mrs. Inchbald, and a flirt of Godwin and Holcroft’s; think of all that is buried under anti-slavery societies, and Joseph Lancaster’s schools! If the Quakers demanded a life to themselves, why not make over the materials to a literary friend, and have two. (qtd. in L’Estrange 2.298, my emphasis).

Mitford suggests that only two separate life stories can do justice to the scope of Opie’s experiences, or properly depict the woman who morphed from rabble-rouser at revolutionary-leaning political meetings, to a protector of traditional morals whose works were recommended by the likes of the conservative Ladies’ Monthly Museum magazine as ideal tools of “improvement” for the virtuous “daughter, wife, and mother” (qtd. in Macgregor 66).

And yet, these two identities were never as far removed from one another as they were intentionally made to seem. Opie’s own “confession” with which this chapter began demonstrates that even in her last years, marked as they are in most accounts of her life by increasing conservatism and religiosity, she cherished memories of her “radical”
self. Moreover, the “Jacobin” or “liberal” tendencies of which she was thought cured—or, in Mitford’s assessment, which were forcibly buried—appear throughout her fiction in her “subversive narrative techniques” (Eberle 125), through which presumed vice is revealed as virtue, respectability is unveiled as hypocrisy, and defiance of authority is often vindicated. Repeatedly, her texts question instead of endorse the status quo, particularly as it relates to ideals of female propriety, honor, and chastity. Just as Adeline might have found a conservative message submerged in the presumably “mischievous” work of Rousseau, Opie’s “simple moral tales” harbor hidden strains of their own “mischief” that compel readers to reevaluate accepted discourses of gender and sexuality.

Rather than having undergone a “moral inoculation” to recover from and become resistant to radical influences, then, Opie remains throughout her career a carrier of “dangerous” ideas about women’s place in society, transmitting subversion through even ostensibly innocuous texts. In this light, Dorothy Wordsworth’s recorded reaction to Adeline Mowbray—that it “made us quite sick before we got to the end of it” (qtd. in McWhir 32)—appears particularly apropos. Instead of merely condemning the fallen woman or simply mourning her transgressions, readers of Opie’s tales could also contract a dissatisfaction amounting to sickness with their society’s equation of fallenness and fatality, or of a woman’s worth with her physical chastity. Thus sickened, they may be poised to remedy it.

Therefore, Amelia Opie’s fiction can ultimately be read as multiply recuperative. Much as the character Madeline recovers and preserves her own reputation through the act of writing, Opie utilized her authorship to control and disseminate a particular
narrative of herself as a respectable writer whose “moral” publications were but outgrowths of her wifely duties and commitment to traditionally conservative mores. She superficially complied, as Claire Sheridan observes, “with a critical climate that demanded an attitude of disengagement” from “proper” women—and particularly, proper women writers—but her “reasons for conforming to this view were far from socially disengaged” (180). Instead, by presenting an appropriately feminine demeanor and dutifully denouncing her former associates, Opie ensured for herself a large audience who would patiently and unsuspectingly imbibe her brand of submerged social criticism. No wonder by the time she published Madeline, readers had been lulled into expecting from Opie a safe spoon-feeding of “plum pudding.” What they actually consumed, however, was an open challenge to the existing (and fatally infecting) constructions of female virtue and deviance.

The same texts through which Opie recuperated her own public reputation thereby also offered undetected correctives to the ailments of society. Allen Christensen has noted that some novelists “evidently consider themselves as allied with physicians and public health authorities in their solicitude for the physical health and comfort of their society” (21). It would make sense if Amelia Opie, daughter of a doctor and lifelong reformer, considered her role to be the same. In her tales—essentially “novels” hidden under a more acceptable name—she subtly infected the conventional discourses that designated transgressive women as valueless victims or villains with alternative images of “fallen” women as virtuous, deserving, and not only potentially redeemable, but sometimes, even more radically, as not requiring their society’s hypocritical redemption.
The excessive trials of Adeline and Agnes, and the triumphal agency of Madeline, expose the condemnatory ideology of fallenness as itself the true social contaminant, not the women tainted by it. Their tales—penned by a presumed “proper” woman whose life only superficially fit the expected parameters of acceptable femininity—diagnose a society that denies, based upon often arbitrary designations of chastity, half its members human value as suffering from its own malignant moral disorder. This disorder does not have to prove terminal, however. Through Opie’s fiction, readers receive (in a discrete, palatable package) perspectives that can prove antidotal to the destructive fallen-woman discourse.
Chapter 3:

“Such a Strong Wish For Wings”:
The Life of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell’s Fallen Angels

Elizabeth Gaskell undertook the writing of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* with a highly specific purpose in mind: it was meant, first and foremost, as a defense. Although Gaskell’s initial inclination to memorialize her friend and fellow novelist reflected more private and personalized intentions—she recalled, “I thought that I would simply write down my own personal recollections” of Charlotte Brontë, because “my children, who loved her, would like to have what I could write about her” (*Letters* 347-8)—she found herself, only three months after Brontë’s untimely death in 1855, charged with what she would later call a “grave duty” (*Letters* 349). She planned to present to the world a definitive account of the celebrated, if enigmatic, writer’s life, in defiance of the inflammatory and rumor-filled posthumous reports that were circulating.

In light of the major role she would eventually play in Gaskell’s writing process, it is fitting that Brontë’s longtime friend Ellen Nussey had actually instigated this task. She had written to Brontë’s father Patrick and widower Arthur Nicholls despairing over “the misrepresentations and the malignant spirit” at work in recent commentaries about the late author of *Jane Eyre*. Enraged after the appearance of a particularly gossipy piece in *Sharpe’s London Magazine*, Nussey insisted:

> Will you suffer the article to pass current without any refutations? […] there will be readers and believers. Shall such be left to imbibe a tissue of malignant
falsehoods, or shall an attempt be made to do justice to one who so highly deserved justice, whose very name those who best knew her but speak with reverence and affection? (780)\textsuperscript{128}

Nussey then dictated her choice of respondent, writing, “I wish Mrs Gaskell, who is every way capable, would undertake a reply, and would give a sound castigation to the writer” (780). Although Nicholls initially rejected the idea, Patrick Brontë soon wrote to Gaskell himself, observing that since “many things have been stated, are true, but more false—and having reason to think that, some may venture to write [Charlotte’s] life, who will be ill qualified for the undertaking,” he hoped an “established Author” like herself might produce a biography of his daughter immediately (781-2).

As many scholars have noted, Nussey’s choice of Gaskell as Brontë’s champion was particularly ironic, considering the fact that the Sharpe’s article she so desired Gaskell to refute was, unbeknownst to Nussey, largely comprised of quotations from Gaskell’s own account of meeting Charlotte Brontë for the first time. The article, entitled “A Few Words about ‘Jane Eyre’” but functioning as an obituary of Jane Eyre’s author, contained unflattering descriptions of the Brontës’ shabby home, Patrick’s uncouth and dismissive behavior toward his children, and Charlotte’s extreme social awkwardness, all of which were taken nearly verbatim from an 1850 letter Gaskell sent to Catherine Winkworth. Gaskell was thus effectively being asked to give a “sound castigation” to herself.\textsuperscript{129} Aside from this uncomfortable coincidence, however, Gaskell was a logical

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\item[\textsuperscript{128}] All quoted material from the letters of Ellen Nussey and Patrick Brontë come from Barker’s The Brontës, unless otherwise noted.
\item[\textsuperscript{129}] According to Linda Hughes and Michael Lund, the fact that Gaskell was the primary source—though not the actual author—for the unflattering Sharpe’s article was first suggested by Richard Gilbertson in 1963, and has since been elaborated upon by J.G. Sharps, Dennis Robinson, and Juliet Barker. Hughes and
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choice for the biographical project. She was both an established author and a genuine friend of Charlotte Brontë’s over the last five years of Brontë’s life; thus, in Nussey’s words, Gaskell’s ideal combination of proven talent and unprecedented intimacy with “Haworth, the Parsonage, and its inmates fit her to the task” (780). Additionally, Gaskell was not merely a capable writer, but had achieved undeniable celebrity status following the 1848 publication of her first novel, Mary Barton, and her varied subsequent works, including numerous short stories in Charles Dickens’s Household Words. Patrick Brontë was well aware of the practical benefits of having a popular author pen his daughter’s story, as he included in his letter to Gaskell “a request that you would affix your name, so that the work might obtain a wide circulation” (781). The Life of Charlotte Brontë, a work about a woman writer who did not affix her real name to her novels, would in fact be the first publication that would bear “Mrs. Gaskell’s” own name on its title page.130

However, in addition to her familiarity with the Brontë family and her popularity with the Victorian reading public, Gaskell was also particularly fitted to the task of defending Charlotte Brontë’s reputation because of the kind of defense that was seemingly required: not one of Brontë’s genius, or the merits of her authorial productions, or even her professionalism, but rather of her morality and respectability. Critics’ repeated accusations of “coarseness,” evidenced in the work of “Currer Bell” and

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130 Mary Barton had been published anonymously, as were many of her short stories. Ruth appeared as “By the Author of Mary Barton”; while North and South was attributed to “The Author of ‘Mary Barton’; ‘Ruth’; and ‘Cranford’”. Gaskell’s earliest published pieces in Howitt’s Journal of Literature and Popular Progress appeared under the male pseudonym “Cotton Mather Mills, Esq.” Charlotte Brontë, of course, famously adopted the pseudonym “Currer Bell” for her own publications.
thus attributed to the life of the actual author, served as barely-veiled insinuations about Brontë’s questionable virtue and general womanliness. An unsigned 1848 review by Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake, infamously claimed the “anti-Christian composition” of Jane Eyre could not be the work of a woman, unless she was “one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex” (111). “Coarse,” “unfeminine,” and “improper” became common adjectives applied to Brontë’s novels in various reviews. A piece in the North American Review even described Jane Eyre as infecting readers with a mental “distemper” (“Novels” 355), and suggested that the “profanity” and “brutality” of the text—especially in light of its presumed female authorship—acted as “shocks to the nervous system” (“Novels” 357). Though the NAR review was largely satirical, such language nonetheless aligned Brontë’s public persona and work with moral and physical contamination. Even Harriet Martineau made mention of the potential offensive influence of Brontë’s writing in the obituary she wrote for her former friend, in which she criticized the disturbing “passion” exhibited by characters like Jane Eyre or Villette’s Lucy Snowe, who gave their love “too readily, too vehemently,” and in an indiscriminate fashion “which their female readers may resent” (302-3).131 Indeed, Brontë’s heroines were even sources of allegations of actual sexual impropriety against their author, such when as rumors spread that Jane Eyre was likely penned by a real governess-turned-mistress.132

131 For an overview of more nineteenth-century reviewers’ comments regarding Brontë’s “coarseness,” see Bick, “Clouding” 36.
132 It had already been rumored that Jane Eyre was penned by an unrepentant mistress of William Makepeace Thackeray, whose own wife, like Rochester’s, had been declared mad. This scandal was compounded when Brontë, unaware of Thackeray’s domestic troubles, warmly dedicated the second edition of the novel to him. Later, the belief that Brontë’s Belgian teacher Constantin Héger was the model
In many ways, then, the authorial task with which Gaskell was faced surprisingly resembled a vindication of an accused “fallen” woman—surely no small feat in a cultural climate which Deborah Anna Logan describes as “reject[ing] such notions as degrees of fallenness or a hierarchy of fallen behaviors, and, by association, the possibility for redemption and social integration” (*Fallenness* 7). While some existing biographies had successfully vindicated public men from “low” characterizations, there was no clearly established form as to how to do this for a woman’s reputation. For instance, while James Boswell incorporated, rather than denied, elements of the “dirty linen” of Samuel Johnson’s life into the biography that would raise his subject to a heroic status, offering the unadulterated truth of a woman’s life carried with it far more risks, as William Godwin’s memoir of Mary Wollstonecraft had proven. 133 Moreover, Gaskell was expected to defend Brontë from certain improprieties even she, as wife of a Unitarian minister, could not fully condone, and her private correspondence betrays her own ambiguous responses and reservations to the questionable content of novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. 134

But Gaskell had already worked out, at least in fiction, a model of how to record and defend an unconventional woman’s life. Only two years earlier, her controversial for M. Paul in *Villette* (and thus, the author’s suspected lover) reportedly lost Héger a number of pupils. On the Thackeray scandal, see Barker *The Brontës* 514; for more on the Héger rumor, see Barker *The Brontës* 787.

133 In his introduction to Oxford World’s Classics edition of *The Life*, Angus Easson discusses Johnson’s biography as a possible model from which Gaskell worked, and in the process redefined (xii).

134 Suzann Bick outlines Gaskell’s private reactions to many of Brontë’s novels, including her playful claim that she was unable to tell if she liked or disliked the plots of *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*, and her lamentation that *The Professor* was “disfigured by more coarseness—& profanity in quoting texts of Scripture disagreeably than in any of her other works.” Bick suggests these reactions would later force Gaskell to eschew literary analysis, rather than reveal (or lie about) her disapproval, in the *Biography* (“Clouding” 37).
novel *Ruth* had presented Victorian audiences with the story of fifteen-year old Ruth Hilton, a dressmaker’s assistant who, in keeping with typical literary tropes, is seduced, impregnated and abandoned. However, in highly atypical twist, Gaskell’s heroine lives a productive and honorable life following the initial “fall,” only to emerge as a virtual saint by the narrative’s close. Importantly, Ruth’s redemption comes after she is reincorporated into, rather than banished from, a familial home. Though the novel’s risky subject matter led to some inevitable backlash, including bannings and burnings of the book alongside a number of hostile reviews, *Ruth* had also received praise for its delicate treatment of a difficult topic, and its thoughtful, if cautious, indictment of the sexual double standards that condemned women after any misstep. Many of *Ruth*’s first readers recognized Gaskell’s work as a potential force for good, including Charlotte Brontë, who confided in her personal correspondence with Gaskell that, “Such a book may restore hope and energy to many who thought they had forfeited their right to both, and open a clear course for honourable effort to some who deemed that they and all honour had parted company in this world” (qtd. in *LCB* 405).

Outside of Brontë’s enthusiastic response as a reader of Ruth Hilton’s story, the apparent connections between Brontë, the mature woman writer (who also boasted titles of wife and daughter of respected curates) and Ruth, the fictional unwed teenage mother, would seem virtually nonexistent. And yet, as I will show over the course of this chapter, the depiction of Charlotte Brontë that unfolds over the pages of *The Life* has much in

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136 In parenthetical citations, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* will be referred to as *LCB*. All other primary texts by Gaskell will also be referred to by their initials in citations: *Mary Barton* (*MB*); “Lizzie Leigh” (*LL*); *Ruth* (*R*); and “The Well of Pen-Morfa” (*WPM*).
common with that of the eponymous heroine of *Ruth*, as well as a number of other more traditionally fallen women who people the pages of Gaskell’s writings. Many modern readers of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* have criticized Gaskell for her apparent failure to emphasize Brontë’s exceptional authorship and writings in favor of offering a more conventional portrait of a dutiful daughter and sister. I argue instead that Gaskell’s defense of Brontë and her endeavor to rehabilitate her fellow writer’s public reputation distinctly and purposefully mirrors the efforts Gaskell made to “rescue” other euphemistically-termed “public women” in her personal philanthropic activities and in her socially-conscious fiction. In each case, Gaskell works to combat the presumed irrevocable effects of an individual’s “fall” by reinserting the transgressive woman into what she considers an alternative, recuperative discourse of domesticity and home. These recoveries often involve literally re-covering women who had been left exposed—to seduction, to the streets, to ostracism and death—with the literal roof of a new family home, and with what Gaskell saw as the strengthening embrace of maternal and sororal bonds.

This chapter will therefore consider Elizabeth Gaskell’s general treatment of the Victorian fallen woman, which I argue includes her biographical portrait of Charlotte Brontë. The fact that Charlotte Brontë did not technically “fall” in a strictly sexual sense does not automatically exclude her from this grouping, since, as Logan has argued, the concept of the “unchaste” or “fallen” woman assumed far more extrasexual connotations during the Victorian period than many studies of the terms suggest. Thus the “fallen” category also incorporates any woman who fails to conform fully to and “properly”
manifest the marriage-and-motherhood domestic ideal, regardless of their sexual behavior (Logan Fallenness 16). Additionally, Beth Kalikoff’s discussion of “falling” women—a group comprised of characters like Brontë’s own Jane Eyre, who suffer passionate temptations “played out in spiritual rather than exclusively sexual terms” (364)—demonstrates the ways in which deviant behavior could often be constructed where none actually existed. Under the tyranny of middle-class sexual ideology, being merely faced with the threat of falling, regardless of actually succumbing to it, could potentially push a woman out of the ranks of the respectable.¹³⁷

And throughout The Life, Brontë is indeed depicted as a woman tragically “falling.” In the biography she appears, in Angus Easson’s summary, as “a wronged woman, called an outcast, judged by a lesser standard than [men], accused of coarseness, denied any lasting happiness” (Elizabeth Gaskell 158). In short, she seemingly experiences many of the standard consequences of a fall, without having committed the actual sin. In addition to her already suspect role as a “public” woman (despite her efforts at anonymity), Gaskell’s Brontë is a body perpetually in crisis, chafing against the confines of both her physical form and the social conformity required of members of her sex. Brontë’s private letters, inserted (albeit heavily edited) directly into Gaskell’s text, convey to readers of The Life her constant battle with personal desire, in opposition to the apparently natural selflessness expected of “proper” women, and the corporal consequences of perpetual ill health that appear to accompany such psychological

¹³⁷ One prominent example of such a circumstance in Victorian literature can be found in Maggie Tulliver of George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (1860), a character who suffers cruel ostracism, humiliation, and eventual death not due to an actual sexual fall, but only because she is suspected of one.
struggle. For instance, after perusing the letter of a friend who has taken a continental

tour, Brontë recounts:

I hardly know what swelled to my throat as I read her letter: such a vehement
impatience of restraint and steady work; such a strong wish for wings […] such
an urgent thirst to see, to know, to learn; something internal seemed to expand
bodily for a minute. I was tantalized by the consciousness of faculties
unexercised,—then, all collapsed, and I despaired. (qtd. in LCB164)

To collapse and despair following an unbearable bodily tantalization is, quite literally, to
fall. It is a crashing descent brought about, somewhat ironically, by Brontë’s desperate
“wish for wings” that might allow her to transcend her given place and the female body
that, as I will demonstrate over the course of this chapter, appears throughout The Life as
disability and liability. Above all, it is not the expected attitude of a Victorian model of
ideal femininity and morality.

And yet, Gaskell highlights such scenes of Brontë’s apparent loss of control—
potentially indicative of the loss of self that presumably accompanies a moral fall—in
order to transform them into displays of heroic self-discipline. She is careful to include,
for instance, Brontë’s resolution that such “rebellious and absurd emotions were only
momentary; I quelled them in five minutes” (qtd. in LCB 164). The fact that Brontë finds
such quelling “acutely painful” is presented as further evidence not of her depravity, but
her willingness to suffer for home and duty. Her bodily pain, perpetually emphasized
throughout The Life, becomes a sign of her moral fortitude. Thus, Gaskell recasts the
“falling” Brontë as a veritable Angel in the House, one who earns heavenly wings not
because she never faced temptation, but because she nobly struggles against the urge to
fly from “restraint and steady work.” In her fiction, Gaskell depicts women more blessed
in endeavoring to recover from falls than those who have fortuitously never been tried. Likewise, in *The Life*, she suggests Brontë triumphs by remaining a paragon of feminine and domestic virtues despite an unusual environment and imaginative genius that could easily have tainted her.

*The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is thus indicative of Gaskell’s larger interest in the ways in which female deviance is discursively constructed, and can therefore be discursively combated. Repeatedly in her writings, Gaskell challenges the more rigid religious, medical, and social narratives of fallenness that doom nonconforming women to such fates as rejection, disease, institutionalization and marginalization. In their stead, she privileges traditionally “feminine” relationships, spaces, and modes of discourse, and prescribes sympathetic acceptance within the private sphere for transgressive women, rather than punitive incarceration in the impersonal public lock hospital or workhouse. In this manner, Gaskell’s rhetorical rehabilitation of fallen women in her prose also echoes aspects of her real-life involvement in the “magdalenist” reform movement of the mid-1800s, as in both arenas she worked to impose a domestic norm over other women’s dubious reputations—essentially recovering the “lost” by covering them with what Gaskell posits as the healing, protective shelter of home and community.

This approach, however, is not unproblematic. As critics like Lynda Nead have pointed out, magdalenist philanthropy purported to “save” women by perpetuating many of the same restrictive middle-class definitions of the feminine domestic ideal and sexual morality that contributed to initial “falls” in the first place, and was thus an “ambiguous

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138 Mason explains the adoption of the word “magdalen” for these projects; see pp. 89-90.
tool for women’s emancipation” at best (201). Similarly, Gaskell covers many of her fallen heroines, from Ruth to Brontë, with a mantle of perfect domesticity that comes eerily to resemble a death shroud. The selflessness that saves and defines them as “angels” often leads to a literal loss of self, such as when Ruth dies as a result of her saintly nursing—a fate to which Brontë famously objected. Writing to Gaskell after having read an outline of *Ruth*, Brontë lamented the novel’s end:

Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping? [...] And yet you must follow the impulse of your own inspiration. If that commands the slaying of the victim, no bystander has a right to put out his hand to stay the sacrificial knife: but I hold you a stern priestess in these matters. (qtd. in *LCB* 405)

Brontë had no inkling that only a few years later, the same “stern priestess” would be deciding her own posthumous fate, choosing to defend Brontë’s seemingly untoward authorial identity by essentially subordinating it to her more acceptable familial roles as daughter, sister, friend, wife, and (almost) mother—the same socially-revered position that eventually cost Brontë her life, as she died at the age of thirty-eight from pregnancy complications. In private letters, Gaskell repeatedly lamented the fact that she had not been able to prevent Brontë’s physical death by attending her personally and forcing her to “do what was so absolutely necessary, for her very life” (*Letters* 337); some scholars have claimed there is evidence that Gaskell may have even considered convincing Brontë to terminate her pregnancy.\(^{139}\) Publicly, however, she proceeded to save her friend’s

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\(^{139}\) In a letter to John Greenwood, Gaskell confided, “…it is no use regretting what is past; but I do fancy that if I had come, I could have induced her;--even though they had all felt angry with me at first,--to do what was so absolutely necessary for her life” (*Letters* 337). Barker suggests the use of “induce” here refers to inducing delivery prematurely, and therefore “the thought of abortion had occurred to Mrs. Gaskell” (*The Brontës* 774-5); Anna Unsworth draws similar conclusions in “Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë,” *GSN* 8 (August 1989) 17-18. Jenny Uglow disagrees with this assessment, writing that “despite [Gaskell’s] knowledge of midwifery this seems highly unlikely” (656 n. 4).
legacy in the exact reverse of how she might have saved her life: by casting Brontë as a willing martyr for familial roles, and forcing her life’s narrative to fit middle-class Victorian gender ideology and its existing ideals of respectable femininity.

That Ruth and Brontë alike are lifted up from their falls only to be “fixed” on the page in an image of deadly domesticity is not necessarily a failure in Gaskell’s progressive vision, however. Instead, I argue that it is reflective of Gaskell’s own ambivalences about how to balance what she considered her personal “warring Mes” of woman and writer, and the ultimate untenability of the “angelic” ideal in real women’s lives. Gaskell’s writings betray her recognition that women may be equally felled by meeting, rather than transgressing, constraining and disabling societal standards of femininity. There is therefore yet another level of feminist defense at work in The Life of Charlotte Brontë, in which, as I will show over the course of this chapter, Gaskell works from within the existing ideological system in order to challenge it. Just as she posits the home as the place for a fallen woman’s reformation, Gaskell’s depictions of reformed fallen women are meant to transform existing ideals of the proper home and its female inhabitants.

Fallen Women in Gaskell’s Life and Fiction

Fallen women appear often in Elizabeth Gaskell’s fiction, from the eponymous subjects of Ruth (1853) and the short story “Lizzie Leigh” (1850), to the prostitute Esther in Mary Barton (1848), to tragic unwed mothers in “The Well of Pen-Morfa” (1850),
“The Old Nurse’s Story” (1852), and “The Poor Clare” (1856). However, before Gaskell imagined many of these characters, she encountered and documented a real-life abandoned woman’s story. While visiting Manchester’s New Bailey Prison in 1849, Gaskell met a sixteen-year-old prostitute known as Pasley whose sad circumstances piqued her interest. Pasley was, according to Gaskell’s account, the daughter of a clergyman, and had been harshly ignored by an indifferent mother following her father’s death. Placed with relatives or orphan’s schools until the age of fourteen, she was eventually apprenticed to a dressmaker who, Gaskell related, “connived at the girl’s seduction by a surgeon in the neighborhood who was called in when the poor creature was ill.” Having written in desperation to her mother but receiving no reply, the ruined girl fell in with a woman who procured girls for prostitution, and subsequently lived on the streets “in the hopes […] of killing herself, for ‘no one had ever cared for her in this world’” (Letters 98).

Gaskell recounted Pasley’s situation in a letter to Charles Dickens, as she was aware of his involvement with refuges for women like the Urania Cottage that he had established with Angela Burdett Coutts, and was eager for advice on how to help the girl. Specifically, Gaskell hoped Dickens might accept Pasley for one of Coutts’s existing

In addition to the encounter with Pasley that I detail here, Gaskell’s cook Anne was also seduced and impregnated in 1847, the account of which Gaskell details in a letter to her family governess, Barbara Fergusson (Letters 37-8). Gaskell explains that she and her husband attempt to assist Anne first by asking the seducer to marry the pregnant woman, and, when he refuses, asking Anne’s mother to welcome the girl back home; the mother also (much to Gaskell’s disgust, who calls her a “selfish woman”) refuses, saying “babies make her nervous.” Gaskell stops her efforts, however, once she finds out that Anne has been perpetually lying to her about the details of her affair (i.e. she is continuing to call on the man although he will not marry her). Gaskell admits to Fergusson that she is going to have to let Anne go (more on account of the lying than the actual sexual transgression), but notes, “I am so very sorry for Anne, notwithstanding all” (Letters 38).
emigration schemes for destitute women. Gaskell personally vouched for Pasley as a “good reader, writer and a beautiful needlewoman,” and offered to pay all expenses associated with a voyage to Australia, but worried about the actual logistics of travel. She writes to Dickens:

But the account of common emigrant ships is so bad one would not like to expose her to such chances of corruption; and what I want you to tell me is, how Miss Coutts sends out her protégées? under the charge of a matron? and might she be included among them? I want her to go out with as free and unbranded a character as she can; if possible, the very fact of having been in prison &c to be unknown on her landing. I will try and procure her friends when she arrives; only how am I to manage about the voyage? […] I want to keep her out of all temptation, and even chance of recognition. Please, will you help me? (Letters 99)

Dickens replied with a letter of advice from Coutts herself, who though she declined to take responsibility of Pasley suggested the plan of “placing the girl under the charge of some respectable family, (of working class if possible)” during the duration of her voyage (Letters 100). Gaskell speedily followed Coutts’s recommendation, as she was particularly frustrated with the limited institutional options Pasley had available in Manchester (the girl was by mid-January 1850 out of the penitentiary, but lodging at what Gaskell saw as a “bad place,” a “refuge” that indiscriminately allowed any woman to enter regardless of their actual interest in reform [Letters 100]). Two weeks after receiving Dickens’s response, Gaskell proudly reported to her friend Eliza Fox that she had “found a man and his wife going to the Cape, who will take loving charge of [Pasley],” and “a whole nest of good ladies in London, who say they will at any time help me in similar cases” (Letters 101).

Amanda Anderson discusses how women in Urania Cottage were told that ‘the refuge admits only those ‘who distinctly accept this condition: That they came there ultimately to be sent abroad.’” Dickens believed that emigration was the only way to “rescue” fallen women from their old associates, although Anderson suggests this tactic also carries with it an “appearance of a commuted sentence” (69-70).
For Gaskell, the problem of Pasley begins and, happily, ends in the confines of the familial home. A victim of neglect by an unnatural mother—whom Gaskell roundly condemns for both “keeping her child out at nurse” and “never correspond[ing] with her all the time she was at school and an apprentice” (Letters 98, original emphasis)—Pasley is further victimized by false family units and perverted scenes of domesticity, as purported caretakers facilitate everything from her initial rape to her eventual prostitution. Gaskell thus envisions Pasley’s rehabilitation not as a result of institutionalization or even the act of emigration itself—Gaskell’s distrust of the emigrant ships and Pasley’s being left alone anywhere, let alone the colonies, is palpable in her letters\(^{142}\)—but rather in enveloping her for the first time in her life with the “loving charge” of surrogate parents and a sympathetic community.

In all its idealism, both productive and problematic, Gaskell’s “rescue” of Pasley perfectly encapsulates her wider interest and approach to the issue of fallenness. Today, critics like Roxanne Eberle have recognized Gaskell’s inability, or unwillingness, to address the “ugly commingling of socio-economic power and sexual abuse” (Chastity 160) truly at the heart of Pasley’s experience; likewise, the recommendation that Pasley move forward with her life by paradoxically regressing to the role of protected child disturbingly infantilizes fallen women and denies the possibility they might be agents of their own reform, or express any autonomous sexual desire. Moreover, Gaskell apparently acquiesces to Dickens’s recommendation that Pasley’s reform is dependent

\(^{142}\) Elsie B. Michie discusses Gaskell’s “negative feelings” about emigration as a proposed solution for the problem of prostitution, and her frustration that no other option seemed available for girls like Pasley (91). In Chastity and Transgression, Eberle also discusses how despite apparently supporting emigration through the conclusion of Mary Barton, Gaskell became more dissatisfied with this option as time went on (153-4).
upon her suppression. “She must be profoundly silent there [on the Cape], as to her past history” (Dickens 29), he advised in his reply to Gaskell’s letter, and enforced a similar silence upon the inmates of Urania Cottage, where women were told never share their personal backgrounds with one another—as if, Amanda Anderson points out, “‘communicating’ one’s history to another inmate […] communicates a disease” (72).143

In expressing her urgent wish that Pasley suppress “the fact of having been in prison &c,” Gaskell’s hurried “&c” simultaneously contains and conceals a multitude of social wrongs done to real women, and left unaddressed by their self-styled saviors.

On the other hand, Gaskell’s particular brand of the “women’s mission to women” is more progressive than it at first appears. For instance, she rejects the popular notion that the degeneracy of the fallen threatens to contaminate the virtuous, an argument often cited to question the expediency of allowing “respectable” women to engage directly in magdalenist rescue work outside of their homes (Nead 201-2).144

Gaskell recognizes that vice stems from material circumstances and environmental determinants rather than abstract spiritual and moral contagion.145 Hence, in contrast to those who would protect the private spaces from the “contamination” of the likes of

143 Dickens however “ritually” recorded each woman’s history and preserved them in books for the women to later peruse. For Anderson’s discussion of this practice, and its relation to the “Silent System” in prisons, see pp. 71-2.

144 Nead includes an excerpt from a 1848 article in the Quarterly Review that states that rather than have middle-class women work directly with fallen women, “there might be other and better modes of showing compassion and practical mercy; above all, they may give bountifully of their worldly means to penitential hospitals; in this way the pure, without being soiled by any contact with impurity, may help to rescue the unhappy” (qtd. in Nead 202).

145 Indeed, the plot of Mary Barton hinges upon this very point, as “vices” like drunkenness, abuse, and even murder are shown to stem from desperation brought on by material wants.
Pasley by banishing her to depersonalized institutions, Gaskell’s solution is to welcome Pasley directly into the confines, and thus protection, of respectable households.\textsuperscript{146}

Additionally, Gaskell is aware that sexual lapses are not irrevocably destructive acts on their own, but are made agents of women’s destruction by the discourse surrounding them. Thus one could argue that Gaskell is less interested in securing Pasley’s silence as a means of denying her agency and her experiences, but out of sheer certainty about the unsympathetic audience her story will meet if not “authored” in the most optimal way. After all, Gaskell’s personal correspondence reveals her belief that the “true histories” of the fallen should be told; she remarked on the necessity of eschewing evasion in favor of “talk[ing] and think[ing] a little on a subject which is so painful that it requires all one’s bravery not to hide one’s head like an ostrich and try by doing so to forget that the evil exists” (Letters 227). In her estimation, “evils” like fallenness are not communicable when one speaks honestly. On the contrary, free communication enables their remedy.\textsuperscript{147}

However, as a writer whose contemporaries would later call her a “born story teller” who had in the art of narrative “no superior, perhaps no equal” (qtd. in Shattock x), Gaskell must have instinctively felt that stories like Pasley’s might fare best when composed by an expert who could manipulate prose to elicit in an audience’s empathy

\textsuperscript{146} I also want to point out that Gaskell’s concern for Pasley’s future temptation is not indicative of an unfounded belief that all fallen women are automatically seduced back into vice if left to their own devices. She had been directly warned by Pasley herself that “there are two of the worst women in the town who have been in prison with her, intending to way-lay her” the moment she was released; thus, Gaskell was likely under the impression Pasley was in danger of being forcibly returned to the streets if she did not remove to another area (Letters 99).

\textsuperscript{147} Gaskell observed after writing Mary Barton that “evils once recognized are half way on towards their remedy” (Letters 827).
and potential action over judgment and certain disdain. Gaskell had avowed a similar aim in writing *Mary Barton*: to share the stories of the working class, who were in need of “a Dante to record their sufferings” (*MB* 84) in order to “give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people” (*MB* 3). The use of the word “dumb”—when *Mary Barton’s* Chartist plot reveals a greatly vocal laboring class indeed—and Gaskell’s implication that reading and writing are tools of power belonging exclusively to the middle class does, as Jill Matus has argued, reinforce class stratification even as Gaskell attempts to level it through feeling (34-5). Nonetheless, Gaskell’s desire to articulate the distress of lower or outcast classes, from starving industrial workers to seduced, imprisoned women, was ultimately based on practical considerations. As a respected middle-class mother and wife and established public voice, Gaskell could afford to share “untoward” truths and see less severe consequences than a woman whose reputation was already precarious. Moreover, this class status coupled with her emergent writing career guaranteed her the attention of an audience who had already dismissed the fallen as necessarily “invisible” and thus voiceless. Even if a

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148 Indeed, numerous critics including Eberle, Schor, and Uglow have commented on how Gaskell’s letter to Dickens demonstrates her typical flourish for storytelling, complete with a “dramatic, ironic coda” (Uglow 246) in which she narrates a climactic scene in which Pasley faints upon realizing that the doctor who treats her in prison is her original seducer. Though the “style and structure” and even content may be better suited to fiction, Uglow observes, they are employed to serve Gaskell’s specific purpose: to tell Pasley’s story in such a way that will get immediate and positive results (246).

149 Gaskell’s reference to Dante here is worth noting, as it implies she thinks of herself as a participant observer descending into the “hell” of working class realities, rather than a figure merely reporting from on high. I argue that the Gaskell tries to adopt the same stance of active participation, rather than privileged distance, in her work with fallen women.
woman like Pasley had spoken against her injunction of silence, there would likely have been few—other than those already of Gaskell’s mindset—willing or able to hear her.\textsuperscript{150}

But Gaskell, aware that “stories had a persuasive power beyond that of rational exposition” (Uglow 203) and armed by her socio-economic privilege with the ability to disseminate such stories to a ready readership, could make Pasley’s situation, if not her individual voice, be heard by many. She does exactly this in works like \textit{Ruth}, where she introduces a sympathetic image of a fallen woman to her middle-class audience.\textsuperscript{151} Perhaps even more importantly, she does not stop at merely calling for general compassion from her readers, but also uses her fiction as a forum to advocate for the radical “option of reforming the repentant sexual transgressor within the English home” (Eberle 154). This stance went against the existing medical and religious discourses of the time. Medico-moral approaches to prostitution, for instance, focused on regulating the prostitutes’ behavior through registration systems and forced hospitalization or incarceration, often in the name of “protecting” the British home. In such cases, the prostitute was, as Deborah Epstein Nord points out, posited as the “silent and invisible corruptor of apparently respectable families” (110), a carrier of venereal diseases like syphilis that could wreak havoc on the lives of the innocent wives and children of men

\textsuperscript{150} Gaskell demonstrates this very fact in her depiction of the prostitute Esther in \textit{Mary Barton}; no one will hear Esther’s story when she tries to share it, though the information she possesses may save lives, and she is even jailed during one of her attempts to speak. Gaskell writes of Esther, “To whom shall the outcast prostitute tell her tale? Who will give her help in the day of need? Hers is the leper sin, and all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean” (158-9).

\textsuperscript{151} Many critics have cited Gaskell’s meeting with Pasley, and the frustrations she encountered while trying to assist her, as the genesis of \textit{Ruth}. For a discussion of what was maintained and what was changed when translating Pasley’s story to fiction, see Eberle 159-60.
who came into contact with her. Likewise, while religiously-motivated magdalenist “rescue” programs employed a rhetoric of greater compassion and benevolence in “homelike” establishments than could be found in the earlier “committee-run, prison-like refuges,” they nonetheless were modeled more like disciplinary convents than family “cottages” (Mason 94). None of the reformist approaches to fallenness openly advocated welcoming fallen women into private homes.

Yet Gaskell’s fictional work represents this very option as the most practical and effective solution to the question of what to do with fallen women. She insisted that redemption for the fallen could be found in the sanctity of the domestic sphere, either in a return from the streets to surrogate homes and families—as in the real case of Pasley—or, preferably if at all possible, within the loving environment of their own familial home. By literally reclaiming, rather than banishing, their wayward daughters, the families of Gaskell’s fiction find their fallen women reclaimed from the brink—often quite literally, as when Ruth’s suicidal leap is arrested by the cry of Mr. Benson, the man who will become her adoptive parent.

Benson’s rescue of Ruth is somewhat exceptional in Gaskell’s novels and stories, however, as more often, male characters stand in the way of the fallen woman’s return to the home. In some of Gaskell’s earliest explorations of fallenness, fathers, husbands,

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152 In a similar manner, prostitutes were also conceived of as a threat on a national scale, as they were suspected of weakening Britain’s military forces through the spread of venereal disease. For more on this rhetoric and its relationship to the development of the Contagious Diseases Acts, see my full discussion in Chapter 4.

153 For instance, in his letters Dickens describes the goals of Urania Cottage as the propagation of “all home affections and associations” (41), and to teach its residents a routine of household duties. For a lengthy discussion of evangelist rescue establishments and their differences, and similarities, to existing prostitute penitentiaries, see Mason pp. 82-115.
sons, and brothers all ventriloquize the gender ideologies that banish the sexually transgressive female from the Victorian household. For instance, in Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*, Esther’s fall into prostitution is effected only after her brother-in-law banishes her from their home, not because she has “fallen” but because she appears in danger of doing so. The character John Barton recalls,

Says I, “Esther, I see what you’ll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you’ll be a street-walker, Esther, and then, don’t you go to think I’ll have you darken my door, though my wife is your sister.” So says she, “Don’t trouble yourself John, I’ll pack up and be off now, for I’ll never stay to hear myself called as you call me.” (MB 9)

While John Barton believes Esther’s fall is an inevitable result of her failure to adhere to expectations of proper femininity, ironically his action of driving her from the family home is what leads subsequently to her being seduced by a soldier, abandoned, and forced to take up prostitution to support her ailing infant daughter. Barton’s prohibition that she must never “darken his door” prevents Esther from returning home despite her fervent desire to do so—a fact that ultimately tears the family apart even more, as Mrs. Barton dies in part from the shock she had “in the mysterious disappearance of her cherished sister” (23). Esther only dares enter the Barton household again as part of her larger mission to save her niece, the eponymous Mary, from coming to a similar fate as her own; thus Gaskell’s fallen woman enters only to protect, rather than contaminate, the home and its inhabitants. Esthern can never be an angel in the house, though her street

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154 This is what ultimately hardens John Barton’s heart against Esther. Blaming her for his wife’s death, he curses and strikes Esther the next time she reaches out to him (he is also on opium at the time). Later, he somewhat regrets this interaction, and tries to seek his sister-in-law out, but never sees her again.

155 Esther discovers that Mary is in danger of being seduced by the wealthy Mr. Harry Carson, and is desperate to preserve her niece from the same consequences of “ruin” she experienced. Her particular visit
name “Butterfly” associates her with another winged symbol, earthly and fragile rather than heavenly and strong. However, much like her namesake, she transforms over the course of the novel from a lowly creature to a veritable “guardian angel” (Logan Fallenness 84), redeemed at least spiritually by her devotion to the family that failed her.

Unfortunately, Esther is not rescued herself. She refuses Jem Wilson’s half-hearted offers that she join his mother’s household, having internalized the social scripts that insist the fallen deserve no return to domestic spaces: “Decent, good people have homes,” she tells Jem, “We have none” (MB 164). Esther ultimately returns to her family only to die, notably after John Barton has also passed away, along with his injunction against her homecoming. Mary’s earlier hopes to “bring her home, and we will love her so, we’ll make her good” (390) are thwarted, and Gaskell depicts the tragedy of banishing the transgressive woman (particularly preemptively) rather than embracing and rehabilitating her.

Two years later, Gaskell would return to this theme in the first story she would write for Household Words. Much like Esther, the title character of “Lizzie Leigh” is turned out of her home before she has fallen, and is unfairly disowned once her sexual ignorance and social vulnerability are inevitably exploited. Stern patriarch James Leigh sets the tragic events in motion by sending his daughter Lizzie, who he fears is being

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156 Jem Wilson, though a male character, is Gaskell’s choice for her heroine’s husband; thus, he is able to voice a compassion not expressed by most of the other male characters in the text. To Esther, he offers: “You loathe the life you lead, else you would not speak of it as you do. Come home with me. Come to my mother. She and my aunt Alice live together. I will see that they give you a welcome. And to-morrow I will see if some honest way of living cannot be found for you. Come home with me” (163). However, he does not press the issue after Esther leaves, and admits to himself “he had not done enough to save her” and later regrets “his omission of duty; his weariness of well-doing” (165).
spoiled by her loving mother, away from their family farm to the city of Manchester to go into service. Upon hearing that the girl has promptly been “led astray” and fired when her illegitimate pregnancy is discovered, James forbids his heartbroken wife to seek Lizzie out, and “declared henceforth they would have no daughter; that she should be as one dead, and her name never more be named at market or at meal time, in blessing or in prayer” (LL 7). Again, the same downward trajectory that *Mary Barton*’s Esther experiences begins to play out for Lizzie; rejected by her family and unable to find work to support herself and her daughter Nanny, she turns to prostitution as her only means of survival.

However, Lizzie, unlike Esther, has a mother who dares (albeit belatedly) to defy the patriarchal strictures that have produced the very “sins” they ostensibly prevent. Anne Leigh, who has been emotionally estranged from her husband “as against a tyrant” (LL 3) ever since his harsh treatment of their daughter led to her fall, is liberated from her begrudging wifely submission when James dies. She immediately moves the surviving family to Manchester in order to find Lizzie, and demands that her eldest son Will, who vocally disapproves of the venture, defer to her wishes, commanding the young man to “take home the wandering sinner, and heal up her sorrows, and lead her to her Father’s house” (22). Nonetheless, Will at first attempts to uphold his father’s punitive expulsion of Lizzie from the family, particularly as he believes his own chances to marry and have children have been destroyed by the taint of his sister’s shame. In keeping with many medico-moral narratives of transgressive female sexuality, Will sees Lizzie herself as a contaminant that pollutes or prevents healthy reproduction in otherwise “respectable”
families for generations. However, Will soon learns that his beloved Susan Palmer, a “pure” woman whom he has shielded from the corrupting influence of his sister’s story, has herself knowingly adopted the illegitimate Nanny, thus welcoming the very emblem of the fallen woman’s sin into her home.

Amanda Anderson writes in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces* that Lizzie’s rescue is “secured through maternal resistance to the social law” (109). To this statement I would add “sororal resistance,” as Susan’s behavior toward the outcast Lizzie is decidedly sisterly. Susan’s decision to pretend Nanny is her niece solidifies this relationship between the two women years before they become actual sisters-in-law. Her attitude also calls to mind the rhetoric of sisterhood espoused by many magdalenist rescue workers, who spoke of the prostitute as “not just a sister, but an enslaved sister” (Mason 99) who could be saved through merciful hope and action. “She may turn right at last,” Susan insists when others despair of Lizzie’s rehabilitation, citing specifically that “Mary Magdalen did” (LL 19). Furthermore, while characters like Will view the moral gulf between Susan and Lizzie as insurmountable, Anne Leigh voices how little truly separates “pure” and “impure” women when she bluntly observes of Susan, “Every one says you’re very good, and that the Lord has keeped you from falling from his ways; but maybe you’ve never yet been tried and tempted as some is” (16). Couched in Anne’s rural delivery is a forceful commentary on the fluidity of female identities and the unrealistic polarization between “good” and “bad” women. There but for the grace of God—and individual material and social conditions—any are liable to go.
Together, then, Anne and Susan teach Will to consider and forgive Lizzie as an individual affected by circumstances, rather than an archetypal figure of evil, and to ultimately receive her back into “her Father’s house”—or, more precisely, her merciful mother’s house, where she spends the remainder of her life tending to the suffering and sick and “prays always and ever for forgiveness” to enter the divine Father’s house in heaven. The unsympathetic principles of her earthly father have been replaced thanks to the work of women like Anne and Susan, who, in keeping with Gaskell’s own mission in authoring such a story, attempt to reshape their society’s judgments of fallen women.

In her subsequent works of fiction, Gaskell continues this mission, as her stories often highlight the havoc wreaked by the very appearance—regardless of validity—of fallenness and its ensuing social repercussions. For instance, Gaskell 1856 gothic tale “The Poor Clare” features a virtuous woman named Lucy who, as the result of a

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157 Hughes and Lund argue that Gaskell’s call for less judgmental attitudes toward fallen women is compromised by the fact that Anne and Lizzie’s ultimate residence is extremely secluded, and, perhaps more importantly, because Nanny dies in a tragic fall that appears to sacrifice the illegitimate girl to the rigid moral code (76). I would point out, however, that Lizzie’s seclusion appears largely self-imposed—she, like Esther, believes herself more “wicked” than her saviors do—and is mitigated by the fact that the sick and suffering of her community know where to seek her out, and often do. Nanny’s death is also notable in that it is caused, importantly, by another unkind paternal figure, this being Susan’s drunken father whose late-night disturbances cause the little child to wake from her bed and fall down the stairs. In this way, Gaskell may be emphasizing that it is not the fallen woman or child who contaminates a domestic space; rather, Nanny’s “illegitimate” presence in Susan’s home created a temporary “legitimate” family that is only destroyed by another patriarch voicing callous social standards. His reaction to Nanny’s death echoes the false middle-class “morality” that is dismissive of the plight of fallen women and children: Gaskell writes, “He said it was well that the child was dead; it was none of theirs, and why should they be troubled with it?” (LL 27).

158 Interestingly, in an 1850 letter Gaskell indicated some of the profits from her story would be donated to a “Refuge,” presumably for fallen women. She writes: “Do you know they sent me 20£ for Lizzie Leigh? […] and Wm has composedly buttoned it up in his pocket. He has promised I may have some for the Refuge” (Letters 113). Yoko Hatano suggests that refuges to which Gaskell was most likely to contribute were Blackmore’s “family-style” ones. See Hatano, “Evangelicism in Ruth,” The Modern Language Review 95.3 (2000): 634:41.
supernatural curse, is haunted by a sexually assertive doppelganger. Although Lucy heroically resists her double’s attempts “to suggest wicked thoughts and to tempt [her] to wicked actions,” her reputation is nonetheless destroyed by the behaviors of her lookalike, and she is “set apart from all sweet love or common human intercourse” (PC 83). Lucy thus becomes a fallen woman by proxy. Similarly, Gaskell’s novel Cranford (first published as a complete volume in 1853) depicts a family destroyed by the merest hint—even in jest—of fallenness. Peter Jenkyns, “vexed” by his eldest sister Deborah’s apparent lack of humor and hoping to mock her, makes the fatal mistake of conflating her—and himself—with a fallen woman. Years later, Miss Matty, Peter and Deborah’s sister, recounts the events to a listener:

[Peter] dressed himself in [Deborah’s] old gown, and shawl, and bonnet; just the things she used to wear in Cranford, and was known by everywhere; and he made the pillow into a little—you are sure you locked the door, my dear, for I should not like any one to hear—into—into—a little baby, with white long clothes. It was only, as he told me afterwards, to make something to talk about in the town: he never thought of it as affecting Deborah. (52)

Matty’s halting reluctance to even narrate the central image of the hoax—the “little baby” that would brand Deborah as unwed mother—illustrates her understanding (if not her brother’s) of the dreadful consequence Peter’s practical joke would have for Deborah if accepted as truth in the “talk about the town.” And consequences do indeed arise: the Jenkyns’s father, enraged at the sight of his son dressed as his daughter and holding a

159 Lucy’s grandmother Bridget, who inadvertently cast the curse upon the girl, ultimately also saves her by entering the religious order of the Poor Clares. Significantly, she takes on the penitent name of Sister Magdalen.
160 Cranford originally appeared from 1851-1853 as a series of short stories in Household Words before being compiled in novel form.
baby in his arms, beats Peter before a crowd that has gathered, and the event leads to the general dissolution of the family.

Linda Hughes and Michael Lund have argued in *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell’s Works* that Peter’s “violation of decorum” and challenge to strict notions of masculine and feminine roles causes his exile, much as it would for a real fallen woman. His father’s flogging of his body and tossing of his “baby”—Mr. Jenkyns violently throws the pillow into the crowd—seem to represent “the harm visited upon the illegitimate child [and its mother] by proper Victorian society” (Hughes and Lund 90).161 I would also suggest an alternative, though not mutually exclusive, reading of the scene, in which Mr. Jenkyns, whom Gaskell establishes as particularly loving toward his eldest daughter, beats Peter in (sadly, futile) retaliation for the unthinking “violence” Peter’s joke enacts upon Deborah’s life. After all, the mere suggestion of sexual female deviance—so powerful even in later years that Matty wants the door locked upon her retelling of it—could ruin women. It arguably does in *Cranford*, as both Deborah and Matty live out their lives as spinsters, marginalized figures with their own “fallen” associations with nonproductive sexuality.162 We should also recall that it is against such same suggestions of deviance—unfounded rumors, mistaken identities and impressions—that Gaskell would later defend Brontë’s reputation when she writes *The Life* two years later.

162 Logan details the intersections between spinsters and other fallen women like “harlots,” both of which pose a challenge to maternal ideology. She specifically discusses this comparison in relation to the Jenkyns sisters of *Cranford* (192-200). For more on old maids as deviant figures, see Auerbach pp. 109-149.
That the serious issue of sexual transgression should intrude into *Cranford*, a largely comic text often deemed an uncontentious, if not downright conservative, book, may surprise readers.163 However, Gaskell composed much of *Cranford* in the middle of writing *Ruth*, her most extended exploration of fallenness; the subject, then, was likely never far from her mind.164 In *Ruth*, Gaskell also alters her approach. Rather than depict the destruction and condemnation experienced by fallen characters who are rejected by society, Gaskell presents in *Ruth* an unwed mother who flourishes, along with her illegitimate son, when accepted into a familial home of a Dissenting minister, Thurstan Benson, and his sister Faith. Once established inside the domestic sphere, the unlikely heroine also defies popular mid-nineteenth-century assumptions that to allow a fallen woman into a home equates, in the words of Gaskell’s contemporary W.R. Greg, “the introduction of filth into the pure sanctuary of the affections” (450). Instead, Ruth Hilton “infects” her community with her virtuous example, and combats literal contagion through her selfless acts as a nurse.165

Whether or not Gaskell’s portrayal of Ruth’s “fallen” status is itself effective has been a subject of critical debate since the novel’s first publication. While it is clear Ruth

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163 In the introduction to 2008 reissue of Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Cranford*, Charlotte Mitchell explores the changing critical response (read as “trivial” and “inconsequential” to potentially radical) to *Cranford* since its publication, and whether or not its themes are complementary to *Ruth*, or a conservative retreat from them.

164 Gaskell wrote the first volume of *Ruth*, then took a break and wrote the first four stories of *Cranford* before finally returning to *Ruth*. For specific details on the composition, see Uglow 278.

165 Gaskell’s choice to make Ruth a nurse is notable, as professional nurses had to contend with their own associations with prostitution and fallenness. In *The Hour and The Woman*, Logan discusses the stereotype of nineteenth-century nurses as “disease-ridden prostitutes and alcoholic camp followers; in a sense, choosing to work with ‘base bodily functions’ of complete strangers of the opposite sex stigmatized women even more than prostitution (the latter, at least, could be ascribed to mental imbalance or immorality” (151). Thus, Ruth simultaneously embodies and defies all these stereotypes. For more on representations of fallen women as nurses, see my discussion of Amelia Opie’s nursing heroines in Chapter 2.
is impregnated outside of marriage by her rich seducer, Mr. Bellingham, it is unclear whether or not Gaskell intends readers to view this action as a “sin” at all; thus, as Easson summarizes, there are lingering questions as to whether “the novel is a protest against society’s victimization of an innocent, or a protest against society’s belief that no woman, once fallen, can live a decent life” (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 119).\(^{166}\) In either case, however, Gaskell’s suggested solution remains the same. The blameless woman who is unfairly ostracized because of uncompromising societal standards and the true “sinner” in need of moral rehabilitation are both best served by being welcomed back into the domestic sphere.

In *Ruth*, the English home is imbued with a transformative power that successfully combats any negative transformations usually associated with a sexual fall. For instance, in many fictional depictions of transgressive women, narratives of physical as well as moral ruin are enacted upon the female body, virtually like the stages of a terminal illness: seduction, pregnancy, disease, and death are recognizable phases in a Hogarthian “harlot’s progress.” In many cases, possessing a beautiful female body leads

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\(^{166}\) For more on the inconsistent portrayal of Ruth’s fall—in which she both appears “sinless” and simultaneously extremely penitent, see Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 118-20. Margaret Ganz also offers a discussion of how Gaskell’s portrayal of Ruth’s ignorance of sin undermines later plot points: “For the fact that a virtuous woman instinctively remains untroubled after sinning (in ignorance of course) casts a very dubious light on the necessity of guilt, an imperative Ruth will be *taught to feel* […] for a behavior that will be considered *inherently* sinful” (118, emphasis original). See Ganz, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Artist in Conflict* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969) 106-31. Of course, this criticism was first and perhaps most famously voiced by G.H. Lewes in an 1853 review in the *Westminster Review*, in which he writes as follows: “The guilt, then, of Ruth is accompanied by such entire ignorance of evil, and by such a combination of fatalities, that even the sternest of provincial moralists could hardly be harsh with her; and this we think a mistake on the part of the authoress. Her position would have been stronger had Ruth been older, and had she more clearly perceived the whole consequences of her transgression. We think, for the object Mrs. Gaskell had in view, the guilt should not have had so many extenuating circumstances, because as it is, Ruth, although she has much to regret, cannot in her conscience have much to repent” (267). Lewes’s review is reprinted in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage* 264-271.

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directly to a woman’s fall; Ruth only meets Bellingham because she is chosen, based solely on her remarkable attractiveness, to assist her employer at an upper-class ball.\textsuperscript{167}

Ironically, the same beautiful bodies then come to bear visible marks of moral corruption. Lizzie Leigh, for example, becomes wrinkled and ugly, “old before her time” (LL 27), while the once lovely Esther becomes “nought but skin and bone, with a cough to tear her in two” (MB 391). Ruth, in contrast, grows more handsome, healthy, and graceful after her actual sexual transgression and subsequent pregnancy, as the Bensons notice that her original beauty is amplified by “complete and perfect health,” “a thoughtful spiritual look,” and an “increase[d] dignity in her face [that] had been imparted to her form.” Ruth literally seems to hold her head up higher, as the narrator remarks, “I do not know if she had grown taller since the birth of her child, but she looked as if she had” (R 173). Ruth’s bodily improvement therefore belies any claims that “sins” such as hers are inherently, naturally corrupting, and likewise proves that other fallen women only fall apart because of the degrading environments and actions they have been forced into by a judgmental society. Furthermore, Ruth does not have to prostitute herself to survive, as both Esther and Lizzie do, and thus does not have to choose between starving to death or contracting deadly diseases and numbing habits (Esther laments she has resorted to alcoholism to forget her pain). Instead, the household that she joins both materially supports her in the present, and, as Eberle points out, provides her with a model of economic self-sufficiency.

\textsuperscript{167} Gaskell goes out of her way to show that Ruth is a poor choice for this task otherwise, as she works less diligently and skillfully than the other girls at the dressmaking; however Mrs. Mason views Ruth as a “credit” to her business precisely because of her “waving outline of figure, her striking face, with dark eyebrows and dark lashes, combined with auburn hair and a fair complexion” (13). Thus Ruth is already seen in terms of bodily transactions—like a prostitute—before she falls.
that effectively allows her to “withdraw her body from purchase by male figures” for the rest of her life (157). 168

Many critical studies have argued that Ruth’s social reintegration is effected through her maternity. 169 While this may be true, her ability to embrace motherhood is, like her continued health and beauty, only enabled because she has been offered a secure place within the Benson home. After all, maternity alone often destroys other fallen women, particularly in Gaskell’s fiction. It is specifically maternal instinct and care that propel both Esther and Lizzie to prostitution. Furthermore, Esther and Lizzie cannot maintain their motherhood, since both their children die as a direct result of the mothers’ banishments from family homes: Esther’s daughter grows fatally ill amidst their abject poverty and isolation, while Nanny Leigh is accidentally killed in her adoptive household, where Lizzie had placed her as an alternative to living on the streets. Institutional shelters for unwed mothers promised little better results, as according to Logan, women who entered workhouses with their children were immediately separated from them in “a sort of emotional endurance test designed to distinguish the ‘deserving’ from the ‘undeserving’ poor” (Fallenness 78); notably, the only characters who suggest

168 Gaskell considered it notoriously difficult to “reclaim” women “after they had once taken to the street life” (Letters 236). This was not necessarily a commentary on fallen women’s obstinate degeneracy, but more likely indicative of Gaskell’s awareness of many of the practical snares prostitutes encounter once entering the profession, including illness, violence, addiction, etc.

such options to Ruth are cruel ones who have had a hand in her fall, such as Bellingham’s mother, who heartlessly dismisses the pregnant girl with a fifty-pound bank note and a recommendation to “enter some penitentiary” (R 78). If Gaskell’s novel presents motherhood as the ultimate redemptive force for fallen women (and in turn their illegitimate offspring), then, it also suggests this redemption can only occur in the safety of an established home.

“Once fallen, always fallen” was a foregone conclusion, Logan argues, according to Victorian middle-class popular opinion (Fallenness 17). And in Ruth, even the fallen woman’s seducer disturbingly accepts the inevitability of the path he has put her on; spotting Ruth years after their affair, Bellingham is certain she can’t be the same woman he once knew, as “there was but one thing that could have happened, and perhaps it was well he did not know her end, for most likely it would have made him very uncomfortable” (R 229, my emphasis). It is only fitting that Bellingham does not allow himself to think about the sordid details of Ruth’s potential end, but rather chooses to view her as a being who has simply faded into the void. Under prevailing gender ideologies that link acceptable femininity with morality, the loss of a woman’s moral reputation dangerously erased her socially-recognized “self”; Hughes and Lund refer to such a woman as a “blank in the social order” (73).

However, the Bensons halt this predetermined doom and recover the seemingly irrecoverable by taking Ruth under their roof, where she learns to reconstruct a purposive identity within a family—as virtual daughter and actual mother—that replaces the emptiness usually associated with the fallen. Having been restored to a “self”—or, more
precisely, given a temporary new one, as the widowed “Mrs. Denbigh”—at home with the Bensons, Ruth is eventually able to implement those loving private roles in a productive public position as a nurse. In this role, the fallen woman removes, rather than spreads, contagion, braving the “poisoned air” of the fever-ward to minister to the sick. Even after her past is made public, Ruth’s quietly selfless actions ultimately outweigh society’s judgment. By the end of novel, she appears as the literal embodiment of the “virtuous woman” of biblical Proverbs, as in the streets of her town “many arose and called her blessed” (R 352). Given a chance to live a valuable life, Ruth proves herself equal to those domestic angels whose price is far above rubies, and when she suddenly dies as a result of her exertions, the once-supposed monster of sin becomes one with the literal angels as well.

Throughout her fiction, Gaskell repeatedly posits the home and its attendant domestic affections and duties as the most efficacious setting in which to rehabilitate a fallen woman. Her short stories and novels echo other elements of her personal vision of real-life magdalenist rescue work as well. For instance, Gaskell articulates, to use Eberle’s words, “a vision of cloaking the sexually transgressive woman in the persona and dress of a ‘proper’ Victorian wife” (Chastity 154). From the “decent” disguise that momentarily allows Esther to cross her niece’s doorway and thereby save Mary’s future, to the false name Faith Benson lends Ruth that affords the girl “some years of peace, in which to grow stronger and wiser, so that she can bear her shame [later] in a way she never could have done at first” (R 297), Gaskell’s narratives demonstrate that fallenness

170 Proverbs 31:28.
is largely a social construction, unfairly assigned by discourse, rather than individual actions. Gaskell also calls for women to work together against her society’s current definitions and treatment of apparent female deviance. Consistently in her texts, it becomes the duty of female communities—much like that “nest of good ladies” she found in her dealings with Pasley—to literally re-cover (and hence, morally recover) women left exposed and abandoned without the shelter of the domestic sphere.

Moreover, Gaskell clearly hoped her readers might be moved “beyond contemplation to action both practical and ethical” (Easson Elizabeth Gaskell 110). If they could welcome characters like Ruth into their hearts, ideally they may be more likely to view real women who offend against social and sexual mores, like Pasley, with mercy and lenience, and just possibly individual acceptance. At the very least, they might rationally debate, rather than callously dismiss, the matter. “I think I have put the small edge of the wedge in,” Gaskell wrote after Ruth’s publication with some satisfaction, “if only I have made people talk and discuss the subject a little more than they did” (Letters 226).

Anderson has argued that Faith and Thurstan Benson’s lie is a second kind of “fall” in the text, which though it enables Ruth’s redemption “causes Benson to lose his characteristic ‘instincts of conscience’” (133). I disagree with this reading, as the Bensons’ action seems in keeping with advice Gaskell gave Pasley; that is, to be profoundly silent about the past, and thus lie by omission. In Ruth, the presence of Leonard requires some kind of explanation, and so a new past, rather than just lack of one, has to necessarily be supplied so that the fallen woman can have a chance. Faith Benson argues this point too, and though she does not convince her brother that “our telling a lie has been the saving of [Ruth],” their conversation ends in silence (R 297). It is left up to the reader to decide which siblings’ interpretation is correct.

This point arguably holds true even for Ruth’s male savior, Mr. Benson, who is viewed as decidedly “feminine” by other characters within the text. Gaskell connects Benson’s disability—a spinal injury that occurred as a child—with his community’s perception that Benson has a “feminine morbidness of conscience” (R 310). Interestingly, this is in keeping with centuries-old associations between male disability with effeminacy and/or impotence; see Deutsch’s and Nussbaum’s introduction to Defects, especially p. 12, for more on this subject.
Having established this particular approach to fallenness in both her personal and professional life, then, it is understandable that when approached in 1855 to defend Charlotte Brontë’s honor, Gaskell employed the very strategy she had promoted so long. She, along with a series of largely female allies, “covered” her fellow author’s unconventional life with an overarching narrative of home, domesticity and sympathetic selflessness, in the hopes that in doing so, she could erase the fallen implications Currer Bell’s work brought to Charlotte Brontë’s reputation.

Recovering Brontë

Gaskell’s decision to compose a biography that would compel readers to “honour [Brontë] as a woman, separate from her character as authoress” (Letters 347), has been met with unfavorable reactions by many modern readers. Suzann Bick, for instance, argues that the focus on the personal over the professional in The Life of Charlotte Brontë creates a disappointing and “essentially one-dimensional portrait” of Brontë (46), while Deirdre D’Albertis’s more cynical reading locates a fierce literary rivalry at work in Gaskell’s approach, in which Gaskell appears to use The Life as a means by which to “subordinate the other woman as the subject of her text” (2). However, in light of Ellen Nussey’s and Patrick Brontë’s original invitation to write the biography as a defense against “malignant falsehoods” about Charlotte Brontë’s reputation, it is only reasonable that Gaskell eschews portraying her subject as above all an author. As Linda Peterson notes, the same reviewers who already criticized Currer Bell’s works for “unfeminine
coarseness” would have likely “found further ammunition in a construction of Brontë’s authorial self as ‘professional’ and thus implicitly ‘masculine’” (“Triangulation” 915). Brontë’s professionalism needs no defense; her “womanliness,” however, does.

And as we have seen in her previous defenses of various fallen women, Gaskell considers that one of the most effective ways to recuperate a woman’s questionable reputation is through a return to, and immersion in, the presumed safety of the private sphere. This is the tactic she specifically applies while writing Brontë’s biography, and she does so by marshalling a new “nest of good ladies” to assist in what essentially amounts to an authorial version of magdalenist reform. Aided by the likes of Brontë’s lifelong friends Nussey and Mary Taylor, both of whom literally co-author portions of The Life, Gaskell compiles “hundreds of letters, domestic details and personal testimonies to attest to Brontë’s good breeding, innate feminine delicacy and adherence to feminine duties” (Parker 73), and which serve to reinscribe the public author into the domestic space.173 Nussey and Taylor appear throughout the biography as Brontë’s surrogate sisters, particularly after the deaths of Emily and Ann left Charlotte devoid of female familial support. Their work on The Life is accordingly presented as a natural extension of their sororal dedication. These efforts are in turn presided over by Gaskell, who, as Gabriele Helms has noted, casts herself “in the surrogate mother’s role—the mother who has to protect her child” (352). The Life can therefore be read as the collaborative work of...

173 For an overview of Nussey and Taylor’s specific contributions, see Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell 139-142. In addition to offering hundreds of her own letters to Gaskell, Nussey contributed the full account of Anne Brontë’s death to the biography, as she was on the scene with Charlotte at the time; Gaskell included Nussey’s narration with minimal changes. Mary’s voice is heard in The Life through a number of her letters, including a particularly passionate one with Gaskell chooses to end the biography. In her own letters, Brontë listed Taylor and Nussey as her closest friends, describing them as “staunch and true, in whose faith and sincerity I have as strong a belief as I have in the Bible” (qtd. in LCB 170).
a female community and self-styled “family,” through whose loving efforts a fallen, unfeminine genius is rehabilitated into the more socially-acceptable image of proper woman, who happened to write.

Interestingly, however, Gaskell begins her task of clearing Brontë of charges of deliberate unfeminine coarseness (and hence depths of potential “fallen” immorality), with a move that initially seems counterintuitive. From the opening pages of the biography, she declines to portray her subject’s life as conventional or stable, but instead highlights how easily a “fall” into impropriety might have occurred for a young woman growing up in Brontë’s particular environment and circumstances. Writing that it is “more necessary” in Brontë’s case than in most others “that the reader should be made acquainted with the peculiar forms of population and society amidst which her earliest years were passed, and from which [her] first impressions of human life must have been received” (LCB 15), Gaskell proceeds to argue that any perceived “roughness” of Brontë’s persona should not be viewed as an indicator of her “natural” character, but rather as a more superficial product of her “peculiar” external surroundings, which in Gaskell’s depiction includes everything from the county of Yorkshire, to the village of Haworth, to an eccentric homelife unfolding within the walls of the Brontës’ parsonage.

In The Life, both Western Yorkshire and the parsonage at Haworth appear far removed from contact with the outside world, unfamiliar and exotic to the point of near-barbarism. While Brontë family biographer Julie Barker has shown the inaccuracy of this depiction by pointing out that by the nineteenth century Haworth was in reality “a busy, industrial township, not some remote rural village of Brigadoon-style fantasy” (Brontës
Gaskell nonetheless found it advantageous to construct a myth of cultural isolation and position Brontë squarely within it. As Gaskell’s narration ponders “what strange eccentricity—what wild strength of will—nay, even what unnatural power of crime was fostered by a mode of living in which a man seldom met his fellows, and where public opinion was only a distant and inarticulate echo” (LCB 22), readers are led to apply such potentialities to Brontë: what “eccentricities” and even “crime” might a woman so removed from the proper influence of “public opinion” fall into?

Brontë’s family situation is another environmental factor Gaskell asks her readers to consider. In keeping with many fictional depictions of fallen and falling women like Ruth Hilton, Brontë is motherless—truly multiple times over, with the death of her maternal elder sisters Maria and Elizabeth in 1825—and thus potentially vulnerable to untoward influence. In fact, Gaskell suggests that Brontë’s “strong mind and vivid imagination” received their first impressions from either the household servants (whom she deems the closest things to “friendly companions” in the isolated Brontë home) imparting traditional Yorkshire lore and local scandal, or from her Aunt Branwell, who came to the parsonage to take charge of her late sister’s family and hailed from Cornish community Gaskell describes as “very superstitious,” rarely “dignified or intellectual,” and in which “drunkenness and dissipation occasioned the ruin of many respectable families” (LCB 36-7).

Though Gaskell is quick to note “in the Branwell family

175 Here, Gaskell’s strategy echoes what Nancy Armstrong has called the “internal colonialism” that was projected upon the people in the peripheral counties (particularly those thought part of the Celtic “fringe,” like Cornwall) of Great Britain, in which certain nineteenth-century texts “asked the reader to imagine
itself, violence and irregularity of nature did not exist” (37), the impression is nonetheless one of a young girl whose sole female role models consisted of variously rough or odd women who themselves were steeped in unconventional habits and beliefs. Furthermore, in discussing the Brontës’ relationships outside of the home, Gaskell finds a way to connect, however obliquely, the young Charlotte with an actual transgressive woman. She reports that one of the only neighborhood families to befriend the Brontë girls was coincidentally also “accursed” and haunted by the ghost of a seduced girl. The Life thus claims Charlotte Brontë and her sisters grew “into girlhood bereft, in a singular manner, of all such society as would have been natural to their age, sex, and station” (46).

And if Brontë’s siblings are any indication, readers of The Life should suppose such childhood circumstances are more likely to produce improper than proper people. Gaskell infamously held little back in her representation of the varied indiscretions of the sole Brontë brother, Patrick Branwell, including his intemperance, debt, and his alleged affair with Lydia Robinson (later Lady Scott), the discussion of which resulted in Gaskell being threatened with a lawsuit for libel. Branwell is not the only one to receive such regional people as having racially different bodies” which were “British [but] just not really English.” Armstrong explains that “primitive cultural practices were regarded as the important cause and symptom of difference. Ethnic flesh was never half so responsive to self-restraint and education as it was to curious superstitions, arcane cures, and incomprehensible desires” (259-60). Armstrong’s point about “self-restraint” is important, as Gaskell chooses to portray Bronte as an inhabitant of this primitive periphery, but one who proves herself to be a “proper” woman (and thus, properly English) through rigorous self-denial and self-control. See Armstrong, “Emily's Ghost: The Cultural Politics of Victorian Fiction, Folklore, and Photography,” NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction, 25.3 (1992) 245-267.

Gaskell subsequently removed this reference from the third revised edition of The Life. See pg. 472, n. 46 in Easson’s edition for the full account.

Barker’s extensive biography of the Brontë family provides details of both Branwell’s relationship with Robinson (456-65) and on the lawsuit which Gaskell was threatened (800-2). Gaskell portrayed Robinson as a wicked seductress in her first edition of The Life, and, while not completely absolving Branwell of his part in the affair, particularly depicted the actions of Robinson, a married mother, as an unspeakable crime against her family, household, and general morality. Gaskell eventually had to remove the most damning references to the “wretched woman” in order to avoid further litigation (LCB 520 n. 218).
unbecoming treatment in the biography, however. Gaskell’s portrayal of Emily in particular calls to mind some of her more desperate “fallen” characters, despite the middle Brontë sister’s surely irreproachable sexual history. Although largely associated with the home—indeed, she “droops” whenever forced to leave Haworth—Emily is far from domestic; she is at times unearthly, but no angel. Instead, Gaskell imbues Emily with a preternatural fierceness, describing her face as “full of power” (LCB 106) and her demeanor as “extremely reserved,” which Gaskell suggests is indicative of her complete indifference to pleasing others (99). More comfortable with animals than with humans, the Emily that appears in The Life is a wild being who silently cauterizes her own wounds with red-hot pokers and beats her offending pets with a savagery only surpassed by the intense affection she otherwise shows them.\footnote{For both incidents, see pp. 214-5 of The Life.} Her behaviors are so consistently outside the boundaries of acceptable femininity that observers remark she “should have been a man” (177). In these ways, Emily is also highly reminiscent of the nameless beekeeper of Gaskell’s 1850 short story “The Well of Pen-Morfa,” a “stern and severe-looking” unwed mother who “associated with no one” and was “sad and distrustful to her kind,” but carried on with a dignified “mute endurance” that earned her neighbors’ respect, though she rejects their friendship (WPM 162). Like this fallen woman in her “primitive dwelling,” Emily appears so close to the natural world that she seems to have reverted to it, and is unable or unwilling to behave as society expects.

In representing Brontë’s upbringing and surroundings as she does, Gaskell seems to suggest that such a life would likely end in either inevitable victimization, just as the
 naïve, orphaned Ruth finds when left isolated with no proper role models or support, or in viciousness or deviance, the territory into which Branwell and Emily apparently veer. Charlotte Brontë thus proves to be all the more remarkable to readers, when, in fact, she not only does not fall, but rather is shown as developing into a voice of reason, morality, and normality in her otherwise chaotic world. Brontë is depicted as the primary manager of a difficult household, whose ventures into the public world, from governess work to studies abroad to, ultimately, publishing, were all motivated by her sense of appropriate feminine duty. For instance, Gaskell explains that Brontë became a governess against her own inclinations out of a sense of personal sacrifice, knowing that her father’s limited income would be used to finance her brother’s studies, and that Emily was ill-suited for such work away from home. As commentators like Hughes and Lund have observed, scenes of Brontë’s “penetration into public spaces,” like the publishing world of London, are presented “under the aegis of modesty and innocence” (139), and are often connected to family obligations first. In one example, Brontë’s excursion to the city is excused as having been taken “as much for her father’s sake as her own,” since in between meeting with publishers she would have her health checked by physicians (LCB 324). “Masculine” intellectual pursuits, presumably distractions from a woman’s proper tasks in the home, are also thoroughly domesticated in The Life; Gaskell represents the Brontë sisters finding “an odd five minutes for reading while watching the cakes” (110), and insists that notwithstanding Brontë’s obsessive desire to create, “never was the claim of any duty, never was the call of another for help, neglected for an instant” in favor of
Indeed, as D’Albertis notes, the biography suggests that Brontë comes dangerously close to “martyring herself to the claims of her immediate family in private life” (12).

Here I must point out that, as with any discussion of a biographical subject, whether or not this is an entirely “true” characterization of Brontë’s actions and motivations is beside the point. As Helms notes, biography is a “hybrid form that searches for a possible, plausible, but necessarily fictive, version of a life experience” (343). Gaskell consciously chooses and arranges gathered material—much of it already “fictionalized”—in order to establish coherent narrative connections that, in keeping with the project’s larger purpose, portray Brontë in steadfast service to family and home. Brontë, much like Ruth and perhaps even young Pasley, may indeed have “rewritten” a predetermined downward narrative of her life through sheer will and innate virtue; however, these efforts of self-authoring are in danger of being dismissed like all other “improper” productions, from “coarse” fiction to illegitimate infants, unless properly mediated by a rhetorically savvy and socially accepted storyteller like Gaskell.

Gaskell therefore artfully crafts a narrative meant to prove that the signature passion and rebellious rage at a woman’s circumscribed role associated with Brontë’s novelistic heroines were, according to Bick, “singularly absent in Charlotte Brontë, the woman” (35). Showcasing the “coarseness” that surrounds Brontë works as an effective rhetorical intervention toward this goal. Gaskell acknowledges that coarseness exists all

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179 For a more extensive list of instances in The Life in which Brontë appears to sacrifice personal, professional, and emotional needs out of a sense of filial duty, see Hughes and Lund 135.

180 Helms notes that Charlotte Brontë herself is not a “reliable narrator,” as she “seems to have imposed the fiction of her novels onto her own childhood, and thus her reality had been changed in the process of recalling it in her conversation with Gaskell.” The “truth,” therefore, is “recursively fictionalized” (353).
around Brontë, but always at a remove, “in other’s experiences or characters that [Brontë] could later put to good use in fiction without suffering their taint” (Hughes and Lund 133). Accusations of untoward aggression are drawn away from Charlotte Brontë and toward Emily, who is a ready scapegoat having written the likes of *Wuthering Heights*—a work Gaskell describes as “revolt[ing]” readers in its unflinching depiction of “wicked and evil characters (*LCB* 270)—and having conveniently died without instigating biographies in her own defense.\(^{181}\) Gaskell also simultaneously addresses and conceals the rumors (largely based on what reviewers deemed as inappropriately “passionate” plot points and characterizations at work in texts like *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*) of Brontë’s own improper sexual desire and action by, perhaps more problematically than the scope of my analysis allows me to address here, displacing such matters onto Branwell and the Robinson affair.\(^{182}\) Furthermore, when placed against “a background of barely contained

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\(^{181}\) Actually, the closest thing to a posthumous defense of Emily came from Charlotte Brontë herself, in the famous “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” and “Editor’s Preface” she affixed to the 1850 combined edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* (the full texts of which are reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Wuthering Heights*, Ed. Richard J. Dunn [New York: W.W. Norton, 2002]). In them, Brontë attempts to excuse the “coarse” nature of Emily’s authorial productions in a tactic similar to the one Gaskell employs to defend Charlotte’s writings in *The Life*; she explains her sister was merely a product of her coarse environment, writing: “Doubtless, had her lot been cast in a town, her writings, if she had written at all, would have possessed another character.” Also, while admitting that it may not be “right or advisable” to create works like *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë avows that “the writer who possesses the creative gifts owns something of which he is not always master—something that, at times, strangely wills and works for itself.” Thus Brontë depicts her sister not as vicious, but more as a victim of her unconventional upbringing and the demands of genius. Gaskell’s *The Life* notes these same effects in Charlotte Brontë’s life, but only to highlight her more heroic ability to withstand them.

\(^{182}\) During her biographical research Gaskell uncovered proof of Brontë’s near-adulterous advances toward her married Belgian teacher, Constantin Héger. However, she chose to attribute the distress and depression Brontë expressed in her letters home not to Brontë’s own improper relationship, but rather to fears about Branwell’s bad behavior and eventual affair with Mrs. Robinson (events that modern scholars have proven Brontë did not know about at the time she was writing her depressive missives from Belgium). Winifred Gérin has shown in *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) that Gaskell literally filled in the gaps in her narrative left by Brontë’s excised letters about Héger with discussions of Branwell’s misdeeds; see pp. 189-201. Branwell proved a good scapegoat through whom Gaskell could address the possibility of “improprieties” in the Brontës’ lives, but not directly associate them with her
violence and overt eccentricity,” Brontë in all of her quirks appears, again in Bick’s words, as “a rather normal young woman” (38). We might also equate “rather normal” with extraordinary, as Gaskell’s text urges readers to view respectability, normalcy, and devotion to feminine duty as downright heroic, particularly when ruination may be the more likely fate.

This is not to say, however, that Brontë does not appear to be in danger of “falling” throughout much of the biography. According to Gaskell, Brontë despairingly realized that her personal ambitions often exceeded the narrow boundaries and duties of acceptable femininity to which she strove to adhere. The Life highlights Brontë’s lamentations that, “I cannot bend my life to the grand end of doing good; I go on constantly seeking my own pleasure, pursuing the gratification of my own desires” (LCB 128). Warning friends that she possessed a corrupt heart that was a “very hot-bed for sinful thoughts,” Brontë saw herself as nearly already fallen; “I am not good enough for you,” she writes at one point to Nussey, “and you must be kept from the contamination of too intimate society” (qtd. in LCB 128-9). In these passages, Brontë exhibits precisely the kind of internal struggle Kalikoff ascribes to the typical Victorian falling woman, who finds it a “complex and ongoing” challenge to remain good while both avoiding the temptations (spiritual and physical) and accepting the responsibilities of the world (358). In The Life, this challenge also manifests physically for Brontë, much as markers of fallenness appear on the bodies of many of Gaskell’s fictional characters. The pages of the biography become a virtual catalog of pain, replete with descriptions of her “bodily

biographical subject. Thanks to the double standards of sexual behavior (not to mention Branwell’s untimely death), the brother’s conduct would be more quickly forgiven than the sister’s.
weakness,” “nervous disturbance,” lingering fevers, digestive complaints, mental
“distemper,” and depressions of spirit, much of which, it is implied, is a result of trying to
“subdue her nature to her life” (LCB 401).

Rather ingeniously, Gaskell subsequently justifies Brontë’s authorship as an excusable step in properly managing the “falling” woman’s inevitable psychic and corporeal pain, and even in potentially halting her fall. While Robert Southey thought women so “unfit” and “unfitted by” writing fiction that he famously warned Brontë, “The day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind” (qtd. in LCB 123), Gaskell portrays writing as a literal cure for “distemper” of mind and body. She recounts that in Brontë’s most trying moments, when plagued by loneliness or frustration with the narrow confines of her life, “[t]he interests of the persons in her novels supplied the lack of interest in her own life; and Memory and Imagination found their appropriate work, and ceased to prey on her vitals” (401). This description recalls Elaine Scarry’s discussion of transformative imagining in The Body in Pain, in which imagination “is there, almost on an emergency stand-by basis, as a last resort” in order to temporarily mitigate the otherwise passive experience of pain (166)—especially pain as a result of an unfulfilled desire or missing object, much like the reported “lack” Bronte experiences.\footnote{“Missing,” Scarry writes, “they will be made-up; and though they may sometimes be inferior to naturally occurring objects, they will always be superior to naturally occurring objectlessness” (166-7).} It is as if Gaskell anticipates Scarry’s reading of pain’s implications in artistic production, and uses such a formulation to her own subject’s advantage. In this light, Brontë’s novels might no longer appear to her contemporaries as indicative of improper or unwomanly “public” exertions, but may
instead be seen as therapeutic endeavors that, in lessening her pain, actually facilitate her commitment to domestic duties and roles; after all, Gaskell explains, “when she could employ herself in fiction, all was comparatively well” (401).

But Brontë’s physical body often appears as itself a general impediment, seemingly conspiring against even its possessor’s attempts to alleviate the physiological symptoms of her emotional struggles. For instance, Gaskell reports that Brontë’s first inclination was not toward authorship specifically, but rather any form of artistic self-expression. However, failing eyesight prevented her from achieving her initial desire to “draw stories,” and in fact “prevented her from doing anything for two years” to assuage her “desire (almost amounting to illness) of expressing herself in some way” (LCB 439). The pain she experienced as a result of chronic headaches or liver ailments also often resulted in bouts of debilitating depression, which in turn kept her from writing. Though Gaskell states that Brontë was aware such spells were “constitutional, and could reason about it,” nonetheless “no reasoning prevented her suffering mental agony, while the bodily cause remained in force” (199).

D’Albertis observes that in The Life, Brontë appears “to accept the ‘poverty’ of her ‘frame’ as a specifically female complaint” (7). This is unsurprising, since even at its healthiest state, female physicality could be made disabling by exclusionary gender roles and practices. Brontë’s sex subjected her to everything from occupational and educational restrictions—she is literally barred, by virtue of her female body, from entrance into certain public spaces or situations—to perceived limitations of intellectual and creative faculties. For instance, as Sally Shuttleworth has shown, women’s intellectual pursuits
were connected in nineteenth-century medical discourse to “suppressed menstruation, and thence, to the eruption of nymphomania” (77); thus woman writers risked being seen as physiologically unfeminine or maniacally sexual, and their work as the mere product of multiply disordered beings. No wonder one of Brontë’s personal letters in *The Life* reads, “I wish all reviewers believed ‘Currer Bell’ to be a man; they would be more just to him” (321). If Esther, Lizzie Leigh, and Ruth become targets of seduction once their female bodies circulate in public spaces, Brontë’s public productions are critically targeted because of their author’s biology.¹⁸⁴

Much of *The Life* thereby reads, in Pamela Corpron Parker’s words, as a “portrait of gender-specific victimization” (74), in which woman’s life is a “battle” and virtue, and consequent happiness, does not come easy. Some commentators have suggested that the biographer faults Brontë by depicting her in this fashion; for example, D’Albertis argues that Gaskell “undermines Brontë’s commitment to ‘domestic genius’ by constantly exposing the other writer’s failure to integrate masculine mental culture and feminine duty” more effectively, particularly by criticizing Brontë’s perceived inability to “turn outward from the suffering of the self,” which results in a “morbid” sense of duty (10).¹⁸⁵

However, where D’Albertis reads Gaskell’s condemnation of Brontë’s “morbid” self-

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¹⁸⁴ On a related note, some critics, like Scarry, would even argue that Brontë’s publications are virtual extensions of her own body. Scarry describes the act of creation, including writing, as akin to the “turning of the body inside-out,” as it involves “the making of what is originally interior and private into something exterior and sharable” (284). Therefore, in this theoretical framework, Brontë’s productions can be seen as literal, “public” projections of her “private” body and its desires. Though my own readings differ from this more psychoanalytical approach in my focus on women’s negotiations of actual embodied experience, Scarry’s view helps demonstrate the multiple and complex ways the human body can be understood in relation to cultural production.

¹⁸⁵ D’Albertis bases this claim on her reading of Gaskell’s “optimistic” vision of outward social responsibility, which stands in opposition to the seemingly selfish introspection (based upon conceptions of Romantic male genius) that characterizes Brontë’s understanding of duty (11).
introspection, other critics like Easson find a sympathetic portrayal of a dutiful woman who is painfully “aware of the calls of pleasure or the yet more sublime though terrible calls to things beyond the domestic sphere: to intellectual activity, to spiritual development, to doing some good in the world at large, to some enlargement of the human spirit through creation” (“Domestic Romanticism” 170). The fear that to hear, let alone to answer, such calls equates to a fall understandably stifles her. I tend to agree with these latter readings, and find Gaskell’s characterization of Brontë to be less about faulting than portraying the “falling” heroine, who by definition cannot easily reconcile duty and desire, but who in her struggles proves herself more actively virtuous than those who have never slipped from propriety’s pedestal.

This falling depiction is also part of what allows Gaskell to manipulate her readership into a sympathetic bond with Brontë. By claiming, as Gaskell does, that only a “critical, unsympathetic public,—inclined to judge harshly because they have only seen superficially and not thought deeply” (LCB 457) would confuse Brontë’s selfless suffering or proximity to impropriety with real fallenness, The Life thereby compels its readers to automatically envision themselves as active participants in a sympathetic, progressive, and admirably contemplative community. In keeping with Thomas Carlyle’s assessment that biography ought to call “the Sympathy of mortal hearts into action” (qtd. in Easson Domestic Romanticism 173),¹⁸⁶ The Life of Charlotte Brontë concludes with a confident description of its readership as comprised of those who “know how to look

¹⁸⁶ In “Domestic Romanticism,” Easson discusses Carlyle’s Life of Sterling as a contemporary example Gaskell may have looked to in order to determine “what a romantic treatment in biography might be” (172).
with tender humility at faults and errors” as much as they know “how to admire generously extraordinary genius, and how to reverence with warm, full hearts all noble virtue” (457). Gaskell’s text encourages each actual reader to align themselves unconsciously with this vision of the ideal reader, who will close the book and reenter the world ready to sympathetically defend Charlotte Brontë.

Of course, Brontë’s reputation presumably needs no further defense by the end of the biography, as her fall is arrested and her virtue “fixed” by a safe landing into marriage. The engagement, wedding, and brief married life of Charlotte Brontë and Arthur Nicholls occupy the final pages of The Life. Just as a respectable marriage stood as the public woman’s elusive yet “longed-for solution in street literature and melodrama” (Kalikoff 58), Brontë’s marriage in June 1854 appears to “recover” her from fallenness multiple times over. In her early days of matrimony, Brontë is shown literally recovering from her chronic ill-health. She writes of her bodily wellness to Nussey in October, stating, “It is long since I have known such comparative immunity from headache, &c., as during the last three months” (qtd. in LCB 453). Brontë also seemingly recovers, as a direct result of her new role as wife, from the idiosyncrasies of personality that had partially contributed to the implications of “coarseness” against her. Gaskell writes, “We thought of the slight astringencies of her character, and how they would turn to full ripe sweetness in that calm sunshine of domestic peace” (LCB 451). Gaskell implies that “domestic peace” helps assuage the emotional and physical turmoil that had previously resulted from Brontë’s conflict over public and private identities and desires; abandoning Currer Bell in favor of Mrs. Nicholls seemingly brings about holistic
improvement. Occupied with caring for her curate husband and visiting his parishioners, Brontë admits, “I have not so much time for thinking” (qtd. in *LCB* 452),\(^1\) as if she, just as Gaskell expected of the biography’s readers, had lost “all thought of the authoress in the timid and conscientious woman [who had] become a wife” (*LCB* 444).

Gaskell then literally re-covers Brontë with the veil of privacy that the biography had temporarily lifted, removing her subject from public circulation and permanently fixing her within the safety of the domestic sphere. After having narrated the events of the new Mr. and Mrs. Nicholls’s wedding day, some details of which were “too private a nature for publication” (*LCB* 420), Gaskell brings her own project to a halt, proclaiming, “Henceforward the sacred doors of home are closed upon [Brontë’s] married life” (450). Hughes and Lund note that, as if to solidify the associations of “public” women writers and notoriety, many obituaries of Brontë had implied there was an infamy and virtual promiscuity in how much she was “talked about” (126). By closing the “sacred”—and therefore presumably inviolable—doors of “home” upon any more discussion of Brontë’s life, Gaskell retroactively combats these existing associations, and proactively prevents any new malicious conversations from arising. She suggests that Brontë’s private self need only to have been exposed once, and done so only with the maternal care needed to reinstate her public persona back within the bounds of feminine propriety. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was, readers are meant to recognize, ultimately Gaskell’s to tell, and thereby save. Safe at “home” in the hearts of that sympathetic “Public” to whom the last

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1\(^1\) This statement can be compared to Brontë’s earlier clever comment to Southey: “In the evenings, I do think, but […] I carefully avoid any appearance of pre-occupation and eccentricity, which might lead those I live amongst to suspect the nature of my pursuits” (qtd. in *LCB* 125).
line of the biography “commit[s] the memory of Charlotte Brontë” (LCB 457), Brontë’s angelic legacy is now secured—exceeding, perhaps, her artistic one—and presumably ought be left undisturbed, except for respectful adulation.

A problem arises, however, when one considers that the culmination of Brontë’s whole-hearted recommitment to the home, and her consequent assumption of the Angel in the House status, is a deadly maternity. Interestingly, in her analysis of the falling woman literary trope, Kalikoff finds that such fictional heroines may meet a comparable end: when a “falling” character marries out of an obsessive desire to be good and a drive for “moral perfection,” she more often encounters a damaging self-renunciation, by which her descent is paradoxically hurried (362). Something similar appears to occur in Brontë’s unfortunate descent to the grave. The “quintessentially feminine death,” to use Parker’s phrase (74), to which Brontë succumbed less than a year after marrying Nicholls has not escaped the attention of feminist commentators, many of whom read the pregnancy complications that killed her as part of a larger process in which the woman writer is “subordinated” and eventually disappears under domestic relationships and roles. After all, Brontë is, by even objective medical accounts, effectively consumed by her condition. The “martyrdom” D’Albertis locates in Brontë’s earlier dealings with her family seems realized in a death that directly results from almost achieving that idealized state of married mother. Like Ruth, who dies enacting a domestic role meant to

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188 For an early example of this kind of reading, see Helene Moglen, Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived (New York: WW Norton, 1976) 241-42.
189 Barker explains that Brontë was most likely suffering from hyperemesis gravidarum, a case of excessive vomiting during pregnancy that led to severe dehydration, malnutrition, organ failure, and a “general wasting” (as her official cause of death was described) of her body. For a full discussion, see Barker, The Brontës 967, n.96.
mitigate her transgressions, Brontë’s life ends through much the same means by which her happiness was supposed to have been achieved, and by which her reputation was saved: a final “confinement” in the domestic sphere, which becomes solidified with a tombstone—the inscription of which Gaskell reproduces—that lists her primarily as “Charlotte, WIFE,” and secondarily as “daughter” (LCB 14). No mention of authorship, or other potential identities, is made.

The details of Brontë’s death are unchangeable facts, unlike those of the fictional Ruth’s, whom Gaskell actively chose to “sacrifice.” Yet both appear to conflict with Gaskell’s scheme of recovery through domesticity. Readers are therefore faced with the question of what to make of the high price of becoming an “angel” in Gaskell’s works; why does a woman’s moral and social salvation so often resemble destruction?

The answer may lie in Hughes and Lund’s observation that, so often in Gaskell’s writing, “what seems the closest conformity to domestic ideology also upends its claims” (135). Gaskell’s apparent embrace and endorsement of domestic ideology in The Life is not, I would argue, uncritical. Instead, it masks a more radical agenda, through which female authorship is promoted, rather than erased, and conventional boundaries of female propriety are quietly challenged.

Exposing the Angelic Ideology

First, we might consider that although The Life of Charlotte Brontë appears to privilege exemplary domesticity at the expense of authorship, this partiality actually
works for the woman writer’s benefit. Just as Brontë’s posthumous personal reputation would have suffered more had Gaskell emphasized her “masculine” professionalism, Brontë’s literary oeuvre is protected, and indeed promoted, by presenting its author as a virtuous and “proper” woman, whose work is by association safe and even edifying for public consumption. The hagiographic nature of The Life has the opposite effect of a text like Godwin’s Memoirs of Wollstonecraft, which effectively plunged Wollstonecraft and her body of work into a notoriety that lasted for over a century. The Life actually offers little to undermine the powerful genius and often radical subject matter at work in Brontë’s novels; instead, the biography simply helps to remove the texts’ external badge of “coarseness” and thus ensure their wider dissemination.\(^{190}\)

Additionally, it can be argued that Gaskell actually expands, rather than obscures, Brontë’s claims for literary genius. As Hughes and Lund note, by denying that Brontë ever acted upon improper emotions, Gaskell effectively asserts the tremendous power of Brontë’s creative imagination and faculties. After reading The Life, readers must presumably accept that the wonderfully-rendered passion of characters like Jane Eyre’s Mr. Rochester was “created out of sheer brilliance than personal experience” (Hughes and Lund 145). Thus Brontë’s artistry is elevated by her evident propriety.

It is not only Brontë’s individual authorship that is bolstered by The Life, however. The text is composed out of what are commonly seen as distinctly “feminine materials,” and places a high value on “gossipy” modes—“the informal, the anecdotal,

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\(^{190}\) This point is similar to the one I make in the previous chapter regarding Amelia Opie’s work; her conservative reputation ensured a readership that more overtly radical texts would not have attracted. For a discussion of Wollstonecraft’s notoriety after Godwin’s publication of her biography, see my introduction.
the confidential aside,” as D’Albertis lists—that are “generally associated with the
discursive province of women” (14). Traditionally feminine spaces also become sites of
productive power in *The Life*. For instance, the noted scene of the sisters reading over
their cakes may be less an illustration of genius domesticated than of genius unrestrained;
the Brontës’ kitchen is empowered to produce physical and mental nourishment alike.
Additionally, in writing the biography, Gaskell often privileges female knowledge and
storytelling above arguably more appropriate masculine contributions. Barker notes
Gaskell “almost completely ignored” the potential input of Patrick Brontë or Arthur
Nicholl pools, despite the fact that they were “the most obvious and knowledgeable sources
for her book” (“Saintliness” 105). While Gaskell may have had a number of personal
reasons for this omission—including Nicholls’s general opposition to the project from its
inception—her choice to rely most heavily on Nussey, Taylor, and even Brontë’s own
words reflects Gaskell’s larger commitment to female creation and collaboration.

Thus both the purpose of and process behind the composition of *The Life of
Charlotte Brontë* support female cultural authority and action beyond the domestic
sphere. Why, then, does Gaskell seem to go to such lengths to deny Brontë the kind of
emancipatory “wings” she desired, casting her friend instead as a flightless angel who did
not fall only because she declined to soar? One answer I would suggest is that this rather
cheerless defense is meant to be recognized as such; that is, nineteenth-century readers of

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191 In her article “Saintliness, Treason, and Plot,” Barker offers a detailed discussion of the personal issues
that arose between Gaskell and Nicholls over the course of *The Life’s* composition. Barker seems to think
Gaskell was rather underhanded in her dealings with Nicholls, especially in her publication of Brontë’s
private letters, which prompted Nicholls to openly regret that he had been “dragged into sanctioning a
proceeding utterly repugnant to my feelings […] a project, which in my eyes is little short of desecration”
(qtd. in “Saintliness”111).
The Life could both acknowledge that Brontë strives incessantly to meet the contemporary standards of female propriety—and therefore could accept her (and her publications) as virtuous, rather than fallen—and simultaneously, by viewing the thankless pains that accompany her struggle, concede that such standards might be detrimental, or even impossible, to meet. The Life demonstrates that a woman’s body might be effectively disabled by the endless physical and mental contortions required to fit the expected parameters of feminine morality. These disabilities range from the metaphoric—as women were barred by mere virtue of their sex from exerting themselves in any number of public arenas—to the literal; after all, it is ironic that the presumed “harlot’s” progress of disease, pregnancy and death appears to be Brontë’s “reward” for proving her virtue, as her body is so weakened by years of agonizing self-denial that she is physically unable to fulfill the paramount female role in her society, motherhood.¹⁹²

The litany of physical complaints that Brontë undergoes while trying to “subdue her nature to her life” is therefore not necessarily meant to be emulated. Instead, the image Gaskell produces of the Brontë sisters’ “wild, strong hearts, and powerful minds” being “hidden under an enforced propriety” (LCB 61) acts as an appeal to a sympathetic audience to regret such repression of power, not to admire a propriety that imprisons.

Thus we can see that so many of Gaskell’s texts offer effective, if restrained, objections to the equation of female goodness with unmitigated selflessness. Their heroines—including Brontë—experience excessive physical and emotional pain all in

¹⁹² Barker suggests that Brontë’s weakened physical state may have been one of the reasons that her father initially vehemently opposed her marriage to Nicholls, as Patrick Brontë was surely aware of “the danger of pregnancy and childbirth to a woman of delicate health in her late thirties” (The Brontës 755).
order to suppress personal desire. In the self-sacrificing and largely unnecessary deaths that often occur for characters like Ruth (and so discomfited many early readers), Gaskell reveals the unnatural and fatal effects—themselves undeniable “falls”—of a supposed natural female selflessness.

Just as Gaskell challenges existing narratives of fallenness, then, we also see her question the Angel in the House model of ideal femininity. In her texts, domestic angels are ultimately difficult to discern from their fallen sisters. If the fallen woman is constructed in Victorian discourses as a “blank” cipher of lust, having lost control of a self, Gaskell’s angels control themselves into nothingness, literally becoming self-less through death in the name of virtuous self-renunciation. Both are revealed to be pitiable monsters, and inhuman constructions; thus both are unsuitable identities for any real woman to occupy.

In this way, The Life of Charlotte Brontë “emerges as a more deliberate, engaged intervention in public discourses than is often appreciated” (Hughes and Lund 125), as it works not only to defend a single individual from allegations of coarseness, but also to resist the expectations of perfection unfairly thrust upon all women. It is, therefore, a work of self-defense on Gaskell’s part as well. This fact has been noted by some commentators in a more literal sense; presenting Brontë as a woman of exceptional virtue who praises Gaskell’s fiction obviously helps shield the author of Ruth from her own implications of impropriety.\(^{193}\) On a broader scale, however, by exposing the dreadful

\(^{193}\) Hughes and Lund discuss this form of “self-advertisement” (142). Peterson also sees Gaskell as using the biography in an attempt to build a community of writers who appear to uphold combined literary and domestic values; therefore “Gaskell must confirm Brontë’s purity so that she can confirm intimacy” (910).
artificiality of what Logan calls “angelic ideology,” Gaskell also seeks to vindicate women like herself who hope to integrate, rather than unnaturally divide, their public and private identities, desires, and responsibilities.

Gaskell personally struggled with such integration in her own life, and her frustrations are famously evidenced in her 1850 letter to Eliza Fox, in which she discussed what she called the “plague” of her separate “mes”:

One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian—(only people call her a socialist and communist), another one of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house […] Now that’s my ‘social’ self I suppose. Then again I’ve got another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh [sic] is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? (Letters 108)

Gaskell’s use of the language of disease and violence—plague and war—in describing her feelings of internal division is worth noting, even if it is employed somewhat lightheartedly. She would invoke it again, in a far more serious tone, when discussing the public reaction to controversial works like Ruth, which made her feel like “St Sebastian tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows” (Letters 221), and to which she ascribed real physical consequences; she complained to friends of having seemingly contracted “a ‘Ruth’ fever,” becoming ill and living “in a quiver of pain” after reading cruel reviews (221-2). In particular, Gaskell was troubled by those who seemed to judge her writing as an immoral act, and admitted again to Fox, “I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it […] you can’t think how ‘improper’ I feel under their eyes” (223).

We can see then that Gaskell viscerally experienced the disabling, persecutory effects of too-rigid definitions and ideals of propriety. Unsure which “me” she must occupy, and aware of how arbitrarily she may be assigned an entirely unwanted one, a
woman could feel (especially considering Gaskell’s self-reported physiological symptoms of pain and illness) effectively torn apart. And yet, in the same letter in which she discusses her multiple mes, Gaskell also rejects the notion that her struggle would be alleviated by eliminating any potentially “offensive” behavior and subsuming all her selves into a single patriarchy-approved role as her husband William’s helpmate. Though she confesses, “I try to drown myself (my first self) by saying it’s Wm [sic] who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule,” she ultimately finds, “that does not quite do” (Letters 108). Sacrificing her “first self” and its multiple facets to a selfless status is not a viable option for Gaskell. Her very use of the word “drown”—a choking, unnatural end—speaks to the intense personal violence such a “sacrifice” entails. Whereas nearly a century later Virginia Woolf would cite killing the Angel in the House as a path to feminist freedom, at the height of Victorian mores Gaskell briefly considers killing all but her angelic persona, and finds—as Brontë will, tragically too late—it would only amplify her suffering. Instead, Gaskell chooses to allow her many conflicting “mes” to continue to wage war, but uses her writings to encourage society to expand its vision of womanhood to perhaps one day fit them all.

It would be incorrect, then, to assume that where Gaskell discusses Brontë’s authorship in The Life, she excuses women’s writing solely as extension of divinely-appointed responsibilities and inclination to complete unselfishness. It is true that she maintains that a woman in possession of artistic talent must not shrink from developing it, but realize “it was meant for the use and service of others” (LCB 272). However,

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194 See Woolf’s “Professions for Women” (1931).
although this depiction of female authorship does in part work, like the rest of Gaskell’s portrait of her self-sacrificing biographical subject, to cloak Brontë’s actions in shades of conventional feminine morality, I would caution against reading the description of women’s authorial “service” as yet another form of abject selflessness. Gaskell’s Christian beliefs discourage her from admitting the validity of any truly self-interested actions, for either men or women; “if Self is to be the end of exertions, those exertions are unholy,” she writes (Letters 107). Instead, however, she encourages a notion of duty to others that also empowers and justifies women stepping out of domestically circumscribed roles. Her vision of authorship does just this, as it offers an expansive sense of women’s potential influences and interventions in the public sphere—one that includes, for instance, the otherwise “improper” act of publishing a work like Ruth. No confined guardian of existing cultural mores, the woman writer’s wide-reaching service can be of her own design—even, if she so chooses, an iconoclastic one. Gaskell’s own literary output reflects this empowered and powerful category of duty, as in her writings she resists and redefines existing female positions—fallen and angelic alike—in order to move audiences from aesthetic contemplation to moral action. As I show in my Coda, Ruth certainly provided this inspiring effect for women like Josephine Butler, who attributed the feminist campaigns she would lead at the end of the nineteenth century in part to having read Gaskell’s work.

This is not to say that Gaskell’s specific intention was to call for a complete radical overhaul of women’s social and cultural roles. Indeed, she upheld and personally embodied far more conventional ideas than she rejected. She identified traditional
domestic positions like motherhood as some of her most gratifying “mes,” and famously attributed the very creation of her public one—which she presented to the world under the instantly respectable moniker of “Mrs. Gaskell”—to private motivations; the fact that she wrote *Mary Barton* in order to cope with her son’s death was alluded to in the novel’s preface. Charlotte Brontë clearly also saw Gaskell as a figure of conventionality, and teasingly urged her fellow author to leave her comfortable home life in order to brave the “wilds” of Haworth. In a letter Gaskell included in *The Life*, Brontë writes to her friend, “Leaving behind your husband, children, and civilisation, you must come out to barbarism, loneliness, and liberty. The change will perhaps do you good, if not too prolonged…” (qtd. in *LCB* 435).

The language of Brontë’s invitation tellingly divides domesticity and liberty into two separate and seemingly irreconcilable categories, one containing all the comforts of the world, while the other leaves one outcast, but free. It is the same insurmountable division under which Brontë, at least as she is depicted in Gaskell’s biography, labors and, failing to find a satisfactory middle ground, ultimately falls. Brontë’s letter suggests, however, in that tantalizing and open-ended silence of the ellipsis, that Gaskell may be able to achieve a balance between the two, and infuse her own “civilisation” with a sense of “liberty” that will only improve her life—and, presumably, her art. It is as if Gaskell might sprout the “wings” Brontë denied herself, through which she could move with more ease between her worlds of social responsibility and individual desire.

Because *The Life* seems to remove Brontë from the shades of barbarism only to confine her image in a veritable prison of Victorian middle-class mores and static
suffering, some readers might be tempted to view what Brontë offers to Gaskell here as, in effect, the exact opposite of what Gaskell later granted her. And yet, as I hope to have shown over the course of this chapter, we ought to consider Gaskell’s biography of Brontë and Brontë’s invitation to Gaskell as complementary, rather than contrasting, impulses. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, in keeping with Gaskell’s many other interventions on behalf of alleged fallen women, is not a work that advocates stripping women of liberty so that they might properly conform to the confines of the private sphere. Instead, Gaskell’s text subversively works to expand the boundaries of the domesticity and propriety. By highlighting the intense mental and physical misery Brontë undergoes in her determination to meet her society’s ideals of female virtue, Gaskell both vindicates her fellow writer’s character and calls into question the torturous standards by which she, and in turn all women, had been judged, and even more injuriously, had learned to judge themselves.

Just as Gaskell’s fiction and personal philanthropic efforts called for the doors of home literally to be opened to sympathetically receive once-outcast fallen women, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* ensures that the woman writer and her public productions can and should be welcomed into respectable homes with open arms. Moreover, the text advocates for the same doors to open outwards as well, allowing “proper” women more freedom in the world at large and normalizing their public contributions to and influence upon society, be it through charitable service or authorial exertions, communal efforts or individual genius. Thus, spurred by her own experiences of constraining ideals of femininity, Elizabeth Gaskell works to reform the very space of the home, transforming it
from a place of either rejection for the fallen or imprisonment for the angels, to one of endless possibility, that might provide a safe springboard from which a woman might spread her wings and a soft landing for any falls.
Chapter 4:

“The Spoiler of My Life Has Become the Agent of My Usefulness”:
Harriet Martineau’s Enabled Feminism

According to her posthumously published autobiography, one of the most formative experiences of disability Harriet Martineau encountered was not her own.\textsuperscript{195} Rather, Martineau—a Victorian figure nearly as famous among her contemporaries as well as modern critics for her bodily trials as for her extraordinary literary career—recounts the profound effects of her childhood friendship with the “very lame” Emily Cooper, whose leg was amputated following a wasting disease. More affecting in Martineau’s opinion than the “great courage” and “remarkable composure” with which her playmate faced the dreadful operation (about which Martineau embarrassingly claims to have indulged masochistic dreams of martyrdom for some time afterwards), or the patience and determination the young amputee demonstrated in rejoining everyday activities following the loss of the limb, was rather Emily’s distinct effort to claim her own bodily experience. The Cooper family initially desired to mitigate their daughter’s difference, “covering up the fact in an unnatural silence” that Martineau observed only

\textsuperscript{195}Martineau finished her \textit{Autobiography} in March 1855 while under the impression that she was dying; she decided to have it printed in two volumes and stored for her release after her death. She also asked her American friend Maria Weston Chapman to compose a third volume based upon an “immense mass of journals, memoranda, letters, papers, and manuscript studies of her whole life” Martineau specifically compiled herself for this purpose (Chapman 140). Chapman completed the volume, which would eventually be published under the title \textit{Memorials} in 1877 along with the \textit{Autobiography} by Martineau.
“enormously increased their daughter’s suffering.” Emily, however, quite literally spoke out against this denial of her disability. Martineau writes:

E.’s lameness was never mentioned, nor recognized in any way, within my remembrance, till she, full late, did it herself. […] I have much pleasure in adding that nothing could be finer than her temper in after life, when she had taken her own case in hand, and put an end, as far as it lay with her to do so, to the silence about her infirmity. (Autobiography 64-5)

Martineau goes on to affirm how Emily’s example resonated with her throughout the rest of her long life, stating, “I owe her a great deal; and she and her misfortune were among the most favourable influences I had the benefit of after taking myself in hand for self-government” (65).

For Harriet Martineau, this notion of “self-government” means far more than mere self-restraint, in a restrictive sense of the phrase; instead, Martineau suggests that Emily Cooper’s actions demonstrated the inherent right one has to name, claim, and indeed govern one’s own body and consequent corporal experiences. It is also a right Martineau would repeatedly come to exercise herself over a career that would span more than five decades, as she built a public reputation based in large part upon writings of personal, and often initially “private,” bodily experiences, and her own authoritative interpretations of them. In works like her 1834 “Letter to the Deaf,” which offered advice garnered from her own hearing impairment, her 1844 record of invalidism Life in the

196 This is not to say the concept of self-control and the regulatory discipline of emotion and desire were not also major factors in Martineau’s personal philosophy; in fact, they are especially evident in her advisory letters to the deaf and invalid communities. Valerie Sanders states that Martineau distrusts “emotional exhibitionism,” instead viewing one’s feelings as something to be carefully controlled and restricted (Letters xi). However, this is less indicative of Martineau’s interest in repression or passivity, but is rather consistent with her assertions of the importance of willpower and autonomy, particularly in the case of disabled individuals. As Martha Stoddard Holmes argues, Martineau eschews emotionality because “becoming a person who asks for nothing,” and who is therefore in complete control of her own life, is paramount (153).
Sick-Room, and her final Autobiography, which, replete as it is with depictions of her life-long physical ailments, has been identified by Linda Peterson as a text that “anticipates the modern disability memoir” (Introduction 15), Martineau repeatedly claimed the ultimate—indeed, as I shall discuss below, the only—authority over the true narrative of her life and body. Martineau’s ready acknowledgement, and often outright embrace, of otherwise “disabling” embodied experiences thus literally enabled some of the most well-known works in her impressive oeuvre.

Anka Ryall makes an important distinction, however, when she argues that Martineau “attained her position as a female intellectual not by denying her bodily experiences but by refusing to let herself by defined by them” (51). That is, not only did Martineau follow Emily Cooper’s example and eschew any falsely enforced “silence about her infirmity,” visibly marked as “other” as her body was, but she also fiercely tried to control just how, and by whom, that silence was to be broken. In fact, Martineau’s sense of inviolable ownership over her own life extended not only to her physical person, but to any artifacts of “self,” including personal correspondence. She famously spends nearly the entire introduction to Autobiography justifying her decision to forbid the publication of many of her private letters, claiming to have based this

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197 Martineau’s deafness was made readily visible by her use of an ear trumpet, while her later uterine problems led to observable physical changes (including a distended abdomen and mobility issues), and, more noticeably (if paradoxically), her seeming “disappearance” from public life.

198 Interestingly, Martineau’s determination to control her own public image and “artifacts” of self actually caused trouble for Elizabeth Gaskell, when Martineau repeatedly demanded Gaskell alter “inaccurate” passages about Martineau’s relationship and correspondence Charlotte Brontë in The Life, including on such trivial matters as what time Martineau arose each morning while Brontë was her guest (Gaskell’s text claimed it was five o’clock, while Martineau insisted it was six). For more on the changes Martineau demanded Gaskell make to the third edition of The Life, see Linda Peterson’s “Triangulation, Desire, and Discontent in The Life of Charlotte Brontë” (911-12).
resolution on the grounds that she, with “a disposition naturally open and communicative” (35), will offer all pertinent details about her life with complete candor; no other source therefore need be necessary.

In his examination of Martineau’s fiction, Aaron Hunt has located a prevailing tension between an avowed aversion to secrecy, and a tendency to hold on to a strict division of matters “properly private” and matters available for circulation. He posits that in works like her domestic novel *Deerbrook*, Martineau ultimately argues for an “ethic of openness” (7), while accepting the “contemporary social designation of love and desire as properly private matters, belonging to a realm of interior experience and not to be spoken of too freely” (21). I suggest that we can see a similar pattern at work in Martineau’s approach to her own life and the dissemination of her personal information: though Martineau claims to abhor secrecy (repeatedly emphasizing throughout *Autobiography* “how little reticence I can boast of” [449]199), she nonetheless, true to her role as strong spokesperson for political economy, believes in a concept of private property and ownership, and extends that ownership to one’s interior, embodied experience.

Martineau does not go so far, then, as to claim that the details of an individual’s interior, lived experience must necessarily always be kept confidential. In fact, in a seeming paradoxical move, she states that her duty to share the details of her life through an autobiography became “unquestionable” only after she made up her mind to “interdict the publication of [her] private letters” (*Autobiography* 34). Therefore, it is apparently

199 Martineau insists that the anonymous publication of *Life in the Sick-room* was the only time she, “who had never had a secret before or since,” did not readily share information with her friends and family; she also recounts that “several friends confidently denied that the book was mine, on the ground that I had not told them a word about it,—a conviction in which I think them perfectly justified” (*Autobiography* 449).
more out of a proprietary interest, rather than an interest in propriety, that Martineau seeks to limit the dissemination of her personal information. She has no concerns that any illicit secrets may be exposed if her personal correspondence comes to light. Instead, she explains in *Autobiography*, “I have [...] no fear of my reputation of any sort of being injured by the publication of anything I have ever put upon paper,” and that “it would be rather an advantage to me than the contrary to be known by my private letters” (35). It is for this very reason—the irreproachable private life she has led, and her established habits of openness—that Martineau feels confident she is precisely the person to advocate for objective and universal principles of privacy.²⁰⁰

However, in addition to principle, practical concerns necessarily fuel Martineau’s interest in regulating the spread of her personal matters. Her dogged determination to exercise complete control over her own person—even as she claims to share so much of herself willingly with the public—also speaks to how unconventional her claim of “self-governement” was in a society in which both female and disabled bodies were so often equated with selves dangerously out of control.²⁰¹ Additionally, as untoward associations with the wrong kind of “public woman” could threaten nearly any nineteenth-century woman’s professional endeavors (particularly ones so literally based on self-display and examination, as many of Martineau’s musings on health could be characterized),

²⁰⁰ Many of Martineau’s correspondents ultimately disregarded her express wish that her letters be burnt; it is for this very reason that collections like Valerie Sanders’s *Harriet Martineau: Selected Letters* and Elizabeth Arbuckle’s *Harriet Martineau’s Letters to Fanny Wedgewood* exist (both of which I utilize in this chapter). Sanders explains that Martineau’s descendents now approve the publication of her communications, reporting that “over a century after her death her family have agreed that her stringency might now be relaxed” (*Letters* vi). Additionally, because many of her letters to friends and family reveal a mingling of public and domestic matters, some of Martineau’s correspondents may have justified ignoring her request to destroy the letters because the topics of conversation were deemed to not be entirely “private” (i.e., interiorized or embodied experience) matters, and thus not subject to her injunction. ²⁰¹ For an expanded discussion of this point, see my Introduction.
Martineau’s near-obsessive anxiety regarding the illegitimate and unregulated circulation of her private letters is understandable.\textsuperscript{202} Losing control of even an extension of the private self she had committed to the page to have it distorted into a promiscuous public spectacle was a “fall” that she dared not risk.

To combat the potential of these truly disabling gender assumptions, then, Martineau strategically aligned her authorial acts of self-exposure (in particular, the accounts of her health problems and recovery, which I will discuss below), with generous edification rather than wanton exhibitionism. She assigned a strictly-defined use-value to any objectification of her body, which was, as Martineau described to a friend, “to suffer for other people’s information,—to be a sort of pioneer in the regions of pain” (qtd. in Sanders \textit{Letters} 83). Proclaiming that “if any sickness of mine can afford warning, I am willing to disclose it”—and disclose it “with as little personal shame on the one hand as vanity or pride on the other” (\textit{Autobiography} 433)—Martineau’s writings on her embodied experience consistently ensure that if and when her body is made object, her identity remains that of active and rational subject. She is the conductor of her own case study.\textsuperscript{203}

Nowhere is Harriet Martineau’s vested interest in “self-government,” and the complicated negotiations involved in asserting that right as an allegedly doubly pathological (female and disabled) person, more apparent than in two separate yet, as I

\textsuperscript{202} Of course, the association of a woman’s private letters and her private body—and the question of who has access to both—is also a familiar trope in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature; see, for instance, Samuel Richardson’s \textit{Pamela} or \textit{Clarissa} for an earlier literary exploration of Martineau’s real-life Victorian concerns.

\textsuperscript{203} As Sanders states, “She studied herself intently, so that pain became something of a laboratory experience” (\textit{Reason Over Passion} 83).
will argue over the course of this chapter, deeply interrelated campaigns that Martineau undertakes two decades apart: the first, an endorsement of mesmerism in 1844 that would have profoundly personal consequences; and the second, her involvement in the large-scale political work of the Ladies’ National Association For the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts throughout the 1860s and early 1870s.

Strangely, while questions of a woman’s rights over her own body and epistemic authority over her own lived experience lie at the heart of Martineau’s writings on both mesmerism and the Contagious Diseases Acts, the two are rarely discussed in tandem. Moreover, although embodiment and disability have proved to be highly productive critical lenses through which to view much of Martineau’s prolific corpus—a point I demonstrate throughout the first section of this chapter—her explicitly feminist work, and particularly her involvement in the Ladies’ National Association (LNA), has not often received such treatment. Rather, Martineau’s participation in the LNA is discussed primarily as an outgrowth of her prior interest in Florence Nightingale’s sanitary reforms, which in turn is seen as a result of Martineau’s general attention to matters of political economy (coupled, as Deborah Anna Logan suggests, with “an instinctive rebellion

As I explain in my Introduction, I employ the term “feminist” here and throughout this chapter while conscious of the charge of anachronism. I find it a particularly appropriate description for the late nineteenth-century campaigns that critiqued and contested the gendered order of society in ways that lie outside the scope of more narrow yet historically-accurate designations (such as “woman’s suffrage movement”), and especially those that did so in an organized, public fashion, as did the Ladies’ National Association. Furthermore, as Phillipa Levine explains, the women working within these campaigns “commonly adopted lifestyles consonant more with their ideas about gender than with the dominant social milieu from which they came” and thus were part of “a conscious and active process of redrawing the definitional boundaries of politics” that would today be seen as an “exercise in the creation and definition of sexual politics” (2-3). My use of the term “feminism” is, I argue, justified in this context. See Levine, Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).
against institutionalized oppression” [215]). Furthermore, if we accept the argument Mary Jo Deegan makes against reading Martineau’s collaborations with Nightingale as “experientially based” or “invalid-identified” (“Harriet Martineau” 44), we may be hesitant to consider issues of embodiment as at all relevant to her purported consequent participation with the LNA.

However, Martineau’s association with the LNA deserves a fresh look, particularly in light of what Deirdre David calls “the nagging problem raised by [Martineau’s] writings about women” (“George Eliot’s Trump” 89); that is, while “the subject-matter of Martineau’s work adhered to and even helps define much of the nineteenth-century feminist programme, her tone and many of her specific comments were often at odds with the dominant feminist approach and even unsympathetic to it” (Caine English Feminism 70). For many modern critics, Martineau’s well-known denouncement of Mary Wollstonecraft in Autobiography, in which she dismissed the protofeminist figure as a “poor victim of passion” whose “advocacy of Woman’s cause becomes mere detriment” (303), carries with it the uncomfortable implication that

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205 Logan, who writes that Martineau’s “links with Nightingale and the military, health, and hygiene reform and its connection with public morality, and women’s issues segued naturally into the social purity movement” (159), does suggest that Martineau may have first been drawn to working with Nightingale because of her interest in personal, communal, and national health issues” (213); however, she does not connect this interest to Martineau’s own lived experiences of disability, illness, or recovery. Also, all references to Logan in this chapter refer to her Martineau study The Hour and the Woman, unless otherwise noted.

206 Deegan disagrees with Maria Frawley’s claim that (in Deegan’s paraphrase) “Martineau identified herself as an invalid from 1840 until her death and always wrote from this perspective after that time” (“Harriet Martineau” 44), stating instead that “Martineau rarely employs an experiential theoretical framework in [her] studies of health and medicine, sanitation, and the built environment in her books focusing on health” (58). She also argues for an observable difference in the writing style between of work on disability vs. that on sanitation reform: “There is […] almost a breathless quality to the writing. She wants to save lives and institute changes immediately […] but her understanding of physical disability and being an invalid were human problems that emerged slowly and reflectively after years of her living in a flawed body” (58).
Martineau had “a dualistic perspective on the sexes that unassailably values male over female,” and saw “feminism weakened by femininity” (David *Intellectual Women* 47). This stance, coupled with her apparent adherence to a sexual double standard, her skepticism and at times outright refusal to lend her name to many public calls for women’s enfranchisement, and other seemingly “anti-feminist” behaviors, often prove difficult to reconcile with her other instances of activism in favor of women’s rights, and in particular with her work against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Her involvement with the LNA at the end of her life was in fact the first and only time that she was closely and publicly associated with a powerful, organized feminist campaign (Caine *English Feminism* 80); why, we might ask, did a law regarding the enforced medical examination of “common prostitutes” seemingly inspire the most overtly politicized feminist rhetoric of Martineau’s fifty-year career?

Maria Weston Chapman, Martineau’s friend and only authorized biographer, noted that Martineau’s journals of the early 1840s “record[ed] the strong feeling that moved her to the service of unhappy women, and her conviction that it must be, if possible, a part of her future life” (Chapman 531). With this impulse arising more than a

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207 Martineau wrote to one unnamed advocate of Woman’s Rights in 1849, “I cannot accede to your request—that I would send some communication to be read to your assembled friends on the 25th. I do not approve of the tone used by some of the public advocates of Women’s Rights; & I do not think that any good object will be attained by the formation of such a society as you tell me of” (qtd. in Sanders *Letters* 115). While Martineau did eventually sign some petitions in favor of women’s suffrage, she also made it clear she believed “women had a long way to go before the vote would do them any good” (David *Intellectual Women* 119). Barbara Caine argues that Martineau “accepted absolutely the prevailing sexual double standard, refusing to associate with any woman guilty of sexual irregularity—although she continued to acknowledge and see men guilty of the same behavior” (*English Feminism* 72), and Yates also discusses the fact that Martineau was “not very tolerant of or informed about sexuality and unorthodox relationships” (17); her disapproval of George Eliot’s relationship with George Henry Lewes is usually cited as an example of this. For an overview of other problematic aspects of Martineau’s feminism, see Amy Hobart’s discussion of the limitations Martineau’s emphasis on public labor puts on her feminism in “Harriet Martineau’s Political Economy of Everyday Life,” *Victorian Studies* 37(1994):223-51.
decade before Martineau ever met or collaborated with Nightingale, it seems therefore inadequate to explain her involvement in the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts as a simplistic “natural segue” from “hygiene reform […] into the social purity movement” (Logan 159). I argue that what is missing from our current critical discussions of Martineau’s last, and seemingly anomalous, project is a careful consideration of earlier narratives of her own embodied experience, and in particular those that argue against attempts to exert outside authority—specifically, that of established male medical authority—over her personal understanding of and control over her own body. Though made an invalid by what would eventually prove to be an ovarian cyst, the more disabling factors Martineau would combat were often doctors who diagnosed her commitment to self-government as a symptom of a female brain’s dangerous pathology.

In this chapter, I look to Martineau’s writings on the complex gynecological issues she intermittently endured from approximately 1839 until her death in 1876 (the initial bout of which occurred during the very same years she first recorded the “strong feeling” toward the unhappily “fallen” sisterhood, as Chapman reports), and her decision to treat her condition through the controversial pseudo-science of mesmerism, which she documented in a series of “Letters on Mesmerism,” published in the Athenaeum in November and December 1844. The narrative that unfolds over these texts—alongside the vitriolic rebuttals to “Letters on Mesmerism” published by members of the medical community from 1845 until even after Martineau’s death thirty-two years later—provides a new explanation for Martineau’s final feminist efforts, one that suggests her LNA
involvement was far more connected to and consistent with other seemingly disparate elements of her authorial career than it has previously appeared.

In positing private experiences of problematic embodiment as a direct source of her political writing, I also argue for a more expansive understanding of precisely how Martineau’s identity as a disabled woman affected—truly, as I will demonstrate, enabled—her feminism and authorship overall. Whereas many recent disability studies perspectives on Martineau have located, to quite productive critical ends, an isolating effect arising from the author’s health conditions that afforded her a privileged outsider status, I find, particularly in her writings on mesmerism, an impulse toward the formation of collaborative communities developing out of Martineau’s first-hand understanding of female embodiment and (or perhaps, as) disability. If Emily Cooper’s example may have inspired Martineau’s unwavering commitment to personal self-government, her own bouts with the disabling embodiment influenced her commitment to protect other women’s civil rights.

An Embodied “Need for Utterance”: Martineau’s Illnesses and Authorship

Harriet Martineau was born in 1802 in Norwich, the sixth child in a prosperous manufacturing family, and over the course of her life would come to occupy a number of often competing identities. She was variously viewed as the devoted and put-upon
daughter of a domineering mother, and a best-selling author and international authority on everything from abolitionism to positivist philosophy; an accomplished seamstress and proponent of domesticity, and, in the words of Elizabeth Barrett (later Browning), the “most manlike woman in three kingdoms” (qtd. in Sanders Letters 168); a meddling, deaf old maid, and an influential correspondent on legislative matters to prime ministers and members of parliament. In addition to—or perhaps, because of—these multiple marks of identity, Martineau’s immense literary output is as equally difficult to categorize. Her body of work consists of over one hundred separately printed titles of diverse subjects and genres, including two adult novels (1839’s Deerbrook and 1841’s The Hour and the Man) and collected stories for children (1841’s The Playfellow); her famed Illustrations of Political Economy (1832-1834), a series of didactic accounts dramatizing ideas of new economics; sociological reports of various tours through other countries and cultures, such as 1838’s Retrospect of Western Travel and 1848’s Eastern Life, Past and Present; and many more, alongside scores of periodical articles and some 1,600 newspaper editorials for the London Daily News. Martineau even prepared her own third-person obituary, which ran three days after she died on June 27, 1876; clearly, her determination to control her public self and story was not easily relinquished even in death.

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208 Martineau’s mother is often depicted as a domineering, and at times even tyrannical, force in her daughter’s life, in both Martineau’s own writings and modern critics’ biographical studies. For an extensive discussion, see Mitzi Meyers’s “Unmothered Daughter and Radical Reformer: Harriet Martineau” in The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature, ed. Cathy Davidson and E.M. Broner (New York: Ungar, 1980), 70-80. See also n.25 below.

209 In Autobiography, Martineau recounts her work toward the repeal of the Corn-laws and her influential correspondence with Sir Robert Peel (Prime Minister from 1841-1846), among other members of Parliament (507-51).
One fairly consistent theme across Martineau’s life experiences and numerous authorial productions, however, seems to be that of physical infirmity and bodily trial. It is little wonder, then, that in recent years her work has received increasing attention from a disability studies perspective. Describing herself a “delicate child,” Martineau recounted being dangerously “starved to death” and “fast sinking under diarrhea” in the earliest days of her infancy under the care of an ineffectual wet nurse (to whom Martineau’s mother would later ascribe her daughter’s life-long indigestion and even deafness) (*Autobiography* 40). Martineau herself would propose yet another source of her ill-health, citing her association with Emily Cooper—the very same figure who would seemingly inspire elements of her independence and fortitude—as a veritable cause for her subsequent disabilities; she writes in *Autobiography*, “I am sure that my nervous system was seriously injured, and especially that my subsequent deafness was partly occasioned by the exciting and vainglorious dreams that I indulged for many years after my friend E. lost her leg” (63).

The initial causes aside, Martineau suffered from a variety of health issues over the course of early life, including constant digestive disorders, a frustrating loss of her senses of smell and taste, and “languor, and a muscular weakness which made life a burden” (*Autobiography* 79). At age twelve, she first encountered what she would eventually describe as “the great calamity of my deafness” (79). Experiencing what modern-day medical historians have diagnosed as *otosclerosis*, she gradually lost much of her hearing by age seventeen and utilized an ear trumpet and lip-reading skills for the rest of her life. After a short and welcome respite from severe health troubles in her early
thirties, Martineau suddenly became incapacitated by pain while traveling in Venice in 1839. She was diagnosed as suffering from a prolapsed uterus and polypous tumors, and returned home to England under the care of her physician brother-in-law, Thomas Greenhow, where she would spend the next six years as an invalid on her self-described “couch of pain” (430). Though (as I will explore in far greater detail below) she eventually considered herself cured through mesmerism of her gynecological ailment, Martineau continued to labor under a variety of illnesses, in particular what she believed to be an incurable and fatal heart condition. It was with this imminent diagnosis in mind that she rushed to complete her *Autobiography* in 1855 (ending with a passage entitled “Last View of the World”), only to live for another twenty years.

Many early explorations of Martineau’s writing have mentioned these repeated experiences of disability as something for the author to overcome heroically, mirroring statements like Gayle Graham Yates’s that Martineau “wrote without a significant break from early adulthood into her late sixties, despite health obstacles, supporting herself by writing” (3, my emphasis).\(^2\) Such readings often ignore the possibility that Martineau assumes a position of authority and self-assertion because of, rather than in spite of, apparent physical infirmity. More recent work in disability studies has attempted to rectify this stance, as critics like Peterson point out that “Martineau felt that disability authorized her to speak and that she had a duty to do so” (Introduction 14). Such “authorization,” however, is often connected only to Martineau’s writings on her own

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\(^2\) These “overcoming” narratives, in which disabled individuals are praised for apparently surpassing their bodily limitations in order to achieve either an expected level of “normalcy” or seemingly extraordinary accomplishments, are pervasive even in modern critical discussions of disability, and have been helpfully critiqued by a number of disability theorists; see, for instance, Simi Linton’s “Reassigning Meaning” (161-172) in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), especially p. 165.
body, her advice to invalids, and her discussions of various medical remedies, or, as Maria Frawley has suggested, her journalistic explorations of the health of the nation’s working classes.  

Nonetheless, several critics have begun to consider how Martineau’s disabling experiences directly influence a number of her other prose pieces, beyond those focused on the limited scope of private or public health issues. For instance, both Deegan and Deborah Fratz have suggested ways in which Martineau’s invalidism and deafness directly influenced her development as a sociologist, allowing “the cultivation of the observational position and skills” so necessary in that line of inquiry (Fratz 47). According to Fratz, Martineau developed the “ethically appropriate detachment” required for sociological analysis through the “relative social detachment” she experienced as a deaf woman; “unable to fully participate in social exchanges, they may contemplate what they observe” (49). Martineau herself often cited her apparent disadvantages as the very source of her journalistic prowess. Responding to a review of her travel writing that contemptuously questioned how a “stone deaf” woman gathered information, Martineau answered that she was “as everybody knows, so deaf that she is obliged to use an ear-trumpet, which, however, she does so well, that very few persons indeed surpass her in the ability with which she collects information, whether from seeing or listening” (“Criticism on Women” 469-70). Similarly, when the author W.R. Gregg suggested Martineau’s ear trumpet limited her access to truth, allowing only statements that were

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211 In “Harriet Martineau, Health and Journalism,” Frawley suggests Martineau’s interest in working-class health issues stem directly from her personal experiences of invalidism. See Women’s Writing 9.3 (2002): 433-444.
212 For Deegan’s full discussion, see “Making Lemonade: Harriet Martineau on Being Deaf.”
“inevitably manufactured, or at least modified for export” to reach her ear (qtd. in Bohrer 29), Martineau countered with a description of her speaking tube’s “winning power, by which I gain more in tete-a-tetes than is given to people who have general conversation” (Society xiv). In *Life in the Sick-Room*, Martineau also insisted that invalidism equipped her and fellow sufferers with expanded powers of perspective unavailable to the healthy:

> By our being withdrawn from the disturbing bustles of life in the world; by our leisure for reading and contemplation of various sides of questions, and by our singular opportunities for quiet reflection, we must, almost necessarily, see further than we used to do, and further than many others do on subjects of interest, which involve general principles. [...O]ur judgments of things must be worth something more than formerly. (*Life* 117)

Notably, this observation comes from the very text that Martineau produced while completely confined by illness, a presumably unfavorable situation that nonetheless provided her “abundant leisure for thought” (*Autobiography* 457). Susan F. Bohrer points out how Martineau even made similar recuperative moves in considering her other assumed shortcoming, her sex. She emphasized that as a woman, she was able to enter (and thereby observe and analyze) more domestic spaces—“nursery, the boudoir, the kitchen”—“than could possibly have been exhibited to any gentleman traveling through the country” (*Society* xii).

Repeatedly, then, Martineau recasts presumed evidence of her disability—from the stigma of a speaking tube, to a bedridden existence, to her status as woman—as in fact super-abilities, the very attributes that enable her unprecedented success. As Bohrer states, “What Martineau’s critics see as her greatest liabilities, her gender and her deafness, become for the ‘little deaf woman of Norwich,’ the foundation of her fortitude, intellect, and unlimited opportunities for fulfilling her life’s business” (36). It is
somewhat surprising, then, that few Martineau scholars have considered how Martineau’s experience and understanding of her own “disabled” position potentially authorized her entire writing career, and particularly her interventions in feminist issues. For instance, one of the very reasons Martineau was able to pursue the Conventionally “masculine” career of journalism, as she did after her father’s death plunged the family into financial instability, was precisely because her disabilities precluded her from other standard modes of women’s work. She would have been obliged to follow her sisters’ paths as governesses, if, as she explained to a friend in 1829, “I had not been incapacitated for the office by great and increasing deafness, which obliges me to depend on my pen alone” (qtd. in Sanders Letters 19). Her deafness also “excused” other unorthodox behaviors, including her habit of reading excessively when “it was not thought proper for young ladies to study very conspicuously” (Autobiography 99). Martineau’s parents even allowed their daughter to peruse books and newspapers—the very media through which she would later rise to fame—at the dinner table, partially in “response to her difficulty in participating in conversations she could not hear” (Deegan “Making Lemonade” 44). Thanks to this indulgence, Martineau would later recall that during these adolescent hours she spent freely reading, she was “becoming a political economist without knowing it, and, at the same time, a sort of walking Concordance of Milton and Shakspere [sic]” (Autobiography 80).

Martineau nonetheless did participate in other forms of respectable middle-class women’s work, including paid needlework; however, after her first publication success, she recalled her brother Thomas’s advice: “Now, dear, leave it to other women to make shirts and darn stockings; and do give yourself to this” (qtd. in Chapman 156)
Martineau hinted that her disabilities also shielded her from overt social pressure to marry. She thereby occupied the very “surplus” status around which the “Women Question” debates of the mid-nineteenth century centered, and through which she would steadfastly back the calls for increased education, work opportunities, and legal protections for women. Martineau was engaged once in 1826 to John Hugh Worthington, a friend of her elder brother’s, but viewed the upcoming nuptials with great anxiety, listing among her worries, “I dared not undertake the charge of his happiness […] I was ill—I was deaf” (Autobiography 119). The marriage ultimately did not occur, ironically not on the basis of the prospective bride’s ailments, but those of her fiancé; Autobiography explains, “Just when I was growing happy, and surmounting my fears and doubts, [Worthington] became suddenly insane; and after months of illness of body and mind, he died” (119). Several biographers speculate this sudden death to have actually been a suicide. Shocking as the events may have been, Martineau reflects logically on the end of the relationship itself, writing “There has never been any doubt in my mind that, considering what I was in those days, it was happiest for us both that our union was prevented by any means,” and insisting that her “infirm and ill-developed nature” along with her “strong will, combined with anxiety of conscience, makes me fit only to live alone” (119-120).

In protesting that her “constitution,” physically and emotionally, proved unfit for married life, Martineau in effect asserts how aptly “fitted” she was for the independent

214 Gayle Graham Yates’s Harriet Martineau on Women offers excerpts of Martineau’s writings on various aspects of the Victorian “woman question,” including pieces in which she advocated for expansions in women’s education, access to birth control, and protection from domestic abuse.
path to authorship; after all, had Martineau been viewed by her society as more properly “eligible” for marriage, she may not have had the luxury of deciding, as she recorded in her journal in 1829, that “my chief subordinate object in life shall henceforth be the cultivation of my intellectual powers, with a view to the instruction of others by my writings” (qtd. in Chapman 166). Or, according to Yates’s blunt assessment of the thwarted matrimony, “Worthington’s death liberated her to be alone and like it” (57).

Unlike the unmarried disabled female characters Martha Stoddard Holmes has located in Victorian fiction, whose function is to “shore up the institution of marriage—and the idea of a married woman’s happiness—by embodying the miseries of the woman who must live outside of it” (224), Martineau records real satisfaction in her single status and the freedoms it affords.215

And, contrary to ready assumptions, Martineau’s bouts of invalidism (presumably a state of total dependence) only increased her sense of autonomy. Far from being an imprisoning place (despite Martineau’s liberal employment of the melodramatic rhetoric of incarceration in her memoirs, describing herself as “a sick prisoner,” one “under sentence of disease for life” [Life 66]),216 Martineau’s sickroom provided a retreat from typical domestic tasks and served as a sanctuary for her writing. For example, Martineau intended to complete her autobiography at several different points throughout in her life, but found that “while [she] was in health, there was always so much to do that was

215 As Martineau stated in her Autobiography, “I long ago came to the conclusion that, without meddling with the case of wives and mothers, I am probably the happiest single woman in England” (120).
216 Holmes suggests that nineteenth-century autobiographical narratives of disability are inevitably fashioned with reference to the “melodramatic” conventions that permeated Victorian constructions of disability, even if the author’s purpose is to present a counternarrative to dominant depictions of the disabled (133).
immediately wanted, that, as usually happens in such cases, that which was not immediately necessary was deferred” (Autobiography 34). Common social conventions and typical womanly duties—household chores, social calls, familial cares—rendered Martineau’s beloved personal project to write her life “not immediately necessary.” It was only in the “acceptable” solitude of invalidism that she found the time and independence to complete her task.217

The subversive power—a “strength through weakness, and authority through submission,” as Allison Winter notes (214)—that Martineau apparently gained from her sickroom confinement did not go unnoticed by her contemporaries, nor was it unprecedented. In Invalidism and Identity, Frawley outlines the increasing push throughout the Victorian era (largely propagated by Evangelical Christians) to make illness productive, and for invalids to “embody a kind of exertion” despite their apparent incapacity (41). Frawley also addresses the argument, proposed by nineteenth-century commentators as well as by modern critics, that many individuals “may have been ‘driven to bed’ by a desire for exemption from social responsibilities”; this list includes Martineau’s peers Florence Nightingale and Elizabeth Barrett, both of whom, it has been

217 In her 1852 novelistic essay “Cassandra,” Florence Nightingale explored a similar phenomenon. She writes: “Mrs. A has the imagination, the poetry of a Murillo, and has sufficient power of execution to show that she might have had a great deal more. Why is she not a Murillo? From a material difficulty, not a mental one. If she has a knife and fork in her hands during three hours of the day, she cannot have a pencil or brush. Dinner is the great sacred ceremony of this day, the great sacrament. To be absent from dinner is equivalent to being ill. Nothing else will excuse us from it. Bodily incapacity is the only apology valid.” See Nightingale, Cassandra (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1979): 30. Interestingly, Nightingale would, much like Martineau, experience invalidism, and be bedridden after her return from the Crimean War from the time she was in her thirties until well into her sixties. During this time, she produced over two hundred books, pamphlets, and reports, perhaps because of the very “excused” isolation she relates in the above passage.
suggested, deliberately adopted the posture of an invalid as a socially-approved escape from familial expectations or tensions (*Invalidism* 24).

There is, then, an undeniable purposely productive and “escapist” element to Martineau’s illnesses.\(^\text{218}\) As Valerie Sanders states, Martineau “made her invalidism into a profession, a fine art, through which she won her freedom” (*Reason over Passion* 83), and through which she justified declining unwanted work or visitors while retaining only the duties and companions she enjoyed. However, this assessment often comes with cynicism: biographers have posited that, rather than having a physiological source, Martineau’s illnesses were, if not outright faked, “unconscious” attempts on her part “to evade family responsibilities, particularly for her mother” (Banks 124). Indeed, Martineau’s mother is often vilified in late twentieth-century scholarship as the cause of her daughter’s health issues; for example, Deirdre David offers a Freudian reading of Martineau’s illness as self-inflicted psychological punishment for the ways in which authorial success separated her from “maternal authority,” and claims that “the daughter believes she became sick in her reproductive organs by virtue of the ‘mental suffering’ inflicted upon her by her mother” (*Intellectual Women* 91).\(^\text{219}\) Others have suggested that Martineau’s invalidism is rooted in a repressed guilt for her lack of conformity to an acceptably “feminine” domestic role. Caroline Roberts, for instance, argues that Martineau’s sickroom “was less of a virtually sanctioned means of rebellion than it was an atonement for a successful professional career” (118), and sees Martineau’s illness as

\(^{218}\) Martineau herself admits that during her long confinement, she felt “comparatively happy in [her] release from responsibility, anxiety, and suspense” (*Autobiography* 431).

\(^{219}\) In a similar vein, Sidonie Smith writes in *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987) that Martineau’s mother, described as “at once powerful and oppressive,” becomes for her daughter “the locus of emotional deprivation and physical disease” (128).
a morbid, defeatist embrace of hyper-femininity (120). Diane Postlethwaite and Sidonie Smith maintain similar views, suggesting that Martineau suffered from hysteria arising from her inability to fulfill an appropriate womanly station in conjunction with her “masculine” writing career, and thereby resolve the “needs of her female nature” (Postlethwaite 585).

However, these readings of a prominent woman’s private “female” illness as a psychosomatic consequence of her professional endeavors uncomfortably recall many nineteenth-century critical responses to Martineau, in which her “unfeminine” and thereby unqualified interventions in public arenas were deemed worthy of shame, or at least belittlement. One contemporary reviewer’s infantilizing and humiliating suggestion that rather than theorize about population statistics, Martineau ought to ask “a simple question or two of her mama” (Croker 141) stands as just one of many such instances. Modern depictions of Martineau as ultimately neurotic and self-punishing ignore the subtlety and consistence with which she declined to view herself through the lens of separate-spheres ideology that would require her to, in Logan’s words, “expatiate her social sins of intellectualism and economic autonomy” (226). Instead, Martineau denies possessing either a “feminine” or “masculine” mind, arguing rather for an egalitarian view of human intellect in which the “one true method in the treatment of each human

220 Interestingly, Roberts reads in *Life in the Sick-room* Martineau’s “reoccurring feelings of guilt” about her industry (locating the source of this guilt as Martineau’s fraught relationship with her mother), and suggests that because of the text’s seemingly “morbid” attitude, “one should reject the view that illness was empowering to her” (120). However, Martineau herself recognized passages of *Life in the Sick-room* as “morbid,” but locates that morbidity not in any feelings about her career, but rather the “debris of the theological” mindset from which, at the time of its writing, she was “not perfectly emancipated” (*Autobiography* 450).

221 See Smith’s chapter “Harriet Martineau’s Autobiography: Desire of a Life Like a Man’s” in *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography* for her extended argument.
being of either sex [is] to ascertain what are the powers of that being, to cultivate them to the utmost, and then to see what action they will find for themselves” (qtd. in Yates 51).

Neither did Martineau consider her mental productions as in any way “unnatural.” Instead, she claimed that all her authorial output, from her seemingly gender-appropriate domestic guidebook Household Education (1849) to her most controversial philosophical works, like the co-authored (and deemed atheistic) Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development (1851), stemmed from an innate compulsion that she would describe in her own obituary as “simply the need for utterance” (662). As she explained in Autobiography:

Authorship has never been with me a matter of choice. I have not done it for amusement, or for money, or for fame, or for any reason but because I could not help it [...] What wanted to be said must be said, for the sake of the many, whatever the consequences to the one worker concerned. (155)

Martineau presents her “masculine” endeavors as not as conscious, contrived reactions against accepted gender “norms,” nor signs of her social aberration, but simply “the fulfillment of a natural function,—conducive to health of body and mind, instead of injurious to either” (Autobiography 155). Here Martineau seems to be describing what Alison Winter refers to as a “physiology of creativity,” a “welling-up of knowledge” that burst forth regardless of volition, and proves most damaging only when “unnaturally” held within (236).²²²

Resigned to the fact that medical doctors could not necessarily understand this physiology of creativity “because they were not similarly creative, and only personal

²²² Winter discusses the “physiology of creativity” in relation to Elizabeth Barrett’s career, and recounts Martineau’s advice to her fellow writer and invalid that she ought regularly “empty” herself of the utterances within so as to relieve the “burning and thrilling weight of poetry on [the] heart and brain” (qtd. in Winter 236).
knowledge of this state could allow one to know it” (Winter 236), Martineau confidently self-diagnosed and “treated” her innate authorial drive with an intensive prescription for work, even in the face of differing advice. In fact, she lamented the repeated misunderstandings that arose regarding her literary endeavors and their relationship to her body, writing, “Almost every one of [my friends and critics] has proceeded on the supposition that the labour of authorship involved immense ‘excitement;’ and I, who am the quietest of quiet bodies, when let alone in my business, have been warned against ‘excitement’ till I am fairly sick of the word”; she also mischievously reports the “satisfaction with which I find myself dying, after all, of a disease which nobody can positively attribute to over-work” (Autobiography 155).

Scholarly claims that Martineau’s illnesses arise solely as a result of her unresolved anxieties about authorship, or as a contrivance to create a “safe” space from which to write, disregard, then, her own estimations of her innate authorial drive, which she claims exists—and must be heeded—regardless of the state of her bodily health, and at times is even integral to it. To read Martineau’s invalidism as primarily a hypochondriacal retreat is to risk participating in the same kinds of oppressive diagnostic practices that Martineau’s vision of patient-centered, patient-controlled health care (explicated at length in Life in the Sick-Room), and her repeated calls for the primacy of personal testimony and self-assessment in regards to bodily experience, were meant to combat.

To cast doubt on the legitimacy of Martineau’s own understanding of and authority over her lived experience actually calls to mind one of the most difficult public
ordeal she ever faced, one which her obituary would acerbically deem “a curious sign of the times” (667) in which she lived (and, surely, of the era’s potential treatment of unapologetically outspoken women). I refer here to the backlash that arose following Martineau’s publication of her *Letters on Mesmerism*, in which she detailed how taking control of her own medical care, particularly through the unorthodox practices of mesmerism, resulted in a seemingly full recovery from conditions that male medical professionals had for years deemed decidedly incurable. Though Martineau regained the ability to leave her “couch of pain” for the first time in five years, her account of physical restoration was met with tactics meant to discredit and effectively disable her public persona, and to silence her in a way the sickroom never did.

Medical Men and Mesmerism: Martineau’s Public Trials

In 1839, while traveling through continental Europe, Martineau was struck by an immobilizing abdominal pain; the Venetian physicians who treated her concluded the problems stemmed from a prolapsed or enlarged uterus. Upon her immediate return to England, she established herself at Tynemouth and placed herself under the care of her elder sister Elizabeth’s husband, Dr. Thomas M. Greenhow, where she would remain, with little change in her condition, for the next five years.

In the early days of her invalidism, Martineau’s doctor-patient relationship with Greenhow and his associates can be characterized, in Caroline Roberts’s words, as one of “mutual cooperation” (109). Of the numerous physicians who attended Martineau’s case
(most under Greenhow’s urging, including Sir Charles Clarke, a leading practitioner of early midwifery), many were able to prescribe for their patient solely on the basis of Martineau’s descriptions of her own symptoms. These included irregular menstruation, abnormal vaginal discharges, groin pain, vomiting, a distended abdomen, the inability to walk, and “a membranous substance, like the end of a little finger” apparently projecting from the mouth of her uterus (Greenhow “Medical Report” 189). Frawley points out that Martineau also enjoyed “frequent and friendly” consultations with medical doctors, most notably Dr. Peter Latham and Sir Thomas Watson, throughout her life, their extensive correspondence offering evidence of reciprocal respect (Introduction 23).

It would be inaccurate to assume, then, that all nineteenth-century doctors invariably viewed their patients as objectified case-studies, or that Martineau’s (or any other female invalid’s) encounters with medical men were always disempowering. In fact, Martineau often sought the legitimizing power of medical authority to shore up her own assessment of her health, citing, for instance, official diagnoses of her purportedly incurable conditions in the face of critics’ sneering insinuations of hypochondria. She also publicly lauded even ineffectual courses of treatment suggested by her doctors as evidence of their true concern and dedication to her case; “Everything was done for me,” she asserted with confidence, “that the best medical skill and science could suggest” (Mesmerism 4). Martineau’s ideal arrangement, then, was one of a collaborative doctor-patient process of diagnosis and treatment. It was only when doctors’ deference toward her personal opinions and their valuation of her lived experience faltered that she found it necessary to contest or dismiss their established expertise.
And by 1843, Martineau was finding that her collaborative relationship with Greenhow was indeed beginning to deteriorate. After undergoing a series of failed treatments, which included prescriptions for everything from vaginal salt water injections, to iodide tablets, to leeches, to smoking cigars, Martineau was still experiencing daily pain and discomfort, and had also become completely dependent upon opiates as her only means of slight relief. Greenhow had declared that he was “compelled to give up all hope of affecting the disease”—an admittance that surprised his patient, coming as it did from, in Martineau’s words, “the most sanguine man I know, and the most bent on keeping his patients hopeful”—and would now focus only on “maintaining,” rather than curing, her condition (Mesmerism 4). Martineau claimed to take this discouraging diagnosis in stride, writing, “This was no surprise to me, for when any specific medicine is taken for above two years without affecting the disease, there is no more ground for hope in reason than in feeling” (4). However, she had privately lost confidence in Greenhow’s empathy and even expert understanding of her illness. In a letter to Fanny Wedgewood in early 1844 Martineau confided:

He [Greenhow] never was ill, and has not the remotest conception of the wear and tear of intellectual labor […] and clever as he is about the immediate concerns of illness, I shall not consult him about remoter influences upon it. Any trouble of nerves is curious and interesting to him when the proofs are before his eyes, but wholly inconceivable when not immediately visible. (qtd. in Arbuckle 75)

In other words, Greenhow lacked equivalent lived experiences of illness (and, interestingly, authorship), and thus the imaginative or empathetic capacity to understand fully—and thus treat properly—Martineau’s condition. Furthermore, his respect of her own diagnostic powers was apparently weak; Martineau’s testimony regarding her
symptoms and their possible causes meant nothing unless objective material “proofs” could be produced and examined. There is also ample indication that Greenhow generally doubted the legitimacy of Martineau’s claims of ill health; early Martineau biographer R. K. Webb insists that “her brother-in-law knew perfectly well that there was no malignity” (198), while Greenhow would later mockingly note that Martineau “seemed always best satisfied with anything approaching to an admission that she must ever remain a secluded invalid” (“Medical Report” 195). Faced with increasingly dismissive and skeptical medical care, then, it is no wonder Martineau began to seek alternative approaches.

Martineau was specifically careful not to denigrate Greenhow’s expert opinion in public (more likely for the sake of family allegiance and general professional decorum, I would argue, rather than any temerity induced by his comparative masculine, established position of authority). She did, however, suggest that his “hopeless” assessment of her case gave her immediate license to take over the management of her treatment. Martineau writes, “I felt myself not only at liberty, but in duty bound, to try, if possible, the only remaining resource for alleviation”; she also insists that “nobody in the world would undertake to say I was wrong in seeking even recovery by any harmless means, when every other hope was given up by all” (Mesmerism 4). By framing her actions as a “duty” she undertakes only after capable men have given up, Martineau deftly sidesteps accusations of willful, “unfeminine” rebellion against male authority while

223 Martineau recounts in Letters on Mesmerism how family ties kept her from questioning Greenhow privately even when she wanted to do so. She writes, “Tenderly guarded and cared for as I was by those who […] went even further than myself in deference for the ordinary medical science and practice, it was morally impossible for me to entertain the idea of trying Mesmerism while any hope was cherished from other means” (4). In other circumstances where not bound by familial loyalty, she had no qualms about disagreeing, often publicly, with male authorities, as demonstrated by her forceful communications with members of parliament and her counterattacks of male critics.
simultaneously offering a subtle critique of her doctors’ narrow-mindedness and essential abandonment of their post.

To stress even further that her eventual turn to mesmerism was not a break with established treatment, but a continuance, Martineau also claimed that her doctor sanctioned, and even brought about, her first trials of the controversial practice. She reports that Greenhow “himself brought over the Mesmerist under whom the first trial of [her] susceptibility was made” (Mesmerism 4). Greenhow’s own version of events did not contradict this; after witnessing one of the mid-nineteenth century’s many itinerant mesmerist lecturers, Spencer T. Hall, demonstrate his trade one evening in Newcastle, Greenhow brought him to Martineau’s bedside on June 22, 1844. Winter suggests that Greenhow may have been more open to mesmerism at this time since Martineau’s other brother-in-law, the Liverpool physician Alfred Higginson, had started to use mesmeric sessions to anesthetize his patients (221).224 However, if Greenhow was under the impression that he was to evaluate and control the ensuing mesmeric experiments, he would soon find himself sorely mistaken.

Before continuing the discussion of Martineau’s experience with mesmerism and its debated efficacy, it may be helpful to contextualize briefly the general state of the practice in mid-nineteenth-century Britain.225 Mesmerism, as Martineau experienced it, grew out of the theories of “animal magnetism” popularized by eighteenth-century Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer, who in the late 1770s developed a theory of

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224 Martineau recounts in the first of her Letters on Mesmerism that “a surgeon, a near relative of mine, had, to his own astonishment, operated on a person in the mesmeric sleep without causing pain” (5).
225 For an excellent in-depth analysis of this topic, see Winter’s Mesmerized.
inherent magnetic fluctuations within the human body and their relation to a person’s health. Out of these theories, Mesmer “elaborated a healing technique in which the physician could cure ailments by a simple laying on of hands, thereby using his own body’s inherent magnetism to restore the natural harmony of the magnetic field in the patient’s body” (Roberts 123). While often met with skepticism, if not outright indictment (particularly in Britain, where it did not attract widespread attention until the 1830s), Mesmer’s techniques grew in popularity, until the “mesmeric séance” was a familiar event. During the séance, mesmerists would make magnetic “passes” over a subject’s body (sometimes using metal rods or water in addition to their hands), until the subject eventually sunk into a trance. Trances were accompanied by a variety of experiences for the subject, from altered sensory powers to premonitory visions; mesmerists also claimed to be able to manipulate mentally the movements of entranced subjects, turning living men and women into virtual marionettes. Mesmeric sessions were perhaps most sought, however, for their purported healing potential, and after a half-decade spent in even the most productive invalidism, this was the effect Martineau found most enticing.

Martineau’s first mesmeric sessions with Hall produced instant, if not wholly expected or welcome, results: Martineau fell into a light trance in which she claimed to see, among other things, a luminous smoke envelope the room, and felt “heat, oppression, and sickness, and for a few hours after, disordered stomach,” which gave away over the course of the evening to a distinct sense of “lightness and relief” (Mesmerism 5-6). The next day brought yet another session with the visiting lecturer, in which the same
middling results were achieved. On the third day, however, Hall’s schedule prevented another visit; it was then that Martineau took the bold step of managing her own séance. In *Letters on Mesmerism*, she recounts the subsequent life-altering events in detail:

… I rang for my maid, and asked whether she had any objection to attempt what she saw Mr. Hall do the day before. With the greatest alacrity she complied. Within one minute the twilight and phosphoric lights appeared; and in two or three more, a delicious sensation of ease spread through me,—a cool comfort, before which all pain and distress gave way, oozing out, as it were, at the soles of my feet. During that hour, and almost the whole evening, I could no more help exclaiming with pleasure than a person in torture crying out with pain. I became hungry, and ate with relish, for the first time for five years. There was no heat, oppression, or sickness during the séance, nor any disorder afterwards. During the whole evening, instead of the lazy hot ease of opiates, under which pain is felt to lie in wait, I experienced something of the indescribable sensation of health, which I had quite lost and forgotten. (6)

In a fascinating turn of events, then, Martineau’s maid-of-all-work managed to induce far more satisfying—indeed, nearly orgasmic, as Martineau’s cries of pleasure suggest—effects in one amateur session of magnetic “passing” than had the alleged male expert. Ironically, this democratizing nature of mesmerism was one of the very things championed by Hall in his lecture tour (and seen as potentially dangerous by the practice’s critics). A former stocking-maker, Hall argued that mesmerism, rooted as it was in simple, natural, and universal law, was a science and philosophy in which “common people” could readily take part and practice; unlike orthodox medicine, there need not necessarily be a divide between elite producers and passive, popular consumers of this form of knowledge (Winter 130-2). Hall was soon after dismissed, quite amicably, from Martineau’s case, thus ending the only mesmerist interventions Greenhow had tepidly sanctioned, and Martineau chose to continue the sessions with her maid for the next three months, until the fall of 1844.

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However, mesmerist proponents stressed it was “important, if not necessary, that the predominance of will should be in the Mesmerist, not the patient,” and Martineau soon perceived “the subordination [as] being in the wrong party” in her maid-mistress equation.226 Additionally, though mesmerism could be performed by any lay person—and was, Martineau’s account stresses, practiced by her maid quite successfully—Martineau felt her particular ailments were severe enough that only someone “so familiar with the practice of Mesmerism as to be able to keep a steady eye on the end” could treat her effectively (Mesmerism 7). Therefore, she soon enlisted the services of an established mesmerist, the widowed Mrs. Montague Wynyard, to continue her treatment. Under the care of Wynyard, who herself claimed to have been cured by mesmerism after a dreadful marriage had destroyed her health, Martineau saw her condition continually improve.227 Only days after Wynyard’s arrival, Martineau reported to have set “foot on the grass for the first time in four years and a half” (7), and felt herself nearly entirely recovered from the gynecological complaints by early November.228

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226 This observation is not indicative of Martineau’s belief that her maid, by virtue of her class, was herself a poor choice of mesmerist, but rather that the employee-employer roles they had already long occupied troubled their new mesmeric exchange of “wills.” In an 1838 piece for the Westminster Review, Martineau had lamented that the current system of domestic service in England combined the worst evils of slavery and of contract labor, with “the requisition of obedience and subjection to caprice of the first, and the uncertainty of maintenance of the last”; she also observed that “free, friendly intercourse is scarcely possible” between the mistress and maid, though fault lies in the system rather than the individuals, as it makes the interests of both parties appear at war (222). Therefore Martineau’s substitution of Mrs. Wynyard for her maid does not deny the democratizing aspect of mesmerism, or suggest classism at work in Martineau’s approach to mesmeric treatment; as I explain below, other working-class women will successfully mesmerize Martineau later. See Martineau’s “Domestic Service” reprinted in The London and Westminster Review (New York: Jemima M. Lewer, 1838): 219-232.

227 According to Martineau’s letter to Richard Monckton Milnes, Mrs. Wynyard had been once been married to an “abominable husband, paid all his debts twice, refused a third time, for which she was much abused by his family; got into wretched health, was mesmerised… and entirely cured” (qtd. in Winter 222).

228 Notably, Martineau did not expect (nor did she experience) any significant change in her hearing after the mesmeric sessions, due to the fact of, as she explained in a personal letter, “the form of the ears being changed by long disuse of the one and an artificial use of the other” (qtd. in Arbuckle 80)
Winter points out that Martineau most likely would have felt far more comfortable “submitting” temporarily to Wynyard—a woman of a similar social background as her own, simply lacking the financial security that Martineau had earned through her writing—than the more typical male mesmerist, out of the fear that the traditional gender dynamics at work in such sessions might threaten “her recent success in establishing independence and authority,” or lead to unwanted public appropriation of her story (mesmerists like Hall would presumably use their trials on established figures like Martineau as material for their speaking tours) (223). In the private sessions between the two women, however, the roles between subject and mesmerist were not characterized by overt power struggle, but collaboration; Wynyard ostensibly “controlled” Martineau during the mesmeric trance, but under Martineau’s strict direction: “To have her will uppermost is just what I want,” Martineau declared (qtd. in Winter 222). Additionally, the roles between mesmerist and subject were far more fluid than those of a more traditional doctor and patient (as Wynyard’s easy move from one to the other demonstrates); thus, Martineau was able to learn mesmeric strategies from Wynyard and subsequently use them on others, until she and her companion were together managing a sort of private mesmerist practice out of her new home in the Lake District. Importantly, Martineau and Wynyard took on a number of mesmerist clients who had been failed—or rejected, in the case of one particular “fallen” woman—by

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229 Martineau was later impressed that Hall refrained from this expected behavior. Although he did mention his connection with Martineau in a few early advertisements, Martineau recounts that on the whole he “remained honourably silent, till he had [her] express permission to tell the story when and where he pleased. When he did tell it, it was with absolute accuracy” (Autobiography 465).

230 In Autobiography, Martineau details her treatment of a girl who had been lately “seduced” Though neighbors caution her not to welcome the “fallen” woman into her treatment, Martineau recalls: “On
more traditional medical care; “Why not?” she asked in Autobiography of her intervention in these cases, “[…] if the doctors would do nothing more for the patient?” (500).

In the months following her embrace of mesmerism, then, Martineau’s home became a space of cooperation and identification between women from many walks of life: Wynyard acted as Martineau’s mesmerist; together, Wynyard and Martineau mesmerized other women; these women were then trained to perform mesmerism themselves, and some even began treating Martineau, thus bringing the process full circle. Indeed, the feminocentric mesmerist haven Martineau establishes in her home contradicts the common modern-day understanding of mesmerism as a practice predicated on masculine authority and feminine submission. This society also belies Martineau’s reputed (in her own time, as well as today) derisive attitudes toward many female acquaintances. Though her quarrels with Margaret Fuller, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot are well known and often discussed in scholarship, Martineau’s productive relationships with the women in her mesmeric practice (not to mention her full catalog of female friendships as recorded in the Autobiography) reveal her active participation in and embrace of female community. In addition to incorporating Wynyard—whom

inquiry, we found that she had long been repentant and reformed, so that she was now an esteemed member of the Methodist body; so we did not dismiss her to disease and death, but with the sanction of my landlady, let her come while we remained at Tynemouth” (469 n. 2). This is the same girl who later will be purposely confounded with Jane Arrowsmith by unscrupulous journalists.

For an extended discussion of Martineau’s often-fraught relationships with other women, see Logan’s chapter “Not Fine Ladies, but True-Hearted Englishwomen” in The Hour and The Woman, and Elizabeth Arbuckle’s “Harriet Martineau and Her Feminine ‘Tail’” in Women’s Writing 9.3 (2002): 445-459. Both Logan and Arbuckle acknowledge Martineau’s reputation for feuding with some other prominent women but also demonstrate the intense and loyal friendships she developed with women who were out of the public eye (like Julia Smith and Isabella Rankin), as well as those who were her intellectual equals, and thus potential rivals (for instance, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Anna Jameson).
Martineau claimed to “cordially respect and love” (qtd. in Winter 222)—into the household and providing mesmerist services for a number of (primarily female) clients, Martineau created a new domestic “family” out of “young servants whom I might train and attach to myself” (Autobiography 485)—girls Martineau reportedly “treated like daughters” (Pichanick 130). One of these pseudo-daughters was Jane Arrowsmith, an orphaned, uneducated, and unhealthy servant girl who, under Martineau’s tutelage and Wynyard’s treatment, would become a well-known, powerful somnambulist, who on one infamous occasion accurately foretold a shipwreck and the fate of its crew during a mesmeric trance.232

This is not to say that Martineau’s female community was completely egalitarian, of course; that Martineau chose servant “daughters” to “train” indicates that hierarchal structures still very much in place.233 However, this does not diminish the importance of the moments of cross-class identification and cooperation that, I argue, did occur behind her doors. Though Martineau occupied a clear position of authority in her various roles of employer, mentor, or pseudo-“mother” to women like Jane Arrowsmith, mesmerism

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232 Details of this famous instance of Arrowsmith’s prognostication can be found in Letters on Mesmerism, pp. 12-13.
233 As early as 1836, Martineau had imagined the formation of a female community that disregarded class structures, writing in her journal: “I should like to see the economy of association made use of by women; to see them living in a sort of club-house, enjoying comfort and luxury, rather than dispersed in poverty among boarding-houses and schools: but there must be […] no distinction between rich and poor, no ostentation about schools attached. Simple, living without other restraints” (qtd. in Chapman 321). This did not mean, however, that she imagined no hierarchical system would be in place, specifically one organized according to merit in place of class (conceivably in reference to such qualities as intelligence, industry, skill set, etc.). And, considering the quirks of Martineau’s personality, it is only natural she would have imagined herself (based on the aforementioned qualities) as a leader; as Arbuckle argues in “Harriet Martineau and Her Feminine ‘Tail,’” Martineau’s “forceful personality meant that friendships with women who did not challenge her authority lasted longest.” Arbuckle suggests this was because “dependents offered Martineau unquestioning support while equals might threaten the autonomy necessary for her writing” (456-7).
required at least temporary leveling of these hierarchies: for instance, Martineau recounts submitting herself to Arrowsmith’s superior mesmeric and diagnostic powers, only one time refusing to accept Arrowsmith’s prescription of brandy before bed, “till reminded—‘Remember, she has never been wrong’—[Martineau] obeyed” (*Mesmerism* 11). Part of this may be attributed to the supposed process of mesmerism itself, which was thought quite literally to “dissolve the boundaries between two people or to subsume one person’s identity in another’s” (Winter 119). For the moments that Martineau and Arrowsmith were locked in a mesmeric trance together, distinguishable (and classed) selves were theoretically erased. Furthermore, not only did Martineau’s chosen treatment enable greater identification with others, but so did her original ailment. Frawley has remarked that of all the “truths” Martineau attempts to impart in *Life in the Sick-Room*, none is more frequently invoked “than that of the ‘class un-consciousness’ of the chronically ill” (*Invalidism* 230). Martineau wrote of the leveling quality of pain, in which the “proud” and “humble” alike are equally prone to illness, and commented that the invalid is “apt to forget, till expressly reminded, the importance of distinctions of rank and property in society, so nearly as they vanish in our survey of life, in comparison with moral differences” (*Life* 103).\footnote{Of course, Martineau’s statement here ignores the fact that only the middle-class invalid had the luxury of forgetting “distinctions of rank and property in society” while in the (relative) comfort of their sickroom. Working-class men and women often could not “retire” into invalidism, as their very survival depended on continued labor and wage-earning.} That many of the lower-class women Martineau treated—and in turn was sometimes treated by—were themselves chronically ill or disabled made them, at least according to Martineau’s *Sick-Room* logic, decidedly members of her own “class”: the “class of sufferers” (*Life* 101).
As Martineau’s involvement with mesmerism grew, it became nearly impossible
to keep the news of her unexpected recovery (and its surprising cause) confidential.
Martineau had been initially reluctant to broadcast her experiences; “It was not so much
that the clergy here would burn us for witches,” she wrote to W.J. Fox, “as that I did not
choose the effects of what might be temporary exhilaration to get abroad, lest a relapse
should tell against Mesmerism” (qtd. in Sanders Letters 101). Though the witchcraft
reference betrays her acute awareness of the potential backlash that awaited the
unorthodox, female-centered space she had created—particularly one that stood in
apparent defiance of representatives of patriarchal authority like Greenhow (whose
treatment at this point she had completely rejected, causing a painful familial rift)—
Martineau posits her “real” reason for hesitation as in line with the principles of rational
experimentation. Unbeknownst to her, however, various advocates of mesmerism began
to publish mistaken reports of the famed writer’s successful trial in newspapers, often
“ridiculing the doctors for their repugnance to it”; these, in turn, “drew out from the
grossest and more ignorant of the medical profession […] speculations, comments, and
narratives […] foolish and utterly false in regard to facts” (Martineau Autobiography
465). Seeing a clamor arise about her own embodied experiences that lacked her own
voice, Martineau had no other choice but to set the record straight.

235 Martineau often compared the early treatment of witches to the persecution of mesmerists; in Letters on
Mesmerism, she recalls Jane Arrowsmith telling a story about a woman being ducked in the sea for trying
to heal people: “‘Now,’ said she, to her Mesmerist, ‘this is the way they would have treated you then; and
maybe burnt you: but they know better now’” (15). Martineau also wrote that “if any friend of mine had
been lying in a suffering and hopeless state for nearly six years, and if she had fancied she might get well
by […] reciting charms or bestriding a broomstick, I should have helped her to try” (464). For more
information about Martineau’s own historical research and personal interest in the treatment of witches, see
Susan Hoecker-Drysdale’s “Witch Hunts and Enlightenment: Harriet Martineau’s Critical Reflections on
Salem” in Advancing Gender Research from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Centuries, eds. Segal and
Demos (Bingley, UK: JAI Press, 2008) 7-22.
On November 23, 1844, the first of Martineau’s “Letters on Mesmerism” was printed in the *Athenaeum*, a publication she had specifically chosen for its educated, professional male audience. She explained:

> After much consideration, it seemed to me best to send to (not a newspaper, but) a scientific journal, a simple narrative of the facts,—making no allusion to anything already published, but so offering the story as to lift it out of the professional mire into which it had been dragged, and to place it on its right ground as a matter of scientific observation. (*Autobiography* 465-6)

Martineau also appreciated that the *Athenaeum’s* editor, Charles Wentworth Dilke, was a known unbeliever in mesmerism, as she “wanted to address an Establishment readership and not just the converted” (Roberts 126). Over the course of seven essays, the last of which would appear on December 21, Martineau outlined in detail the specifics of her own course of mesmeric treatment (including the various visions and revelations that came to her during her entranced states, along with her physical restoration), related the remarkable effects that had been produced on and by Jane Arrowsmith, and generally offered rational justification for undertaking such experiments at all. In particular, she hoped other invalids might not be faulted for seeking alternative healing methods, as she had done: “Though the science of medicine may be exhausted in any particular case, it does not follow that a curative means is exhausted,” Martineau wrote, subsequently insisting that it is also more “rational to seek a way to refreshment first, and then to health, amidst this wilderness of ignorances, rather than to lie perishing in their depths” (*Mesmerism* 9). Additionally, Martineau was insistent that her agenda was not to promote

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236 Though Martineau’s “Letters on Mesmerism” were initially published as a series in the *Athenaeum*, they were eventually published as a single volume; I use this 1845 book edition, which was distributed under the title *Miss Martineau’s Letters on Mesmerism*, as my source for the quotations throughout this chapter.
mesmeric healing at all costs—“If found untrue, Mesmerism may then be ‘exploded’” she readily offered (20)—but to simply ensure that observable evidence, rather than preconceived scorn, provided the basis of all conclusions regarding its curative potential.

In her final letter, Martineau directly addressed medical doctors who sought to suppress accounts of mesmerism’s efficacy and “common” accessibility in misguided attempts to bolster their existing professional authority, cautioning that “objects of reverence [are] desecrated, not sanctified, by attempted restriction of truth, or of research into it” (26). After ending her series with this call for open minds, Martineau must have been disappointed by what immediately followed; in the very next Athenaean issue, Dilke published a scathing response to her account, attacking everything from the legitimacy of her initial invalidism to her current claims of wellness.237 Roberts paraphrases Dilke’s stance: “[Martineau] was an incompetent witness. She lacked special knowledge of medicine, and, as a consequence, none of her statements respecting her own health or the means of recovery, if she did recover, merited respect” (126). Over the next several months, the Athenaean would publish a series of similar attacks on both the content of Martineau’s “Letters” and the woman herself. Martineau claimed in Autobiography that the journal eventually “gave public notice it would receive communications from our adversaries, and not from us” (466). Several other medical journals, including the Lancet, the British and Foreign Medical Review, and the London Medical Gazette published similar dismissals of Martineau’s narrative, with the general

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237 This piece was “A Few Words By Way of Comment on Miss Martineau’s Statement,” Athenaean 896 (28 Dec. 1844): 1198-9. Though published without credit, Roberts cites it as Dilke’s own work; Winters credits it as a piece commissioned by Dilke but penned Sir Benjamin Collins Brodie, president of the Royal College of Surgeons. Regardless of its precise composition, the views expressed in “Comment” were understood by Martineau and other Athenaean readers to be Dilke’s own.
consensus seemingly being that “Martineau could not participate in medical debates […] because there could be no distinction made between her and her disease” (Winter 227). Meanwhile, Dilke even attempted to prohibit Martineau’s “Letters” from being republished as a complete pamphlet, and thus effectively bar Martineau’s version of events from reaching a larger audience; however, this effort ultimately failed.  

Jane Arrowsmith also became the target of printed vitriol, and was promptly deemed a fraud whose mistress was well aware of the “misrepresentation” she imposed upon the public (“Miss Martineau on Mesmerism” 291). In a particularly frightening turn of events, Martineau alleged that under direct inducements from the Athenaeum, two medical men came to Arrowsmith’s home and attempted to force her with threats of imprisonment to sign a “declaration that she had been guilty of imposture throughout” (Autobiography 505). This was not the first time Arrowsmith’s body, the contested site of her mesmeric powers, was menaced in a supposed search for truth; Greenhow’s nephew Headlam, also a physician, had once perpetrated a “brutal assault” on her during her mesmeric sleep, having “wrenched her arm, and employed usage which would have been cruelly rough in her ordinary state,” in an effort to break the alleged performance (Mesmerism 16).  

When such physical abuses produced no results, Arrowsmith’s reputation was the next logical site of attack. Martineau’s Autobiography details how

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238 Martineau had received no payment for the initial articles, and thus claimed the Athenaeum had no rights to them; Dilke attempted to argue that he had “given money on account of the ‘Letters’ to some charity” but ultimately was unable to produce any proof (Autobiography 467).

239 Headlam Greenhow had attended unsuccessfully to Jane’s eye complaints, and would later join his voice to the chorus of letters to Athenaeum. Martineau reflects upon this fact angrily in her letters to Fanny Wedgwood; see Arbuckle 80. Roberts points out that such violent treatment of female mesmerist subjects had a precedence among the medical community; she outlines the brutal strategies that the famed somnambulist sisters Elizabeth and Jane O’Key were subjected to “to detect the counterfeit of supposed bodily insensibility in the mesmerized state,” including being punched, pinched, stabbed with needles, and electrically shocked (129-30).
physicians and journalists falsely publicized that “Jane of Tynemouth was a girl of loose character, too well known among the officers there” (469 n.2).

These kinds of attacks had a precedence within the era’s debates about mesmerism; as Winter explains, many female mesmeric subjects (particularly young, working-class ones like Arrowsmith) were accused of “a kind of abstracted prostitution, a perverse manipulation of men’s appetites for intellectual excitement” or monetary gain (101). They also carried similar “contagious” associations, spreading supposed “deception and dishonor” through their public, bodily performances in the same matter prostitutes might spread disease. Indeed, part of the anxiety about mesmerism within the medical community was rooted in the potentially uncontrollable and uncontained power of the supposedly “controlled” subject. Again and again, public demonstrations of mesmerism exhibited mesmeric subjects whose wildly unpredictable behaviors resulted in personal revelations about (or restorations of) the state of their own health; this presented the unsettling possibility that “animal magnetism produced the opposite of the quiescent, deferential patient of reformist medicine” (Winter 96), who was expected to submit wholly, body and will, to rational (equating, at the time, “male”) medical expertise rooted in established scientific principles.

In publishing a full account of her mesmerist experiments on the heels of her earlier authoritative statements on deafness and invalidism, Martineau too had effected a kind of “infectious” spread of alternative understandings of and approaches to embodied experiences. And spread it did, with her original run in the Athenaeum being reprinted three times over to meet rabid reader demand, her bound edition of Letters on Mesmerism
selling out in four days, and she reportedly being buried beneath letters from fellow invalids who wished to replicate her mesmeric recovery, even in the face of opposing medical advice. Even as she urged physicians to participate in and eventually lead the study of mesmerism, Martineau openly questioned the primacy and competence of existing medical practices and suggested that the ultimate authority over one’s body belongs to the individual him- or, importantly, herself. There is little wonder, then, that Dilke and his associates attempted to use legal means to prevent her from sharing this message outside the *Athenaeum*’s initial audience of professional gentlemen. Her implicit model of self-assertion and self-government undermined the very “scientific revolution” that was occurring in Victorian medicine, in which a patient’s subjective experience and agency were receding before the expert authority of the clinician.240

Therefore, while the onslaught of contemptuous criticism that met Martineau’s mesmerism letters might easily be read as misogynistically motivated—that is, a woman was attempting to insert herself into an exclusive masculine arena, and thus was met with ridicule—I want to argue that a more complex impulse is at work, one in which Martineau’s feminine lack of authority is not the problem; rather, her firmly established (and virtually de-gendered) authority is. By the mid 1840s, Martineau had been a well-known public figure for over a decade, and had built her career on authoritative interventions into male-dominated discussions of everything from local taxation to and international politics. Regardless of her position as a woman, then, her public influence was already far-reaching and effective long before she turned her attention to issues of

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240 Frawley offers an extended discussion of this “revolution” in *Invalidism and Identity*, pp. 52-60. 254
mesmerism and medicine, appearing to usurp her own physician’s place (and implicitly to suggest that her readers do the same).

Members of the medical community who were threatened by her account of mesmerism did not criticize Martineau because she was a woman, then; however, in order to combat the “ungendered rationality” (Ryall 44) she successfully wielded, they actively employed tactics to remind the world that she was indeed was one, and an improper, pathological one at that. In doing so, they took a page from earlier critics who had attempted to discredit Martineau’s discussions of population control in her *Political Economy* series by gratuitously highlighting her “maiden” status. Responding to her implicit call for birth control options (expressed through a character’s desire for a “preventative check”) in her 1832 story “Weal and Woe in Garveloch,” John Wilson Croker famously cast Martineau as at worst an unnatural monster—“a woman who thinks child-bearing a crime against society! An unmarried woman who declaims against marriage!!” (151, original emphasis)—and at best an attractive child, a “poor innocent!” whose naiveté on sexual matters was “not unbecoming” but not appropriate for tackling such “ticklish topics” (141).

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241 “Weal and Woe in Garveloch” features a female character named Katie Cuthbert who decides to “check” her poor community’s growing population by refusing to marry (and thus, refusing to reproduce), in a move based on Thomas Malthus’s famous (and controversial) 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*. In Martineau’s story, Katie’s resolve appears as something of a tragedy, as it keeps her from marrying the man she truly loves. By not stating an alternative between “tragic” celibacy and unwanted fertility, the story was seen as implicitly urging for birth control to become part of the nineteenth-century conversation.

242 Bohrer also offers a fascinating reading about the other statements Croker made against Martineau in this particular review, including Croker’s references to “queans” and “Laputa,” both of which Bohrer argues resonate with implications of “whore” (33). Though Croker published this attack on Martineau anonymously, Martineau was aware he had written the review under the editorship of John Gibson Lockhart; she subsequently coined the word “Crokerism” in her editorial “Criticism on Women” to identify the particularly kind of reputation-smearing Croker engaged in against her.
By 1844, however, Martineau’s extensive autobiographical publications made it clear that she was well aware of the state of her own female physiology, and dismissals of her writings on the body as “naïve” would no longer be effective. Thus, her very impulse to discuss such topics openly had to be recast as evidence not of mature authority, but a depraved and exhibitionist appetite. This is the strategy employed in a particularly venomous editorial that appeared in an 1847 issue of the *Lancet* that claimed that, driven by some “moral pica,” the “celebrated authoress of the preventative check parades her diseased vagina and os uteri as it were in a public speculum before the general gaze […] in a manner to have made our grandmothers sink into the earth for shame” (“Mesmeric Deceptions” 178-9). Here Martineau’s self-exposure in texts like *Letters on Mesmerism* is either deserving of shame or indicative of madness, but regardless proves that she is decidedly out of control.

In essence, Martineau’s critics sought to make her a “fallen” woman, one whose voice and message become inseparable from the chaos and contamination of her female body; thus the knowledge she attempts to offer becomes a veritable forbidden fruit, itself diseased, dangerous, and rightfully dismissed. The illicit sexual associations that already surrounded mesmerism—in which one person “penetrated” another’s body with his or her “vital principle”—made its participants easily susceptible to these kinds of accusations, and rumors of “magnetic orgies” at Tynemouth flew (Elizabeth Barrett, notably, was confused and aghast at such gossip against her friend, lamenting to Mary Russell Mitford, “But [Martineau] was magnetized by a woman … How dare they say it
Additionally, if detractors could claim Arrowsmith was a real prostitute, Martineau appeared as good as one, “selling” her self and story as public wares.

Interestingly, and perhaps strategically, Martineau did not actually receive immediate compensation for her most personal pieces of self-exposure, particularly those centered on revelations about her own body. For instance, Martineau purportedly accepted no initial payment from the publisher of *Life in the Sick-Room*, claiming she “could not bear to think of selling such an experience while in the midst of it” (*Autobiography* 451). She had also published her story of mesmeric recovery in the *Athenaeum* for free. Nonetheless, a graphic open account of her body and experience was soon on general sale in early 1845, in the form of cheap pamphlet entitled “Medical Report of the Case of Miss H___ M___.” This was the work of Thomas Greenhow, who, justifiably concerned that Martineau’s account of the past autumn’s events put his professional reputation at risk, took it upon himself to publish his own version of the case. However, whereas Martineau had been reticent in print about the precise symptoms of her gynecological complaints, stating bluntly in her “Letters” that “this is not the place in which to give any details of disease” and referring to it simply as an “internal” complaint (4), Greenhow was far from discreet. His pamphlet exhaustively recounted the numerous vaginal examinations he had performed on his patient, detailed the appearance of her irregular uterine discharges (“of a brown or yellowish color [...] mixed with clotted

243 Ironically, some aspects of mesmeric sessions were conversely viewed as more in line with the traditional habits and sensibilities of Victorians than were the new sickroom routines brought about by the medical reform movement. For instance, the physical examination of patients’ bodies and the removal of clothing were viewed by many as “breaches of propriety,” compared to which the mere “passes” of the mesmerist appeared conservative (Winter 159).
blood”), and offered crude depictions of the polypus tumors (“like a bullock’s tongue”) (189). For all its appearance of a standardized case-study—and Greenhow’s own proclaimed motivations of “calm and dispassionate inquiry” (188)—what actually emerges from “Medical Report” is a testament to how difficult it was merely to objectify a powerful figure like Martineau. Rather, she appears throughout Greenhow’s pages as a body made, much like that of proverbial fallen woman, abject; a thing alive only as a monster of pathological femininity, literalized in the lurid spectacle of her misshapen, malfunctioning uterus “pregnant” with unnatural growths.

The pamphlet also sought to bring this disorderly female body back under “proper” medical, and ideally masculine, control. While acknowledging the validity of Martineau’s apparent recovery, Greenhow also resolutely denied it had been brought about by mesmerism. Instead, he suggested Martineau’s recovery was in line with, and perhaps caused by, his more traditional line of treatment and diagnosis, pointing out that though she “ceased to be properly under [his] care” once she took up with Wynyard, his prescribed list of remedies (i.e. iodide of iron pills, opiates, pessaries, etc.) were “not yet laid aside” for some time (189). Greenhow also claimed, contrary to Martineau’s insistence that her case had been deemed “hopeless,” that he knew that “no symptoms of malignant disease of the affected organ existed” and thus always expected she would recover; the mesmeric treatment had merely coincided with the “natural sequel of progressive improvements,” and, as most of her complaints appeared purely psychological, “a new and powerful stimulus only was required to enable the enthusiastic mind of my patient to shake them off” (195).
Greenhow’s version of events thus reclaims Martineau’s recovery as a victory for established medical science while simultaneously casting her own understanding of her experience as rooted in at best imagination and feminine ignorance, at worst hypochondria and stubborn foolishness. In one fell swoop, he bolsters his own professional authority by subjugating her own. Yet the authority of Martineau’s published account is not the only thing overthrown in this move; more importantly, in Roberts’s words, Greenhow “subjugated her by turning her into an object of (common) knowledge” (109, my emphasis). Greenhow’s choice to publish his rebuttal in the form of an inexpensive English pamphlet, affordable enough for any middle-class reader to attain, quite literally made Martineau a “public woman”; for a shilling, any member of the general public could effectively access the innermost workings of the famed author’s private body.

Greenhow claimed to have the “entire concurrence of the patient” in publishing the details of her illness and treatment, and implied that her communications to the Athenaeum demonstrated her willingness—and perhaps, it was insinuated, desire—for this very type of exposure. However, as with her related concerns over the publication of her personal letters, it was not the exposure itself Martineau would object to but its unregulated availability. She later explained in Autobiography that she had expected Greenhow to publish the case “in a Medical Journal, where nobody but the profession would ever had seen it, and where I should never have heard of it,—but in a shilling
pamphlet,—not even written in Latin,—but open to all the world!” (467 n.1). Instead, Greenhow had effected a promiscuous display of Martineau’s “self” without her consent, failing to recognize (or if we may read his actions more maliciously, specifically in reaction to) the fact that Martineau’s previous “exposures” had been carefully crafted to maintain her privacy even as they edified the public. Martineau’s refusal to be ashamed of her embodied experience (coupled with her audacious claim of sole control over her own person) was falsely equated with a wanton disregard for established codes of feminine modesty, and a punitive kind of excessive exploitation ensued.

The imputation of Martineau’s “fallenness,” however, was ultimately bound to fail, despite the best efforts of her critics. While monstrous associations could indeed surround both women writers and old maids, Martineau’s well-established reputation as an aged, eminent lady of respectable letters ensured her body was read as mostly blameless of the real transgressions required to deem a woman impure.

244 Winter suggests that the choice to publish in an inexpensive pamphlet might not be indicative of malice on Greenhow’s part, but rather reflects the “lack of consolidation and authority within the medical profession” at the time and the general public’s perceived importance in deciding the status of mesmerism (228). Nonetheless, Greenhow’s statement that he “forgot” to tell Martineau about the change of publication plan from medical journal to public pamphlet (as explained in Autobiography 467 n.1) seems highly suspect.

245 Bohrer discusses how some nineteenth-century reviewers saw Martineau, and many of her fellow women writers, as “distinctly extraordinary breed, a kind of intellectual hermaphrodite” who could be characterized as metaphorically grotesque: as “the exceptional woman, she figures forth an outrageous body, her abilities disproportionate to the brain she’s allocated” so that her “accomplishments as a female verge on the monstrous” (24). Likewise, some mid nineteenth-century treatises offered depictions of the physical and mental deformity (itself also understood as usually hermaphroditic) of the old maid. For instance, the anonymous text “Women in Her Psychological Relations” (1851) warned that, in addition to “moral insanity,” women who remained celibate well into middle age would experience “a corresponding change in the outer form, [which] becomes angular, the body lean, the skin wrinkled […] Sometimes, indeed, the male characteristics are in part developed […] and a hoarser voice accompanies a slight development of the beard […] This monstrous metamorphosis eventually “renders her repulsive to man […] and offensive to her own sex” (175). For this and other excerpts of Victorian texts that depict “monstrous” women, see Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830-1890, eds. Jenny Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Oxford UP, 1998).
commentators outside of the London medical community were outraged by the indiscretion and personal animosity apparent in Greenhow’s “Medical Report” and similar publications, and spoke out against them. Martineau eventually claimed, “[T]he sympathy of all the world,—even of the medical profession,—was by [Greenhow’s] act secured to me,” and that “the whole affair presently passed from my mind” (Autobiography 467 n.1). The only real consequence she would admit was the loss of a relationship with her sister Elizabeth, as she cut off complete contact with Greenhow and his family by mid-1845; privately, however, she confided in friends that the experience had taken a great toll on her, confessing, “I almost thought I should never sleep again” (qtd. in Sanders Letters 107).  

Martineau did not put her ordeal completely to rest, however, and if her detractors had meant to disable the personal power she had long sought to establish, both as a public intellectual and over her private life and person, the effect was quite the opposite. Rather, Martineau was now uniquely equipped to be in the “service of unhappy women” as she had long desired, particularly in the face of forces poised to strip away their semblance of self-government in the name of a sexual double standard disguised as biomedical authority.

The Public Women’s Political Campaign

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Martineau’s early references to Greenhow’s actions were as a mere “blunder of my well-meaning but stupid bro: Greenhow,—of who the less said the better”; she also insisted that, “There is no quarrel between us; but I can never again enable him to speak of my health” (qtd. in Sanders 107). Later, however, she would admit, “I could never again hold intercourse with one from whom I had so suffered” (Autobiography 467 n.1).
In *Life in the Sick-Room*, Martineau proclaimed, “The privacy I claim for myself, I carefully guard for others” (94). Although at the time she was referring to her desire to keep personal correspondence private, her words are also applicable to the last public effort of her life, in which Martineau found herself defending the privacy and autonomy of women who were under the kind of excessive, nonconsensual medical scrutiny she herself had known all too well.

Following her apparent full recovery from the gynecological problems and the devastating backlash from the medical community (a reaction she described acerbically in her own obituary as “as a penalty for getting well when she was expected to die” [667]), Martineau’s subsequent publications dealt less directly with her personal experiences of embodiment than did her earlier works. However, her attention noticeably turned outwards toward the health of others, as evidenced by her weekly columns on the health hazards of various working-class occupations (i.e. the maid of all work, the baker, the steel-grinder, etc.) in the periodical *Once a Week* and her collaborations with Nightingale on larger issues of nursing professionalization and military sanitary reform, which produced 1859’s *England and Her Soldiers*. 247 A specific kind of public activism, then, was already arising from Martineau’s personal experience of illness and her method of recovery, and the literal “connection” with other minds and bodies these experiences had involved.

247 For a full discussion of Martineau’s *Once a Week* articles, see Maria Frawley’s “Harriet Martineau, Health, and Journalism.” Nightingale provided Martineau with confidential reports from her nursing commission regarding “grossly mismanaged health care” of soldiers during the Crimean War, from which Martineau produced *England and Our Soldiers*; its enthusiastic reception led Martineau to write more updates on the British Army with recommendations for improved sanitation procedures, food supplies, shelter, and transport for soldiers. Deegan provides a detailed discussion of these reports in “Harriet Martineau and the Sociology of Health.”
Having devoted so much thought to issues of public and private health in the preceding two decades, then, it is no wonder that Martineau was one of the first prominent female voices to sound the alarm regarding Britain’s Contagious Diseases Acts, some five years before repeal groups like the LNA would be formed. Beginning in the early 1860s, British legislators began to consider a “regulationist” approach (much like ones already in place at this time in Belgium and France) to what was perceived as the growing danger of uncontrolled female prostitution, specifically in relation to the propagation of sexually transmitted diseases. Citing prostitutes who serviced military camps, and the venereal diseases that their services presumably spread, as literal threats to national security, an 1864 “Act for the Prevention of Contagious Disease” was passed affecting eight garrisons and dockyard towns in England.\footnote{Walkowitz writes that by 1864, one in three sick cases treated by the British army were venereal in origin (49); thus, there was apparent cause for concern.} According to this Act, any woman identified—or even suspected—by police and magistrates as a “common prostitute” could be subjected to medical examination and, if found to have a contagious venereal disease, incarcerated in a lock hospital for as long as three months; the penalty for refusing to submit to the initial examination was itself imprisonment.\footnote{“Lock” hospitals were hospitals that specialized in the treatment of venereal disease, usually syphilis.} In an updated 1866 Act, the policed geographical area was widened, and the proposed “sanitary” detention extended to six months, with compulsory religious and moral instruction added to the lock hospital regime. Additionally, the 1866 Act reflected a “pronounced medicalisation of the system” (Howell 42), in which the earlier powers of the magistrate were effectively replaced by the powers of medical officers; doctors were now able to
order the arrest of women who failed to present themselves for “voluntary” examinations. In 1869, yet another iteration of the Act was passed, in which even more subjected districts were added. Women were now also required to register publicly as prostitutes and, under the threat of criminal prosecution and punishment, present themselves repeatedly for periodic medical examination.²⁵⁰

Throughout 1863 and 1864, Martineau used her regular column in the London Daily News to express her concerns about the proposal, and eventually passing, of the first Contagious Diseases Act. In a series of four editorials, she acknowledged the “awkwardness and difficulty” faced in bringing matters presumably “unfit” for discussion to the public eye; nonetheless, she believed embarrassment was “no justification to journalists for permitting the slightest risk of bad legislation which they may preclude by timely warning.” In particular, Martineau’s 1864 article warned of the vague wording of the new act and its potential ramifications for all women, as the law was “full of ill-defined or undefined terms, provisions for punishing unproved and unprovable offences, and for remedying evils which cannot be ascertained to exist” (qtd. in Logan 160).

As most modern commentators on the Contagious Diseases Acts have recognized, the truly alarming element of this new legislation was its deeply misogynistic basis. The Acts, as Logan nicely summarizes, effectively “robbed all women of their civil liberties and made their bodies property of the state, subject to incarceration, detainment, and repeated pelvic examinations by men who were complete strangers” (161). Meanwhile,

²⁵⁰ Howell’s Geographies of Regulation offers an in-depth study of the regulationist approach in Britain and the history of the Contagious Diseases Acts. He responds to, as well as updates, some of the arguments in Walkowitz’s oft-cited and equally important Prostitution and Victorian Society.
men suspected of either engaging with prostitutes or having venereal diseases themselves were wholly exempt from any penalties; thus, the Acts represents what Judith Walkowitz calls a “‘high water mark’ of an officially sanctioned double standard of sexual morality, one that upheld different standards of chastity for men and women and carefully tried to demarcate pure women from the impure” (70). Martineau would have disagreed with the notion that the Acts implemented any kind of “careful demarcation” between “pure and impure” women, however, as one of the “ill-defined terms” she references in her Daily News piece included the legislation’s exceptionally vague legal category of “common prostitute.” While this phrase generally meant to designate women who solicited men in public thoroughfares (an act that Walkowitz points out was not in fact illegal at the time [14]), its lack of specificity meant it could presumably be attached to any woman out in public who somehow failed to adhere to established expectations of female propriety—an accusation Martineau had herself unjustly faced.

Thus we can see how Martineau’s interest in the Contagious Diseases Act was reflective not only of her recent work with Nightingale, in which the two had discussed various reforms specially related to the quality of life and health of military men, but also of a far more personal investment, one rooted in the events of twenty years earlier. That is, the Acts threatened to publicly expose—quite literally, in the form of invasive physical examinations and legal records—any woman whose behavior fell outside accepted norms of femininity as “fallen,” while equally punishing those who resisted immediately ceding their bodies to the demands of medical authorities. Such consequences were highly reminiscent of Martineau’s own public treatment in 1845 after
she had dared usurp her doctors’ presumed control over her person and openly share accounts of her embodied experience.

The language used by members of the medical profession—the most significant group to support the Acts, according to Frank Mort—\(^{251}\) in relation to the prostitutes targeted by the Acts also calls to mind the scrutiny and contempt to which Martineau was subjected. For instance, during the mesmerist debates, commentators often made no distinction between Martineau herself and the diseases of her body; one letter to the \textit{Lancet} sarcastically excused Martineau’s failure to “diagnose” her own illness, quipping “It would be somewhat odd for the disease to give itself a name” (qtd. in Winter 227). Likewise, many proponents of the Acts described the prostitute in purely material, inanimate terms, mere carriers of contagion lacking human traits (and thus, unworthy of human considerations, save perhaps as objects of case study). Unsurprisingly, the \textit{Lancet} ran an 1864 editorial that asked, “If the butcher’s shop may be occasionally visited and inspected for diseased meat, why should the brothel be exempt?” (qtd. in Fisher 81).\(^{252}\) Additionally, just as Greenhow had justified exposing intimate details of Martineau’s reproductive organs by citing her own willing discussions of her medical problems in print, so the Acts’ supporters claimed “fallen” women ought not mind the enforced pelvic

\(^{251}\) Mort states, “Numerically, medics dominated on all parliamentary inquiries of the working acts between 1867 and 1881, pushing hard for their extension to a national system of inspection and detention of prostitutes” (55). The Association for Promoting the Extension of the Contagious Diseases Acts to the Civilian Population was also apparently dominated by the voice of medical men. Howell cautions readers to remember, however, that there were also medical dissenters, and sanitary science at the time “did not speak with a unified voice” (33).

\(^{252}\) In \textit{Flesh Made Word} (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), Helena Michie also explores representations of prostitutes as “symbol or figure rather than human being,” particularly in the case of women whose features were distorted by syphilis. She writes: “The features of many London Prostitutes, erased and razed by syphilis, become an apt emblem of the prostitute’s invisibility, a synecdoche for her strangely fleshless fleshiness. The ‘lump of flesh’ at once foregrounds the body and reduces it to featurelessness, forces the reader to gaze on the horrible, and renders it invisible” (70).
exams and public registration; it was little different, they argued, from the sexual acts they “volunteered” for each day. In all scenarios, consent and exploitation were hopelessly confused.

In taking a stance against the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864, Martineau was effectively resuming the battle for “self-government”—to be viewed as autonomous person, not biomedical “problem”—she had waged since managing her own care at Tynemouth. This time, however, she sought to protect not only her own rights and reputation, but those belonging to women who did not have recourse to public forums for their own defense. Accordingly, this activism need not be read solely as a “respectable” middle-class woman deigning to patronize an outcast group (a criticism often levied by modern commentators against participants in the general repeal movement), but, particularly in Martineau’s case, an act rooted in cross-class empathy that grew out of both positive collaborations at Tynemouth and more painful connections on the pages of the Athenæum. As Deborah Anna Logan has argued in Fallenness in Victorian Woman's Writing, there are “experiential links between women, regardless of class” in the face of the discourse of “fallenness” (14); economic and social privilege did not necessarily protect one from accusations of sexual transgression, and was effectively erased when such charges arose.²⁵³ I would argue, then, that the “fallen” body proves multiply leveling for Martineau. She insists in Life in the Sick-Room that in suffering all are equal; in her

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²⁵³ Lynda Nead also argues that class privilege actually drew accusations of sexual transgression, as according to common middle-class wisdom, working-class sexuality lacked a code of sexual morality and chastity; therefore “the women of the undeserving poor were indistinguishable from prostitutes anyway” (77). Technically, then, only “respectable” upper and middle-class women could “fall” from their social status.
“Letters on Mesmerism,” she enacts collaborative relationships with members of the working class in her quest for recovery; in her subsequent writings against the Acts, she speaks against the same forces that had attempted to make her “fallen” on behalf of women who were already seen as such.

There is, then, a personal impetus behind Martineau’s writings against the Contagious Diseases Acts that contemporary critics cannot ignore in any thorough analysis of her authorial career. The experience of “fallen” embodiment enables a level of identification between the respected woman of letters and the suspected “common” prostitute, one Martineau seemingly found difficult to deny. This is not to say that Martineau had no qualms about aligning herself with, or suggesting she was in any way like, the “unchaste” women of the streets; in private letters, she repeatedly expresses reservations about her participation in the repeal movement. However, though social conventions and her own inclination may have made Martineau wish to avoid the topic altogether, she reported feeling (as with so much of her previous work) nearly physically compelled to address the issue. Writing later to her friend Chapman, she recalled, “It was sickening to think of such work; but who should do it if not an old woman, dying and in seclusion […] I felt that I should have no more peace of mind if I did not obey ‘the inward witness’” (qtd. in Chapman 541).

Ultimately, however, hers would not be the only voice raised in protest. Although Martineau’s initial dissent proved to be the minority position, public resistance grew as the legal powers of the acts were extended, until by 1869 there were a number of organized efforts demanding repeal. Of these, the Ladies’ National Association For the
Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (LNA), a middle-class women’s group spearheaded by charismatic leader Josephine Butler, was the most prominent force.\textsuperscript{254} The LNA took up many of Martineau’s original points with a vengeance, attacking the Acts on all grounds. Whereas regulationist supporters saw a link between medicine and morality, citing the “decorous and wholesome” improvement in behaviors that came over women subjected to the new sanitary regulations (Mort 56), the LNA pointed out that the Acts actually impeded any real upturn in a prostitute’s life. Once identified and inscribed on an official register as “fallen,” it was difficult for a woman to shake off such a shameful ascription and ever move back into the ranks of “respectable” working class (the very path Butler’s other project, the Social Purity Association, urged for prostitutes) (Howell 67). The LNA also refused to shy away from the associations between forcible vaginal examinations and rape, displaying speculums at their public meetings and describing their use in lurid detail to horrified audiences. While repealers focused heavily on sensationalist stories of virtuous wives and daughters of workingmen wrongly accused of being prostitutes being subjected to such outrage—or, in one shocking case, committing suicide over false entrapment and brutal treatment—they strongly insisted that even “experienced” prostitutes had personal rights that trumped the claims of medical authority.\textsuperscript{255}

\textsuperscript{254} The LNA was formed after local branches of the National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts excluded women from participating in their meetings. For more on Butler, the LNA and its development, see Walkowitz, especially pp. 90-147.

\textsuperscript{255} For an in-depth discussion of the repealer’s “instrumental rape” propaganda, see Walkowitz pp. 108-110. Walkowitz also details the suicide of Mrs. Percy, a music-hall entertainer who refused to submit to an examination and was subsequently blacklisted from all the music halls in town. After complaining in vain of police abuse and intimidation, she committed suicide in an effort to vindicate her own reputation and that of her daughter (110).
Members of the LNA were soon subjected to treatment similar to what Martineau had experienced during the mesmerism debates; that is, as they gained political prominence, their detractors attempted to paint them as a “shrieking sisterhood” who were “indelicate, and by implication immoral” for daring to speak publicly about sexuality (Mort 64). However, the LNA organizers had shrewdly anticipated this potential reaction, and had therefore constructed the executive board of mature single women (whose social situation allowed them the freedom to engage in active reform activity, and whose age conferred a “respectable” status) and, most importantly, women like Butler who were mothers and wives, whose presence indicated an embrace of domestic ideology and traditional family roles even as they discussed “improper” subjects.  

Martineau, all too aware that no woman speaking out in public is exempt from charges of impropriety, considered her own involvement carefully. She had admitted to her biographer, “I am told this is discreditable work for woman, especially for an old woman” (Chapman 506), and, on other occasions confessed, “It turns me chill in the night to think of what things I have written and put in print” (Chapman 542). In these moments of hesitation, however, Martineau often looked to the model of Lady Godiva, the Anglo-Saxon noblewoman of legend who braved literal exposure in a stand against tyranny; “Happily I thought of Godiva,” Chapman records Martineau saying, “and that helped me through” (542).

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256 For an extended discussion of the strategic formation of the LNA board, see Walkowitz pp. 118-120.
Interestingly, Martineau had already been compared to Godiva during the aftermath of Greenhow’s “Medical Report” publication, when Elizabeth Barrett had described her friend’s public ordeal as “a more miserable exposure […] than Godiva’s own” (qtd. in Winter 242). What Barrett invoked as a “miserable” experience, then, Martineau reworked to appear inspirational and enabling, just as I have argued she did with so many of the supposed “disabling” effects in her life. She had already once shared private aspects of herself with the public only to have the exposure used against her; rather than cowed into submission by the experience, however, she appears to have been encouraged to speak out against similar wrongs done to other women. Accordingly, she could emulate, rather than pity or dread, Godiva’s ride, knowing, as she stated to Chapman, it was only “the fault of the other side, if modesty in others and myself is outraged” (542).

Indeed, Martineau’s writings against the Contagious Diseases Acts speak exactly to this point: the way in which she and other women were multiply “outraged”—unjustly violated and justifiably angered—by laws like the Acts, by misogynistic medical discourse, by the sexual double standard, and by generally oppressive constructions of femininity. Though Martineau is not the only woman who protested with the LNA at the end of the nineteenth century, she was one—if not the only—who already had lived through a highly public version of the same kinds of fallen accusations and treatment that the organization meant to protest, and more importantly, had penned a record of those experiences and a defense of herself. Therefore, the way she again employed that pen on behalf of the LNA is of particular interest. Martineau began her official work with
Butler’s organization in 1869. Being unmarried, she was not a candidate for an ideal visible spokeswoman, while her growing infirmity and old age offered practical impediments to active repeal campaigning. A behind-the-scenes role, however, satisfied everyone involved. From her home in Ambleside, she wrote speeches and letters on the Association’s behalf, and also arranged to have her earlier anti-Acts *Daily News* editorials reprinted as a single pamphlet for LNA distribution, in much the same way she had done with the earlier *Letters on Mesmerism* (this time, luckily, with no lawsuits or angry editors blocking her way). Additionally, Martineau devised a series of placards and petitions to be distributed in specific districts. One addressed “To the Women of Colchester” warned women that the “security of our sex [is] at present exposed to urgent danger, and even undergoing violation,” and proved so effective that the local pro-Acts politician’s bid for reelection was soundly defeated. Such LNA successes proved that the “revolt of women,” as a member of parliament referred to Butler’s organization, was a political force to be reckoned with even without having a representative voice in government; it also suggested that Martineau, though nearly seventy years old, was still a formidable foe in the battle of institutional authorities versus personal liberties.

In the last days of December 1869, unbeknownst to members of the LNA, Martineau published three letters signed by “An Englishwoman” in the *Daily News*; the anonymous nature of the publication was less about concealing Martineau’s identity (she having already signed her name to numerous items of repeal propaganda) than it was a symbolic call to arms to all English women against the Acts that threatened them. The

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257 This placard is reprinted in full in Chapman’s *Memorials*, pp. 537-8.
letters ran in consecutive editions of the *Daily News* from December 28 to December 30, with each new installment introducing readers to arguments in favor of the Contagious Diseases Acts’ immediate repeal. In the first, Martineau condemned the Acts’ apparent sanctioning of prostitution on both practical and moral grounds, writing that the proposed regulationist system would prove to be “as injurious to the health as it is fatal to the morals of every community which lies under the curse of it,” with “vice made easy” and “aggravation of disease” inevitable (253). She also drove the threat of loss of personal liberties home for her middle-class readers, explaining that while originally intended only for military bases, the Acts’ were being extended to the civilian population, and might very soon result in “the extension of the power of the police and the outrage and degradation of the new law over the whole womanhood of England” (254). If the “outrage” of the Acts was about to infiltrate the English home, however, Martineau suggested the guardians of the home would fight back, and once again cited Lady Godiva as inspiration. Writing of women like the LNA members who were “putting away the most sensitive of personal feelings, to help us out of the peril we have incurred,” Martineau insisted:

Their deed is of a quality kindred to Godiva’s, while its scope is wider and its import infinitely deeper. She pitied starvation in poor men’s homes. These are striving to save home itself, and to preserve the most sacred of institutions, and one hitherto pre-eminently our own—the Family. (256)

Here, Martineau shows middle-class wives and mothers driven, like Godiva, to appear in public in ostensibly “improper” fashion by a “proper” motivation befitting a true Angel

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258 All three of Martineau’s LNA letters along with the December 31st LNA Declaration are reprinted in Yates’s collection *Harriet Martineau on Women*; all citations refer to this edition.
of the House: to protect their homes and families at any personal cost. The LNA members’ “unfeminine” self-assertion is recast for potentially hostile readers as acceptable, even expected, feminine self-sacrifice.

While the first letter drew on the powerful rhetoric of Victorian domesticity and depicted a private sphere under siege, Martineau’s second letter outlined the Acts’ assault on personal privacy. Beginning with the assertion that fallen as well as presumably “pure” women ought to be equal to men in their claims upon the law, Martineau describes a suspected prostitute’s new brutal treatment under the Acts:

She is subject to the extremity of outrage under the eyes, hands, and instruments of surgeons, for the protection of the sex which is the cause of the sin, which is to be protected in further indulgence in it, and which is passed over by law, while the victim is punished […] Meanwhile, the men who have contrived this curse for their country and nation are always ready with their assurances that that sort of women get used to the new treatment. (257)

Here, as Martineau decries the absurd sexual double standard legitimated in the Contagious Diseases Acts and the devastating effect of the callous, nonconsensual medical inspections, her language also calls to mind aspects of the personal outrage she was subjected to beneath the hands, or rather pens, of surgeons, who had attempted to punish her for getting well under her own “unsanctioned” authority. In the third letter, Martineau then utilizes that very personal authority, in this case as political economist (again, demonstrating irrefutable expertise in a supposed “masculine” field), to outline the statistical impossibilities at odds with eradicating disease by registering prostitutes.

Immediately following the publication of the three anonymous missives, the Daily News featured in its December 31 edition an official declaration by the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, drafted by Martineau and
signed by her, Butler, Nightingale, and 125 other women. This document succinctly reiterated the arguments of the previous letters, stripped largely of the original appeals to pathos, and presented eight rational bases of “solemn protest,” from the apparent failure of the Parliamentary representatives to fully inform their constituents of the legislation they had passed, to the fact that no proof of the regulationist system’s efficacy existed even after several years of trial.\textsuperscript{259} The final line of the declaration suggested that alternative approaches to the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, and, by implication, the extenuating circumstances that led women to prostitution, had not been thoroughly considered by medical or legal authorities. Instead of supporting a dismissive legalization of vice, then, the LNA’s declaration stated, “We hold that we are bound […] to try to deal with the causes of the evil, and we dare to believe that with wiser teaching and more capable legislation those causes would not be beyond control” (267). Here, Martineau utilizes a similar strategy as those she employed when defending her own experiments with mesmerism two decades before; she justifies the LNA’s actions as not rooted in rebellion, but rather reflective of feminine duty necessitated by masculine authorities’ failure to imagine effective curative means outside the existing narrowly-conceived scientific and legal channels.

Thanks in large part to these tactics of the repeal movement, the drive to extend the Acts’ powers and geographical range stalled by 1870. In the following years, the LNA and similar repeal groups were not able to replicate fully the success they saw in the

\textsuperscript{259} The notion that the Acts had been passed “secretly” with little discussion was popularized by Victorian repealers, and is even repeated by modern historians. However, Howell explains this narrative is a “convenient fiction,” as the 1864 bill was subjected to “searching questions” and some significant amendments while in committee, if not when presented in the debating chamber (31).
Colchester election, though their continued presence ensured that the Acts were continually debated, suspended, and eventually removed from the statute books completely in 1886. The LNA may possibly have seen even more public victories had Martineau been able to continue lending her voice to their protests; by 1871, however, the state of her health had made composition—the process always a full physical act for Martineau, as we have seen—difficult. She nonetheless was pleased with the campaign she had largely put in motion. Writing a private letter to Butler in late 1871, Martineau described her metaphorical view from her final sickroom:

That triumph of wrong and ignorance [the Contagious Diseases Acts] has clouded the lives of some of the best men and women of England since 1864; but I have seen, for months past, from my easy-chair, as I looked abroad over your field of action, the foul vapours dispersed before the strong breeze of the popular opinion and will, and the clear light of our ancient domestic virtue spreading from roof to roof among the homes of our land. (qtd. in Chapman 540)

In contrast to the popular depictions of prostitutes as a literal scourge upon the public, Martineau shifts the associations of “foul vapours” to the unfair legislation that potentially persecuted any woman who fell outside of rigid (and, as burgeoning feminist movements like the LNA demonstrated, already outdated) constructions of femininity—constructions that were themselves by far the most dangerous and disabling cultural contagions.

Martineau’s Legacies

Martineau eventually died of heart failure, as she had long anticipated, in the summer of 1876. However, in keeping with the literary exhibitions of self she had offered
to the public during her life, she had planned to offer some edifying “anatomical legacies” even after death. Her *Autobiography* explains:

> When I found that […] it was not easy to obtain those of persons whose minds are well known, so that it is a rather rare thing to be able to compare manifestations with structure, I determined to do what I could to remedy the difficulty of bequeathing my skull and my brain to the ablest phrenologist I knew of […]. (297)

She further laments having “only one pair of ears,” as she wishes she could donate those separately to the further studies on deafness (298).

While Martineau’s desire to donate the physical vessels of her powerful intellect never came to fruition, several men of science did make sure the physiological proof of her supposed “pathological” nature was put upon public display. During a lecture entitled “Remarks on the Case of Miss Martineau” that was delivered to the Clinical Society of London on April 27, 1877 and published the following month in *British Medical Journal* (*BJM*), the surgeon Thomas Spencer Wells exhibited the large ovarian cyst that had been removed from Martineau’s body during its autopsy. In many ways, Wells’s appearance was in direct response to Martineau’s last words on her own embodied experience: the obituary that she had penned in 1855 and that ran in the *Daily News* the day after her death. In it, Martineau had reasserted her supposed complete recovery through mesmerism, and the public renewal of this subject launched yet another debate in the pages of the periodicals. While several commentators wrote in to the *BJM* to

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260 Regarding the failure of Martineau’s plans to donate her head to science, Florence Fenwick Miller reports: “The Ambleside surgeon, who had undertaken, in accordance with Harriet Martineau's will, to prepare and transmit her skull and brain to Mr. Atkinson, died in the year 1872 […] Mr. Atkinson was, however, now residing out of England, and not in a position to usefully accept the bequest, so he intimated his desire to be freed from his promise to undertake the examination of his friend's brain. A codicil was added to Harriet Martineau's will, therefore, revoking the provision about this matter” (208-9).
take issue with the famed author’s posthumous criticism of the medical profession (for instance Sir Thomas Watson, a physician who had treated Martineau in her lifetime, emphasized his patient’s hypochondriac tendencies in his July 8, 1876 letter “The Late Miss Harriet Martineau”\textsuperscript{261}), Thomas Greenhow was particularly interested in vindication. On April 14, 1877, he published the “Termination of the Case of Miss Harriet Martineau” in the \textit{BJM} as a follow-up to his infamous “Medical Report” of 1845. In it, Greenhow eagerly pointed out how the discovery of an enormous ovarian cyst during the post mortem examination of his sister-in-law’s body proved that no cure had ever been effected by mesmerism, and that her account of the events of 1844 “contains \textit{little fact} and \textit{much imagination}” (196, original emphasis); the “dislocated ovarium” had merely shifted at the same time Martineau was undergoing her mesmeric treatments, providing a temporary and completely natural respite from the pain it had been causing. Greenhow ended his self-congratulatory piece with the suggestion that further explanation of the “class of disease” Martineau had suffered under “may serve in some degree to explain some of the peculiarities of character which were apparent during her remarkable career” (199), thus linking her authorial accomplishments with her “diseased” female condition.

Wells’s lecture, delivered only two weeks after Greenhow’s article appeared, bolstered his colleague’s account by literally showcasing the cyst—preserved in spirits and displayed on stage—as “proof” against Martineau’s recovery, and implicitly, her authority. Wells absolved Greenhow of any blame in diagnosing Martineau’s condition as

\textsuperscript{261} For Sir Thomas Watson’s full letter, see “The Late Miss Harriet Martineau,” \textit{British Medical Journal} 2.810 (8 July 1876): 64.
originating in the uterus, claiming that even among gynecological experts “doubt must be in some exceptional cases felt whether a pelvic tumour is uterine or ovarian” (543), and lamented that Martineau’s life wasn’t made more comfortable by an oviariotomy rather than false mesmeric hopes. In yet another letter to the \textit{BJM}, Greenhow himself would reiterate this point, and go one step further, blaming Martineau’s death on her own perverse willfulness and secrecy. Pointing out Sir Watson’s claim to have known about Martineau’s tumor when he treated her in 1855, Greenhow continues:

May I not ask, is it possible that [Martineau] could be unconscious of its presence? And could she do otherwise than connect it in her own mind with the former disease, of which she believed that she had been cured by mesmerism? Might not a noble candour have induced her to acknowledge and communicate this important truth? Even to myself her generous nature might have induced her to make it known. If this had been done, it is probable that, by the skill of Mr. Spencer Wells, her life might have been prolonged for some years. (“The Case of Miss Martineau” 786)

In this passage, Martineau’s refusal to confide in the very man who had sold her intimate bodily details in a public pamphlet is made evidence of her own deceitfulness and unfeminine, even \textit{fatal}, obstinacy. Unbeknownst to Greenhow, however, Martineau had acknowledged her awareness of the tumor to friends since 1855, and expressed fear as to how her brother-in-law might use the information against her. As late as 1874, she wrote that Greenhow “would like nothing better than to get hold of it, and bring out another indecent pamphlet” she wrote (qtd. in Miller 131). Ironically, then, even as Greenhow attempts to undermine Martineau’s authority, his very behavior proves how accurate her “diagnostic” skills remained. As she predicted, he delights in the medical community’s literal “hold” on her cyst and retroactively casts her attempt to claim her own experience
as itself symptomatic of a diseased nature, one that might have been cured through proper feminine submission.\(^{262}\)

Thanks in large part to the published post mortem details, many modern critics have dismissed Martineau’s account of mesmeric healing as, in keeping with the cynical nineteenth-century readings of her illness and recovery, a “fall into femininity,” to use Postlethwaite’s phrase (595). Tamara Katabgian points out that Martineau’s “mesmerist mania” is often placed in contrast with “her otherwise successful participation in the masculinist and more culturally dominant discourses of political economy and social investigations” (352-3), while critics like Yates merely deem it “bewildering” for “so logical and analytical a writer to participate in such a mysterious and controversial” practice, and dismiss the entire incident as “one piece in the puzzle of her emotional and rational contradictions” (12).

If Martineau’s participation in mesmerism is representative of a “feminine” departure from her previous adoption of “masculinist” discourses, however, it does not necessarily equate a “fall.” Whether or not mesmerism actually resulted in any real physiological relief of her symptoms—and Martineau, in both candid private and crafted public utterances, unequivocally defended her belief that it had\(^{263}\)—Martineau experienced undoubtedly enabling effects during and after her treatment, not the least of

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\(^{262}\) He also conveniently ignores the fact, as Ryall points out, that Martineau did apparently die of the “heart condition” she had long feared—a fear many doctors had dismissed as a figment of her perverse imagination or will. (50).

\(^{263}\) Winter also cautions modern readers against writing off mesmerism as a “quack” medicine that was disproven with the advent of “legitimate” science. She argues, “Mesmerism did not decline in the later in the century because scientists were more knowledgeable than hitherto […] or less gullible. Rather than being exposed as fraudulent or explained away by progressive science, it was absorbed into other practices, particularly psychic research, physiology, and psychoanalysis” (8).
which were her active collaboration and identification with other women, even across
class divides that may have otherwise appeared insurmountable. The sympathetic
connections encouraged by the very tenets and practice of mesmerism (Martineau
claimed, for instance, to have felt fellow sufferers’ pain in her own hands and fingers
while performing mesmeric “passes”) coupled with dehumanizing treatment she had
received at the hands of affronted medical authorities helped bring about Martineau’s
show of solidarity with women dismissed by many as undeserving of “proper” ladies’
attention. The previous interest she had shown in women’s authority over their own
bodies, expressed in either abstract or academic terms (for instance, Malthusian theories
of “preventative check”) in her earlier economic work, could only be reinforced by the
personal stand she had taken against others’ claims about or over her own body, and the
public consequences weathered as a result. The political questions of the Contagious
Diseases Acts thus were immediately personal to Martineau, and were therefore subject
to the compulsive “need for utterance” that drove her authorship at all stages of her life.

To locate a personal stake in Martineau’s LNA work may seem to contradict
readings like those of Logan, who has suggested that part of Martineau’s objection to the
careers of other feminist thinkers like Wollstonecraft and her Victorian counterparts lies
in the fact that their activism apparently derived from personal unhappiness rather than
from selfless orientation, and thereby “pervert[s] the ideals of social-problem
movements” (171-2). However, these arguments need not be mutually exclusive.
Martineau may have believed that female activists ought not betray the personal
disappointments (particularly those stemming from heterosexual romance) that fuelled
their political demands, nor “injure the cause by their personal tendencies” (Autobiography 304), and thus fulfill their society’s expectations of women as weak and irrational in their excess emotionality—although, as Martineau expressed her statements about Wollstonecraft two decades before the end of her life, we ought not discount the possibility that her mind might have changed on this issue by the time of her own involvement with the LNA. Nonetheless, she simultaneously insisted that one ought to address problems that hit close to either literal or metaphoric “home,” espousing that “every body does best what lies nearest at hand” (Autobiography 387). Thus, Martineau’s writings for the LNA find her addressing matters that lie close at hand and heart, aligning herself altruistically with less fortunate women (when she might easily have rested in well-earned and wholly respectable retirement) in a series of rational public statements that only obliquely reveal their relation to her earlier personal ordeals. She melds appeals to emotion and logic, very much in keeping with the rhetorical strategies she previously employed in defending her individual interpretations of or authority over her own body and lived experiences in the face of social disapproval, in order to convey a declaration of all women’s rights to privacy and personal protections.

In this light, Martineau’s writings for the organized feminist agenda of the LNA are less anomalous in her overall oeuvre than they may initially seem. Moreover, they reveal the ways in which Martineau’s presumed disabilities often made possible some of the most important projects of her career. Writing to Edward Bulwer-Lytton in February of 1844, just one month after the publication of (and immediate popular response to) Life
in the Sick-Room, Martineau reflected on this fact, recalling the early days of her invalidism in comparison to her present moment:

My nearest & best friend said to me, when I asked her the nature of her apprehension when she & I made the discovery of my case & prospect, “I think your whole life spoiled.” So did I till now; & now I find, what former experience might have foreshown,—that the very mischief itself—the spoiler of my life,—has become the agent of my usefulness,—has brought the suffering directly under my helping hand. (qtd. in Sanders Letters 83)

Martineau confidently articulates here what current scholarship is only now poised to recognize: that her impressive body of literary work exists not in spite of her physical body, but in many ways because of it. So many of her extraordinary authorial achievements develop out of the effects of her varied “disabling” experiences—those supposed “spoilers” of her life—from the isolation that left her at liberty to write, to the social detachment that facilitated her eventual sociological analysis. To that same list, we ought now add the activist impulses that arise out of her sense of community and identification with fellow “sufferers” of all kinds. In this way, then, the connection Greenhow noted between Martineau’s “peculiarities” of health and the pattern of her “remarkable” career ultimately holds true, but not in the pathological sense he intended. Rather, in both the very act of authorship as well as the content of her prose, Harriet Martineau defied the “fallen” narrative others attempted to force upon her person, and did so with a determination that would also compel her to rewrite the fate and reclaim the rights of many other women in the process.
Coda

In her autobiographical memoir published in the early years of the twentieth century, Josephine Butler recalled the impetus for her activism with the Ladies’ National Association. She writes:

A book was published […] by Mrs. Gaskell, and was much discussed. This led to expressions of judgment which seemed to me false—fatally false. A moral lapse in a woman was spoken of as an immensely worse thing than in a man; there was no comparison to be formed between them. A pure woman, it was reiterated, should be absolutely ignorant of a certain class of evils in the world, albeit those evils bore with murderous cruelty on other women. One young man seriously declared that he would not allow his own mother to read such a book as that under discussion—a book which seemed to me to have a very wholesome tendency, though dealing with a painful subject. Silence was thought to be the great duty of all on such subjects. (31)

Here, Butler cites the unfair reception of *Ruth* as the specific source for her later determination to shatter the silences and “fatally false” conceptions surrounding transgressive female sexuality. As Elsie B. Michie explains, “for Josephine Butler, the gesture Gaskell makes in *Ruth*, and the audience’s subsequent refusal to accept that gesture, helped make visible what needed to be changed in her society” (108). Fiction provided a galvanizing effect.

I bring up Butler’s comments on and reaction to *Ruth* because they serve to illustrate an important point about all the texts I have considered in this dissertation; that is, the woman writer’s decision to position herself publicly as a defender of fallen women—or in some cases, equivalently “fallen” herself—resonated with real-world
personal, social, and political implications. Writers like Robinson, Opie, Gaskell and Martineau, each of them subjected to various constructions of disabling femininity themselves, understood how the presumed “advantages” of the proper woman are only gained by the subjugation of the fallen one. Rather than participate in this subjugation, they instead used their texts to call—either directly, or indirectly through the cultivation of a sympathetic readership—for communal efforts to change this. As Butler’s work with the LNA demonstrates, such communities could actually be realized.

One of the rallying cries of the organized feminist movement of the latter half of the twentieth century was “the personal is political”; the texts considered in this dissertation, though written over a century before such a slogan was articulated, exemplify precisely that. Each is a work that, as I have demonstrated in the preceding pages, grows directly out of its author’s personal negotiation of the cultural meaning inscribed on female bodies, and her personal understanding of how such meanings have mediated her own lived experience. Recording—or, more often, transforming—these experiences onto the page and disseminating them to wide audiences, these writers thereby create (whether intentionally or not) political documents, as they pose a challenge to monolithic constructions of femininity imposed on other women. Robinson redefines virtue in order to preserve her own reputation, but thereby offers other women an alternative to a “self” assessed solely in sexual terms. Opie veils her “improper” personal

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264 Cora Kaplan has explained that while this slogan spawned “vigorous but also productive disagreement about what constituted a politically progressive ‘personal’ agenda,” the phrase was originally meant as a challenge to existing discourses that were unwilling to debate such issues as divisions of labor in and out of the home, violence against women, and contested issues of sexuality and reproduction (254). I would suggest that many of the texts I have examined in this dissertation challenge similar discourses of their time. See Kaplan, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s Reception and Legacies.” The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft. Ed. Claudia Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 246-270.
associations, only to transmit radical ideas to readers in popular, seemingly “safe” tales. Gaskell works out her own ambivalence about the Angel in the House ideal by revealing the torturous standards of “proper” femininity. Martineau offers her own bodily experiences for the edification of others, and in doing so works to safeguard other women from invasions of privacy. It is not so far of a stretch to say, then, that the work of these woman writers across the long nineteenth century opened up the very possibilities of future feminist activism, particularly as it relates to issues of female embodiment and sexuality. Contemporary challenges to the hetero-normative discourse surrounding such matters as female sexual freedom, lesbianism, reproductive rights—all critical issues of real political urgency at the very historical moment at which I am writing—were surely enabled by these earlier texts, through which women dared to represent and rewrite “fallen” bodies, and thus recover narrative—and in turn, actual—control over their own experiences.

Interestingly, one of the very narratives that came back into female control by the end of the nineteenth century was that of Mary Wollstonecraft’s life and work. As I began my project with a consideration of Wollstonecraft’s “fall,” it is only fitting to end on her “recovery.” Barbara Caine has helpfully outlined the ways in which Wollstonecraft’s legacy was alive (if often disavowed) throughout the nineteenth century; a public reevaluation of her reputation did not come about, however, until the latter half of the Victorian era. Many accounts of Wollstonecraft’s “rescue” from obscurity cite Kegan Paul’s 1876 biography of Godwin and his edition of her Letters to Imlay as the
turning point. However, Caine observes that the first published account that connected Wollstonecraft’s life with the conflicts faced by mid-Victorian women was written by another famous “fallen” woman herself: George Eliot wrote an essay on Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller for *The Leader* in 1855, the same year she also “suffered most intensely [from] social ostracism” for her decision to live with the married G.H. Lewes (Caine “Victorian Feminism” 267). Though not necessarily a laudatory account of Wollstonecraft’s writing—indeed, Eliot finds fault in Wollstonecraft’s lack of imagination and overreliance on dull rationality—the essay insisted that Wollstonecraft’s scandalous private life had no bearing on the interest or importance of her work. Dismissing the “vague prejudice against the *Rights of Woman* as in some way or other a reprehensible book” (Eliot 988), Eliot argues that Wollstonecraft’s text was not “contaminated” by her private actions; moreover, by suggesting that a woman’s personal and professional merit has nothing to do with her sexual standing, Eliot preemptively defends her own career as well.

And as the nineteenth century progressed, others continued to wrest Wollstonecraft’s reputation away from its fallen associations. Not all followed Eliot’s tactic of dismissing Wollstonecraft’s sexual transgressions as immaterial to her work (an understandable reaction from a woman negotiating her own potential notoriety); instead, many highlighted and reinterpreted the very actions that had earned her the “fallen” label in the previous century. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, various British writers began to

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265 In *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1951) Ralph Wardle dates the first significant re-evaluation of Wollstonecraft to Paul’s work (338).

266 Caine humorously observes that “Eliot seems to be engaged in the rather unusual task of attempting to revive interest in Wollstonecraft by assuring readers that she is intensely dull!” (267).
defend “Wollstonecraft’s deviation from accepted moral norms as the result of a passionate and sincere attempt to live according to her own ideals and beliefs” (Caine “Victorian Feminism” 269). Indeed, Wollstonecraft’s death and subsequent disgrace came to be presented not as just punishment for her wanton disregard for social and sexual mores, but, in the words of one Victorian commentator, as courageous martyrdom for “moral theory gravely and religiously adopted” (qtd. in Caine “Victorian Feminism” 269). Additionally, what most interested many feminists by the dawn of the twentieth century was what Wollstonecraft understood—and what her fallen treatment represented—about the politics of female embodiment. Arguing that Wollstonecraft “not unnaturally, had a more profound knowledge of her own sex” than did men, The Woman’s Leader editor Mary Stocks wrote in a 1929 piece that Wollstonecraft was justifiably “obsessed” with the nature of “sexual imposition” by which she and fellow women were victimized, and “its attendant subjugation of all other standards to sex standard in its various social, artistic and domestic manifestations” (239).

Here Stocks makes a point that has also been central to my dissertation; that is, that Wollstonecraft’s personal experience and understanding of embodied femininity as disabling effectively enabled her calls for protofeminist reform. And as I hope to have shown, Wollstonecraft’s death and the campaign to discredit her as a mere “fallen” woman did not silence other women from making their own such calls. Instead, writing in Wollstonecraft’s wake, women like Mary Robinson, Amelia Opie, Elizabeth Gaskell and

267 Godwin’s culpability for this “fall” was also lessened, as observations like Virginia Woolf’s that “the memoir of his wife could not have been written without unusual depth of heart” (161) replaced Southey’s image of Godwin dispassionately “stripping” his wife. See Woolf, “Four Figures,” The Common Reader, Ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986) 140-172. Woolf’s individual essay was first published in 1929.
Harriet Martineau found new ways to speak out against the damaging standards of “normality” that surrounded the nineteenth-century British female body. Faced with discursive constructions of themselves as “fallen” for any number of reasons—sexual transgression or bodily impairment, political radicalism or professional endeavors, “unfeminine” claims to authority and autonomy—they saw and seized opportunities for discursive intervention. In rewriting the fallen body, they sought to recover control over their own lives in the present, and opened up new possibilities for the women’s writing and feminist efforts that were—and still are—to come.
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