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DEFINING A MIDDLE-CLASS ARISTOCRACY:
LABOR, LEISURE, AND AMBIGUITY
IN FOUR VICTORIAN NOVELS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

This project explores how the presence of socially and morally indeterminate characters in four Victorian novels enable textual reconceptualizations of the middle class. The particular works discussed in this study are *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Woman in White*, *Bleak House*, and *Barchester Towers*.

This study began by asking what role ambiguous figures—characters whose social, moral, and/or economic status is unclear—play in Victorian fiction. This inquiry seemed crucial to understanding the dynamics of Victorian society, for England at mid-century was ripe with change and social uncertainty: the parliamentary reform bills had or would soon extend the franchise; massive urbanization allowed a degree of anonymity previously unthought of; and industrialization provided the economic and symbolic means for social ascendancy. These factors combined to create a context in which social indeterminacy could become the rule rather than the exception in a society which formerly believed that an individual's status was immediately evident.

The present discussion investigates how, in such a context, mysterious fictional characters like Lucy Audley and Anne Catherick provide an opportunity for a redefinition of the middle classes. *Lady Audley's Secret*, for example, is concerned not only with clarifying the identity of its title character but also with redefining the economic and moral status of Robert Audley, the novel's socially irresponsible protagonist. Similarly, *The Woman in White* is concerned not just with discovering Anne Catherick's identity, but with refining Marian Halcombe from a problematic spinster into an ideal Victorian
woman. Similar discussions occur in *Barchester Towers* and *Bleak House*, with the emphasis there placed on how speech and the body signify social and moral status.

All four novels work together to clarify the boundaries of a new middle-class aristocracy, a group which seeks the power of the traditional, leisured aristocracy by redefining the criteria for social dominance along a paradigm of work and earnestness. Thus, by including socially and morally ambiguous characters, these novels enable a reconceptualization of not only marginal characters, but of the middle-class elite whose views would dominate Britain for the next half-century and beyond.
For Ellen
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INTRODUCTION
DEFINING A MIDDLE-CLASS ARISTOCRACY

An 1858 article entitled "Conduct and Carriage" in a British women's journal tells the story of an upper-class mother and daughter who debate the social origins and respectability of a young man they meet in the first-class carriage of a train. While the daughter is inclined to see him as "respectable society," the mother points to a number of features--his style of dress, his name-dropping, his showy diamond ring--which lead her to believe the man less than worthy of their attention. Some days later, the two women receive a letter in a "weak, illegible hand." It is from the man on the train, whom the mother terms a "vulgarian," and who, in fact, turns out to be a mere pastry chef (Curtin 174-75).

In a similar vein, an 1838 work entitled "Etiquette" laments the difficulty of explaining to readers the nuances of aristocratic life:

How, for instance, can we explain the exact pitch of voice which is employed in good company? how regulate the exact intervals at which it is necessary to give a nobleman his title, or set down the exact circumstances that make it impertinent in one man to drop the distinctive title altogether? or what it is that renders it priggish in another to abstain from so doing? (28)

Indeed, "no tuition will suffice" for the protection of "those who seek to displace themselves, and run after associations for which their previous habits unfit them." For this reason, the author notes, all books of etiquette "are not, and cannot be, other than downright traps," of "no use to anybody but the bookseller" (28).
Both of these pieces demonstrate a willingness in Victorian society to assume that an individual's class is clearly evidenced in his or her behavior and appearance. Indeed, a person's social standing is so immediately apparent to all with whom he or she comes in contact, that no level of artifice, no manner of learning, no degree of subterfuge can disguise an individual's social and moral background. These lines, then, testify to Victorian assumptions concerning the essentiality of class, to there being inherent features of a particular group which cannot be mimicked convincingly by those not belonging to that group.

Despite the certainty with which these examples make their case—and there are many more illustrations like them in Victorian writing—literature in the nineteenth century is rife with unreadable or "ambiguous" characters, with figures whose social and moral status is not immediately apparent to all with whom they come in contact. There are, for example, the tales of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who not only unmasks characters—in "The Man with the Twisted Lip," for example—but who himself often dons a costume. The four novels with which this dissertation is concerned also contain a number of characters whose social and moral status are difficult to determine: Lady Audley from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, for instance; or Count Fosco, Percival Glyde, and Anne Catherick from Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*; Obadiah Slope in Trollope's *Barchester Towers*; and Lady Dedlock from Dickens's *Bleak House*. Each of these characters has some success at undermining the supposed self-evident essentiality of class, either consciously or by accident. During her honeymoon on the continent, for example, Lady Audley is, according to her servant, "the talk of the place, as long as we stayed in it" (28), this despite her low-class upbringing and mental illness. Similarly, Lady Dedlock is represented as being at "the centre of the fashionable intelligence, and at the top of the fashionable tree" (57), all because she is able to cover
up her socially reprehensible history. To a lesser degree, the lower-class Slope is likewise successful at wooing some members of the Barchester community into believing him a gentleman, while Anne Catherick manages to elude social definition altogether, presenting a figure entirely unreadable to those around her.

On one level, it seems safe to say that the socially and morally undefined characters of these four novels reflect the potential for social deception in mid-nineteenth-century British society. This was, after all, a period characterized by a level of economic fluidity previously unseen in English culture. At the most simple level, the industrial revolution made items that had once been accessible only to the wealthy more affordable: gloves, for example, previously worn only by the well-to-do to signify that one's social position did not necessitate physical labor, were now mass-produced and readily available to all (Altick 795-96). Further problematizing class distinction in the nineteenth century was the shift from an agricultural economy to an industrial one, accompanied by a mass migration of rural citizens to the cities. This urbanization created a context ripe with the potential for deceit: where once people were born, raised, and buried in a village where all knew each other's histories, large cities allowed a degree of anonymity previously unanticipated. With this anonymity came the freedom to rewrite one's "story," to reconstruct one's "self."

As a result of this industrialization and urbanization, the middle class found itself with increased economic power. Not surprisingly, between 1840 and 1880 this class began to challenge the previously assumed superiority of the traditional landed aristocracy. During this period debate raged concerning what it meant to be a true "gentleman" (Gilmour, The Idea of the Gentleman 2)—a moral individual worthy of the respect of society—and though this term has taken on almost innocuous connotations today, the Victorian discussion had far-reaching ramifications, moving well beyond
abstract issues of social worth into questions of economic power, political strength, and, indeed, the very structure of society. Jonathan Loesberg relates these debates to the Second Reform Bill of 1867, asserting that much of the discussion in the years preceding and following this act giving the vote to members of the less affluent classes centered around a fear of the loss of hierarchical identity. Loesberg supports his argument by quoting Carlyle's assertion that going the "full length" of democracy is problematic, leaving England's inhabitants "more and more to follow each his own nose, by way of guide-post in this intricate world" (121). A glance at the transcripts of the parliamentary debate concerning this bill demonstrates a similar sentiment. M.P. Robert Lowe, for example, asserts that in countries like the United States where white male suffrage is universal, there is "an utter absence of distinction, a complete lack of a leisured class, a wide range of corrupt institutions, and an anxiety to kowtow to the multitudes" (quoted in Loesberg 122). The mention of distinction here has an almost punlike quality for the present discussion: though here it clearly refers to maintaining social hierarchies, it also implies a lack of distinguishing surface characteristics. With increased male suffrage, in other words, it becomes difficult to discern who is whom— who is upper class, who is lower class, who is middle class, who is titled, who is not, who is to serve as the model of appropriate social behavior, who is to follow this model, who is to receive the deference and respect traditionally bestowed upon the leisured aristocracy, who are to recognize this and accept their own position as socially inferior. The anticipated effect of this erasure of distinction is not only the death of the leisured class but complete social

1 That the larger social debate concerning this bill is actually relevant when discussing novels published in the 1850s and '60s is not as much of an issue as it may at first appear: as Loesberg points out, discussion of this bill stretches back at least to 1858 when The Manchester Guardian labels John Bright's demand for household suffrage a "wilde and mischievous doctrine" (121).
chaos. Once those social markers are gone, once each person must follow his or her "own nose," the world becomes a strange and unmapped space where nobility may be treated inappropriately as paupers, and paupers given the respect of kings.

From the present perspective, such may not seem entirely undesirable, but as Lowe's mention of corruption highlights, in Victorian thought, class and morality are linked. The deconstruction of traditional class hierarchies thus becomes associated with the moral decay of the nation as a whole. E. Chadwick, for instance, author of the Report on an Inquiry into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain, connects "slums to sewage, sewage to disease, and disease to moral degradation" (Stallybrass and White 131). Mayhew tends to make these terms synonymous as well, as illustrated by, for example, his comparison of a woman who collects dog feces to "a bundle of rags and filth" in a room "redolent of filth and pregnant with pestilential diseases, and whither all the outcasts of the metropolitan population seem to be drawn" (quoted in Stallybrass and White 132). As Stallybrass and White point out, this last phrase implies that the low are drawn to filth, just as a pig is drawn to mud (132). Using Chadwick's logic that filth and immorality are synonymous, if the poor choose filth, they also choose immorality. Thus, nineteenth-century thought among the upper and middle classes contained the deep-rooted sense that their working-class peers were essentially lacking in virtue.

To an extent, then, one may read the ambiguous figures with which the present work is concerned as expressing a widespread Victorian fear of broadening moral corruption: because traditional signifiers fail, class distinctions become more difficult to

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2 One might of course argue that the upper classes' "sense" that the working class is immoral, and their fear that this immorality will spread is, finally, simply a rationalization for their own economic and social power. Such was certainly the case; more on this below.
make, thus enabling the spread of immorality from the lower to the higher classes. To employ Sir Leicester's phrasing from *Bleak House*, the success the ambiguous characters in *Bleak House*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Woman in White*, and *Barchester Towers* experience in mimicking the previously assumed inherent signifiers of the aristocracy registers the fact that "the floodgates of society are burst open, and the waters have--a--obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together!" (628).

At the same time, however, these novels and their ambiguous figures also present something of an opportunity for the members of the middle class. Consider, for instance, that for every socially unreadable Lady Audley there is an equally problematic Robert Audley, that opposite a Slope who does not seem willing to keep to his place in British society, there is a socially indeterminate Arabin, struggling to discover a position that suits his own needs and is not morally reprehensible. Each of these novels, to generalize, contains not only an ambiguous antagonist--someone who transgresses the mores and morals of a given community and whose "true" social status is difficult to determine--but an ambiguous, socially and morally undefined, protagonist who struggles to define him- or herself in a world where assumptions of essential identity have been undercut.

This dissertation is primarily concerned with the latter group, namely, Robert Audley, Marian Halcombe, the Grantly circle, and Esther Summerson and Allan Woodcourt. This work is intended to examine how these socially unstable characters respond to the possibilities presented by the presence of the ambiguous antagonists within their respective communities. More particularly, this dissertation seeks to clarify just how it is that the presence of the latter allow these four novels to define the proper boundaries and behaviors of a work-oriented aristocracy.
Several points here require clarification. First, on a purely semantic level, the term "work-oriented aristocracy" needs to be defined. This is most easily done by examining the history of what will here be called—for lack of a less problematic term—the "traditional aristocracy." What is meant by the latter phrase is an elite which claims as its due the respect of those excluded from their circle, based solely upon a single factor: the absence in their lives of the necessity for money-earning labor. Implied within this is the understanding that this aristocracy is one in which title, estate, money, and all that they carry with them are inherited, passed from father to son, and have been so for a number of generations.3 "Traditional aristocracy," then, refers to an elite group which has not been tainted by the daily necessity of doing business—of buying and selling, of mingling and even associating with persons from morally and socially varied backgrounds. It is this group, that, according to scholars like Gilmour (The Idea of the Gentleman 2), Chapman (170), and Girouard (Camelot 160), continued to dominate prestigious society in Britain as late as the 1880s.

There are several rationales for why such a class would hold a position at the apex of the British social hierarchy. On some level, Victorian thought continued the tradition

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3 Curtin makes the claim that it was a "piece of conventional wisdom" that a middle-class family, after having bought an estate and moved out into the countryside, still needed three full generations before it "thoroughly imbibed the habits of its new station." This was because the father of this family was "indelibly stained" with his bourgeois habits and ways, as was his son, who had been educated to participate in business. Only the founder's grandson, then, who had been born and raised in the country and in the company of the socially refined, would feel completely at home with the family's aristocratic status (56). I would suggest that even more generations were needed for a family to be considered truly a member of the leisured aristocracy. In Barchester Towers, the aristocratic Thorne (admittedly, somewhat parodied by Trollope) refuses to recognize as less than "dirt" anyone whose name does predate Queen Elizabeth (191); and in Emma, despite having come from a "respectable family, which for the last two or three generations had been rising into gentility and property," Mr. Weston is snubbed by the old-school Churchills (46).
of rationalizing aristocratic superiority in terms of an absolute, universal order. For example, in a sermon delivered at Radley entitled "Rank," headmaster William Sewell claims that social distinctions are the product of divine will:

A gentleman, then, and a Christian, whether a boy or man, both knows, and is thankful that God, instead of making all men equal, has made them all most unequal. Hereditary rank, nobility of blood, is the very first condition and essence of all our Christian privileges; and woe to the nation, or the man by whom such a principle is disdained. (quoted in Gilmour, The Idea of the Gentleman 88-89)

According to Sewell, then, the leisured aristocracy dominates British society because they are simply inherently better, intrinsically more noble than other classes. So absolute are these distinctions that they cannot be undermined without causing irreparable harm—"woe to the nation, or the man by whom such a principle is disdained," a phrase that echoes Dedlock's warning concerning the opening of floodgates.

Rationales for aristocratic social domination also took a more practical turn. Thorstein Veblen, for example, creates a historical narrative in which labor is related to slavery, which in turn signifies an inferior individual will and a tendency toward subordination (28). Leisure, then, is the visible demonstration of an opposite, dominating will and mental agility (30). Further, leisure is not indolence, but a "non-productive consumption of time"; aristocrats, to put it another way, don't simply waste their time, but use it to refine themselves in ways which further demonstrate their leisured state, teaching themselves the arts, for instance, or refining their manners, practices for which their laboring inferiors could not find the time (34-35). Similarly, Jane Nardin points out that in the eighteenth century the general conception of the leisured class was that its existence was justified by the benefits society received from its refinements. Nardin provides as an example Lord Orville from Burney's Evelina, who spends his spare time cultivating himself and then goes from one home to another, presenting examples of good breeding: "Orville keeps the best moral, artistic,
and literary standards of his civilization alive in his own person and helps those who admire him fulfill their human potential" (124). Thus, in Nardin's model at least, a life of leisure in the eighteenth century was believed to be justified because it allowed the aristocratic individual to develop him- or herself fully, thus providing a morally beneficial example to the rest of society.

Implicit within all of these explanations for the valorization of leisure and the leisured classes is a complex tangle of economic, social, and moral issues. In the paradigms Sewell and Nardin describe, for example, economic and social superiority are rationalized by moral superiority. Because the aristocracy are inherently better people (as Sewell would argue) or because they use their time to better themselves and hence better society (as Nardin asserts), their economic and social might are justified and should continue, as it allows them to lead the nation as a whole in an appropriate direction.

Historically speaking, the necessity of these sorts of rationalizations is relatively recent. As Veblen's argument hints, more likely than not, social and economic superiority in pre-modern England were based upon military force, with feudal lords and other nobles garnering the aid of personal armies to maintain their position of power. As such systems of determining rank in society became outdated, however, those with the greatest social and economic strength found themselves in the position of having to find new means of both justifying and maintaining their power. One way this was done was by constructing a paradigm in which—as in Sewell's and Nardin's models—the leisured aristocracy argue that they have a moral superiority which less affluent classes do not, a moral superiority which is clearly visible to all, as the examples at the beginning of this introduction attest. In this way, the leisured aristocracy's social and economic dominance is rationalized and justified in terms of their assumed moral superiority.
Beginning with the Industrial Revolution, however, the middle class found its economic resources growing beyond those of the (often cash-strapped) leisured aristocracy, while its position on the middle rung of the social hierarchy remained the same. As a result, the middle class may have sought to redefine the means by which moral—and hence social—superiority was assessed, in order that they might ascend to a position of social and political dominance. More particularly, I would argue, the rising middle class sought to assert that hard work, rather than leisure, was the true sign of a moral lifestyle. Aiding them in this process were numerous factors trailing back to the Evangelical Revival in the 1790s, a movement that led to a general public debate about the relationship between work and Christianity, as well as to the belief that a moral person must justify his or her existence through useful labors (Nardin 130). Such beliefs are echoed by Ruskin nearly a century later when he asserts that "Gentlemen have to learn that it is no part of their duty or privilege to live on other people's toil" (quoted in The Idea of the Gentleman 7). An assertion such as this leads to what Mark Girouard refers to as the "Earnest Victorian," that familiar figure whose attitude toward life is "both serious and moral, characteristic of people who took their religion and their marriage vows seriously, and believed that they were put in this world to cultivate their talents and assets for the benefit of others, not themselves" ("Victorian Values" 51).

As much as this new ethic of hard work was related to a religious fervor among some circles, it was also paradoxically tied to a general diminishing of faith within Great Britain. As Lionel Trilling points out, for many in the 1850s and 1860s, Christianity was

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4 None of this is to say that the middle classes did not feel some ambivalence toward labor; on the contrary, generally speaking, members of the middle class seemed to believe that the best a person could do was to work to gain the leisure time to cultivate one's gentlemanly behaviors. Nevertheless, that an individual must earn that right to leisure was not in dispute among the rising merchant class.
irrelevant, often engaged in merely for appearances sake. The result of this general lack of interest in traditional religion and the sense of purpose it gave to the universe was its replacement by a theology of duty. In response to the loss of religious faith, Trilling writes, the nonbeliever felt the necessity to somehow maintain in life a degree of the seriousness and earnestness previously associated with religion (116-17). Exactly how this transition might have been achieved is suggested in George Eliot's assertion that, though God was inconceivable and immortality unbelievable, what was beyond question was that duty was "peremptory and absolute." "Never, perhaps," Eliot's friend F. W. H. Myers states, "have sterner accents affirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and unrecompensing Law" (quoted in Trilling 117).

The 1850s and 1860s, then, were not only a period of increased social fluidity, but one in which an economically powerful middle class sought to redefine the values of society in order to create a professional elite, a new middle-class, work-oriented aristocracy.5 These two decades, in other words, demonstrated a power struggle between the old values of the traditional, landed aristocracy, and the new, labor-oriented values of the rising middle class--a class which felt that they, and not their leisured cousins, had the greatest claim to a moral superiority that would enable social dominance.

Out of this fray emerge four novels uniquely suited to clarify the boundaries of this new, labor-oriented ruling class, this new middle-class aristocracy.6 First, as should

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5 In Marxian terms what is outlined here involves a battle between the "bourgeois" and the "nobility." I am not presenting, however, a classically Marxian discussion. For while Marx is generally concerned with economic power, I'm more interested in social and moral power--that is, the power with which a class is able to position itself in such a way as to gain the admiration, respect, and benefits bestowed upon those at the apex of the social hierarchy. All of this is not, of course, entirely unrelated to economic might: indeed, part of my point here is that during the nineteenth century the traditional aristocracy's social power was out of proportion to its economic strength.

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be clear by now, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Woman in White*, *Barchester Towers*, and *Bleak House* each contains unreadable characters whose social and moral ambiguity reflect the increased social fluidity of the Victorian era. Second, each novel includes a protagonist or group of protagonists who, because they hold an unstable position on the social ladder, can be used to clarify the role of the new middle-class aristocracy. Each novel, then, evokes both a rising and a falling motion, wherein an ambiguous and unreadable antagonist is defined downward to a socially and morally lower position, just as an ambiguous and unstable protagonist is clarified upward to a socially and morally valorized position derivative of the new, middle-class working aristocracy.

Important to note here is that as much as this rising and falling image reflects the new social fluidity of the Victorian period, there is an undercurrent of essentiality running through these novels. Once ambiguity is cleared away—once Obadiah Slope's false constructions and Francis Arabin's social indefiniteness are erased—at the core of these individuals is an inherent, fixed identity. These two figures—and the others with which this project is concerned—aren't so much reinvented, then, as reinstated in the positions they each should properly hold. This assumption of a core essentiality is important to the new middle-class aristocracy for two reasons: first, it provides this class with a sense of stability in a world turned upside down by the rapid pace of economic and social change. In a time when all the old rules no longer seem to function, the sense that there is some essential identity for both the class and the individual hints that the world is an ordered

6 While this term in some ways echoes Nancy Armstrong's "new aristocracy" in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (page 160), the two usages should not be confused. Whereas Armstrong refers to a class that was "neither gentry nor nobility as the eighteenth century knew them, yet one that was clearly a leisure class" (160, my emphasis), my use of "new middle-class aristocracy" seeks to evoke a class which, though it admires leisure (see note 4, above), favors earnestness and labor. I am primarily concerned, in other words, with a reconceptualization of the criteria by which the members of society—and particularly the elite—are evaluated.
and hierarchical place, that there are natural universal laws by which everything must
function. Second, and related, the sense that a core essentiality lurks beneath the fluidity
of Victorian identity asserts that the new middle-class aristocracy is not so much carving
out a new place for itself as claiming the place that it should always have occupied. By
portraying the laboring aristocracy as essentially superior, in other words, the four texts
this project explores seem to assert that what is occurring in the Victorian period is not a
rewriting of the old social rules and hierarchies but a discovery of the true rules by which
British moral superiority should be assessed.

The particular texts discussed here were chosen because together they define the
codes of proper behavior for this new professional elite, not only covering the proper role
of the new aristocratic male and female but clarifying the ways in which membership in
this new socially dominant group is signified.7

For example, at the same time that Lady Audley is being stripped of her
aristocratic bearings and revealed to be Lucy Maldon, daughter of a drunken officer and a
mentally ill mother, Robert Audley is being reconstructed from an insouciant, self-
indulgent, unproductive individual in such a way as to provide a blueprint for a new,
hardworking and socially responsible, elite. More particularly, he is learning that the role
of the new aristocratic male involves accepting responsibility to people other than one's
self—that, in other words, it is his duty to set aside his old, self-serving insouciance and
become an earnest and productive member of society. As the first chapter will

7 That the novel in general is an appropriate site for this professional aristocratic
manifesto almost goes without saying: a genre generally written, published, reviewed,
and read by the middle class, it was also considered an invaluable educational tool, as
evidenced in works ranging from Hard Times to Tess of the d'Urbervilles.
demonstrate, however, this "new" Robert is firmly grounded—though well hidden—in the "old" Robert. Thus, the earnest, hardworking Robert is more a rediscovery than a reinvention.

The discussion of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* serves as the partner to that of Braddon's text in that it defines the role of the middle-class aristocratic woman who is to aid the hardworking, new aristocratic male. Specifically, this chapter explores Marian Halcombe's transformation from a socially and morally ambiguous and economically threatening "spinster" into a tamed and unthreatening domestic angel. By first examining how Anne Catherick's social and moral indefiniteness result from and are addressed in her position as an unmarried woman—as someone who lacks a fixed (and restraining) role within the Victorian family configuration—and how Marian's own situation mirrors this woman's threatening ambiguity, this second chapter seeks to explore how Marian's reconceptualization clarifies the role of the new middle-class aristocratic woman.

The third and fourth chapters contain a slight shift in focus from the earlier sections. Generally speaking, these two discussions focus more on the causes of ambiguity in Victorian England than on the ambiguous characters themselves. More particularly, *Barchester Towers* concentrates less on the indefiniteness of the Grantlys and their circle than on the way in which Slope's (mis)use of language addresses Victorian anxieties concerning the possibility of socially and morally transgressive individuals hiding their true selves behind masks of rhetoric. This chapter will also examine the ways in which Eleanor's and Arabin's invention of a "new" language of the body is an attempt to create social signifiers that cannot be misunderstood.

The final chapter, on *Bleak House*, takes this discussion of the body one step further, exploring the ways in which Dickens's novel reveals how physical signifiers
may misrepresent an individual's moral status. Specifically, this section investigates how
Lady Dedlock constructs her appearance to hide her socially condemnable history, and
how this construction is linked to traditional conceptions of beauty which valorize a life
of leisure. In contrast, Dickens's portrayals of Esther Summerson and Allan Woodcourt
appear designed to reconceptualize what is "beautiful" in such a way as to praise bodies
that engage in selfless work.

Most important, the chapters that follow will, I hope, clarify a grand ambivalence
held by the increasingly powerful middle class. This ambivalence is demonstrated in a
simultaneous desire for and disapproval of the wealth and lifestyles of the traditional
aristocracy, as well as in a paradoxical wish for an essential, hierarchical, ordered world-
a world which will contain the contaminative powers of the lower classes--and a fluid
world, where the aforementioned wealth and prestige can be attained by the professional
class.
CHAPTER 1
DEFINING THE MIDDLE-CLASS ARISTOCRATIC MALE:
ROBERT AUDLEY IN BRADDON'S LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET

Very little has been written on Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* that does not focus almost solely on Lady Audley herself. This is not surprising, for the transformation of Helen Maldon Talboys to Lucy Graham, to Lady Audley, back to Helen Talboys, and finally to Mrs. Taylor, provides useful insight into Victorian concerns about gender, authenticity, social mobility, and moral transgression. Thus, Helena Michie and Chiara Briganti separately explore *Lady Audley's Secret* in terms of male attempts to combat a perceived duplicity in women; Jonathan Loesberg expands this discussion to include issues of class identity; and works by Showalter, Knoepflmacher, Schroeder, and Miller Casey examine the ways in which Braddon's text (and others like it) challenge, often subvert, and sometimes reaffirm prescribed women's roles.

All of this is important scholarship. But if Lady Audley is the spectacle at the center of the novel—the figure raised in poverty who eventually transgresses economic and moral boundaries—what is to be made of those who observe her: George Talboys, Phoebe and Luke Marks, Sir Michael Audley, Alicia Audley? In particular, what is to be made of Robert Audley, the young barrister with whom readers spend the majority of their time, and who undergoes a transformation—one which rivals Lady Audley's in
everything but the number of pseudonyms employed--from a lazy bachelor to a respected family man and a productive member of Victorian society?1

This chapter will explore the ways in which Lady Audley's presence as an ambiguous and unreadable figure within Braddon's text—that is, as a person whose moral and social status are not immediately apparent to the full body of the other characters—allows for a textual reconceptualization of Robert as a member of a new and middle-class aristocracy. More particularly, I will argue that Lady Audley's ambiguity presents the opportunity for a reconstruction of Robert Audley in order to suit changing social expectations regarding work, productivity, and family.

As *Lady Audley's Secret* begins, the title character's position within the text is socially and morally unreadable. When she first arrives in the village of Audley, "no one knew anything of her," not even, it appears, her employer (220). Even her age is unknown (7). These factors in themselves do not call into question her personal integrity, of course, though it does seem strange to the people who observe her that one so accomplished and brilliant should take a position which pays so little (5), something which hints at a mystery hidden in the then Lucy Graham's past. The general consensus of all involved, however, is that it is simply part of Lucy's nature to "always be light-hearted, happy and contented under any circumstance" (5). That the Dawsons' new governess could have any social aspirations whatsoever is strongly denied by both the villagers (5) and Sir Michael Audley, who considers it impossible that "any one so lovely and innocent could value herself against a splendid house or a good old title"; indeed, it pains Sir Michael to consider the alternatives (7).

1  The one article which does concentrate on Robert, Jeanne F. Bedell's "Amateur and Professional Detectives in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon," for the most part ignores the change this young man undergoes.
Faced with contrary evidence, however, the baronet is soon forced to reexamine his opinion. Lucy's admission that she does not love "any one in the world," much less Sir Michael, causes the latter to leave her company, even after having won her hand, with "some strong emotion at work in his heart—neither joy, nor triumph, but something akin to disappointment; some stifled and unsatisfied longing which lay heavy and dull at his heart, as if he had carried a corpse in his bosom" (11). For Sir Michael, then, Lady Audley is finally an unreadable figure. The old ways of thinking, wherein loveliness and the outward appearance of innocence signified a core morality, have been undermined. Sir Michael's struggle to understand his wife's moral position continues throughout the novel. At times the reader is told that he believes his wife's "simple account of her youth" as he believes "the Gospel" (349); similarly, he positions himself alongside his wife and against the daughter upon whom he once doted; and at his wife's prompting he not only asks his nephew to leave his house, but begins to suspect that the younger man is mad. As the novel concludes, however, and Lady Audley's "true" nature is revealed, the narrator asserts that Sir Michael has always, on some level, believed that his wife was false, for no honest man, "however pure and single may be his mind... is ever really deceived by falsehood" (352). Despite the force of the rhetoric here, the examples provided above serve as evidence to the contrary. Thus Lady Audley is finally a truly unreadable character—a character whose place on the social and moral hierarchy cannot be easily determined; given this, her very existence defies the traditional assumption that morality is revealed in the external self. To put it another way, Lady Audley's success at mimicking the aristocratic behaviors which were traditionally felt to be inimitable—which, indeed, the aristocracy had sought to assert were intrinsic signs of an essential moral superiority—signals to the Victorian reader the existence of the world so feared by Carlyle, a world in which the traditional
guideposts of social distinction have been struck down, and where people are left "more and more to follow each his own nose" (quoted in Loesberg 121).

Thus far, the present discussion of Lady Audley's Secret may seem to suggest that Braddon's novel seeks to align itself with the aristocratic reader concerned with the invasion of the upper classes by lower, morally corrupt individuals. This text, however, also calls into question the relevance and morality of the aristocracy. To the extent that it does this, Lady Audley's Secret acts out a general middle-class ambivalence toward the upper classes: on the one hand the middle class often sought to portray their supposed social superiors as economic parasites, living off of the labor of others; on the other hand, the middle classes to an extent envied and attempted to emulate the lifestyles of the leisured classes. This middle-class ambivalence is acted out not only in the general treatment of the aristocracy within Lady Audley's Secret, but in the selection of Robert Audley as a hero of the new middle-class aristocracy.

Almost as soon as Braddon's novel begins, questions are raised concerning both the relevance and the morality of the aristocracy. The opening description of Audley Court portrays a home in decay: its chimneys are "so broken down with age and long service" that ivy seems to be the only thing which supports them (2); its "stupid, bewildering" clock barely functions; many of the building's windows rattle in "every breeze" (1). As Chiara Briganti demonstrates, all of these features call into question the value of an aristocratic class to Victorian society as a whole (192). Further, the images presented in this opening passage highlight the aristocracy's lack of

2 Stallybrass and White assert that the bourgeoisie had an "eccentric" relationship with the hierarchies maintained by the aristocracy, decrying them as antidemocratic, but, while doing so, nevertheless attempting to establish their own superiority to both the upper and lower classes (199).
engagement in productive labor. Whereas previously the well "had been of good
service" and "busy nuns" had "drawn the cool water with their own fair hands," now
the occupants of the house scarcely know whether or not the well is dry (4-5). The
Audleys' leisurely lifestyle is particularly demonstrated in Alicia Audley, whose
attempts at serious labor are mocked:

Miss Alicia had reigned supreme in her father's house since her earliest
childhood, and had carried the keys, and jingled them in the pockets of
her silk aprons, and lost them in the shrubbery, and dropped them into
the pond, and given all manner of trouble about them from the hour in
which she entered her teens, and had on that account deluded herself
into the sincere belief that for the whole of that period she had been
keeping house. (4)

For these people, work is such an inessential part of maintaining their lifestyle that it is
nearly a form of play or pretend. The broken clock reinforces this: whereas for the
merchant and working classes time is of value, here it lacks even enough importance to
necessitate repairing the main timepiece of the estate. Those who visit Audley Court
seem to recognize the escape it offers from the worries and troubles of the work world,
many of them falling "into raptures with it; feeling a yearning wish to have done with
life, and to stay there for ever" (2).

Ironically enough, as much as Audley Court and its residents resist these
would-be invaders and seek to guard the Audley name from infamy, the estate and all it
represents seems itself to have a darker side and, consequentially, an ambiguity which
mirrors Lady Audley's: for example, the rumor of a long-ago murder at the court (28)
threatens to undermine the aristocracy's assertion of moral superiority, as does the
description of the estate's "lime-tree walk" as so hidden from view that "it seemed a
chosen place for secret meetings or for stolen interview; a place in which a conspiracy
might have been planned or a lover's vow registered with equal safety; and yet it was
scarcely twenty paces from the house" (3). Additionally, there is the description of
Audley Court in a chapter entitled "Hidden Relics." The usual pastoral conceits are mentioned—the lowing cows in the meadow, the creak of wagon wheels, the rare notes of the evening birds. Rather than being calm or reassuring, however, rather than giving Audley Court an air of peace, these sounds only tend to make the evening stillness "more intense," to the point of being "almost oppressive." Indeed, the reader is informed that "The very repose of the place grew painful from its intensity, and you felt as if a corpse must be lying somewhere within that grey and ivy-covered pile of building--so deathlike was the tranquillity of all around" (24). In reality, of course, there is no corpse, though there is soon to be an attempt at creating one. Nevertheless, here again is the assertion that surfaces are deceptive.

To the extent that these passages undermine cultural (and generally aristocratic) constructions of the leisured classes as socially and morally superior, they create an ambiguous representation of the upper class, which mirrors the text's representation of Lady Audley. In other words, just as the latter is presented as finally morally unreadable, so too are Audley Court and the aristocracy with which it is affiliated. Both Lady Audley and the leisured aristocracy, then, present exteriors which, though perhaps striking and even beautiful, are undermined by hints of moral corruption and decay.

In no single aristocratically aligned figure (other than Lady Audley herself) is this depicted more clearly than in Robert Audley, a man whose position is perhaps just as complicated as his aunt's. To the extent that he is the heir apparent to his uncle's title and fortune, he is a member of the aristocracy. Likewise, since he lives off an inheritance from his father, he is a member of the leisured class. His position is problematized, however, in that he has been educated to participate in an occupation—that of barrister—which John Kucich and others have recognized as representing a new
"professional" class. In theory at least, then, Robert is himself somewhat of an "unstable" figure, neither truly middle class, nor truly aristocratic.

In practice, of course, Robert is in no way aligned with any class that earns its bread by labor, either intellectually or physically, for despite being a member of this new professional class, he is a barrister who has "never either had a brief, or tried to get a brief, or even wished to have a brief." On the contrary, Robert spends his days reading French novels and smoking a German pipe and, after he has "exhausted himself with the exertion" of these practices, strolling into the Temple Gardens, collapsing in the shade, and complaining about having "knocked himself up with overwork" (32). Throughout the first sections of Lady Audley's Secret, Robert's lethargic approach to life is emphasized again and again. He has a "listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute manner" (32); his brain is "idle" (33); and in general he takes life as "altogether too absurd a mistake for any one event in its foolish course to be for a moment considered seriously" (61).

Robert's behavior is, needless to say, contrary to the earnestness so treasured by the Victorian middle classes, particularly during a time when critics such as Ruskin do not hesitate to assert that "Gentlemen have to learn that it is no part of their duty or privilege to live on other people's toil" (quoted in Gilmour, The Idea of the Gentleman 7), and writers such as George Eliot insist that, though God is inconceivable and immortality impossible, what lies beyond question is the sense that duty is "peremptory and absolute" (quoted in Trilling 117). Eliot's words foreground the fact that duty and hard work are related to the present study's concern with authenticity and essentiality. Eliot's assertion that "Duty" is "absolute" carries with it the idea that work is an

"authentic" pastime, an essential part of human nature. Thus, not to engage in work, and consequently not to aid one's fellow human beings, is unnatural, inauthentic, a fact which further destabilizes Robert Audley's "self" as Lady Audley's Secret begins.

Other elements of Robert's behavior signify his problematic position in Victorian society. Chief among these are his smoking and reading, two habits which, according to Altick, highlight a leisurely lifestyle (240). Certainly, however, the first was a practice which threatened to alienate Robert not only from the middle classes, but from the aristocracy as well. In The Presence of the Present, Richard Altick does a comprehensive study of smoking in the Victorian era and in Victorian literature, covering the various types of tobacco, the contexts in which they were used, and the ways in which they signified various social positions in literature. By midcentury, pipe-smoking, one of the two ways in which Robert indulges his taste for tobacco, was generally perceived as a lower-class habit, scorned by the members of the upper and middle classes (240-41). The only exceptions to this rule were "mildly Bohemian artists' circles," and university undergraduates, who adopted it in a "deliberate inversion of social symbolism" as a sign of their "temporary membership in an elite little precinct of society" (241). None of this speaks particularly well for Robert. On the one hand, if pipe-smoking is associated with the working classes, certainly his indulging in the habit would not endear him either to the aristocracy or to the appearance-conscious middle classes; nor, of course, would the pipe's links to Bohemes, mild or otherwise. If, on the other hand, Robert's pipe-smoking is simply a remnant of his university days, then it only serves to highlight—at twenty-eight—his lack of maturity, and consequently his unwillingness to engage with the world as a proper Victorian "man" should—that is, in an earnest, productive, selfless way. Cigar smoking, Robert's other favorite form of ingesting tobacco, leaves him no better off.
For though by 1855 Prince Albert had to an extent brought the rolled leaf into public favor, it still retained some of its earlier associations with the middle-class dandy and the lower-class swell (Altick 248).

Altick's general conclusion, finally, is that smoking can be used by any writer to signify anything he or she wishes it to with regard to the smoker (257). If this is true, then in Robert's case it serves to testify to his unstable social position, distancing him from both the middle classes and the aristocracy. Already discussed is a passage in which Robert's smoking ironically serves to highlight his leisurely lifestyle, in that he claims the habit has caused him to have "knocked himself up with overwork" (32). More directly, the text associates smoking with fishing, a sport which, even the narrator admits, "is not the most lively of occupations" (62). Similarly, Alicia Audley associates smoking with laziness, sarcastically assuring her cousin that it best that he "amuse" himself in his "own way": "loll in an easy-chair all day, with those two absurd dogs asleep on your knees; spoil my lady's window-curtains with your cigar; and annoy everybody in the house with your stupid, inanimate countenance" (114). To this tirade, Robert responds only by opening "his handsome grey eyes to their widest extent" and looking "helplessly" at his cousin (115). After spending all day doing nothing, moving not even enough to disturb the sleeping dogs on his lap, he is incapable of invigorating his "inanimate countenance" to even a verbal response. If the laziness associated with Robert's smoking is not itself enough to earn him the disrespect of those "earnest Victorians" who make up the middle classes, then surely his habit of smoking in train cars "in mild defiance of the authorities" is. For in his assertion that "the Company may make as many bye-laws as they please, but I shall take the liberty of enjoying my cheroot as long as I've half-a-crown left to give the guard" (143), Robert displays an attitude which reflects the middle class's sense that
those associated with the aristocracy felt themselves above the laws that applied to everyone else (Gilmour, The Idea of the Gentleman 49).

Strangely enough, it is also Robert's disrespect for society's rules regarding smoking which earn him the disapproval of the upper classes. As Alicia's comment concerning Lady Audley's curtains serves to signify, Robert displays a lack of concern over the etiquette surrounding smoking. When first introduced to Great Britain, cigars were used by some to skirt the rules associated with pipe smoking: whereas it was considered improper to smoke a pipe around women, for instance, it was not unusual for early cigar smokers to indulge their habits almost anywhere, regardless of their effect on others (Altick 242). When cigar smoking did become more acceptable, the expectation was that it would occur only in certain parts of the home, and then far from the company of women (252-53). Robert not only smokes in the presence of the ladies (116), potentially ruining his aunt's curtains in the process, but goes so far as to suggest that not only Lady Audley's maid but Lady Audley herself might consider taking up the habit (134, 118). As Alicia's comment makes clear, Robert's lack of consideration does not escape the notice of those members of the upper class with whom he associates. Likewise, Robert's habit draws upon him reproof from his uncle (128), and it is one of many things that cause the young squires who visit Audley Court for Christmas to dismiss him as an "inoffensive species of maniac," a person "utterly unworthy of any remark whatsoever" (113). In this way Robert's smoking distances him from the upper classes in much the same way as it does from the middle, thereby destabilizing his social position, presenting the text with a prime opportunity to reconstruct him into an essential and superior "new aristocrat" who can serve the aspirations of the rising middle class.
As for the other half of Robert's "Lares and Penates" (130), novels, they too were considered by some to be of questionable value. As far back as the eighteenth century, the novel had a reputation as an indulgence for "the giddy and licentious of both sexes, who read, not for the sake of thinking, but for want of thought" (Taylor 9). In the early nineteenth century, so strong was the feeling against the genre that the editors of the *Reasoner* compared it to sleep in that both wasted valuable time (109), and a customer of the *Christian Observer* actually canceled his subscription and burned an issue in which one writer dared to remark that perhaps only some novels were bad, and not all (107). Some years later, working-class periodical editor Richard Carlile launched a scathing attack on the genre as a whole and the "drawing-room dolls" who engage in it in particular:

Well as they are, as far as all the luxuries of life are in question, they shrink from labour, and dread the process of thought. . . . They give fashion to that which is nationally useless, rather than useful, and decry the innovation of original thought, or any thought, that thinks there is room for improvement in the present, and to them delightful, constitution of things. (quoted in Murphy 74)

Here again is an assumed dichotomy between leisure and productivity, with the habits associated with Robert Audley tending to lean toward the former. The fact that the novels Robert reads are French only helps to build the case against him in the eyes of the middle class. As David Skilton reveals, within *Lady Audley's Secret*, "the use of French fiction is suggestive of a certain moral and intellectual atmosphere" (xiii). For one thing, Robert's preference for continental literature over more manly pastimes like hunting--he claims the weight of his rifle hurts his shoulder (50)--serves to make him seem "un-English," and consequently "irresponsible" (Skilton xiii-xiv). Further, references to authors like Dumas and de Kock may hint at a penchant for the exotic on Robert's part, something which would certainly offend Girouard's earnest Victorians (*Camelot* xiv).
Also implicit within Carlile's reference to "drawing room dolls" is the not uncommonly held idea that reading was an effeminate pastime. Certainly such an assumption is also present within Lady Audley's Secret. The only characters other than Robert who engage in novel reading are Alicia, Lady Audley herself, and Phoebe, Lady Audley's maid. Both of the latter women also have a taste for French literature. Already mentioned is Robert's penchant for reading over more "manly" tasks, a fact which perhaps explains Sir Harry Towers's extreme reaction when Sir Michael suggests, after his daughter has declined the young baron's proposal of marriage, that she has an attachment to her cousin:

'Don't say that, Sir Michael,' interposed the fox-hunter energetically. 'I can get over anything but that. A fellow whose hand upon the cub weighs half a ton . . . . A fellow who turns his collars down, and eats bread and marmalade! No, no Sir Michael; it's a queer world, but I can't think that of Miss Audley.' (127)

This passage emphasizes at every turn the contrasts between Sir Harry and Robert. The former is an expert huntsman who is full of energy. Robert, in contrast, is lethargic; when he can be bothered to put down his book and climb upon a horse, he mishandles the latter, nearly pulling "the Cavalier's mouth to pieces" (127).

Though it would be anachronistic to read too much into Sir Harry's reference to "queer," it is worth noting that Robert's seeming preference for the company of men over that of women, as well as other elements of his "bachelor" lifestyle, were not unproblematic to the Victorian reader. It has long been a staple of Victorian criticism that by 1850 the concept of the close family had become not only the means through which the middle classes sought to create a differentiated class identity, but—as a result of the increasing dominance of the bourgeoisie—the single most important building
block upon which Victorian society as a whole was based (Weeks 24-28). Jeffrey Weeks, for instance, uses the work of Althusser to tie the family to the broader apparati of state ideology, asserting that family is

that social form within which people are assigned a place in society and where they internalise the values of that place and which shapes sexual attitudes to conform to wider social needs. The family is therefore the site of both primary socialisation of children and the continuing socialisation of adults. (25)

What went on in the home, then, was intimately related to the broader social structure in that it both responded to and shaped that structure and its needs. More particularly, the home was the sphere in which "Victorian values" were reinforced and reproduced. Given that the ideology of domesticity arose in part as a middle-class response to what they perceived as the immorality of the aristocracy (Weeks 28), it is not surprising that the values most generally espoused in this sphere were aimed to suit the economic needs of the middle class. The concept of separate spheres for instance, can be linked to issues of legitimacy and the economic consequences of producing an heir; consider, as an example, Samuel Johnson's assertion that "all property in the world depends" upon the chastity of women. According to Weeks, "The middle-class capitalist required the legitimacy of all his children not only to protect his possessions from being enjoyed by the off-spring of other men, but to ensure the loyalty of sons who might be business partners, and of his daughters who might be essential in marriage alliances."

In contrast, systems of primogeniture and entail protected aristocratic estates from the hands of would-be illegitimate claimants (28-29).

All of this is included here simply to demonstrate the importance of family in Victorian society, and consequently--by his apparent unwillingness to abandon bachelorhood--the potential threat a figure like Robert Audley could pose to the middle-class vision of the status quo. And indeed, at first Robert does seem destined for a life
of isolated self-indulgence. For one thing, he assures Lady Audley that there is little chance he will ever have children (62), which seems to imply his intention of remaining single. Similarly, Braddon's narrator characterizes Robert as the sort of person in who, should he ever actually feel love, the emotion would be "so vague and feeble a sentiment that he might have gone down to his grave with a dim sense of some uneasy sensation which might be love or indigestion" (62). More interesting, perhaps, is a later passage in which the narrator explains why Sir Michael does not understand how Robert cannot love his Alicia Audley. The problem is that the baronet

forgot that there are certain Jacks who go through life without meeting the Jill appointed for them by Nemesis, and die old bachelors perhaps, with poor Jill pining an old maid upon the other side of the party-wall. . . [Sir Michael] ignored all those infinitesimal differences in nature which make the wholesome food of one man the deadly poison of another. (332)

This last phrase is particularly interesting, as it implies that Robert is in some way different from other men. Sir Michael himself thinks as much, noting that though his nephew is "sensible" and "tolerably clever," he is also "perhaps a bit careless in the performance of certain social duties." Additionally, "there was some slight difference not easily defined, that separated him from other men of his age and position" (331).

Though it is important to note Linda Dowling's caution not to mistake Victorian male homosocial behavior for active homosexuality, a reading of Robert that argues his homosexuality can be sustained by the text of Lady Audley's Secret, and fits in well with his otherwise unstable position within Victorian society. Most noteworthy in such a reading is Robert's affection for George Talboys. The same Robert who wouldn't notice love enough to differentiate it from indigestion feels very painfully the loss of his friend. More than once the reader is informed of how strong his feelings are for George:
If any one had ventured to tell Mr. Robert Audley that he could possibly feel a strong attachment to any creature breathing, that cynical gentleman would have elevated his eyebrows in supreme contempt at the preposterous notion. Yet here he was, flurried and anxious, bewildering his brain by all manner of conjectures about his missing friend, and, false to every attribute of his nature, walking fast. (82)

Here again there is the assertion that Robert is incapable of affection for another. Nevertheless, his feelings for George are so strong that he is actually forgoing his usual thoughtless and lazy approach to life, instead allowing his mind to conjecture, his legs to move quickly. This is a striking description, particularly of a man who reads the letters of the cousin who loves him "without so much as removing the amber mouthpiece of his German pipe from his moustachioed lips" (33), and whose affection for his aunt—the woman who has charmed all of Europe with her beauty—is described as "placid" (56). Even when face to face with Lady Audley, Robert seems unmoved by her refinements: "Still my lady's pretty musical prattle ran on as merrily and continuously as the babble of some brook; and still Robert's thoughts wandered, in spite of himself, to George Talboys" (86). It is worth noting that, in contrast to the passage concerning George in which Robert is energetic and concerned for another, each of the passages in which Robert's relationship with women is the subject seems to highlight his least admirable traits: his habit of smoking, his lethargic nature, his lack of emotional involvement.

Also worth noting is the fact that the passage in which Robert's thoughts wander from Lady Audley to George contains elements of the triangulation of desire, with the female serving as a conduit for the feelings of one man for another. Indeed, this model is played out elsewhere in the text, perhaps the most prominent example involving Robert Audley, George Talboys, and George's sister, Clara (Michie 70).

4 Much in the following discussion of homoerotic desire is based on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Between Men.
Robert's affections for George never abate—he alternately fantasizes about having him by his side (161) and having him die in his arms so that he might bury him (256). In Clara Talboys, however, Robert at least seems to find a socially acceptable vessel through which to channel his feelings. At various times throughout the novel, the reader is told that Clara's handwriting resembles her brother's (209), that she has "his face" (258), that, in general, "she's very like him" (208). Similarly, the reader learns that Clara Talboys has brown eyes, "like George's" (197). Not surprisingly then, whenever Robert thinks about Clara, he dwells on her eyes: at one point he feels that the thoughts of his heart are read by her "solemn brown eyes" (258); at another he is jealous of anyone who comes into "the region inhabited by those calm brown eyes" (436); and in yet a third passage, in a moment of sadness, Robert is "weak enough to let his fancy wander away to...the dark-brown eyes that were so like the eyes of his lost friend" (371). This catalogue of references linking Clara and George in Robert's affection goes on and on—at one point the text even explicitly states that the "bond of union" between Robert and Clara is "her lost brother George" (439). Simultaneously, Clara seems to serve as a replacement for George, as evidenced by Robert's assertion to her that he loves her "as earnestly and truly as I have mourned for your brother's fate" (401). What becomes clear in even these few examples, then, is that Robert's feelings for Clara are closely linked to, perhaps even dependent upon, his affection for George.5

5 Interestingly enough, even Braddon's choice of the surname Audley for Robert might help support a queer reading of this text, for in 1631, a Mervin Touchet, ninth Lord Audley, was beheaded for sodomy (Craft 10). There is nothing which directly links this historical figure to Braddon's text: the novel traces Robert's family back some five hundred years, to the reign of Edward IV, but keeps them in England (258), whereas Touchet was in the Irish peerage. Nevertheless, there is the possibility that Braddon, in

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Several factors complicate any oversimplification of these details. First, there is the recognition, much documented of late, of the frequency of strong same-sex nonsexual relationships in Victorian England. As Jeffrey Weeks argues, "It was widely accepted in Victorian society that strong and indeed often emotional relationships between men were normal" (109). Writes W. T. Stead concerning the prosecution of Wilde: "A few more cases like Oscar Wilde's and we should find the freedom of comradeship now possible to men seriously impaired to the permanent detriment of the race" (quoted in Weeks 109). Implicit in Stead's fears that the prosecution of gay men will lead to a general indictment of even "nonsexual" male-male relationships is the fact that homosexuality itself held not only a marginal status in Victorian society but an ambiguous one as well. For though there can be little doubt that nineteenth-century British culture felt male-male erotic relationships were morally reprehensible, there is much evidence of confusion as to just what these relationships involved. For one thing, as Stead's words make quite clear, there is an uncertainty as to where the lines between the homosexual and the homosocial lie. Though debate continues to rage as to the exact moment a distinct and self-conscious homosexual identity emerged, there can be little doubt that Victorians felt they knew "it" when they saw it, and understood on some level that it closely resembled the homosocial relationships upon which their various social institutions--the public school, the college, the club, the military--were founded (Martin 74). As Sedgwick points out, "the paths of male entitlement" during the Victorian period "required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds" ("The Beast in the Closet" 180). In this way--again, as Stead himself makes clear--the

her wide reading, might have come across an account of this trial in a collection concerning famous state trials or a similarly sensational work.

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very existence of male-male sexual relationships seemed to threaten British culture. The practices in which Oscar Wilde engaged, explained the prosecutor for the Crown to the jury, posed a threat to to British society, a moral infection, "a sore which cannot fail in time to corrupt and taint all" (Hyde 253). In contrast, claims Weeks, "The puritan emphasis on the family, and on sexual life as being necessarily confined to the marital bed, offered an antidote to social crisis and a counter to the fear of decline" (107).

Thus, the lines between the homosexual and the homosocial were ambiguously drawn: where did the one end and the other begin? How might the taint of the former undermine the necessity of the latter? If this fear and confusion was present toward the turn of the century when Stead was writing--following the highly publicized trials of Wilde, prostitute Jack Saul, and transvestites Boulton and Parks--it seems reasonable that it was even more of a factor thirty-some years earlier.

Indeed, the prosecution of Boulton and Parks in 1870, for instance, shows an intriguing sense of confusion regarding male homosexuality. A Dr. Paul, who examined the two transvestites after their arrest for indecent behavior, had never seen a similar case in his entire career; nor had the doctor upon whose book, Medical Jurisprudence, Dr. Paul based his conclusions. Similarly, none of the other many medical "experts" called in seemed capable of agreeing on the signs of sodomitical activity. The Metropolitan Police also seemed ill prepared to produce a conception of what might constitute the "homosexual identity" (Weeks 101). Related to this is the fact that the law referring to crimes "against nature"--under which any sort of sexual activity between two men was prosecuted--also referred to a multitude of other "sins," from bestiality to birth control (Weeks 100); thus, argues Christopher Craft, the category of "unnatural" copulation is "utterly confused" (12). The term "sodomy" could, in other words, be employed at different times, in different contexts, and in
reference to differing degrees of penetration, to discuss acts between men and women, men and animals, and men and men. In this way, "sodomy's mobility initiates a proliferation of substitutions whose effect is to corrode identities" (Craft 12). A very simple example of this sort of corrosion can be gleaned from the testimony of a male servant who asserted his male employer "us'd his Body as the Body of a Woman" (Brodway, quoted in Craft 10). In this example, sexual intercourse which is "unnatural" asks at least one of the engaged parties to assume an "unnatural" position, to transgress assumedly essential biological boundaries. In this way, stable identities are threatened. The case of Boulton and Parks demonstrates similar automatic assumptions that men whose outward appearance signified womanhood engaged in "unnatural acts," that, in other words, transvestites are necessarily homosexual. Thus, repeatedly in Victorian thought outward appearances are tied to morality, with the twist here that it is assumed that those who engage in undermining surfaces are necessarily engaged in immoral behavior. In this way the two go hand in hand, shifting identities signifying immoral behavior, immoral behavior causing shifting identities.

All of this ties to the larger argument concerning Lady Audley's Secret: Lady Audley's constructed surface signifies an immoral essentiality in much the same way that homosexuality's shifting of gender roles (from the Victorian standpoint, at least) signifies its essential immorality--in both cases, "role-playing" is morally subversive behavior. Additionally, the ambiguity inherent in homosexual relationships reflects Robert's own class ambiguity: just as homosexuality undermines the "essentials" of "man" and "woman" (again, from the Victorian standpoint), Robert destabilizes the essentials of "aristocrat" and "middle class."

This blending of the sexual and the economic is by no means limited to this particular text. Though there is no evidence linking one class more than any other to
the male homosexual subculture that begins to emerge around the end of the eighteenth century, Sedgwick makes the claim that "an important, recurrent, wishful gesture" by the creators of bourgeois ideological meanings was the "feminization of the aristocracy as a whole, by which not only aristocratic women but the abstract image of the entire class came to be seen as ethereal, decorative, and otiose in relation to the vigorous and productive values of the middle class" (93). Thus, middle-class constructions of the upper classes in popular and other media are filled with images of intellectual lightweights, dandies, and impotent old lords. Present within such a comparison is an equation that places sexual productivity alongside economic productivity; in this way, the construction of the aristocratic male as effeminate serves to reinforce the reprehensibility of his life of leisure. His inability to produce offspring mirrors his inability to produce a marketable product; both failures serve to confirm his immorality and therefore his inferiority to the middle-class male.

That those elements in Robert's character which hint at homosexual tendencies are related to this blurring of the aristocratic and the sexually deviant is demonstrated in a number of ways, but perhaps most effectively by his public school background. Early on in Braddon's novel the reader is informed that Robert and George attended Eton together (35), a fact brought up repeatedly, although for no apparent reason. In the aforementioned passage occurring just after George has disappeared, for instance, where Robert is "flurried and anxious" at his friend's disappearance, there follows a line of dialogue in which Robert murmurs to himself, "I haven't walked fast since I was at Eton" (82).

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6 Lord Fairlie from Collins's *Woman in White*, Joseph Sedley from *Vanity Fair*, and Sir Leicester Dedlock, respectively.
In and of themselves these references to Eton seem harmless enough; to those versed in the lore of the public school, however, such references seem designed to foreground the idea that Robert's affection for George is not simply that of a good friend but something containing erotic overtones. For by the middle of the nineteenth century, homoerotic activity had become something of an institution in major public schools. Symonds, for instance, describes Harrow as a place where every good-looking boy had a woman's name and was either a "prostitute" or a "boy's bitch." Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson describes a similar situation at Charterhouse, referring to it as a "hothouse of vice." Prior to the 1880s, when social purity advocates began questioning these practices, the general assumption—albeit an unspoken one—was that these male-male relationships were a part of growing up, a phase one went through and then left behind. To this extent, then, these activities were considered "legitimate," having little or no effect on a person's conception of self (Weeks 109). Thus, what occurred between Robert and George at Eton—if anything—was received with a wink and a nod, or at the very least a glance in the other direction. The effect of Robert's and the narrator's repeated references to Eton in the present, however, is to foreground a behavior—generally perceived as that of schoolboys—in a relationship between two grown men. To the extent that such is the case, the impression of Robert with which the audience is left is that of a person who is more boy than man. The connotations of such a construction are many and vastly negative: in a culture that values "manliness" (a sense of duty and responsibility, a productive economic life, and a procreative married life), Robert seems almost prepubescent. Consequently, he carries about him an air of harmless impotence and of a careless unwillingness to take life seriously and shoulder his share of the social burden.
To the extent that Robert is all these things—economically and sexually unproductive, lazy and socially irresponsible—he seems the exact opposite of the middle-class Victorian ideal. In that he is all these things and socioeconomically indefinite, he presents a unique opportunity for the construction of a new laboring aristocracy. For to the degree that Robert is aligned with the old aristocracy—to the degree that he is lazy, unproductive, and effeminate—he is a vehicle for middle-class criticism of their supposed social superiors. By foregrounding all of these negative elements of the aristocracy, the text calls into question the value of such a class.

Paradoxically, because Robert is also in some ways aligned with the middle classes—he does have a profession, for instance, and he is not as yet technically titled—his reconstruction as an earnest Victorian is not beyond the realm of the possible. In addition, and perhaps yet again paradoxically, Robert's aristocratic background lends to the new middle-class aristocracy an air of legitimacy: he does not have to purchase or claim a title which is not his—he is an Audley, and in that he is an Audley who eventually chooses to join the ranks of the earnest and hardworking middle classes, he lends legitimacy to their cause.

The thematic site upon which this reconstruction of Robert occurs is his exploration into Lady Audley's identity. Though Robert does not at first realize that it is his aunt he is investigating, his determination to discover the whereabouts of his friend and his beginning to read Lady Audley's identity occur almost simultaneously within the text. The very evening that George disappears, Robert visits Audley Court and notices a number of bruises on his aunt's wrist. When questioned about these, Lady Audley replies that she rather absentmindedly tied a ribbon around her arm so tightly that it left a bruise. "Hum!" Robert thinks to himself: "My lady tells little childish white lies; the bruise is of a more recent date than a few days ago" (88).
Moments later he repeats this thought, then bids his adieu and walks home slowly, wondering again at his fondness for George and asserting that he would "go to the very end of the world" in order to find him (88-89). Here the beginning of Robert's transformation from an insouciant member of the leisure class to a man with purpose is closely linked, if only by chronological proximity, to his exploration of the deceptive self Lady Audley has constructed. At the very moment he realizes that his aunt might not be all that she seems, it appears, Robert begins to show the first signs of changing for the better by gaining a sense of proper Victorian earnestness.

Some time passes before there are clear signs Robert is conscious that he is investigating his aunt. Nevertheless, he begins to show an industriousness very unlike him. The morning following George's disappearance, Robert goes from Audley to London. When he discovers his friend is not there, he continues on to Southampton, where he questions Mr. Maldon, and he returns to London "by the mail," arriving at dawn. "The young barrister," our narrator tells us, "was worn out by a long day spent in hurrying from place to place. The usual lazy monotony of his life had been broken as it had never been broken before in eight-and-twenty tranquil, easy-going years" (95).7

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7 One might compare Robert's very active mode of detecting with that of Sherlock Holmes. As Audrey Jaffe points out, stories like "The Man with the Twisted Lip" display an anxiety about "labor that appears not to be labor." She cites, as an example, a scene wherein Holmes, in order to consider the details of his case, "took off his coat and waistcoat, put on a large blue dressing-gown, and then wandered about the room collecting pillows from his bed and cushions from the sofa and armchairs. With these he constructed a sort of Eastern divan, upon which he perched himself cross-legged, with an ounce of shag tobacco and a box of matches laid out in front of him." As Jaffe points out, "Holmes at work resembles nothing so much as the habitué of an opium den" (110). That Robert gives up tobacco when he begins his "work," will be touched on momentarily.
Though this investigation is purely a personal one, the text goes to some lengths to imply that what Robert is doing here displays not only a sense of duty to a friend, but a degree of professional industriousness. For instance, he acquires the habit of writing things down: "Upon my word," he reflects upon beginning a document entitled "Journal of Facts Connected with the Disappearance of George Talboys, Inclusive of Facts Which Have No Apparent Relation to That Circumstance," "I begin to think that I ought to have pursued my profession, instead of dawdling my life away as I have done" (100). Later, he spends half an hour adding several paragraphs to this document and wonders if it is "to be my first brief" (155).

Robert's natural skill at practicing law eases his transition from a leisured to a laboring lifestyle. For though Braddon's narrator makes it clear that Robert is going through a transformation of sorts--stating, for instance, that since George's disappearance Robert has "learned what it was to have an honest purpose" (144)--the text also reassures the reader that the "new" Robert is not as distinct from the "old" Robert as might at first be expected. Indeed, at one point it is clear that Robert's newly acquired earnestness is not so much the contrary as the product of his former laziness:

The lazy bent of his mind, which prevented him from thinking of half a dozen things at a time, and not thinking thoroughly of any one of them, as is the manner of your more energetic people, made him remarkably clear-sighted upon any point to which he ever gave his serious attention. (89)

The relevance of this apparent contradiction—Robert's former ineffectiveness being the cause of his present effectiveness—is twofold: first, it again acts out middle-class ambivalence toward the leisure classes. In the same way that the rising middle class both despised and envied the aristocracy, Robert's personality is both damnable and admirable. Second, in that the "new" Robert is so closely related to the "old" Robert, the implication is that the former is not so much an artificial construction covering up
the essential self as a natural extension of that self. Robert's apparently natural skill at his profession, in other words, places him in direct contrast to Lady Audley: whereas the new self she constructs and presents at Audley Court is pure artifice, the Robert that evolves during the course of the narrative is not artifice but truth, not construction but essentiality. In this way, Robert avoids committing the same crime as his aunt— that of constructing a deceptive self, which, through its very existence, could participate in the creation of Carlyle's world without guideposts, a world in which a common sense of order is struck down and each individual is allowed to follow his or her "own nose."

Worth noting is how Robert's discovery of his "true" earnest self is intricately linked to revelations about Lady Audley's core immorality. The main part of Robert's investigation into Lady Audley's true identity begins when Robert arrives in London and runs into his aunt, who has just, unknown to Robert, broken into his chambers and removed letters revealing her identity. Here, Robert's quick eye allows him a glimpse into the essential identity which lies behind Lady Audley's mask. As he glances at her, he thinks to himself:

What does it mean? She is altogether a different being to the wretched, helpless creature who . . . looked at me with her own pitiful face, in the little room at Mount Stanning, four hours ago. What has happened to cause the change? (145)

Indeed, the version of Lady Audley Robert encounters at the train station is quite different from the one he has come to know. When she visits his quarters at Mount Stanning, she is described as a "childish, helpless, babyfied little creature" (138). Now, however, her most noteworthy feature is her smile, which is twice described as "defiant" (145). This supposedly essential version of Lady Audley that Robert is beginning to discover, then, is not only transgressive—claiming one social and moral status while actually holding another— but arrogantly and aggressively so.
Even this early in Robert's investigation into George's death and its relationship to Lady Audley's identity, Robert begins to show the positive benefits of his new "earnest" lifestyle. Upon returning to his chambers after grilling the locksmith who assisted Lady Audley, the reader is told that Robert has "no humour even for his meerschaum consoler" and that "the yellow-papered fictions on the shelves above his head seemed stale and profitless" (156). This description is striking, given that in volume one Robert is seldom described sans pipe or cigar, and that he travels with a dozen French novels even to his uncle's home only an hour out of London. Similarly, Robert suddenly develops a penchant for orthodox religion. At a loss as to how to continue his investigation after Helen Talboys's letters have been stolen from George's trunk, Robert buries his face in his hands and prays. As he does so, "The one purpose which had slowly grown up in his careless nature until it had become powerful enough to work a change in that very nature, made him what he had never been before--a Christian." This new Robert, the reader is informed, is "conscious of his own weakness; anxious to keep to the strict line of duty; fearful to swerve from the conscientious discharge of the strange task that had been forced upon him; and reliant on a stronger hand than his own to point the way which he was to go" (157-58). Most important here is that Robert is transformed into not just a "Christian," but into that specific brand of Victorian Christian who felt that religious faith imparted a sense of duty upon the believer; thus, Robert becomes anxious that he fulfill his duty and avoid distractions of the sort that kept him from practicing his profession.

The reference here to "a stronger hand than his own" deserves notice, as it adds the air of a religious crusade to Robert's task: his responsibility is not just to George, then, but to his God and, by implication, to his Queen and country. As the text continues, these religious overtones blur in interesting ways with the domestic ideology
discussed above. As determined as Robert is after his prayer—"Justice to the dead first, mercy to the living afterwards" are his exact words (158)—almost immediately he begins to equivocate, fearful of the consequences his actions may have upon his uncle's happiness. Eventually, he resolves to visit George's father, place the entire case before him, and allow the older man to determine whether or not the investigation should continue (161). Upon discovering that Harcourt Talboys firmly believes his son to be alive and hiding of his own free will, Robert is prepared to drop his first and only case; Clara Talboys steps in, however, and threatens to take up the investigation herself if Robert does not. In response to this intervention, Robert remembers "the stronger hand" he'd thought of only the day before and considers how he'd been about to give up his investigation: "Now this girl, this apparently passionless girl, had found a voice, and was urging him on towards his fate" (199). The next time Robert considers dropping the investigation and sparing his uncle's wife, he is urged on by the image of Clara's "uplifted face, sublime in its unutterable grief; of her impassioned words, still ringing in his ears" (225). Robert remembers this woman's words, her threat to investigate her brother's death on her own, then reflects: "Could he stop now? For any consideration? No; a thousand times no! Not with the image of that grief-stricken face imprinted on his mind" (226). What has occurred, in effect, is that Robert's Christian sense of duty has blurred into a sense of responsibility to the domestic ideology. Briganti, for instance, asserts that Robert's ability to continue his queries is driven by his desire to keep Clara "as the desired calm angel, that is, by his determination to insist upon sexual difference" (198). He is driven, in other words, by the desire to maintain the domestic hierarchy which places women in the home and men out in the world. Robert has become a convert then, not only to Christianity, but to the
Victorian domestic ideology: though he and Clara have not yet married, she has already become his angel in the house, her image driving him on, keeping him earnest and honest in his pursuit of his goal.

A further sign that Robert has become invested in Victorian domestic ideology is his sudden concern for the welfare of George Talboys's son. Here again, Robert's increasingly responsible behavior is directly tied to his investigation into Lady Audley's identity. Upon returning to his chambers after spending Christmas at Audley Court, Robert discovers a book that contains the handwriting of Helen Talboys. It is quite distinct, and apparently matches Lady Audley's perfectly. Robert, then, has for the first time discovered a direct clue as to Lady Audley's true identity. His first thought, upon making this discovery is, "My next visit must be to Southampton. I must place the boy in better hands" (159). The change in Robert's attitude toward the younger Talboys is striking: when first made guardian of his friend's son, his response was typical of his old behavior: "I," he says, "guardian to anybody or anything! I, who never in my life could take care of myself!" (46). Though as yet unmarried and heirless, Robert's growing relationship with both Clara and young George foreshadow the domestic tranquility presented at the conclusion of Lady Audley's Secret.

Once Robert has discovered Helen Talboys's handwriting, all that remains for him to do is construct a chain of evidence that links George's wife to Lady Audley. This he does in rather short order, first questioning Dr. Dawson concerning his former governess's credentials, then questioning the woman who recommended the then Lucy Graham, and, finally, traveling up to Yorkshire to confirm the date upon which Helen Talboys was last seen. While visiting Mrs. Vincent—Lucy Graham's former employer—Robert discovers a pair of labels on a hatbox, one on top of the other, the topmost containing the name of Lucy Graham, the lowermost printed with the name of Helen
Talboys. To all appearances, then, Robert has made his discovery of Lady Audley's true identity, of the self that lies beneath her construction of an innocent young governess turned socialite.

Of course, Robert has yet to discover the madness which lies at the core of Lady Audley's being, beneath all of her social refinements, her beauty, and her deceptions. This secret, and Robert's reaction to it, seems to undermine the conclusions thus far; more specifically, to the extent that Robert's decision to ferry his aunt off to an asylum in Belgium helps her elude legal punishment for her crimes, this act seems to indicate that Robert has not, after all, developed into a hero worthy of the new middle-class aristocracy. After all, as mentioned above, part of the bourgeoisie's disapproval with the old aristocracy was the latter's apparent lack of respect for the law (Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman* 49). Indeed, Robert clearly uses aristocratic privilege to help his aunt avoid prison and his uncle avoid a scandal, and recognizes as much, as is evident in his handling of Dr. Mosgrave. When the doctor first appears, Robert consciously neglects any mention of George Talboys's disappearance and his own suspicions of murder; his purpose for doing so is to gain Lady Audley a diagnosis of mental insanity which would render her inculpable for her actions and justify his taking her to the Continent. As the narrator explains, the thing Robert fears most is a court scandal: "It was a trial for murder that so long had haunted his dreams. How often he had awoken in an agony of shame from a vision of a crowded court-house, and his uncle's wife, in a criminal dock, hemmed in on every side by a sea of eager faces!" (377). Even when Robert does tell Mosgrave the entire story, he cannot help but plead for the doctor's cooperation in covering up the incidents: "I do not ask you to do any wrong to society," he states at one point, "but I ask you to save our stainless name from degradation and shame, if you can do so conscientiously" (378). Upon
concluding his tale, Robert again cannot resist appealing to the physician's "best feelings," imploring him to "spare the generous old man, whose fatal confidence in a wicked woman had brought such misery upon his declining years" (379). That Mosgrave changes his initial diagnosis of "sanity" to one of "latent insanity" seems to indicate that the aristocracy has once again gotten away--quite literally--with murder. Robert's treatment of "Mrs. Taylor," then, seems to demonstrate that, finally, he is still a member of the arrogant rich whose concern for the title overrides their concern for society as a whole.

While to an extent valid, such an argument tends to oversimplify the complex series of negotiations in which Robert engages himself while deciding how to resolve his investigation. First, as Robert himself says, what he is doing keeps Lady Audley from causing further harm: "I have done that which I thought just to others and merciful to you," he explains to his aunt when she accuses him of bringing her to a "living grave." "I should have been a traitor to society had I suffered you to remain at liberty after--after the disappearance of George Talboys and the fire at the Castle Inn" (391). Thus, though Robert is not technically obeying the laws of his country, he is also not merely overlooking Lady Audley's crime and allowing her to go unpunished. This is a change, at the very least, from the days when Robert was inclined to bribe railway officials in order to have his way, regardless of discomfort to others.

Additionally, though Robert helps his uncle avoid social scandal, the text acknowledges that he has already caused a great deal of personal pain to a man he loves. Such is made clear immediately after Robert has asked his aunt to confess to Sir Michael. Following his uncle's assertion that he "cannot hear any more," a strange silence fills Audley Court. Writes Braddon:

Robert took no comforting thought from the unnatural stillness. He knew enough to know that Sir Michael Audley went away with the
barbed arrow, which his nephew's hand had sent home to its aim, rankling in his tortured heart; he knew that this strange and icy calm was the first numbness of a heart stricken by a grief so unexpected as for a time to be rendered almost incomprehensible by a blank stupor of astonishment. He knew that when this dull quiet had passed away, when little by little, and one by one, each horrible feature of the sufferer's sorrow became first dimly apparent and then terribly familiar to him, the storm would burst in fatal fury, and tempests of tears and cruel thunder-claps of agony would rend that generous heart. (358-59)

The length of this passage testifies to the extent of the damage Robert feels he has caused; additionally, the references to the storm's "fatal" might and the rending of "that generous heart" imply that Robert has in essence killed his uncle. Compared with this, rescuing the family name is almost an afterthought, a symbolic gesture designed to save his uncle from any further pain. Thus, under pressure from a domestic ideology which functions with a "hand stronger than his own," Robert shows himself capable of making great personal sacrifice.

Complicating this further is Robert's apparent willingness to forfeit an even greater portion of his personal happiness, for this "hand" which Robert feels drives him on is in his mind linked not to an abstract cultural apparatus but to a very concrete face, one containing a pair of very brown eyes. Clara's motivation for urging Robert thus are similarly personal; namely, she seeks vengeance for her brother's death. "Oh my God," she says when she and Robert first discuss the case. "[L]ead me to the murderer of my brother, and let mine be the hand to avenge his untimely death" (200). Though it is not explicitly stated, it is fair to assume that the vengeance Clara seeks is legal recourse: to see her brother's murderer arrested, brought to trial, and incarcerated or perhaps even executed. Certainly this is the way Robert understands Clara's command, a fact evidenced by his assumption that, by sentencing Lady Audley only to life in a madhouse rather than life in prison, he feels he has sacrificed any claim on Clara's affections:
He had no claim upon Clara Talboys; for he had resolved to keep the horrible secret that had been told to him... To reveal it would be to embitter her life. Could he, for any selfish motive of his own, tell her this terrible story?--or could he think that if he told her she would suffer her murdered brother to lie unavenged and forgotten in his unhallowed grave? (415)

The "secret" to which this passage refers is Lady Audley's confession that, yes, she did indeed throw George Talboys down a well. Rather than relate this confession to Clara Talboys and risk her bringing legal action upon Lady Audley, Robert decides simply to sacrifice his relationship with her, a relationship which to him would seem to realize an ideal life set in a "bright region" in which there was "neither death nor trouble, grief nor shame; only himself and Clara Talboys in a world that was made all their own by the great omnipotence of their loves" (399).

Thus, Robert is involved in an intricate series of sacrifices and double sacrifices: first, he succumbs to the ideology of the earnest Victorians and reveals Lady Audley's duplicity at the expense of the happiness of the uncle he loves, in effect causing his own unhappiness; then, in an effort to limit the harm to his uncle, he sacrifices his relationship with the woman he loves. Complicating this even further is the fact that in sacrificing Clara Talboys, Robert is in effect giving up all connection with George Talboys, the man he apparently loves more than any other, and whose disappearance was the event that led to Robert's own transformation. This lack of self-interest on Robert's part would not go unnoticed by middle-class Victorian readers. As Gilmour makes clear, "disinterest" was an "absolutely fundamental" ingredient in the recipe for the new aristocracy. A "true" gentleman, he writes, demonstrates a belief that a person's final loyalty must be to something larger than himself and his own interests (The Idea of the Gentleman 97). Certainly, Robert demonstrates flashes of this, sacrificing his own happiness with regard to both his uncle and his beloved.8
Two additional factors seem to excuse Robert's unwillingness to allow Lady Audley to be punished according to the due process of the court: first, there is the fact that in the end, of course, no murder was committed. Though Robert could in no way have known this—particularly after his aunt's "confession"—the effect of this textual maneuver is to absolve Robert of any guilt. In the end he has not helped a vicious murderer escape legal justice but simply removed a family embarrassment from the public eye.

Second, Robert's behavior regarding Lady Audley is contrasted with that of Harcourt Talboys, a comparison that serves Robert well by demonstrating the alternatives he did not choose. The elder Talboys is "all daylight," a Spartan taskmaster who sees "no softening shadows that might alter the sharp outlines of cruel facts, subduing them to beauty" (181). Much like his literary predecessor, Thomas Gradgrind, Harcourt Talboys seeks to portray himself as a moral absolutist:

> With him right was right and wrong was wrong. He had never in his merciless, conscientious life admitted the idea that circumstance might mitigate the blackness of wrong or weaken the force of right. He had cast off his only son because his only son had disobeyed him, and he was ready to cast off his only daughter at five minutes' notice for the same reason. (182)

Given this philosophy, Mr. Talboys's response to Robert's actions concerning Lady Audley is not surprising: "It is not for me to blame you, Mr. Audley," he declares, "for having smuggled this guilty woman out of the reach of justice, and thus, as I may say, paltered with the laws of your country. I can only remark that, had the lady fallen into my hands, she would have been very differently treated" (434). An interesting

8 Some might suggest that Robert's efforts to keep his aunt alive are an attempt on his part to ensure his uncle has no further children, so that he, Robert, may inherit Sir Michael's estate. Were Audley Court entailed, such could certainly have been the case; as it is not, however, as evidenced by the fact that Alicia is listed as "the sole heiress to a very fine estate" (33), it seems safe to trust that Robert has no ulterior motives.
inversion occurs here. In contrast to earlier moments in the text in which the aristocracy seem inclined to believe themselves above the law, here we find Harcourt Talboys—a squire and aristocrat—and the legal system aligned. This relationship works to mitigate the desirability of a legal system that can be both egotistical and inhumane in its refusal to see qualifying circumstances. In other words, because Mr. Talboys is moral to a fault—certain always that he is right and willing even to sacrifice his own family to prove himself so—his relationship with law and order reveals the undesirable underside of a system that fails to consider human consequences. Changing Victorian perceptions of what denoted gentlemanly conduct recognized the need for a humanizing sympathy which could mitigate the harsh reason of the eighteenth century (Gilmour, The Idea of the Gentleman 86). So while the middle class felt the need to assert that no individual should be above the law, it also recognized the necessity of occasionally bypassing strict legal procedures under mitigating circumstances. A long list of figures from middle-class Victorian literary texts who choose kindness over vengeance is evidence of this: consider, for example, the aforementioned Thomas Gradgrind, Gaskell's Mr. Carson, and Ellen Price Wood's Archibald Carlyle.

In contrast to Harcourt's harsh (and some might even say egotistical) approach to the law, the text wishes the reader to believe that Robert uses law not to attain savage vengeance upon the perpetrator but to achieve the reformation of said prisoner. As he leaves his aunt in her maison de santé he assures her that her life there will be no worse than a nun's in a convent: "Surely it is a small atonement which I ask you to render for your sins, a light penance which I call upon you to perform. Live here and repent; nobody will assail you, nobody will torment you. I only say to you, repent!" (391). Not only does this passage serve as a reminder of Robert's earlier conversion to
Christianity, thereby reaffirming his moral status, it demonstrates that he is capable of recognizing that strict legal procedure void of sympathy is inhumane.

In the end, perhaps it is best to say that Robert Audley's negotiation of conflicting loyalties mirrors in many ways the negotiations that the middle class itself goes through in relation to the issues of democracy and social hierarchies. In other words, in the same way that Robert struggles to resolve the conflicting demands of social responsibility, domestic ideology, old testament morality, and personal happiness, the Victorian middle class struggled to strike a path through a maze of conflicting interests: democracy, economic domination, social legitimacy, a leisured domesticity, market productivity. Not surprisingly, these middle class negotiations were seldom, if ever, resolved, a fact perhaps mirrored in the uneasy peace finally struck in Lady Audley's Secret.

Granted, at the conclusion of Lady Audley's Secret, Robert Audley seems a dramatic revision of his former self; indeed, he himself is barely able to recognize the old Robert who used to "lounge all day in an easy chair reading Paul de Kock, and smoking mild Turkish." "Was it I," he asks himself, "to whom life was such an easy merry-go-round?" (401). He has, he claims, learned that

man cannot choose his own life. He cannot say, "I will take existence lightly, and keep out of the way of the wretched, mistaken, energetic creatures, who fight so heartily in the great battle." . . . He cannot do this. He can only do, humbly, and fearfully, that which the Maker who created him has appointed for him to do. If he has a battle to fight, let him fight it faithfully; but woe betide him if he skulks when his name is called in the mighty muster-roll. (367-68)

To prove that Robert really is ready for the "mighty muster-roll" of social responsibility, he attends boot-camp at the Harcourt residence, rising to the sound of the early morning bell, making his toilet in the "cruel early morning sunshine, which is
bright without being cheerful, and makes you wink without making you warm." He even goes so far as to emulate his host by taking cold shower-baths, emerging "prim and blue as that gentleman himself, as the clock in the hall struck seven, to join the master of the house in his ante-breakfast constitutional under the fir-trees in the stiff plantation" (435).

As if to reassure the reader that the transformation that Robert has undergone is the discovery of an essential self rather than the construction of an artificial self, the text contains a number of examples of Robert's unwillingness or inability to engage in deceit. When Lady Audley asks where he has taken her in Belgium, he answers her directly, adding, "I have no wish to juggle with or to deceive you" (387). When asked by Monsieur Val for "Madame's" title, Robert suddenly remembers that Dr. Mosgrave had suggested it best to incarcerate Lady Audley under an assumed name. Confused, Robert pretends not to have heard the director's question, and the narrator informs the reader that, though "it might seem a very easy matter to have hit upon a heap of names, any one of which would have answered his purpose," Robert is embarrassed and unable to do so (388). Robert, then, unlike his aunt, is not comfortable in participating in deceit; in him, what is seen on the surface accurately reflects what exists at the core. Robert realizes this, and as a result dreads going before Clara Talboys, for fear she will perceive what he is unwilling to tell her concerning her brother's death. How could he, Robert wonders, "dare to meet her with that secret held back from her? How could he ever look into her earnest eyes, and yet withhold the truth? He felt that all power of reservation would fail before the searching glance of those calm brown eyes. If he was indeed to keep this secret he must never see her again" (415). Strains of Sarah Ellis's The Woman of England run through this passage, evidenced particularly by Clara's ability to see, as Ellis puts it, "directly to the naked truth" (1638-39). The effect of all
of this is to affirm Robert's essential status not only in the present—he cannot now
deceive another—but in the future: assuming Robert marries Clara (and of course he
will and does), his association with a proper Angel in the House and his general
participation in the proper Victorian domestic ideology will ensure that he is never able
to engage in deceit, for he is married to a woman who can see beyond surfaces and
straight to essential truths.

Paradoxically, Robert's marriage to Clara and the domestic refuge they
construct can also be read as testifying to the lack of total and/or permanent closure in
Lady Audley's Secret. True, the novel does leave the reader with a picture of domestic
tranquility: Robert and Clara and their child reside in a beautiful cottage nestled in a
forest and beside a river; Robert is a successful practicing lawyer and enjoys hosting
his beloved uncle, his cousin, and her fiancé; "Madame Taylor" has passed away; peace
reigns.

Several factors, however, testify that the implied closure within this scene is
unstable. First of all, as Briganti asserts, the text itself repeatedly undermines images
of peace, pointing out that

We hear every day of murders committed in the country. Brutal and
treacherous murders; slow, protracted agonies from poisons
administered by some kindred hand; sudden and violent deaths by cruel
blows, inflicted with a stake cut from some spreading oak, whose very
shadow promised—peace. (54)

Three additional times similar claims are made (24, 140, 231), at each instance an
apparent tranquility being undermined by acts or threats of transgression. As a
consequence, the "peace" which reigns at the conclusion of Lady Audley's Secret also
seems open to these underminings (Briganti 207).

One might also argue that George Talboys's presence at Robert's "fairy
cottage" might also threaten the assurances the closing pages of Braddon's text seek to
provide the reader. Certainly, this is a possibility. After all, George's permanent residency at Robert's home seems to suggest that, unlike the rest of the old Robert's morally suspect attributes, his desire for his male companion has not completely been erased. Complicating such a reading, however, is the fact that, as Eve Sedgwick points out, this sort of triangulation of desire is not so much contrary to Victorian domestic ideology as part of the larger structures of socialization. In Between Men, Sedgwick discusses models of social transference, asserting that not only are "large-scale social structures . . . congruent with the male-male-female erotic triangles" but that "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" (25). Sedgwick seems to suggest that, generally speaking, the sort of transference described here occurs through means of advantageous marriages (26), something which certainly applies to Robert's marriage to the independently wealthy Clara Talboys. Additionally, the fact that Robert's reconstruction occurs during his search for George and is helped along by his affection for George/Clara, and the fact that Robert's union with Clara (via George) leads to a child, both provide evidence that the torch of social ideology is being passed along from character to character and generation to generation. What appears to be contrary to Victorian hegemony, then, may also be an important component of reinforcing that larger social structure. Granted, of course, Victorian "tolerance" of homosocial/homosexual attraction only went so far, even when cast in terms of a seemingly safe domestic arrangement; in this regard, the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895 speaks for itself.

Thus, the "peace" presented by the conclusion of Lady Audley's Secret appears not beyond reproach. Again, this apparent instability seems not historically inappropriate: in the half-century or so following the publication of Braddon's novel,
members of the working class and women were given the right to vote, people began to see respectability as residing in the lower rather than upper-middle class (Weeks 30), and traditional morality came under fire by the mainstream literati.

Nevertheless, though all of this may (rightly) call into question the stability of the new laboring aristocracy present at the conclusion of Braddon's novel, it does not negate the larger argument of this chapter: namely, that Lady Audley's presence within the text as an unreadable figure creates an opportunity for the transformation of Robert Audley into an appropriate representative of this new middle-class elite. "Was it I to whom life was such an easy merry-go-round?" Robert asks himself toward the novel's end. "Was it I who was one of the boys who sit at ease upon the wooden horses, while other boys run barefoot in the mud, and work their hardest in the hope of a ride when their work is done?" Indeed it was. But as Robert himself recognizes, he has now learned the "business of life" (401), a business, Braddon's text seems to imply, founded on clarifying the economic and moral status of those who seek to defy social categorization.
CHAPTER 2
DEFINING THE MIDDLE-CLASS ARISTOCRATIC FEMALE:
MARIAN HALCOMBE IN COLLINS'S THE WOMAN IN WHITE

The preceding chapter was concerned with how the difficulty of reading Lady Audley's true social and moral status creates the opportunity for the textual reconceptualization of Robert Audley as the masculine model for the new middle-class aristocracy. This chapter explores a similar process in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White, wherein the presence of an unreadable figure is the site for the delineation of the proper role of the new middle-class aristocratic woman. The two characters with which this chapter is primarily concerned are the ambiguous Anne Catherick and the socially unstable Marian Halcombe. Both are women who occupy no set position within the all-important Victorian domestic ideology outlined in Chapter 1. As such, both characters speak to Victorian anxieties about the role of women in a changing world. The particular aim of this section of my dissertation is to outline these anxieties as raised by Anne and Marian, and to demonstrate how the presence of the unreadable Anne enables a re-formation of Marian in ways which define the appropriate role of women in a society shaped by the values of the new aristocracy.

In a novel full of unreadable figures, Anne Catherick is perhaps the most enigmatic. After all, she is the only character introduced without a name and the only character whose history, whereabouts, and secrets remain hidden for nearly the full length of the novel. As he and Anne walk toward London the evening they meet, Walter Hartright...
describes her as "this woman, whose name, whose character, whose story, whose objects in life, whose very presence by my side, at that moment, were fathomless mysteries to me" (50). One hundred and fifty pages later, an entirely different narrator speaks of the "disheartening obscurity" that "hangs over the fate and fortunes of Anne Catherick" (221). And near the end of the text, even though Count Fosco still lurks in St. John's Wood, Walter is nevertheless distracted by questions surrounding Anne, referring to her parentage as "the last mystery that still remained to baffle me" (561).

The difficulty in determining Anne's social and moral status, and particularly the questions surrounding how much she does and does not know of other people's secrets, very obviously presents a threat to Percival Glyde. "I am a lost man if I don't find her," Glyde tells Fosco on the evening Marian eavesdrops from the veranda. "Is it so serious as that?" Fosco asks, and Glyde is so distraught he is unable to respond. It is more serious than the money matters, he tells Fosco eventually (352); and indeed it is, for when Glyde states that he is a lost man if Anne is not found and silenced, he speaks the truth: his manhood, his very identity, disappears the moment the secret of his illegitimacy is out. "The disclosure of that secret," Walter says of Glyde's act of forgery, "even if the sufferers by his deception spared him the penalties of the law, would deprive him at one blow of the name, the rank, the estate, the whole social existence that he had usurped" (530). To all appearances, everything that Glyde is, everything that he owns, his caste, his ancestry--everything--would disappear the moment Anne Catherick speaks.

In fact, of course, Anne does not know Glyde's secret. In essence, then, her threat lies not in her knowledge of his inauthenticity but in the difficulty of determining what she does and does not know. The threat that the difficulty in reading Anne creates
to another's identity also appears in her interaction with Walter Hartright. Immediately following his musings about the "fathomless mysteries" of the woman beside him, Walter reflects:

It was like a dream. Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays? Had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally domestic atmosphere of my mother's cottage? (50)

In general terms this demonstrates the way in which, in Victorian England at least, one individual's social and moral ambiguity has the potential to undermine everyone else's assumed social and moral positions. Because Anne calls into question the belief in a social hierarchy in which different levels can easily be read by one's outward appearance, manners, and speech, she challenges Walter's sense of who he is. The latter's words evidence the breadth of this undermining of identity, the way in which it touches every element of his life: without knowing who the woman beside him is, he is unsure of his name, of his lineage, and thus, of his very place within society. What are his politics? Is he from a conventional family that engages a traditional domestic arrangement? Where does he stand morally? Is he behaving appropriately or inappropriately? He is uncertain, so much so that he is reduced to an almost unformed, child-like status—unable even to speak, unable even to gather his thoughts. This single passage, then, demonstrates how one individual's undermining traditional assumptions about the visibility of social and moral status may threaten the entire structure of society.

In many ways Anne Catherick's undefined status (and the threat that lies therein) mirrors the predicament generally suffered by single women during the Victorian era. Consider, for instance, her lack of a clear position within the structure of the domestic ideology: at various times, Walter wonders if Anne is Glyde's daughter (494) or wife (530), when in fact she is neither. Additionally, Anne's father is unknown and she is more or less disowned by her mother (485), making her, for all practical purposes, an
orphan: Anne is passed off onto Mrs. Clements, Mrs. Fairlie, and the private lunatic asylum from which she escapes. In a nation that prides itself on its carefully ordered hierarchies in the home, the church, and society as a whole—in a nation where order is sustained by the knowledge that everyone has a place and there is a place for everyone—Anne becomes literally and figuratively homeless, running around the countryside with a woman who is not quite her mother, sending messages to another woman who is her sister but doesn't know it, and threatening the identity of a man who might be her father (or even lover) but is not.

Although, at twenty-one or twenty-two Anne is not technically a "spinster"—the official age for that in nineteenth-century Britain being set at twenty-seven (Kern 202)—the fact that she is considered insane makes it unlikely she will marry, thus placing her in the ranks of a rapidly growing faction of single women in Victorian society. Indeed, just as Anne is defined with relation to family not by what she is but by what she isn't, the average spinster similarly was defined by absence, particularly, though not necessarily, of a beloved other (Doan 6). At midcentury, the general myth was that a single woman from the middle class would remain at home throughout her adulthood, fulfilling her duties as daughter and sister. In reality, however, as Vicinus reveals, these single women were generally perceived as ancillary to their mothers or married sisters, perhaps explaining why Victorian discourse on old maids often refers to them as "redundant" or "excess" women (Vicinus 10-14). In addition, unable to go out into the

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1 By the late 1850s single women greatly outnumbered single men in Great Britain. W. R. Greg, writing in 1862, figures the number of "excess" women to be 440,000 (444); Jeffreys states that the number of spinsters in England rose every year after 1821 (88). For an excellent survey of the 1850s discussion of these women and its possible influence on Collins's writing, see Susan Balée's "Wilkie Collins and Surplus Women."
marketplace and earn a living (something to be touched on shortly), spinsters had the potential to be an economic burden to their families and were thus often shifted from home to home (Kern 201).

On the unusual occasion when a single woman was able to support herself economically, her position within the framework of the domestic ideology was no less problematic. During the mid-nineteenth century, British law recognized as a free and legal being only the head of a family. As such, the moment a woman married, she ceased to be an independent individual: her husband gained control over her finances, her children, and even her body. Nor was she able to participate in even the most minor of legal matters: she could not institute proceedings for the collection of debts, sue for libel, or be sued. This complete and utter powerlessness continued even after separation (Basch 16-18). A single woman, by contrast, was considered the head of her household and was thus free to buy and sell her property, to move around as she pleased, and to initiate and engage in legal action (104); with regard to her property, she was a legally recognized, fully independent human being. "In short," states one scholar, "her legal position was from every point of view identical to that of a man" (Basch 104). Unfortunately, though recognized by the laws of the state and susceptible to those laws, the single woman of mid-nineteenth-century Britain was utterly incapable of shaping those laws by running or even voting in a political election. Thus, the position of the single woman was essentially unstable, inherently self-contradictory.

Not surprisingly, the language used to discuss the spinster often reflected her domestic ambiguity. To her Victorian contemporaries she was an "abstract entity" ("Of Old Maids" 344), "unnatural" and therefore "essentially unsound [and] unstable" (Greg 454). Women who were compelled to lead these existences were "incomplete" and had destinies that were "unfulfilled" (436-37). In Victorian eyes, then, single women were
not whole beings. Implicit within the use of the term "unnatural" are assumptions about essentiality, about what is and is not inherently womanly. In "The Condition of Women," Margaret Oliphant writes:

God has ordained visibly, by all the arrangements of nature and of providence, one sphere . . . for a man and another for a woman. He has given them different constitutions, different organisations, a perfectly distinct and unmistakable identity. (145)

As many Victorians saw it, then, the world is theoretically an ordered place, with each sex having a distinct position to hold; deviance from that position, a destruction of the "natural" boundaries which separate these positions and identities, is abhorrent. This is effectively demonstrated in an anonymous article in Fraser's Magazine, aptly entitled "Fear for the Future." The author of this piece recollects how the women he knew as a young man "generally employed themselves indoors with wool-work, harmless flower-painting, or a little gentle music. I never heard of anything more profound than these forming their pursuits." By contrast, this writer laments that some women see fit to "write pamphlets and issue manifestoes; they speak at crowded meetings, and take an ardent part in important controversies. They are not really young women--they are Public Persons" (246). How, the author wonders, are the men with whom these women work to fall in love with them, make them their wives after "working side by side with them in the great arena of business, politics, or science":

Are [these men] to be supposed capable of entertaining for [these women] the proper manly feeling of protecting tenderness to the physical weakness, of self-reproaching, half-wondering admiration of the gentleness, purity, and moral strength that in former times used to make women, women? (248)

When women cross the line separating the domestic sphere from the outside world--when they become, in other words, "Public Persons"--gender identities begin to crumble. Men can no longer be men when women are not behaving as they should. As
a result, "purity and moral strength" are lost not just by women, but by men, who need their guidance. The result leads this author to entertain a "Fear for the Future" (248).

Given this, it is not surprising that people felt threatened by the indeterminate status of the old maid, of women who, like Anne Catherick, fit into no specific sphere and hence had no specific identity. Martha Vicinus argues that the very stridency with which Victorians spoke of the old maid reflects their fear of her (4): she a "social evil" Greg says, a "problem," a "disease" (437-38). Here, very clearly, ambiguity in and of itself presents a threat to the Victorian world vision.

The challenge posed by women who have no literal or figurative "place" within the Victorian domestic ideology is partially enacted in socioeconomic terms. When Walter first describes Anne, he states that she has "not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life" (48). Indeed, at least in terms of heredity, this description suits Anne perfectly, for though her father is a wealthy landowner, her mother is a member of the working class. Additionally, Anne Catherick actually does become a member of a different class: arriving at Count Fosco's home in St. John's Wood, she is introduced as "Lady Glyde" (420), and when she dies a short time later, she is buried beside Mrs. Fairlie beneath a tombstone enscribed "Sacred to the Memory of Laura, Lady Glyde, wife of Sir Percival Glyde, Bart., of Blackwater Park, Hampshire, and daughter of the late Philip Fairlie, Esq., of Limmeridge House" (426).

As was true in Lady Audley's Secret, class indeterminacy in The Woman in White often seems to be figured alongside social ambition, the assumption being that if a person--Percival Glyde, for instance--can falsely claim an aristocratic status in order to reap its social and economic benefits, he or she will. Although it seems inappropriate to compare Anne to consciously transgressive individuals like Lady Audley, Percival
Glyde, and "Count" Fosco, certainly some of Anne's actions and remarks do hint at a desire to escape her present social condition. For instance, Anne responds to Walter's comment that he'd been living at Limmeridge House in a passage which demonstrates some element of class envy:

"At Limmeridge House!" Her pale face brightened as she repeated the words, her wandering eyes fixed on me with a sudden interest. "Ah, how happy you must have been!" she said, looking at me eagerly."

(120)

Again, although it seems inappropriate to compare Anne and her relatively innocent comment to other blatantly ambitious characters in this novel and others, certainly her words here—as well as her eagerness, her brightening face and interested eyes—show a desire for a life other than her own, for the supposed peace and calm and kindness of the leisured classes. To the extent that such might be the case, Anne violates the code of "disinterest" which moderated the actions of the rising middle class. Because she expresses an interest in a life to which she has no claim, her actions potentially can be read as self-serving rather than altruistic. Her note warning Laura away from Percival Glyde, for instance, might be considered an effort on Anne's part to regain the favor she once had at Limmeridge. Such, as far as most readers are concerned, is obviously not the case, but it is that potentiality—that slight possibility, which creates in the reader's mind an uncertainty about Anne's intentions—with which the present discussion is concerned.

Perhaps more important to this investigation is how the mystery surrounding Anne's identity and motivations threaten to undermine Walter's social standing by revealing his own lack of disinterestedness, and, consequently, his culturally inappropriate social ambition. According to Walter himself, prior to meeting Anne and going to Limmeridge, he had never had a problem remembering his "position" in relation to his wealthy female students:
It had been my profession, for years past, to be in this close contact with young girls of all ages, and of all orders of beauty. I had accepted the position as part of my calling in life; I had trained myself to leave all the sympathies natural to my age in my employer's outer hall, as coolly as I left my umbrella there before I went upstairs. I had long since learnt to understand, composedly and as a matter of course, that my situation in life was considered a guarantee against any of my female pupils feeling more than the most ordinary interest in me, and that I was admitted among beautiful and captivating women much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them. This guardian experience I had gained early; this guardian experience had sternly and strictly guided me straight along my own poor narrow path, without once letting me stray aside, to the right hand or to the left. (89)

This passage would please the most earnest of earnest Victorians, the least interested of the disinterested, for not only does Walter strictly discipline himself to leave his own emotional needs outside the door when working with his students, he reveals an almost brutal sense of the reality of his situation. He is admitted among his students, he informs the reader, because the assumption is that he knows his place and will not forget it, much as a mongrel will never forget that it is only a dog.

With Laura, however, "I and my trusty talisman were parted for the first time." "Yes," Walter continues, "my hardly-earned self-control was as completely lost to me as if I had never possessed it; lost to me, as it is lost every day to other men" (89-90). That Walter's loss of his sense of social inferiority is related as much to Anne as it is to Laura is demonstrated in a number of ways: first, there is the blurring that exists between Anne and Laura. Even when Walter is first describing his future wife, Anne lingers somewhere in the back of his mind, as evidenced by his concluding his loving portrait of Laura by referring to his "vivid impression" of "something wanting in her" or "something wanting in myself" (76). That "something wanting," of course, is Laura's resemblance to Anne, or Walter's recognition of such. Additionally, one could argue that that "something wanting in myself" is Walter's sense of his own position.

Supporting the latter is a passage already discussed, in which, having just met Anne,
Walter wonders, "Was I Walter Hartright?" In losing his sense of who he is when encountering the unreadable woman in white, Walter loses his self-control, his sense of his place in the world, which in turn affects his relationship with Laura. Walter has now become "other men," and those other men aren't nearly as disinterested as Walter himself used to be.

Again, all of this is related to Anne Catherick's indeterminate status, to the lack of clarity surrounding her domestic and social status. As Walter cautiously approaches Anne in the cemetery during their second meeting, he dwells upon the lifelong interests which might hang suspended on the next chance words that passed between us—the sense that, for aught I knew to the contrary, the whole future of Laura Fairlie's life might be determined, for good or for evil, by my winning or losing the confidence of the forlorn creature who stood trembling by her mother's grave. (119)

Clearly illustrated here is the sense that Walter's own "interests" and those of the people he loves are directly tied to Anne Catherick and her domestic and moral position—whether she is Glyde's illegitimate offspring, his mistress, or even his secret wife.

Implied within this entire discussion of Walter's socially inappropriate class ambition is the same middle-class ambivalence toward the old aristocracy seen in Lady Audley's Secret. On the one hand, Walter and his fellow middle-class males despise the traditional aristocracy for its unabashed self-interest, its unwillingness to disguise—indeed, its downright pride in—a life of leisure which the middle class felt was founded upon the labor of the non-landed classes. This disgust is effectively rendered in the person of Frederick Fairlie, whose effeminacy and unwillingness to lift a finger

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2 Further supporting this reading is the fact that the dreamy forgetfulness of the earlier passage is repeated when Walter describes his "folly" of falling in love with Laura: "The delicious monotony of life in our calm seclusion flowed on with me, like a smooth stream with a swimmer who glides down the current. All memory of the past, all thought of the future, all sense of the falseness and hopelessness of my own position, lay hushed within me into deceitful rest" (90).
(literally) to help others make him an object of disgust to all with whom he comes in contact, and particularly with Walter. On the other hand, however, the middle class admired the lifestyle of the traditional aristocracy, and recognized the ways in which aligning itself with the outward signs of the leisured gentry would help to signal their own social ascendancy. The crux, for the would-be members of the new middle-class aristocracy, is to acquire all outward signs of the old aristocracy, without also assuming the negative connotations associated with these signs. In Walter's case, the means by which he can negotiate this difficult path involves serving, in a disinterested manner, the interests of Laura Fairlie. Her own socially unreadable status—as signified by her unwillingness to lord her wealth over others (80)—at once allows Walter to demonstrate his lack of self-interest by serving a class which seeks to exclude him and enables Laura Fairlie to be "redeemed" as a member of the new aristocracy, in much the same as was Robert Audley.

In many ways, the extent to which Anne impedes Walter's attempts to serve Laura in a disinterested manner causes the relationship between Anne and Walter to parallel the relationship between actual middle-class Victorian males and their unmarried female counterparts. Certainly, the social indefiniteness Anne displays, along with the threat it presents to the economic position of the men around her, is a feature that can be applied more generally to the plight of old maids in Victorian England. Employment opportunities for single women—particularly those of the middle classes—were limited during this period. The handful of jobs to which single women could apply, including governess or nurse, were generally low-paying, or, as was the case with authorship, limited to a few fortunate souls (Vicinus 3). Further restricting opportunities for women was the limited (and limiting) education they received, enough only, some believed, to make them suitable housewives, or "ornaments" for the rising middle class (106). Here
again, then, the spinster is caught in a netherworld, in limbo between Victorian expectations that women will marry and the reality of her own, single, life. As a result, many single women—even those originally from middle-class families—ended up in low-paying jobs, and often ended up in poorhouses (Basch 105). Thus, according to Sheila Jeffreys, old maids found themselves caught between "Victorian notions of respectability" and the prospect of a life of near or complete poverty (87). Indeed, given the wages some governesses earned—the average was between twenty and thirty pounds sterling per annum, with some salaries dropping as low as ten (Basch 112)—a single middle-class woman could face both the social embarrassment associated with having to seek employment in another's home and a life of poverty.

Not surprisingly, given this bind facing single women, some of the most visible social causes in the mid-nineteenth century centered on opening up a greater number of occupations for women (Jeffreys 87). This movement was perhaps the most direct challenge to middle-class men made by single women. Davidoff and Hall, for example, assert that as earnestness and hard work began to receive greater valorization in nineteenth-century industrial England, the middle-class male identity became increasingly dependent on men's "ability to operate as economic agents. To become adult men within their own terms they must provide a livelihood which made possible a domestic establishment where they and their dependants could live a rational and morally sanctioned life" (229). By working, then, the middle-class male demonstrates himself as productive, moral, and manly. Thus, work is a means for the male to create not simply an economic identity, but a moral, social, and sexual one as well.

In this way, just as Anne—simply by virtue of her indeterminacy relative to the rigid social structures of the time—threatens to endanger Walter Hartright's claim to a
position in the new aristocracy, the real-life Victorian single woman threatened to endanger the middle-class male's ascendancy to this same group.

That this threat was taken seriously is evidenced by the ferocity of the rhetoric against expanding the female sphere. The aforementioned Fraser's Magazine writer, for example, expresses relief that his wife "would as soon think of picking pockets as of writing a book," a statement which has the consequence of placing Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte in rather strange company ("A Fear for the Future" 248). The Saturday Review discouraged offering single women viable economic alternatives to marriage, asserting that a woman's failure to marry is a failure in "business, and no social reform can prevent such failures" (quoted in Vicinus 3), a theme echoed a few years later in a periodical essay on "excess" women:

To endeavour to make women independent of men; to multiply and facilitate their employments; to enable them to earn a separate and ample subsistence by competing with the hardier sex in those careers and occupations hitherto set apart for that sex alone; to induct them generally into avocations, not only as interesting and beneficent, and therefore appropriate, but specifically and definitely as lucrative; to surround single life for them with so smooth an entrance, and such a pleasant, ornamented, comfortable path, that marriage shall almost come to be regarded, not as their most honourable function and especial calling, but merely as one of any ways open to them . . . this would appear to be the aim and theory of many female reformers . . . Few more radical or more fatal errors, we are satisfied, philanthropy has ever made, though her course every where lies marked and strewn with wrecks, and failures, and astounding theories, and incredible assumptions. (Greg 454-55)

This passage explicitly links many of this chapter's significant themes. On a very basic level it reveals a jealous opposition to broadening women's job opportunities to the extent where they would be "competing" with men. Such a broadening, the above writer feels, is not just an error, but perhaps one of the most fatal mistakes ever made by philanthropy. Additionally, the language here shows an assumption of essentiality that fits well into more general Victorian assumptions about oppositional gender identities: men are always "the hardier sex," while it is "appropriate" for women to engage in
beneficent activities, which are their "especial calling." Finally, the above assertion that women must not be "independent" inversely reveals the belief that female dependence on males is a positive attribute. In effect, what these lines foreground is not an actual female dependence on men but a male dependence on female dependence; for without the latter, the Victorian male could not establish himself as a provider, thus allowing himself to be distinguished from the old aristocracy. The middle-class male’s worst fear, in other words, was that the single woman would flourish, thereby undermining the "essential" place men had constructed for themselves in nineteenth-century society.3

All of this, it should be remembered, is linked not just to an isolated movement within mid-nineteenth-century British society but to a large-scale reconceptualization of that society: "The more independent husband and wife are of each other," Margaret Oliphant states, "the less sure is the basis of society." Because of her undefined position within the framework of the domestic ideology, then, Anne Catherick and other single women have the potential to undermine the personal, social, and economic identity of the men with whom they come into contact. As such, these women are a threat to the entire socio-political agenda of the new middle-class aristocracy.

On the face of it, Anne Catherick and Marian Halcombe appear two very dissimilar women: while the former seems to epitomize feminine weakness, the latter seems nothing if not strong. Despite their differences in personality, however, the positions

3 Similar arguments have been made by previous scholars: Jeffreys, for instance, discusses the devaluation of the Victorian male specifically in terms of male sexuality and marriage (92), while Vicinus and Auerbach point out how fictional caricatures of old maids seek to undermine the very real challenge that living spinsters actually presented (31; 114).
they occupy—or rather, the positions they fail to occupy—are similar, as are the threats these two women consequently present to the men around them.

To begin with, it should be noted that Marian, like Anne, is an old maid. Though Collins never gives her age, it is stated that she is older than Walter (434), who is twenty-eight when the novel begins. This places Marian over the age of twenty-seven, the "official age" that defined a single woman as a spinster. Certainly, Marian considers herself a "spinster" (219), and promises her half-sister that she will never marry (235). As such, she, like Anne, holds no real position within the domestic framework: both of her parents are dead, meaning she is deprived of her status as daughter; and she has a half-sister, but is not the niece of the man who is uncle to that sister, making her a perpetual guest in the manor she calls "home," just as she is nothing more than a guest at Percival Glyde's estate, Blackwater Park. At various times throughout the text, Walter refers to Marian as "sister" although she is not his sister (434), while Laura compares her to her mother, although she is obviously not that either (268).

Marian's lack of a place within the framework of domesticity evidences itself in a number of more specific ways. As Walter enters the dining room his first morning at Limmeridge, he glances around and sees, across the room and silhouetted by a window, a woman who is "tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat." Walter is immediately struck by the "rare beauty" of the form of this woman: catching his eye in particular is her waist, "perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays" (58). Thus far at least, Marian seems at once nondescript and rare, nearly commonplace.
and exquisitely unique. The complexity which even these few sentences seem to promise is fulfilled as Marian moves toward Walter with an "easy elegance" in "every movement of her limbs and body":

She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly! (58)

Thus, just as Marian is Walter's sister but not really, and tall but not really, she is beautiful but not really. In this way, the indeterminacy of her domestic status is reflected in the indeterminacy of her physical appearance.

Marian's contradictoriness shows in other ways: as Susan Balée points out, Marian is androgynous, with a "distinctly masculine face set upon a perfectly feminine figure" (202). Other details bear out this indeterminacy: while Marian is silent, Walter suggests, her expression appears "to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete" (58-59). The "moment she began to speak," however, Walter is pleased to see Marian's "dark face lightening up with a smile, and softening and growing womanly" (59).

As was the case with Anne, Marian's domestic indefiniteness also evidences itself in socioeconomic terms: she tells Walter that her father was "a poor man" and that she herself has "nothing" in the way of a fortune (60). Nevertheless, Marian is educated in Paris (82) and reaps all the benefits of her half-sister's social status, including sharing her drawing instructor. Collins's text also includes hints that Marian

4 This is not entirely true. When Marian discovers Laura at the asylum, she immediately goes to her stockbroker and sells out of funds everything she possesses, "amounting rather less than seven hundred pounds" (443). Rather than diminishing Marian's threat as an old maid, however, her property only increases her mobility and hence the difficulty in harnessing her within some domestic apparatus.
is not above lording a status not her own over others. For instance, when Walter inquires of her who it is that Laura is to marry, Marian first informs him of Glyde's property, then of his name, and then of his rank. "Knight or Baronet?" Walter asks, hoping to discover if Glyde is the man of whom Anne spoke so fearfully: "[Marian] paused for a moment, and then answered, rather coldly--'Baronet, of course" (100). There is not much here--perhaps not enough to erase the apparently genuine kindness Marian shows Walter elsewhere--but at the very least the inclusion of those two final phrases--"rather coldly" and "of course"--are enough to cause the reader to question the way Marian aligns herself within the social hierarchy. Additionally, Marian's attitude here might cause the reader to turn back and re-examine this woman's explanation to Walter of why he must leave: "It is a real true relief to me that I am not obliged," she states as she explains that Laura is already engaged, "in what I have now to say, to enter into the question—the hard and cruel question as I think it--of social inequalities" (95). If she is pleased that she must not touch on these issues, why does she raise them nevertheless?

Marian's social ambiguity is also attested to by her unwillingness to take part in the pastimes generally associated with women. When, for example, she visits the boathouse at Blackwater Park in the company of Sir Glyde, Count Fosco, Eleanor Fosco, and Laura, Marian states: "We three women found plenty of room on the large seat. Laura took her work, and Madam Fosco began her cigarettes. I, as usual, had nothing to do. My hands always were, and always will be, as awkward as a man's" (253). Here, Laura Fairlie and Madam Fosco, two aristocratic women in line to inherit large sums of money from the Fairlie estate, busily fill with activity even the smallest moments of their time. In contrast, Marian Halcombe, whose lack of an estate and limited good looks virtually assure her an eventual seat in the pauper-house but for the
goodwill of her stepfamily, sits idle. Marian's comparison of her hands to those of a man works in a double-edged manner, simultaneously rationalizing her inability or unwillingness to engage in "women's work" and hinting at her potential to engage in "men's work." Thus, Marian poses a double challenge to the rising middle class: at the same time that she lives a socially elite (and, arguably, morally damnable) lifestyle, she also threatens to step into the male sphere and appropriate the labor which is so essential to the middle-class male identity. Thus, in the same way that Marian is both tall and not tall, womanly yet manly, beautiful yet ugly, and rich but poor, she is both a lazy representative of the unproductive aristocracy and a genuine threat to the male labor-related identity. In the same way that the unstable domestic position of the real-life Victorian old maid leads to—via her lack of employment opportunities—a direct challenge of the male identity in the work world, Marian's undefined domestic status and the economic insecurity which accompanies it also threatens Walter's construction of a self worthy of the new aristocracy.

Consider, for example, the ways in which Walter's response to Marian's physical and sexual ambiguity echoes his reaction to Anne Catherick. "It was like a dream," Walter says of his encounter with Anne, and goes on to describe how he questions his very identity. Similarly, of his first meeting with Marian, he writes:

To see such a face as this set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model—to be charmed by the modest graces of action through which the symmetrical limbs betrayed their beauty when they moved, and then to be almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended—was to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognise yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream. (59)

This passage demonstrates the reaction of the male to the destabilized female: Walter is both "charmed and "repelled," as much at odds with himself as this woman's head is with her body. Thus, once again, the undefinable, conflicted identity of a single female
undermines the ability of a male subject to construct a whole, unconflicted identity. This deconstruction of identity causes Walter to feel "helpless," and here, as in his initial encounter with Anne, he compares the encounter to a dream.

Marian's ambiguity threatens male identity in more concrete ways as well. For instance, like Anne, Marian demonstrates a great deal of mobility generally reserved for men in Victorian society. At Limmeridge House, for instance, she moves freely about the estate and surrounding countryside. This is even more pronounced at Blackwater Park, where she twice steals into the village to receive and send messages to Mr. Kyrle, Laura's acting lawyer. Her goal each time is to thwart the plans of Fosco and Glyde, and her relative freedom is highlighted by the way she is contrasted to the former's wife. The morning Marian ventures forth to meet Kyrle's messenger, for instance, she pauses to speak to Madame Fosco, who is "walking by herself in her favourite circle, round and round the great fish-pond" in front of the house. When Marian inquires if she intends to go out before lunch, Madame Fosco "smiled at me in the friendliest manner--said she preferred remaining near the house, nodded pleasantly, and reentered the hall" (290). Eleanor Fosco's words and actions demonstrate her limited mobility: her continual circles around the fishpond brings to mind a pet chained to a post, able to move only so far in any one direction. Her assertion that she "prefers" things this way actually hides the fact that she plays no part in deciding when she does and doesn't move about, for as the novel repeatedly informs the reader, Eleanor Fosco is nothing if not submissive to her husband. Though talkative and unruly as a single woman, the elder Mrs. Fosco now "sits for hours together without saying a word" (238); on the rare occasions her eyes are not concentrating on "rolling up endless cigarettes for the Count's own particular smoking" Madame Fosco is looking at her husband "with the look of mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog"
Fosco rules his wife, Marian states, with "a rod of iron" (244). Marian, on the other hand, is ruled by no one, and thus moves about freely for much of the novel.

By the close of the second epoch of The Woman in White, Marian's freedom of movement allows her to go down to London, where she discovers Laura detained in an asylum under the name of Anne Catherick. After single-handedly freeing her sister, Marian takes her to Limmeridge House, where Frederick Fairlie promptly denies that he recognizes his own niece. Undaunted, Marian determines that she and Laura will return to London, where "all traces of them might be most speedily and most surely effaced."

Leaving their lifelong home "without a soul to wish them well at parting, the two took their way into the world alone, and turned their backs for ever on Limmeridge House" (451). With Laura in her possession, Marian holds a secret that carries at the very least the potential to destroy Percival Glyde's (and Count Fosco's) reputation and economic well-being. Thus, there exists a traceable path from Marian's uncertain position relative to the domestic ideology to her extreme mobility relative to other women, to her presenting a threat to the economic and social well-being of the men who wish to dominate her life.

Marian presents a further threat to male identity, in that she demonstrates an earnestness and disinterestedness which undermine Walter's attempts to construct himself as someone worthy of the new aristocracy. The drawing instructor begins The Woman in White by insisting that it is a story of "what a woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve" (33). Be that as it may—and scholars continue to disagree on the matter—Walter fails to demonstrate a great deal of resolution during

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5 Perkins and Donaghy (394) and Balée (210) suggest that this line is intentionally the opposite of the rest of the novel; Auerbach states that this first sentence threatens to "obliterate" Marian (135); Showalter sees this line as "an endorsement of Victorian sex-roles" (162).
the first half of the novel. The very first day he meets Laura, for instance, Walter recognizes the potential for his forgetting his position—something to which, as already discussed, he is greatly opposed: "Yes! let me acknowledge that on the first day I let the charm of her presence lure me from the recollection of myself and my position" (78). Nevertheless, he does not put himself on guard; indeed, he places himself more than necessary in the company of his students by forgoing the usual male tradition of a glass of wine after dinner (80). Additionally, he blames his surroundings rather than himself: "There was some excuse to be found, surely, in the conditions under which my term of hired service was passed at Limmeridge House." Following this is a long catalogue of the temptations that Walter faces in his day-to-day contact with Laura: "It was part of my service to live in the very light of her eyes—at one time to be bending over her, so close to her bosom as to tremble at the thought of touching it; at another, to feel her bending over me, bending so close to see what I was about, that her voice sank low when she spoke to me, and her ribbons brushed my cheek in the wind . . ." (88-9).

Despite these breathy details aimed at excusing Walter's social impropriety, Marian Halcombe is not impressed: "You are guilty of weakness and want of attention to your own best interests" she tells Walter on the morning when she "rescue[s]" him from his position of "helplessness and humiliation" (95; 92). Marian then illustrates her own strength of will by refusing to avoid the very serious and sometimes painful issues and decisions before her: "Shake hands," she states to Walter. "I have given you pain; I am going to give you more, but there is not help for it." In contrast to her self-control, Walter finds his eyes dim with tears, and his voice failing him (95).

This trend—wherein Marian demonstrates strength while Walter shows only weakness—continues throughout the first two epochs of *The Woman in White*. When Walter eventually leaves Marian's company, he grumbles "bitterly" the whole time.
Deprived of her support, he loses his resolve, and, in his own words, goes off to South America to "fly from my own future" (427). In contrast, Marian continues to fight to protect Laura: it is she who discovers that Mrs. Catherick has been in the area of Blackwater Park; she who overhears Glyde discussing his financial problems with his lawyer; she who sends and receives letters from Laura's lawyer informing the women of what to do in their present predicament; she who recognizes Fosco's power and insists that Laura not anger him; she who eavesdrops on Glyde and Fosco in the dark of night; and she who frees Laura from her asylum prison.

Marian not only reveals a resolve that Walter lacks, but a disinterestedness as well. Consider, for instance, that on a purely theoretical level Marian has the same economic motives as her male counterpart for keeping Laura from marrying Glyde. Very obviously, Walter would gain by Laura's ending her engagement to the baronet, in that that would allow Walter to marry her and gain her fortune. Similarly, once Walter has left Limmeridge, Marian would benefit Laura's staying single, in that—as Laura herself makes clear by promising never to marry anyone if Glyde would release her (192)—she, Marian, would become Laura's sole beneficiary.6

Whereas Walter flees England once it becomes clear that he will not gain Laura's wealth, Marian stands by her half-sister, even though—having been taken out of the latter's will by the marriage agreement—she has no financial motivations. Marian appears to be driven, then, not by her own needs, but by Laura's. Marian's disinterest in her own good is illustrated repeatedly in Collins's novel, as when, for example, the Count asks her to witness Laura's signature to Glyde's secret document. Hesitating,

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6 This information also comes directly from Laura: when asked by her lawyer if there is anything in particular she would like in the marriage agreement, Laura asks that Marian inherit her entire estate (166).
preferring not to get involved in the suspicious business, she writes, "No consideration of less importance than my consideration for Laura would have induced me to consent to be a witness at all. One look, however, at her anxious face decided me to risk anything rather than desert her" (265). Thus, in contrast to Walter, whose actions seem to demonstrate only a sense of his own hurt feelings and dashed hopes, Marian stands by her sister and reveals a true selflessness, despite the fact that she too has been completely cut out of Laura’s will. Indeed, as Marian’s willingness to pay every penny she possesses to free Laura from the asylum indicates (443), money is the least of Marian’s motivations.

Thus, Marian poses a multileveled threat to Walter during the first two epochs of *The Woman in White*. First, because she is not married or otherwise in a relationship that makes her subordinate to male power, she has a mobility that rivals any male’s. Second, because she doesn’t receive economic support from a father or husband, she—much like the middle-class male—is placed in the position of being forced to "earn" a living, either through labor or some less earnest means. Third, and paradoxically, she reveals herself to be truly disinterested—indeed, much more so than Walter. And finally, she demonstrates a resolve to care for those dependent upon her, a resolve Walter appears to lack. Simply put, because of the above, Marian undermines Walter’s ability to claim—to paraphrase Davidoff and Hall’s terms—a middle-class identity by proving himself capable of supporting a domestic establishment wherein he and his dependents are able to live a "rational and morally sanctioned life."

Thus far, this discussion has focused mainly on Anne’s and Marian’s separate relationships with Walter, and particularly on the ways in which their positions as women undefined within the Victorian domestic ideology threaten his ability to prove
himself a hardworking, disinterested, socially responsible member of the new middle-class aristocracy. The final sections of this chapter will investigate how this threat is neutralized through a complex series of containments in which Marian is placed within the domestic paradigm and in turn reinforces her position there by similarly situating Anne Catherick.

In *The Novel and the Police*, D. A. Miller asserts that "Male security in *The Woman in White* seems to depend on female claustration." Miller cites as examples Glyde's containment of Anne and Fosco's containment of Laura in the asylum as examples of this, as well as Glyde's virtual imprisonment of Mrs. Catherick at New Welmingham and Fosco's figurative containment of Eleanor in the prison of wife-dom (166-67). This list should be extended to include Marian Halcombe, who, in the third epoch of the novel, seldom stirs outside the tiny apartment she shares with Walter and Laura (453). Susan Balée asserts that Marian's restricted motion demonstrates her transformation from a rebellious independent woman to what I am here calling a model of the new middle-class aristocratic female, a woman who recognizes and follows the doctrine of separate spheres, and who subordinates herself to her male counterparts. Balée locates Marian's transformation with Count Fosco's invasion of her diary:

It might be said that Fosco literally makes a woman of her when he reads her diary. His invasion of her room (a private sanctuary that, in psychoanalytic terms, may be read as her "womb") and his taking possession of her innermost thoughts constitutes a kind of psychic rape. (203)

This is an insightful reading, and one that gains much support from the text and the work of other scholars. U. C. Knoepflmacher, for instance, stresses that Marian has ambivalent feelings toward the count and that her final alignment with Laura and Walter involves a "repression of her own asocial impulses" (366). The text itself seems to bear out such a reading, for Fosco himself is the one who places the domestic ideology
"Exercise your fine natural sense and remain in retirement," Fosco writes to Marian in a note forwarded by Kyrle, Laura's lawyer. "Dear and admirable woman, invite no dangerous publicity. Resignation is sublime—adopt it. The modest repose of home is eternally fresh—enjoy it. The storms of life pass harmless over the valley of Seclusion—dwell, dear lady, in the valley" (468). This message is rife with the language of Victorian domestic ideology. In The Women of England, for example, Ellis contrasts the tempestuous world of business with the sanctuary of the home. The former is full of "snares," temptations which assault the male in a confusing whirl. The house, in contrast, is a calm, still place of "fireside comforts" and "moral beauty" (1598). Fosco's words echo these images: the world outside the domestic sphere is a "storm," a battlefield that pitches a person against the elements in a test of wills. The hearth, in contrast, is a sanctuary, a place of peace, of "seclusion," safety, and "repose." Fosco is careful to address Marian by her gender, as though to affirm her status and contain her within it. Additionally, he asks that she submit to "resignation." One might even argue that Fosco's "insolent familiarity of language" when writing to Marian is carefully designed to reinforce her femininity, her status as an object of affection rather than an individual of action. In contrast, the count refers to himself as "the Man of Action," and promises that anyone who ventures forth from the home and challenges him will be "lost" (469).

A reading that constructs Marian as the lion and Fosco as the lion-tamer/rapist, though insightful and certainly useful, is, however, not unproblematic. For one thing, on a very simple level, if it is Fosco who domesticates Marian, why does she continue to resist him as she does? Indeed, if his invasion of her womb/room "makes a woman" of Marian—and that woman is assumed to fit the Victorian classification of submissive helpmate—then why does she, immediately following this event, run off to London and,
in a most unwomanly manner, bribe a nurse to free Laura? The answer lies in the fact that while Fosco may make Marian a "woman," he does not make her a wife. It is only after Marian and Laura have found Walter, only after the three of them have settled in London, that Marian's transformation begins. Only after the problematic old maid—that figure who has no place in the domestic ideology—gains a place within a home, can the social and economic threat of Marian begin to be contained.

The foundation for Marian's change appears to be laid the night she eavesdrops on Fosco and Glyde. As should be clear by now, prior to this event, Marian has occupied an androgynous position in the text, behaving (and, indeed, appearing) in a manner neither fully appropriate for a Victorian male, nor for a Victorian female. This trend is further illustrated as she prepares for her nighttime adventure:

A complete change in my dress was imperatively necessary for many reasons. I took off my silk gown to begin with, because the slightest noise from it on that still night might have betrayed me. I next removed the white and cumbersome parts of my underclothing, and replaced them by a petticoat of dark flannel. Over this I put my black travelling cloak, and pulled the hood on to my head. In my present dress, when it was held close about me, no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I. The little breadth left on the roof of the verandah, between the flower-pots on one side and the wall and the windows of the house on the other, made this a serious consideration. (342)

Here Marian claims male privilege, shaking off her petticoats—to which she'd felt "condemned . . . for life"—to occupy a more mobile male body, a body not only free of the stays which Marian always neglects to wear, but of the "propriety" associated with her undergarments, and the "patience," which, as Nina Auerbach states, threatens to obliterate her lively nature (135). Thus, Marian not only wishes to be a man, but becomes one, and as such the threat she poses to Walter's identity and the domestic ideology associated with him reaches its apex: sinking to the floor of her apartment early the next morning, Marian reflects that "the words those two men had said to each
other would furnish us, not only with our justification for leaving the house, but with our weapons of defence against them as well" (357). Marian threatens Walter's position, then, by finally gaining information which would free Laura from Glyde's tyranny, demonstrating that she, and not Walter, is best qualified to provide for the fragile, feminine Laura.

In the end, of course, Marian's eavesdropping in her manly costume results only in her illness and her inability to interfere in Fosco's plot to switch the identities of Laura and Anne. The moral of her failed gender-bending experiment is clear: first, inauthenticity is ethically harmful not only to the individual directly involved but to those around him or her as well: Marian wishes to become a man, does so, and is punished for it; consequently, her decision to act as she does has the effect of allowing Fosco to lead Laura into his trap.

Second, Marian's illness following her rainy-night adventure is designed to demonstrate to both the reader and Marian herself her limitations: though she may wish to be a man, in the end she is "only" a woman and should learn to behave as such. All of this is highlighted by contrasting Marian to Walter: on the night he successfully discovers Glyde's secret, Walter not only walks through a "misty rain" similar to that which falls Marian, but fights in it (531), runs in it (532), and tries to save his mortal enemy in it. Marian, in contrast, merely sits and listens during her rainstorm. While Walter shows no ill effects from his adventure, though it must occur in winter or early spring, Marian immediately gets typhus, though she sits through only a June rain.

That her essential and limited femininity is a lesson not lost on Marian is evidenced repeatedly during the final third of the text. For example, she repeatedly refers to her own gender status, stating, for instance, that "what a woman's hands are fit for ... early and late these hands of mine shall do" (453), and assuring Walter that he
will never regret having "only a woman" to help him (459). Marian's new status is demonstrated physically as well: when he first sees her at the cemetery in Limmeridge, Walter describes Marian's face as "worn and wasted piteously," with "pain and fear and grief written on her as with a brand." Her eyes are "large and wild," and they look at him with a "strange terror in them" (430-31). Additionally, Marian's arms are "wasted," and she cannot keep her hands from trembling (453). This description is striking, considering that Marian was once known for her health and energy.

This "new" Marian also appears to be limited geographically. Once free to roam the countryside, Marian now never leaves the house without Walter present, instead spending her days cleaning and taking care of Laura (453). In contrast, Walter, once the harmless pet who spent his time in women's drawing rooms, is now an almost predatory male, stalking Glyde and Fosco across the battleground of the nondomestic world. His quest, states Walter, is to reclaim Laura's identity—she who is "socially, morally, legally—dead. . . . And yet, alive! Alive in poverty and in hiding. Alive, with the poor drawing-master to fight her battle, and to win the way back for her to her place in the world of living beings" (434). And fight Walter does, demonstrating the resolve he so lacked earlier in the novel. His journey beyond the confines of the home take him first to see Laura's lawyer, then to Blackwater Park, back to London, and down to Hampshire. Before the novel has concluded, he has traveled hundreds of miles, venturing as far away as France and Ireland. Along the way, his will is severely tested: he is twice followed, twice taunted in attempts to get him to fight, and once arrested and taken before the magistrate. When given the opportunity, he walks on foot; he purchases a cudgel, and demonstrates an ability to use it. He even ventures, on his own and unarmed, into that den of inauthenticity, Count Fosco's drawing room, where he is threatened with a braining.
Here again, Collins' s writing mirrors much Victorian thought on the appropriate (and separate) spheres for the separate genders. A satire in *Punch* for example, tells the story of the feminist "Jane" who has a dream about a world where the sexes have changed places. Jane is horrified by the rough treatment she encounters in the world of business and politics, and concludes, "Everywhere I found that when women attempted men's work, they proved their own unfitness for it" (quoted in Anstruther 70).

Similarly, Coventry Patmore writes in an 1851 review that

> The social subordination of woman to man is a law of nature: it is not a thing that can ever be reasonably called into question. That men have the strongest muscles no one doubts... This being the case -- the social subordination of women [is] an irreversible natural law... (Quoted in Anstruther 68)

Like Jane, Marian soon discovers her unfitness for men's work; like Patmore's male, Walter demonstrates a biological superiority that allows him to provide for Laura in ways that Marian cannot.

Marian's containment within the domestic sphere is mirrored by her socioeconomic containment. Whereas previously her status was indeterminate, now she is rolling up the sleeves of her "poor plain dress" and taking over the work of servants (453), reflecting that heritage of poverty of which she herself informed the reader (60). More importantly though, Marian relinquishes to Walter his career as provider for Laura's safety. In other words, Marian is no longer the old maid who challenges the economic ambitions of the middle-class male ascending into the new aristocracy. With Marian out of the way, Walter is able to present the disinterestedness and resolution that eluded him through the first two-thirds of the novel. "Let me beg that we may not discuss Lady Glyde's affairs," Walter informs Kyrle during a visit to the lawyer's office:

> There shall be no money motive... no idea of personal advantage in the service I mean to render to Lady Glyde. She has been cast out as a
stranger from the house in which she was born . . . and there are two
men, alive and unpunished, who are responsible for it. That house shall
open again and receive her in the presence of every soul who followed
the false funeral to the grave . . . and those two men shall answer for
their crime to ME . . . I have given my life to that purpose, and, alone as
I stand, if God spares, me, I will accomplish it. (466)

Clearly demonstrated here are Walter's disinterest and resolve. More subtle is that final
line, particularly the word alone. This term implies that sharing his investigative duties
with Marian is no longer an option for Walter. As mentioned above, middle-class male
identity during the Victorian period was "dependent" upon the man's ability to provide
for his family. Thus, Marian's sharing in Walter's detective duties--duties which
eventually lead to the economic reward of Limmeridge House--would quite clearly
undermine Walter's identity.

Similarly, Walter's insistence that he stand alone reflects his newfound social
independence. Whereas previously, as John Kucich points out, Walter was dependent
on upper-class patronage for his living (89), in the novel's final epoch he demonstrates
repeatedly his economic independence, saving the money he received from his trip to
Honduras (in which he participated as a result of Marian's help) for special occasions
(453), and earning his, Laura's, and Marian's weekly expenditures doing wood
engraving and illustrating. Walter's financial self-sufficiency is a key ingredient to his
climb up the economic ladder to the new aristocracy, as it places him in positive contrast
to members of the old aristocracy, who inherited rather than earned their money. By
releasing himself from upper-class patronage, Walter frees himself from the taint of
money earned parasitically, off the labor of others. Walter's ability to make an
independent living is foregrounded by his gradual ascendancy, from the poor and
crowded streets of London's East End, to the "quieter" and cleaner neighborhood of
Only after Walter has worked at this climb for nearly a year is he allowed to return—triumphantly, and with his son as its heir—to Limmeridge House.

In the end it is Walter who obtains the information that makes it possible for Laura to regain her legal identity. It would be inappropriate, however, to suggest that Walter is solely responsible for reclaiming Laura's name and heritage. Indeed, in a manner entirely appropriate to her new, limited role as the domestic matron, Marian demonstrates an aptitude for stabilizing ambiguous identities, both those of others and, as a consequence, her own. The most obvious example of this is seen in her relationship with Walter: simply by staying in the house and allowing him to move freely about his man's world without fear of her superior skills, Marian enables Walter in his establishment of an independent and earnest male identity. Another instance of Marian's ability to clarify the selfhood of others occurs in her relationship with Laura. When Walter arrives at Fulham after serving as a witness at the inquest of Percival Glyde, he discovers Laura in "better spirits" and glowing with "brighter looks":

The change for the better which had been wrought in her during the few days of my absence was a surprise to me for which I was quite unprepared—and for all the unspeakable happiness of seeing it, I was indebted to Marian's courage and to Marian's love. (554)

Laura's appearance is, of course, one of the key factors in regaining for her her name and rightful position at Limmeridge House. Previously, her identity had been denied solely on the basis of appearance, neither Frederick Fairlie nor his servants being able to distinguish her from Anne Catherick (450). Thus, by helping Laura regain her old features, Marian has aided her in reclaiming her name. The effectiveness of Marian's efforts are clear the moment Laura appears before the assembly at Limmeridge. Writes

7 That in London Walter has no servant (453) while in Fulham he has at least one (645), further illustrates Walter's ascendance.
Walter: "All the persons assembled rose from their seats as Marian and I led [Laura] in. A perceptible shock of surprise, an audible murmur of interest ran through them, at the sight of her face" (637).

But Marian's power to erase ambiguities does not stop here. To the extent that Marian plays a role in clarifying Laura's identity, she is also key to stabilizing Anne's domestic and social position. On a literal level, of course, this simply means that by eliminating the assumption that Laura is Anne, Marian has clarified the fact that it is Anne in Laura's grave. On a more complex level, however, one could argue that Marian clarifies the ambiguity surrounding Anne by providing her—not once, but twice—a place within the domestic sphere.

Before demonstrating this point, it must be noted that the living arrangement of Walter, Marian, and Laura while in London and Fulham mirrors, if not legally at least theoretically, the idealized Victorian home. Already discussed are Walter's and Marian's enactment of the ideology of separate spheres: while Walter leaves the home to do battle in the broader world, Marian stays inside and takes care of domestic arrangements. Just as their economic behavior parallels the gender expectations of the time, their interpersonal relationships with one another and Laura fit the social expectations concerning the family. Previously, for instance, Walter loved Laura so ferociously that her marriage to another drove him out of the country; now, however, living in the same home with her, seeing her day to day in much the same way as during their time at Limmeridge, Walter describes their relationship as anything but romantic. Early in their tenure in London, for example, Walter reports Laura's changed state and his own relationship with her, asserting, "The sad sight of the change in her from her former self, made the one interest of my love an interest of tenderness and compassion which her father or her brother might have felt, and which I felt, God knows, in my inmost
That Walter's relationship with this woman is more patriarchal than fraternal is evidenced by the number of passages constructing Laura as a child: at one point, for instance, Walter and Marian amuse Laura by playing children's games with her (456); at another, Laura is referred to as speaking like a child and showing her thoughts as a child might (458).

Similarly, Marian's relationship with Laura bears more resemblance to that of mother than sister, particularly during the last third of the text. Marian demonstrates her maternal role in a number of ways: for example, she keeps from Laura information that might frighten her, such as information concerning Glyde's death, or the true reason for their move to Fulham. Additionally, her efforts to clarify Laura's identity casts her in a motherly role—certainly the ability to nurture children, to bring out the identity of each child in an effort to lay the groundwork for future social integration, was considered a major function of the Victorian mother (Davidoff and Hall 176). That Marian does everything in her power to keep Fosco from entering the apartment proper solidifies her position as nurturing mother: the home, according to the domestic ideology, was to be a haven of peace, a space cut off from the greed and violence of the modern world (Ellis 1598).

Though in reality Marian may mother only Laura Fairlie, she functions in clarifying Anne's identity just as she does Laura's. More specifically, because of her role as mother in the domestic configuration of London and Fulham, Marian resolves Anne's social ambiguity by providing this woman—who formerly had no distinct place within the domestic framework—the position of daughter. This process occurs on several levels. The simplest domestic positioning of Anne occurs because, in the eyes of the law at least, she is alive and well, living in London with Walter and Marian. Writes the former:
We two, in the estimation of others, are at once the dupes and the agents of a daring imposture. We are supposed to be the accomplices of mad Anne Catherick, who claims the name, the place, and the living personality of dead Lady Glyde. (434)

From a legal perspective, then, Laura is Anne. Thus, in the logic of this domestic configuration of Walter as father and Marian as mother, Anne—the woman who is parentless, having no father and a mother who disowns her—has finally found a place as daughter. As such, the threat of this socially undefined woman has been contained. As Walter and Marian's "daughter," Anne/Laura has become essentially voiceless: no longer the head of her own family, she cannot assert her legal rights, cannot begin or engage in court proceedings, and cannot sue Glyde for wrongs enacted upon her. Should she choose to do so, should she act in some way deemed inappropriate or offensive by Glyde and/or Fosco, Walter—as head of this family configuration—is legally liable, and will, as Fosco himself states, become "a lost man" (469).

Of course, just as the liability referred to here is not true legal liability, the Anne who is daughter to Walter and Marian isn't really Anne, but Laura, a younger, slightly modified variation of her half-sister. Nevertheless, Marian uses her new role as domestic woman to claim the social position of daughter for the wayward Anne. Already mentioned is the idea that, by helping to erase any ambiguities in Laura's features, Marian helps to distinguish the two daughters of Philip Fairlie, providing each an individual identity. A consequence of this clarification is that the elegy to "Laura, Lady Glyde" on the stone above the Fairlie burial plot is changed to read "Anne Catherick, July 25th, 1850" (639). Viewed in the harshest light possible, what this suggests is that Marian, in her role as Victorian mother, has played a part in containing the threat of the indeterminate Anne permanently. On another level, however, that Anne ends up buried next to the woman she loved more than any can be seen as Marian's generous offering to her fellow spinster. When thinking of the "little Cumberland
churchyard where Anne Catherick now lay buried," Walter remembers how the former once pounded the stone of her "protectress" and cried, "Oh, if I could die, and be hidden and at rest with you!" (575). In essence what has occurred here is that Anne—again, the woman with no fixed place in the social domain—has found a place as Mrs. Fairlie's daughter. Technically, of course, Anne is not Mrs. Fairlie's birth child, but this legality pales when one considers the strength of the ties, both familial and otherwise, which join the two. There is, for instance, the fact that the one's father is the other's husband. Though this may not seem a close link, in a novel where name plays such an important role, in effect this tie through Mr. Fairlie means Anne and Mrs. Fairlie share the same last name—the one by birth, the other by marriage. Additionally, there is the pair's great affection for one another: as a good daughter should, Anne reveres her "mother" above all others, wishing not only to live with her, but to be buried beside her; Mrs. Fairlie, likewise, takes "a violent fancy" to her strange pupil, dressing her in her daughter's clothes and providing her with special attention, all the while recognizing that Anne is "the living likeness" of Laura. What is achieved, then, when Anne is buried beside Mrs. Fairlie, is not simply the closure of the grave, the violent containment of a runaway woman, but the closure of a circle of women, in which position is at once fluid and—importantly, for Anne and Marian—affirmed: the dark-haired Marian serves as mother to the light-haired Laura, daughter of Mrs. Fairlie, while the dark-haired Mrs. Fairlie serves as mother to the light-haired Anne, sister—in her spinsterhood—to Marian. All of this, again, is the result of Marian's efforts to clarify Laura's (and hence Anne's) identity.

As was the case with Robert Audley, Marian's work at clarifying the identities of the ambiguous figures with whom she comes in contact relates conversely to the further stabilization of her own position. The first step in Marian's transformation from a
threatening woman occurs, as discussed above, on the night of her attempt to defeat Glyde and Fosco by taking on the role of a man and eavesdropping on their conversation. Soon after, she is cleaning house and raising children. Perhaps the defining moment in Marian's reconstruction into a model of the Victorian domestic woman occurs when Walter announces to her his intention to marry Laura in order that he may solidify his legal position with regard to her. As Walter details his rationale, he pauses, emotionally unable to continue. Marian then speaks: "Walter! . . . I once parted you both, for your good and for hers. Wait here, my brother!--wait, my dearest, best friend, till Laura comes, and tells you what I have done now!" (582). In a moment the door to the room opens and Laura enters and throws herself into Walter's arms, "the light of happiness radiant in her face" (582). In this way, Marian, formerly a threat to the ideology of the home--the woman who not only parted Walter and Laura to begin with, but who sought a legal separation in Laura's marriage to Glyde--becomes a protagonist for domesticity, an active force in bringing men and women together.

That her action replaces the "sorrow" in Laura's face which confused her with Anne with a "happiness" which signifies her true identity only reinforces Marian's role as nurturing mother figure, establisher of selfhood. This role is one she plays again at the novel's close. As she, Walter, and Laura take residency at the newly vacated

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8 How Walter manages to marry Laura, without first establishing her legal identity, is a problem the text fails to address.

9 Kucich's theory that Marian is in love with Walter, and that her coupling of him and Laura is thus an example of the self-sacrificing angel (93), is interesting, and only serves to strengthen my larger argument. That there is enough evidence to support his argument is debatable; although one cannot help but wonder why it is that, when Walter informs Marian of his plans to marry Laura, Marian's face grows pale: "For a while she looked at me with a sad, hesitating interest" (571).
Limmeridge House, it is Marian who christens the new middle-class aristocracy. When Walter refers to his son as "child," Marian chastises him:

Do you talk in that familiar manner of one of the landed gentry of England? Are you aware, when I present this illustrious baby to your notice, in whose presence you stand? Evidently not! Let me make two eminent personages known to one another: Mr. Walter Hartright—the Heir of Limmeridge. (646)

Though once so ambivalent toward domesticity as to oppose not one but two marriages, once so socially ambiguous as to wear more expensive clothes than her wealthy sister (this despite her poor upbringing), that Marian should now be the person to bring Walter and Laura together, the one chosen to introduce a new aristocracy purified by hard work and frugal living, demonstrates the extent of her development into a nonthreatening figure.

To a degree, Marian Halcombe's final position in The Woman in White may seem only partially satisfying. In part, this could result from Marian's appearing to conclude the novel much as she began it, not fully a member of a domestic arrangement, playing "aunt" to Walter's and Laura's more stable "father" and "mother." In addition, even at the conclusion of Collins's novel, Marian continues to demonstrate occasional sparks of that "man's resolve" which seemed so threatening to male identity at the start of the novel.

The first of these issues arises when Walter decides to marry Laura. Until this point, the living arrangements of the third epoch had consisted of the "family" of the patriarchal Walter, the matriarchal Marian, and the child Laura. This appears to change, however, with the marriage of Walter and Laura, as Walter himself notes before leaving on a business trip to Paris:

On leaving Laura once more... in her sister's care, a serious consideration recurred to me, which had more than once crossed my
wife’s mind, as well as my own, already—I mean the consideration of Marian’s future. Had we any right to let our selfish affection accept the devotion of all that generous life? Was it not our duty, our best expression of gratitude, to forget ourselves, and to think only of her? (640-41)

When Walter raises this issue with Marian, she quiets his fears. How could they part, she asks, after all they have been through? "Wait a little till there are children’s voices at your fireside. I will teach them to speak for me in their language, and the first lesson they say to their father and mother shall be—We can’t spare our aunt!" (641).

Several points in this passage mitigate Marian’s apparent, continued, indefiniteness. First of all, as Walter’s reference to leaving Laura in Marian’s care reveals, though the actual titles of the three may have been realigned, their basic positions have not. Though, in other words, Marian is again called Laura’s sister, her basic role is still that of mother, caring for Laura, protecting her, nurturing her. Second, though Marian returns to Limmeridge still an "old maid," her situation there has changed dramatically. Throughout the first epoch Marian demonstrates her power on the estate daily, essentially running the place ("It is a habit of mine always to give up to Miss Halcombe," Frederick Fairlie tells the reader [362]); now, however, she returns to Limmeridge in the company of a man who has demonstrated a working knowledge of the ideology of separate spheres, a man whose identity Marian, in her assumption of the "patience" considered appropriate to the female sphere, helped to create.

Marian’s familiarity with the intricacies of her new position are evidenced in her assertion that she will teach Walter and Laura’s children to speak in "their language" (641, Collins’s emphasis). Never a woman lacking words of her own, here Marian seeks to help provide words to others, demonstrating that the nurturing skills she acquired during her tenure away from Limmeridge will continue to be put to good use. Additionally, in her claim that these first words will be, "We can’t spare our aunt!" Marian reveals her understanding that only by thus dedicating herself to the needs of
others can she assure herself a continued place within the Hartright household. In this way, her subservience to Walter is affirmed: the woman who once ruled Limmeridge House despite her dependent status now serves Limmeridge House in recognition of that same status. As such, the Marian the reader leaves at the conclusion of *The Woman in White* serves as a model for the new middle-class aristocratic female: like her male counterpart, she is disinterested; like Robert and Walter, she works for others. Unlike the Marian who began the novel lacking a stable position within Victorian society, and as such threatening to usurp the positions of all the men with whom she came in contact, this new Marian enables those around her to maintain or claim their appropriate positions.

The second charge against the "new" Marian—that she seems at the conclusion of *The Woman in White* still to demonstrate some of her threatening fire—is supported by a number of passages. For example, on the night Walter decides finally to force a confession from Fosco, he makes a point of avoiding Marian's glance: "Marian's quick eyes were beginning to look inquiringly at my face—Marian's quick instinct was beginning to discover that I had something weighing on my mind" (603). D. A. Miller asserts that Marian's strong gaze—out of which, the text claims, her "old quick fiery temper" flames (469)—is the outward manifestation of the phallus she has internalized in her iron soul (180). To the extent that such is the case, Marian's bright, insightful eyes seem to reveal her continued threat to the masculine identity, representing a strength potentially superior to Walter's, as well as a generally assertive nature that is difficult to reconcile with the "patience" described as the supreme female attribute in the first line of Collins's novel.

If, however, one considers the intrinsic complexities of the domestic role that Marian assumes in the final third of *The Woman in White*, the strong gaze she displays
even at the novel's close affirms rather than compromises her reconstruction. Consider, for example, that while Margaret Oliphant refers to equality between the sexes as "the mightiest of humbugs" and decries the opening of "the professions and occupations and governments of men to women" the "vulgarest of chimeras" (145), Sara Stickney Ellis contests that the women of England have "obtained a degree of importance in society far beyond what their unobtrusive virtues would appear to claim." This is particularly true, Ellis continues, in British women's skill at reading situations clearly and looking "directly to the naked truth" in order that they might correct and redirect their weary men, who, because of their "inborn selfishness" or "worldly pride," have been or could be led astray within the marketplace. Indeed, Ellis contends that though the sphere of women's influence may appear small, it is "central," and "its extreme operations are as widely extended as the range of human feeling" (1653-54). Thus, though the ideology of separate spheres constructs women as too weak to participate in the "professions and occupations and governments" of men, they are nevertheless considered strong enough to single-handedly regenerate the nation's moral direction. Implicit within such a belief are serious contradictions concerning the proper role of the Victorian woman. On the one hand, she is expected to be submissive to her husband; on the other hand, she is told to guide this man gently, ridding him of any immoral quirks or idiosyncrasies he may pick up while wandering through the evil world outside domesticity's door.

Thus, the (albeit limited) strength that Marian demonstrates at the conclusion of The Woman in White is not so much a contradiction of her transformation, testifying to some mighty male phallus in her possession, as a testimony to that transformation, demonstrating that the woman who once seemed to seek to undermine the progress of the middle-class male—and hence to inhibit the progress of the nation as a whole—has now become part of that progress, capable of guiding and purifying the (masculine) soul
of the new aristocracy. That Marian does indeed play such a role is illustrated by her caution to Walter before his journey to New Welmingham. "Remember," she tells him, "what anxious hearts you leave here... Remember all the hopes that hang on your safe return. If strange things happen to you on this journey—if you and Sir Percival meet... for God's sake, keep your temper if you come in contact with that man!" (502). "Never fear," cries Walter in reply, and then marches off promptly to be drawn into a trap by Glyde's cohorts. "I had been irritated by the manner in which he and his companion had dogged my steps," explains Walter, "and I unfortunately pushed the fellow away smartly with my open hand" (524). In an instant, Walter is arrested and dragged to see the magistrate, losing precious time in his search to discover Glyde's secret. Having failed to listen to Marian's moral guidance, Walter loses his temper and is distracted from his responsibility of righting the wrongs that have been done to his loved ones, of erasing the social ambiguities with which Glyde and Fosco threaten the new aristocracy.

In the end, Marian's ability to reconcile the internal contradictions of the Victorian expectations of the wife by maintaining her power in submission to Hartright, allows her to live, while Anne Catherick—the novel's other single woman—dies. In contrast to Marian, Anne is incapable of correcting the moral wrongs of the man who seeks to constrict her movement into the world outside her home. Indeed, she lacks the strong, quick eye of Marian, and hence the ability to determine just what moral wrong Percival Glyde has committed. Even her lack of real ammunition, however, doesn't stop Anne from seeking to destroy the sanctity of male superiority within the home, as demonstrated when she tells Laura, "You are helpless with your wicked husband... I once threatened him with the Secret, and frightened him. You shall threaten him with the Secret, and frighten him too" (303). Whereas Marian moves from a situation in
which she opposes Walter's efforts to strengthen his position with Laura, to aiding those efforts by guiding his attempts to discover Glyde's secret, Anne is never able to subdue her resistance to male domination. As a result, when she finds herself suddenly in the Count Fosco's home in St. James' Wood, Anne collapses and eventually dies. In reference to Anne/Laura, Hester Pinhorn, Fosco's cook, states that she is unable to explain "what caused the sudden fright, which my mistress informed me had seized the lady on her first coming into the house" (425). Given her unwillingness to submit to the power of men, it makes sense that Anne should faint in the presence of Fosco—who "looks like a man who could tame anything"—and Eleanor Fosco—who, under Fosco's tutelage, has become a woman "frozen up in the strangest manner in herself" (238-39).

Thus, Marian's early ambiguity is perhaps itself the key to her eventual reconstruction; in other words, Marian's initial ability to blend strong and weak, masculine and feminine, enables her to reconcile the contradictions of the ideal middle-class woman in ways that Anne—and, indeed, Laura—is unable to do. This in mind, it makes sense that the complex Marian rather than the one-dimensional Laura is considered by Walter to be "the good angel of our lives" (647).
CHAPTER 3
DEFINING MIDDLE-CLASS ARISTOCRATIC SPEECH:
ELOQUENCE AND IDENTITY IN TROLLOPE'S BARCHESTER TOWERS

This chapter and the next involve both a continuation of and a departure from those previous. To the extent that implicit within the following discussions of Trollope's Barchester Towers and Dickens's Bleak House lies an interest in figures whose moral, social, and economic status is difficult for their fellow characters to determine, and in the way in which the construction of a new middle-class aristocracy occurs in the presence of these figures, these chapters follow the pattern set by the explications of Lady Audley's Secret and The Woman in White. In Barchester Towers, for instance, the Grantlys and their associates struggle to define themselves in the presence of the enigmatic Obadiah Slope in much the same way that Marian Halcombe worked to clarify her identity in contrast to Anne Catherick.

This and the following chapter depart from those before it, however, in two ways. First, whereas the readings of Braddon's and Collins's texts focus on how a single, socially indefinite individual responds to an unreadable figure, the explorations of Trollope and Dickens concentrate on an entire group as it reacts to the threat of a socially and morally undefined character. The discussion of Barchester Towers, for instance, examines how those associated with "Grantlyism"--Archdeacon Grantly, Septimus Harding, Francis Arabin, and Eleanor Bold, among others--react to the presence of the ambiguous Slope. Although this focus on parties in Barchester Towers is not
unprecedented, and does not contradict the theoretical paradigm laid out in this dissertation's earlier exegeses, this gesture is noted here in the hopes of avoiding undue confusion.

The following two chapters present a more substantive departure from their predecessors, however, in the degree to which they explore the causes of the ambiguity of the various unreadable characters in the texts, rather than the characters themselves. In particular, the present chapter will concentrate less on the indefiniteness of the Grantly party in the eyes of the residents of Barchester than the means by which that ambiguity is created—the means by which, in other words, Arabin's, Harding's, and the others' social and moral status are undermined by Slope's rhetorical misrepresentations. More to the point, this chapter will center on Obadiah Slope's ability to reconstruct rhetorically himself and those around him in a manner that serves his purposes and undermines theirs; additionally, it will explore how this action speaks to Victorian anxieties about the degree to which an individual's speech can be used to make judgments concerning their social and moral standing.

At first it may seem strange to refer to Obadiah Slope as morally and/or socially ambiguous. After all, Trollope's narrator never hesitates to let the reader know how he himself responded to the chaplain, nor how he wishes them to respond: "I never could endure to shake hands with Mr. Slope," he writes; "A cold, clammy perspiration always exudes from him, the small drops are ever to be seen standing on his brow, and his friendly grasp is unpleasant" (25). This physical repulsion is mirrored by a moral revulsion. Slope is portrayed as an unabashed power monger and social climber,
motivated almost solely by self-serving ambition. At a point prior to the novel's events, Slope courted Doctor Proudie's eldest daughter, withdrawing his "declaration of affection" only upon "finding the doctor had no immediate worldly funds with which to endow his child." Almost as soon as Slope has done this, Proudie is appointed Bishop of Barchester, and the reader is informed that "Mr. Slope began to regret that he had not been more disinterested" (22). What drives Slope in all of his decisions, even that all-important one of whom he will choose to be his life-long partner in domesticity, is fiscal ambition.

Slope is hungry for power as well as money. He accompanies the Proudies to Barchester not, the reader is informed, as the couple's "mere associate." Rather, "He intends to be, if not their master, at least the chief among them. He intends to lead, and to have followers; he intends to hold the purse strings of the diocese, and draw round him an obedient herd of his poor and hungry brethren" (26). Although the final phrase here seems to hint that Slope hopes to do good in Barchester, clothing the poor and feeding the hungry, the passage as a whole has a tone clearly dark in nature. Those who follow Slope are a "herd" of mindless cattle, and an obedient herd at that, forced into submission by the withholding of necessary funds. It seems, then, that Slope is not as interested in aiding the poor and hungry as he is in using their condition to gain their adoration.

As seen in the novels discussed in previous chapters, in Barchester Towers moral inferiority is paired with low socioeconomic status. For example, although Slope attended Cambridge, he did so as a "sizar"—that is, on a fellowship for poor students (22). Additionally, Slope's family is not so much of ill repute, as of no repute: "Of the Rev. Mr. Slope's parentage," the narrator writes, "I am not able to say much" (22). Thus, Slope is marked from the beginning as a commoner, as one of the nameless
masses—this in a novel where both the Proudies and the Grantlys are in some way linked with peers and nobles; where some members of the community refuse to recognize the "pedigree" of a family whose name reveals "only" Norman roots (191); and where even the humble Arabin is tied to the "Arabins of Uphill Stanton," a family predating Queen Elizabeth (192).

Despite the narrator's efforts to draw Slope in purely negative terms, the latter does finally fit under this project's definition of an "unreadable figure," as a character whose moral and socioeconomic status are not immediately apparent to all around him. For although Trollope's narrator and many of his protagonistic characters revile Slope, some Barsetshire residents are less certain about his standing. Following Slope's cathedral sermon undermining the values of the Barchester clerical status quo, the reader is told that "there were those who had heard Mr. Slope with satisfaction" (48). Although Trollope's narrator seeks to diminish the idea that Slope and his ideas might have some merit by suggesting that his appeal lies chiefly in adding excitement to country routine—"It is so pleasant to receive a fillip of excitement when suffering from the dull routine of everyday life!" (48)—the narrator's language reveals a genuine anxiety about the chaplain's ideas. At one point, for instance, he lets escape the fact that "many" of the people who heard Slope sided with him; at another point, his language is filled with qualifiers:

And so a party absolutely formed itself in Barchester on Mr. Slope's side of the question! This consisted, among the upper classes, chiefly of ladies. No man—that is, no gentleman—could possibly be attracted to Mr. Slope, or consent to sit at the feet of so abhorrent a Gamaliel. (49)

That Slope's party is formed "chiefly" of ladies admits that there are indeed upper-class men who side with him. Additionally, all of this addresses only the upper classes, leaving the reader with the impression that of the middle and lower classes, "many,"--both men and women--are "absolutely" impressed by Slope's rhetoric. Even the
narrator's assertion that "no gentleman" could be attracted to Slope is not particularly convincing, coming as it does during a time when the definition of this term was less than clear.

Indeed, as much as the narrator himself claims to dislike Slope, at one point admitting that "My readers will guess from what I have written that I myself do not like Mr. Slope" (55), he seems to demonstrate a confusion about how to judge the chaplain. At the very moment when Slope considers the question of whether or not to marry Eleanor for her money, the narrator interjects:

And here the author must beg it to be remembered that Mr. Slope was not in all things a bad man. His motives, like those of most men, were mixed; and though his conduct was generally very different from that which we would wish to praise, it was actuated perhaps as often as that of the majority of the world by a desire to do his duty. He believed in the religion which he taught, harsh, unpalatable, uncharitable as that religion was. (120)

Here, very much despite himself, the narrator admits that there is some part of Slope that is sincere in his beliefs, and that his actions are, to an extent, motivated by duty. He goes on to describe Slope in terms that almost fit the new aristocratic gentleman:

Mr. Slope had never been an immoral man. Indeed, he had resisted temptations to immorality with a strength of purpose that was creditable to him. He had early in life devoted himself to works which were not compatible with the ordinary pleasures of youth, and he had abandoned such pleasures not without a struggle. (121)

On some level, then, the narrator recognizes that there is a part of Slope that is a moral man and a hard and steadfast worker: even at a young age he had a purpose and stayed with it, regardless of the obstacles and tangential paths which threatened to detour him. That this sincere Slope described by the narrator is in contrast to the ambitious, conniving Slope, who considers marrying for money, only reinforces the difficulty—for the narrator and others—of reading this character's moral status. All of the above serves to demonstrate, then, that despite a tendency on the part of Trollope's protagonists to seek...
to construct Obadiah Slope as "a fellow raked up . . . from the gutters of Marylebone!" (45), in fact his social and moral position are much more complicated than that.

As was the case in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White*, those who oppose Slope's entrance into the circle of power in Barsetshire seem to hold unstable positions in terms of the Victorian social hierarchy. More particularly, the members of the Grantly circle are socially undetermined because of their positions as ordained members of the Anglican church. In general terms, the title of clergyman itself holds an indefinite, shifting rank in the British society. Though considered an appropriate occupation for a "gentlemen," it is nevertheless thought at least one step down from being titled, landed, aristocracy. This acceptable yet demoted state is evident by the fact that it is a not uncommon occupation for the younger sons of aristocrats: while, for instance, Vesey Stanhope's elder brother has inherited their father's land and peerage (64), this second son has become a clergyman—and a rather well-to-do one at that, possessing a prebendal stall in the diocese, one of the best residences in Barchester Close, two large nearby rectories, and the cure of three parishes (61). One reason becoming a cleric was considered appropriate for the son of the traditional aristocracy is that, from this group's perspective at least, it was believed to be a position beyond moral repute. More important for the present discussion, however, is the fact that it was not unusual practice for a figure high on the ladder of the Anglican church to delegate the everyday work of his parish(es) to lesser figures. The clergy, in other words, allowed a gentleman denied his father's estate—for whatever reason—to remain a gentleman by traditional standards: that is, to engage in a life of leisure. Such Dr. Stanhope has certainly done:

Years had now passed since he had done a day's duty; and yet there was no reason against his doing duty except a want of inclination on his own part. . . . He had resided in Italy for twelve years. His first going there had been attributed to a sore throat; and that sore throat, though never repeated in any violent manner, had stood him in such stead, that it had enabled him to live in easy idleness ever since. (60)
The language of the leisured aristocracy is evident enough in this passage. Further reinforcing the impression that Stanhope has turned his clerical position into a pseudo-aristocratic standing are a number of details, among them his wife's habits and style of dress: she never "appears" until three or four in the afternoon, wears ornaments that are rare and costly, and firmly believes that "a state of inactivity" is the "only earthly good" (63). Then, too, there is the influence of Charlotte Stanhope, who has "aided her father in his indifference to his professional duties" by persuading him that "his livings were as much his individual property as the estates of his elder brother were the property of that worthy peer" (64). Here the life of a clergyman is blatantly paralleled with that of a landed, leisured, member of the traditional aristocracy.

That this lifestyle is tolerated by the Grantlys is illustrated in a number of ways. First, there is their general association with the "high and dry church" (43), a group characterized by an approach to clerical living that emphasizes an "easygoing, gentlemanly, unenthusiastic, undogmatic Anglicanism" inherited from the eighteenth century (Gilmour xxi). The archdeacon and his father reveal their high church leanings through their tolerance of the leisurely lifestyles of those under their influence. Regarding the issue of absentee clergymen, for example, the narrator writes: "Poor dear old Bishop Grantly had on this matter been too lenient, and the archdeacon had never been inclined to be severe with those who were absent on reputable pretences, and who provided for their duties in a liberal way" (60).2 Further aligning the Grantlys with the

2 Even the archdeacon himself is not above taking a leisurely approach to his duties, at least at times. In The Warden, for example, he is described as retiring to his study as though to work, when in fact--after he has locked the door--he spends the morning reading Rabelais (105). Of course, no such similar event takes place in Barchester Towers, where Grantly seems genuinely dedicated to his work.
traditional aristocracy is the fact that, though not themselves members of the landed upper class, they lead a near-aristocratic life of luxury that surpasses even the Stanhopes. This is illustrated when Grantly first faces Mrs. Proudie and hears her not only brag of her own horses, but hint that Mrs. Grantly has none. Dr. Grantly, the reader is told, says nothing in reply, despite the fact that "He could have bought every individual possession of the whole family of the Proudies, and have restored them as a gift, without much feeling the loss; and had kept a separate pair of horse for the exclusive use of his wife since the day of his marriage" (32). The extent of the Grantlys' wealth, and the circles into which it allows them passage, is explicated when Mrs. Grantly is described as the "wealthiest of the ecclesiastical matrons of the county." Despite this, the narrator murmurs:

She had so managed her affairs that her carriage and horses had given umbrage to none. She had never thrown herself among the county grandees so as to excite the envy of other clergymen's wives. She never talked too loudly of earls and countesses, or boasted that she gave her governess sixty pounds a year, or her cook seventy. (108)

Though phrased in negatives, this passage reveals a great deal about Mrs. Grantly's (and Dr. Grantly's) position in that gray area between landed gentry and upper-middle-class professionals. Though she never throws herself among the "grandees," or brags of the titled aristocrats she's met, Mrs. Grantly could do these things, because said grandees would be more than willing to accept her company, and, as a matter of fact, she has met aristocrats about whom she could brag. Thus, Mrs. Grantly moves in the exclusive circles of the leisured classes, is all but a member of the traditional aristocracy herself. Indeed, her husband's desire to inherit his father's position as bishop only strengthens this impression, turning the bishopric into an entailment of sorts, passed from privileged father to privileged son.
The "all but" aristocratic quality of the Grantlys is crucial, however, for it reinforces the sense that although this family and the families of other clergy are quite close to the upper echelons of society, they are not, finally, themselves aristocratic. In other words, at the same time that Mrs. Grantly's social and economic status allow her to mingle in the company of earls and countesses, there is finally a distinction between herself and a countess and her husband and an earl. The social indefiniteness of the Grantlys is mirrored in Arabin, who, though the son of a "country gentleman" is forced to enter Oxford as a "commoner" (168). Despite this, Arabin eventually becomes a fellow at Lazarus "the richest and most comfortable abode of Oxford dons" (169); and while there, he does not completely forfeit a youthful tendency to "look down on the ordinary sense of ordinary people," instead nurturing a social elitism which causes him to view his rural clerical brethren "almost with contempt" (171). Arabin, then, is someone who holds neither a purely high nor a purely low status; he is at once a gentleman and a commoner, socially superior and socially ordinary. In addition, Arabin's snobbery toward rural clerics might be read as a rejection of those who engage in the day-to-day labor of the church, ministering for the poor and generally mingling with those the upper classes would deem unsavory. Certainly, Arabin favors a life far away from the hands-on work of the church, preferring theoretical debates to daily labor (112). Thus, the Grantly party is filled with individuals who, like Slope, defy categorization within the traditional socioeconomic hierarchy. While the new chaplain has a low-class background and high-class ambitions, the Grantly party holds a position that lies somewhere between the two extremes.

The subsequent action of Barchester Towers is designed not only to clarify the social and moral status of each of these parties, but to do so in a way that erases the possibility for
creating future uncertainties. That at its core the social uncertainty of Barsetshire is linked to language rather than theology is made evident very early in the novel. Following Slope's sermon in the cathedral, the Grantly party meets to plot a course of defense against this invader and his cohorts. For the archdeacon, one thing is obvious:

We must not . . . allow [Slope] to preach again here. It is not because his opinion on church matters may be different from ours--with that one would not quarrel. It is because he has purposely insulted us. When he went up into that pulpit last Sunday, his studied object was to give offence to men who had grown old in reverence of those things of which he dared to speak so slightingly. What! to come here a stranger, a young, unknown, and unfriended stranger, and tell us, in the name of the bishop his master, that we are ignorant of our duties, old-fashioned and useless!

(51)

Two things are worth noting in this passage: the first, which will be dealt with immediately, is that the emphasis here is clearly not on theology; as much is illustrated in the second sentence. Rather, Slope's offense lies in his willingness to "insult," to "give offence," to "speak slightingly," to "tell." What Grantly and the others most resent is being rhetorically reconstructed by the chaplain. As important as the fact that they are constructed, however, is what they are constructed as: undutiful, out-of-date, and of no benefit to the greater society. While this later element will be touched on in more detail momentarily, at this point let it simply be noted that at the heart of Barchester Towers are issues and concerns about the relationship between language, identity, and labor.

Although it is difficult to generalize about the root of these anxieties--particularly those concerning language--one possibility traces them back to classical assumptions about the relationship between rhetoric and morality.3 There were numerous debates on this topic; however, there was a general belief dating back to Aristotle that the one was in part the product of the other: "We believe good men more fully and more readily than

3 Many thanks here are due to Jean Williams, whose thoughts on this subject were key in developing my argument.
others. This is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided" (quoted in Baumlin xv). For Roman orators, what is a general trend for Aristotle becomes a hard fact. Quintilian, for instance, whom Trollope referred to as the "greatest of Latin critics" ("Cicero" 401), postulated what became known as the "Good Man Theory" (Brody 13):

The orator must above all things devote his attention to the formation of moral character and must acquire a complete knowledge of all that is just and honourable. For without this knowledge no one can be either a good man or skilled in speaking. (125)

Implicit here is the idea that eloquence is more than mere presentation. Rather, because skill in speaking requires a particular type of knowledge, it becomes clear that eloquence is also a matter of content. Truly effective speech, then, arises from a combination of content and presentation, and can occur only when the speaker is a "Good Man."

Further, eloquence has a double-edged nature that not only allows the orator to say something about the world, but that in turn says something about the speaker. A person listening not only learns what the speaker is saying, in other words, but learns as well whether or not he or she is a virtuous person. The presence of eloquence, simply put, leads to an assumption of personal virtue.

This is an idea that Quintilian expresses repeatedly in Institutio Oratoria, his most famous work. At one point he clarifies what he means by "just and honourable":

"It will certainly be the duty of all good men to bear their part in the administration of the state. If the origin of our souls be divine, we must win our way towards virtue and abjure the service of the lusts of our earthly body... And finally, how can we conceive of any real eloquence at all proceeding from a man who is ignorant of all that is best in the world? (128)

The eloquent man--the effective, convincing speaker--must be both socially responsible and personally selfless. Without these features, Quintilian makes clear, eloquence is impossible. And to the contrary, people distracted by worldly concerns such as "desire,
avarice, and envy" cannot be successful speakers, for their minds are "so preoccupied, so
distracted, so rent and torn by so many and such varied passions" that there is little room
for "virtuous pursuit": "You might as well look for fruit in land that is choked with
thorns and brambles" (119).

Despite the fact that Cicero, Trollope's favorite Roman orator, precedes
Quintilian and thus does not use "Good Man" terminology, some of the same precepts
concerning virtue and the effective speaker nevertheless pervade the former's work. In
De Oratore, Cicero makes the point while discussing the role of the legal advocate that "A
potent factor in success . . . is for the characters, principles, conduct and course of life,
both of those who plead cases and of their clients, to be approved" (171). Further, states
Cicero, an orator who is "grasping and covetous" will fail in the quest to be eloquent,
phrasing that once again seems to illustrate the Victorian sense that virtue and eloquence
can occur only where there is disinterest.

Trollope's many writings on Cicero seem to link the Roman's virtue and
eloquence, as well as to relate the two to Victorian standards of gentlemanliness. In The
Life of Cicero, Trollope lists the Roman's finer qualities, stating that as an "orator, a
rhetorician, an essayist, and a correspondent he was supreme . . . as a statesman he was
honest, as an advocate fearless, and as a governor pure" (8). Trollope elaborates on both
Cicero's eloquence and his virtues, uncharacteristically hyperbolizing in an 1877 essay
written for the Fortnightly Review that his subject is

a model to all who have come after him, not only in style, but in thought,-
-and, as in the arrangement of words, so also in the arrangement of ideas.
He has taught all men of letters how the weight of serious subjects may be
lightened by the beauty of language, and how dignity may be lent even to
our pleasantries by the choice of phrases in expressing them. His ear was
so perfect that he may be said to have created euphony in prose for all time
to come. (401)
Trollope is equally enthusiastic about the orator's virtue, stating that there was a
"humanity" in Cicero that was almost akin to Christianity, "a stepping forward out of the
dead intellectualities of Roman life into moral perceptions, into natural affections, into
domicity, philanthropy, and conscious discharge of duty" (The Life of Cicero 8). That
this language is extremely Victorian in tone is perhaps demonstrated best by Trollope's
inability to resist comparing Cicero to the "well-bred, polished gentleman of the present
day" (23), indeed, to his actually placing the man in Victorian England:

What a man he would have been for London life! . . . How popular he
would have been at the Carlton, and how men would have listened to him
while every great or little crisis was discussed! . . . How the pages of
magazines would have run over with little essays from his pen! "Have
you seen our Cicero's paper on agriculture? That lucky fellow, Editor
------, got him to do it last month!" "Of course you have read Cicero's
article on the soul. The bishops don't know which way to turn." "So the
political article in the Quarterly is Cicero's?" (37)

Here, again, the terms along which Cicero is defined are that of a man both eloquent and
virtuous, engaging in socially responsible discussions of matters that affect society as a
whole.

Although it is not known for a fact that Trollope read Quintilian any earlier than
1879 (Letters 6 February 1879), there can be little doubt that he was at least generally
familiar with the orator, and held his Good Man theory at the back of his mind when
describing Cicero's virtue and eloquence. In his 1877 essay on Cicero--two years earlier
than his documented reading of Quintilian--Trollope makes numerous references to the
latter orator, calling him, as noted above, "the greatest of Latin critics," and quoting in
great detail Quintilian's opinions of Cicero (407, 409). Further, as Miriam Brody points
out, numerous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetoricians and scholars, including
Blair, Rollin, Hume, Campbell, and Ogilvie, carried Quintilian's ideas on the good man
to a broader reading public (10-11). Campbell's work alone was reprinted more than
twenty times in the two centuries, most probably because of its widespread use as a

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university rhetorical text; Blair was even more popular with Georgians and Victorians, going through sixty-two editions and fifty-one abridgements by 1883 (Bizzell and Herzberg 11).

Indeed, it is safe to say that most educated Victorians were familiar on a formal or semiformal basis with the ideas of both Cicero and Quintilian. In addition to being transferred in the writings of the above-mentioned scholars, Latin writers made up the largest portion of formal education (Rosner 251). Further, as one might assume given Trollope's comparison of Cicero to the Victorian gentleman, nineteenth-century England was generally interested—one might even say obsessed—with Roman history and culture, particularly as it might serve as an analogue to their own nation's rise, and—possibly—decay and fall (Dowling 85). Trollope mentions at least five recent biographies of Cicero; additionally, Rosner points to plays in verse, editions of letters, and historical dramas that concerned this orator and other important Romans (252). Given this, it is not surprising to find an 1850 essay entitled "Ancient and Modern Eloquence," making statements that echo Quintilian's Good Man theory: "As in all the other arts which are intended to please and instruct mankind, TRUTH, and a regard to the limits of nature, are essential to [oratory's] success" (Alison 647). As far as the Victorians are concerned, then, virtue—and particularly an adherence to truth—leads to eloquence.

At a basic level, British society in the 1850s held it as common sense that the way a person spoke indicated something about that person. Simply put, this meant that people's speech would reveal if they hailed from Birmingham or Surrey, if they were of the working class or the aristocracy. Further, it was assumed that one's manner of speaking reflected his or her personality, as evidenced by a review of Richard Whateley's Elements of Rhetoric, which asks, "Why is Addison diffuse, Johnson pompous, Goldsmith simple? Why is one author abrupt, another rhythmical, another concise?
Evidently in each case, the habitual mode of utterance must depend upon the habitual balance of that nature. The predominant feelings have by use trained the intellect to represent them" ("The Philosophy of Style" 458). Key here is the "must," for it denotes an inevitable, unavoidable relationship between one's speech and one's personality. A diffusive person speaks diffusively, a pompous man in a pompous manner. It follows, then, that if a person is immoral, that will reveal itself in his or her speech. Thus, the Good Man theory is alive and well in Victorian England.

In terms of sheer eloquence, in terms of elegant and proper and effective speech in both formal and informal settings, the aristocracy, at least by traditional assumptions, was not to be surpassed. How, moans a Victorian essay on etiquette

    can we explain by words the exact pitch of voice which is employed in good company? how regulate the exact intervals at which it is necessary to give a nobleman his title, or set down the exact circumstances that make it impertinent in one man to drop the distinctive title altogether? or what it is that renders it priggish in another to abstain from so doing? (Morgan 28)

Thus, just as Quintilian's good man has a complete knowledge of "all that is just and honourable," the Victorian aristocrat also has insight into honorable behavior, into mannerisms that demonstrate necessary respect, and that, by doing so, reveal the subject's virtue.

Members of the traditional aristocracy were not only unsurpassable in their knowledge of how to speak, but also in knowing what to say in order to reveal their superior moral status. During the eighteenth century, Lord Chesterfield wrote to his son describing how there is "an awkwardness of expression and words, most carefully to be avoided; such as false English, bad pronunciation, old sayings, and common proverbs; which are so many proofs of having kept bad and low company" (25 July 1741). The same was held to be true in Victorian times, as represented in a review of Dickens that criticizes the author for using too much improper language. Slang, the reviewer writes,
"arose in towns, amid thieves and gamblers... Wherever it goes, it bears the stamp of its nativity, and an impress of crime, concealment, and baseness. The man of pure and honourable feeling cannot use it; and its spread will be an index of the departure of these qualities from society" (Cleghorn 83). Implicit in these passages is a complex equation in which proper morals are linked to proper language, which in turn is tied to the lady or gentleman who is able to avoid the business of mingling with "bad and low" company. In essence, then, what British society has done is add an addendum to the Good Man theory that links social eloquence--instinctively knowing what to say and how to say it in such a way as to reveal one's moral good sense--to class. From this perspective, speaking well reflects not only one's virtue, but one's superior social status. Thus, just as in Quintilian's time, during the early Victorian period eloquence is double-voiced, allowing the speaker to say something effectively, as well as itself saying something about the speaker. Morality, then, is readily apparent to the listener: the presence of eloquence leads to an assumption of the individual's virtue.

It is not long into Barchester Towers that the reader becomes aware that the Good Man theory and its traditional Victorian class manifestations are being undermined. Very early on, the text makes clear that the lower-class Slope is an extraordinarily effective speaker: he is blessed with a "pulpit eloquence" (24); he has the "gift of using language forcibly" (47). When the man of whose parentage little can be said is clearly one of the most powerful speakers in Barchester, it is obvious the reader has been submerged in a world in which the old rules have been transformed. Certainly, Harding, Grantly, and the rest of their party feel something has gone awry, for though they see Slope as not only low-class but lacking in virtue, they recognize that the chaplain nevertheless repeatedly displays an inimitable rhetorical virtuosity.
One clear demonstration of the chaplain's rhetorical effectiveness comes when he visits Eleanor and Mary Bold two weeks after his cathedral sermon. The reader is informed that during the "first outbreak of the wrath" over this talk, "none had been more animated against the intruder [Slope]" than Eleanor and Mary. Thus, it is not surprising that upon first meeting the pair after his sermon, Slope is received as "the great enemy of all that was good in Barchester" (54). Given the opportunity, however, the chaplain talks to the women, "unsaying a great deal of his sermon, expressing his highest admiration for the precentor's talents, eulogizing the father and the daughter and the sister-in-law." By the time he leaves, he is making his farewells "as gentlemen do who have been graciously entertained" (55). Not only does Slope get his listeners to believe what he is saying, but he does so in such a way as to raise his social standing. Because he is an effective speaker, Slope leaves the Bold home a "gentleman," despite having arrived there as the enemy of all that is good and moral. Even this early in the novel the reader realizes that an important transformation has occurred: no longer is language the reflector of a person; in the world of Barchester Towers, rhetoric is a mask, used to reconstruct oneself and others in such a way as to hide the essential self. In this scene and others, Slope proves himself entirely capable of creating multiple costumes for those around him and himself, easily "unsaying" constructions of Eleanor and Harding, and, by doing so, reconstructing himself.

Similar processes occur repeatedly in the text, as, for example, when Slope insults Mr. Harding into rejecting the offer of Hiram's Hospital by telling him how "Work is now required from every man who receives wages" and of how, all over England, "new men" are "carrying out new measures, and carting away the useless rubbish of past centuries" (99). The implication here, of course, is that Mr. Harding is not himself willing to work for his wages, that he is, on the contrary, a man of leisure, a
part of the "useless rubbish of past centuries." In contrast, Slope is asserting that he is this "new man," intent upon earning his own way, this despite the fact that only days later he proves himself more than willing to marry a woman, Eleanor Bold, solely for her money—the second time he has formed such a scheme. Even more interesting than these conceptualizations of identity, however, is the reconceptualization that occurs only moments later. Almost the minute Harding flees Slope's company, the chaplain pays a visit to Eleanor and rewrites all that has just occurred. Mr Harding, he insists, is just about to regain his position at the hospital. Slope then describes the Sunday school in such positive terms that Eleanor goes so far as to say that she is certain her father will approve of the idea, and that she herself would gladly teach a class. The narration continues:

Anyone who had heard the entirely different tone, and seen the entirely different manner in which Mr. Slope had spoken of this projected institution to the daughter and to the father, could not have failed to own that Mr. Slope was a man of genius. He said nothing to Mrs. Bold about the hospital sermons and services, nothing about the exclusion of the old men from the cathedral, nothing about dilapidation and painting, nothing about carting away the rubbish. Eleanor had said to herself that certainly she did not like Mr. Slope personally, but that he was a very active, zealous clergyman, and would no doubt be useful in Barchester. (105)

That Slope should earn the title of "genius" simply for his ability to reconstruct rhetorically himself and others speaks to the importance language plays in Barchester Towers. Here again it becomes clear that eloquence masks rather than reveals the self. Slope speaks very convincingly despite a clear lack of virtue, particularly that all-important virtue—to the Victorians at least—of veracity. In the language of "The Philosophy of Style," Addison's speech and writing are diffuse, Johnson's pompous, and Goldsmith's simple because these men are diffuse, pompous, and simple in turn, and because "the habitual mode of utterance must depend upon the habitual balance of the nature" (458). Those who read these men, then, read not only their words, but their
natures, their characters. If such were indeed the case in the world portrayed in
*Barchester Towers*, Slope's avarice and ambition should appear in his speech, in his
choice of words, his allusions, his presentation. In Cicero's words, a "grasping and
covetous" orator will fail to be eloquent (171). But such is not the case for the chaplain.

Perhaps the most important rhetorical act in which Slope engages occurs during
his cathedral sermon, particularly when he undermines the moral credibility of the
Grantly party by constructing them as men out of pace with the times, men who are
unwilling to accept the Victorian call to carry their own share of the social burden. A
large part of Slope's talk (which is only paraphrased by the narrator) explains how a
clergyman should "show himself approved unto God, as a workman that needeth not to
be ashamed" (44), words that seem to reiterate the aforementioned criticisms of clerics
who indulge in a life of leisure. As in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White*,
then, *Barchester Towers* is a text that links issues of social and moral ambiguity to
concerns about labor and leisure.

More generally, Slope's sermon advocates his own theological beliefs while
belittling those of the Grantly party:

> the peculiar points insisted upon were exactly those which were most
distasteful to the clergy of the diocese, and most averse to their practice
and opinions; and . . . all those peculiar habits and privileges which have
always been dear to high church priests, to that party which is now
scandalously called the high and dry church, were ridiculed, abused, and
anathematized. (44)

In essence what Slope does here is reconstruct the practices and beliefs of the Barchester
hegemony, men who "had grown old in the exercise of their peculiar services, with a full
conviction of their excellence for all intended purposes!" (44). The result of Slope's
portrayal of these figures has already been mentioned: many are offended outright by his
words, but nevertheless there are those who "heard Mr. Slope with satisfaction":

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Mr. Slope might be right. Sunday had certainly not been strictly kept in Barchester, except as regarded the cathedral services. Indeed, the two hours between services had long been appropriated to morning calls and hot luncheons. Then Sunday-schools! really more ought to have been done as to Sunday-schools; Sabbath-day schools Mr. Slope had called them. The late bishop had really not thought of Sunday-schools as he should have done. (These people probably did not reflect that catechisms and collects are quite as hard work to the young mind as book-keeping is to the elderly. . . .) And then, as regarded that great question of musical services, there might be much to be said on Mr. Slope’s side of the question. It certainly was the fact, that people went to the cathedral to hear the music. (49)

Thus, what this lower-class chaplain of questionable morals has done is step into a high church city and criticize the unearnest, leisurely life of the clergy there. He attacks their habits, points out their privileges, and causes the general populace to recognize the lack of sincerity with which the "work" of the church has been undertaken—how services have become merely a prelude for social calls, how the music is meaningless entertainment rather than a practical expression of praise. The extent to which sloth has taken hold in Barchester is even evident in the city’s lack of Sunday schools: rather than being asked to assume the responsibility of learning their moral creed, children are raised to be ignorant and undutiful, just like the clergy who fail to instruct them.

In contrast to this very negative portrait of the Barchester status quo, Slope constructs himself as someone not ashamed to show himself as a workman before God, or anyone else for that matter: "Whatever opinion of Mr. Slope might have been held in Barchester before he commenced his discourse, none of his hearers, when it was over, could mistake him either for a fool or a coward" (43). By speaking as a low church minister in a high church setting, Slope has constructed himself as a principled man, a man of conviction who is willing to endure martyrdom for his beliefs. That such is not actually the case, that Slope makes decisions about the bishopric based solely upon his
own advancement, only further demonstrates the schism that has occurred in Barchester between speech and the essential self. Language, in Slope's hands, becomes a mask that hides one's character.

Thus, what *Barchester Towers* presents is a world in which the premises of the Good Man theory have all but collapsed. Though of lower-class origins, and though selfishly ambitious, Obadiah Slope is undeniably eloquent, so much so that he is able rhetorically to hide his true self. Further, the extreme degree of Slope's facundity allows him to convince at least some of the residents of Barchester that their clergy lack the earnestness necessary in changing times, a point that, it appears, most of his audience had previously failed to recognize.

In order for the archdeacon, Arabin, and the rest of their party to regain their previous social status in a world thus reconfigured, they must find both a way to counter Slope's rhetoric, and to prove that they are sincere and responsible workers. At least at first, they are not particularly effective with either of these. Repeatedly, the members of this group find themselves struggling simply for words, much less an eloquence which can counter the chaplain's. Although, for example, the dean has the ability to decide who will and will not speak in the cathedral, after Slope's sermon this powerful man, "betook himself silently to his deanery, afraid to speak; and there sat, half stupefied, pondering many things in vain" (48). Because he cannot think clearly, cannot acquaint himself with, in Quintilian's words, "a complete knowledge of all that is just and honourable," the dean is incapable of speech. From the perspective of the traditional Good Man paradigm, then, as well as its Victorian offshoots, it is not the dean, but Slope who appears to hold virtue in his hand.
The dean is not the only member of the Grantly party who suddenly finds himself unable to speak on the side of all that appears moral. When faced with Slope's successful use of the language, the archdeacon is also incapable of using speech to construct himself as a moral man. After Eleanor has received a letter in which Slope implies that he is her intimate, for example, Grantly decides he must speak to his sister-in-law and warn her that an alliance with the bishop's chaplain is unpardonable. Prior to this interview, the narrator explains that there are some people who delight in "serious interviews," particularly when these discussions allow them to offer advice or administer rebuke. The archdeacon, the text continues, was perhaps one of these: "Yet on this occasion he did not prepare himself for the coming conversation with much anticipation of pleasure. Whatever might be his faults he was not an inhospitable man, and he almost felt that he was sinning against hospitality in upbraiding Eleanor in his own house" (266). Normally, Grantly revels in speaking in a manner which implies knowledge and virtue (and knowledge of virtue). Challenged by Slope's construction of himself as Eleanor's lover, however, the archdeacon finds himself in a morally questionable position, that of threatening one of his own guests with social ostracization. Thus, the effects of Slope's rhetorical skill creep into every corner of Barsetshire, his words undermining the archdeacon's moral standing even when he himself is absent.

Arabin's moral standing also suffers in a world where the presence of Slope disrupts traditional assumptions about virtue and eloquence. Although this Oxford fellow has a reputation for being "great in sermons, great on platforms, great at after-dinner conversations" (172), he is almost incapable of uttering a single word his first time in the pulpit of St. Ewold's:

It was enough to put a man a little out, let him have been ever so used to pulpit reading, to see the knowing way in which the farmers cocked their ears, and set about a mental criticism as to whether their new minister did or did not fall short of the excellence of him who had lately departed from
them. A mental and silent criticism it was for the existing moment, but soon to be made public among the elders of St. Ewold’s over the green graves of their children and forefathers. (204-5)

As it turns out, Arabin does his work "sufficiently well, in spite of the slightly nervous affection which at first impeded him, and which nearly drove the archdeacon beside himself" (205). Nevertheless, a comparison of Arabin’s first sermon in Barsetshire—a community that, until recently at least, had tended to share his high church beliefs—to Slope’s reveals a striking contrast. While the latter is able to step into hostile territory and emerge looking both intelligent and courageous, Arabin seems just barely able to surpass his predecessor, "poor old Mr. Goodenough," who, as his name implies, "had not been wonderful" (205). Here again, from the perspective of the Grantly party, the rules appear to have changed: those who were traditionally deemed virtuous due to their upper class, leisured status seem incapable of speech, while those who are aligned with the lower (and supposedly less moral) classes have an eloquence which allows them to hide their lack of virtue.

Arabin shows himself similarly tongue-tied in his personal life. Several times the clergyman is struck dumb in Eleanor’s presence. Having heard, for example, that she is to become Slope’s wife, Arabin loses his voice:

Mr. Arabin, when he saw Eleanor, could not succeed in looking or in speaking as though he knew nothing of all this [concerning her and Slope]. He could not be cheerful and positive and contradictory with her, as was his wont. He had not been two minutes in the room before he felt he had done wrong to return. . . . Why, indeed, should he have wished to have aught further to say to the future wife of Mr. Slope? (278)

Important to note here is that, as with Grantly, Arabin’s silence is the direct result of Slope’s construction of himself as an intimate—as the future husband, in fact—of Eleanor Bold. This kind of paralysis occurs at a number of points, with crucial consequences. The most important, perhaps, takes place as the party at Ullathorne ends. When he and Eleanor are thrown together in a quiet corner of the Thorne home, Arabin makes an
allusion to Plumstead, then, "perceiving that he was approaching dangerous ground," drops it, and the two, "finding it impossible to say anything further," stand silent:

And yet these two people were thoroughly in love with each other; and though one was a middle-aged clergyman, and the other a lady at any rate past the wishy-washy bread-and-butter period of life, they were as unable to tell their own minds to each other as any Damon and Phillis, whose united ages would not make up that to which Mr. Arabin had already attained. (396)

Such had not always been the case for Arabin; before coming to Barchester he was considered a master with words. Already mentioned was his reputation for being "great" at sermons, on platforms, and in after-dinner conversations. Further, he had debated at Oxford (168), trained to be a poet (111), and spent much of his time writing and speaking publicly (112).

Much as Slope's eloquence has the effect of constructing him as virtuous—in the eyes of some Barchesterians—Arabin's inability to represent himself through speech results in questions concerning his morality. When he finds himself incapable of speaking to Eleanor, for instance, the latter accuses him of being ungentlemanly. After Arabin has stated that it is a pity that Eleanor's pleasant visit to Plumstead should end so soon, the young widow responds, "It is a pity, certainly, that men and women do so much to destroy the pleasantness of their days. . . . It is a pity that there should be so little charity abroad. . . . You should practise as well as preach, Mr. Arabin" (279).

Eleanor's assumption, of course, is that Arabin is at the root of the rumor concerning her and Slope. Arabin is so silenced by this same rumor that he finds himself unable to counter Eleanor's assertions, and thus she leaves him believing he is both unkind and a hypocrite. Eleanor's phrasing here is crucial: in accusing Arabin of failing to practice what he preaches, Eleanor is creating a distinction between speech and action. In this paradigm, speech is inauthentic in that it enables the creation of lies, of deceitful masks which hide an individual's true personality; in contrast, action is authentic, demonstrating
true goodwill. Thus, by living his life purely in the realm of language and not turning abstract words into concrete acts, Arabin is participating in a process that fails to benefit society—indeed, that "destroys" happiness, undermining the greater good.

Arabin's inability to speak with Eleanor has other negative consequences, particularly in the extent to which it costs him the opportunity of placing himself in a socially respectable relationship. Because the younger clergyman cannot find a way to express himself to Eleanor, the pair does not become intimate, and the lonely Arabin seeks comfort in the company of another woman who—though alone—is not a widow or in any way single. With Madeline, Arabin discovers that his ineloquence is not a problem, for the signora proves herself more than adept at reading the "secrets" of his heart, and the "bodings of his own soul" (365). As a consequence of Arabin's association with this woman, his reputation as a good and moral man begins to fall. Mr. Grantly, for instance, hears less than subtle whispers concerning his would-be "champion":

The meagre little prebendary who lived in the close told [Grantly] to a nicety how often Mr. Arabin had visited at Dr. Stanhope's, and how long he had remained on the occasion of each visit. He had asked after Mr. Arabin at the cathedral library, and an officious little vicar choral had offered to go and see whether he could be found at Dr. Stanhope's. Rumour, when she has contrived to sound the first note on her trumpet, soon makes a loud peal audible enough. It was too clear that Mr. Arabin had succumbed to the Italian woman, and that the archdeacon's credit would suffer fearfully if something were not done to rescue the brand from the burning. (450-51)

Unable to find an effective way to represent himself rhetorically, Arabin loses the opportunity to attain a socially sanctioned relationship, becomes with Madeline, and as a result threatens to reveal not only himself but the rest of his friends as lacking in virtue. Put another way, a lack of eloquence results—albeit in a roundabout manner—in the assumption of immorality. All of this, again, ties back to Arabin's assumption that
Eleanor is to be married to Slope, an assumption he and the rest of the high church circle arrive at because of Slope's constructions of himself in his letter to the widow.

Finding themselves in a changing world where language has been usurped by a social transgressant of questionable morals, the Grantly party seeks an alternative method of claiming identity. Perhaps the most successful approach they find is an eloquence of the body which leaves—or seems to leave—no room for misrepresentation. This new mode of signification is first effectively employed by Eleanor when Slope pursues her into the gardens of the Thorne estate. When the would-be dean assails her with statements of affection, Eleanor seems unable to prevent "the expression of Mr. Slope's wishes and aspirations." As long as Slope talks, in other words, Eleanor is defenseless against his creating a vision of them as husband and wife, traveling "hand in hand through this mortal valley which His mercies will make pleasant to us." The moment Slope actually attempts to touch Eleanor, however, the moment he tries to pass his arm around her waist, the young widow finally succeeds in communicating to the chaplain her feelings about him:

She sprang from him as she would have jumped from an adder, but she did not spring far; not, indeed, beyond arm's length; and then, quick as thought, she raised her little hand and dealt him a box on the ear with such right good will, that it sounded among the trees like a miniature thunder-clap. (384)

The effect is immediate and surprising in a novel in which Slope has—thus far—never lost the ability to maintain his dignity. Eleanor, the reader is informed, had a "true instinct" as to the chaplain:

To him the blow from her little hand was as much an insult as a blow from a man would have been to another. It went direct to his pride. He

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4 See Chapter 4.
conceived himself lowered in his dignity, and personally outraged. He could almost have struck at her again in his rage. Even the pain was a great annoyance to him, and the feeling that his clerical character had been wholly disregarded, sorely vexed him. (385)

Having struck, Eleanor has made clear her feelings about Slope. Having been struck, this ambiguous figure who had been able to maneuver himself in a position to become dean is revealed as a less than virtuous man, so undignified even as to consider striking a woman. This physical reconstruction is lasting in its effects as well: though Eleanor has fled his company, Slope's face continues to sting with the weight of her hand, "and he fancied that everyone who looked at him would be able to see on his face the traces of what he had endured" (386). This sense stays with the chaplain until he departs Barchester; even as Madeline Stanhope publicly ridicules him in front of Arabin, Thorne, and others, Slope cannot help think about "the sharp points of Eleanor's fingers" and is reduced to standing before the company "mute as a fish" and "an object of pity" (447). Thus, Eleanor has found a method of physical representation which does not mislead in the way that Slope's rhetorical constructions have been proven to.

Eleanor quickly realizes as much: even as she leaves Slope, for instance, she fears that her feelings will be read in her face (388). Over the next few days, she repeatedly finds herself in situations where words are not effective but physical communication is. When asked by Madeline Neroni whether or not she knows Francis Arabin, Eleanor blushes "up to her forehead," a sign which Madeline interprets as assent. When the "signora" notes that everyone who knows Arabin must like him, Eleanor finds herself at a loss for words. Her body, however, speaks volumes, both to herself and to Madeline: "Her blood was rushing about her body she knew not how or why. She felt as though she were swinging in her chair; and she knew that she was not only red in the face, but also almost suffocated with heat" (439). Madeline's reason for calling Eleanor into her company, of course, is to inform the widow that Arabin loves her madly, news
which Eleanor receives in silence, only standing up and touching Madeline to demonstrate her appreciation for what the bedridden woman has done. As Madeline continues, asserting that for Arabin, "yea will stand for yea, and nay for nay," Eleanor again is silent, responding only with an "infinitesimal soupcon of a squeeze" of the signora's hand. When Eleanor finally leaves, she does so only with a "half-whispered" assent to Madeline's request for a line forgiving the Stanhope family. Then, "without uttering another word," Eleanor "crept out of the room, and down the stairs," promising to herself that her "'yea' should be 'yea,'" should Arabin in fact propose to her (440-41). The final line of this chapter, "Would not all her miseries be at an end, if she could talk of them to him openly, with her head resting on his shoulder" (441), serves to demonstrate the extent to which Eleanor has realized the effectiveness of bodily communication: should she finally be able to touch Arabin, she now knows, all would be solved.

Having honed her skills at constructing herself physically, Eleanor does indeed assure that her "'yea' is 'yea,'" but not until after further struggle with spoken language. When she and Arabin finally have an opportunity to be alone, they are unable to communicate with words; at one point, language so completely fails to accurately represent their feelings that Arabin begins to leave. Only when Eleanor touches him does he pause and turn to look at her, peering into her face as if it were a book into which is written the "whole future destiny of his life"; Eleanor returns his gaze, and in turn reads the "sober, sad seriousness in his own countenance." When the moment has passed, both are certain that they are loved by the other. For Eleanor, "No words, be their eloquence what it might, could be more impressive than that eager, melancholy gaze"; and Arabin, "though he knew but little of women," is certain that all he must do is ask in order to take possession of "that inexpressible loveliness, those ever-speaking but yet
now mute eyes" (465). The body, though mute, communicates in ways that words cannot, so much so that it has a loveliness that spoken language cannot represent.

The couple eventually part, knowing that they are to be married, despite the fact that Eleanor has yet to fulfill her promise to make certain that her "'yea' is 'yea."" The next morning the two meet in the Thorne diningroom. When Arabin asks if they are indeed to be man and wife, Eleanor looks up into his face, "and her lips formed themselves into a single syllable. She uttered not a sound, but he could read the affirmative plainly in her face:

They neither of them spoke, or found any want of speaking. All that was needful for them to say had been said. The yea, yea, had been spoken by Eleanor in her own way—and that way had been perfectly satisfactory to Mr. Arabin. (470)

Finding themselves in a context where their traditional view that the self can be read in speech fails them, Arabin and Eleanor discover a physical eloquence wherein the body takes the place of words, speaking more effectively, with less room for misrepresentation or miscommunication.

That Arabin has himself learned this new language, and that it spreads throughout the high church party is demonstrated in a number of ways. Following his engagement, Arabin rides out to Plumstead to inform Grantly of his news, while Eleanor hurries to Barchester to tell her father. Grantly, also on his way to Barchester, hears of the pair's engagement from his father-in-law. When Arabin and the archdeacon then meet on the road, few words are exchanged: "Mr. Arabin warmly returned the archdeacon's grasp, but he said little. His heart was too full for speaking, and he could not express the gratitude which he felt. Dr. Grantly understood him as well as though he had spoken for an hour" (480). It is thus that the members of the party who at times had found themselves stricken into uncommunicative silence by Slope's rhetorical constructions of
himself and others are finally able to negotiate a means for communication that allows them to be represent themselves effectively.

That learning this new eloquence of the body is crucial to Arabin's securing his place in Barchester is evidenced in a number of ways. First of all, it allows Arabin to counter the aforementioned rumors of his impropriety effectively by situating him in a socially sanctioned relationship with Eleanor. When expressing his love for the young widow was dependent upon traditional speech, Arabin failed to construct himself effectively, and the entire Grantly party paid the price. Because Eleanor has discovered the language of the body, however—because she has learned to communicate herself in a way that leaves no room for misconstructions—and because she teaches that language to Arabin, the two of them become engaged to be married, dissipating the socially inappropriate rumors, and saving Grantly's and Arabin's reputations. Further, Arabin's learning the significance of the body results in a shift in his professional life wherein he reconceptualizes his duty as a "workman that needeth not be ashamed" from the abstract, rhetorical plane to the concrete, physical plane. Previously a man who spent much of his time teaching poetry at Oxford and debating, "both in print and on platforms the privileges and practices of the church to which he belonged" (112), Arabin had once considered it appropriate that he should maintain his chambers at Oxford, despite taking on the parish of St. Ewold's. By locating himself at the university in Oxford rather than at his parish in Barsetshire, Arabin demonstrates a preference for theology over ministry, for abstract theories over concrete problems and answers, for words over actions. As a result, Arabin ends up seeming to be someone who—like Dr. Stanhope—sees fit to absent himself from a job for which he is being paid. In short, at the beginning of Barchester
Towers, Arabin does not appear to have learned that, to borrow a phrase from Lady Audley's Secret, it is not appropriate to "sit at ease upon the wooden horses, while other boys run barefoot in the mud" (401).

Once Arabin has moved away from rhetorical abstractions in his personal life, however, his professional life also becomes more tied to the physical realm. He becomes, the reader is told, a "hard-working man." More important, he "lives constantly at the deanery, and preaches nearly every Sunday" (498). Arabin, then, is present at his place of work continually and involved in the day-to-day business required of his position. Even the scholarly work that he does do, "sifting and editing old ecclesiastical literature" and reproducing "the same articles anew" seems somehow more grounded in the physical, in the noble action of paging through dusty manuscripts and transcribing them for the use of present generations. Thus, he has learned, in Eleanor's words, to practice what he preaches.

As Barchester Towers concludes, even Grantly seems satisfied with how things have turned out. Now, the reader is told, the archdeacon can "walk down the High Street of Barchester without feeling that those who see him are comparing his claims with those of Mr. Slope" (497). In effect, what he and the rest of his party have learned is that the realm of the physical, the realm of the body, of action, is more expressive than the abstract realm of speech. Trollope himself seemed to recognize as much, as evidenced some years later in his Life of Cicero. While introducing the latter project and discussing the cowardly reputation the Roman figure had in Victorian times, Trollope exclaims: "He is a coward to the critics because they have written without giving themselves time to feel the true meaning of his own words. If we had only known his acts and not his words . . . then we should not call him a coward!" (19). Here again in Trollope's writing is an
understanding not only of the fact that one's speech can misrepresent one's essential self, but of the sense that action, somehow, is more honest than words, more authentic. Neither of these assumptions was by any means unusual in Victorian times. For example, an 1852 essay in the Westminster Review notes how much more effectively ideas are communicated through gesture than words: "No phrase can convey the idea of surprise so vividly as opening the eyes and raising the eyebrows. A shrug of the shoulder would lose much by translation into words" ("Philosophy of Style" 437); Samuel Smiles, similarly, talks of how superior the "silent teaching" of good example is to hollow preaching (346-47).

Despite all this, in many ways the conclusion to Barchester Towers is less satisfying—particularly in regard to the establishment of a new aristocracy which favors work over leisure—than the other novels discussed thus far. For although Arabin clearly demonstrates a willingness to adopt the ethics of action, this is not necessarily the case of the rest of the high church party, that group inclined toward "an easygoing, gentlemanly, unenthusiastic, undogmatic Anglicanism." Certainly, there seem to be indicators at the conclusion of Trollope's novel that the cathedral city has not changed at all: the Stanhopes, for instance, return to Italy, where the doctor resumes his life of ease; similarly, now, "the burly chancellor and the meagre little prebendary are not teased by any application respecting Sabbath-day schools" (496).

At the same time, however, there are other signs that demonstrate that Barchester has been permanently affected by its contact with Slope's theory that every man accept his responsibility to the community as a whole. Ann Frankland makes the assertion that in Arabin some synthesis of the progressive Slope and the conservative Grantly is enacted (197), and that although he certainly sides with the Grantly party, the new dean's rise to power in Barchester ushers in some degree of change in the cathedral town (207).
Such is certainly the case. In addition to leaving the church hierarchy with a new, more middle-class work ethic, the battle between Proudieism and Grantlyism results in a town in which high and low church, old and new, live side by side (496). But Arabin is not the only person who demonstrates signs of being influenced by the doctrines of hard work: Harding, for example, refuses to accept the position of dean, insisting that "Every day that is added to my life increases my wish for peace and rest." When Grantly responds by asserting that the deanery is exactly the place for this kind of relaxation, Harding continues to resist, and eventually gets his wish (456). Although Harding never comes to accept Slope himself, it appears he has nevertheless taken the chaplain's word that, in this changing world, "Work is now required from every man who receives wages" (99). Recognizing that he cannot perform with the earnestness necessary for this new position, the former warden instead chooses to demonstrate his disinterestedness and defer to the common good.

Barchester Towers, then, is another novel in which the presence of an unreadable figure provides the opportunity for a reconceptualization of the role of work in mid-nineteenth-century British society. What the text leaves the reader with is a party that was once closely aligned with the values of the landed, leisurely aristocracy, and that is now refigured in such a way as to value work, social responsibility, and disinterestedness. To paraphrase the narrator's final words about Harding, Barchester Towers leaves the reader with a group not heroic in the old sense of being "admired and talked of," or toasted at public dinners--not, in other words, being overconstructed rhetorically as a "perfect

5 Although Barchester Towers presents no direct proof that the archdeacon has also set aside his leisurely ways, there is nevertheless evidence that even he has accepted the spirit of cautious progress which affects the others at the end of Trollope's novel: for Eleanor's wedding, for instance, the conservative Grantly showers his friends with gifts designed during the Great Exhibition of 1851, that mecca of the progressive spirit of the age (496).
divine," hyperbole which again reveals how deceitful language can be. Rather, what is perhaps one of Trollope’s finest novels leaves its readers with a group of people who practice their beliefs, who, in other words, seek to erase any schism between signifier and signified, between word and fact.
There is an irony in the fact that one of Barchester Towers's strongest advocates for the language of the body is Madeline Neroni. Madeline has, after all, been physically mangled by the abuse of a husband the text implies she should never have married, and she spends the rest of her life being carried from place to place to ensure that no one ever sees her twisted form and inelegant walk. Through the clever arrangement of her limbs, her fine gowns, and her expensive jewelry, Madeline further guarantees that her body will never reveal her questionable past. Nevertheless, it is largely Madeline who aids Eleanor and Arabin in their development of a new, supposedly truer, language of the physical form: when Arabin is frustrated with his inability to speak to Eleanor, he flees to Madeline, who understand the "bodings" of his soul without him having to speak a word; after Eleanor has slapped the new chaplain, it is Madeline who is present when Eleanor further learns the subtleties of this new and complicated bodily communication. That Madeline both advocates this new language and practices it in deceptive ways hints that this eloquence of the form is not as unproblematic as it may at first appear.

The present chapter is concerned with continuing where Chapter 3 left off by exploring physical representations and misrepresentations of the self in Bleak House. Implicit within the following argument is the idea that Dickens's novel contains the basic narrative arc outlined in the three previous chapters, and that this structure is by now easily evident even to the casual reader. This chapter will not, in other words, concern
itself with outlining in detail the difficulty her fellow characters have with reading the ambiguous Lady Dedlock, nor the manner in which the socially indeterminate Esther Summerson and her soon-to-be-husband and equally indeterminate Allan Woodcourt develop into members of a new and earnest aristocracy. Rather, the emphasis here will be on the way in which this 1853 text reveals and addresses concerns about how identity may be misconstructed in physical forms. More particularly, this chapter asserts three things: first, that *Bleak House* recognizes that conventional means of interpreting a person's outward appearance as a sign of his or her social and moral status have broken down; second, that the text seeks to rewrite the outward features that testify to morality; and finally, that the new criteria by which morality is signified valorizes a work ethic and sense of social duty that simultaneously critiques traditional social hierarchies and legitimizes a middle-class aristocratic work ethic, as revealed in the particular examples of Esther and Allan.

In *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett describes Victorian England as a world in which "appearances speak." He provides as an example a passage from Conan Doyle's "A Case of Identity" in which a young woman walks into Sherlock Holmes's flat and is greeted by the words, "Do you not find . . . that with your short sight it is a little trying to do so much typewriting?" When Watson later expresses shock at Holmes's acute observations, this most famous of British detectives laments, "I can never bring you to realize the importance of sleeves, the suggestiveness of thumbnails, or the great issues that may hang from a bootlace" (169). In Holmes's mind, then--and indeed, according to Sennett, in the minds of the general Victorian populace--individuals' appearances provide those around them with insight into their occupations, their habits, and their social and moral standing.
Nowhere is this perhaps clearer than in the Victorian interest in the "science" of physiognomy. This term dates back to Aristotle, to whom is attributed De Physiognoma, a treatise on reading physical manifestations of human character in terms of the animals that these manifestations most resemble (Fahnestock 334). As this content might imply, physiognomy is a method of interpreting in the external appearance of the body the character of an individual. Implicit within such a "science," of course, is the belief that, as Joseph Simms states in an 1874 manifesto published in both the United States and Britain, "the soul, pervading the human frame throughout, manifests itself in the face, hands, neck, ears, hair, voice, all parts and every habitual movement" (vi). By the nineteenth century, physiognomy had had a long and varied history. In addition to Aristotle, Simms lists as its advocates Polemon, Theophrastus, Plato, Galen of Pergamos, Cicero, Pliny, and others; he also sees it evidenced in all the ages, disappearing only briefly during the "barbaric" Middle Ages before making a comeback in the Renaissance (8-9). To Victorians, the best-known proponent of this method of reading the body was perhaps Johann Kaspar Lavater, an eighteenth-century Swiss pastor who sought to transform the "well-known truth" that one's appearance spoke to one's core nature into an exact science (Dallas 473); Lavater's methods are detailed in four lengthy volumes published between 1775 and 1778.

Physiognomy was, for a time, overshadowed by phrenology, a related study of the form that focused exclusively on the bones of the head, accepting as its major premise the idea that the shape of the skull determined—and, thus, could signify—a person's personality (Davies 39). By the mid-nineteenth century, however, phrenology had fallen largely into disrepute: "Phrenology makes a pretence of science where there is none at all, affects precision, and leaps to conclusion" (Dallas 476). Physiognomy, in contrast, was "the true temple," a science that would never make the mistakes or
subscribe to the poor methods that phrenology did (476). In part, physiognomy's appeal might have been due to the fact that it addressed a broader spectrum of the factors that make up individual appearance, embracing, as Dallas states "the entire form" (475). Further, as the above quotation from Simms reveals, physiognomy studied not just the body, but the voice and the habits as well, particular gestures and ticks—"every habitual movement"—that might give some indication of the subject's personality, class, morality, and occupation. Physiognomy also embraced changes to the individual form, recognizing, for example, that different lifestyles would mold figures differently. Hard work, for example, "expands the shoulders and widens the palms of the hands."

Further, particular kinds of labor can produce particular kinds of changes in the features:

Stooping labour widens the cheek-bones (mala ossia), lengthens the under jaw, shortens and enlarges the occipital process, protrudes the lower part of the forehead, and widens the hands, feet, and shoulders. Hence, in accordance with the principles before mentioned, these enlargements are Nature's recorded evidences of the ability and inclination to physical exertion. (448-49)

In contrast, those who fail to engage in physical exertion show it in their physiognomies:

How the hands and feet will diminish may plainly be seen in all young men who are reared to hard work on a farm, but upon entering a shop, store, or lawyer's office to earn a livelihood, half a score of years will suffice to narrow their structure, and . . . render their framework as sure a tell-tale of the deterioration as untongued Nature can become in revealing any of her great principles. (448)

Thin hands and feet, then, testify to people's "leisure-loving natures." Thus, physiognomy records a person's complexities, registering not just his or her personality, but his or her careers (if any), habits, beliefs, and important traumas or changes in lifestyle. It is perhaps this breadth which allowed physiognomy to thrive where phrenology failed. For while there were few texts published after 1850 devoted to the latter, physiognomy's emphasis on seeing the body as a whole by that time had
become accepted by the general reading public, introduced to them through journals and shilling monthlies (Fahnestock 337). Indeed, physiognomy's precepts were so well-known as to be taken almost for granted. In an 1853 review in Athenaeum, for instance, editor Edwin Lankester bemoans the apparent redundancy of a work on the "facts" relating the lines of the nose to morality by pointing out that "this is not an age in which a dissertation on so very prosaic and well-worn a fact as the connexion between face and character is likely to be studied" (888).

Physiognomy was so much a part of the popular discourse, in fact, as to find its way into the literature of the times. For instance, the oft-quoted description of Gradgrind in Hard Times is a paragon of physiognomic methodology, matching his interest in bare, dry facts, to the very structure of his face. Gradgrind's emphasis on data, the reader is told,

was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set... The speaker's obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders--nay, his very neckcloth, trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was--all helped the emphasis. (7)

Gradgrind, a man who won't bend his willful desire for clear-cut facts, shows no compromising curves in his physiognomy, no willingness to allow himself to be swayed from his interest in fixed empirical evidence. Indeed, Dickens's belief that external features reveal the internal self is so well-known that one proponent of physiognomy even uses his name to forward his cause, pointing to a recent Dickens

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[1] Also worth noting in this passage is the way in which--as in the aforementioned Conan Doyle quotation--the language of the body blurs with the language of dress. In both of these cases, clothing is seen as continuing the work of the body, further clarifying an individual's identity. Just how clothing can also mask the body will be discussed shortly.
claim that he had "never been deceived in a character." Apparently, when upon occasion
the famous author had allowed his original beliefs about a figure to be set aside, "in the
end his original views have almost invariably proved right" (Dallas 478).

In short, advocates of physiognomy asserted that it was so vital, so accurate, so
important not just to science but to the arts and society as a whole that nothing "short of
the extinction of the human race and the hurling back of mother earth to its original
conditions" would cause it to disappear, either as a science or as a commonsense
practice (Simms 9). Worth noting is Simms's insistence that physiognomy is not
simply a natural science, but a social one as well, capable of reforming the world.

Should everyone learn the means of reading the morality of an individual in the external
features, argues this writer, "Vice, easily detected, would hide its head, and gradually
disappear; while the human race would become refined and ennobled, mentally,
morally, and physically, by a true understanding of that which improves on the one
hand, and deteriorates it on the other" (v).

Simms's optimism aside, during the nineteenth century physiognomy was not
without its internal debates nor its external detractors. As much is acknowledged by E.
S. Dallas in a Cornhill Magazine article entitled "On Physiognomy." Dallas refers to
those who assert that "no one with ordinary experience of life allows himself to be
guided by physiognomy in his estimate of character. ... Many faces are mere masks
concealing what lies behind" (477). Dallas also quotes a passage from Adam Bede,
which questions the extent to which one can really read personality in the features. The
excerpt begins with Eliot's narrator noting, "I find it impossible not to expect some
depth of soul behind a deep grey eye with a long dark eyelash, in spite of an experience
which has shown me that they may go along with deceit, peculation, and stupidity."
The narrator continues:
One begins to suspect at length that there is no direct correlation between eyelashes and morals; or else, that the eyelashes express the disposition of the fair one's grandmother, which is on the whole less important to us. (199)

Dallas's response to these criticisms is that any error that occurs in a reading of the face lies not in a lack of correlation between feature and personality, signifier and signified, but in a failure to correctly understand these complex connections:

The critic I have quoted says, that often the face is a mere mask. What of that? Does the mask mean nothing? He might as well say that language means nothing, because, according to the diplomatist, it has been given to us, not to express, but to conceal our thoughts. Depend upon it, if we fail to read a face, the fault is not in physiognomy, but in our own want of penetration. If George Eliot has seen a deep grey eyes, with long dark eyelashes, combined with peculation, deceit, and stupidity,—deceit, peculation, and stupidity were there, and might have been detected. (477)

Crucial to this project's larger discussion of ambiguity is Dallas's assertion that the body is a text with a language all of its own. Implicit within his reference to the diplomat who abuses language is not so much the assumption that there is no absolute inherent connection between the signifier (the outward expression) and the signified (the internal moral and social personality) as that somehow this connection has been obscured by people's assumptions about how this language operates. Dallas is not, then, a postmodern Wittgensteinian deconstructionist as much as a language scientist examining Egyptian hieroglyphics, attempting to determine the exact and absolute relation between signifier and signified. When mistakes occur in reading another's physiognomy, the cause is not the absence of a connection between a person's interior and exterior. Rather, that fault lies in the inability to see the correlations that are there: a grey eye means deceit, but because people like grey eyes--because they value grey eyes--they assume they can be nothing but wonderful and as a result do not see their connection with deceit. They do not understand the language of the body. Thus, as Dallas and
others see it, Victorian culture has not yet fully learned how to read the body effectively; standing in its way are traditional assumptions about the meanings of the physical text.

Part of what Bleak House attempts to do is re-teach its readers the language of the body. This novel seeks, in other words, to get readers to set aside their assumptions about what various textual bodies signify in a way that simultaneously destroys the possibility for the kinds of social and moral ambiguity this project is concerned with, and that favors the work ethic of the new middle-class aristocracy.

There can be little doubt that Bleak House is a novel that recognizes both the ways in which the body acts as a text and the problematics of reading it as such. Dickens's novel is filled with bodies linked to narratives which people attempt to read. At the most basic level, physical features testify to character. John Jarndyce, for instance, has "pleasant eyes" (71); further, in contrast to Jarndyce's "broad and upright" posture and "rich, ringing voice," the lawyer Vholes is "narrow and stooping," and speaks in a "cold-blooded, gasping fish-like manner" (671); the expressions on Hortense's face convince Bucket that she is a murderer, while Lady Dedlock's grace and beauty simultaneously convince him that the latter is not (798); Mrs. Snagsby's acidic temper reveals itself in the flare of her nostrils (179); Mrs. Pardiggle's self-interest is demonstrated in her "formidable style" and "prominent nose," just as the deprivation she casts upon her children is revealed in their "weazened and shrivelled" looks (151); Harold Skimpole's appearance strikes Esther as "not at all like the manner or appearance of a man who had advanced in life, by the usual road of years, cares, and experiences" (119), and indeed, this reflects perfectly Skimpole's careless and carefree approach to life.
Further, the bodies Dickens creates are linked to narratives. This occurs in an explicit manner in a number of examples: Mrs. Bagnet, for instance, tells George that she can read the narrative of his being "sold up" by Smallweed "as plain as print" in his face (531). On a more subtle level, bodies often speak the narrative of family, allowing, for example, George to recognize his nephew without being introduced (902), Bucket to see the kinship between the Bagnets and their children (728, 731), and Guppy to suspect Lady Dedlock's relationship to Esther Summerson (503). More often, though, bodies reveal the narrative of an individual's life: that George and Mr. Bagnet were once soldiers is immediately evident, even to an old housekeeper simply passing them in the entrance to a solicitor's office (538). Similarly, the legend of the ancient Lady Dedlock's betrayal of Sir Morbury and her king is inscribed in her limp (140-41). The difficulties Charley has faced evidence themselves in her "shrewd and older-looking" face and "white and wrinkled" fingers (262). The body of the hardworking Prince Turveydrop reveals his ill-usage by his father (242), as does Richard's eventually reveal his ill-usage at the hands of Chancery (751). In contrast, the Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty displayed in Mr. Weevle/Jobbling's room contains portraits whose smirks reveal the "capital" these women represent (340), and though Sir Leicester seems ill-used by the gout, in the end even this is a sign of his privilege, signifying his membership in the Dedlock clan (271).

Not surprising in a novel that emphasizes the body as text, Bleak House also places a great deal of importance on reading the body. When, for example, Kenge is sent by Jarndyce to examine young Esther at her aunt's house, the solicitor never asks her to speak:

The gentleman put up his eye-glasses to look at me, and said, "Come here, my dear!" He shook hands with me, and asked me to take off my bonnet—looking at me all the while. When I had complied, he said, "Ah!" and afterwards "Yes!" And then, taking off his eye-glasses, and
folding them in a red case, and leaning back in his arm-chair, turning the

Kenge does not need to speak to Esther to determine her suitability as a ward; simply a

clear look at her face is enough. The emphasis upon sight here—the multiple references
to eyeglasses, the phrase "looking at me all the while"—is quite in contrast with the

minimal use of spoken language, all of five or six words. Nevertheless, it is a pattern

encountered time and again in Dickens's novel. Perhaps the most extraordinary example

of this is when Esther attempts to read the contradiction between Boythorn's violent and

hyperbolic speech and his kind nature. On one level this simply indicates a struggle on

her part to reconcile his harsh words and ludicrous signs with his obvious gentleness,
signified among other things by the small bird that perches now on Boythorn's finger,
now on his head. But Esther attempts a further reading of Boythorn, spurred on by his
interest in the courtship of Richard and Ada. After learning from Jarndyce that

Boythorn was once himself engaged to be married to a woman who has since "died to
him," Esther struggles to picture what this "tartar"—to use Guppy's phrase—must have
looked like as a young man. Esther states that she fell asleep before wholly succeeding,
but her efforts are not entirely in vain, for in her dreams she encounters her godmother,
the very woman who broke Boythorn's heart (171-73). Esther's contemplation of
Boythorn's looks, then—of what they are and of what they may once have been—gives
her insight into the story of his life, although she herself does not know this at the time.

The most important reading that occurs in Bleak House is the reading of the

similarities between Esther Summerson and Lady Dedlock. Several characters engage in
this interpretive act, the most obvious being Guppy. His attempts to interpret the

narrative of the two women begins with a visit to Chesney Wold, where he encounters a
portrait of Lady Dedlock, "considered a perfect likeness, and the best work of the
master" (138). Repeatedly, the young clerk returns to the portrait, struck by the sense
that he has seen it before. There is no telling just when it is that Guppy begins to make
the connection between this great lady and her daughter, but his attempts to read their
physical texts continues when he encounters Esther on a visit to Bleak House. Esther
barely recognizes Guppy in his fresh suit of clothes, but he certainly remembers her:

He looked at me with an attention that quite confused me, when I begged
him to take a seat until the servant should return; and as he sat there,
crossing and uncrossing his legs in a corner, and I asked him if he had
had a pleasant ride, and hoped that Mr. Kenge was well, I never looked
at him, but I found him looking at me, in the same scrutinizing and
curious way. (173)

Though by contemporary standards the semicolon here would signify the conclusion of
Guppy's stare, the structure of the phrases immediately following this punctuation
indicate that his staring does indeed continue, that the words "and as he sat there" and so
on are simply another qualifier for the initial "He looked at me." In the matter of five
short lines, then, Guppy's gaze is emphasized three times. That Guppy's look is
clinically "scrutinizing" is crucial, as it indicates that his is different from the expression
of a would-be lover. And this is not the conclusion of his struggle to read the text
before him: as the clerk leaves for his talk with Boythorn, he glances at Esther again;
when he returns for his lunch, he stares so long while sharpening the carving-knife that
Esther feels obliged to return his look, in order to "break the spell under which he
seemed to labour" (174). Even after Esther has rejected his proposal of marriage and all
but thrown him out of the room, Guppy continues in his attempts to understand the
textual body before him. Says Esther: "Raising my eyes as he went out, I once more
saw him looking at me after he had passed the door" (178). Guppy is, at best, only
partially successful in his quest to interpret the narrative of Esther and her mother.
Though he suspects a relationship, he doubts himself at least to the extent that when he
cannot receive documented confirmation of Lady Dedlock's relationship with Captain
Hawdon he resigns himself to defeat.
Esther similarly struggles to understand her relationship with Lady Dedlock, and, like Guppy's, her efforts also take place in the realm of the physical. Just as Boythorn's looks lead Esther to the narrative past of his relationship with her aunt, the sight of Lady Dedlock causes her to think about her own past. When Esther first sees Lady Dedlock, for example, she feels as though she is looking into a "broken glass" in which she sees "scraps of old remembrances" (304). Esther fails to detect a connection between her self and this most fashionable of aristocratic women, "And yet I--I, little Esther Summerson . . . seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady" (305). Appearances in Bleak House tell stories, sometimes very explicitly, sometimes by revealing personality traits or personal histories, and sometimes by evoking family resemblances which in and of themselves can be the key to understanding narratives--in this particular case, the tale of Lady Dedlock's and Hawdon's relationship.

As was true with Guppy, Esther is only partially successful at reading the narrative of her life in her own and Lady Dedlock's appearances; finally, she is dependent upon her mother to reveal that part of the tale which she herself cannot understand. Part of the reason neither Guppy nor Esther is successful in reading Lady Dedlock is that the latter makes repeated, concerted efforts to defy interpretation. Upon his first visit to Lady Dedlock, for example, Guppy seeks to discover what if anything she knows about Esther Summerson, a Miss Barbary, and a gentleman named Hawdon. The first two names are received by Lady Dedlock in near silence, and with a look that clearly intimates her sense of her own and Guppy's relative social positions: "Young Man of the name of Guppy!" the narrator writes, "There have been times when ladies lived in strongholds, and had unscrupulous attendants within call, when that poor life of yours would not have been worth a minute's purchase, with those beautiful eyes
looking at you as they look at this moment" (462). When the name Summerson is
linked with the name Hawdon, however, the intensity of Lady Dedlock's look
disappears, albeit only briefly:

Mr. Guppy stares. Lady Dedlock sits before him, looking him through,
with the same dark shade upon her face, in the same attitude even to the
holding of the screen, with her lips a little apart, her brow a little
contracted, but, for the moment, dead. He sees her consciousness
return, sees a tremor pass across her frame like a ripple over water, sees
her lips shake, sees her compose them by a great effort, sees her force
herself back to the knowledge of his presence, and of what he has said.
All this, so quickly, that her exclamation and her dead condition seem to
have passed away like the features of those long-preserved dead bodies
sometimes opened up in tombs, which, struck by the air like lightening,
vanish in a breath. (464)

At the very beginning and the very end of this passage the reader sees again that
habitual, haughty look that Lady Dedlock uses to distinguish herself from those she
feels are beneath her. Clearly, this "look" is carefully constructed, "composed,"
sometimes with great effort. Finally, the text reveals that part of the intention of this
expression is to screen out people. This is illustrated both by the presence of the actual,
physical screen—which is referred to repeatedly in the larger scene—and by the fact that
Lady Dedlock's act of composition is in response to her awareness of Guppy's
presence.

The end result of all of this is perhaps best revealed in a later scene in which
Guppy informs his ladyship that he has failed to attain the documents he promised to
share with her. In addition to being "depressed, disappointed, and uneasy," he is
further disadvantaged by "the splendour and beauty" of Lady Dedlock:

She knows its influence perfectly; has studied it too well to miss a grain
of its effect on any one. As she looks at him so steadily and coldly, he
not only feels conscious that he has no guide, in the least perception of
what is really the complexion of her thoughts; but also that he is being
every moment, as it were removed further and further from her. (525)
Here again, attention is drawn to the constructedness of the self Lady Dedlock allows the world to see: she has studied her art, practiced it, perfected it. The results are devastating. Guppy is like a man in unfamiliar territory who is deprived of a map. As a result, he is made even more aware of his social inferiority to Lady Dedlock.

This passage ties in wonderfully with Dallas's argument about the bodily mask. Guppy, like Eliot's narrator, is confronted with an appearance that, on the surface, would seem to speak one thing while actually speaking another. Further complicating Guppy's situation are issues of class: Lady Dedlock's regal "beauty and splendour" work in such a way as to "remove" the young clerk "further and further" from her. Implicit within all of this is a complicated equation linking appearance, class, morality, and leisure. Consider, for instance, an 1866 Cornhill Magazine essay entitled "Good Looks," in which the author asserts that whatever it is various men from various cultures perceive as beauty, "they invariably recognize its claims to consideration, and, by the very constitution of their minds, are prone to associate its presence with everything that is good, pure, and virtuous" (334). For this writer, then, and assumedly for other Victorians, "beauty"—whatever form it may take—signifies morality. The particular beauty and (supposed) morality that Guppy is facing in the form of Lady Dedlock is perhaps best traced back to the eighteenth century and a culture that valorized both the traditional aristocracy and their leisured lifestyles, as well a physical beauty which signified the latter. In On the Sublime and Beautiful, for example, Edmund Burke defines beauty almost completely in terms that exclude any woman who performs labor, even housework. One of the key elements for good looks, Burke declares, is smoothness, "a quality so essential to beauty that I do not now recollect anything beautiful that is not smooth." Smoothness is the "most considerable" part of beauty, he continues, especially in women: "For take any beautiful object, and give it a broken and
rugged surface; and however well formed it may be in other respects, it pleases no
longer" (162). It almost goes without saying that the feature Burke praises here cannot
be claimed by women at a socioeconomic level that necessitates labor of any sort:
physical work, particularly outdoors, dries the skin and raises callouses on the hands
and feet; indeed, it can even change the curves of the figure as a whole, causing, bulky,
angular, shoulders which--a generation after Burke--Leigh Hunt states are appropriate
for men, but unattractive on women (149). Thus, in a time when living a life of leisure
is valorized--is itself read as a sign of moral and social superiority--"beauty" is defined
in a manner that reinforces this ideology: smoothness of the features and form is a sign
of a leisureed lifestyle, which is a sign of membership among the social elite, a group
thought to be morally superior in ways those who must spend their days working can
never be.

Well into the nineteenth century, one continues to encounter the belief that labor-
even mental labor--wears at the features, giving them a roughness absent in those who
live a leisurely life (Simms 456). By the later half of this period, however, the marked
features of those who engage in the business of the world come to be seen as contrary to
neither morality nor beauty. In features chiseled by the individual's efforts to earn a
living for themselves, Simms argues, one sees "no falsehood," but rather, "God's
truth," a beauty of the form in which the earnest individual, "overflowing with strength
and nature's nobility, walks forth the highest type of man, self-made" (457). In
contrast, Simms discusses those who live leisurely lifestyles, those whose smooth
features were formerly thought beautiful, as such:

Unaspiring and nebulous faces are often met with in society, and more
especially among the wealthy. Their expressionless smoothness has
never been broken by tornadoes of thought or intense application. Many
of the young may be seen who are called beautiful, and those individuals
present faces only of the smooth and undefined form, which is the image
of their minds. (456)
Worth noting is the fact that Simms's discussion of industriousness focuses not only on physical labor but on mental labor as well. What is important, then, is not what sort of work the individual engages in, but how hard he or she works at it. Also noteworthy in this passage is the way in which the expressionless smoothness of those privileged enough to live leisurely lives—of those who are only "called" beautiful rather than being beautiful—testifies to their "sin" of ignoring their duty to earn their livings in a time in which, to borrow a phrase from Ruskin, "Gentlemen have to learn that it is no part of their duty or privilege to live on other people's toil" (quoted in Gilmour The Idea of the Gentleman 7). Paradoxically, there is something about the smooth face of the leisured aristocrat which defies reading, which is noteworthy not for what it testifies to, but for its unwillingness to testify at all. Whereas the furrowed faces of those who work tell "no lies," the smooth features of those who have inherited their livings are "nebulous," cloudy, unreadable. Almost by definition, then, the face of the wealthy individual is a mask which, while revealing a morally condemnable (by middle-class standards) life of ease, may also hide even greater sins.

Thus, what Guppy is struggling with when he encounters Lady Dedlock is a beauty that disables him in two ways: first because it testifies to Lady Dedlock's privileged life of leisure, it distances him from her, reminds him of how inferior he is to her; second, her smooth splendor and beauty keep Guppy from reading her bodily text to attain the information he is seeking. Her aristocratic beauty—a beauty gained by ignoring the earnestness of the age—is a mask which hides (further) moral impropriety. By implication, then, rather than being the realm of superior beings, the aristocracy is the perfect hiding place for those who wish to cover up socially inappropriate behavior, for its concept of "beauty" is one which turns the body into a smooth, unreadable text.
Not surprisingly, then, in *Bleak House* the aristocratic body is linked repeatedly with obfuscation, with the presence of ambiguous, unreadable features that mask social and moral misconduct. Mr. Turveydrop presents perhaps the most blatant example of this, for though not technically aristocratic, he does serve as a "comic" representative of this class (Lawson 26). This is an association that Turveydrop himself encourages, naming his son after George IV (240), imitating the movements and posture of this same figure, and informing Esther that he has been called, "for some years now, Gentleman Turveydrop" (246). As the unnamed woman who informs Esther of this "gentleman's" history states: "He fully believes he is one of the aristocracy!" (245). Certainly, Turveydrop has adopted some of the beliefs of this class. His insistence, for instance, that "a levelling age is not favourable to Deportment" and that England has degenerated, leaving "nothing to succeed us, but a race of weavers" (246), sounds in no small part like Sir Leicester's assertion that inviting an ironmaster into Parliament demonstrates that "the floodgates of society are burst open, and the waters have--a--obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together!" (628).

As a self-proclaimed representative of the aristocracy, Turveydrop shows a propensity for falsifying appearance that rivals Lady Dedlock's. He is, Esther tells us, a very fat man with a "false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig." His coats have a padded breast, and in general he has been "pinched in, swelled out, and got up, and stepped down, as much as he could possibly bear." Even his ears have been taken out of their "natural shape" by a large neckcloth. He carries a pair of gloves, a cane, an eyeglass, a snuffbox, rings and wristbands. In short, states Esther, "he had everything but any touch of nature; he was not like youth, he was not like age, he was not like anything in the world but a model of Deportment" (243-44). Nothing about Turveydrop is real, then; through the use of clothing, he manipulates his appearance in
order to deceive those observing him. As such, Turveydrop's "deportment" parallels Lady Dedlock's "acquired expression of her fashionable state": both bodily texts are false and both are representative of a now outdated aristocratic ideal.

For Turveydrop, just as for Lady Dedlock, this deceptive aristocratic beauty conceals a life of "impropriety." While Lady Dedlock's sin is largely sexual, however, Turveydrop's is work-related. More specifically, it is the sin of living a life of leisure while the rest of the nation toils. Consider, for instance, that when Esther asks the "old lady with the censorious countenance" if Mr. Turveydrop presently gives lessons in Deportment, the old woman returns, "Now! . . . Never did." After a moment Esther presses her, asking if, then, the elder Turveydrop teaches fencing. "I don't believe he can fence at all, ma'am," is the reply (244). Indeed, what it is that Turveydrop does is not so much do as be. When asked by Prince if he is about to be off, Turveydrop responds, "I must show myself, as usual, about town" (248). In a sense Turveydrop is the personification of the eighteenth-century aristocrat discussed in my introduction. Just as, according to Jane Nardin, aristocratic figures like Lord Orville saw it as their duty, their social responsibility, to travel from estate to estate, presenting an example of aristocratic refinement (124), Turveydrop views it as his duty to society to be seen about town; it is something he "must" do. To fail to do it is to fail in his calling.2

2 And indeed, it is a calling, something that only a select few can do, as Turveydrop himself makes clear to Esther when he informs her that his own son lacks Deportment. All that can be acquired, Prince has acquired; "But there are things - " Turveydrop says, and then leaves the sentence unfinished, implying that not everyone can pinch snuff and crease his eyeballs quite as effectively as he can (247). Thus, despite Turveydrop's obvious falseness, despite his very blatant self-construction, he makes an argument for the essentiality of class, or more aptly, for the essentiality of class signifiers: either you have them or you do not. The irony of course, is that what is essential here is essential falseness, essential perfidy.
Esther leaves Turveydrop's company stunned by what she has seen. She wonders "whether there were, or ever had been, any other gentlemen, not in the dancing profession, who lived and founded a reputation entirely on their Deportment" (248). The answer is, of course, that there are, and that they are called lords and barons and dukes. Like Turveydrop, they also fail to engage in the active business of the world—they do not, in other words, work for a living. When one extends the logic of the parallel between Turveydrop and the traditional aristocracy, the dance studio and the nation as a whole, the consequences of a leisured aristocracy upon the latter are horrific: Turveydrop's wife "toiled and labored" until she died, all so that her husband could be seen at Brighton or the opera displaying his Deportment; additionally Prince, dresses in clothes described as "plain," "threadbare," and "almost shabby," labors twelve hours a day to support his father's habits of Deportment (244-45), and becomes lame at the age of thirty-seven as a result of his overwork (933). What the model of the dance studio as nation-state argues is that if people do not recognize the necessity of each individual's performing his or her share of the work what will be left is a threadbare and imminently lame nation.

For Turveydrop, the falsified physiognomy that he constructs for himself is a means of justifying his insouciant lifestyle. Because, he rationalizes, only he has deportment, it is his "duty"—his profession—to display his refinement for the betterment of the nation as a whole. In truth, of course, Deportment is nothing more than a justification for Turveydrop's having "a little meal" at the "French house, in the Opera Colonnade," while his son eats cold mutton between dance lessons (248). Thus, the constructed ideal of aristocratic beauty and a socially irresponsible leisure are linked. A similar case can be made concerning Harold Skimpole, another Bleak House character aligned with the aristocracy (Lawson 26) who constructs a self that rationalizes a self-
serving and leisurely life. The reader's first introduction to this man is through Jamdyce, who describes his friend as "a musical man; an Amateur, but might have been a Professional. He is an Artist too; an Amateur, but might have been a Professional. He is a man of attainments and of captivating manners. . . . He's a child!" (117).

Skimpole is, then, a person whose life has all of the refinements associated with the aristocracy and who serves no real purpose. He was a doctor at one time, but he preferred lying in bed and "making fancy-sketches in pencil" to caring for his patients (119). This and other socially irresponsible habits—such as failing to pay his butcher or decorator bills, informing Bucket of Jo's whereabouts, and introducing the vampirish Vholes to Richard (each of these last for five pounds)—Skimpole justifies by asserting his childishness, supposedly evidenced by his complete inability to understand either time or money, two things which those who must work to survive inevitably comprehend. More than once, though, the text asks the reader to question the apparent sincerity of Skimpole's "pleasant eyebrows" and "whimsical expression" (884): his assertion in his diary, for instance, that John Jarndyce is "the incarnation of Selfishness" (887) does Skimpole no service in the eyes of readers asked to view Jarndyce as nothing but benevolent; similarly, Esther's confession that "I could not satisfy myself that [Skimpole's avowal of his weaknesses] was as artless as it seemed; or that it did not serve Mr. Skimpole's idle turn quite as well as any other part, and with less trouble" (578), does not stand this character is good stead. Here again, then, a pattern emerges wherein an aristocratic appearance is constructed in order to conceal a life of leisure at the expense of others.

Through its portrayal of deceitful, leisured figures like Lady Dedlock, Mr. Turveydrop, and Harold Skimpole, *Bleak House* seeks to unteach its readers traditional ways of
reading appearance, ways which maintain that aristocratic features such as Deportment and the classically smooth beauty of a lady signify true moral superiority. Rather, the novel seems to say, these signs represent self-interested preservation of a socially contemptible lifestyle. This misrepresentation of the self evidences itself even in the particular expressions that make up Lady Dedlock's "freezing mood"--the look that keeps inquiring minds like Guppy's at bay. Included in this stare are an "exhausted composure, a worn-out placidity, an equanimity of fatigue," terms which seem to hint that Lady Dedlock has been busying herself with some eminently important project. Nothing, of course, could be farther from the truth.

In contrast to this false (and falsifying) traditional beauty, Bleak House presents an alternative style of reading appearance which redefines prettiness. Not surprisingly, given how perfidy and leisure are linked in characters like Lady Dedlock and Turveydrop, this new way of judging beauty in the body valorizes work.

Bleak House is very much a text that commends employment. One might read, for instance, the character of Richard purely in terms of the contrast between the productive, socially beneficial life and the aristocratically selfish life of leisure. Richard begins his time at Bleak House determined to "work my own way. Never mind! Plenty of people have had to do that before now, and have done it" (164). Thus, early in life Richard relishes the idea of employment, and in doing so, assumes the values we are here associating with the new middle-class aristocracy. All three of his attempts at a career fail, however. At first, Richard, Esther, and the others assume that solving this problem is merely a matter of finding him the right occupation. In discussing what profession might suit him, Esther takes pains to tell Richard that employment should be very much a matter of civic duty:

I thought it a good opportunity to hint to Richard, that if he were sometimes a little careless of himself, I was very sure he never meant to
be careless of Ada; and that it was a part of his affectionate consideration for her, not to slight the importance of a step that might influence both their lives. This made him almost grave. (285)

Underlying Esther's comments is a firm belief in the domestic ideology and its broader, national implications. In asserting, in other words, that Richard must be mindful of the needs of those dependent on him (his soon-to-be wife), Esther is drawing a subtle analogy to the role of the individual in the broader society: although the Victorian male may at times be mindful of himself, he must always be mindful of how his actions affect those around him, particularly those who depend on him, those less fortunate than him.

That this criticism is aimed particularly at the aristocracy becomes clear as Richard gradually forgoes his attempts at middle-class earnestness in favor of a life of leisure founded on an inherited fortune. When Richard informs Esther that he no longer wishes to work for Kenge and would prefer instead the army, he justifies his actions by asserting, "It's not as if I wanted a profession for life. These proceedings will come to a termination, and then I am provided for" (377). The proceedings to which he refers are those of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, a case founded, at its root, on questions of inheritance. Richard anticipates that eventually enough family money will be handed down to him to allow him to live without working. In this way he reveals a traditional aristocratic approach to life, one in which money is not earned by the sweat of one's own brow but handed down to one from father to son—or, in this case, from Jarndyce to Jarndyce.

Thus, the cause that predominates this novel is used to critique not only the self-serving inefficiencies of the courts but also the selfishness of a class whose insistence on not earning its own way harms others. That Richard's actions do harm others is, again, highlighted by the pain he causes Ada, both emotionally and financially--for once his own ready money is depleted, he begins to use his wife's.

In contrast to Richard is Allan Woodcourt, who never neglects his duty to the world around him. This is not to say that Allan is not tempted to live a life of ease;
certainly, his mother is not about to let him forget his "royal" heritage. Upon first meeting Mrs. Woodcourt, Esther describes her as "a pretty old lady, with bright black eyes" and adds, "but she seemed proud." Despite having just met the occupants of Bleak House, Allan's mother launches into a history of her and her son's ancestry:

"She came from Wales; and had had, a long time ago, an eminent person for an ancestor, of the name of Morgan ap-Kerrig--of some place that sounded like Gimlet--who was the most illustrious person that ever was known, and all of whose relations were a sort of Royal Family" (292). Like Sir Leicester Dedlock, then, who takes so much pride in the history of his titled family as to celebrate even their gout, Mrs. Woodcourt shows an aristocratic pride in her pseudo-royal lineage:

Mrs. Woodcourt, after expatiating to us on the fame of her great kinsman, said that, no doubt, wherever her son Allan went, he would remember his pedigree, and would on no account form an alliance below it. She told him that there were many handsome English ladies in India who went out on speculation, and that there were some to be picked up with property; but, that neither charms nor wealth would suffice for the descendant of such a line, without birth; which must ever be the first consideration. (292)

Thus, both Richard and Mrs. Woodcourt hope to claim some of the benefits of belonging to the traditional aristocracy: while Richard seeks a life of ease, Mrs. Woodcourt seeks prestige. That the latter's goal results from her sense of aristocratic lineage is made clear in this passage--no one other than someone with "property" and "birth" would do for the "descendant of such a line."

Although Richard and Allan--or, his mother, at least--are similar in their apparent aristocratic ambitions, the text is also careful to make very clear distinctions between the two. For example, while Richard is unsteady and moves from profession to profession--indeed, would prefer not to have one at all--Allan has been a doctor for a number of years (291). More important, according to Mrs. Badger, Allan is also quite dedicated to his work: "Young men, like Mr. Allan Woodcourt, who take [medicine] from a strong
interest in all that it can do, will find some reward in it through a great deal of work for
very little money, and through years of considerable endurance and disappointment.
But I am quite convinced that this would never be the case with Mr. Carstone" (282).
Thus, Allan, though encouraged by his mother to have an interest in aligning his good
name with another, perhaps more profitable one, is willing nevertheless to work very
hard for very little money. Although it is not stated explicitly, it is safe to assume that
the "reward" Allan finds in his work has to do with helping those less privileged. He is,
for example, "night and day, at the service of numbers of poor people, and did wonders
of gentleness and skill for them" (291). Indeed, almost the first thing Woodcourt does
upon returning to London is to take a tour through Tom-All-Alone's, randomly helping
needy persons as he goes along (683-86). The situation Woodcourt eventually accepts
in Yorkshire is, John Jarndyce states, perfect

for a man whose hopes and aims may sometimes lie (as most men's
sometimes do, I dare say) above the ordinary level, but to whom the
ordinary level will be high enough after all, if it should prove to be a way
of usefulness and good service leading to no other. All generous spirits
are ambitious, I suppose; but the ambition that calmly trusts itself to such
a road, instead of spasmodically trying to fly over it, is of the kind I care
for. It is Woodcourt's kind. (872)

This passage praises Woodcourt for his willingness to assume his responsibility to the
larger community, despite ambitions which might lead him to do otherwise. In this last
he is greatly contrasted to Richard, who, as mentioned above, seems unable to care even
for the woman he seeks to make his wife. Jarndyce's final comment about "spasmodic"
ambition might indeed be intended to contrast the young doctor to Richard, for the very
next scene involves the latter.

By the conclusion of Bleak House, there is no doubt left in the mind of the
reader that Allan has eschewed his "royal family" background and possible aristocratic
ambitions in favor of a more middle-class sensibility. This is evidenced in a number of
passages, among them that in which Esther reads a newspaper account, provided to her by Miss Flite, which details Woodcourt's heroic actions following a shipwreck at sea. States Esther, "I felt so triumphant ever to have known the man who had done such generous and gallant deeds; I felt such glowing exultation in his renown; I so admired and loved what he had done" (556). Here it is clear that Woodcourt has achieved the national renown of his late "royal" ancestor; his claim to that attention, however, is not his lineage, but his actions, as evidenced by Esther's reference (twice in three sentences) to what Woodcourt "had done," his "generous and gallant deeds." Woodcourt is a man of action then, actively and selflessly taking responsibility for the needs of those around him.

Bleak House's valorization of work evidences itself in its portrayal of the body. This is certainly clear in the case of Allan Woodcourt, whose adventures at sea are testified to in his tanned features. Indeed, the text seems unwilling to let the reader forget that Woodcourt's features have darkened as a result of his labors saving his fellow castaways. For example, in the aforementioned scene in which Woodcourt journeys into Tom-All-Alone's upon his return to London, his altered features are so much a part of him that at first he is described only as a "brown sunburnt gentleman" (683). Interesting here is the fact that, by traditional aristocratic standards of beauty, "brown sunburnt" and "gentleman" are paradoxical in nature. As is perhaps indicated above, historically, a gentleman was designated as one who was not sunburnt, as one who was not forced to work outdoors so long that the color of his skin changed from a smooth white to brown. Given that the phrasing of the above description of Woodcourt seems almost to imply that he is a gentleman because he is brown and sunburnt, this passage represents a revision of the beauty aesthetic; further, given that this phrase occurs as this gentleman ventures into a part of town that most aristocrats eschew, this
passage hints that this reconceptualization of aristocratic good-looks goes hand in hand with a revision of what it means to be a gentleman, with what sorts of actions are required of a member of the new aristocracy.

That the refiguring of the type of appearance that signifies a moral soul is linked to work is further evidenced in another scene in which Allan’s sunburnt visage is mentioned. After encountering Jo in Tom-All-Alone's, Allan seeks a place where the boy can rest and recover from his illness. Miss Flite recommends "General" George's place. George receives Allan warmly:

"Excuse me, sir. A sailor, I believe?" says Mr. George.
"I am proud to find I have the air of one," returns Allan; "But I am only a sea-going doctor."
"Indeed, sir! I should have thought you was a regular blue-jacket, myself." (694)

Not long after that, George glances at Woodcourt's "sunburnt cheek and bright dark eye, rapidly measures his height and build, and seems to approve of him" (698). Here, quite clearly, Allan's physiognomy earns him approval from an earnest and socially responsible member of the less affluent classes; further, this approval is the result of the way in which his appearance testifies to his hard work. Again, this is a change historically from the valorization of bodies that evidence leisure, not labor. One need only remember Dedlock's crippling gout as a signifier for his superior position to see the truth of this. A person might consider, as well, Lady Dedlock's boredom, which testifies to the lack of demand placed upon her time.

Repeatedly, Bleak House asks the reader to admire bodies that show signs of labor. The most obvious example of this is perhaps Mr. George, whose trooper physiognomy is often highlighted. George, like Woodcourt, is brown and sunburnt:

What is curious about him, is that he sits forward on his chair as if he were, from long habit, allowing space for some dress or accoutrements that he has altogether laid aside. His step too is measured and heavy, and would go well with a weighty clash and jingle of spurs. . . .

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Altogether, one might guess Mr. George to have been a trooper once upon a time.  (349)

Indeed, such is exactly the case. In that George's history can be read clearly in his appearance, he stands in direct contrast to the masks worn by the aristocratically aligned characters discussed earlier, particularly Lady Dedlock, whose looks cause her personal narrative to be unreadable. That George's build and carriage are intended to be praised by the reader is made clear in the very next lines, which contrast George positively against the Smallweeds and their "stunted forms" and "narrow pinched ways" (349).

Other working bodies are similarly valorized: Phil Squod is another character whose appearance testifies not just to his life of earnest labor but to his morally responsible nature. He is described as a "little man with a face all crushed together, who appears, from a certain blue and speckled appearance that one of his cheeks presents, to have been blown up, in the way of business, at some odd time or times" (357). Such is indeed the case, as Phil himself testifies. Although, he admits, "my beauty was queer, wery queer" even as a youth, his hard work has only exacerbated the situation: at one time an assistant to a tinker, he singed his hair and spoiled his complexion while blowing on the fire; additionally, at that time he had a habit of "running against hot metal, and marking myself by sich." Later in life he is scorched in a gasworks accident and "blowed out of winder, case-filling at the firework business," all with the end result that his "queer beauty" is finally such that, in his own words, "I am ugly enough to be made a show on!" (422). Certainly, one should avoid making too much of Squod's

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3 Although physiognomy is today generally thought of as referring to the figure and the features of the face, it should be pointed out again that in Victorian times it also encompassed "every habitual movement" of the body (Simms vi). Thus, George's manner of walking and sitting—even his habit of holding his hand over his lip as though brushing a moustache—can be considered part of his textual body.
phrasing (his usage of "beauty" is clearly a colloquialism for appearance); however, that
the text places this term side by side with "ugly" hints again that a paradigmatic
reconceptualization is occurring in which the two words are no longer in contradiction.
To put it another way, in the world of the new middle-class aristocracy, a world that
valorizes earnestness and hard work above all else, an ugliness caused by physical scars
testifying to one's hard work is beautiful. And because this new beauty is likened to the
individual's willingness to assume the responsibility of carrying his own economic
weight, this beauty testifies to its bearer's morality. Of course, Phil's moral nature is
illustrated in other ways as well, for he--along with Esther, whose face is also scarred--
is one of two characters in the novel who nurse a sick orphan, demonstrating his
willingness to assume the responsibility of caring for those less fortunate than him, a
responsibility which the leisure-loving Lady Dedlock, Skimpole, and Turveydrop fail to
accept.

A beauty that represents concern for others is also found in the "rough scarred
hands" of Jenny, who sees fit to lay a small bunch of herbs "so lightly, so tenderly,"
over her friend's dead baby after the latter's drunken husband and children have fled the
cottage. These hands which testify to the hard work of their owner, stand in stark
contrast to those of Lady Dedlock, whose hands are part of what betrays her disguise to
Jo: "Jo silently notices how white and small her hand is, and what a jolly servant she
must be to wear such sparkling rings." As mentioned earlier, thin, undeveloped hands
are evidence of a "leisure-loving" nature (Simms 449). Also in contrast to Jenny is

4 Lady Dedlock's hands also distinguish her from Hortense. When Jo is dragged into
Tulkington's office and confronted with the disguised maid, he truly believes he is
faced with the same "veiled lady" as earlier. Only when he sees the body that lies
beneath the clothing does her realize his mistake. "Hand was a deal whiter, a deal
delicater, and a deal smaller," he tells Bucket (369). That the lady's hands show no sign
of work, then, distinguishes her from her maid.
Lady Dedlock in her unwillingness to involve herself in the painful lives of others. She is never anything but cruel to Jo, and whereas Jenny is tender, Lady Dedlock shudders as she drops money into Jo's palm and refuses to touch him (279). Here again, then, the reader sees an inversion of the formula wherein traditional aristocratic beauty equals morality. On the contrary, Bleak House seems to argue, it is the beauty of hands and bodies that have labored that demonstrate true goodness.

If any doubt should remain as to the validity of such a reading, one need only turn to the figure of Mrs. Bagnet, another character whose physiognomy testifies to her willingness to labor for others, and who is praised for doing so. Mrs. Bagnet also has rough hands and a face colored by the sun (801, 764). Every bone in her body seems to testify to her work as a soldier's wife:

Mrs. Bagnet is not at all an ill-looking woman. Rather large-boned, a little coarse in the grain, and freckled by the sun and wind which have tanned her hair upon her forehead; but healthy, wholesome, and bright-eyed. A strong, busy, active, honest-faced woman of from forty-five to fifty. (439)

Particularly noteworthy here is the way in which—as in Simms's work—"busy," "active," and "strong" are coupled with "honest-faced," again in contrast to the deceptive physiognomies of the leisured classes. A similar equation is implied later when Mrs. Bagnet takes responsibility for those around her (in this particular case, Mr. George) by taking a lengthy journey in order to free an innocent man. As she marches off at her "sturdy pace," Jarndyce asks Mr. Bagnet if he is really going to let her leave on such short notice. The former soldier replies that he has no choice, for when "the old girl says, I'll do it. She does it." Jarndyce responds: "Then she is as honest and genuine as she looks . . . and it is impossible to say more for her" (768). Here again, labor and honesty are linked with appearance; that the face is true testament to the labor is the highest praise one can receive.
All of this leads us to Esther Summerson, her illness and scars, and Allan Woodcourt's assertion to her at the close of the novel that she is now prettier than ever before. Much of the contemporary criticism on *Bleak House* centers on the illness and subsequent scarring that befall Esther Summerson. Readings of Esther's disfigurement generally fall into a number of different categories. Perhaps the most common is that which views it as the visible evidence of her illegitimate state and/or of the socially inappropriate passion that concluded in her birth. Christine Van Boeemen-Saaf, for instance, asserts that Esther's disease is related to her parents' "unbridled sexuality" (245), and that in the end, Esther only regains her beauty when she accepts her mother's sin and her own resulting existence (248). Another popular way of reading Esther's scarring is best represented by F. S. Schwarzbach, who, in a series of articles, attempts to label the particular, untitled disease that strikes Esther, and to discuss how Dickens uses illness as a means of critiquing a social structure that fails to immunize its citizens adequately ("Social Pathology" 97). Michael Gurney pursues a similar argument, adding to inadequate vaccination the lack of graveyard reform as one of the "sins" of the ruling classes (79). In each of these readings, as well as in similar ones by James Hill, Gilian West, and Nancy Aycock Metz, Esther's illness is interpreted as a means of showing the interrelatedness and hence the interdependentness of the various classes. A third interpretation of Esther's convalescence and its aftermath is linked to what many critics see as her more general struggle for individual identity in a world that does not recognize orphans—much less illegitimate ones—and that has, through the figure of her aunt, taken every effort possible to erase Esther's very existence. It is interesting to note that

5 Michael Steig, Alex Zwerdling, Mark Spiika, Taylor Stoehr, William Axton, Gordon Hirsch, and Kay Hetherly Wright all propose similar readings.
present-day scholars tend to disagree on whether or not the new, scarred Esther is an assertion of individual identity, a confirmation of selfhood denied, or both. Cynthia Northcutt Malone, for example, sees Bleak House as a text that continually blurs identity, and she argues that Esther is no exception. Not only is she the daughter of "no one"—of Nemo, Hawdon's clever Latin pseudonym—her own mother does not even know that she survived birth, thus effectively negating her very existence (115-16).

While Esther's scars seem to promise to distinguish her from those around her, to give her selfhood, inevitably they do not, says Malone (112). On the contrary, say Michael Gurney, Richard Gaughan, and Helena Michie, Esther's scarring is not a continued negation of identity, but the establishment of one. "Esther's fever, delirium, and disfigurement," says Gaughan, for example, "free Esther from a life largely defined by the expectations of others. . . . Esther's fever does more than change her looks; it effectively makes her a new person" (90).

All three of these readings are useful in explicating one of Dickens's most complicated novels, clarifying the complexities of characterization, theme, and social conscience that occur in all of Dickens's writing. Nevertheless, each approach to Esther's illness, scarring, and apparent "regeneration" is not without some weak link. Claiming, for instance, that Esther's disfigurement represents an individual identity distinct from that found at the beginning of the text ignores the fact that the Esther at the end of the novel is just as self-effacing as the Esther at the beginning; otherwise, how can one explain her inability to conclude the final sentence of her novel? By ending on "even supposing - " (935), Esther seems unable to assert her "self" even so far as to raise the possibility that she is attractive, much less affirm such an idea. Similarly, while Dickens's text often explicitly supports scholars who view Esther's illness as a means of raising social awareness concerning society's responsibility to care for its
lesser privileged (through various reforms), such an argument becomes muddled when attempts are made to discover just what it is Dickens wishes to reform. While Schwarzbach, Hill, and others hint that it is national vaccination policy, particularly for smallpox, the fact that Esther's disease is never named complicates such a reading. Further, as both Shatto and West point out, neither the time scheme for nor the symptoms of Jo's and Esther's disease fit those of smallpox (189, 30).

Finally, while it is tempting to see Esther's scarring as somehow related to her mother's fallen status and her own position as an illegitimate child, this reading leaves a number of questions unanswered: first, why does Esther's scarring precede rather than follow her discovery of her own and her mother's history? One could, of course, argue that her disfiguring evidences a more general sense of shame caused by her aunt's telling her, "Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers," and her order that Esther "pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written" (65). To read the text as such, however, would be to give the aunt's bitterness and venom a legitimacy that Dickens actively seeks to deny, both explicitly—by having Esther's final words to her be a quotation from the Bible stating that only those without sin may cast stones (66)—and implicitly, through, among other things, the kindness of John Jarndyce, who, far from condemning his illegitimate ward, seeks to link her name, and hence her morally reprehensible history, with his own name and history.

The apparent disappearance of Esther's scars—hinted at by Woodcourt's comment to Esther as the novel closes that "You are prettier than you ever were" (935)—

6 Perhaps the best-known of these supporting passages involves the narrator's asking, in a chapter entitled "Tom-All-Alone's," "What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom . . ." (272).
further problematizes most of the major readings mentioned above. If, for instance,
Esther's disfigurement is the fixing of her identity, is then what many assume is the
fading of these scars the erasure of this same self? Similarly, if, as Metz has argued,
Dickens's choice of a disfiguring illness is related to his "self-conscious efforts to keep
the fact of disease visible before us" in order to argue for social interrelatedness and the
necessity of reform (19), why finally undermine the seriousness of the issue he is
addressing—whatever that may be—by minimizing its lasting effects?

In the context of the present reading linking a new middle-class aesthetic which sees
beauty in physical signs of the individual's labor, these questions surrounding Esther's
scarring and Woodcourt's comment about her beauty begin to fade, for in such a reading
Esther's beauty occurs not despite her scars but because of them. Simply put, her rough
face is a testament to her selfless "work" for others, her gender-appropriate "occupation"
as a housekeeper and sometime amateur nurse, just as Mrs. Bagnet's sunburnt face,
rough hands, and sturdy pace testify to her moral kindness.

That Esther is a kind and almost painfully selfless character is obvious
throughout Bleak House. Consider, for instance, the scene at the Jellyby's in which
Esther comforts a distraught Caddy. The latter is upset by her lack of social and
domestic skills, caused by her mother's always forcing her to participate in "telescopic
philanthropy" (93). Esther does what she can to soothe the younger woman's fears,
and eventually convinces Caddy to sit on a stool at her feet, where she falls asleep.
Rather than disturb her, Esther struggles to cover the two of them with shawls and
remains where she is, all night long, with the fire out:

At first I was painfully awake, and vainly tried to lose myself, with my
eyes closed, among the scenes of the day. At length, by slow degrees,
they became indistinct and mingled. I began to lose the identity of the
sleeper resting on me. Now it was Ada; now, one of my old Reading
friends from whom I could not believe I had so recently parted. Now it was the little mad woman worn out with curtsying and smiling; now someone in authority at Bleak House. Lastly, it was no one, and I was no one. (94)

Here, Esther is willing to remain in a painful position for a long time simply in order that she might provide some kindness and needed rest for a woman she barely knows. Her lack of comfort and the dreariness of the night are emphasized in a number of ways, most obviously with the adjective "painfully," but also through the almost redundant phrasing, "at length, by slow degrees." Esther eventually does drift off to sleep, but it is not a quick process. Also of import here is that all of those listed are people that Esther presently or will soon in some way aid: Ada, one of her pupils at Reading, Miss Flite, and Mr. Jarndyce. Finally, the effect of this is a near-absolute erasure of Esther: in caring for these others, she gives of herself so fully, so unselfishly, that she becomes "no one."7

This is a pattern of behavior seen repeatedly in Bleak House: some have even argued that Esther's willingness to marry Jarndyce, despite her love for Woodcourt, is yet another act that demonstrates Esther's lack of self-interestedness (Nicholls 43). The most selfless act of Esther's, however, is her willingness to nurse her maid throughout a potentially contagious and deadly illness. Esther shows a perfect awareness of the danger in which her actions place her by her decision to lock the door the moment Charley says she is ill, in order that Ada might not be infected (494). Esther also reveals an understanding of the danger Charley's illness poses to her own appearance when she states, "I was very sorrowful to think that Charley's pretty looks would change and be disfigured, even if she recovered... but that thought was, for the greater part, lost in

7 None of this is meant to suggest, of course, that Esther's loss of identity is praiseworthy from a twentieth-century perspective. My point, rather, is that at least from the viewpoint of the new middle-class aristocracy, such selflessness is a positive attribute, particularly in a woman.
her greater peril" (495). Nevertheless, Esther remains beside Charley and nurses her back to health, despite the fact that "not a servant in or about the house" would have been willing to take her place, despite the fact that there is a hospital nearby (as Jo indicates when he tells of how Bucket took him there for treatment of the same or a similar illness [690]), and despite the fact that until Florence Nightingale took female nurses to the Crimean War in 1853 nursing was generally considered a working-class task (Vicinus 86-89). Regardless, Esther sees to the care of her young maid.

Esther's scars, then, are the physical evidence of her earnest nature, of the seriousness with which she takes her responsibility to look after her fellow human beings. They are an honest testimony, in other words, that she has taken her "occupation" at Bleak House seriously. Soon after her arrival there, Jarndyce renames Esther "Dame Durden" and tells her that she is the "little old woman" who will sweep the cobwebs "so neatly out of our sky, in the course of your housekeeping, Esther, that one of these days we shall have to abandon the Growlery, and nail up the door" (148). The "house" Esther is keeping is the emotional and moral house of Jarndyce and Jarndyce; thus, Esther's job is to rid the world of Bleak House and its occupants of the pain caused by this case, and of the destructive obsession with an inherited life of leisure which it in part represents. Esther's scars are the evidence that she has done her job well; as such, they make her "prettier" than she ever was before.

The text reinforces the relationship between Esther's new looks and her sense of civic responsibility in a number of ways. First, just before Woodcourt makes his final comment about Esther's beauty, he refers to her--for the first and only time in Bleak House--by her "work" related name: Dame Durden (935). By calling her Esther, Woodcourt would have invoked her pseudonym of Summerson, a "mask" which at once testifies to and disguises her relationship with the old, "deceptive" aristocracy; in
contrast, by calling her by her nickname, all that Woodcourt brings to mind is Esther's role as the emotional and spiritual housekeeper of the old Bleak House.

Esther's dreams during her illness also clarify that what is at stake here is her role as a selfless participant in the social and moral business of the world. Concerning these visions, which consist of her "labouring" up a tremendous staircase and of a flaming necklace of which it is painful to be a part, Zwerdling asserts:

In these dreams, Esther can no longer force herself to be content. The frustration of a life made up solely of duties is sharply expressed. Her obligations "mount up" like the endless staircases of her dream; there is no surmounting them in this life. The image of the starry circle probably expresses her intense though unacknowledged need to break out of the chain of commitments to the community, "to be taken off from the rest" and be a separate self. (436)

In other words, assuming one's responsibility to serve the greater good of the community is not an easy thing to do. Esther's delusional sleep shows her struggling with her commitment to the sort of self-sacrifices that caused her illness to begin with. Esther's sickness leads to a scarring which reflects her commitment to eschew the ambition and leisure of the old aristocracy in favor of the hard work, social responsibility, and personal disinterestedness of the middle class.8

Part of the problem with Esther's face before her illness is the fact that it too closely resembles her mother's, too closely resembles the old, aristocratically aligned and deceptive form of beauty. One scholar goes so far as to say that Esther's face is not even her own before her illness (Malone 110), and such does appear to be the case. As noted above, Esther feels as though looking at Lady Dedlock is like staring into "a broken glass" (304); similarly, the sight of her mother causes Esther to see "innumerable

8 Esther's original decision to follow this path occurs, of course, in a promise she makes early in her life to "strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could" (65).
pictures" of herself rise up before her eyes (309). Further, Esther is not the only person who notices her resemblance to her mother: "I'll be shot," says Guppy the first time he sees Lady Dedlock's portrait, "If it ain't very curious how well I know that picture!" (138). Hortense also seems to see the similarity, a point evidenced not only by her asking to serve as Esther's maid, but by Esther's own comment, the first time she is in church at Chesney Wold, that she is "conscious of being distressed . . . by the observation of the French maid" (305). Jo, too, notices that Esther is very like Lady Dedlock. Even after Esther has removed her veil upon finding him sick at the brickmaker's cottage, and even after being told by Jenny that Esther is not who he thinks she is, Jo is not convinced: "She look to me the t'other one. It ain't the bonnet, nor yet it ain't the gownd, but she looks to me the t'other one" (486).

Such a strong resemblance is a threat to the text's attempts to rewrite the alphabet of the textual body and to construct a new, disinterested and earnest middle-class aristocracy which stands in contrast to the traditional upper classes. In Bleak House, it is important to remember, traditional beauty finally comes to signify the sin of being unwilling or unable to eschew self-serving leisure and engage in productive and socially responsible work. As Cynthia Northcutt Malone points out, in this novel, "idle beauty" and duty are in opposition to one another (119). Thus, should the kind and disinterested Esther—the antithesis of these traits—have a traditionally beautiful physiognomy, the text's efforts at teaching Victorians to read differently would be undermined.

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9 Although beautiful in a manner aligned with the traditional aristocracy, Ada is one figure who does not neglect her duty, at least to Richard, for whom she cares until he dies. Nevertheless, the breadth of the responsibility she assumes to those around her is much narrower than Esther's. Thus, though her traditional, leisured beauty perhaps does not signal idleness, it certainly testifies to a less productive and selfless lifestyle than does Esther's new, middle-class aristocratic "ugly" beauty.
It is tempting, perhaps, to say that the old Esther matches her old face—that she is, in other words, as ambitious and self-serving as her mother—and certainly there are passages which hint that such may be the case. The overwhelming impression caused by Esther's character, however—by all of her kind and selfless acts and by her disparaging reactions to selfish characters like Mrs. Pardiggle and Vholes—is that the traditional, leisure-related beauty of her old face is out of sync with her true personality, and must thus be redefined. This in part explains why Esther is the only person scarred by the disease passed from Jo to Charley to her: Charley's face, as mentioned above, is already "shrewd and older-looking," testifying to her life of hard work at a young age; the same might be said of Jo, whose rags and almost animal-like movements—at one point he is compared to a dog (275)—likewise speak to his difficult existence. Only Esther has a refined beauty which does not testify to her work as Dame Durden.

In attempting to rewrite the way in which morality is defined in appearances, Bleak House seeks to erase moral ambiguity. By asserting that eighteenth-century conceptions of beauty as aligned with a life of leisure are innately deceptive, in other words, Bleak House attempts to exclude the possibility that in the future people like Lady Dedlock and Turveydrop (or Lady Audley or Percival Glyde) could advance themselves socially—either to the extent of becoming the "centre of the fashionable intelligence," or simply to the extent of justifying a life of ease (a "little meal" at the "French house, in the Opera Colonnade"), while others have cold mutton between dance classes.

To the degree that it asserts that the "new beauty"—the new signifier of moral goodness—is associated with work, Bleak House undermines the supremacy of the

10 Esther admits, for instance, that she finds something "very winning" in Lady Dedlock's "haughty manner" (310).
traditional aristocracy. Just as no longer are thin hands and pale skin beautiful, no longer is a leisurely lifestyle which ignores the greater good praiseworthy. Physiognomic redefinition, then, occurs with social redefinition. Labor is true beauty. Labor—particularly disinterested labor—indicates true social superiority, true aristocratic leadership. As is fitting, in place of the old, large Bleak House filled with the memories of at least two men who have wasted their lives waiting for an inheritance that was never to come, the reader finds the scarred Esther and her sunburnt husband representing the new aristocracy in a mere cottage in northern England (912). "We are not rich in the bank," Esther tells the reader, but every day Allan ventures into the surrounding country and alleviates pain, soothes "some fellow-creature in time of need . . . Is not this to be rich?" (934-35).

Another important—albeit less idyllic—representation of the new middle-class aristocracy is found in the figure of the "ironmaster" and his family. This man and his world offer a glimpse of what one branch of the middle-class aristocracy will look like. When Rouncewell is first introduced to Lady Dedlock and Sir Leicester, he is described as such:

He is a little over fifty perhaps, of a good figure . . . and has a clear voice, a broad forehead from which his dark hair has retired, and a shrewd, though open face. He is a responsible-looking gentleman dressed in black, portly enough, but strong and active. Has a natural and easy air, and is not in the least embarrassed by the great presence into which he comes. (450)

11 Lawson's assessment of Rouncewell, in an essay which compares the works of Carlyle to those of Dickens, supports such a reading. Writes Lawson: "Carlyle views the burgeoning class of industrialists as a potential savior for the nation, as a kind of replacement for the apathetic aristocracy. Rouncewell the ironmaster in Bleak House is a representative of this new class, a self-made man who becomes an active advocate for reform in the political system" (26).
In contrast to the old aristocracy, Rouncewell is open, with a broad forehead which perhaps denotes "rectituditiveness" (Simms 195); then again, from this brief description, it might also signify "beneficentness," for the reader also knows that--again, unlike the society that allows a place like Tom-All-Alone's to exist--Mr. Rouncewell takes his responsibilities to himself, his family, and even his nation (as evidenced by his work in politics) seriously. Certainly, he is not false and constructed like Lady Dedlock, instead possessing a "natural" air about him. Finally, unlike the gout-crippled body of Sir Leicester, Rouncewell's is "strong and active," even to the point of his traveling all night to make an appointment (454).

But Rouncewell is not entirely dissimilar to the upper class he appears to replace. His daughters, for instance, are educated on the Continent, are graceful and accomplished, dress in "floating muslins," and waltz "after the German manner." His "elegant" house demonstrates a "pleasant mixture of the originally simple habits of the father and mother, with such as are suited to their altered station and the higher fortunes of their children" (904). Here, then, as in this work's earlier chapters, is some of the ambivalence of the middle classes to the aristocracy: the middle classes wish to undermine the latter's claim to social and moral superiority, yes; but they are not above coveting the bounty of their wealth.

All is not so traditionally beautiful in the ironmaster's life, however. Indeed, the very name by which he is known in Bleak House brings a less than polished image to mind, one that is justified by the text's description of his place of business. At his factory there is

a great perplexity of iron lying about, in every stage, and in a vast variety of shapes; in bars, in wedges, in sheets; in tanks, in boilers, in axles, in wheels, in cogs, in cranks, in rails; twisted and wrenched into eccentric and perverse forms, as separate parts of machinery; mountains of it broken up, and rusty in age; distant furnaces of it glowing and bubbling in its youth; bright fireworks of it showering about, under the blows of
the steam-hammer; red-hot iron, white-hot iron, cold-black iron; an iron
taste, an iron smell, and a Babel of iron sounds. (902)

At first glance this is an ugly scene: the fevered and swollen metal, the rough, rusty
scars of steel. But this description has a beauty as well, found in the honesty of the
phrasing, in an unwillingness to flinch from those less attractive elements—found, too,
in the sense that there is progress here, action, activity, advancement. The world is
being refashioned in this passage, reshaped, reinvented. It is a beauty not unlike that
which is found in the scarred face of Esther Summerson.
CONCLUSION

In a recent film entitled *Princess Caraboo: A True Story*, Stephen Rea plays a reporter named Gutch doing a story on a young woman, apparently of foreign origin, who suddenly appears in the Bristol area: she is dressed in strange clothing, which appears Eastern in style, and does not speak English, communicating only through a number of exotic gestures and unidentifiable sounds. The film is set in 1817, a time when England feared invasion from the French and thus enacted what Gutch refers to as "repressive laws" outlawing begging and assigning hanging as the punishment for committing perjury. The story details how this mysterious and beautiful woman eventually gains entrance into the home of the Worralls, a wealthy family on the edge of aristocratic status but with ties to the banking business.

In time, the Worralls come to believe that their guest is of royal blood, and begin to treat her as such, removing her from the servants' quarters where she had first slept and providing her with a canopied bed and private room, replacing her ragged costume with expensive dresses made of the finest silks. Princess Caraboo, as she comes to be called, eats at the Worralls' table, with the Worralls' guests, and is waited on by the Worralls' servants. Music is brought in to entertain her, and she weeps when Schubert is played. Interest in the princess increases as the people around her realize the benefits to be gained from a relationship with her: Mrs. Worrall dreams of being allowed into even higher social circles; Mr. Worrall fantasizes about a spice monopoly, knighthood, and possibly even peerage. Eventually, the princess is invited to a costume ball (where she dresses as a British aristocrat while the British aristocrats all
masquerade as oriental exotics) and spends the entire evening dancing with the Prince Regent, who invites her to live in a pavilion he is building in Brighton, and who offers her and the Worralls a military escort back to their estate.

Throughout the film, the validity of Princess Caraboo's identity is tested repeatedly. Frixos, the Worralls' Greek butler, whispers threats at her in English in hopes of causing her to reveal her understanding of that language and--with the aid of another servant--searches her body for tattoos similar to the ones he has seen in depictions of travel in the Far East. An Oxford language professor is brought in to examine her in Eastern tongues and test her knowledge of an oriental counting string. Each time, the princess passes the test. Even the cynical Gutch cannot help but finally believe her story, almost despite himself. "My first instinct was that it's all an elaborate deception," he informs the Oxford scholar. "But there's something about her, in her bearing: pride, spirit. [I] can't quite dismiss her." Only when a young child speaks to Gutch in the princess's tongue does the newspaperman discover that Princess Caraboo is really Mary Baker, a thoroughly English beggar who had been taken off the streets and placed into a position as maid in the home of philanthropists.

Although the time in which Princess Caraboo is set is earlier than that of the novels discussed above, and although the film is erroneous in some of its details, and thoroughly "Hollywood" in its rendering of its subject--in the end, Mary Baker and Gutch flee to America, stopping on the way in order to dine with Napoleon on his island prison--much in the film is relevant to the present discussion, and enables a refreshing and insightful lense through which to examine the interplay of unreadable and otherwise ambiguous figures in literature of the mid-nineteenth century.

First, as in Lady Audley's Secret, The Woman in White, Barchester Towers, and Bleak House, in Princess Caraboo identity is located in speech and appearance.
The first is illustrated by the aforementioned test of the princess's language: though initially the professor who examines her doubts that that she is indeed from the Far East, once she speaks a phrase or two that bear similarity to other tongues he has heard, he changes his mind. "I am not prepared to dismiss her," he tells Mr. Worrall, reversing his position of only moments before. Those around her also come to believe she is who she says she is because of the way she looks. Not only does she have, as mentioned earlier, a certain proud bearing which strikes people as regal, she has tattoos on her body matching those found in studies of Far Eastern cultures. Thus, as in the texts discussed earlier in this project, speech and appearance are crucial signifiers in determining social status.

Also as in the texts discussed above, Princess Caraboo contains a socially unreadable figure surrounded by borderline aristocrats and/or other socially indefinite figures. The princess is quite obviously socially ambiguous. Further, her sexual status is problematic: though she once lived at a home for "fallen" women, she herself was not a prostitute. Additionally, questions are raised throughout the film concerning her gender--caused perhaps, by her wearing trousers when first discovered. Princess Caraboo also contains a number of socially indefinite characters who appear to stabilize as the film progresses. Although wealthy, the Worralls still have ties to business, and do not quite move in the highest aristocratic circles, only knowing those who know the Prince Regent rather than mingling with him themselves. Further, Mr. Worrall is a drunken, philandering, foul-mouthed bore, hardly the model of proper society Nardin envisions as benefiting lower classes. Gutch also seems to be a man whose position in Britain is not quite stable. Numerous characters make reference to his Irish nationality, highlighting the fact that he is all but a foreigner himself; additionally, as a printer and journalist he is part artisan, part laborer. Nor does he hesitate to disguise himself--to
commit perjury of identity—much as Mary Baker has disguised herself: after he discovers her "true" identity, Gutch breaks into the manor where a ball is being held, steals a costume, and sweeps Mary away from the Prince Regent. ("Who was that man?" the Prince asks. "He looked like Byron.")

The presence of the fluid, unreadable Mary Baker/Princess Caraboo, then, seems to highlight the unstable positions of those who surround her, just as the social and moral ambiguity of Obadiah Slope or Lady Dedlock draws out the problematic social status of those with whom they come in contact—Francis Arabin, for example, or Allan Woodcourt. Additionally, just as the clarification of Lady Audley's previously illegible identity occurs in tandem with the stabilization of the previously ill-defined Robert Audley, the clarification of the princess's "true" identity is simultaneous with a stabilization of the identities of those she meets: Mr. Worrall is finally revealed for the scoundrel he truly is; Mrs. Worrall establishes herself as the dignified individual she is; Gutch, in leaving England for the United States, fulfills his lifelong dream of exploring new worlds.

Princess Caraboo also contains an undermining of aristocratic values, and, indeed, of the aristocracy itself. Not only is the semi-aristocratic Mr. Worrall in every way contemptible, so too are those whose social positions surpass his own. One member of the nobility—listed in the credits as "Light-fingered Aristocrat"—steals a tiny silver box from the Worrall home during their absence, just as Lady Apthorpe "steals" Princess Caraboo in an effort to gain the Prince Regent's presence at her ball. The dance itself is a spectacle of Regency-era decadence. When the prince invites Princess Caraboo to participate in a "new continental dance," he states gleefully that the press has declared it "unwholesome, disreputable, and lascivious." The next morning, as Mrs. Worrall surveys the ball's aftermath, the viewer sees members of the upper class
passed out in compromising positions, as a lone violin continues to play for a single, drunken couple. The Prince Regent himself sits staring straight ahead, head wobbling, eyes glazed—open, but seeing nothing.

At the same time that this film seems to critique the values of the leisured classes, it also validates those who work hard and disinterestedly. Mr. Worrall, for example, seldom seems to attend to business at the bank, and when he does, as the film eventually reveals, he engages in acts of financial fraud. In contrast, the middle-class Gutch is never pictured away from work: he is always either in his print shop or out trying to learn more about the princess, at times traveling from one end of the country to the other in an attempt to trace the origin of a book found in her possession. Further, Gutch labors in a manner that does not necessarily serve his own desires. As a child, the viewer is told early in the film, Gutch had read of faraway lands and exotic peoples, and had dreamed of visiting these places and cultures. In his relationship with the princess, Gutch finds some degree of fulfillment for these fantasies. Nevertheless, he continues to follow the trail of identity placed before him, though it threatens to undermine this fantasy. Gutch is torn, then, between his duty and his desire: "Although I longed to discover something about the girl," he states, "part of me was heartened when I did not." Despite this, he continues to search, intent on serving the greater good rather than his own individual needs.

Gutch's motives are further complicated, however, by the fact that some other part of him almost wants the princess to be a fraud, and this is the point at which Princess Caraboo lends some fresh insight into the texts with which the present work is concerned. Relatively early in his narrative, Gutch describes how he tries to imagine the princess "in her world—a far-off place with a beautiful name." His exercise is
interrupted, though, by "a more intriguing and complicated idea": the idea that this exotic woman is not really foreign royalty at all, but an imaginative beggar:

If this girl had really come from the streets, but had invented her own language and kingdom to make fools of a class she'd been taught to fear and obey, if she'd been so imaginative as to do that, I'd swear I would cherish her forever.

In *Princess Caraboo*, then, the unreadable figure of the princess plays out a complicated web of middle-class emotions concerning class and identity. Most evident here is the hostility Gutch's statement reveals: into the possibility that the princess is a fraud, the newspaperman projects a motive of ridiculing the upper classes. Gutch ignores the possibility that Mary Baker may have done what she did out of necessity—which, in fact turns out to be the case; to Gutch, Mary's is an act of rebellion aimed against a class that has demanded her own—and everyone else's—respect and complicity. For making this group look foolish, the printer is willing to "cherish her forever."

Related to this is the fact that Gutch's assertion of love for the princess—especially should she turn out to be a fraud—reveals a desire for fluid social identity. Gutch is intrigued by the idea of "an ordinary girl with an extraordinary imagination." This line demonstrates the hope that the assumed essentiality of identity can be overcome. Though merely, "ordinary," though unskilled and uneducated, Mary Baker is able to defy the "laws" of class and soar beyond her initial and supposedly inescapable socioeconomic identity. To the extent that she is successful in doing so—and would have continued to be, were it not for a mere accident—Mary's very existence as Princess Caraboo frees less affluent classes held down by aristocratic assertions of essential superiority. Mary's act of imagination, in other words, liberates an entire nation from a hierarchical system of class identity which constricts and limits the individual with assertions of social and moral essentiality. Thus, in Mary Baker's reconstruction of herself into *Princess Caraboo*, Gutch sees the possibility of freeing
himself from what he believes to be his inescapable position as middle-class artisan. Tempted to flee with Mary Baker to the United States at the end of the film, Gutch at first balks and returns to his office. "The coward in me," Gutch states, "had taken refuge in his safe, dull life. This was my reality. I was a printer, a newspaper publisher, a man of supposed responsibility. Or was I?" These final three words illustrate Gutch's understanding of the full import of Mary's actions--his realization, in other words, that her creation of the princess was not so much an act of imagination as a demonstration of the constructedness of identity. As such, he himself does not need an "extraordinary" imagination to defy the chains of his life, for in fact there are no chains. That Gutch has learned this lesson is illustrated in the very next scene, in which he joins Mary on the ship bound for America.

The newspaperman is not the only person in Princess Caraboo who has learned this lesson. When Mrs. Worrall frees Mary Baker at the end of the film, the latter thanks her. "Don't thank me, child," the wealthy woman responds. "You owe your deliverance to Mr. Gutch; and in a way, I owe my deliverance to you." Immediately thereafter, Mrs. Worrall forces her husband out of her home, thereby freeing herself from the bondage of male dominance which she had once believed to be the essential position of women. Thus, implicit within the story of Princess Caraboo is a desire for the fluidity and freedom of identity which her constructed identity represents. Indeed, the viewer is encouraged to side with Mary over those who would punish a perjury of identity. "The law is the law," states Mr. Worrall's business partner Mr. Haythorne, "and I as magistrate and you as moral citizens have a responsibility to put a criminal like that at the end of a rope!" When Mr. Worrall agrees, his wife responds, "Until now I was not aware of the true nature of your character." The implication, of course, is that
it is Worrall and the magistrate who are in the wrong for insisting that the laws of identity must be obeyed.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Woman in White*, *Barchester Towers*, and *Bleak House*, there are hints that this admiration for unreadable characters who undermine assumptions of essentiality is not simply a fancy created in twentieth-century Hollywood. Certainly, each of these novels includes some admiration for or even valorization of those who defy their "normal," supposedly inescapable, positions. U. C. Knoepflmacher, for example, points to Marian Halcombe's fascination with Count Fosco and asserts that the elaborate detail with which she describes his clothing, his habits, and his corpulence "permits the reader to share her fascination" (366). The 1860 review of *The Woman in White* in *The Times* seems to support Knoepflmacher's assertion, calling the "enigmatic" Fosco the most important personage in the story. It is wonderful what he can do. He is irresistible. Everything goes wrong, and everybody is powerless in his hands. He detects every design; he forestalls every plan; he is always prepared. Everybody else fails at the proper moment, like straws in the wind. He alone is firm and carries his point. (101-2)

In contrast, as the reviewer sees it at least, Hartright is merely lucky in his battle with the count, succeeding only because of "the will of the author" (102). Margaret Oliphant further backs up Knoepflmacher's claim, stating that the reader not only shares Marian's initial fascination with the Count, but notwithstanding the fullest proof of Fosco's villainy, does not give him up, and take to hating him, as Marian does. The fact is, that he is by a very long way the most interesting personage in the book, and that it is with a certain sensation of sympathetic triumph that we watch him drive away in safety at last, after the final scene with Hartright, in which his own victorious force and cleverness turn discomfiture and confession into a brilliant climax of self-disclosure. ("Sensation Novels" 567)

*The Times* and Oliphant both seem to recognize that the appeal of Fosco lies in his strength of will, in his ability to defy tradition and live life by his own laws, to turn
even the confession of a crime into a moment of self-aggrandizement. Fosco is not, of course, finally a count at all, but merely an impersonator, a man who has discarded obscurity and claimed a place among European aristocratic circles. Thus, it is no mistake that Knoepflmacher locates the reader's admiration of Fosco in Marian's description of him, in his opulence, his silk vests, his cream tarts, his corpulence. All of these things are signs of the count's success at his grand facade, just as Princess Caraboo's silken dresses and canopied bed evidence the degree to which she, too, has succeeded in undermining assumptions of essentiality by becoming, as Frixos states "her own princess." In locating the readers in Marian, in allowing them to feel her initial admiration for the count, Collins lets them indulge in Fosco's success at breaking the rules, in the financial—or at least material—gains he has received as a result of having the courage to ignore traditional class boundaries and claim a position that is not his own.

The same holds true in Lady Audley's Secret. Although in the final third of the text Lady Audley is very clearly the novel's antagonist, initially there are moments wherein the reader is invited to revel in what she has done, in the wealth she has gained for herself. When Luke and Phoebe first enter Lady Audley's "fairy-like boudoir" the reader's senses are submerged in the wealth that lies within: Luke stares at the "massive walnut-wood and brass inlaid casket" used to store the mistress's jewelry and comments that it is large enough to store every piece of clothing he owns; when Phoebe actually opens the jewelry box, Luke cries out in wonder "at the ornaments glittering on white satin cushions. He wanted to handle the delicate jewels; to pull them about, and find out their mercantile value. Perhaps a pang of longing and envy shot through his heart as he thought how he would have liked to have taken one of them" (30). Perhaps a pang of longing shot through the heart of the reader as well, when faced with the
evidence of what Helen Talboys has gained by shaking free of the chains of identity and climbing to a social position generally reserved for only a select few. The same is perhaps true when the reader learns of how successful this imposter has been on the Continent. Phoebe tells Luke that he would have been impressed had he seen the large group of men admiring Lady Audley in Europe:

You should have heard her laugh and talk with [the gentlemen]; throwing all their compliments and fine speeches back at them, as if they had been pelting her with roses. She set every body mad about her wherever she went. Her singing, her playing, her painting, her dancing, her beautiful smile, and sunshiny ringlets! She was always the talk of a place, as long as we stayed in it. (27-28)

In each of the four novels with which this project is concerned, the unreadable, transgressive figure not only enters a society beyond his or her "natural" place, but reaches the apex of that society: Lady Audley is "the talk of the place," Lady Dedlock is at "the centre of fashionable intelligence" (57), Obadiah Slope is in line to become the newest dean of Barchester. Even Anne Catherick, in her own way, dominates the characters who surround her, enthralling them all with the mystery of her past, and with what she does and does not know about Percival Glyde.

To a degree, the almost hyperbolic success of these figures enacts the same sort of class envy that Gutch evidences: the higher the characters climb, after all, the more they make the upper classes appear ridiculous by undermining assertions of inherent, inimitable superiority. In other ways, however, that the unreadable figures discussed here climb so high also speaks to the degree of the less affluent classes' desire for social mobility: in *Princess Caraboo* one servant praises not only Mary Baker's success at undermining the supposed superiority of the aristocracy, but also the life she

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1 That in both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White* the admiring description comes from characters of economic means lower than those described is relevant, evidencing not simply admiration, but a degree of fiscal envy.
led while doing it: "She made fools of them all, see, and she had the time of her life
doing it. That girl danced all night with the Prince Regent! Well, I say good honour,
that's what I say: Good Honour!" Though Lady Audley does not dance with Prince
Albert and though Obadiah Slope never speaks before the queen, both in their own
ways have "the time of their lives" while carrying on their masquerades: the one
sweeps all of Europe off its feet; the other marches into a high church cathedral and
verbally overturns (to some applause) the beliefs of those he opposes. To an extent,
then, all of the transgressive characters in these middle-class novels enact some wish
fulfillment for the readers, promising the possibility that class boundaries can be not
just overcome, but shattered.

In the end, of course, all of the unreadable characters discussed here are finally
found out and returned to their "natural" place. As mentioned in my introduction, part
of the reason for this eventual reassertion of essentiality is that it offers a sense of
stability by implying that there is, finally, some absolute order to the universe--some
universal and natural law that will always be followed--at a time in history when all
signs indicated the opposite. Additionally, one might argue that the final containment
of figures like Slope and Lady Dedlock is a gesture of disapproval by the middle-class
toward its own social and economic ambition. In other words, just as the incredible
success of these figures allows the reader to revel in the possibility of attaining similar
heights, the social claustration of Lady Dedlock and the others serves as an
acknowledgement that such ambition--unchecked by the earnestness to fulfill it in a
socially responsible and disinterested manner--is not to be approved.

The four novels discussed here walk a fine line, however. As much as these
texts criticize unchecked ambition in ways which *Princess Caraboo* does not, they
seem unable to help themselves from considering the possibilities of ambition properly
focused: drawing instructors, these novels say, can become the fathers of heirs of huge estates; university fellows can rise to the position of cathedral dean. In each of these cases, however, wealth, power, and prestige is gained only after individuals have proven themselves to be concerned for the well-being of others, and not simply driven by dreams of personal gain. The promise ambiguous figures make, then—the promise of a social standing that surpasses the leisured aristocracy—can be fulfilled only after individuals and classes have recognized and exorcised their own morally questionable ambitions. In *Princess Caraboo*, Mrs. Worrall argues with her husband’s intention to have Mary Baker hanged, asserting “We are really the guilty ones. . . . We wanted her to be a princess. You, for greed, to enrich yourselves, and I to gain the admiration of society.” Later, Mrs. Worrall will not allow Mary to thank her for her freedom: “In a way,” says the former to the one-time princess, “I owe my deliverance to you.”

Despite their containment, to a degree what figures like Lady Audley, Lady Dedlock, and the others promise is that those trapped in the strict caste system of preindustrial Britain will one day be delivered. However, as the transformations of Robert Audley, Marian Halcombe, Francis Arabin, and Esther Summerson testify, this deliverance—this freedom—can only be attained if people adhere to a new set of strict rules, wherein earnestness is favored over insouciance, disinterestedness over self-interest, and hard work over leisure.
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