THE MARRIAGE PROPOSAL IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVEL

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The proposal scene, as utilized by Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Charles Dickens, is a volatile and instrumental moment in the course of the marriage plot. Entering the marriage conversation through the narrow window of the proposal scene provides a new understanding of the nineteenth-century British author’s working commentary on marriage.

In the nineteenth-century British novel, the marriage proposal becomes a finite moment that the author uses to encapsulate a couple’s central challenge and/or crystallize one of the novel’s prevailing tensions. Total bliss and contentment rarely appear in the proposal scene; in fact, more often than not, the proposal uncovers anxieties and reservations that may (1) prevent a perfect union or (2) signal the presence of larger concerns (related to gender, power, sexuality, self-expression, and/or religion) made pertinent by the proposal. Nineteenth-century British novelists exploit this moment in unexpected ways, oftentimes subtly revealing their discomfort with the “solution” of marriage in general.

This thesis closely analyzes the proposal scenes in several nineteenth-century British novels, focusing on the eruptions that occur during the proposal moment and the impact of the proposal moment on the discourse of marriage that is woven through each novel.
Keywords: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, proposal, courtship, marriage
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my fiancé, Andy.
His proposal was simple and sweet – the only way I would have it.
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I would like to thank my graduate professors at UAB for encouraging me as a writer, student, and thinker. I would like to give Dr. Daniel Siegel special thanks for trusting in my vision and for asking all the right questions.
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INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth-century British novel is driven by the marriage plot. Because the quintessential authors of the era – Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Charles Dickens, to name a few – are committed to following the marriage plot to its conclusion, the great matrimonial question (as it is presented in the proposal scene) is often worth examining. Surprisingly, this proposal moment is not always indicative of the couple’s eventual success, some of the “happiest” marriages being sprung from marriage proposals gone awry. Take, for instance, Mr. Darcy’s two proposals to Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*: in the first, Darcy is stubborn and condescending; in the second, Elizabeth is silent and withdrawn. Similarly disappointing is Rochester’s proposal in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*; Rochester’s offer is hastily formed and carelessly delivered, causing Jane (and the reader) to doubt his sincerity. In Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Allan Woodcourt’s proposal to Esther is offered – strangely enough – by a third party (Jarndyce) who happens to be Esther’s former love interest. These proposal scenes, despite their happy outcomes, seem to be crafted to raise questions about the validity of the relationship – a response that is quite different from the hopeful anticipation that the proposal act is meant to encourage within both the reader and the couple.

The marriage proposals that do not yield a long-term relationship are equally puzzling: Dickens’s Bradley Headstone tries to belittle Lizzie Hexam into marriage in *Our Mutual Friend*, while Austen’s Mr. Collins attempts to capture Elizabeth with his matter-of-fact snobbishness and imbecility. The rejected suitor is obviously crafted to
deserve his rejection, though, in general, the proposal scenes in this study demonstrate very little difference between the right suitor and the wrong suitor. In these cases, the woman’s and the author’s choice of suitor must be dependent upon factors that far outweigh the suitor’s behavior or the woman’s momentary uncertainty. I am keenly interested in what the marriage proposal and its outcome can communicate about the other forces coloring the characters’ decisions and/or the authors’ intent. There are many variables to consider – suggest these authors – in the development of the marriage plot and in the creation of the right marriage match.

The sheer number of nineteenth-century novelists, both male and female, who place the “marriage question” (often accompanied by the “woman question”) at the center of their novels demands that attention be paid to the subject. Novelists during this period emphasize the plight of the couple because – on a practical level – marriage, insofar as it paved the way for family, domesticity, and personal growth and fulfillment, was a realistic and integral part of everyday life. The courtships depicted in these novels can therefore be analyzed as glimpses of social history, as cornerstones of the developing domestic and realistic novel, and as mouthpieces for conflicted authors who both adhere to and struggle against established views of courtship and marriage.

Austen, Brontë, and Dickens are each recognized for different contributions to nineteenth-century conceptions of love, courtship, and marriage. Jane Austen is known for devising the “classic marriage plot,” and, as Pamela Bromberg notes, many noteworthy texts with female protagonists (such as *Jane Eyre*, *A Doll’s House*, and *The Awakening*) are either recapitulations of or reactions to Austen’s basic marriage story (126). According to Jean Kennard, Austen pioneered the convention in which the heroine
must recognize and choose the “right” suitor even as she is faced with appealing alternatives (24). Bromberg views Austen’s ideal marriage as a “culmination of a process of education about the self, the other, and the world” (126), which might explain why, in Austen’s novels, the heroine’s choice of suitor usually coincides with the heroine’s own process of self-realization. Charlotte Brontë, on the other hand, is not recognized for her readjustment of the marriage plot as much as she is regarded as a writer who championed passion as a necessary component of romantic love. While Brontë’s work “builds on the traditional staples of fiction,” from Shirley Foster’s perspective, Brontë manages to challenge the “romantic orthodoxies” of her day (71). Brontë’s depiction of love, as described by Susan Weisser, includes “intense feeling, intimations of erotic pleasure, [and] uncontrollable longing” (98). This description of love could scarcely be applied to Austen’s works. In fact, Brontë disliked Jane Austen because she could discern very little passion in Austen’s “ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses” (qtd. in Weisser 94).

Dickens, an author who is central to Victorian ideas about family life and the home, is also a key player in the discussion of marriage in the nineteenth century. Peter Scheckner identifies Dickens as mostly conservative in his treatment of both women and marriage: “Dickens wrote as if he believed a woman’s place was mostly in the home, doing domestic things and supporting her husband” (240). While Dickens upholds this tradition in some cases, his assorted array of marriages and functioning households makes it nearly impossible for scholars to identify a marriage pattern in his works. Holly Furneaux, contrasting with Scheckner’s views, points out that Dickens seemed to “persistently recommend” nonconventional households (153). Most critics would agree
with Furneaux’s assertion that “domesticity is undoubtedly at the emotionally invested heart of Dickens’s work,” but, as Furneaux convincingly argues, Dickens is willing to try unusual arrangements in his marriages and domestic settings. Within his flexible and loosely-defined parameters, Dickens’s marriages can alternately be read as staunchly conservative or quite unconventional for their time.

Nineteenth-century reviewers were ever attentive to the marriage question within the works of their novelists which, of course, reinforced their novelists’ exploration of the topic. As Rohan Maitzen explains, nineteenth-century British society “treat[ed] novelist, critic, and reader as part of a common process of sharing, exploring, and establishing community values” (177). Issues centering on the venerated institutions of marriage and the family were of special interest to critics and readers alike. Jane Austen’s marriage plots, for example, garnered much critical interest, especially in the latter half of the century. Richard Simpson, a notable Shakespearean scholar, was, in 1870, one of the first scholars to praise Austen for her depiction of marriages that were bound by “intelligent love,” which he saw as her “exaltation of judgment over passion” (qtd. in Ray 44). However, Coventry Patmore – author of The Angel in the House – challenged Austen’s alleged greatness, especially when compared with Shakespeare or Scott, because of what he classified as her feminine tendency to develop only the “small” and “perfect” matters of love and marriage (qtd. in Ray 48) – which seems curious given his obvious reverence for domesticity.

The nineteenth-century perspective on courtship and marriage has remained a popular topic of scholarly study. Contemporary critics tend to examine the author’s treatment of the topic to see working examples of the period’s conventions of courtship
and marriage, and, more interestingly, departures from these conventions. Both Jenni Calder and Shirley Foster have established that Victorian authors in particular offer a rich and complicated social critique that often probes the institution of marriage. Critics such as Mary Poovey and Rachel Ablow have traced Victorian authors’ preoccupation with marriage to the central role of family in Victorian society and the author’s determination to act as a moral compass within the family circle. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, providing a sociohistorical perspective, have stressed that marriage was the “economic and social building block of the middle class” and was also central to a Christian’s notion of family (322-323). Nancy Armstrong, with a different focus in view, has contended that “the narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female” (5), thereby acknowledging the inseparability of the marriage plot from notions of female identity. While the above assertions are (arguably) past the point of debate, the topic of courtship and marriage seems inexhaustible, and the nuanced relationships in these novels offer, as Calder aptly puts it, “enough paradoxes and complexities to satisfy the subtlest of modern analytic critics” (10).

Marriage is at the center of my argument. However, the focus of my argument is unique because I am pinpointing a certain moment – the moment of the marriage proposal, or engagement – during which it is possible to view (and perhaps impossible to ignore) the intensity and complexity of the marriage question. My interest in the proposal scene is endorsed and solicited by the authors themselves who consistently use the moment to pressurize and concentrate any number of issues related to courtship and
marriage. An author’s decision to make use of the engagement act can be explained in simple terms: the scene forces a significant question that must be answered.

Several scholars have noted that certain proposal scenes within the nineteenth-century British novel are fraught with meaning. Allan Christensen, in his essay entitled “Not a Love Letter,” examines epistolary proposals in both *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch* and concludes that love can be “misread” by the recipient. Esther Godfrey, in her analysis of *Jane Eyre*, marks Jane’s rejection of St. John’s marriage proposal as her ascension to power. Kathleen Lundeen, observing the “lack of demonstrativeness” in Austen’s proposal scenes, argues that these scenes indicate “a changing artist as well as a changing heroine” (66). Even though critics like these have noticed peculiarities and paradoxes as they occur in certain proposal scenes, fewer have explored how the very nature of the proposal act supplies the conditions for a revelation. Critics have pointed to proposal scenes as benchmarks in a character’s trajectory, instances of stylistic display, or strange moments of intense reader dissatisfaction, but far fewer have discussed how the act itself – a collision of genders, desires, expectations, and ideologies – consciously and consistently functions as a moment of potential explosion. Janis Stout has labeled the proposal act “the culminating event” in the development of the romantic plot (317), and Serena Hansen has classified it as “an obvious moment of rhetorical address,” (*rhetorical*, here, being synonymous with *persuasive*); however, neither of these scholars recognizes the moment as the center, the very pulse, of the author’s lively and volatile discourse on marriage. The volatility of the proposal scene, and the tendency for nineteenth-century novelists to erupt and disrupt notions of marriage during this scene, has neither been acknowledged nor thoroughly explored. I will enter the marriage conversation through
this narrow window, and prove that the proposal scene alone can provide the material for
a refreshingly new understanding of the author’s working commentary on marriage.

I aim to demonstrate that in the nineteenth-century British novel the marriage
proposal becomes a finite moment that the author uses to encapsulate a couple’s central
challenge and/or crystallize one of the novel’s prevailing tensions. Total bliss and
contentment rarely appear in the proposal scene; in fact, more often than not, the proposal
uncovers anxieties and reservations that may (1) prevent a perfect union or (2) signal the
presence of larger concerns (related to gender, power, sexuality, self-expression, and/or
religion) made pertinent by the proposal. Nineteenth-century British novelists exploit this
moment in unexpected ways, oftentimes subtly revealing their discomfort with the
“solution” of marriage in general.

I have formulated my argument using five texts: Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*;
Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*; and Dickens’s *Bleak House, David Copperfield*, and *Our Mutual
Friend*. These works, showcasing their authors’ comfort with contradiction and subtlety,
offer sophisticated readings of the nature of courtship and marriage. I have chosen to
include only these five texts in this study because each work presents a number and
variety of proposal scenes – some proposals even occurring between the same characters
more than once (which can be particularly telling in terms of characters’ internal shifts
and authors’ modified visions). In the case of my analysis, limiting the field of authors
does not limit the questions to be raised or the conclusions to be drawn: indeed, each
author crafts a host of examples, suggesting a range of responses to the marriage question
depending on the characters and context. I will argue, though, that in each text the author
promotes an attitude toward marriage – as depicted in his/her characters’ relationships –
that can ultimately be deciphered and encapsulated, even if this attitude is, in fact, replete with complexity and/or paradox.

In each of my chapters, I analyze two different relationships, each from a different text. I have paired the relationships with respect to a dominant feature that is reflective of the couples’ central challenge. This feature/challenge manifests itself, or erupts, in the proposal scene – a scene that is hyper-aware of its own significance – which then projects these points of contention as issues that the novel must recognize and, in some cases, resolve. In the course of each chapter, I discuss how an author’s treatment of courtship and marriage is revelatory of insights that are both concrete (insofar as they impact the specific relationships) and far-reaching; therefore, the chapters incorporate broader subjects – such as ideology, psychology, and spirituality – that are made evident through the chapter’s particular relationships. All chapters, because they are centered on the oftentimes conflicting desires of men and women, are inextricably entwined with notions of gender.

In chapter one, I study the “insult proposal” in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Dicken’s *Our Mutual Friend*. I describe an insult proposal as a marriage proposal during which the suitor insults the woman by suggesting that she is not worthy of him or not quite marriageable material. The insult suitor graciously overcomes his feelings against the marriage, but has no scruples in implying that he has condescended to make the match. In this chapter, my focus is on the author’s depiction of willpower and how self-discipline naturally translates into an attempted mastery of another. I also juxtapose the courtships of the insult suitors against the courtships of the successful suitors and discover that these
authors seem to prefer a sexual sort of dominance over a rigid and mechanical psychological dominance.

In the second chapter, I explore the rational romance in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Dickens’s *Bleak House*. I claim that both authors are interested in portraying courtships that illustrate an “enlightened” version of romance – that is, a kind of romance that is well-reasoned and moderated by thoughtful decision-making. I argue that the heroine’s uncomfortable silence during the proposal scene is a consequence of the author’s choice to prioritize contemplation over expression and self-assertion. However, I eventually conclude that the authors’ adherence to the rational romance results in a disappointing depiction of marriage and a heroine who appears stifled and passive.

In chapter three, I analyze female influence in Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. I apply the traditional “angel-in-the-house” model of domesticity to these novels and point out that the authors have crafted both an angel-figure and a contrasting fairy-figure (who embodies enchantment and sexuality). My purpose in this chapter is to use male desire to explain the presence of both an angel-figure and a fairy-figure. In other words, I argue that the male characters in these novels desire much more than the “angel in the house” can provide, so these authors feel compelled to supply their male characters with fairy women – an artistic move that undermines the supposed perfection of the angel-wife. The proposal scenes, as well as other significant moments, illustrate the limitations of both the fairy-woman and the angel-woman, highlighting the author’s gestures to intermingle the two forms of female influence.
Ultimately, my study demonstrates that the proposal moment is a useful tool in deciphering the nineteenth-century novelist’s conflicted opinions about marriage. The decision to marry is an agonizing one for the characters in these texts precisely because the authors are determined to capture the uncertainties and potential terrors that can arise from an ill-advised union. The proposal moment teaches us to read the novel’s discrepancies and peculiarities with a purpose, understanding that the romance of the moment must have been sacrificed to some kind of illuminating end. Even as these authors show some allegiance to the traditional components of courtship and marriage (the submissive, angelic wife; the strong and dashing suitor; a noble profession of love, etc.), their decision to allow the unconventional to weave its way through their love stories suggests a certain disappointment with marriage in its idealized and, perhaps, impractical form.
CHAPTER 1

The Insult Proposal and Dominant Love in Jane Eyre and Our Mutual Friend

Nineteenth-century courtship and marriage tended to adhere somewhat neatly to an ideological framework\(^1\) that confirmed the subordinate nature of women. However, there was a “fatal contradiction” in this ideology; as J. Hillis Miller recognizes, women had absolute power during the most decisive moment of the proposal act. In spite of the efforts of the suitor, the preferences of either family, or the pressures of society, the woman ultimately possessed the freedom to accept or refuse an offer of marriage (43). This freedom, when explored and expounded by contemporary novelists, promised to create unique proposal scenes with potentially surprising results.

Suitors in the midst of the proposal act could check this awe-inspiring freedom in a variety of ways: Brontë’s St. John Rivers and Dickens’s Bradley Headstone decide – quite oddly and ineffectually – to verbally abuse and offend the woman in hopes that she will come to understand her own inferiority. During these “insult proposals” (as I have termed them), both Rivers and Headstone hope to disarm the woman by implying that her liberties and inclinations are, in fact, suffering from want of proper supervision and guidance. In short, the insult proposal becomes an occasion for the suitor to test his powers of persuasion and dominance.

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\(^1\) This ideological framework, as explicated by Miller, consisted of several assumptions, one of which was the idea that “a woman is ‘owned’ by her father, who ‘gives’ her to her bridegroom” (43), thus making the woman out to be a voiceless commodity.
These insult suitors feel intimidated by the woman’s momentary authority, and so they contrive to diminish her power; however, they are rejected. Because both Rivers and Headstone actually do offer something tangible in the way of stability, status, or moral virtue, it is worth considering why both novels see fit to reject their suits. One probable explanation for the woman’s resounding “no” is that these men are psychologically domineering in their attempts to convince her of her obvious need to be rescued and provided for. It would seem, then, that both Brontë and Dickens are criticizing a match that reflects patterns of male domination and, instead, choosing to give preference to a match that has companionship and mutuality at its core. This assumption seems to hold true until the novels’ successful suitors are added to the equation. Brontë’s Edward Rochester and Dickens’s Eugene Wrayburn are able to secure the women’s affections and garner the novels’ support; yet, strangely enough, these men also possess the will to dominate. Even though both Rochester and Wrayburn care deeply and passionately for the women they pursue, upon closer inspection, they are also offensive and dominant in ways that are troubling in their suggestion of physical aggression. When the two groups of suitors are compared, the insult suitors clearly represent a mental and psychological threat while the successful suitors embody an emotional and sexual dominance. The behavior of both groups of men is reminiscent of what Judith Wilt refers to as “the binary figure of intimacy,” a power structure that depicts the man as master and the woman as his slave/subordinate (452); in these novels, the man threatens to master the woman by the forcible imposition of either his ideas or his desires. From the novels’ perspective, the desire-driven successful suitors are somehow less offensive and more pardonable.

\[2\] Wilt assigns this term to Victorian Gothic fiction in particular, which is concerned with intimacy as it relates to violence.
There is yet another crucial difference which can help distinguish the two categories of suitors—their tendency to self-dominate. Brontë and Dickens emphasize the significant correlation between the suitor’s powers of self-control and the ways in which he attempts to dominate his prospective wife. The insult suitors, for instance, are prone to self-discipline and self-chastisement. They submit themselves to a kind of psychological self-reprimand, which makes them predisposed to enact a system of chastisement on the woman during the insult proposal. The successful suitors, on the other hand, seem to lack the self-control that would require them to master their emotions or curb their passion. As a result, they are more genuine in their advances toward the woman though less likely to check their sexual desires. It is important to note that the insult proposals themselves are not devoid of sexual impulses, but the insult suitors have learned to control their wayward desires in a way the novel does not deem necessary for the successful suitors.

With notions of discipline and dominance in view, I will attempt to understand and explain the suitors’ impulse to conquer, focusing particularly on the proposal act as a critical moment of power and vulnerability. In tracing the man’s need for control and dominance (which is often echoed in the woman’s response), I will analyze his skills of self-discipline and self-mastery—skills that demand attention because both Brontë and Dickens emphasize their formative nature. I will show that a character’s impulse to conquer is directly tied to his self-mastery, thus forging a connection between treatment of self and of other. The insult suitor, accustomed to mastering his own will, uses the same rhetoric of discipline in his efforts to persuade the woman to marry; however, it is precisely a lack of self-discipline that compels the successful suitor to attempt a persuasion of a more passionate and sexual nature. Following the thread of dominance in
these relationships becomes relevant as readers strive to understand the solutions that are presented in the course of these marriage plots. If, for instance, readers are asked to view the processes of self-discipline and psychological dominance (as depicted in the insult proposals) as stifling and unfeeling, are we then supposed to be content with an alternative relationship that indicates the potential for sexual dominance? I will argue that, yes, these novels do support the successful suitors because, in their attempts to dominate, they paradoxically relinquish themselves to genuine emotion, passion, and the spontaneities of love. In other words, the successful suitors allow themselves to be overwhelmed by love, whereas the insult suitors attempt to master their passions and disregard their emotions. Ultimately, Brontë and Dickens ask us to advocate for the successful suitors because, even though they show signs of sexual aggression, they permit themselves to be dominated by their own passions. In this way, their disregard for composure and self-discipline makes them less of a threat to a prospective wife since they are less capable of complete dominance.

There is a broad, umbrella term which can incorporate all the complexities of my argument, and that is the concept of will. The courtships in Jane Eyre and Our Mutual Friend beg to be considered with this question in mind: Is an act of love synonymous with an act of will? Brontë and Dickens give us several examples in which the suitor musters the strength to offer his proposal and then wills the woman to accept it; however, suitors who follow this formula do not often meet with success. James Eli Adams, focusing on Victorian masculinity, explains that “the self-regulating will” seems an essential component of manliness (qtd. in Rose 506), and both Brontë and Dickens equip

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3 My definition of “will” closely follows John Reed’s delineation of will as “volition (as the power to initiate action), and strength of will (as a character trait reveled in assertion and self-control)” (ix).
their insulting suitors with a will that is powerfully self-regulated. Interestingly, the successful suitors are happy to neglect this particular component of manliness, but they retain the novels’ sympathies despite their less-monitored willpower. Both authors are interested in the will as it is translated from self to other, and in how the will, so important to the Victorian man, is accounted for during the cooperative and mutually-dependent process of courtship and marriage.

In my attempts to fully unearth the man’s will to dominate, I will analyze a conspicuous scene – the insult proposal – as it occurs in these texts. I will contrast the insult proposals with the courtships of the successful suitors, differentiating between two distinct types of dominance, psychological and sexual. (Psychological dominance is associated with the insult suitors, and sexual dominance is associated with the successful suitors – although instances of stifled sexual desire are evident within the insult proposals as well.) During this analysis, I will highlight the role of self-discipline, or the self-regulated will, as it impacts the man’s drive to dominate. My goal with this study will be, first, to illustrate the authors’ decision to depict a clear relationship between discipline and dominance and, second, to demonstrate that these novels favor the successful suitors precisely because they lack the need for control that both authors see as a destructive force in the lives of their heroines.

A proper though perhaps unsteady starting point for my argument is Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice* has two notable insult proposals, though neither meticulously adheres to the construct that I have outlined. Both insult proposals (Collins’s proposal and Darcy’s first proposal to Elizabeth) are rejected, which is a hallmark of the insult proposal. However, Collins does not exercise a rigorous self-discipline, as is the case
with both Rivers and Headstone. For instance, he is invariably loquacious, embarrassingly forward in his introduction to Darcy, and free with his “condolences” to the Bennet family after Lydia’s disgrace. During Collins’s proposal to Elizabeth, he does reference his “violence of affection,” but Elizabeth is never in any real danger of being conquered by him, psychologically, sexually, or otherwise. Darcy’s insult proposal is likewise difficult to categorize because Darcy, of course, is to become the successful suitor. Darcy’s insulting remarks are reminiscent of Headstone’s love confession, though perhaps spoken with a bit more confidence: “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed” (123). He goes on to emphasize Elizabeth’s condition in life, which is “so decidedly beneath [his] own.” Elizabeth is quite offended by Darcy’s struggle and his “sense of her inferiority,” and she immediately recognizes that his attitude of entitlement is “very unlikely to recommend his suit.”

These examples are worth mentioning because they illustrate a changing attitude toward marriage that would necessitate the rejection of an insult proposal. As Susan Weisser explains, “in the late eighteenth century, there was an increasing acceptance of marriage based on . . . mutual attraction and affection” (95). Weisser recognizes this as a distinct turn from the “pragmatic exchange” of the woman’s looks and domestic abilities for the man’s economic and social status. In other words, the tangibilities that could be gained from a marriage were not as important as the mutual affection that would create a healthy and long-lasting relationship. Weisser argues that Austen seeks to promote relationships that allow her female characters to achieve a sense of “dignity and worth,” which Elizabeth would not be able to do had she accepted the proposals of either insult suitor. Darcy learns to appreciate and value Elizabeth beyond her economic and social
position, so, one could argue, his second proposal is valid in that Elizabeth is respected rather than chastised. Also, Darcy is much more vulnerable in his second proposal, leaving himself open to potential rejection; his ability to relinquish control of the situation (and speak without that haughty sense of security that Elizabeth so disdained) is appealing to Elizabeth and also partly responsible for the novel’s altered opinion of him.

The insult suitor in *Jane Eyre* is disguised particularly well. He is a minister with noble ambitions and of marked intelligence, but – as Jane soon learns – he is offensive, oppressive, and totally controlling. St. John Rivers is Brontë’s version of the “other” suitor, a foil to Edward Rochester. Rivers is the stillness to Rochester’s vivacity, the iciness to Rochester’s heat. Jane seems to feel only extremes for Rivers; she can profess all devotion and admiration for him or feel only bitterness and repugnance toward him. The novel capitalizes on this ambiguity so that it becomes more difficult to anticipate the course that Jane will take. However, there are crucial moments that characterize Rivers as a man that is predominantly unattractive and threatening to Jane.

The first time that Jane hears Rivers preach, she becomes aware of his powers of self-mastery. Jane is perceptive enough to see beneath his appearances, and she is certain that the stoic minister contains within him a great and mighty tumult:

[The sermon] grew to a force – compressed, condensed, controlled . . . Throughout there was a strange bitterness; an absence of consolatory gentleness . . . I experienced an inexpressible sadness: for it seemed to me – I know not whether equally so to others – that the eloquence to which I had been listening had sprang from a depth where lay turbid dregs of disappointment, where moved troubling impulses of insatiate yearnings and disquieting aspirations. (405)
Rivers is actually quite a passionate man, but his desires are buried in the “depths” where he houses all his inconvenient feelings and impulses. That Jane would notice a certain self-denial in Rivers as he sermonizes is perhaps not so strange; holy men have often stressed the importance of death to self in order to become alive in God. However, Rivers clearly smothers his true emotions even in his personal relationships. Perhaps the best example of his systematic self-control is his handling of his desire for Rosamond Oliver, the town beauty. When Miss Oliver makes an unexpected visit, Jane has the opportunity to observe the effect on Rivers. She sees “his solemn eye melt with sudden fire, and flicker with resistless emotion” and his “chest heav[e]” as though it would burst from the “despotic constriction” of his resolute will – but Rivers curbs his desires like “a resolute rider would curb a rearing steed” (420). Brontë endows Rivers with a formidable will that seems impossible to influence or contradict, a will that Jane sees as nearly inhuman in its superiority and detachment.

An ordinary woman would be no force to equal St. John Rivers, but Brontë has not crafted an ordinary woman. Jane can also boast of a strong will and a disciplined heart (a tribute, perhaps, to the wisdom of Helen Burns). Rivers himself notices Jane’s lack of “tractability” in the lines of her face as she recovers from her illness (390). Miss Oliver, too, recognizes that Jane and Rivers are both “good, clever, composed, and firm” (425). Brontë is interested in developing a battle of wills between Jane and Rivers, the essence of antagonism between the two carrying more weight than any feelings of warmth. Rivers, as “penetrating” young judge, questions Jane about her previous occupations and her reasons for remaining unmarried. Rivers quickly discerns, by way of Jane’s countenance, that she has a previous attachment (Rochester) whom she is unable
to forget. No doubt, Rivers feels superior to Jane because he has learned to “control the bent of nature” and disregard the call of “the forbidden fruit” (416). Jane learns to treat Rivers’s rigid self-discipline with a strange sort of reverence. Eventually this respect turns into a kind of unthinking acquiescence on Jane’s part, during which time she seems to be lulled into a stupor by Rivers’s command and self-control. Narrator-Jane recalls that “[b]y degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind” (459). It becomes clear that Rivers has the upper hand in this battle, which he himself knows, and so he prepares to conquer Jane completely in the proposal act and “kiss . . . [the] seal affixed to [her] fetters” (460).

Jane is long aware of Rivers’s plan to become a missionary. However, when Rivers asks Jane what her “heart say[s]” about his plan, she begins to fear that this mission trip is the culmination of his gradual dominion over her. Jane tells Rivers her heart is “mute,” to which he replies that he “must speak for it” (463). This exchange summarizes the dangers of the psychological dominance that Rivers embodies: Jane is slowing losing her powers of choice and volition as Rivers decides to make choices for her. Rivers continues with his offer:

“God and nature intended you for a missionary’s wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary’s wife you must – shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you – not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign’s service.” (464)

Rivers insults Jane by asserting that she is incapable of love and implying that her “endowments” would not easily guarantee her another offer of marriage. Then Rivers claims Jane as his wife (which, he willfully prophesizes, shall be) not to satisfy any
desires of his own, but to place her in the service of the Lord. Jane clearly understands the power struggle inherent in this decision. She realizes if she joins Rivers she would “abandon” herself because he would “compel” the fire of her very nature to “burn inwardly” (466, 470). In other words, Rivers would expect Jane to adopt his behaviors, including his habit of repressing desire and exercising a sacrificial sort of self-control.

Ultimately, Jane decides that Rivers’s offer is “unendurable.” Despite Rivers’s suggestion that she disregard “all scruple[s] about the degree, kind, strength or tenderness of mere personal inclination,” she is repulsed by the thought of marriage without love (469). Rivers, it seems, has resigned himself to the idea of this unfeeling arrangement, though Jane admits that perhaps his Christian nobility sheltered him from the frustration he might have otherwise felt: “[A]s a man, he would have wished to coerce me into obedience: it was only as a sincere Christian he . . . allowed so long a space for reflection and repentance” (472). After several days of reflection and an unremitting coldness from Rivers, Jane makes the definite decision to refuse him. This refusal marks Jane’s sudden return to herself and, in her own words, the time for her “to assume ascendancy” (484). Jane recognizes that Rivers is “a good and a great man; but he forgets, pitilessly, the feelings and claims of little people” (479). Jane decides it is best “to keep out of his way, lest, in his progress, he should trample [me] down.” This comment of Jane’s is not unfounded; as Pamela Bromberg emphasizes, marriage was the “primary, in fact single, institution through which female protagonists in the nineteenth-century achieve identity” (127). Rivers threatens to absorb Jane’s identity into his own, and Jane rightly realizes that she might have been conquered by a strong-willed man with clear notions of her flaws and the ways in which she was to be made useful.
Edward Rochester intends to use Jane in other ways. Regardless of her lack of beauty, Rochester is drawn to Jane; he sees in her a spark of personality that excites him, partially because he believes that even Jane is unaware of her own verve. Rochester’s desires are wrought into a frenzy by Jane, especially when he thinks he might lose her. After he is forced to disclose the secret of his previous marriage, which prompts Jane’s staunch resolution to leave, Rochester is beside himself with an urgency that becomes wild and aggressive: “Jane,” says Rochester, “will you hear reason? . . . because, if you won’t, I’ll try violence” (349). Rochester clearly threatens rape; though, interestingly, Jane does not feel herself in any real danger. Brontë even allows Jane to perceive a certain “charm” in this crisis; both Jane’s power over Rochester and his uncontrollable desire for her are validated, thus rendering the moment somewhat fascinating.

Rochester’s thorough explanations and genuine apologies do not alter Jane’s decision to take flight. Even after Rochester makes plain the relative blamelessness of his own situation, Jane is determined to avoid a complicated and bigamous affair with him. Rochester, though convinced of his own logic, painfully begins to understand that, in this case, Jane will not be dissuaded:

“Never, never was anything [as Jane] so frail and so indomitable . . . Conqueror I might be of the house; but the inmate would escape to heaven . . . And it is you, spirit – with will and energy, and virtue and purity – that I want: not alone your brittle frame.” (366)

In this vivid and climactic moment, Rochester (and Brontë) clearly differentiates between psychological and sexual dominance. Rochester acknowledges that Jane is frail in body yet strong in spirit; even though Jane’s body may be conquered, her inner convictions
would remain untouched. Rochester, unlike Rivers, realizes that Jane’s spirit can be harnessed by no one but Jane. Through his anger and utter defeat, Rochester actually upholds and affirms Jane’s sense of self, and, paradoxically, respects her while cursing her strength. Rochester makes one last, desperate attempt to master Jane. In a clearly sexual maneuver, Rochester, with the “blood rush[ing] to his face” and the “fire” flashing from his eyes, springs “erect” and reaches for Jane. She leaves “at once” with her heart in shambles but her dignity and self-respect in tact (367).

In the advances of both Rivers and Rochester, Brontë depicts the impulse to dominate; however, one impulse is distinctly more threatening than the other. Rivers intends to enact a total domination that would be equivalent to an annihilation of Jane’s personhood. Rochester, out of sheer panic and despair, threatens to master Jane in the only way that he knows how; and even this kind of sexual dominance is a flimsy replacement for the mutual union that Rochester desires. Jane eventually chooses Rochester – after experiencing the perfect rigidity and coolness of Rivers – because Rochester is unencumbered by an obsessive need for control and evidently loves Jane even as she maintains her strength of will. Weisser believes that Brontë ultimately chooses for Jane the hero who more closely adheres to the ideals of the British Romantics – artists who possessed an admiration for “liberty and equality [represented by Rochester] rather than authoritarianism [represented by Rivers]” (95). Brontë similarly prefers Rochester’s “wildness and rule-breaking passion” to Rivers’s self-restrained and inauthentic notions of love. Though Rochester does attempt to dominate Jane, he is simultaneously dominated by her, and this suggestion of equality invests their relationship with a mutuality that Rivers and Jane could never hope to achieve.
Bradley Headstone is Dickens’s version of the insult suitor. Headstone attempts — with no less determination than Rivers — to master his emotions and eradicate any desires that might prevent him from properly behaving the part of respectable schoolmaster. Headstone is “decent,” somewhat prone to “stiffness,” and competent at a handful of tasks (arithmetic, singing, organ-playing), all of which he executes “mechanically” (218). Dickens introduces a strain of bridled unpredictability, or rather a contained sort of irritation, into Headstone’s character, which is evident in the “settled trouble” in his face. Headstone’s efforts to keep hold of his respectability are occasionally thwarted by his “fiery” nature, which sizzles beneath the surface — much like Rivers’s passions.

The wrench in Headstone’s plan is Lizzie Hexam, the young woman for whom he acquires an instant and insatiable desire. It is not clear why Headstone is so taken by Lizzie, although we can imagine it has something to do with her beauty. Miss Abbey Potterson’s remarks to Lizzie illustrate the profound effects of Lizzie’s beauty, even on a fellow female: “I vow and declare,” says Miss Abbey, “I am half ashamed of myself for taking such an interest in you [Lizzie] . . . for I don’t believe I should do it if you were not good-looking. Why ain’t you ugly?” (73). In all likelihood, Lizzie’s beauty is also responsible for securing Headstone’s interest. Whatever the cause of his desire, after his first meeting with Lizzie, Headstone is already admitting the possibility of having her for his wife: Headstone describes to Charley a hypothetical man who “might come to admire [her]” and “might even in time bring himself to think of marrying [her]” even though he

4 The question of beauty is significant to Jen Cadwallader, who argues that Jane Eyre is unique because of the plainness of the heroine. Crafting a “plain Jane” is Brontë’s way of “condemn[ing] an upper-class system of values” which, because it was centered on appearances, actually limited a woman’s ability to “develop selfhood and achieve autonomous action” (235). The question that Cadwallader’s argument raises is whether Lizzie’s beauty is actually a hindrance to her self-development — a question that is beyond the scope of my argument.
would be forced to “overcom[e] in his mind other inequalities of condition and other considerations against [the marriage]” (231). This is Headstone’s first confession of love for Lizzie, and it is unsettling in its cold calculation; however, it must be acknowledged that Lizzie’s working-class station would be difficult for any man of Headstone’s position to overlook. The fact that Headstone is already making the mental leap to marriage is quite unexpected considering his personal code of steadiness and respectability. Headstone is aware of the reckless nature of his affections for Lizzie, but his constant attempts to repress these passions instead of releasing them are part of what prevents him from gaining the novel’s support and succeeding with Lizzie.

There is a distinct difference between Dickens’s treatment of Headstone and Brontë’s treatment of Rivers. While Brontë firmly believes that Rivers is not the man for Jane, she seems to respect and revere him throughout the text, even choosing to praise Rivers during the novel’s final moments. Dickens, on the other hand, leaves Headstone open to ridicule from Wrayburn, from Charley, and even from the narrator himself who occasionally refers to Headstone not by his name but as “schoolmaster” – the same tactic Wrayburn uses to successfully incense Headstone (287). The novel’s somewhat insulting attitude toward Headstone actually serves to create and develop reader sympathy, especially because Headstone seems slightly more sensitive to these jabs than the icy and apparently unflappable St. John Rivers. Headstone is no less insulting toward Lizzie, but he somehow manages to evoke pity even as he causes offense. By making Headstone pitiable and nearly pathetic, Dickens deliberately masks the true danger of his character, crafting him to be a victimized villain.

Brontë closes *Jane Eyre* with a recapitulation of Rivers’s difficult but dignified life as a missionary; the novel’s last words are a prayer, in Rivers’s voice, of hope and steadfast faith (521).
Headstone, realizing that “all that he could suppress in himself he had suppressed,” yields to his desire and decides he must see Lizzie again (336). En route to meet her, the narrator tells us Headstone is losing his “power of self-command” – a debilitating power that, from the novel’s perspective, should be readily abandoned. However, as is clearly evident in the ensuing scenes, Headstone’s self-command can never totally dissipate, it can only be provoked. The more that Headstone flounders, the more desperate are his attempts to bend Lizzie to his will.

When Headstone arrives at the house where Lizzie stays, he is obliged to converse with Miss Jenny Wren until Lizzie returns. Jenny is, of course, quite certain of Headstone’s desires for Lizzie, and she is somewhat amused by his attempts to deny the true nature of his affections (338). Headstone classifies himself as a “perfectly disinterested person,” though he struggles to behave as such especially when Lizzie enters the room. He proceeds to discuss with Lizzie the “disappointing” arrangement of her schooling, which has been initiated and arranged by Wrayburn. Headstone uses this topic to gather Lizzie’s feelings about both Wrayburn and himself, as he offers his own “poor abilities” as a means of further instructing her (340). Dickens’s description of Headstone’s outward appearance communicates volumes about the kind of internal struggle that Headstone is experiencing:

[H]e went on with much greater firmness and force of emphasis: though with a curious disposition to set his teeth, and with a curious tight-screwing movement of his right hand in the clenching palm of his left, like the action of one who was being physically hurt, and was unwilling to cry out. (339)
Headstone tries to master his desires, which – as Rochester and Wrayburn understand – cannot always be done. He acknowledges to Lizzie that he is often compelled to “keep [his feelings] down,” and in this case, his repression seems to be causing him physical pain. Caught in the “heat of . . . torment,” Headstone realizes the interview is escaping his control, so he resigns to make his proposal at another time (340). The way in which Headstone forces this resolution upon Lizzie is perhaps the most uncomfortable part of their discussion: “Will you please come to the understanding,” remarks Headstone, “that there shall be another interview on the subject?” (341). Lizzie questions the purpose of the next interview, and Headstone’s response is curt and forceful: “You – you shall be informed in the other interview.” It is clear from his handling of this situation that Headstone does not wish for Lizzie to participate in a cooperatively-formed decision; he wishes to subject her to his resolutions, which will remain unaffected by her wishes and desires. Once Headstone leaves, Jenny makes a perceptive comment (as is her habit) about Headstone’s disposition. She believes that a man like Headstone might “take fire and blow up,” but he “wouldn’t blow up alone”: he would “carry [a woman] up with him” (341). Jenny’s comment serves as a warning to Lizzie that a man with such a frightful propensity to contain his emotions would make for a dangerous partner and husband.

When next he attempts to propose to Lizzie, Headstone is accompanied by her brother and removed from the watchful eye of Jenny Wren. These conditions, he believes, are slightly more favorable because of the addition of Charley’s support and the absence of Jenny’s curiosity. Before Charley leaves Headstone to his own devices, he tells his sister to “be a rational girl and a good sister,” (387) thus asserting that the
reasonable choice would be for Lizzie to secure the respectability that Headstone could provide for her and for Charley by extension. Charley is already preparing his sister to be dominated by Headstone and to acknowledge the subordinate status that compels her to join with him.

Headstone begins by professing to Lizzie that she is, in fact, “the ruin of [him]” (388). To further dispel any possible hint of romance, he admits that the day he met Lizzie was “a wretched, miserable day.” As Headstone attempts to articulate the agony of his emotions, he grasps a nearby brick with a force that could have “dislodged the stone” (389). This detail serves to signify the sheer power of will that is being harnessed and the unhealthy degree to which Headstone is battling his passions. Sensing that Lizzie is alarmed by his violent struggle, and with promises to “restrain” himself, Headstone requests they take a short, silent walk before he continues the discussion. Lizzie acquiesces to his plea, unable to do anything but yield to his awful power and quiet urgency. After Headstone has gathered himself, he delivers a sick and utterly offensive declaration of love:

“I love you. What other men may mean when they use that expression, I cannot tell; what I mean is, that I am under the influence of some tremendous attraction which I have resisted in vain . . . You could draw me to fire, you could draw me to water, you could draw me to the gallows, you could draw me to any death, you could draw me to anything I have most avoided, you could draw me to any exposure and disgrace . . . .” (389-390)

Much like Darcy, Headstone stresses the fact that he has tried to overcome his affections, which are not only inconvenient but also unpleasant and disruptive. Every association
that Headstone forges in this description is negative: he compares his love to torture, exposure, disgrace, and even death. Interestingly, Headstone suggests that Lizzie is the dominant force, the one who controls and directs his responses. However, what Headstone is unable to realize is that his sense of defeat is prompted by the unavoidable arousal of his own passions, which he attempts but fails to contain in his usual, mechanical way. Lizzie has no direct control over his responses, though Headstone assumes that she must be responsible given his typical success with the art of self-control. In actuality, Headstone is fighting himself, not Lizzie. Headstone then assures Lizzie that he has “conquered” other “considerations” that may have hindered his offer and is now prepared to risk the damage to his “high” reputation and ask for her hand (390). In Headstone’s mind, the fact that he has noticed Lizzie’s shortcomings but graciously decided to “conquer” his feelings against them is reason enough for her to accept and love him; mastery of self naturally warrants mastery of another – or so it would seem until Lizzie realizes that her inclinations should not be considered irrelevant.

To no one’s surprise, Lizzie turns him down. For a brief moment, Headstone becomes violent in his efforts to dominate and persuade Lizzie, and he “[catches] her by the arm” when she attempts to leave him (an impulsive and aggressive act that seems more in tune with the behavior of the successful suitors). However, as Lizzie “release[s] her arm from his grasp” and rallies her “dignity of courage,” Headstone realizes his misstep and promises that he has “recovered” himself (391). Headstone’s constant monitoring of his own behavior makes it very difficult for Lizzie to understand the true nature of his reactions. Soon after, Charley approaches the pair; Headstone bids Charley to let him leave without being spoken to, but not before assuring Charley that tomorrow
morning he will be “just as usual” (393). By Headstone’s manner of departure, Charley soon understands that the proposal did not unfold as he had hoped. Speaking for Headstone, but with an anger that Headstone took pains to avoid, Charley says to Lizzie in exasperation: “You were obliged to tell him [no]! Do you know that he is worth fifty of you? . . . And so all my endeavours to cancel the past and to raise myself in the world, and to raise you with me, are to be beaten down by your low whims; are they?” (393). Charley goes on to claim that Lizzie is undeserving of Headstone anyway, which Headstone himself implied though in a less forthright manner. Lizzie continues to refuse the match even after Charley explains the many ways that both he and Lizzie could benefit by her acceptance. Dickens seems to be calling attention to a lack of consensus regarding the motivation and purpose of the marriage act. Lizzie, of course, believes marriage should be founded upon a mutual feeling of fondness and respect, Headstone views the impulse to marry as a humiliating testament to the power of desire, and Charley uses marriage as a way of climbing the social ladder.

Headstone fails because, like Rivers, he possesses an immutable psychological disposition. Completely accustomed to the processes of repression and containment, Headstone ultimately proves to be unchangeable even in the face of overwhelming desire. (This is particularly evident as he pathetically swears to appear “as usual” the next day, which is arguably impossible after such an emotional upheaval.) With Headstone, Dickens seems to be asserting that the force of desire can actually tear apart the man who is determined to overcome it. A half-hearted and begrudging surrender to emotion is not the same as the willingness to be conquered by it. There is no reason to believe that, once married, Headstone would ever allow himself to love Lizzie openly, freely, and without
shame. Neither is it safe to assume that Lizzie could ever compensate for the painful act of will that resulted in Headstone’s concession to his passions. The only probable outcome, according to Dickens (and iterated by Jenny) is that Headstone’s impulse to contain and control will destroy him and obliterate any ability he has to form a loving and mutually-respecting bond with Lizzie.

Besides Lizzie, the only other person that could inspire such emotion in Bradley Headstone is Eugene Wrayburn. After Headstone’s failed proposal, he reveals to Lizzie that her refusal is made even more unendurable when he considers Wrayburn’s reaction to it: “I had to wrestle with my self-respect when I submitted to be drawn to you in spite of Mr. Wrayburn. You may imagine how low my self-respect lies now . . . [Wrayburn] knew with triumph what was in store for me to-night” (392). Headstone imagines, and rightly so, that Wrayburn rejoices in Lizzie’s rejection of him. Strangely, this thought evokes nearly as much emotion in Headstone as his desire for Lizzie. Wilt explains that there are two dramatic struggles that can be acted out in the nineteenth-century novel: the “heterosexual struggle . . . between a dominant [typically male] and a submissive [typically female] figure” and the “homosocial struggle” that becomes “a possession battle between male titans” (453). The “titans” in this battle are quite opposite in terms of willpower – Headstone is consumed by his own powerful will, and Wrayburn is initially reluctant to enact his will at all. However, Wrayburn undergoes quite a change as result of his relationship with Lizzie; he begins to understand the forces of power at work in a romantic relationship. Wrayburn succeeds with Lizzie by allowing himself to be dominated by certain forces even as he comes to be dominant in other, more forgivable ways.
Conveniently, as Lizzie mulls over Headstone’s strange proposal and Charley’s stern words toward her, Wrayburn enters the scene and offers himself as a comfort in her distress (398). Lizzie is already seeking solace in her friend, Riah, who suspects Wrayburn of harboring dangerous feelings for Lizzie. Wrayburn “politely” asks Riah to leave Lizzie in his trust, but Riah’s instincts inform him that Lizzie should be protected from this man: “I will hear only one voice to-night, desiring me to leave [Lizzie] before I have conveyed her to her home. If she requests it, I will do it. I will do it for no one else” (399). Judging from Riah’s determined response, Wrayburn’s ungoverned passion must be quite visible, and/or Lizzie’s reaction to him is suggestive of his power over her. Wrayburn himself begins to notice his effect on Lizzie, and he begins to feel confident in his dominance:

He knew his power over her. He knew that she would not insist upon his leaving her. He knew that, her fears for him being aroused, she would be uneasy if he were out of her sight. For all his seeming levity and carelessness, he knew whatever he chose to know of the thoughts of her heart. (399)

Suddenly, Wrayburn begins to feel the power that necessarily arises out of Lizzie’s vulnerability. It is undoubtedly strange that Dickens would highlight his successful suitor’s dominant nature in this way, but the realization that Wrayburn is having is both genuine and instructive. He is allowing himself to feel the natural pull of desire and to understand the consequence of passion. Mentally, Wrayburn compares himself to Headstone (a comparison that Lizzie has likely made as well), and Wrayburn feels “superior” in his “self-possession” as he imagines Headstone – so “gloomy” in his “constraint.” Fortunately for Wrayburn, he is not restrained by shame or self-doubt and
not too rigid to allow himself the gratification of the “chase.” Significantly, Wrayburn’s passions do make Riah uneasy. After Riah wishes Lizzie goodnight, he opts to wait outside of her lodging for one hour until he is certain that Wrayburn has ended his pursuit for the evening. Thus, the novel’s concern for Lizzie demands that Wrayburn be somewhat chastened in order to appropriately channel his desire for Lizzie.

Dickens tests Wrayburn’s capacity for growth in a chilling nighttime scene. Lizzie, having just finished work at the paper mill, comes upon an impatient Wrayburn who awaits her arrival at their prearranged meeting spot. As soon as Lizzie is within reach, Wrayburn cannot help but touch her; he struggles to keep his distance from her body even after she specifically requests it (674). Wrayburn is perhaps charming in his persistence but dangerous in his lack of concern for Lizzie’s modesty. He is moved by his sexual desires and yet unconcerned about their effects on Lizzie’s sense of security. As he continues to pour forth his emotions, he recognizes that Lizzie’s goodness should be motivation enough to “impel him to sacrifice himself and spare her;” but this fleeting sentiment is “not strong enough” to force him to place her cares above his own (675). The novel is not disappointed in Wrayburn for expressing his desires but fearful of him because, in so doing, he ignores Lizzie’s wishes and attends to his own satisfaction. Wrayburn continues, unimpeded by self-control, to address himself as Lizzie’s “lover” and ask her to fully disclose her feelings for him. Lizzie, overwhelmed by the conflict between her desires and the impropriety of the situation, appeals “weepingly” to Wrayburn to avoid the topic. Wrayburn thinks that there “was something in the attitude of her whole figure as he supported her, and she hung her head, which besought him to be merciful and not force her to disclose her heart. He was not merciful with her, and he
made her do it” (677-678). Here, Wrayburn is given yet another opportunity to sacrifice his will for Lizzie’s benefit, but he chooses to be forceful and invasive. The sexual undertones of this passage should not be overlooked. By making Lizzie reveal her inner desires, Wrayburn is forcing himself into an intimate space where he has not been invited.

That Wrayburn could appear so dominant and sexually threatening and yet also succeed in his pursuit of Lizzie is a riddle that the novel solves – bizarrely enough – by way of Headstone. Wrayburn is embarrassed by the tears that he sheds after Lizzie’s sincere request that he leave her in peace (679). As if to regain the position of dominance, Wrayburn satisfies himself by recalling his “wonderful power over [Lizzie],” which verifies his belief that it would be “out of the question to leave her” (682). As Mortimer’s fateful words⁶ echo through his mind, Wrayburn saunters along the riverbank and is suddenly attacked by Headstone. Headstone has, of course, been driven mad by Wrayburn’s presumed successes with Lizzie, and Headstone’s unanswered passion finds a vent in the mutilation of Wrayburn. Not only does Lizzie save Wrayburn’s body from certain death but she invests his affections with a seriousness and a gravity that Wrayburn could not have possessed without this incident. Lizzie’s goodness is now manifested in a very real way to Wrayburn, whose reverence for Lizzie soon places her on equal footing with himself. It is indeed fitting that Dickens chooses to rein in Wrayburn’s dominant passions with Headstone’s unforgiving rod of chastisement and containment. This dose of punishment ensures that Wrayburn will view Lizzie not only as the fulfillment of his sexual desire but as a woman to be honored for her strength of character.

⁶ In response to Wrayburn’s explanation of his affections for Lizzie, Wrayburn’s friend, Mortimer, tells him that the entire affair is a “bad business” (681).
Wrayburn is seriously injured but recovering in more ways than one. He intends to respect Lizzie in both word and deed, as he tells Mortimer: “I have wronged [Lizzie] enough in fact; I have wronged her still more in intention. You recollect what pavement is said to be made of good intentions. It is made of bad intentions too. Mortimer, I am lying on it, and I know it!” (719). Here, Wrayburn confesses that he has mistreated Lizzie by not heeding her wishes and even further mistreated her with his bad intentions – a clear reference to his careless sexual desire. However, Wrayburn makes a decision that showcases his emotional growth: he asks Mortimer never to bring Headstone to justice for his rash and murderous actions. Wrayburn explains that “[t]he guilty man, brought to justice, would poison [Lizzie’s] name” (720). Wrayburn adds, “Lizzie and my reparation before all!” Wrayburn is choosing to sacrifice his own will (his desire to see Headstone punished) so that Lizzie can avoid the shame that would accompany her involvement in the sordid affair. In other words, Wrayburn is learning to exercise his will for unselfish purposes, a skill that Headstone, in his staunch obedience of self, might never have acquired.

Lizzie and Wrayburn’s wedding day reads like the exact opposite of an insult proposal. Wrayburn gallantly praises Lizzie, calling her a “brave devoted girl” and a “heroine” (734). Likewise, Lizzie tells Wrayburn that she has “made the marriage that [she] would have given all the world to dare to hope for.” Both man and woman are appreciated for their attributes so that neither occupies a dominant position. This is likewise the case with Jane and Rochester, who form a union that is mutually loving and reliant or, as Jane puts it, a union that results in “perfect concord” (519). These successful suitors – now husbands – are made aware that their own desires are not more powerful or
more deserving than the woman who is the object of them. Similarly, these men prove their adaptability and humility during the recovery process that follows a life-changing injury (Rochester’s blindness and Wrayburn’s near-drowning). Highlighting the successful suitors’ psychological malleability, both authors are careful to show how these men ultimately lose their impulse to dominate, a tendency that is impermanent because it is not tied to a more habitual form of self-domination.

The insult suitors have a bleak and irrevocable fate that is prompted by one significant flaw: obsessive self-mastery. These men possess a formidable willpower that is at once domineering and debilitating. Their inability to handle either themselves or a prospective wife in any way other than as a faltering conscience in need of atonement prevents them from being capable of participating in a healthy relationship. Ultimately, Rivers and Headstone have constricted and contained themselves to the point that they are outside the sphere of human affection. They have distanced themselves as a way of perfecting the process of discipline which is so integral to their character and disposition. It comes as no surprise, then, that they choose to distance themselves during the vulnerable moments of the proposal act. As Mrs. Fairfax explains to Jane in a conversation regarding the caste system within the household, it is not tactful to converse with servants on “terms of equality,” so it becomes necessary to keep them at “due distance for fear of losing one’s authority” (115). In many ways, this statement can be productively applied to the behavior of the insult suitors. They create psychological, economical, physical, or even spiritual distance between themselves and a prospective wife so as to maintain a sense of authority over her. Her refusal, of course, dispels the myth of this authority. The insult suitors are then obliged to turn again to a personal code
of discipline and a system of self-dominance – a crutch that paradoxically leaves them permanently crippled in the act of love.
CHAPTER 2

The Silent Woman and the Rational Romance:
Understanding the Speechlessness in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bleak House*

[T]he unacknowledged lovers were silent . . . Elizabeth, agitated and confused, rather knew that she was happy, than felt herself to be so . . .

- Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

It would not be worth mentioning for its own sake, but I was wakeful and rather low-spirited. I don’t know why. At least I don’t think I know why. At least, perhaps I do, but I don’t think it matters.

- Dickens, *Bleak House*

Elizabeth Bennet, the witty and composed heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, and Esther Summerson, the compassionate yet inhibited heroine-narrator of *Bleak House*, both demonstrate a process of internalization and rationalization in their pursuit (or rejection) of a potential husband. Austen and Dickens, writing approximately five decades apart, seem equally fascinated with the contemplative woman and the way in which she rationalizes the most irrational of emotions, love. Crafting their female protagonists to be observers and philosophers of the world around them, these authors

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7 Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* was written and revised from 1796 to 1812 (Gray vii) and published in 1813; Dickens’s *Bleak House* was written and published serially in 1852-1853.
allow Elizabeth and Esther to devote much intellectual energy toward the act of understanding the men in their lives. In fact, nearly all of the significant moments in these novels are supplemented by the woman’s meditation and “digestion” of events, especially when these events impact the course of the marriage plot.

However, during pivotal interactions between these heroines and their suitors, the scene does not appear to validate the woman’s thoughts – her ideas are left unuttered and her convictions are left unspoken. Within the context of a novel that emphasizes the importance of a woman’s process of thought-construction, the author’s decision to deny the vehicle of voice that would manifest these thoughts may be unsettling or disappointing to the reader, and understandably so. I will claim that the woman’s compulsion to remain silent – in the proposal scene and other important moments – is the result of the author’s decision to reinforce the woman’s (and the novel’s) turn to rationality in the face of overwhelming emotion. This turn to rationality manifests itself in the form of speechlessness that resembles a lack of self-assertion. Interestingly, because the speechlessness blends into the thematic undertones present in each novel (emotional growth and restraint in Pride and Prejudice, repression in Bleak House), this lack of self-assertion is perhaps less noticeable or more forgivable than it would be if the same proposal scenes were taken out of context. Even considering these explanations, each author’s insistence on the woman’s non-response seems to threaten the atmosphere of mutual respect and acknowledgement that one might expect in every proposal act.

The author’s apparent subjugation of his/her heroine during such an obvious scene as the proposal act is curious and seems to demand further investigation. In the case of these novels, the author creates and generally adheres to a pattern of rationality that
negates the heroine’s impulse to assert herself, though her impulse to self-assert (through the act of speaking) is validated by the novel at other significant moments. Because each author has carefully instructed the reader to anticipate and congratulate the heroine for instances of spoken self-assertion, the heroine’s demure acceptance of the seemingly inevitable course of the marriage plot may be irreconcilable with the strength of character which the author has worked to develop in her. Jean Kennard makes a similar claim when she contends that the conclusion of the marriage plot in novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* or *Middlemarch* reads as false because “the convention within which the writer is working . . . [has] force[d] the material into a form which denies much of what she has revealed about her character” (23). Feminist critics like Kennard may wish to believe that Austen and Dickens are chiefly concerned with providing a voice for their heroines that is equally as strong as the voice of their heroes. Even though both authors make moves in this direction, I will argue that Austen and Dickens craft their marriage plots with other considerations in mind. The proposal acts in these novels are intriguing instances of artistic selection; both Austen and Dickens choose the version of the scene that fits snugly within the parameters of the rational romance, which causes them to neglect their commitment to the voices of their heroines.

That both Austen and Dickens were interested in capturing a rational romance is a tribute to a shifting view of love that, as Joanne Brown notes, took place in the eighteenth century. It was during this century that romantic love, a modernized version of courtly love, “appeared as a new narrative form and model for conduct” (36). Romantic love was a distinct change from courtly love – also referred to as passionate love – because romantic love adhered to the “dictates of reality and reason” whereas courtly love was
all-consuming, impractical, and ultimately “unattainable” (31). As Austen’s didactic Mary Bennet so aptly puts it, “every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason” (22), and the characters we most pity or disdain struggle with this simple dictum. Along with its emphasis on reason, romantic love also stresses the understanding and comprehension of self, particularly because modern romance as we know it is “predicated on choice,” or the selection of a partner who suits one’s needs. In this way, the emergence of the romantic narrative is intertwined with the task of self-definition, or recognition of one’s self, so as to recognize love for another (31). Brown classifies romantic love as “an heir of . . . romanticism and the Enlightenment,” thus succinctly summarizing how romantic love is fueled by emotion that has been tempered with reason and clear-headedness and readjusted to incorporate the process of self-discovery (36). There is an obvious tension, however, in rationalizing an emotion and in introducing reason to the realm of the passions; thus, the very nature of the rational romance may prove to be volatile and counterintuitive.

Mary Wollstonecraft, whose work was perhaps more familiar to Austen than Dickens, explores this contradiction further in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft, an outspoken proto-feminist, believes that reason and passion have very different aims. Reason, as she sees it, is the primary means to self-improvement whereas passion is only an indulgence which serves to “disturb the order of society, and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed” (1472). It would seem then that Wollstonecraft might champion these silent women as stoic heroines who have chosen reason over passion, but the suitors’ contrasting position of powerful expression would

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8 In this category, I would include Wickham, Lydia, and Mrs. Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* as well as Guppy from *Bleak House*; these characters struggle to remain reasonable in the midst of their impulses.
likely be a point of objection for Wollstonecraft. In other words, these silent women are not withholding their words as a means of reasoning their way to an equal partnership.

The well-reasoned speechlessness of Elizabeth and Esther during critical interactions with their suitors only serves to magnify the weakest and most insecure part of themselves, a depiction that Wollstonecraft would likely find unsatisfactory.

G. K. Chesterton, himself a prolific writer with a great many opinions on various nineteenth-century authors, had his own thoughts about the paradoxical nature of romance. Chesterton believed that a truly romantic relationship was equal parts accident and choice, a mixture of impulse and rationality (Crowe 210). Chesterton stressed that “lovers as well as questing knights must call on the resources of the rational” to aid them in the crucial decision-making that occurs in every significant relationship (214).

Interestingly, Austen’s portrayal of Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship contains elements of both adventure and reason; theirs is a blend that Chesterton would have undoubtedly hailed as quite romantic.9 However, Robert Polhemus10 is not as quick to praise. He determines a lack of cohesion in Darcy and Elizabeth’s romance because, as he sees it, Darcy is to be credited with the spontaneity while Elizabeth deserves credit for the rationality. In fact, Polhemus argues that, by the end of Pride and Prejudice, it is still “not at all clear that [Elizabeth] ever falls in love with [Darcy]” (qtd. in Crowe 214). The implication here is that there is quite a difference between reasoning one’s way into love and being “seize[d]” by an “involuntary, often blind, power of emotion” – an experience

9 Marian Crowe establishes this claim by reading the four relationships in Pride and Prejudice with Chesterton’s eye for romance.

10 Robert Polhemus, mentioned in Crowe’s article, is the author of Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D.H. Lawrence.
that is commonly known as “falling in love” (214). Polhemus’s reservations about the true nature of Darcy and Elizabeth’s love affair typify a reader’s reaction to the overworked and, perhaps, hyper-rationalized marriage plots in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bleak House*. While the theory of the rational romance does much to explain the authors’ formation of central relationships, it may or may not be able to curtail the feelings of disappointment and uncertainty that are produced within the reader during the pivotal moments in these relationships.

In order to confirm each author’s stake in the rational romance, I will trace the cultivation of rationality in both Elizabeth and Esther, emphasizing the distinct turn from emotion to reason at significant moments throughout the texts. During these moments, and especially during the proposal scenes, I will attempt to interpret the role of silence as a manifestation of rationality. Finally, I will discuss the effect of the authors’ use of the rational romance and its impact on the overall strength and authenticity of the portrayal of the romantic relationships with these texts.

Very early within Austen’s development of Elizabeth’s character, she highlights Elizabeth’s intellectual nature. Elizabeth, we are told, has a “quickness” that results in a sharpened wit, acute powers of observation and analysis, and a tendency to judge others prematurely. She is philosopher of humanity and believes, as she tells her sister Jane, that it is nonsensical to be “blind to the follies and nonsense of others” (11). Elizabeth is dedicated to reading her world honestly and accurately, but too often she allows her intellectual construct to override the evidence before her. In other words, she “creates” the substance of a person not only from the tangibles that she witnesses (their mannerisms, words, and actions) but also from the self-fulfilling notions of humanity that
persist in her own mind. She watches Darcy and Miss Bingley interact, for instance, and she thinks that their behavior is “exactly in unison with her opinion of each” – her opinion being formed long before she has received evidence enough to justify it. This glitch in Elizabeth’s character is crucial not only to the dynamic nature of Darcy and Elizabeth’s relationship but also to the moral arc of the novel. In order for Austen to create a situation in which Elizabeth’s thoughts are her own worst enemy, Austen must craft Elizabeth to be a thinker and a rationalizer above all else. And with such a thinker as the novel’s protagonist, the events themselves are filtered through and colored by Elizabeth’s convictions. Her reaction to Charlotte’s marriage is memorably biased and particularly harsh. Even in the midst of what could be interpreted as a sound argument, Elizabeth reveals the dangers of a mind too used to its own company. Her own views have had ample time to solidify without occasion to be challenged and improved:

There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense. [. . .]

Charlotte’s marriage. . . is unaccountable! in every view it is unaccountable! (89)

Here, Elizabeth claims she has considered Charlotte’s marriage from “every view” and found it lacking in both merit and sense. The fact that Charlotte has already given Elizabeth her rationale for the marriage of course highlights Elizabeth’s apparent lack of respect for Charlotte and her convictions. Elizabeth’s reliance on her own well-reasoned version of the world (however subjective) leads to her habit of turning inward at critical moments and speaking out with a kind of philosophical snobbishness.
Having developed such a volatile and destructive trait in her heroine, Austen sets out to craft a defining moment that will pave the way for Elizabeth’s continued growth. As Austen works toward the crisis – which will manifest itself in Darcy’s first proposal to Elizabeth – she is careful to emphasize Elizabeth’s prejudices even as they are reflected and propagated in and among the members of her town. For example, when the townspeople “discover” Darcy’s mistreatment of Wickham, Austen reveals that “every body was pleased to think how much they had always disliked Mr. Darcy before they had known any thing of the matter” (91). This is also Elizabeth’s mindset, and she is ready to believe anything spoken against Mr. Darcy, including Colonel Fitzwilliam’s innocent allegations against him.¹¹

Immediately following Elizabeth’s interaction with Colonel Fitzwilliam, Austen draws a clear parallel between reason and silence. Elizabeth, instead of forming her opinions of Darcy by way of conversational exchange with Colonel Fitzwilliam, chooses to “shut [herself] into her own room” so that “she could think without interruption” (121). Here, Elizabeth practices the withdrawal that the novel seems to think is a necessary component of rationality – it is only within the silence of her room that Elizabeth can construct her opinions of Darcy. Interestingly, Elizabeth’s intensified feelings overwhelm her capacity for quiet rationalization during Darcy’s first proposal, but she will later revert to this pattern of distance and withdrawal during Darcy’s second and final proposal.

Mr. Darcy’s first marriage proposal and its after-effects successfully illustrate the delicate and oxymoronic nature of a true rational romance. Darcy attempts to reason his

¹¹ Colonel Fitzwilliam tells Elizabeth that Darcy “congratulated himself on lately having saved a friend [Mr. Bingley] from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage [with Jane Bennet]” (121).
way through his feelings for Elizabeth, which ultimately leads him to a detailed listing of her inferiorities. Finding that he cannot master his emotions, he concludes that the only logical choice is to yield to his affections for her. After Elizabeth expresses her displeasure in the manner of his proposal, Darcy defends himself by saying that he only wished to avoid any “unqualified, unalloyed inclination” by applying “reason” and “reflection” to their potential union (125). Undoubtedly, this rational process is one that Elizabeth is familiar with, though she most likely has never spent time, as Darcy has, contemplating her own deficiencies. She classifies Darcy’s behavior as ungentlemanly even though, under different circumstances, she too would advocate an application of reason – however harsh – to such a monumental decision. This intersection of reason and emotion proves to be quite difficult even for two people who pride themselves in speaking and behaving rationally.

It is imperative to note that Elizabeth is anything but silent during Darcy’s first proposal. She proceeds to reiterate her rejection of Darcy several times as if to wound him. In fact, Darcy is forced to interrupt her in order to speak his parting words: “You have said quite enough, madam. I perfectly comprehend your feelings . . . .” (126). Though Elizabeth is quite vocal during the proposal act, as soon as Darcy leaves, she solaces herself in silent yet “agitating reflections” to settle the “the tumult of her mind [which] was painfully great” (126). Significantly, Elizabeth experiences some uneasiness following her verbal chastisement of Darcy, which is proof that her mental and philosophical constructs are in a complicated state of flux. After all, we are quite accustomed to regarding Elizabeth’s verbal expression as a sure and natural extension of her thought process (which incites our discomfort in her lack of response in later scenes).
As J. Hillis Miller notes in his analysis of Trollope’s “British maidens,” – also applicable to Austen’s female characters – “integrity depends . . . on a self-awareness of what [these women] really think and feel . . . [and] on [their] inability to speak or behave except in ways that follow directly from that inner self-possession” (50). One could conclude that Elizabeth’s self-possession must be in a weakened state in order for her to question or regret any expression that had sprung from her inner convictions.

Elizabeth begins a more thorough analysis of her treatment of Darcy once she receives his explanatory letter. This scene is arguably the novel’s clearest display of rationality at work. In his letter, Darcy reasons his way through his behavior toward both Jane and Wickham; subsequently, Elizabeth’s notion of Darcy’s character – and her process of assessing a person’s character in the first place – is reconfigured. As Felicia Bonaparte explains, Darcy’s letter to Elizabeth “functions not only as a turning point in the progress of events but as the focal point of a theme that is devoted . . . [to the] ‘reading’ of the world as well as the word” (141). As Elizabeth reevaluates her prejudices toward others, she, like a true daughter of the Enlightenment, puts herself under the microscope. Once she has fully digested the letter, she realizes how her feelings, premature and unsubstantiated, have clouded her assessment of both Wickham and Darcy: “Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned” (135). Elizabeth admits that her reasoning is at fault – a painful confession for someone whose sense of self is firmly rooted in her rationalized understanding of people and events. Hence, Elizabeth has a
powerful and by no means over-exaggerated realization: “Till this moment, I never knew myself.”

Elizabeth’s seemingly endless perusal of the letter and her willingness to consider not only its contents but its implications toward a restructuring of her self-concept is a point of interest for Bonaparte, who finds Austen’s handling of Elizabeth to be strikingly postmodern: “Austen suggests we are not always subjects even to ourselves. Often we are, no less than others, objects to our own understanding and must attempt to read ourselves in the same way we read others” (150). Elizabeth’s decision to regard her family and herself objectively and view each through a potentially threatening and strangely new philosophical lens is a suggestion of maturity and growth. Furthermore, with this progress toward self-discovery, Austen begins to lay the groundwork for Elizabeth’s later encounters with Darcy and admit the possibility of Elizabeth’s uncharacteristic response to the new opportunities before her.

In the interval of time between Darcy’s first and second proposals, Elizabeth’s mind is unceasingly busy. She makes the decided attempt to “compose” her feelings for Darcy, especially one night as she lies awake “two whole hours, endeavouring to make [her feelings] out” (169). Chesterton might say, at this point, that there is a bit too much solitary calculation on Elizabeth’s part – she seems to be missing the spontaneous passion that Chesterton might wish to see in her affection for Darcy. Eventually, Elizabeth does decide that Darcy would “suit” her because of his “disposition and talents” (199). In a passage that is disconcerting in its mathematical approach to marriage, Austen details the reasons why Darcy and Elizabeth would make a good match:
It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received the benefit of greater importance. (199)

These specifics given, the reader can only watch their interaction to see whether authentic emotion will surface.

It is Darcy’s second proposal, functioning as both the novel’s climax and resolution, which is perhaps the most ambiguous scene in *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen, having thus crafted a rational woman to take part in a rational romance, now has the challenge of convincingly supplying the emotion that a reader would certainly expect from Elizabeth (if not Darcy) and probably anticipate in any successful proposal act. Kennard asks the question: “Do we really believe that Elizabeth Bennet will be happy with Mr. Darcy?” (23). Well, the fact is that if we must be convinced, the proposal scene is the place to inspire belief; but, unfortunately, Austen is very stingy with the details.

Darcy begins by reaffirming his love for Elizabeth; then he asks her to speak “one word” to either encourage him or “silence him forever” (235). This is, undoubtedly, the perfect opportunity for some of Austen’s revealing dialogue; however, the rest of the crucial exchange is narrated so that Elizabeth’s words are masked beneath Austen’s formal syntax:

Elizabeth feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forced herself to speak; and immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand, that her sentiments had undergone so material a change
. . . as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurances.

(235)

We are told that in response to Elizabeth’s awkward acquiescence Darcy “express[es] himself . . . as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do.” However, we are aware of no such outpouring of unbridled passion from Elizabeth. We are told that she has difficulty even making eye contact with Darcy, and, instead, she chooses to walk beside him silently while he confesses his love. Once Darcy and Elizabeth join the others, Elizabeth speaks to no one about the recent turn of events, not even Jane who directly inquires about where she has been. The narrator informs us that “[t]he acknowledged lovers [Mr. Bingley and Jane] talked and laughed, [while] the unacknowledged lovers were silent” (239). Darcy is silent because of his quiet disposition, and Elizabeth is silent because she is “agitated and confused, [and] rather knew that she was happy, than felt herself to be so . . . .” In other words, Elizabeth can comprehend that she ought to be happy, but she has less success convincing herself that she is truly fulfilled. Austen must have deemed it necessary to highlight Elizabeth’s uncertainty here so that she can catch Elizabeth in the act of rationalizing her way through her emotions, a habit that Austen clearly endorses. However, it seems curious and even dangerous for the outcome of the marriage plot that Austen would emphasize such an inner confusion after the novel’s most significant decision – Elizabeth’s acceptance of Darcy – has already been made.

Modern readers and scholars experience some difficulty in making sense of this scene, and many find fault with it. Janis Stout, for instance, claims that of all of Austen’s works, this proposal act “affords the most familiar and most frequently noted example of
Austen’s reticence in presenting love scenes.” Stout, like many, is disappointed by the fact that the reader is “shut out” during the climax of the narrative (316), a reaction, I would argue, that is directly related to Elizabeth’s omitted response. Likewise, Mary Alice Burgan laments that “Jane Austen’s prose is usually a source of wonder and delight . . . under the pressure of rendering Elizabeth’s mental state, however, it falters” (31). While I agree that in this scene Austen’s prose seems to be ill-suited to the sentiments she is attempting to portray, I am less sure about the notion that Austen feels intimidated by the task of rendering Elizabeth’s mental state. After all, Austen has devoted the majority of the novel to the task of detailing Elizabeth’s mental state. Why is it, then, that Austen decides in this proposal scene not only to silence Elizabeth but also create a distance between the reader and Elizabeth’s inner voice? When contrasted with the scene in which Elizabeth reads Darcy’s letter, this proposal scene seems uninterested in maintaining a sense of intimacy between Elizabeth and the reader. Consequently, without any evidence of attitude or emotion, the reader is strangely and uncomfortably separate from Elizabeth’s true feelings.

On the other hand, some interesting and valid explanation can be given to justify Austen’s handling of this scene. The explanations that are the most convincing are those that attempt to view the proposal act as an indispensable moment in the development and solidification of Elizabeth’s personal and philosophical growth (arguably, the central theme of Austen’s work). For instance, Stout argues that Austen’s purpose during the second proposal is to keep the “thematic dimension central to her fiction,” and in order to do this she must not allow “powerful private emotions” to overwhelm the novel’s essential message (320). Austen sees fit, however, to develop Elizabeth’s powerful
emotions at other thematically-relevant moments, so Stout’s reasoning does not seem to hold true. Nevertheless, to advocate for the success of the scene, it is worth considering Austen’s utilization of theme. With Elizabeth, Austen has centered on her growth and maturation as she learns to discipline her prejudices and remain intellectually and philosophically open to outside influences. Kathleen Lundeen sees a manifestation of this theme in Elizabeth’s silence; she believes that Elizabeth’s non-response to Darcy provides space for the reader to “consider her emotional blossoming” stemming from her philosophical adjustment. In contrasting Elizabeth’s reactions to Darcy’s first and second proposals, Lundeen sees Elizabeth’s careless and “loquacious rejection” of Darcy’s first offer as reason enough to applaud her “humble surrender” to his second offer (72). In other words, the effectiveness of the second proposal rests particularly on its delineation of Elizabeth’s philosophical and intellectual growth, which is emphasized by her nascent ability to listen with openness rather than speak with impetuosity.

The conundrum that this assertion creates is the alleged impossibility of both illustrating the growth of Elizabeth and providing a believable scene in which Elizabeth responds with the vigor and candidness that we would expect (and hope) to witness from her. It is worth remembering that an outspoken woman was not necessarily a disrespectful or threatening being to a nineteenth-century author; oftentimes, she was cast as interesting and desirable. As Martha Vicinus explains, “[the fictitious] marriages that were most successful . . . showed spirited, even sharp-tongued, women who deviated from the narrow definition of femininity endorsed by the etiquette books” (x). It follows, then, that if Austen had the ability to fully depict Elizabeth’s thoughts, words, and feelings (which she did), and if it was plausible for an outspoken woman to be
successfully married (which it was), then Austen must have capitulated to other considerations while crafting the conclusion to Darcy and Elizabeth’s marriage plot. The process of conjecture at this point is limitless perhaps, but I would argue that Austen’s commitment to the cultivation and depiction of rationality in Elizabeth actually sets the author up for failure in the final proposal scene. When the intellectual processes that have been foregrounded and even championed in earlier scenes are applied to this proposal scene, they do not permit Elizabeth to respond feelingly or candidly. This is a problem that becomes magnified by Darcy’s emotional response, which, paradoxically, is encouraged and validated by the novel. The reader is perhaps excited to see Elizabeth’s intellectual growth, but not willing to completely dispense with her passions (as Wollstonecraft might advocate). Given Elizabeth’s characteristic spunk and liveliness, she seems a different heroine altogether in such an overwrought, intellectual environment; the reader feels that the Elizabeth who has mildly – even silently – consented to marry Darcy so little resembles the Elizabeth whom Darcy (and the novel) has fallen in love with in the first place. Austen’s rendering of Elizabeth becomes ambiguous because her obvious preference for the rational romance has muddied her portrayal of Elizabeth as a strong, assertive woman; this same contradiction could also describe Dickens’s heroine, Esther Summerson.

An analysis of Esther Summerson is difficult because readers are not given unlimited access to Esther’s thoughts, and when we are granted access, we are not always convinced of Esther’s sincerity. (Whether Esther believes herself to be sincere is an intriguing question that I will later address.) Though Esther remains somewhat aloof, Dickens does give us crucial moments of insight, beginning with Esther’s opening
remarks. Esther tells us, “I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever” (27). Esther’s statement that she is “not clever” seems odd – she is either unusually honest, false in her modesty, or strangely prone to self-derision. Despite the quality time we spend with her, it is perhaps a credit to Dickens that we are never quite sure, even by the novel’s closing sentence, \(^{12}\) if Esther’s responses are genuine unless they are translated into action. Unlike Elizabeth, we trust Esther’s physical responses more than her words because Esther’s tendency is to remain guarded in her speech. Dickens seems interested, though, in cultivating Esther’s powers of assertion and challenging her patterns of inhibition.

Dickens’s relationship to the rational romance is evidently more conflicted than Austen’s, particularly considering the unfortunate way in which Esther acquires her method of rationalization. As a child, Esther learns to become comfortable with solitude because she is forced to socialize and conduct most of her “conversation” with her doll. During these conversations, Esther forms opinions and assigns meaning to “all [she] had noticed” during the day. Even through her modesty, Esther seems proud of her “silent way of noticing” people and events in her quest to “understand [them] better” (28). She learns how to create a version of the world that makes sense to her, which could become debilitating as her own opinions remain unchecked by the outside world (Elizabeth, in her earlier stages, is also prone to this kind of self-regulated reality.) Esther’s conversations with her doll are an inadequate replacement for the more sophisticated interaction that she desperately seeks and does not receive from Miss Barbary, her primary caregiver. As

\(^{12}\) The last sentence of the novel is narrated by Esther and reads precisely as follows: “But I know that my dearest little pets [children] are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me – even supposing –” (989).
a result, Esther learns to acquire a comfort with her solitary and self-contained process of rationalization, and, conversely, she learns to find fault in her desire for expression. This habit of self-containment is a trait that the novel casts in a negative light; though Esther’s comfort with solitude and rationality typifies the disposition of an Enlightenment thinker, Esther’s containment does not allow her to grow or acquire a confident form of self-expression. Esther’s challenges are, therefore, opposite of Elizabeth’s – while Elizabeth must learn to occasionally allow others’ voices to rise above the pitch of her own, Esther must allow her voice to resonate.

Esther’s defining moment, or the moment that leaves an indelible stamp on her personhood, occurs when Miss Barbary attempts, not so gingerly, to inform Esther about her mother. Esther learns that both she and her mother were considered a “disgrace,” most likely from her mother’s surrender to passion at the point of Esther’s conception. Miss Barbary goes on to declare the rules by which the ever-unfortunate Esther must abide: “Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it” (30). Esther, so young and still so impressionable, takes these words to heart. Miss Barbary has ordered her into “submission,” and Esther obeys – at least outwardly – for the rest of her life. After Miss Barbary delivers her speech, Esther, hurt and emotionally confused, seeks the comfort of Dolly, her closet companion: “I went up to my room, and crept to bed, and laid my doll’s cheek against mine wet with tears; and holding that solitary friend upon my bosom, cried myself to sleep” (31). Here, narrator-Esther is moved to tears, and consequently feels compelled to add, “I hope it is not self-indulgent to shed these tears as I think of it. I am very thankful, I am very cheerful, but I cannot quite help their coming to my eyes” (31). These few lines simply and effectively
depict Esther’s tendency to ignore and repress her emotions. Even as she attempts to convince us (and possibly herself) that she is happy, her eyes fill with tears. Dickens is making us aware that Esther is wired to over-rationalize, sometimes at the expense of expressing her true feelings and desires.

It is worth asking the question: Why would Dickens craft such an enigmatic person to be his narrator? As Richard Currie recognizes, “[a]t no point . . . does Esther take any credit or permit her feelings to take center stage. The circumstance is quite odd since one-half of the novel is hers to tell . . .” (17). The issue is more complicated than a simple lack of development on Dickens’s part; oftentimes he purposefully draws attention to Esther’s anxiety as she attempts and subsequently fails to elaborate on her feelings. Early on, Esther writes that it seems “curious” to write about herself because no one could even be interested in the narrative of her life (40). When the narrative seems unavoidably tied to the events of her life, she tries to side-step the reader’s attention. This is exactly what she does when she is informed that she will be provided for under Jarndyce’s care; according to narrator-Esther, “What the destitute subject of [Jarndyce’s] offer tried to say, I need not repeat. What she did say, I could more easily tell, if it were worth the telling. What she felt, and will feel to her dying hour, I could never relate” (35). These sentences are packed with many peculiarities. First and perhaps most obviously, Esther’s words are filled with self-abasement, or what Currie refers to as “subdue[ed] instances of egotism” (16) – she appears uncertain that her voice is even worth hearing. Next, one must admit how strange it is for our narrator to find she is unable to relate such significant emotions. Isn’t that, after all, the purpose of a narrator? Robyn Warhol offers an interesting and plausible reason for Esther’s guarded narration; Warhol terms it an
“unnarration,” which occurs when a narrator “cannot or will not tell what happened” (259). Contrary to its apparent function, unnarration actually “opens up alternative stories” and serves to create possibility where the narrator tries to ignore it. The technique of unnarration can be productively applied to other critical scenes in which Esther, by avoiding a response, actually gives her reader the power to infer it. Dickens relies on this power of inference when Esther herself refuses to provide a genuine explanation. By using this method of narration, Dickens implies that Esther has much to tell, but she has reservations about being openly assertive and forthright.

As Dickens works toward Jarndyce’s proposal to Esther, he supplies us with a comical scene that is nonetheless instrumental in the depiction of Esther’s potential for strength and growth. Guppy, an energetic law clerk, is enamored with Esther, and he makes the appallingly rash decision to ask for her hand. Despite the humorous details–Guppy is dressed to impress with a multicolored neckerchief and a “large hot-house flower in the button-hole,” and he attempts to calm his nerves by quickly disposing of no less than four glasses of wine–the scene seems interested in creating a situation in which Esther must assert herself. She is marvelously successful. After Guppy lists all the particulars of his salary (and the finer qualities of his mother), he proposes: “In the mildest of language, I adore you. Would you,” says Guppy, “be so kind as to allow me (as I may say) to file a declaration – to make an offer!” (150). The law-speak is transparent enough for Esther who, “not much frightened,” wastes no time in refusing him: “Get up from that ridiculous position immediately,” orders Esther, “or you will oblige me to break my promise [of keeping you in confidence] and ring the bell!” (152). Here, there is no hint of anguished deliberation on Esther’s part. She responds even
before she has time to over-analyze – though she does allow herself of few solitary moments of laughter and tears that evening in her room (154). Either Guppy brings out the severer passions in Esther or, more likely, Esther has been diluting parts of her personality so as to more closely adhere to Miss Barbary’s mandate of submission. Currie also recognizes that “even as Esther follows conduct-book prescriptions for behavior and thinking . . . the novel subverts the idea that she is a humble housekeeper engaged in self-effacement” (13). In this proposal scene and other moments, Dickens depicts an Esther that is full of strength and self-assertion; suddenly, we are no longer convinced by Esther’s outward show of humility.

Jarndyce’s proposal to Esther is as perplexing as Darcy’s to Elizabeth – and perhaps even more so – because it may be that here an actual proposal does not occur. As Esther and Jarndyce converse, she notices that his expression is full of “possibility” (688). Jarndyce goes on to say that he wishes to write Esther a meaningful letter, but he will not execute his plan unless she convinces him “that nothing can change” their relationship. A proposal is nothing if not the sure promise of change, so this initial request must have been off-putting for Esther. Jarndyce then asks Esther to send for his letter in a week’s time, and they shake hands in agreement (689). Chesterton would wince, along with most readers, because there is emphatically no passion in this arrangement. Everything about their potential union is calculated and over-rationalized, particularly Esther’s response.

After the week had passed during which nothing was said by either about the letter, Esther sends her maid Charley to Jarndyce’s room to retrieve it. The second-hand

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13 For example, Esther repeatedly tells Harold Skimpole, to his face, that she suspects him of taking bribes in exchange for access to Jo and his secrets (933).
nature of this delivery is a signal that Esther will unfortunately revert to her patterns of inhibition and passivity during this moment – perhaps the most important of her life. When Charley returns with the letter, Esther asks her to “lay it on the table,” which allows her to look at it, “thinking of many things.” Esther then recalls her entire life story beginning with her “overshadowed childhood” and concluding with her “happy life” under Jarndyce’s roof. Esther intends, before she even reads the letter, to incorporate its contents into the story of her life, thus, rationalizing Jarndyce’s necessary place in her heart. She finally reads the letter, which, according to her, “is not a love letter though it expressed so much love;” the letter concludes by asking Esther, not if she would be Jarndyce’s wife, but if she would be “the mistress of Bleak House.” The proposal is in letter form, which does not allow Esther to use her voice as a means of acceptance and automatically precludes her from asserting a strong and resonant answer.

Several issues beg to be considered in this scene. First, Esther’s digestion of her letter is striking in its similarity to Elizabeth’s reading of Darcy’s letter; in both cases, the woman incorporates the letter into her intellectual and philosophical construct, rationalizing its contents, and thus creating a meaning that functions as her reality. Second, as Allan Christensen points out, Jarndyce’s letter is genuine in its offer of a choice. Esther, of course, can either accept or refuse, but her “vocation for self-punishment has perversely turned [it] into a very different sort of text” (62). Esther feels that Jarndyce’s repeated acts of good will provide her with motivation enough to “devote [her] life to his happiness” (692). Here again is the suggestion of Esther’s tendency to deny her own interests and submit to someone else’s desires; though, it is imperative to note that (as substantiated in her interaction with Guppy) she has at times acted with her
own interests as her chief concern. Third and perhaps most obviously, Esther does not fully disclose the contents of Jarndyce’s letter – she merely summarizes the letter emphasizing his goodness and her unworthiness. Here, Christensen believes there is evidence that “Esther remains as much a miswriter of her own story as she is a misreader of Jarndyce’s text” (65). In other words, Esther’s process of rationalization is failing her – she is insisting on a version of the text that would venerate Jarndyce, subjugate herself, and bind herself to him. That she actually desires something very different is most apparent in her physical response, which leads to the fourth and final point. Once Esther decides to accept Jarndyce’s offer, she is overcome with emotion and “crie[s] very much” because she has the distinct impression that a part of herself is now “indefinitely lost” to her (692). Narrator-Esther explains that she “was very happy, very thankful, very hopeful, but [she] cried very much.” As earlier stated, Esther’s physical response must be deemed more reliable than her words: obviously Esther is quite unhappy. I would argue, perhaps with no other basis than Esther’s reason and good sense, that she is also painfully aware of her unhappiness. That she feels compelled to repress these emotions is undeniable, but she is always on the verge of failure in her attempts to negate her emotions by rationalizing her way around them. The novel does not champion this repression in Esther; in fact, there is a distinct sense of disappointment as Esther commits herself to this marriage – a commitment that could only be made possible by Esther’s habitual process of internalization and rationalization.

Next follows the silence. Esther, having made up her mind, waits for Jarndyce to prompt her response; however, the next morning, Jarndyce does “not say a word” (693). Esther thinks that surely he will mention it the next day, or even the next week, but in all
that time he never makes the first reference to his proposal. Finally, Esther concludes that she must broach the subject: “I thought then, growing uneasy, that I ought to write an answer. . . I waited seven more days, and he never said a word” (694). Esther’s hesitation in this situation stands in stark opposition to her immediate rejection of Guppy. Even considering that an acceptance to a proposal would likely be handled more delicately than a rejection, Esther’s non-response is certainly unsettling to the reader (and to Jarndyce, one would suppose) because, as Esther attempts to pardon Jarndyce’s silence and rationalize her own, her emotions are being further embedded and buried. Christensen notices the signs of a potential explosion brewing within Esther: “[Esther’s] narration . . . requires the constant silencing of the rebellious and ungrateful, but more authentic, self that has another story to tell – and that will not always be silenced” (65). Christensen is right that Esther constantly battles the more “authentic” version of herself – the self that wishes to be heard – but, unfortunately, her more submissive self is the one that joins with Jarndyce. When Esther finally relays the news to Jarndyce that she will in fact be the mistress of Bleak House, she observes that “it made no difference presently,” which is exactly what is most dysfunctional about their relationship. Esther remains passive and submissive, repressing her desires and allowing someone else’s voice to override her own. The spark of strength that Dickens kindles within Esther, the same glimmer of personality that excites the reader, is snuffed out by Jarndyce.

As if to emphasize Esther’s ongoing struggle, Dickens provides her with Woodcourt, a new and desirable love interest, and she loses her voice yet again. During Woodcourt’s proposal, spoken and directed by Jarndyce, Jarndyce beseeches Esther to “not speak” because “it is for me [Jarndyce] to speak now” (964). Jarndyce then hands
Esther over to Woodcourt without a single word of assent from Esther. Not a word does she speak in response, and, even more disappointing, not a word is solicited from her in return.

In the midst of our disappointment in the construction of these scenes, it is worth attempting to understand why they were crafted in such a way. Though it is tempting to believe, as many feminist critics do, that these authors were pinpointing marriage as the height of “women’s oppression” (Brown 44) and that these types of unions cannot and do not attempt to “tell the truth about the nature of women” (Kennard 24), there are perhaps less scathing conclusions to be drawn. One hypothesis is that nineteenth-century authors may have been exploring the workings of a new type of romance – the rational romance. Within the parameters of this kind of affection, the process of self-discovery and reflection was highly valued and emphasized. In the cases of both Elizabeth and Esther, the process of self-realization is vital if they are to believably perform their roles as heroines and protagonists. In order for Austen and Dickens to highlight the journey toward self-discovery, they may have found it necessary to curb the expression of their heroines in order to stress this process of rationalization.

With that said, it is also worth noting that neither of these authors tended to shy away from the depiction of expressive women. Both Elizabeth and Esther are given moments of powerful expression, and these are often the moments when they seem most alive. Christensen agrees that “in [Esther’s] underground self [we find] a more attractive protagonist than the one that has dutifully agreed to marry Jarndyce” (66). Perhaps, this is what summarizes our complaint. It seems that it should be possible for an assertive and expressive female character to be also happily engaged or married – the two distinctions
should not be hopelessly at odds. Though the theory of the rational romance may satisfy some readers, it may not be reason enough to excuse the silence.
CHAPTER 3

Fairies and Angels, Seducers and Guides:

Female Influence in *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre*

“As by what instinct do you pretend to distinguish between a fallen seraph of the abyss and a messenger from the eternal throne – between a guide and a seducer?”

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

Both Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë experiment with the force of female influence by developing a spectrum of female characters who possess a variety of powers. While these authors feel comfortable crafting influential women, they are uncertain as to the form that this influence should take. In *David Copperfield*, for instance, Dora (as seductress) is notably successful in encouraging David’s sexual desire even though she is unable to supply him with the companionship and grace that Agnes eventually provides. And even Agnes comes to represent more than a domestic goddess as her practical attributes become secondary to her aura of warmth and comfort which mystically surrounds David even in her absence. Clearly, Dickens does not define or restrict the scope of female influence, just as Brontë chooses not to limit Jane’s powers to a domestic sphere that, to her, cannot encompass all of life’s passions.

In broadening the range of possibility, Dickens and Brontë incorporate into the conventional realm of female influence an unexpected element: fantasy/supernaturalism. Several sympathetic female characters in *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre* subscribe not
to the parameters of domestic ideology but to the whims of their desires and imaginations, making them fairy-like instead of angelic. These women are sprightly and alluring rather than predictable and obedient; they become sexually-charged beings who are capable of charming their suitors into a state of love. The magic of their enchantment is, of course, in full force within the proposal scenes, during which the men are frantic to capture the irresistible siren.

Interestingly, Dickens and Brontë do not condemn this type of enchantment, which would seem to run counter to established notions of female influence. It is true that nineteenth-century women were expected to be influential within the domestic sphere; however, their influence was carefully prescribed and limited. A sensual and supernatural woman who could easily bend the will of a stunned, admiring suitor would not be an acceptable or valuable domestic figure according to the female influence model. In fact, the magical qualities of the fairy-woman could easily be considered dangerous in the context of domestic ideology, which highly esteemed a woman’s virtue and subservience. Ideally, a proper Victorian woman would neutralize her powers of seduction and enchantment in order to exemplify the virtues of morality and fortitude, thereby living out her duty as man’s instructor and guide.

Even though these authors uphold conventional notions of female influence by the novels’ end,¹⁴ their willingness to investigate the alternatives works to highlight the shortcomings of the female influence model. What, then, can be deduced from the ambiguous and conflicted nature of the representations of female influence within these novels? I will argue that these authors provide a range female influence because they are

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¹⁴ Both *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre* close with marriages in which the husband is guided by a pure and virtuous kind of female influence.
interested in understanding and fulfilling all the needs of their male characters. In other words, these authors seem to desire both the seducer and guide for their heroes. The supernatural/erotic elements in these fairy-women are intriguing and attractive to male characters because they validate aspects of male desire (passion, erotic love, unfettered emotion) that the “angel-in-the-house” figure either corrects or ignores. Significantly, Dickens and Brontë choose to explore the fairy-woman’s capacity to satisfy her suitor even at the risk of complicating the fairy-woman’s self-concept or subjecting her to society’s harsh judgment. I will argue, then, that this twist in feminine influence is calculated with the suitor/husband in mind. The dichotomous nature of the social, sexual, and religious aspects of female influence in these novels is a consequence of the authors’ attempt to trace and satisfy male desire.

In order to appreciate the risks that Dickens and Brontë endeavor to take, it becomes necessary to understand the nature of female influence as it was conceived by contemporary audiences and critics. The Victorian middle-class woman, despite her social and economic dependence, was judged by her ability to positively influence her husband and fulfill her role as protector of domestic bliss. The nature of this powerful feminine influence was discussed at length by conduct-book writers of the period, particularly Sarah Ellis who believed the woman’s task was to “counteract the onslaught of evil in the world” by devoting herself to “the social and moral well-being” of her husband and family (Ayres 4). This domestic arrangement, according to Ellis, was beneficial for both man and woman: the man received care and direction, while the

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15 Brenda Ayres argues that Dickens’s texts “manipulate” men so as to clearly demonstrate their beliefs about and expectations of women (1-2). My argument here is the reverse: that Dickens adjusts the demeanor/behavior of the women to suit the oftentimes contradictory needs of the men.
woman acquired a sense of purpose through the practice of love and consideration – a mission that functioned as her profession (Davidoff and Hall 183). With this mission at the forefront of her mind, a woman did not require types of validation that existed outside the home whereas the man’s responsibility as bread-winner forced him into the callous and corrupt outside world. Thus, Victorian men and women were assigned to separate “spheres.” As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall explain, “[w]omen did not need the accomplishments of men, they did not need to be involved with parts of his work . . . , but they could expect to influence him and thus assist in fulfilling the duties given him by God” (116). Even though the woman’s sphere was significantly more limited than her husband’s, she alone was equipped with the power to sustain her husband and children and maintain the dignity and serenity of her household.

As Elizabeth Langland remarks, “[j]ust as [Queen] Victoria ran the nation so, too, Victorian women ran their households” (66). There were, of course, many opinions as to the proper makeup of a woman who could accomplish the delicate and regal task of directing a household. Ellis instructed the Victorian woman to be possessed of “a contented mind, an enlightened spirit, and an exemplary life” so that her very actions could inspire reform (qtd in Ayres 4). Coventry Patmore, in his description of the ultimate female, refers to the ideal Victorian woman as an “Angel in the House,” a term that has come to encapsulate the “selfless, virtuous, pure, and spiritualized deity [in female form], who presided over hearth and home and whose presence was a refuge from the storms of commercial strife” (Langland 69). The vocabulary here is conspicuously religious, and the expectations surrounding this angel-figure are not only practical (i.e. peacefulness and order) but also spiritual. The spiritual component perfectly suited the
woman’s habits of consideration and guidance because, as Davidoff and Hall point out, “[religious belief] offered personal comfort and security in an unstable and unsafe world” while reinforcing the difference between right and wrong (77).

Literary explorations of female influence are more complex than the angel-in-the-house model might suggest. While conduct-book descriptions could be somewhat abstract in their grand portrayal of the wife’s abilities and duties, the realistic novelist depicted the female figure in all shades of confidence and uncertainty, creating a character whose daily accomplishments and struggles sometimes implicitly conflicted with established tenets of domestic ideology. Apart from the challenge of creating a “real” woman who could flourish under these rigid conditions, novelists such as Dickens and Brontë felt compelled to experiment with alternate ways of investing their heroines with power. The full force of the woman’s power was not readily apparent in her household station, simply because this kind of power was felt rather than seen and allowed rather than asserted. Both Dickens and Brontë choose to make feminine power more visible by forging associations between femininity and supernaturalism. Even Sarah Ellis makes a passing reference to the “fairy order” of the household, implying that the woman’s powers were as mystical as they were practical (qtd. in Langland 76). Dickens and Brontë take this notion to the extreme by creating women who are electric with power – not political power, of course, but a supernatural, quasi-magical power that becomes a more dazzling vehicle for their feminine influence.

In this chapter, I will contrast two forms of female influence within Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Both authors develop versions of the “angel

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16 Certain powers – like attraction, seduction, and mystery – I will argue are put in place to satiate the desires of men.
in the house” alongside a rival, fairy-figure that is influential in her own right. (In *Jane Eyre*, the fairy-figure and the angel happen to be the same woman, Jane.) My purpose for focusing on these very different types of female influence is (1) to reach a conclusion about the authors’ assessment of male desire and (2) to prove these authors are advocating a readjustment of the conventions of femininity. While I do believe that Dickens and (especially) Brontë wanted more excitement for their heroines, I will posit that their disgust with the domestic angel is her inability to fully satisfy her husband. In the course of my argument, I will analyze characters’ relationships using specific moments from the courtship phase, the proposal scene, and the marriage itself.

It is perhaps only natural that Dickens would create a fairy-woman given his inclination for fairy tales. His essay “Frauds on the Fairies,” written three short years after *David Copperfield*, is a “midcentury manifesto” that speaks to the “importance of the imagination to the Victorians” (Pennington 200). According to John Pennington, Dickens’s essay was written in defense of “the fantastic imagination,” which served as a “liberating force” in an over-reasoned and “utilitarian” age. The bigger problem that the essay addresses, however, is not a simple lack of imagination but a lack of belief stemming from a reliance on factual evidence and a privileging of “fact over fiction” (201). Even though Dickens was solidly a realistic novelist, he recognized the usefulness of evoking the fancy, and worked to incorporate fantastic elements even in his most serious works. He took his novels’ romances seriously but often used a touch of whimsy or fantasy in his characters’ love stories.

Dora Spenlow, David Copperfield’s first (and, arguably, last) overpowering love interest, is formed to please the fancy and enliven the imagination, which places her
squarely in the ranks of the fairy-women. It becomes easier to understand Dickens’s purpose with Dora by recognizing the characters that have previously tread her pathway into David’s heart. Dickens has already crafted certain characters to fit this mold, namely, Clara Copperfield, Emily, Miss Larkins, and even Steerforth: each possesses an indefinable and supernatural power that never ceases to captivate David and lure him into a state of attraction. David’s description of Steerforth, for instance, could very easily be applied to Dora: “There was an ease in [Steerforth’s] manner,” recalls David, “which I still believe to have borne a kind of enchantment with it. I still believe him . . . to have carried a spell with him to which it was a natural weakness to yield . . .” (115). Indeed, the similarities between Dora and Steerforth are certainly not coincidental – David is initially blind to the faults of both due to his pattern of forming intense attachments with people who connote possibility and excitement. Dora is an exceptional case, though, because not only is she a good match (socially speaking) but she is both pleasant and playfully demure – qualities that would seem to lend a certain suppleness to her demeanor and wifely habits. The fact that Dora turns out to be a domestic deviant of sorts is either Dickens’s way of highlighting the dangers of David’s deluded assumptions or exposing the impossibility of the feminine standard.

Dora is undeniably and indescribably beautiful. To David, she seems to exist in layers of mystery and beauty. She is also immediately tagged as seductress when David admits that he felt as though he was “wandering in a garden of Eden all the while, with Dora” (400). Dumbfounded by her, he unabashedly admits that she “was more than human to me. She was a Fairy, a Sylph, I don’t know what she was – any thing that no one ever saw, and every thing that every body ever wanted” (397). David has trouble
even classifying Dora in human terms; she seems to evade all description and surpass all comparison. While David is obviously enamored “to distraction” by Dora’s modest yet overpowering sensuality – a sensuality that Dickens repeatedly emphasizes by way of her blushing cheeks and enchanting curls – Dora’s influence over David is no less real or affecting. Ayres notes that even narrator-David (now married to Agnes) seems overcome with emotion when he remembers the “tingle” he felt in Dora’s presence or sees the forget-me-nots that still cause him an instinctive flutter of passion (25). David’s continued reverence for Dora conveys more permanence than her fairy-nature might suggest; Dickens must be championing Dora to a certain degree, if not for her suitability then for the passion that she inspires within David.

After a quick courtship that is best described as an emotional epiphany, David decides he can no longer bear the torture of not being joined with Dora. In a most frantic manner, David gallantly professes his love to Dora. David-as-narrator recalls, “I don’t know how I did it. I did it in a moment . . . I had Dora in my arms. I was full of eloquence” (494). Even though the reader may be unsettled by David’s claim that he “idolised and worshipped” Dora, it would be remiss to overlook the positive changes that these emotions have wrought in David. At once, he seems expressive, passionate, and full of possibility; most readers would agree that David’s character achieves new dimension when Dora becomes the object of its affections. Dickens uses Dora’s enchantment as a way of provoking David to new levels of determination and boldness. However, as David’s raptures continue, the narrator’s undercurrent of disapproval gradually transforms into outright condemnation: “I suppose,” thinks David-as-narrator, “we had some notion that the was to end in marriage . . . [b]ut in our youthful ecstasy, I don’t
think we really looked before us or behind us; or had any aspiration beyond the ignorant present.” The narrator’s decision to commandeer this scene and deplete it of any romance is criticized by G.K. Chesterton, who “faults Dickens for depicting David’s marriage to Dora as a mere flirtation” (qtd. in Ayres 20). Even as Dickens belittles the proposal act by dubbing it “unsubstantial” and “foolish,” he does not deny that it was “happy.” Dickens’s obvious vacillations with this moment seem to hinge on the role(s) that Dora may or may not be equipped to assume in David’s life. Dickens, at least in this instant, doubts that the Dora who has successfully provided David with his due allotment of earthly pleasure could also be the guide of his interior and spiritual life.

Dora’s best qualities – her association with “light, airiness, and joy” – soon become points of concern for David as they impact his pleasant but unconventional “fairy marriage” (549, 637). Once David begins to realize that Dora cannot and will not fit his preconceived notions of the “angel in the house,” he struggles with his own desire to make her into the wife he had envisioned. In a memorable scene in which David attempts to “create perfect sympathy” between himself and Dora, he decides to “form” her mind by reprimanding her childishness and subjecting her to Shakespeare (701). Here, Dickens snatches Dora’s powers of influence and momentarily transfers them to a man, which is a risky maneuver considering the clearly defined gender roles of the domestic world. Needless to say, Dora resists this manhandling because, as David soon admits, her mind, simplistic as it is, “was already formed.” When David and Dora’s marriage reaches a point of mutual stagnation, the only literary option seems to be Dora’s death.17 As David

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17 This is, of course, the same dead-end that Dickens reaches with Clara Copperfield. Her powers of influence are made ineffectual by the Murdstones, and she can no longer fulfill her feminine/maternal role of David’s supporter and guide.
changes, so do his needs, and Dora’s form of influence, though necessary, may also be fleeting. Dickens seems to be acknowledging that Dora was not crafted for a prolonged or sustainable relationship with David, so she must be removed.

Dora’s death scene, while touching in its own right, also serves to usher Agnes into her new position in David’s life. On her deathbed, Dora pacifies David’s guilty conscience by articulating the thoughts he has managed to keep hidden from her: “I am afraid it would have been better, “says Dora, “If we had only loved each other as a boy and girl . . . I have begun to think I was not fit to be a wife” (772). Enriching as the relationship was for David’s understanding of what it means to love, David himself acknowledges that it would have been better if his wife “could have helped [him] more, and shared the many thoughts in which [he] had no partner” (703). Dora’s fatal flaw, it seems, is her inability to provide constant nourishment and support for David (both intellectually and spiritually); her inadequacy as influential angel-wife prompts a new desire in David that Dickens chooses to answer not by readjusting Dora’s existing talents but by selecting another partner who has spent a life perfecting her role as domestic angel. Agnes is present at Dora’s death, and Dickens immediately implies the passing of wifely duties from one woman to the other.

The recurring image of Agnes pointing upward, first depicted in Dora’s death scene, is an image that serves to direct and influence David. Agnes motions past the dying Dora to the heavens where she intends to direct David’s gaze. Rachel Ablow explains that, to David, “Agnes’s upward-pointing finger indicates a narrative of endless progress and self-improvement” (43). The stagnation that David had experienced in his relationship with Dora is not a threat in his potential union with Agnes, who is committed
to understanding David and instructing him in the ways of self-growth. It is important to note, however, that Agnes’s most defining characteristic is an image, a gesture that comes to represent both improvement and spiritual realignment. She becomes a metaphor personified, a “shadowy” angel too good to be real (Ayres 21). Agnes’s other-worldliness does not connote the same kind of sensual mystery as Dora’s bewildering curls; Agnes’s ethereal qualities serve to distance her from the corrupt world so that she can be consistently associated with purity and tranquility. One must wonder, though, if this detached tranquility is enough to sustain David.

In many different scenarios, Agnes is positioned as an ideal female figure. She is a mindful and compassionate daughter, a patient and devoted schoolteacher, and unconditionally a friend to David. She is especially adept at managing a household, which Langland notes is an unfortunate point of comparison for Dora: “[W]e have seen enough of household chaos with Dora to [recognize the importance of] the household keys Agnes carries at her side: symbol of her authority, tool of her management, and sign of her regulatory power and control” (87-88). Agnes’s particular powers do not stupefy David or dazzle his senses (as Dora’s do), but they reassure him and stabilize his ever-changing world. For chapters at a time, David deals with issues that are unrelated to Agnes, but he always returns to confide in her, receiving comfort from her understanding and support. Dickens chooses this angel for David because of her constancy and reliability – Dora may be amusing with her “graceful, variable, and enchanting manner” (399), but Agnes becomes a firmer foundation upon which to build a life.

Even considering Agnes’s finer qualities, there are moments when David seems unsure about her appropriate place in his life. One of these moments of hesitation occurs
during the proposal scene. In this scene, David is both drawn to Agnes but willing to be patient so as not to disrupt their existing relationship. (His restraint with Agnes is quite different from his ungovernable affection for Dora.) However, when David begins to fear that Agnes’s reserve is proof that she has made another attachment, he professes his love by claiming that he wishes to call her “something . . . widely different from Sister” (867). Perhaps, Dickens chooses to underscore David and Agnes’s platonic love during the proposal moment in order to emphasize David’s comfort with Agnes, who will continue to function as his “guide” and “best support.” Surely, though, Dickens is aware that this “sisterly” association removes the moment’s romantic potential. David continues to make a case for himself by proving to Agnes that he loves her faithfully and by demonstrating that he is willing to “come into the better knowledge” of both himself and Agnes; he is prepared to take instruction from her and, in effect, be influenced. David expresses an undercurrent of doubt, though, about his own worthiness, allowing Agnes to make the final decision based on her good judgment. His proposal to Agnes lacks the confidence, gallantry, and excitement of his proposal to Dora. Also, this scene places David “beneath” Agnes, as though nothing but a union with her could inspire him to achieve his potential.

Aside from the characters’ dialogue, there are curious stylistic elements in this scene. Before Agnes responds to the proposal – and three other times during the course of the short scene, which includes a proposal and a hurried wedding – Dickens inserts line breaks. Presumably these breaks, which represent the passing of time, serve to gloss over the unimportant aspects of the scene; however, their appearance in the text is all too uncommon to be ignored. It seems as if Dickens is struggling to execute the scene
convincingly, so he resolves to flesh out only the significant parts. After the first break, Agnes reveals to David, with calmness, that she has “loved [him] all [her] life” (868). Agnes has always behaved out of love for David, so this confession is arguably not so shocking (despite the dramatic line break). What is shocking – and what is omitted – is Agnes’s decision that her love for David has transformed from that of a “counsellor and friend” (278) to the love that a wife feels for her husband. By distancing the reader from Agnes’s thought-process and extended reaction, Dickens again testifies to the fact that the relationship has been formed to serve David’s needs, thereby allowing Agnes’s response to be segmented and trite.

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of David’s proposal is the text’s sudden and outright awareness of a spiritual presence. Agnes’s role as spiritual guide has, until this point, been implied rather than stated. For example, David’s earlier assertion that Agnes has “filled [his] heart with such good resolutions [and] strengthened [his] weakness” is his abstract way of acknowledging Agnes as his spiritual director (525). During the proposal, however, David channels his gratitude much more forcefully by thanking “our GOD for having guided us to this tranquility” (868). This epic GOD-figure is something synonymous with fate since David views his union with Agnes as an event that was destined for him even in his ignorance of it. Significantly, David labels this force as “God” only when he is joined with Agnes, a sign that Agnes is capable of instilling religious values in him – which is a talent that her “angel-in-the-house” status would demand.

David claims his “domestic joy [is] perfect” (871) but readers may have their doubts. Dickens closes the text as David reminisces about the important people in his life;
Agnes, of course, concludes the list. David hails Agnes as his “soul,” he takes comfort in her “serenity,” and he prays that she will always be near him, “pointing upward” (882). The unsettling thing about this final description is that Agnes is again positioned as a metaphorical figure. Nothing about her is tangible or relatable, and this is not quite worthy of the protagonist whose life in all other aspects has been painted with such precision.

Because Agnes remains idealized, readers may begin to think wistfully about Dora. After all, Dora was exciting and authentic, and David’s emotions were somehow easier to gauge with Dora. Even so, Dora’s domestic deficiencies are not to be overlooked, particularly because they caused David such discomfort and anguish. It seems as though the perfect woman is neither Dora nor Agnes, but a combination of both. In fact, Dickens hints at this solution several times, as if his greatest wish were to create for David a fairy-angel. Once, when David hears Agnes praise Dora, he imagines Agnes casting some of her own “pure light” around “the little fairy-figure” (525), perhaps teaching the already vibrant Dora how to shine with a more angelic luster. And even when David proposes to Agnes, he reflects upon his love for Dora, realizing that when he had Agnes’s sympathy his love for Dora was “perfected” (867). Moving toward this same realization, Maia McAleavey argues that both Dora and Agnes are David’s soul-mates.  

McAleavey contends that it is Dickens’s intention to metaphorically combine the two women into one: “David’s marriage to Agnes unifies the past and future, refining rather than erasing Dora in a perfect (re)union [with David]” (204).

18 McAleavey argues thatVictorians conceived the marriage plot as an “arc beginning on earth but continuing after death.” Therefore, in the afterlife, David, Dora, and Agnes could live in a “heavenly union,” and David would be permitted to join with his two angels in the house (214).
Dickens believes that both types of women serve a purpose because each corresponds to essential male desires. Dora evokes passion, satisfies the fancy, and – in a very real way – epitomizes David’s confident transition into adulthood, an important aspect of Dickens’s coming-of-age story. Agnes, on the other hand, maintains peace, promises improvement, and realigns David’s spiritual focus. It could be argued that the Dora-to-Agnes continuum represents a progression of desires (from earthly to virtuous) that David must experience in order to finally understand the makings of a successful marriage with Agnes. However, David still has lingering sensibilities for Dora even after he marries Agnes, which suggests that his desire for a fairy-woman is something that he never quite outgrows.

The question for Dickens is simple: Why not make Dora and Agnes into the same woman? The answer is arguably too multifaceted to sharpen to a point. Perhaps David must experience a Dora-figure before he can appreciate Agnes, perhaps Dora’s sensuality would necessarily make her unfit for the domestic sphere, or, more practically, perhaps the story requires a love triangle. Whatever Dickens’s reasoning – either ideological or artistic – for separating these forms of female influence, his story demonstrates that David desires both women, and he is never as satisfied as when Dora and Agnes’s versions of femininity converge.

Brontë merges the two kinds of female influence by concocting a fairy-angel as the heroine of *Jane Eyre*. With Brontë’s systematic incorporation of supernatural elements into Jane’s character and the novel at large, some readers may question whether her novel can be classified as realism at all. But Brontë, like Dickens, is comfortable in

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19 Srdjan Smajic argues that the nineteenth-century British novel “routinely mobilized the supernatural as an instrument with which to both formulate and critically interrogate its projects and procedures” (3).
the world of fantasy, having devised fairy tales with her siblings from an early age (Heiniger 24). Her artistic decisions in *Jane Eyre* work toward a more “encompassing and compassionate mode of realistic expression,” so that her realism becomes “open-ended . . . and exploratory rather than just explanatory” (Smajic 15). Due to Brontë’s “remarkably liberal understanding of reality” (16), pragmatic Jane is licensed to have shades of the supernatural even as she simultaneously functions as the conventional angel-in-the-house figure.

Of course, this explanation does not remove the tension between Jane’s fairy-self and her angel-self. Rochester invests Jane with a certain sensuality that complicates her self-concept: Mrs. Fairfax and St. John Rivers are quick to point out that Jane’s wild affection for Rochester is both sinful and incompatible with her station. Jane’s reconciliation of her fairy-self to her angel-self is perhaps the story of the novel. Even though Jane’s fairy tendencies seem at odds with the domestic angel she is poised to become, Rochester is just the man – and Brontë, just the novelist – to appreciate Jane’s ambiguous and layered femininity. Because Brontë works to depict a nontraditional hero in Rochester (who is neither handsome nor genteel), she crafts a female character who is equally nontraditional and surprisingly capable of responding to Rochester’s needs, both earthly and unearthly.

Early on in the novel, Brontë emphasizes Jane’s tendency to become restless when life is too predictable. Once Jane loses contact with Miss Temple – a good-hearted and serenely composed angel-woman – Jane’s drive to develop angelic virtue is replaced with a “stirring of old emotions” (101). She grasps for “change” or some kind of

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20 Shirley Foster notes that Brontë too “experienced the sense of a divided self” much like her character, Jane, and many other mid-Victorian women (71).
“stimulus,” but finally settles for the prospect of “a new servitude” (102). As Jane deliberates over the course that her new life will take, she becomes disgusted with the narrowness of a woman’s field of opportunity, threatening to rebel against the limitations imposed upon her. Jane thinks

[Women] suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings . . . It is thoughtless to condemn them or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (129)

With Jane, Brontë creates a female character for whom the angel-in-the-house role would likely be unsatisfying unless bolstered by another kind of subjectivity and purpose. Jane’s removal to Thornfield is an exciting change of pace, but readers may be skeptical about whether her domestic role as governess will supply the stimulation that she seeks. It is important to note that in tracing the satisfaction of male desire, the delineation of Jane’s desire is not an unrelated issue. As Jane’s time at Thornfield makes clear, Rochester desires an unconventional woman – a woman who is not content to simply fulfill the role that society has prescribed to her. Rochester operates, then, to bring out the rebellious nature in Jane and cultivate the livelier tendencies in her that might otherwise be frustrated and contained. Rochester is similarly lively and unpredictable (consider, for instance, his stint as a fortune-teller), so the pair often provide each other with the stimulation that each is seeking.
Rochester’s way of provoking Jane into her more natural state of vibrancy is to address her in supernatural terms that highlight both her sexual power and her feminine mystique. For example, when Jane shows Rochester a series of her paintings, – which Rochester likely expects should portray a more innocent kind of beauty – he congratulates Jane on her “elfish” thoughts and contends that she must receive her inspiration from the dream world (148). In another scene occurring in Rochester’s bedroom, Jane wakes Rochester to protect him from a fire (lit by a more demonic fairy, Bertha Mason) that would have engulfed him in flames. Rochester cries out to Jane, “In the name of all the elves in Christendom, is that Jane Eyre . . . What have you done with me, witch, sorceress?” (174). Jane’s intrusion into Rochester’s bedchamber and her association with the unbridled passion of Bertha Mason is a choice that Brontë makes to indulge Rochester by weaving a spark of sexuality into Jane’s character. Jane’s position as governess combined with her talents as seductress could yield a being too complicated for many male characters, but Rochester revels in her ambiguity. For instance, when Jane returns, as she says, from visiting her aunt “who is dead,” Rochester believes this “Janian” remark suits her; he calls on the “good angels” to guard him against this being who can visit another world and converse with those who are dead (282). Rochester’s fear may be playful, but his attraction to Jane is quite real.

Rochester’s willingness to be seduced and mastered by Jane becomes evident in the proposal act. The scene is appropriately set in a corner of the garden that is blossoming and “Eden-like” (286) – Rochester delays here until Jane arrives. Based on her own sense of restlessness and internal upheaval, Jane assumes that the “evil . . . seemed to lie with [her]” – presumably, the evil of seduction, which Jane commits
soundly though (arguably) unintentionally. After Rochester roots out Jane’s true feelings by feigning to desire marriage with Blanche Ingram, Jane chastises him for toying with her emotions:

    Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? . . . I have as much soul as you – and full as much heart! . . . I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even mortal flesh; -- it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal – as we are! (292)

Jane’s response is a fascinating mix of rebellion and insecurity, fantasy and spirituality. Her passion for Rochester and her complete disregard of custom are impossible for him to resist. As Abigail Heiniger recognizes, Jane’s attractive fairy qualities are rooted in her “impish personality” unlike Blanche whose desirable and alluring qualities are only skin-deep (25). Rochester tells Jane, “You – you strange, you almost unearthly thing! – I love you as my own flesh” (294). When Rochester begs Jane to “accept [him] as a husband,” Jane proceeds as only a sorceress would; she asks to “read [his] countenance,” and realizes from the “strange gleams” in his eyes that he is genuinely overwhelmed by his feelings for her. After Jane accepts Rochester’s offer, Brontë closes the scene in supernatural fashion: the garden is blanketed in shadow, rain rushes from the sky, and a crash of lightning splits a nearby tree (296). These gothic details serve to foreshadow the difficulties in store for the couple as well as the fantastical forces that seem inspired by their union.

    Jane’s supernatural connection with Rochester is highlighted in another proposal scene, which, oddly enough, takes place between Jane and a different suitor, St. John
Rivers. Jane is nearly ready to accept Rivers’s proposal when an “inexpressible feeling” reverberates through her while her “flesh quiver[s] on [her] bones” (483). Jane hears Rochester’s voice, in wild tones, calling her name – though the voice itself seems to have no earthly source – and interprets the message as a sign for her to reject Rivers. The electricity in this scene parallels the charged atmosphere of Rochester’s proposal, but, unlike Rochester, Rivers neither participates in nor is influenced by this nameless and imaginative energy. Jane is revived by her mystical union with Rochester and commands that Rivers leave her. In this scene, the unearthly and perhaps imagined union occurring between Jane and Rochester is somehow more real and desirable to Jane (and Brontë) than the suitor standing in front of her. Jane as fairy-woman is not only depicted as forceful and influential, but she is also deeply and almost supernaturally in tune with Rochester’s needs. Rochester, who is himself an emotionally-charged man, finds a responsive and intuitive companion in fairy-Jane.

Fairy-Jane is an equally powerful and sympathetic figure. Her influence, in Rochester’s own words, resembles a “thrill” and a “witchery” to which he is only too happy to submit (301). Like Dickens, however, Brontë is not content to ascribe only one set of powers to the novel’s version of female influence. Jane still must prove her domestic adaptability and her effectiveness as an angel-figure. Despite Jane’s resolution that she is “not an angel” and will never resemble “anything celestial” (300), she is required, by Rochester, Rivers, and by Brontë, to at least partially fulfill this role.

Rochester is not long in discovering that Jane is a morally upright person, capable of becoming his angel-guide. In one of his first conversations with Jane, he opens up to

21 Foster claims that Jane’s rejection of the title of “angel” hinges on the fact the imposed label does not allow her to “assert her own definition of herself” (90).
her, telling her about his misdeeds as a young man: “I started, or rather . . . was thrust on to a wrong track . . . I might have been as good as you – wiser – almost stainless. I envy you your peace of mind, your clean conscience, your unpolluted memory” (158). Perhaps Rochester’s envy of Jane’s goodness is the initial sign of susceptibility to her domestic influence. Rochester soon tells Jane that he has no qualms about discussing with her his own weaknesses; after all, Rochester believes he cannot “blight” Jane though she may “refresh” him (168). Eventually, Jane does begin to contemplate both Rochester’s moral makeup and his potential for improvement: “I believed,” thinks Jane, “he was naturally a man of better tendencies, higher principles, and purer tastes than such as circumstances had developed . . . [T]here were excellent materials in him; though for the present they hung together somewhat spoiled and tangled” (127). Just as Rochester comes to view Jane as his moral compass, Jane cannot help but wonder about the effect that her own virtuous influence might have on him.

If the dominant trait of the angel-figure is her self-denial, then Jane proves her angel status time and time again. Following the complications of Jane and Rochester’s failed marriage attempt, Rochester works to recover Jane with the most emotionally-charged yet honest language. He professes to her: “You are my sympathy – my better self – my good angel” (363). Despite Rochester’s genuine attachment and Jane’s undeniable passion for him, Jane chooses to leave Rochester because she recognizes the danger of their frenzied love. She has lamented the fact that Rochester “stood between [her] and every thought of religion” (316), and she challenges Rochester to join her in renouncing “love and idol” (363).22 She directs him, in the midst of her own emotion, to “trust in God

22 See Kathleen Vejvoda’s “Idolatry in Jane Eyre”
and [himself]” (364). Rochester, in his impetuousness, concludes that without Jane he would lose all innocence and resort to “vice” – this prompts Jane to, yet again, muster her strength and advise him: “We were born to strive and endure – you as well as I: do so.” Jane’s utter strength and moral fortitude in the face of such passion is nothing short of astonishing; her status as Rochester’s supporter and guide is, paradoxically, firmly decided in the scene in which she resolves to leave him, perhaps forever. Here, Rochester’s satisfaction becomes less important than the formation of his character – a need Jane prioritizes above her own desire.

In continuing her formation and depiction of an angel-figure, Brontë decides to showcase Jane’s talents as a homemaker. Jane resolves to “clean down” Moor House, and does so with such gusto that she is hardly recognizable (450). Jane arranges for “[d]ark handsome new carpets and curtains” along with a selection of “antique ornaments in porcelain and bronze” (452). It seems strange that Jane would delight in this ornamentation, especially given her own habit of dressing plainly and modestly. Rivers even questions Jane about her sudden appreciation for the domestic world: “[S]eriously,” remarks Rivers, “I trust that when the first flush of vivacity is over, you will look a little higher than domestic endearments and household joys” (451). Jane dismisses Rivers’s critique by asserting that these joys are the “best things the world has!” Jane’s enthusiasm here is difficult to trust only because we have seen her utter frustration with the domestic scenes at Lowood and Thornfield; however, Brontë carefully shows that with the right kind of motivation and under the right conditions, Jane actually enjoys her status as domestic angel. This is a crucial characteristic for Brontë to sketch if she is molding Jane into Rochester’s caretaker and homemaker.
Brontë ultimately chooses Jane for Rochester, and the novel closes with their marriage. Even though both characters are strong, independent, and somewhat eccentric, Brontë gives the pair a conventional ending (to the chagrin of some readers and critics). From the perspective of the fairy/angel dichotomy, the marriage is deflating since, in all probability, the fairy-figure could not survive a nineteenth-century marriage. As Langland explains, the middle-class “angel” figure was destined to become one of the “guardians of spirituality” and as a result be perceived as “sexless” (71). Even though Rochester still flirtatiously addresses Jane as his “mocking changeling” (505), her role in this final relationship is quite altered. Not only has Jane become Rochester’s “prop and guide” in his blindness, but she has also assumed the role of spiritual director now that Rochester plans to build a relationship with his “beneficent God” (516, 514). Rochester’s dialogue with Jane will likely remain as lively as it always was, but Jane’s lust for adventure will necessarily be sacrificed to Rochester’s need for a domestic angel. The conclusion to Rochester and Jane’s love story, though pleasing in its serenity and familiarity, is perhaps disappointing because it lacks the fantastic elements that once characterized both Jane and their courtship.

At the end of both novels, Agnes and Jane are settled in their domestic circumstances. They have prioritized their lives so that their husbands’ well-being is central to their existence. Because each novel takes this trajectory, these novelists seem to be choosing the angel-woman over the fairy-figure. However, neither author feels comfortable presenting these two types of influence as a simple choice of wrong or right. The angel-woman may receive the happy ending, but the fairy-woman has an integral part in the formation of each relationship.
Dickens and Brontë introduce male desires that can only be satisfied by the fairy-creature; for instance, sensuality, enchantment, and excitement are consistently provided for by the fairy-woman and ignored by the angel-woman. Dickens resolves this issue by attempting to demonstrate that David has tested and been dissatisfied with the elements of femininity that Dora provides. However, even if David is eventually able to disregard the emotions and sensations that Dora inspires in him, Dickens never allows these feelings to be put to rest. (Dickens repeatedly infuses David’s thoughts with remembrances of Dora and even sees fit to mention Dora during David’s proposal to Agnes.) Brontë likewise has an attachment to fairy-Jane. Even though Jane eventually assumes the role of domestic angel with ease and grace, Brontë did not set out to craft a Jane whose influence would only be viable in the domestic realm. She carefully creates a Jane who is elfish, seductive, and supernatural because these traits correspond to powerful desires within Rochester. It could be argued that a Jane who did not possess these supernatural tendencies would never have piqued Rochester’s interest in the first place.

A close reading of male desire in these texts – those desires which are acted upon and those which are expressed through the narration – points to the authors’ disillusionment with the constraints of femininity. Aside from the fact that Dora is rendered useless by her lack of angelic virtue and Jane is obliged to suppress her supernatural tendencies once she marries, the male characters in these texts are also stunted by the restraints placed on the women. At novel’s end, both David and Rochester seem to exist in a fixed condition, being attended to by a domestic angel and resting comfortably in her feminine goodness. The internal drive that characterizes both David
and Rochester is notably absent in these final scenes because it has been replaced, supposedly, by a simple contentment with a new domestic arrangement. Whether either author portrays a union that reads as satisfying (from the perspective of either the male or female characters) is debatable, and a question, I would argue, that the authors raise intentionally.

The aspect of femininity of which Dickens and Brontë seem most critical is the labeling of women into categorical extremes. While both authors appreciate the attributes of the angel-woman, neither author believes that if a woman is fairylike instead of angelic then, by default, she must be unproductive or without value. Neither do these authors want the angel-woman to be without traces of the fairy-figure, as is evidenced in Jane’s layered formation and in Dora’s presence within David and Agnes’ relationship. These authors demonstrate discomfort with these rigid extremes because their male characters possess desires which cannot be fulfilled by only one type of woman. Just as Rochester longs for “the antipodes of the Creole [Bertha]” and realizes he longs “vainly” (358), so does David’s story suggest that a woman positioned on either end of the continuum would necessarily be unfulfilling. Dickens’s and Brontë’s depictions of male desire make a trenchant statement about female influence: a man with overlapping and contradictory desires could never be satisfied by either a fairy or an angel – only the unconventional fairy-angel can address the spectrum of his needs.
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