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IN DEFENSE OF UGLY WOMEN:
MARRIAGEABILITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF BEAUTY
IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVEL

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of English

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Sara Deborah Nyffenegger in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

IN DEFENSE OF UGLY WOMEN: MARRIAGEABILITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF BEAUTY IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVEL

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Master of Arts

My thesis explores why beauty became so much more important in nineteenth-century Britain, especially for marriageable young women in the upper and middle class. My argument addresses the consequences of that change in the status of beauty for plain or ugly women, how this social shift is reflected in the novel, and how authors respond to the issue of plainer women and issues of their marriageability. I look at how these authorial attitudes shifted over the century, observing that the issue of plain women and their marriageability was dramatized by nineteenth-century authors, whose efforts to heighten the audience's awareness of the plight of plainer women can be traced by contrasting novels written early in the century with novels written mid-century.

I argue that beauty gained more significance for young women in nineteenth-century England because the marriage ideal shifted, a shift which especially influenced

the upper and middle class. The eighteenth century brought into marriage concepts such as Rousseau's "wife-farm" principle—the idea that a man chooses a significantly younger child-bride, mentoring and molding her into the woman he needs. But by the end of the century the ideal of marriage moved to the companionate ideal, which opted for an equal partnership. That ideal was based on the conception that marriage was based on personal happiness hence should be founded on compatibility and love.

The companionate ideal became more influential as individuality reigned among the Romantics. The new ideal of companionate marriage limited parents' influence on their children's choice of spouse to the extent that the choice lay now largely with young men. Yet that choice was constrained because young men and women were restricted by social conventions, their social interaction limited. Thus, according to my reading of nineteenth-century authors, the companionate ideal was a charade, as young men were not able to get to know women well enough to determine whether or not they were compatible. So instead of getting to know a young woman's character and her personality, they distinguished potential brides mainly on the basis of appearance.

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I. Beautiful, Plain, and Ugly: Marriageability and the Importance of Beauty

It may be that most women love to conquer with the legitimate weapon, beauty, of the sex. Poor plain Madame de Staël would willingly have exchanged all the laurels men laid at her feet for the tiniest, meanest blossom offered in a spirit of “love” or “passion” by them to women whom she justly regarded as her inferiors. [...] Let us own that a woman must be composed of very strange materials who does not feel that it is charming to be young and pretty, considering that youth and beauty are the recognized weapons for slaughtering men’s hearts. (Mrs. Alexander Fraser, *Daughters of Belgravia* 132-133, 163)

One word before this chapter closes, to those who have arrived at years of womanhood without having known what it was to engage the attentions of a lover; and of such I must observe, that by some unaccountable law of nature, they often appear to be the most admirable of their sex. (Sarah Stickney Ellis, *Daughters of England* 336)

In her 1826 essay “On the Disadvantages Resulting from the Possession of Beauty,” Sara Coleridge claims that “[o]f all natural endowments, those of person are perhaps the most generally & the most warmly desired, & great as the influence of Beauty has been at all periods of the world, from the days of Helen even to our own, never, I verily believe, had the Goddess more numerous or more ardent votaries than at the present time. For this is the Age of Taste if not of Reason” (Coleridge 187). Born in 1802, Sara Coleridge grew up immersed in her father’s romantic sensibilities, in the age

of taste. When she wrote this essay, she was twenty-four years old—well past entering the marriage market—and she did not get married for another three years.

In this thesis I explore why beauty became so much more important in nineteenth-century Britain, especially for marriageable young women in the upper and middle class. I further explore what that change in the status of beauty meant for women lacking beauty. I look at how this social shift is reflected in the novel, how authors respond to the issue of plainer women and issues of their marriageability. I also look at how these authorial attitudes shifted over the century, observing that the issue of plain women and their marriageability was dramatized by nineteenth-century authors, whose efforts to heighten the audience's awareness of the plight of plainer women can be traced by contrasting novels written early in the century with novels written mid-century. The genre of the novel is the natural choice when exploring the issue of beauty and the marriageability of women. Illiteracy diminished significantly during the nineteenth century and hence the readership in England grew. Parallel to that development, there was a considerable rise in the importance of the novel. As most of the monthly or weekly periodicals of that time featured novels in installments, which made the novel obtainable for a wider audience, the author Anthony Trollope could rightfully claim in 1870, “[w]e have become a novel-reading people” (Zangen 83).

Beauty gained more significance for young women in nineteenth-century England, because the marriage ideal shifted, a shift which especially influenced the upper and middle classes. Marriages were earlier based on rank, money, and parental control, and later on romantic love and the companionate ideal—all these mainly concerns among the upper classes. According to Jona Schellekens, working-class marriages were more

influenced by the economics of the Industrial Revolution, concerned with whether or not they had enough resources to sustain a household. Furthermore, the Marriage Act in 1753 and the subsequent intellectual movements concerned with matrimony were mainly known to the upper and middle classes. Moreover, the upper and middle classes could also afford playing with the idea of love in marriage—a luxury the working class did not usually have. Consequently, because those movements were so crucial among the upper classes, they were passionately debated in those circles.

The eighteenth century entertained concepts such as Rousseau's "wife-farm" principle—the idea that a man raises his significantly younger child-bride, molding her into the woman he needs. But by the end of the century the ideal of marriage moved to the companionate ideal, which opted for an equal partnership. The companionate ideal became more influential as individuality reigned among the Romantics. That ideal was based on the conception that marriage had something to do with personal happiness and should be founded on compatibility and love. While young men wanted to choose their bride without the interference of their fathers based on the companionate ideal, the same ideal also was the foundation for the myth that young girls always married for romantic and never for mercenary reasons (Zangen 75). Mercenary marriages started to be condemned by society, while on the surface love and affection in matrimony were hailed by many. However, women still did not get to choose, but had to wait until chosen.

In these new circumstances where parents' wishes did not retain as much weight as before, the marital choice now lay predominantly with marriageable men. Florence Nightingale explicitly describes the dilemma marriageable men and women face in the marriage market in her essay "Cassandra" (1852): Women "are not to talk of anything

very interesting, for the essence of society is to prevent any long conversations and all *tête-à-têtes*. ‘Glissez, n’appuyez pas’” (1613). The editors translate this final comment in a footnote as “Slide along, don’t push (French); i.e. remain light and superficial rather than engage ideas seriously” (1613). Nightingale describes meetings between marriageable young people of the opposite sex that lead to men’s choices in spouses: “Under the eyes of an always present mother and sister [...] the acquaintance begins. It is fed—upon what?—gossip of art, musical and pictorial, the party politics of the day, the chit-chat of society, and people marry or sometimes they don’t marry, discouraged by the impossibility of knowing any more of one another than this will furnish” (1620). There is no room in this public arrangement for privacy, and the conversation topics allow very little individuality. How, then, are young men supposed to distinguish one young woman from the other?

Nightingale questioned this practice of young women not being allowed to express themselves in society: “Passion, intellect, moral activity—these three have never been satisfied in woman. In this cold and oppressive conventional atmosphere, they cannot be satisfied” (1610). But Dr. John Gregory, an English physician and moralist, expressed the conventional opinion in his treatise *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (1774) that girls should be disposed to be “silent in company” and “take share in conversation without uttering a syllable. The expression of the countenance shews it, and this never escapes an observing eye” (26)—women are to be looked at, silent and mute, not participating in conversation. These social conventions keep them from actively engaging in conversations which determine their lives. And worse, the conventions of silence make it impossible for their male counterparts to get to know them. More than

seventy-five years after Dr. Gregory died, Florence Nightingale was still wondering what women would say if they “were to speak, and say what are their thoughts employed upon, their *thoughts*, which alone are free” (1609).

Nightingale observes how men and women of her day are really unable to get to know each other because of the strictures of the very society that brings them together. Nightingale notes that current marriages are based on anything but compatibility:

Is it extraordinary that they [men and women] do not know each other, and that, in their mutual ignorance, they form no sure friendships? Did they meet to *do* something together, then indeed that might form some real tie. But, as it is, *they* are not there, it is only a mask which is there—a mouth-piece of ready-made sentences about the “topics of the day”; and then people rail against men for choosing a woman “for her face”—why, what else do they see? (1620)

Thus Nightingale accuses society for marital mismatches growing out of the rising importance of beauty. In direct contradiction of the companionate ideal, social conventions ironically prompt young women to focus on appearance and artificial conversation, rather than expressing and revealing who they really are. Charlotte Yonge seconds Nightingale in her treatise *Womankind*: “Men know so little in reality of women, and credit them with so much, that they are ready to fall in love with mere beauty, fancying that the fair face must be the index to every perfection.” (167).

These oppressive social conventions prevent young men from getting to know a young woman’s mind, personality or character. Because the whole point of the companionate ideal was to marry for compatibility, it is tragic irony that the actual social

practice in nineteenth-century society did not even allow couples to know if they were compatible. Because suitors were unable to connect with a woman's intellect or personality, the chief impression left with young marriageable men was the woman's appearance. As a result matches were reduced to mere physicality—a choice of appearance. That is why in the new companionate ideal beauty, which had been of secondary or even tertiary consequence in a match, got increasing weight in the nineteenth-century quest for a spouse. Financial considerations or incentives of social standing, although still essential, matter less than before.

This gradual shift of marriage ideals and its effect upon marriageable women is reflected in nineteenth-century novels. In fact, the shift is explored in novels by the end of the eighteenth century. In *Camilla* (1796), for example, Frances Burney defends the older ideal embodied in the 1753 Marriage Act (Burgess 131), which reinforced the influence of parents in their children's choice of spouse. Burney portrays how parental control can assure a child's happiness in marriage. Her literary successors such as Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen, on the other hand, though they reflect the Rousseauvian ideal in some of their novels, predominantly champion the companionate ideal.

Edgeworth's character Clarence Hervey in *Belinda* follows Rousseau's child-bride ideal when he tries to raise the beautiful Virginia to become his ideal spouse. Edgeworth shows poignantly how misled this notion is. Even Austen, whose novels such as *Persuasion* dramatize the companionate ideal, still retains some Rousseauvian ideas. Edmund Bertram (*Mansfield Park*) is in sole control of the education of his future wife, Fanny Price, for instance, and Mr. Knightley successfully endeavors to mentor the female protagonist in Austen's *Emma* into a better woman.

Burney differs fundamentally from Austen and Edgeworth in the central marriage ideals represented in her writing. Yet all three novelists are similar in their treatment of plainer women. As the eighteenth century turned to the nineteenth, authors almost unanimously portrayed plainer women as secondary characters in their novels. Authors tended to reflect social conventions, creating beautiful heroines young women could identify with as protagonists, while plainer women figure only as sisters or friends on the periphery of the plotline. Nevertheless the authors did introduce plain women, preparing the way for their rise in the mid-century novel. In creating a place for plainer women in fiction they recognized beauty's increasing importance in the marriage market.

Mid-century authors such as Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Wilkie Collins not only created plainer female protagonists, but made increasingly strong statements about the dilemma those women had to face. While nineteenth-century society and novels taught young women to aim for matrimony and motherhood, it was clear that many of them would never marry. The competition in the marriage market was tough, and the possession of beauty was an advantage in the drawing-room, at dances, in any social gatherings.

The History of Beauty's Role in Western Culture and Current Scholarship

Current scholarship, though it has looked closely at beauty in nineteenth-century British literature, has generally failed to so much as glance at plain, let alone ugly, women. Brontë's plain heroines and the critical works devoted to them constitute an exception. Like Brontë, nineteenth-century authors, more alert to the downside of beauty, tried not only to reflect the fate of plainer women when facing the marriage market, but also to appeal to their audience for compassion, for a better understanding of the inner

workings of a plain woman's mind. Looking at how beauty became more important for women during the nineteenth century because of the companionate ideal, I will argue that because society and its conventions made it impossible for young men and women to see whether or not they were compatible, men were forced to choose women mainly because of outward appearances.

To understand the significance of the term *beauty* and its impact on the female part of humanity in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to consider its history in western culture prior to 1800. The concept of beauty narrowed over time; it has been, however, connected with good ever since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers. Beauty has usually applied to women, even according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Current English*: “**beauty** n. (pl. **beauties**) **1** a combination of qualities that delights the senses. **2** a beautiful woman. **3** an excellent example. **4** an attractive feature or advantage.” Beauty evokes love, or at least desire. Thus beauty establishes power, either the power the object of beauty has over the observer, or the power of the beholder who assigns beauty.

The Greek notion of beauty was broad, including, in addition to visual beauty, tactile and even aural beauty. But the focus of the term *beauty* has tended over time to concentrate more and more upon visual beauty. In his article on “The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline” (1972), Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, a noted Polish historian of philosophy and aesthetician, claims that the term *beautiful* has been generally “restricted in its application to women and children” (165), whereas men are in general excluded from its concept. The Greek poetess Sappho († 570 BC) writes “what is beautiful is good” (Etcoff 40). In similar fashion, Plato († 347 BC) also positioned beauty with the

good and the true among the most important human values. He thought that “if life is worth living, it is so in order that many may behold beauty” (Tatarkiewicz 170). For Plato, the good and the beautiful are one. Plato was also responsible for linking “beauty with love: first, the love of the beautiful body” (Zeglin 2), and looking at beauty as “erotic” (Higgins 282), regarding it as the “object of love” (Synnott, “Part I” 611). Plato is the culprit who initiates a series of polar binaries such as beauty/ugliness, goodness/evil, love/hate, happiness/unhappiness (Synnott, “Part I” 612), which tend to exclude the plain portion of humanity from love or happiness. Synnott summarizes this notion in his statement that “beauty as physically attractive not only reflects Divine beauty, and inner moral beauty, but also inspires physical desire, i.e. is sexy” (“Part I” 625).

Plato is probably right in his assumption that human beings are prone to love what is beautiful. St. Augustine (354-430 AD) exclaimed: “What things can we love, if not the beautiful” (qtd. in Tatarkiewicz 171). As the term *beauty* became more restricted, all the “changes had the cumulative effect of preparing the way for the relativization and, indeed, subjectivization of the notion of beauty” (Tatarkiewicz 172). The notion of exterior beauty as an indicator of spiritual beauty coalesced. Centuries later, Baldassare Castiglione agreed with Sappho and Plato when he wrote in 1561 that “beauty is a sacred thing [...] only rarely does an evil soul dwell in a beautiful body, and so outward beauty is a true sign of inner goodness [...] it can be said that in some manner the good and the beautiful are identical, especially in the human body. [...] For the most part the ugly are also evil” (qtd. in Etcoff 40-41). This narrow perception of beauty and its significance

excludes with one stroke ugly and plain women from love, even going so far as to question their potential for goodness.

The function of the term *beautiful* itself is significant. It gets applied by an observing subject to characterize a certain object. That differentiation between the object to be judged and the observer gives rise to a major tension, a hierarchy in which the observer assumes power, taking a superior place relative to the judged object, which thus becomes subject to the observer's taste. The French philosopher René Descartes thought that beauty "signifies nothing more than the relation of our judgment to an object" (Tatarkiewicz 172). This situation ensures that there is surprisingly little the objects of the evaluating gaze can do about physical appearance. Our taste for the beautiful, although thought by many, including Kant, to be free and individual, tends to be formed and adjusted according to the prevailing standard of the time. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but that "'eye' is culturally determined, as Montaigne and Voltaire had shown" (Synnott, "Part I" 626).

Current scholarship agrees with Montaigne and Voltaire. Literary criticism claims that culture plays a major role in the nineteenth-century obsession with female beauty. It is intriguing to find parallels between current scholarship and the history of beauty in philosophy. Scholarship still connects beauty with women, still explores the platonic notion that beauty may signify goodness—especially as that connection plays out in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popularity of physiognomy, which goes so far as to assign ethical values to facial features. Lori Lefkowitz devotes a major part of her study, *The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel*, to the physical notion of beauty.

Scholarship has also been looking at beauty as power, when related to women, especially when connecting them to art, so as to focus on women as objects. This notion of women as mere objects is explored by Kathy Psomiades's *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism*, in which she establishes the idea that art—literature, paintings, or music—wears a feminine face. It explores what that means for women and how the feminine nature of art influences society and culture, constructing gender ideologies (2). It also depicts how the female body is looked at as an object subjected by the male gaze (2) and a commodity (15) or art work, rather than a human being. Psomiades provides a nice contrast between the depth women provide in art, as well as the mere surface, captured by the artist (28), flirting with Irigaray's idea of the female body as an exchange value for patriarchal transactions (105), a trigger for desire (132) and a status symbol. Beth Newman's *Subjects on Display* explores women's awareness of being seen, and being on display. Both Psomiades' and Newman's research on beauty show how society's objectification of women constitutes an echo of the nineteenth-century obsession with beauty, and how this notion places them in a passive and prostrate position.

Most contemporary scholars writing about women, social conventions, and female beauty in the nineteenth century rely in their research on Deborah Gorham's *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, which explores ideologies young girls were exposed to in the nineteenth century. The historian Gorham explores what cultural and social expectations girls had to grow up with, including their conduct during courtship and the parental influence on the choice of their spouse. She treats "neatness"—essentially being pretty—as a duty of the fair sex, a duty which young girls are trained to

fulfill. However, Gorham's study, focusing on the family dynamics in Victorian England, stops short of treating issues of women's marriageability.

Where Gorham's research ends Britta Zangen's takes over, exploring the strong pressures and dire need for nineteenth-century women to get married, the only life they were trained for. Among the scholarly works studying the pressure to marry, Zangen's *Our Daughters Must be Wives* is one of the most comprehensive. Zangen gives illuminating insight into marriage constellations portrayed in the novels of Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy. She looks at the young marriageable heroines, and their journey to the altar, analyzing their assets and virtues, which often comply with social conventions. Zangen treats the nineteenth-century novel as a reflection of society, looking at the ideologies of that society by studying the socio-historical context. She examines the significance of the typical beautiful heroine as a means of identification for the female reader. Although Zangen acknowledges beauty as an increasingly important asset for young women entering the marriage market, she fails to consider what significance beauty must have had for the plainer, let alone the ugly, female characters in novels. Her focus is on the need to marry more than on the means to attract a suitor.

Lori Lefkowitz's research, by contrast, focuses more on beauty as a characteristic of heroines in nineteenth-century literature that serves as a means to attract men. Her study *The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel* establishes the significance of beauty in the nineteenth century, drawing upon the fact that beauty was considered an exterior sign of goodness. Beauty created a power construct, which Lefkowitz associates with the marriageability of heroines. Lefkowitz explores the notion of beauty and power even in biblical stories, such as the story of Jael, who is "first and foremost, beautiful, and

not simply beautiful, but tantalizingly so” (69). Jael defeats the military leader Sisera with her beauty, as do Judith, Esther and Delilah in their respective stories. Part of the power of beauty is given by its admirers. “[B]eauties, who are deferred to, agreed with, and granted favors, automatically assumed the privileges of power” (Etkoff 47). Everyone seems to agree that “feminine allure was implicitly tied to social power: a woman’s destiny was often determined by marriage, and gaining a man’s favorable glance was the first step to gaining a husband” (Federico 30). Authors portray this distinct relationship between the appearance of a female character and her power within society. “Beauty is power [...] for it can bring a woman effortless achievement” (Federico 30). It is precisely the power plain women lack.

Lefkovitz is not the only scholar to acknowledge the rising importance of beauty in the nineteenth century. Anna Krugvoy’s thorough study on *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* investigates the impact the growing pressure on female appearance had on women. Krugvoy looks at the results of the power construct mentioned before, but instead of treating beauty as empowering to women, she considers the more negative aspects. Krugvoy analyzes women’s trauma resulting from being defined by their bodies and imprisoned by physicality (9), such as the symptoms of anorexia nervosa first documented in the 1820s. Krugvoy traces the changing beauty ideals in the nineteenth century, and how whole generations of women would torture their bodies and submit themselves to tight lacing and unhealthy eating habits, because of what a wasp’s waist signified culturally. Female beauty, according to Krugvoy, was centered on the waist. A slender waist indicated not only the victory of spirit over mere physicality, but also virginity and hence sexual purity.

During the regency the pressure on physical appearance rose, and women became more aware of being looked at as ornaments of a household: “[T]he pursuit of beauty was considered such an important aspect of women’s feminine role; very different writers [...] agreed that women’s role was in part ornamental or aesthetic” (Krugvov 19). The importance of female beauty increased, to the point that Sara Coleridge claimed in 1826. The beauty syndrome triggered eating disorders such as anorexia. Krugvov thinks the influence was fundamentally economic: “For many women, who relied on marriage for financial security, being ‘the queen of the ballroom’ was more than pleasant flattery: the letters to the [*Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*] spotlight women’s economic and social vulnerability, and their need to fit the standards of beauty” (38). Another source investigating the influence of beauty in women’s lives is Nancy Etcoff’s *Survival of the Prettiest*, which documents her study on the science of beauty. Etcoff, a psychologist and current faculty member of Harvard Medical School, provides scientific analysis and statistics merged with cultural observations on the meaning of beauty and its importance in gender relations. Etcoff explores what we find beautiful, and why – and consequently how we treat beauty or the lack of it. According to Etcoff’s studies and statistics, men are more susceptible to appearance in a potential spouse than women (60). Plain women in the nineteenth century felt the pressure to marry even more, as they knew that the lack of beauty was a major obstacle in their way to marriage.

Although several scholars have recognized beauty as a means to attract suitors and therefore as an increasing asset in the nineteenth-century marriage market, they have failed to connect the rising importance of beauty at the beginning of the nineteenth century with shifting marriage ideals. Furthermore, they have overlooked the impact the

rise of beauty had on plainer women. Even studies such as Gorham's, Zangen's, and Lefkovitz's fall short of connecting the growing influence of beauty in the marriage market to the shifting marriage ideals, and pay no attention to the plight of the plain women. My research will explore that niche.

I will look at the shifting marriage ideals portrayed in nineteenth-century novels, focusing on social conventions that prevented men and women from getting to know each other despite the ideal of a companionate marriage young people strove for. This extended distance between marriageable men and women resulted in men choosing potential brides mainly on the basis of their appearance. That practical necessity as a result reinforced the significance of beauty in the nineteenth-century marriage market. Consequently, women tended to become more anxious about their appearance than about their character, and plainer women felt seriously handicapped in the marriage market. Novelists supported that paradigm in their depiction of mismatches and unequal marriages that indict society for making it impossible for young people to get to know each other enough to opt for a true companionate relationship.

Beauty and Marriage in the Eighteenth Century

When did beauty come to be linked irrevocably with the marriageability of women? During the eighteenth century, marriage ideals and practices changed significantly. Since the thirteenth century British society had practiced the tradition of "calling the banns." To allow for objections to the marriage, every wedding had to be announced publicly on three consecutive Sundays at church before the wedding took place. A century later couples were able to avoid "calling the banns" by purchasing a marriage license and taking an oath swearing that there were no legal obstacles for the

marriage. The license had to be issued by an archdeacon, archbishop, or bishop; a special license could be issued only by the bishop of Canterbury. Parents had always wielded a tremendous influence in the marriage market by choosing spouses for their children—originally according to rank, then at the beginning of the eighteenth century increasingly on the basis of finances.

In 1753 Hardwicke's famous Marriage Act passed, which reinforced both "calling the banns" and the license, making both procedures necessary for the marriage to be legal. The new law by means of those procedures granted parents even more control over their children's choice of spouse. This bill "produced one of the most heated debates of the century in the House of Commons" in its attempt to "close up loopholes in existing legislation on marriage that allowed minors to marry without parental (read, paternal) consent" (Harth 125). The intention of the promoters of the act was to put an end to clandestine marriages through which society thought young heirs or heiresses to be prey to fortune hunters.

The Marriage Act was so highly controversial because romantic love, although it lost the day, was at the core of it. Both parties for and against the Marriage Act claimed to have romance on their side. The opposition insisted that marriages made by parents failed to consider their children's love, beauty, or birth, thus becoming financial bargains, mere mercenary arrangements (Lemmings 339). Supporters of the bill, on the other hand, insisted that romantic love had become so acceptable that they were "no longer willing to tolerate the use of marriage as a means of making one's fortune, and parents were content to allow their children to marry for love" (Trumbach qtd. in Harth 131). But whatever the attitudes toward it, the 1753 Marriage Act mainly confirmed was that the personal

interests of women had little influence on marital decisions. Contracts were drawn up by lawyers and discussed by the father of the bride and her potential husband, excluding the bride. Marriage was an agreement between men, a patriarchal transaction in which women were treated as passive commodities.

In 1763 Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* was translated into English, affirming "the traditional notion of the social, political, and intellectual inferiority of women" (Eschbach 6), defining the limitation of women's lives. Whereas men, in Rousseau's opinion, exhibit strength, action, experience, and intelligence by nature, women are naturally passive, yielding, and weak. Women have no choice but to follow the course nature has set for them. If they were to assume "manly" traits, they would render themselves unhappy. Their sole purpose and meaning in life is found in relation to men, so it is only appropriate that the patriarch of the family should decide what man a woman would center her life on. Sophy, the female character Rousseau depicts, personifies the passive woman as contrasted with the more dynamic male. Rousseau's work highly influenced British society, confirming social conventions and the current ideal of womanhood. Even opponents conceded his importance: Wollstonecraft situated herself in opposition to Rousseau, and Mill argued with the gender notions Rousseau had emphasized. Novelists such as Edgeworth, Austen, and Brontë had their characters read Rousseau or otherwise show acquaintance with his work.

Only a decade later, Dr. John Gregory's treatise on female behavior called *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774) was published, underlining and affirming Rousseau's notions about women. It became widely read throughout the nineteenth century, and was used extensively until the 1890s, exposing innumerable marriageable

young women to its teachings and principles. In the preface the publisher claims that “the subsequent letters were written by a tender father, in a declining state of health, for the instruction of his daughters, and not intended for the public” (iiv). The advice is constructed as “domestic intercourse,” intended to instruct young women to become “amiable” and warning them from courtship dangers (iiv). Gregory’s agenda exposes the contradictory standards women had to live by, how fine a line they had to walk in order to retain society’s approval.

Even though Dr. Gregory holds to the eighteenth-century notions of marriage, he sounds at times as if he supports something like a companionate ideal: “You will see, in a little treatise of mine I just published, in what an honorable point of view I have considered your sex; not as domestic drudges, or the slaves of our pleasures, but as our companions and equals.” (12) However, he is decidedly realistic about marriage and the possibility of love: “What is called love among you, is rather gratitude, and a partiality to the man who prefers you to the rest of your sex, and such a man you often marry, with little of either personal esteem or affection. Indeed, without an unusual share of natural sensibility, and very peculiar good fortune, a woman in this country has very little probability of marrying for love” (58-59). He does have the good sense to recognize appearance, although crucial during courtship, to be of little importance afterwards, as “[m]arriage, indeed, will at once dispel the enchantment raised by external beauty” (89).

Part of the paradox introduced by Dr. Gregory revolves around the issue of presenting oneself in society. It is important to appear neat and advantageous for a woman; however, “[o]ne of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted at even

the gaze of admiration” (25). This necessity for delicacy indicates the razor’s edge young women had to walk. On the one hand they had to attract men in order to find their “ultimate happiness” in matrimony—this under the handicap of never showing that marriage was their intention. And to achieve their objective they had to hide their intellect: “The code of feminine behavior, in short, postulates a young woman who is least aggressive, often in fact least conscious precisely where she has most at stake” (Yeazell 126). Reserve is so crucial that Dr. Gregory insists that “[w]hen a girl ceases to blush, she has lost the most powerful charm of beauty. That extreme sensibility which it indicates, may be a weakness and incumbrance [*sic*] in our sex, as I have too often felt, but in yours it is peculiarly engaging” (25). Childlike shyness is welcomed—it is a grievance of Mrs. Gibson in *Wives and Daughters*, who used to be so proud of her blushes, that she cannot blush any longer. Women were put in the impossible position of both having to parade their beauty and having to appear not to.

In spite of his claim that young women should not flaunt their beauty, Dr. Gregory placed them firmly in the role of objects. Since women should not put themselves forward in conversation, they ought to be an adornment to the room: “A fine woman, like other fine things in nature, has her proper point of view, from which she may be seen to most advantage. To fix this point, requires great judgment, and an intimate knowledge of the human heart” (34). Young women have to master a balancing act between showing their beauty in the best possible light and knowing that it is repugnant to do so openly.

Only a year after Dr. Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* was published, Johann Kaspar Lavater, a poet, pastor, and physiognomist from Switzerland

published in 1775 his treatise *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (*On Physiognomy*). According to its German title this treatise had the purpose of furthering the knowledge of human nature, human kindness, and philanthropy. Claiming to determine character according to the face, this book was highly popular, running through many editions, especially in England. Lavater's thesis contributed to the general notion that appearance was enough to know character, enforcing the importance of appearance as a reflection of virtue and personality.

Ideas such as Lavater's physiognomy became more important because young men wanted to choose their future brides without parental interference. Prospective bridegroom turned to stratagems like reading facial features, because society made it hard for them to get to know marriageable young women in a way that would allow them to determine whether or not they would be compatible in a marriage. Erica Harth claims that at the beginning of the nineteenth century "a significantly larger number of people than before expected to marry for love" (123) instead of for rank, property, or money: "[S]ome time in the eighteenth century the idea arose that one should marry for love" (124). This new concept was the foundation for the companionate ideal, an equal partnership between husband and wife supposedly based on mutual affection and respect. The problem is that when men are free to choose in this paradigm, beauty reigns. Appearance became the major asset to attract young men in a ballroom or at other social gatherings which were opportunities for sizing up future wives. Influenced by the shift in marriage ideals and their consequences, nineteenth-century society's obsession with beauty rose because beauty was connected to the marriageability of young women.

Beauty and Marriageability in the Nineteenth Century

An 1868 newspaper article insists that “[i]t is beyond all question the tendency of modern society to regard marriage as the great end and justification of a woman’s life. This is perhaps the single point on which practical and romantic people, who differ in so many things, invariably agree” (“Plain Girls” 195). As beauty became the foremost asset for young marriageable women to attract a suitable husband, people inevitably became more and more obsessed with appearance and particularly with facial features. Society, aware of this shift of values, became increasingly preoccupied with beautifying women so they could attract suitable husbands. Not only were more novels dedicated to courtship and the marriage plot, but a huge part of the publishing industry focused on beauty and marriage. Guides, manuals, and books of advice proliferated, restricting women’s lives on all sides.

One of those guides for young women was written by the wife of the famous physiognomist Alexander Walker, the author of *Beauty in Women Analyzed and Classified* (1840). The main purpose of Ms. Walker’s *Female Beauty: as Preserved and Improved by Regimen, Cleanliness and Dress* (1837) was to beautify women. Mrs. Walker suggests in her dedication that she wrote this book for “the ladies of England, Scotland, and Ireland, in the earnest wish to preserve & improve that beauty for which they are distinguished” (v). The author claims that beauty is the emblem not just of physical but of mental qualities, echoing the platonic notion of goodness reflected in beauty. Walker connects beauty also with organization, order, and cleanliness, which are the assets a good housewife is supposed to have.

Mrs. Walker is extremely detailed in the advice she gives, so detailed as to suggest that to render a woman beautiful must have taken an extreme amount of time. In addition to physical activity and diet, she treats such details as the art of styling hair so thoroughly as to tell the reader between which fingers the individual tresses should be held before securing them with a pin. She spends similar time on stays and corsets (310-317), skin care, color, and complexion—and those are just a few of her “health” crusades. Walker is especially interesting in her notion of color (2), convinced that the right combination of colors can “correct every fault of complexion” (ix). And that is what she is trying to do with everything—correct the fault. That attempt to improve nature and its flaws is an attempt to mold every woman into one ideal form. Walker does realize that any measure taken to beautify a woman is unnatural and pernicious if taken to the extreme (315). Yet she does not seem to heed her own advice about extremes, going so far as to advise rooms with high ceilings if a woman is too tall, or crowded rooms with low ceilings if a woman is too short.

Like Turner later, Walker is concerned with the effect of beauty on the “eye and mind of the observer” (316): working towards pleasing and attracting that observing eye of a possible suitor, she is trying to fashion women into pleasing and beautiful objects. In her world the whole point of beauty is to enhance a woman’s marriageability. Walker claims that organization and cleanliness coupled with beauty indicate “respect for ourselves and others” (vii) and are “essential to happiness both of the male & female sex” (viii). She is supported in her statement by Sarah Stickney Ellis, who claims two years later that “such is the force of public opinion in favour of the delicacies of taste and feeling in the female sex, that no power of intellect, or display of learning, can

compensate to men, for the want of nicety or neatness in the woman with whom they associate in domestic life” (*Women of England* 129). No power of mind or character can compensate for lack of beauty: “In vain to them might the wreath of laurel wave in glorious triumph over locks uncombed; and wo betide the heroine, whose stocking, even of the deepest blue, betrayed a lurking hole” (*Women of England* 129). In the eyes of social commentators like Mrs. Alexander Walker and Sarah Stickney Ellis, nothing can compete with appearance. Character has secondary importance compared to a woman’s looks; society considers appearance means enough to determine personality. The psychological notion runs deeper than that: a woman’s outer appearance reveals a woman’s quality, even expresses her temperament. The façade matters more than the interior.

Sarah Stickney Ellis blamed men directly for women’s obsession with beauty. In her book *The Daughters of England* (1842) she states that “[f]emale beauty has ever been the theme of inspiration with poets, and with heroes, since the world began; and for all the sins and the follies, and they are many, for which beauty has formed the excuse, has not man been the abettor, if not the cause” (167-168). Considering the inappropriately high value society puts on the appearance of women, she claims that “[w]ere there no men in the world, female beauty would be valued as a charm, but not as one of the highest order [...] Still there is so natural and irresistible a delight in gazing upon beauty” (*Daughters of England* 170). Wherever the fault lay, in the nineteenth century female beauty gained importance as an invaluable asset to attract potential husbands on the marriage market. Beauty as a commodity overtook both fortune and rank as the foremost attraction in a woman. The ideal for marriage was companionship, but that ideal was hard

to realize in the limited social arena of drawing rooms or dances. Ellis was very explicit about it: “Men have been found whose admiration of beauty was so great, that they have actually married for that alone, content, for its sake, to dispense with the presence of mind” (*Daughters of England* 175).

More disturbing even than Mrs. Walker’s treatise on female beauty is *The Art of Dress: or, Guide to the Toilette* (1839). The advertisement for the book states that a woman’s choice of dress and its arrangement is an expression of her taste, which should be shaped to draw out her best assets: “correct knowledge of the principles which ought to guide the selection and the adaptation of the various parts of the female costume” is “of the greatest importance.” It certainly was for young women in the marriage market. Perhaps the most dismaying chapter in this guide provides instruction on how to remove unwanted hair on the face, arms, and hands. The ingredients of this depilatory mixture show just how far women were willing to go to achieve beauty, even risking their health: “Take quick lime, one ounce; orpiment, three drachms; orvic, two drachms; salpêtre, one drachm; sulphur, one ounce; soap lees, half-a-pint. Evaporate to a proper consistency, and apply to the part affected. In a few Minutes rub the mixture off with a wet cloth, and the hair will be removed” (67). This strange brew is just one of many noxious beauty treatments, along with corsets, stays, and lead- and mercury-based facial paints, which embrace the German saying *Schönheit muss leiden* (beauty must suffer).

The newfound emphasis on feminine beauty explains why books of beauty, like *Heath’s Book of Beauty* edited by the Countess of Blessington in 1846, or *The Book of Beauty* published in 1896, became fashionable throughout nineteenth-century England. Both volumes are collections of beautiful engravings and portraits of contemporary

women accompanied by texts and poetry. The books are costly, the texts often in gilt printing, and the objects depicted—women—are beauties from the upper classes, the aristocracy and the literary world, important figures and debutantes, mingled with occasional children. Tatarkiewicz's conviction that beauty is always connected with women and children is confirmed by the dramatic fact that there is not one man to be seen in the *Book of Beauty*.

Nineteenth-century novelists depict how men react towards the visible beauty of women with indulgence, understanding, and admiration. In 1856 Joseph Turnley published a book called *The Language of the Eye: the Importance and Dignity of the Eye as Indicative of General Character, Female Beauty, and Manly Genius*, in which he displays the epitome of the male gaze. He approaches the eye as the mirror to reflect the world (1), considering visual impact the most significant impression. Much of what Turnley has to say about the eye as an instrument for viewing goes hand-in-hand with Plato's notion of beauty. Just as Plato connected beauty with both eroticism and the truth of what one ought to love, Turnley seems to claim that beauty, once beheld, invokes love (65). Passion and emotions are "painted in the eye" (38), and it is "through these portals [eyes] fair Truth makes her first advance" (2).

Beauty connected with the good creates a compelling syllogism: a beautiful face equals a good person. That nineteenth-century women were imbued with this notion of beauty as goodness can be seen when Frances Power Cobbe ponders the connection between the three virtues: "The beautiful is necessarily good and true, but it is to be loved because it is beautiful, and not merely for its truth or goodness" ("Old Maids" 68). The practical implications of that connection of the beautiful and good are pressing. Not all

women possess beauty, and not all of them attained the ultimate goal of matrimony in nineteenth-century England—there were many single “superfluous” women. This dilemma was such a major social issue that many different solutions were offered. Harriet Martineau addresses the necessity for single women to be able to work and support themselves in her review article on “Female Industry” (1859). Frances Power Cobbe wrote even more specifically about the issue of single women in her essay “Celibacy v. Marriage” and in “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?” (1862), claiming that because there was “a natural excess [...] of females over the males [...], female celibacy was normal and inevitable” (“Old Maids” 60). Then Cobbe contradicts herself with another solution for the problem of single women—to ship them to the colonies. Marriage was the “only true vocation [...] promoted at any cost,” though thirty percent of women at that time never got married (“Old Maids” 60). Those female-heavy demographics meant men could choose from the selection of marriageable young women, whereas women knew they were not guaranteed the opportunity of choice, or even of marriage itself.

Beauty’s increasing importance in courtship and marriage put strain on plainer women. Marriage was so widely considered the purpose of a woman’s life, that unmarried women were seen as failures. A journalist makes that explicit in a 1868 newspaper article: “[I]f marriage is to be set before all women as the one ideal, a number of feminine lives will always turn out to have been failures” (“Plain Girls” 195). The competition to marry makes all women “marriageable objects of male desire” (Burgess 141).

Despite nineteenth-century society's attempt to ignore the fact that plain women were at a disadvantage facing the marriage market, there were those who addressed this issue, trying to trigger society's awareness of the value of plainer women's attractive assets apart from their lack of beauty. In a newspaper article published in 1868 titled intriguingly *Plain Girls*, the author traces the marriage plot in the popular novel and its beautiful heroine. After illustrating how women are perceived to be objects of devotion, the author muses:

One difficulty presented by this matrimonial view of woman's destiny is to know what, under the present conditions in which society finds itself placed, is to become of plain girls. [...] If marriage is the object of all feminine endeavors and ambitions, it certainly seems rather hard that Providence should have condemned plain girls to start in the race at such an obvious disadvantage. [...] The boldest effort to rectify the inequalities of the position of plain girls has been made, of late years, by a courageous school of female writers. Everything is done that could be done to persuade mankind that plain girls are, in reality, by far the most attractive of the lot. The clever authoress of "Jane Eyre" nearly succeeded in the forlorn attempt for a few years; and plain girls, with volumes of intellect speaking through their deep eyes and from their massive foreheads, seemed for a while, on paper at least, to be carrying everything before them. The only difficulty was to get the male sex to follow out in practice what they so completely admired in Miss Brontë's three-volume novels.

Unhappily, the male sex, being very imperfect and frail, could not be brought to do it. (*Plain Girls* 195)

The journalist suggests that plain girls now settle for less, because they expect no more of life. The writer admires those women who try to be cheerful and happy with their fate. Other newspaper articles dealt with the issue of plain women. In the same year “Plain Girls” was published, the *Daily Telegraph* featured an extensive series titled “Marriage or Celibacy?” (Robson 3).

Women’s rising anxiety concerning their appearance and consequently their marriageability, and society’s resulting attempts to beautify the fair sex, are clear evidence that beauty became the major asset to achieve matrimony in the nineteenth century. According to the nineteenth-century domestic ideology, marriage was the sole purpose of a woman’s life, the making of her happiness. This perspective on the options of nineteenth-century women places enormous pressure on the marriage plot. Marriage as inevitable course of life for a young girl would fulfill her divine purpose. For many it was also the promise of a more stable and financially secure life. The conclusion that a woman can find fulfillment only in marriage, and that her happiness is therefore tied to a man, is supported throughout literature. But some nineteenth-century authors were aware that some of the young women were at a physical disadvantage in the marriage market, and they tried to find a place for those women in literature and in society’s notice.

Chapter Outline

In light of this background on the influence of beauty in women’s lives in the nineteenth century, the chapters that follow will consider the role of plain and ugly women in literature, how they are portrayed, and how that depiction changes. There are

different patterns of that depiction which I have tried to distinguish. In my first chapter I look at the shifting marriage ideals as portrayed by nineteenth-century authors, contrasting Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* with her friend Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*. I demonstrate how the older generation focuses on social standing and financial means, whereas the younger generation, the marriageable men, are mainly attracted to beauty. Both authors show how beauty becomes quintessential in both Rochester's and Roger Hamley's first engagement—in Rochester's case also his first marriage—and how the plainer women get overlooked, turning into "second-choice women." In novels the companionate marriage was an ideal the younger generation strove for. I claim that it was not very feasible in reality, because society prevented young men from getting to know their female counterparts. Brontë and Gaskell are trying to sway the audience's opinion in favor of the plainer female character, but they do that by creating unconventional situations for their heroines in which their character is revealed to the male protagonist. *Jane Eyre*, the predominant "second-choice woman" narrative of the century, is one of the most famous novels to feature a plain protagonist who struggles with life in a society where appearance is a woman's most important asset. With *Wives and Daughters* Elizabeth Gaskell is replying to her friends' successful novel. She may be taking Brontë's idea a step further, creating a pretty heroine who still gets overlooked by young marriageable men when contrasted with her beautiful sister.

When plainer women get overlooked and turn into "second-choice women," they end up watching their friends being courted, getting engaged, and finally marrying. Hence my second chapter is devoted to the "disinclined voyeur," the woman whose only experience of marital bliss is to view it from outside. Looking at very distinct depictions

of ugliness, I consider the attempt of nineteenth-century authors to create a new ideal of womanhood. I contrast the early depiction of a “disinclined voyeur,” Maria Edgeworth’s Miss Broadhurst in *The Absentee*, with the fascinating character of Marian Halcombe in Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*. While Miss Broadhurst figures as a minor secondary character who gets married off-stage in order to comply with the reader’s expectations, Wilkie Collins defies conventions with his Marian Halcombe. She is the female protagonist of the novel and an excellent example of the “disinclined voyeur,” who lives with her happily married sister, aware of her own ugliness and the fact that she will never find a husband in spite of character and strength of mind, much superior to her fair sister’s. Because Marian felt a little *tendresse* for her sister’s husband at some point, her situation in her sister’s household is even more poignant. Collins creates deliberately a discordant picture, never giving his readership the comfort of seeing Marian married. He opts for a new ideal of womanhood that challenges the conventional ideology.

My last chapter focuses on the choices plain and ugly women must make in light of their self-perception and the limited options they have, looking at how the lack of beauty can lead to a lack of marriage options. In “Settling for Less, or Solitary Life” I look at a more realistic depiction of the life and actions of plainer women. I claim that authors discard the idealization of plainer women discussed in the second chapter in favor of representing the non-romanticized fate of plain women. They portray women who settle for less, knowing that their appearance is an impediment to finding a husband. The most famous depiction might be Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*. She is a representative of plain women who marry someone inferior in character to secure a comfortable living, satisfied with being content as opposed to being happy, knowing

there are not many options open to women except getting married and that life as a spinster might be dreary as well as financially insecure. Charlotte Brontë considers another possibility for plain women: to remain single and to enter professional life rather than settling for less. In her novel *Villette* Brontë leaves her audience dissatisfied, refusing to give them the comfort of the conventional marriage plot, portraying Lucy Snowe as an independent professional woman not defined by her relationship with men. By removing Lucy from the marriage market Brontë liberates her from the drawing room restrictions and frees her from the tyranny of beauty.

II. The Second-Choice Woman

This chapter focuses on the consequences of the shifting marriage ideals as portrayed in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and her friend Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1866). The major concern is the effect of earlier models to the companionate ideal for young women's marital opportunities. Charlotte Brontë's creation, the plain governess Jane Eyre, was a novelty for Victorian audiences. Jane Eyre is the epitome of the second-choice woman. She is certainly the most famous such woman, and this novel has a special place in the history of plain women in literature, introducing as something more than a secondary character, a female character who lacks good looks. Plain Jane Eyre is more than capable of capturing her audience's interest; she became a widely popular character in spite of differing so significantly in appearance from her literary predecessors. Her appearance on the stage of literature triggered many conversations on women's issues, largely because in *Jane Eyre* judgment on appearance is a predominant factor: beauty or the lack of it are the focus of the majority of Jane's own conversations and even of the conversations she overhears.

Charlotte Brontë might have had an agenda when she invented the character who would bring her such public acclaim. The author of the 1868 article "Plain Girls" states that "[e]verything is done that could be done to persuade mankind that plain girls are, in reality, by far the most attractive of the lot. The clever authoress of *Jane Eyre* nearly succeeded in the forlorn attempt for a few years; and plain girls, with volumes of intellect speaking through their deep eyes and from their massive foreheads, seemed for a while, on paper at least, to be carrying everything before them" (195). George Murray Smith, Charlotte Brontë's publisher, wrote that "few women ever existed more anxious to be

pretty than she [Charlotte Brontë], or more angrily conscious of the circumstance that she was not pretty” (qtd. in Farkas 324). Charlotte Brontë argued with her sisters about beautiful heroines. In her intriguing article “‘A cool observer of her own sex like me’: Girl-watching in *Jane Eyre*” (1991), Annette Federico states that Brontë “felt it her responsibility to alert readers to the arbitrary standards of beauty in her society, and to dominant attitudes—political attitudes based as much upon class as upon sex—that either limit or privilege women’s potential for self-actualization” (29). Brontë’s two most well-known female characters, Jane and Lucy from *Villette*, lack physical beauty, and Brontë gave her sisters the answer why:

She once told her sisters that they were wrong—even morally wrong—In making their heroines beautiful as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, “I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours.” Hence, “Jane Eyre,” said she in telling the anecdote: “but she is not myself any further than that.” (Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* vol. II 9-10)

Thus she went about proving her sisters and her audience that she was right.

Critical Overview

Brontë was painfully conscious of her failure to meet society’s beauty standard, as she clung to a perception of herself “which had been strongly impressed on her imagination early in life, and which she exaggerated to herself in a remarkable manner” (Gaskell qtd. in Federico 29). This childhood impression of lacking beauty is equally

exaggerated by Jane Eyre. Hence it is not a surprise that much critical discussion focuses on Jane Eyre's appearance and the autobiographical aspects of the novel, treating it as Brontë's way to "interpret her experiences 'without exposing her private self' to the world" (Fitzwilliam 2). Her awareness of plain women and their fate, and particularly her own experience as a plain woman, whom she fashioned one of her fictional characters after, is important to this argument. Brontë's personal experience demonstrates how women felt about being valued according to their appearance, and why authors tried to prove that female characters can be interesting on other terms than their appearance.

Jane's plainness is emphasized even in titles of articles not concerned with her appearance (Gilbert's "Plain Jane's Progress"). Jane is first and foremost a woman devoid of beauty. On the other hand, one critic compares her to Cinderella (Clarke)—which is interesting considering the fact that Brontë makes sure the reader knows Jane does not miraculously transform into a beauty by the end of the novel. Her literary successors, such as Dickens's Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, are inevitably compared to her—for instance in Lisa Jadwin's "Caricatures, Not Faithfully Rendered: *Bleak House* as a Revision of *Jane Eyre*." Many novels featuring plain heroines are looked upon as revisions of *Jane Eyre*. Carol-Ann Farkas, for instance, in "Beauty is as Beauty Does" compares Brontë's Lucy Snowe and Jane Eyre to George Eliot's plain female characters. Other articles are even more directly focused on Jane's appearance, such as Sharon Murphy's "Charlotte Brontë and the Appearance of Jane Eyre" and Annette Federico's "'A Cool Observer of Her Own Sex Like Me': Girl-Watching in *Jane Eyre*." Federico examines women watching each other or being watched, judged in either case according to their appearance. She and Murphy constitute the foundation for the

conversation this chapter enters through their discussion of female appearance and its significance in Brontë's novels. The chapter analyzes society's judging of young women by their appearance, and the reasons female protagonists struggle with their appearance.

The connection between women's appearance and their marriageability in Gaskell, less obvious than in Brontë, is still a consistent theme. Considering the attention Gaskell devotes to Brontë's personal struggle with her appearance in her groundbreaking biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), we can be certain that she was aware of Brontë's anxiety about her own physical appearance, let alone the contemporary issues of appearance Brontë successfully raised in her novels. An even more dramatic parallel is her calling her protagonist's governess *Miss Eyre* in her novel *Wives and Daughters*.

Many critics claim that *Wives and Daughters* was Gaskell's best work and lament the fact that it has not received adequate critical attention. Most readers treat the novel as a reaction against Romanticism because of its focus on science and its persistent allusions to Darwin—the novel contrasts the sentimentality and superficiality representing Romanticism with the depth and reliability of science (Wright 164). Though the critical focus in *Wives and Daughters* is less on female appearance than in *Jane Eyre*, Maria A. Fitzwilliam claims that Gaskell “explores fashion as a subtly powerful form of self-expression open to women” (4). She notes that Mrs. Kirkpatrick, for example, chooses to wear her mourning attire not only because of reasons of economy—she is poor—but especially because the subdued tints flatter her complexion. Maureen T. Reddy describes the “shaping of individual character by social forces, the self expressing itself in some relation to the values of society as embodied in its conventions, including but not limited to conversation, dress, and gesture” (70). Here again we see the focus on the exterior as a

means to express the self instead of through a character's mind or personality. For Gaskell, as for society, the exterior was the canvas on which men could read a woman's character.

Several critics, key among them Marilyn Butler and Eva Borrromeo, trace Gaskell's sources of inspiration for the plot of *Wives and Daughters* in Frederika Bremer's *A Diary* and Maria Edgeworth's *Helen*. Most of them find the character of Cynthia Kirkpatrick and her mother, Mrs. Gibson, more appealing and intriguing than the novel's actual heroine, Molly. Cynthia seems to be Gaskell's most successful character, unique and very complex—much of that complexity a result of her social concerns (Butler, "The Uniqueness of Cynthia Kirkpatrick" 278). Her mother, according to Mary Waters, is the very product of conduct books—Waters sees Mrs. Gibson as an amalgam of Dr. Gregory's ideals and Mary Wollstonecraft's concerns for women (15). Reddy claims that Molly is "likeable but unremarkable"; however, she also states that Molly's "ordinariness, her utter normality, is an important part of Gaskell's strategy" to show that "Molly's dilemma—determining how to live the best life within a cruelly limiting society—is shared by *all* women" (69). Though Molly Gibson is female protagonist, she is disadvantageously contrasted with her beautiful stepsister. Some critics—particularly Panek, Reddy, Fitzwilliam, and Wright—concern themselves with the way Cynthia and her beauty overshadow Molly and how social conventions silence Molly's naturally assertive voice, to force her into the background in the drawing rooms of Hollingford. I claim that Molly's marriageability is in clear competition with Cynthia's, and that appearance figures prominently in that equation.

Marriageability and Social Conventions

In *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell further develops the issue of female appearance and marriageability Brontë emphasizes in *Jane Eyre*. Brontë creates Jane so plain that young men would not be attracted to her; however, she also creates her so poor and with such ambiguous social standing that she is not an eligible match in the eyes of the older generation either. And Jane has no family, no father who would protect her rights as with Gaskell's Molly, who has a loving father who tries to look out for her interests—not always successfully so, but nevertheless. She has better social standing than Cynthia, her stepsister, and is financially better provided for as well. Her father is still alive and protecting her interests. Cynthia has no money except the allowance Mr. Gibson bestows upon her. She is so dependent financially she has to consider working as a governess, thus entering professional life and jeopardizing her social standing. Cynthia has obviously grown up in a household where money was tight, whereas Molly has not had to worry about financial matters.

The only reason Cynthia is a preferred object for marriage proposals is her beauty. Not that Molly is plain like Jane Eyre—she is pretty—but Gaskell shows the marriage market as a place where no matter how beautiful a girl is, she has to be more beautiful than her female competition. Thus Gaskell makes beauty the issue of marriageability, contrasting it with what actually “made a man or a woman a desirable mate” (Panek 127). Whereas Rochester has already learned his lesson behind the scenes about mere beauty in a woman before he meets Jane, the reader can dramatically follow Roger Hamley through that developing process and observe vividly what effect Roger's choices have on Molly. Gaskell does not seem to think it necessary to depict beautiful women as negatively as

Brontë draws them—she sees the marriage problem more as a matter of the choices of men.

Both Brontë and Gaskell depict conventional drawing-room courtship as inadequate for men to get to know women sufficiently for a potential companionate marriage. That puts great pressure in both novels on female appearance in the marriage market—beauty is a woman’s most effective asset in the drawing room. The inevitable result is that plainer women figure as second-choice women, women who are less desirable get chosen as second best. Because they choose beauty instead of compatibility the young men depicted in Brontë and Gaskell’s writing have unsatisfactory engagements or unhappy first marriages. Only because the authors provide unconventional circumstances in which the male protagonist is capable of meeting his female counterpart on a more intellectual level and actually gets to know her, can the Victorian audience be satisfied with the conventional marriage plot.

Shifting Marriage Ideals

Both novelists depict a distinct change in how marriage is looked at from the older to the younger generation. This change causes a rift between the parents and their children (Reddy 72), as the parents—mainly the fathers—try to maintain control over their sons’ choices of a spouse, whereas the marriageable young men insist on choosing for themselves. In *Jane Eyre* Rochester’s father arranges the marriage of his younger son, Edward. His reasons to interfere with his son’s choices are economic. He does not want to split up the Rochester inheritance, but neither does he want his younger son to be poor. Rochester tells Jane, “I was not the eldest son of my house [...] I had once a brother older than I [...] my father was an avaricious, grasping man [...] it was his resolution to keep

the property together; he could not bear the idea of dividing his estate and leaving me a fair portion [...] I must be provided for by a wealthy marriage. He sought me a partner” (395). Hence Edward gets married to a woman with an adequate dowry so the family estate stays intact.

In Gaskell “many characters are confused by the cultural changes they observe, some find themselves in conflict with established social standards, and several entirely reject old notions of rank” (Reddy 69). Gaskell’s Squire Stephen Hamley is not one of them. He has reasons like those of Rochester’s father to meddle with his sons’ marital choices. His younger son, Roger, needs to marry a woman with a dowry, because his older son, Osborne, will inherit Hamley Hall and its entourage. Osborne, too, needs to marry for money because the family has an estate, yet not enough money to maintain it. In addition to money, Osborne’s future bride needs social standing: “[S]he must be well-born, and the more money she brings the better for the old place” (432). Hamley prides himself on his lineage so much that to have Osborne marry beneath his rank would be sacrilege in the eyes of the Squire. After hearing of Roger’s formed attachment, he pleads with Osborne, “you are the only marriageable one left in the marriage market, and I want to hoist the old family up again” (433). According to Debrabant, the Hamley plot is an example of “the law of primogeniture, parental control of mate choice and the perpetuating of social homogeneity by the consistent practice of marrying with one’s social class” (17). Gaskell chooses to apply “to human society the essential evolutionary law, the necessity to adapt, failing which certain groups are exterminated” (19)—something the Hamleys certainly are in danger of. Gaskell depicts the advantages of

Osborne's marriage, resulting in a very healthy baby boy, in accordance with Darwin's theory.

Mrs. Gibson has similar social and economic reasons for her interference with her daughter's future. Foremost she wants Cynthia to marry into money, though this attitude may be excused because Mrs. Gibson has had to live in dire economic conditions. Secondly she wants Cynthia to marry for social advantage. She rejects Roger, strongly favoring Osborne (Waters 16) because Osborne will inherit his father's title and the land, whereas Roger is only a younger son: "I always do like eldest sons. He will have the estate, won't he? I shall ask your dear papa to encourage him to come about the house" (182). She encourages Cynthia to dump Roger once Cynthia is courted by Mr. Henderson. Her mercenary concerns are obvious in how delighted she is when Molly dances with Lord Hollingford at the Easter charity ball, and her fantasizing about a possible union, with no thought of the severe difference of age between Hollingford and her stepdaughter. She is only "vexed that the chance had so befallen that Molly instead of Cynthia was the young lady singled out" (296).

The younger generation in these novels, by contrast, has very different ideas about motivations for marriage. But for all their idealism, young women still have to wait passively until chosen. Their only choice is whether to reject an offer, but only Cynthia has more than one. Only young men profit from the shift in ideals, finding newfound power of choice, while even more than before "the women must all learn to accommodate themselves to the shapes their lives are given by their relationship with men" (Reddy 70).

The social tension of that marriage ideal shift can be seen in Rochester's changing attitudes. Rochester is at first content with his father's choice of bride. He travels to Jamaica without fighting his father's decision. His father, a greedy but clever man, instead of emphasizing Bertha's inheritance to Rochester, focuses on her beauty: "My father said nothing about her money; but told me Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty: and this was no lie" (395). Rochester, finding the stories of Bertha's beauty to be true, marries her only to find out that beauty does not sustain a marriage. Bertha is not an equal, never mind desirable, companion. And just as Dr. Gregory predicts: "Marriage, indeed, will at once dispel the enchantment raised by external beauty" (89). Only in his unhappy marriage does Rochester see Bertha's true character: "I found her nature wholly alien to mine; her tastes obnoxious to me; her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expand to anything larger" (396). Enticed as he was by Bertha's physical beauty, he soon realizes that he lives in a marriage constituting the opposite of the companionate ideal: "I found that I could not pass a single evening, not even a single hour of the day with her in comfort; that kindly conversation could not be sustained between us, because whatever topic I started immediately received from her a turn at once coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile" (396). He and his wife have nothing in common. She is neither a companion nor an equal. They cannot sympathize with each other—mutual respect, never mind real emotions, are missing from the match. When Rochester actually gets to choose for himself, a woman to his own liking—only after years of hunting for beauty—his focus is on compatibility and equality, a model of the companionate ideal.

Both Roger and Osborne reject their father's interference when it comes to their brides, Osborne more volubly than Roger: "I claim the right of choosing my wife for myself, subject to no man's interference [...] I don't admit any man's right of dictation" (432). He marries a woman against every single one of his father's wishes. Aimée, far from being a wealthy English protestant with ancestral lines back to Queen Anne, is a poor former French nursery maid, and a Roman Catholic on top of that (259). Yet Osborne discards rank and money in favor of love. Roger becomes engaged to Cynthia without his father's knowledge or blessing, discarding the Squire's wish for him to marry into money.

Thus the changing marriage ideals led young men to disregard potential brides' dowries and social standing, directly defying parents' wishes. Young men looked for an equal partner according to the companionate ideal, but they ended up choosing beauty over compatibility. The reason for beauty displacing rank and money lies within nineteenth-century social conventions, which kept young men and women on the level of mere acquaintances: social conditions reduced companionate aspirations to a mere contest of beauty.

Courtship and Beauty in the Drawing Room

Rochester marries Bertha uncomplainingly because she is beautiful and because her family makes sure he only gets to see her at social gatherings, and rarely alone: "They showed her to me in parties, splendidly dressed. I seldom saw her alone, and had very little private conversation with her" (395). Bertha is thoroughly capable of imitating society and thus following social conventions in public: "She flattered me, and lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments. All the men in the circle

seemed to admire her and envy me. I was dazzled, stimulated: my senses were excited; and being ignorant, raw, and inexperienced, I thought I loved her” (395). She is an ornament to the room, and so many other bachelors compete with Rochester for her attention that he feels he gains a victory when he leads her to the altar.

Brontë dramatizes that under such circumstances men would pay little attention to a plain woman like Jane Eyre. Consequently this imaginative novelist creates a unique social situation in which Rochester gets to know Jane Eyre. She is governess in his house, he seems to be a bachelor, and there is no one present with the power to reinforce social conventions. In their unguarded conversations Rochester is thus free to touch on subjects highly inappropriate for young women, such as his relationship with Adèle’s mother (213). He also quizzes Jane on her opinions, and learns to appreciate her as an equal. Getting to know her against usual social practice is ultimately why he desires her as his companion.

Gaskell creates a similarly unconventional situation for her heroine. Molly has no mother, and thus there’s no one to enforce proper decorum while her father is out of the house. For this reason Mr. Gibson decides to send Molly to stay at Hamley Hall after intercepting a fervent love letter addressed to her written by his infatuated young pupil, Mr. Coxe (49). Ironically Molly is still not closely supervised at Hamley Hall, which becomes a problem once the young men return from Cambridge. Their ailing mother is scarcely the one to control the young people and oversee their conversations. Consequently when Molly first meets Roger she is able to converse with him unrestrained, and he becomes her friend. Nevertheless, as Molly has not developed into a fully-shaped woman at the age of seventeen, Roger is in no danger of falling in love with

her. Mrs. Hamley states that Molly “is not the sort of girl young men of their age would take to. [...] [L]ads of one or two and twenty want all the accessories of a young woman. [...] Such things as becoming dress, style of manner. They would not at their age even see that she is pretty; their ideas of beauty include colour” (79). Sure enough, eligible young Roger “certainly did not seem to care much what impression he made upon his mother’s visitor. He was at that age when young men admire a formed beauty more than a face with any amount of future capability of loveliness [...] He only looked upon Molly as a badly-dressed, and rather awkward girl” (86-87). Yet even with these social blind spots, as he gets to know her he values her friendship, as does Osborne.

These unconventional idealized situations do not last forever. Rochester invites some friends to stay at Thornfield Hall, and when guests reinforce social conventions, Jane is treated as a pariah in the drawing room. She does not belong. The first evening she is required to accompany her charge to the drawing room, she is quite severely put in her place, and has to overhear the house guests criticizing the “tribe” of governesses (255). Because there is no conversation between her and Rochester, he asks Jane, “Why did you not come and speak to me in the room?” She answers, “I did not wish to disturb you, as you seemed engaged” (259)—reinforced social conventions have made their deep and intimate conversations impossible.

Molly too is forced back into the restricting social conventions. Once Mr. Gibson gets remarried, her life changes severely. Her father’s wife, the former Mrs. Kirkpatrick, steps right out of contemporary conduct books. The “parasitic stepmother” (Debrabant 23) colonizes the Gibson household, reinforcing social conventions and proper behavior. Trying to appear genteel and socially mobile in Hollingford, she lectures both Molly and

Cynthia on etiquette and decorum. Molly's best asset, her assertive and honest voice, gets silenced in the drawing room. Answering one of Lady Harriet's questions at the Easter charity ball, Molly gets reprimanded by her stepmother: "I cannot have you speaking so to Lady Harriet [...] there is no need for you to set up to have an opinion at your age" (293-294). Molly is neither to speak her mind, nor even to have one of her own.

Considering the drawing-room restrictions on Molly though these enforced social conventions, Rivers is right to claim that "Molly Gibson experiences a disjunction between her own morality and that of the world around her [...] Molly is repeatedly silenced in the face of this moral inadequacy" (68). Though "Molly is early known for her assertive speech; it signifies her feeling for honesty and right behaviour [...] authenticity," "[a]s Molly becomes caught between Mrs. Gibson's hypocrisy and self-contradiction, and loyalty to her father, her own speech grows more staccato [...] Mrs. Gibson imposes deceptions which inhibit free speech between him and his daughter" (Rivers 69). Molly is silenced by a stepmother who represents social conventions.

Cynthia's beauty, by contrast, finds its practical function in the drawing room. An ornament to the room and a good passive listener, she is at the center of male attention as Molly is shoved back. When Osborne first visits, Cynthia does not push herself into the social center: "No one could have been quieter—she hardly uttered a word" (230). Nor does she need to; her mere appearance does the trick: he "seemed to fall under her power at once. He no longer gave his undivided attention to Molly. He cut short his answers to her questions; and by-and-by, without Molly's rightly understanding how it was, he had turned towards Cynthia" (230). Sidetracked by beauty, Osborne forgets Molly's earlier

and stronger claim on his acquaintance and becomes neglectful in his manner towards the less stunning girl in the room.

Roger too falls prey to Cynthia's beauty at the Miss Brownings' card party. Molly notices that he "was talking in a most animated manner to Cynthia, whose sweet eyes were fixed upon his face with a look of great interest in all he was saying, while it was only now and then she made her low replies" (239). And again, Cynthia as the passive listener does not reveal herself. On the contrary she lets her beauty, her "armour of magic" (238), communicate, allowing young men to read into her persona whatever fancy they would like to see. Reddy claims that Cynthia "is able to be all things to all people because she has no inner core and so is infinitely adaptable" (80).

Molly realizes that, though Roger's manner towards her did not change, "it was not quite the same manner he had to Cynthia; and Molly half thought she would have preferred the latter. He was hovering about Cynthia" (242), playfully entreating her to take some refreshments. In his flirting he too forgets his manners, leaving Molly to herself when he joins his brother and Cynthia at the piano. Though he asked Molly "civilly" first whether she wanted to join them too, "Molly thought it would have been better to wait for her answer" (270) before leaving her so abruptly.

Beauty's Success in the Drawing Room

In these novels, society interferes with possible companionate romances. Social conventions demote Jane and Molly in the drawing room, while characters like Blanche and Cynthia reign. Society, in the form of house guests or Mrs. Gibson, keeps the level of acquaintance between marriageable men and young women on a superficial level. This detachment from young women's character has a negative effect on men's choices,

rendering the companionate ideal impossible as it reinforces the significance of beauty. Though Kant claims that “all judgments about beauty are individual judgments,” and “[w]hether something is beautiful is decided in relation to each object separately” (Tatarkiewicz 177), this concept seems not to apply to girls’ experiences in society. Every girl gets compared to the *belle* of the ball, the most beautiful girl in the room, in the family, in the village. Of course young men do not consciously want to choose a woman as their future bride based on her appearance only. But fashions such as physiognomy suggest that they can assign virtue to certain facial features, setting up the notion that a beautiful girl must necessarily be good, as promoted by Lavater and discussed in Lefkovitz’s research.

Female beauty traps Rochester into marriage with Bertha. He admits to Jane that he had several beautiful mistresses, all of whom turned out to be incompatible with him (402). He learns the hard way and has to undergo a significant change before he can stand before Jane and claim “[m]y bride is here [...] because my equal is here, and my likeness [...] You—poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are” (339). Even the seasoned Mr. Gibson fails in his choice of a spouse because of the allure of beauty. Enticed by artful Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s feminine and soft ways in the drawing room at the Towers, and attracted by her beauty (Gaskell 96), he considers her to be a perfect example and surrogate mother for his little Molly. Her womanly manners and pleasing appearance lure him into matrimony. Almost immediately he considers his marriage a failure, mourning the day he decided to marry again. Mr. and Mrs. Gibson turn out to be almost polar opposites. Embittered by his wife’s lack of substance and her dealings within his household, Gibson’s cynicism grows substantially, almost to be compared to Mr.

Bennet's intercourse with his wife in *Pride and Prejudice*: "He shuns society when possible as he grows increasingly unhappy in a marriage that was based on Dr. Gregory's principles" (Waters 17).

Roger does not consciously choose beauty over compatibility. After he and Molly get better acquainted and become friends, both still imagine "some one very different for the future owner of their whole heart—their highest and completest love. Roger looked to find a grand woman, his equal, and his empress; beautiful in person" (147). His choice falls upon Molly's soon-to-be stepsister, Mrs. Kirkpatrick's daughter, Cynthia. He certainly gets someone beautiful in person, yet her appearance blinds him to her shortcomings. Panek thinks that "Roger's intelligence and success [...] also problematizes our view of his sexual choices and attitudes towards women in a way that destabilizes the value of intellectual development in determining masculine desirability" (142). That destabilization makes Gaskell's point about the importance of female appearance even more poignant.

Roger focuses on the more beautiful woman so far as not to hesitate to talk to Molly about his infatuation with Cynthia: "I can't tell you how much I like Miss Kirkpatrick" (246). Molly replies calmly that she is fond of her as well, but surprised how fast he had found out Cynthia's virtues. Roger replies: "I didn't say 'virtues' [...] Yet I don't think one could be deceived in that face" (246). Thus he inadvertently aligns his view with the platonic idea that beauty is good. He reads her according to Castiglione's claim that "outward beauty is a true sign of inner goodness [...] it can be said that in some manner the good and the beautiful are identical, especially in the human body" (qtd. in Etcoff 40-41), concurring, too, with Lavater's notion that one can read a person's

character in her face. Roger, like Mr. Gibson, is “deceived by that face” (246). Later on Cynthia proves that she is not interested in Roger as a person and that she is in no way his equal. She is beautiful in person, but “otherwise with charms precisely opposite of those Roger imagines he will desire” (Panek 144). Nor is Roger the only man reading Cynthia’s beauty as an outer sign of her character—Mr. Preston is his rival. And even Molly’s own suitor, the author of the fervent love letter which so offended Mr. Gibson, gets sidetracked by Cynthia’s beauty. Mr. Coxe appears again in Hollingford, intending to propose to Molly, and ends up asking for Cynthia’s hand in marriage instead, a turnaround so quick it astonishes Mr. Gibson and causes quite some uproar in the household (Gaskell 402-406).

Female Competition and Insecurity based on Appearance

Nineteenth-century women are well aware of beauty’s rising importance in the drawing room, and especially its importance in the eyes of young marriageable men. This dilemma resonates in the perception of Brontë’s and Gaskell’s female characters. The significance of beauty in the eyes of men has the effect of reinforcing its importance in the lives of women. Urged to be passive and silent, they start expressing themselves through their attire, using fashion as a means to communicate, as Fitzwilliam demonstrates in her article on Gaskell and fashion. Reddy too states that “Gaskell uses women’s clothing and their sense of style to symbolize the relation of self and society [...] each woman [manipulates] appearances at will but always [recognizes] her inner self as separable from others’ views of her” (80) Waters comments on Dr. Gregory’s conduct book in connection to Gaskell, saying that he as well as society favors “the superficial”: “he recommends that girls cultivate elegance, which he admits is not a quality in and of

itself, but merely ‘high polish.’ [...] [H]e eagerly promotes interest in clothing as ‘natural to you’ in itself and as a means of both concealing blemishes and displaying any beauty to best advantage” (15). No wonder both Jane and Molly begin to consider beauty essential to evoke love. Both of them can be found gazing at their own reflection and contemplating the image the mirror throws back at them. Both are prone to compare themselves to their female competition, and both struggle more and more with feelings of inferiority because of their appearance.

Jane Eyre grows up feeling her physical deficiencies more than Molly. Rejected as a child, she learns to think that being pretty insures affection. No wonder Jane has an unfavorable perception of her appearance, though Carol-Ann Farkas wonders “how accurate these impressions are” (331). The novel is less concerned with society’s current beauty ideal and more with Jane’s conviction that she is plain. Throughout the novel Jane is “foregrounding her own insignificance, her own unsuitability to be a heroine, whenever she is comparing herself with the other women within the text” (Murphy 21). Brontë avoids giving us an accurate description of Jane and her physical failing; she leaves Jane’s appearance ambiguous. Yet the idea that she is inferior physically always looms ominously over Jane’s head. It is less important how she looks than how she feels she looks.

On the first page of the novel we are confronted with Jane’s “consciousness of [her] physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed” (Brontë 63). Jane claims that at that age she “formed an idea of [her] own; shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children’s brains, but strangely impressive” (64). Jane’s self-perception will haunt her throughout the novel. She literally questions

herself: “Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win any one’s favor?” and in the same line answers: “Georgina, who had a spoiled temper, a very acrid spite, a captious and insolent carriage, was universally indulged. Her beauty, her pink cheeks and golden curls, seemed to give delight to all who looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault” (72). She convinces herself that had she been, amongst other things, a more “handsome” (73) child, her aunt would have liked her better. This notion is manifest when she overhears Bessie and Abbott talk about her sad lot, concluding that “a beauty like Miss Georgiana would be more moving in the same condition” after they likened Jane to a toad (84).

When Jane meets with Bessie years after leaving Gateshead, both women talk about appearance. Bessie appraises how much Jane has grown—not that much—and compares her derogatively again to Georgiana (157). Jane takes Bessie’s judgment on her lack of beauty calmly, yet by no means indifferently: “[A]t eighteen most people wish to please” (Brontë 158), even though by that point Jane has accepted her fate as a plain woman with all its consequences. Her resignation to being “obliged to be plain” (165) can be seen in the way she dresses. Her “attire” was made with “extreme simplicity” (165). Still drawn to beauty, she is resigned never to possess it herself. This does not keep her from admiring Miss Temple, nor from giving expression to her sense of beauty in her drawings and paintings. And Jane still desires to please as far as it is in her power: “[I]t was not my habit to be disregarding of appearance or careless of the impression I made: on the contrary, I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit” (166). Her image of herself is sad: “I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer: I sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and a

small cherry mouth; I desired to be stately, and finely developed in figure; I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked” (166). Part of that desire for beauty is the fear of rejection which she has experienced since her childhood. She struggles with the idea that her pupil might “recoil” from her with “antipathy” (166) if she does not take care, lacking the benefit of pleasing looks, to present herself at least as neatly as possible.

Molly’s anxiety about appearance is revealed less immediately. Unlike Jane, she does not care as much about her looks at the beginning of the novel. She wants to appear neat, but she is never anxiously fawning over her attire. Throughout the novel, however, her awareness increases, and she is more and more drawn to compare herself to Cynthia, and more likely to be dissatisfied with her reflection in the mirror.

At the age of seventeen Molly contemplates her appearance for the first time during her stay at Hamley Hall. Anxious to please, she displays some insecurity about her appearance:

She looked at herself in the glass with some anxiety, for the first time in her life. She saw a slight, lean figure, promising to be tall; a complexion browner than cream-coloured, although in a year or two it might have that tint; plentiful curly black hair, tied up in a bunch behind with a rose-coloured ribbon; long, almond shaped, soft grey eyes, shaded both above and below by curling black eyelashes. ‘I don’t think I am pretty,’ thought Molly, as she turned away from the glass; ‘and yet I am not sure.’ (66)

Molly does not seem to mind terribly whether or not she is pretty at that point. She only wishes that her silk gown were ready and available (66)—she hopes to beautify herself

with new and attractive attire. Molly is not a superficial girl; Gaskell makes sure that the reader knows Molly does not often worry about her looks. Even so she, like other girls her age, would like to please visually almost as much as Jane Eyre.

But when do women realize how important it is to have beauty? Hester Chapone writes to her niece in her *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773) “you will often see the woman who is most anxious to be thought handsome, most inclined to be dissatisfied with her looks” (39). True to that response to social pressure, both Jane and Molly are most anxious about their appearance when it most matters to them. Appearance matters most when they fall in love and are consequently most anxious to attract a man. Comparing themselves to their female competition, they resign themselves to failure, thinking themselves too plain to attract anyone. They deny themselves the hope for reciprocated love.

For Jane the question of beauty’s attraction for the opposite gender arises first when she meets with Rochester. She muses about the fact that Rochester is neither handsome nor young. She concludes that she would not have even considered talking to him if he were, as “I should have known instinctively that [a handsome young gentleman] neither had nor could have sympathy with anything in me” (183). She regards handsome gentlemen of her own age off limits, considering her appearance an obstacle to understanding, let alone sympathy.

Jane herself judges others according to the prevalent standard of beauty. She answers frankly when asked by Rochester if she thought him handsome: “No, sir” (202). She tries immediately, none too successfully, to mitigate her frankness: “it was not easy to give an impromptu answer to a question about appearances; that tastes differ; that

beauty is of little consequence, or something of that sort” (203). Her idea of taste accords with Kant as she claims it is formed individually: though the tactful reply is the answer she knows she should have given, it is the frank answer she herself judges by and is judged against—Jane herself is caught in the trap of society’s beauty standards. She falls similarly prey to Lavater’s ideas of reading a character by analyzing facial features when she scrutinizes Rochester’s face. Jane has bought into the concept of beauty completely, and only love can make her reconsider that image, and say “[m]ost true is it that ‘beauty is in the eye of the gazer’” (252).

Being immersed in the prevailing standard of beauty creates a backlash for Jane when she is confronted with the mere account of the beauties of Miss Blanche Ingram. This trauma occurs only a night after she has started to hope that Rochester might give her attention apart from his interest as her employer. Then she learns Blanche Ingram is everything a woman *à la mode* should be. According to Mrs. Fairfax she “was considered the belle of the evening [...] Tall, fine bust, sloping shoulders; long, graceful neck; olive complexion, dark and clear; noble features; eyes [...] large and black, and as brilliant as her jewels” (235). In the aftermath of this revelation of Blanche’s overwhelming presence, Jane gives up all hope for love, reproaching herself for having allowed herself to forget her appearance. She calls herself a “fool” and cross-examines herself: “*You [...]* a favorite with Mr. Rochester? You gifted with the power of pleasing him?” (237).

The key to please and to gain love, according to Jane and Plato, is beauty. Jane punishes herself after her trial, painting a stark portrait of herself “faithfully; without softening one defect: omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularities; write under it, ‘Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain’” (237). This scrutinizing

picture, self-degrading as it is, was to be compared with a most beautiful picture of the imaginary Miss Blanche. Jane does this to regain “self-control” (Brontë 238), the control of a second-choice woman who will not allow herself to hope or desire, never mind to be romantic. This acceding to the prevailing standard of beauty is shown dramatically in her conversation with Rochester when he is disguised as a gipsy—the other girls have hopes, dreams, desires, and far fewer cares than Jane, who rationalizes her every emotion.

Jane is so locked into the social values of beauty that when Rochester clumsily proposes to her she cannot at first believe him, assuming the proposal to be a cruel joke on his part: “Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless?—You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you” (338). This declaration demonstrates clearly that even the educated Jane considers physical beauty the most important asset to attract a man, and particularly to get him to offer her matrimony. She is almost incapable of accepting the offered happiness, so little does she, as a second-choice woman, expect it. And her concerns prove her right: her fear foreshadows what is to come.

Murphy states that even after Rochester proposes, Brontë “is careful to continue to emphasize that Jane Eyre has not been metamorphosed and to underline that Jane is still no beauty [...] Jane herself asserts that her love for Rochester had wrought no magical transformation upon her appearance” (23-24). While I can agree with her first statement, Murphy fails to notice Jane’s feelings in relationship to her appearance, feelings which rule out her second claim. As Lefkowitz puts it, “[t]hat which is beautiful

is loved, and that which is loved appears beautiful” (19-20). Feeling loved, in the light of Plato’s claim that the object of love is beauty, changes Jane’s feelings about her own appearance. It is not that her looks have improved, but because she feels loved, her self-evaluation has, as Jane directly tells the reader:

While arranging my hair, I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain: there was hope in its aspect, and life in its colour; and my eyes seemed as if they had beheld the fount of fruition, and borrowed beams from the lustrous ripple. I had often been unwilling to look at my master, because I feared he could not be pleased at my look; but I was sure I might lift my face to his now, and not cool his affection by its expression. I took a plain but clean light summer dress from my drawer and put it on: it seemed no attire had ever so well become me; because none had I ever worn in so blissful a mood. (342)

Yet the social attitude persists. Even after Rochester comments on her looks favorably, she gets anxious, and will not allow him to dress her up (344) or talk to her much about her appearance. She seems reluctant to be reduced to appearances, as if aware she would fail to please based on appearance solely. Her feeling of being loved and therefore somehow handsome is further shaken when Mrs. Fairfax voices her concerns. The fear of being incapable to please returns, and immediately all the insecurities arise again: “[A]m I a monster? [...] is it impossible that Mr. Rochester should have a sincere affection for me?” (350). What Jane has to offer is not the beauty of other women, but an equal partnership; she has the potential to be Rochester’s wife in a companionate marriage.

Unlike Jane, Molly is not as aware of the importance of female competition based on appearance at first. She only becomes sensitive to the significance of beauty after the Kirkpatrick women enter her life and her father's household. At that point not only her stepmother but her neighbors start contrasting Molly and Cynthia. After Roger shows romantic interest in Cynthia, Molly becomes more sensitive to the contrast between herself and her stepsister. Molly compares herself more and more to Cynthia in looks, and feels increasingly inferior—lacking beauty and incapable of attracting Roger. The more she sees beauty as the one asset to attract young men, the more Molly frets about her own appearance.

The female competition is so keen that Mrs. Kirkpatrick herself competes with her daughter on several occasions. Cynthia, “christened” after her mother Hyacinth (106), has also inherited her mother's good looks. The competitiveness of their appearance comes into play as Mr. Gibson proposes Cynthia and Molly as bridesmaids for the wedding. The future Mrs. Gibson has other thoughts: “[S]he had felt how disagreeable it would be to her to have her young daughter flashing out her beauty by the side of the faded bride, her mother” (122). As a result of this concern for mother/daughter appearances, Cynthia stays at school and cannot attend her own mother's wedding.

It is inevitable in this appearance-crazed society, where even the mother and daughter compete, that Molly and Cynthia, two girls who are almost the same age, get compared to each other. Debrabant remarks that “Chapter 28, entitled ‘Rivalry,’ hints at the underlying competition between the two, for the girls are potential rivals for the affection of Roger Hamley” (24). During her first visit at the Towers, the little girl Molly is already contrasted with Mrs. Kirkpatrick's daughter Cynthia: Mrs. Kirkpatrick shows

Molly Cynthia's picture, and judging the child's appearance she declares Molly to be a "rather a pretty child, though [she's] not got Cynthia's colouring" (21). Years later, now married to Mr. Gibson, she tells Molly: "[Cynthia] is very handsome, people say. In the bright-coloured style—perhaps something like I was" (129). Immediately after she adds while looking at Molly: "But I like the dark-haired foreign kind of beauty the best—just now" (129), in an eager attempt to win the affection of her dark-haired future stepdaughter. But as soon as Mrs. Gibson moves in, she tries to put Molly "through a course of rosemary washes and creams in order to improve her tanned complexion" (180), and more than once tells Molly that her "[c]urls are quite gone out [of fashion]" (445). Mr. Preston, too, raves about Cynthia's beauty (156) when asked about her by Molly, and Lady Harriet calls Cynthia "the prettiest creature that you ever saw" (159).

When Molly gets to meet Cynthia in person, Gaskell describes her first impression in such detail that the reader gets the full impact of Cynthia's beauty:

Molly saw the beautiful, tall, swaying figure, against the light of the open door, but could not see any of the features that were, for the moment, in shadow. [...] When they all came into the full light and repose of the drawing-room, Molly was absorbed in the contemplation of Cynthia's beauty. Perhaps her features were not regular; but the changes in her expressive countenance gave one no time to think of that. Her smile was *perfect*; her *pouting* charming; the *play* of the face was in the mouth. Her eyes were beautifully shaped, but their expression hardly seemed to vary. In colouring she was not unlike her mother; only she had not so much of the red-haired tints in her complexion; and her long-shaped, serious grey

eyes were fringed with dark lashes, instead of her mother's insipid flaxen ones. Molly fell in love with her, so to speak, on the instant. (215-216, emphasis added)

The words *perfect*, *pouting*, and *play* indicate that Cynthia is versed in the charms of women, and knows how to use those charms to her advantage. She clearly has power over her appearance and her bearing. The expression of her face is in the mouth, under her careful control. Her eyes are guarded. She has mastered the control that produces the artificial femininity, which is so valuable in the drawing room: Fitzwilliam claims that Gaskell even appears "to be suggesting through the contrast between Molly's relative ineptitude with her needle and Cynthia's excellence the former's lack of artifice. Molly will not represent herself except through kindness and intelligence" (11). Reddy claims that "[Cynthia] uses her body for social ends, clear-sightedly playing the marriage market to her best advantage" (82). Molly on the other hand, with her unguarded and assertive innocence, is vulnerable to these social circumstances. Rivers's claim that "Molly must keep silent about her attraction to Roger Hamley" to the extent that "her real passion is not an accepted topic of speech in the face of Cynthia's official connection. Authentic emotion must fall silent in the face of convention" (70) demonstrates yet another instance in which Molly is silenced by social conventions.

The circumstances are compelling. Soon the whole household and a major part of the town are as enamored with Cynthia as Molly is: "They were first struck with her personal appearance [...] If Molly had not had the sweetest disposition in the world she might have become jealous of all the allegiance laid at Cynthia's feet, but she never thought of comparing the amount of admiration and love which they each received. Only

once she did feel a little as if Cynthia were poaching on her manor” (Gaskell 229). Seeing how the lovely Cynthia is received by everyone, especially by Roger, Molly begins to long for beauty. She tells Cynthia, “I should like to be pretty” (279). Molly realizes that the difference between how she is treated and how Cynthia is treated comes down to beauty. Cynthia’s response accords with Etkoff’s study about reactions to someone who acts self-confident about appearance (47)—they are considered more beautiful and treated as such, which in turn enhances their self-confidence. As Cynthia puts it, “French girls would tell you, to believe you were pretty would make you so” (279), an insight reminiscent of Jane’s changing self-perception after Rochester proposes.

Even Molly, for all her innocence, realizes that beauty is the fuel for love: “She would look at Cynthia’s beauty and grace, and feel as if no one could resist it” (345). After Roger proposes to Cynthia and is accepted, Molly cannot help but knowingly compare herself to Cynthia. Cynthia steps behind Molly to embrace her, and

Molly could not resist the action—a mute entreaty for a caress. But in the moment before she had caught the reflection of the two faces in the glass; her own red-eyed, pale, with lips dyed with blackberry juice, her curls tangled, her bonnet pulled awry, her gown torn—and contrasted it with Cynthia’s brightness and bloom, and the trim elegance of her dress. ‘Oh! it is no wonder!’ thought poor Molly, as she turned round, and put her arms round Cynthia, and laid her head for an instant on her shoulder. (376)

This echoes Sarah Stickney Ellis’s statement “no power of intellect, or display of learning, can compensate to men, for the want of nicety or neatness in the woman with whom they associate in domestic life. In vain to them might the wreath of laurel wave in

glorious triumph over locks uncombed; and wo betide the heroine, whose stocking, even of the deepest blue, betrayed a lurking hole” (*Women of England* 129). Molly is utterly defeated by her stepsister’s beauty.

Conclusion

Both Brontë and Gaskell blame society for the discrimination plain women experience. *Jane Eyre*, for instance, is an extremely self-conscious novel. The plot unfolds as Jane narrates the story of her life. That narration is a decidedly political move: the narrator puts herself on trial in front of society, struggling with her “inability to match up with externally imposed social standards” (Farkas 326), her unstable class position as a plain woman. However, at the same time society itself, and the reader, are put on trial by the novel—accused of the wrongs done to girls and women like Jane Eyre. As Gana suggests, the “omnipresence of the I-narrator [...] directs the reader towards a clear-cut answer,” and the “seductive narrative strategy” manipulates and pushes us toward that conclusion (4- 5). Molly is not the narrator of *Wives and Daughters*, but Gaskell makes sure the reader sympathizes with Molly and not Cynthia (Butler, “The Uniqueness of Cynthia Kirkpatrick” 286). She makes her audience feel the severe injustice of the way Hollingford treats Molly, and how eager the people who knew her all her life were to gossip about her, and question her reputation. Society is clearly on trial here.

Ultimately both Brontë and Gaskell champion the true companionate ideal, though in the end both novels comply with social expectations and follow the marriage plot. The male protagonists realize they are incompatible with the women of their choice, and the exposed characters of Bertha, Blanche, and Cynthia, dispel the enchantment of beauty. Both Rochester and Roger end up choosing women who will be their equals in

interest, disposition, and character, women compatible with them. Nevertheless both authors make sure the audience is aware of the unique situation which enabled those companionate matches.

In spite of their conventional marriage plots, both Brontë and Gaskell show that under conventional circumstances, society will not allow men to meet women in a way that will help them to determine whether they are equals and compatible. Both novelists depict how this dilemma causes mismatches and such unhappy marriages as the union between Rochester and Bertha. They demonstrate how men can be blinded by appearances, believing there is more to a young woman of beauty than meets the eye, reading every virtue into her features, as happens with Roger and Cynthia: “[E]ach man fails [Molly] at a crucial juncture, Mr. Gibson when he deludedly imagines that Hyacinth would be a good mother to Molly, and Roger when he values Cynthia’s physical beauty over Molly’s more enduring qualities” (Reddy 78). Gaskell and Brontë characterize their female protagonists Jane and Molly as superior in intelligence and character, with depth and morals, yet overlooked and treated as second-choice women. These plain women lose the competition when compared with their female rivals because social conventions will not allow them to assume center stage and to display their assets. Beauty alone has value on the marriage market.

III. The Disinclined Voyeur

This chapter builds on the previous chapter, inasmuch as the second-choice woman is a broad category with subdivisions, the disinclined voyeur is one of the narrower categories. When drawing-room conventions force plainer women to be second-choice women, they're left with little option in light of the fate of their prettier peers but to become disinclined voyeurs. That concept describes what life realistically has to offer to plain women: social conventions condemn them to passivity in the marriage market. Forced to wait until they receive a proposal, there is little they can do to move things forward in a relationship. Yet it is those very relationships that determine their lives; their identities get defined through their relationship to men—women in such a society are never themselves, always daughters, wives, or mothers.

The role of the disinclined voyeur is a waiting stage. All young women have to go through that stage as soon as they enter the marriage market, but some of them never leave it, remaining maids forever. The disinclined voyeur does not experience things first hand, only watches them. The disinclined voyeur is an observer—audience rather than the actor, one who does not get to act all the roles assigned to her gender. The disinclined voyeur watches courtships, engagements, weddings, and marriages, often close up, without being able to participate. She does not experience sexuality, let alone motherhood. She is of course disinclined merely to watch, desiring to be actively involved in life, born and bred, as surely as all the other young women in the marriage market, to aim for marriage as her central purpose in life. Plainness deprives the disinclined voyeur of the life she is trained for.

In literature the disinclined voyeur is featured usually as the plain friend. This young woman's most important fictional chore is to get her beautiful friend married to the male protagonist, in whom the plain woman sometimes displays a romantic interest, but with no hope of attracting him or gaining his attention. Much as she can accomplish for her pretty friend, she cannot further her own chances for marriage and happiness. The plain woman never cares for herself, but rather devotes her entire existence to her beautiful friend. When the male protagonist falls in love with her beautiful friend, as he inevitably does, the plain woman serves as audience for their courtship. Sometimes the plain woman has to be content with watching the happiness of the married couple, which condemns her to be the eternal onlooker on marital bliss, the disinclined voyeur.

There are many examples of this role in nineteenth-century British literature: Molly Gibson (*Wives and Daughters*), discussed in the preceding chapter as a second-choice woman, is also a disinclined voyeur. She must witness the courtship of her stepsister, listen to Roger's ravings about Cynthia, while struggling to save the engagement jeopardized by Cynthia's former choices. Molly agonizes over Roger's well-being in Africa while Cynthia enjoys the pleasures of London and gets entangled with two more suitors. Burney's Eugenia (*Camilla*) goes so far as to break off her engagement so her fiancé can get engaged to her stunning yet thoroughly worthless cousin, Indiana. Fanny Price in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, the confidant of both Edmund and Miss Crawford, oversees their developing relationship while Anne Eliot (*Persuasion*) witnesses the love of her life courting two of her younger relatives while she feels helpless to influence what is happening. Lucy Snowe (*Villette*) feels herself immensely inferior to the feminine beauty of Paulina, who wins the heart of Dr. John, the man whose

letters Lucy deems her most valuable treasure. She cares for him so much she remains his confidant even when he is in love with the brainless Ginevra Fanshawe.

Examples of disinclined voyeurs are everywhere in nineteenth-century fiction, but the main focus of this chapter is Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* (1812), and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60). Both Edgeworth and Collins depict the fate of plainer second-choice women who are forced into the role of the disinclined voyeur. I look particularly at Edgeworth's plain Miss Broadhurst and Collins's ugly Marian Halcombe. These women admire the male protagonists greatly, yet stand by and witness the male leads develop a strong affection for their beautiful counterparts. Both *The Absentee* and *The Woman in White* have similar plots as regards marriage results. The men featured in the novels are unwilling to invest emotional energy in plain, let alone ugly, women. During their first meeting Colambre shows his indifference to Miss Broadhurst because of her appearance, Hartright is repulsed by Marian's looks, and henceforth any romantic interest becomes impossible. Despite the hardship of that unrequited love, both women willingly support the romantic couples—both of which are in distress and threatened to be parted forever—until they can live happily ever after. Marian and Miss Broadhurst are doomed to be mere onlookers to their marital bliss—disinclined voyeurs.

While Miss Broadhurst is of relatively little importance compared to other characters in *The Absentee*, Marian Halcombe is not only central to her novel, but a groundbreaking creation who challenges the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood. Both women are extremely idealized as capable partners, contrasted with their beautiful female counterparts. The authors portray the disinclined voyeur as an opposing model to

the common ideal of British womanhood. Miss Broadhurst and Marian are shown to be superior to their peers in many aspects despite their physical inferiority. They are steadfast and reasonable creatures—as opposed to frail and sentimental—who do not allow themselves to break down or to wallow in self-pity about their fate, but rather face their future squarely and boldly. Both are closely connected, even passionately devoted to their beautiful companions, both of whom have names indicating their feminine delicacy—*Grace Nugent* and *Laura Fairlie*.

In this chapter I explore an alternative ideal of womanhood as introduced by Edgeworth and Collins. I contrast the new ideal with the characters of Grace and Laura, who represent the traditional model of femininity and womanhood. I look at how both Miss Broadhurst and Marian are rejected as potential lovers and wives by the male protagonists during their first encounter precisely because they lack beauty. I note how in both cases the attitude of the male protagonists towards those plain women is reformed once they get to know Miss Broadhurst and Marian Halcombe and learn to appreciate their qualities. The new ideal of womanhood functions as a reaction against the traditional ideal of femininity with its sentimental tropes, nevertheless the two women remain disinclined voyeurs. Even though in both books the beautiful heroine still gets to marry the male protagonist, their plainer peers are portrayed in a more advantageous way.

Critical Overview

Edgeworth's Miss Broadhurst remains a secondary character, while Marian Halcombe takes center stage. That same difference between the novels is manifest in how academia has treated them. Whereas Miss Broadhurst is a nonentity, Marian Halcombe has received ample critical attention, attention focused on her lack of beauty and the

general fate of ugly women. To the contrary, almost all articles written on the subject of Maria Edgeworth, and especially her novel *The Absentee*, are concerned with political issues raised in the novel, mainly the Ireland question as it relates to absenteeism. Though this predominant issue is a natural choice, *The Absentee* is also a goldmine for analyzing gender issues, especially since its female characters are much more intriguing and complex than the male characters portrayed.

There has been plenty of feminist criticism on Edgeworth. But it focuses either on Edgeworth's own biography, making the most of her relationship with her overbearingly present father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, or else is centered on gender issues in such of her other novels, as *Belinda*, *Helen*, *Leonora*, *Patronage*, or *Ennui*, ignoring *The Absentee*. This seems inexplicable since *The Absentee* is among the few Edgeworth novels still in print and hence available to the general public. Moreover one would think that a character as interesting as Miss Broadhurst in *The Absentee*, or even the predicament of Grace Nugent, would not escape critical notice. Ian Topliss's "Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth's Modern Ladies" suggests that Edgeworth, in spite of trying to promote and support certain rights for women such as education, is much more moderate than the radical Wollstonecraft. Anne Mellor too insists that "Maria Edgeworth points to a more moderated and balanced feminism, one that would combine the positive characteristics of each gender" (42). For all that relative moderation, Edgeworth and other contemporary female writers "wrote novels designed to advocate the revolutionary idea that women must think as well as feel, that they must act with prudence, avoid the pitfalls of sexual desire, and learn from their mistakes" (Mellor 40).

Edgeworth's creation of Miss Broadhurst shows us that she must have understood the problems of objectifying women, of judging only according to appearance.

Edgeworth described herself as "little, and ugly" (qtd. in Butler 73). Audrey Bilger claims that "Edgeworth was acutely aware of conventional standards of beauty" and that "[she] was herself victimized in physical and violent ways by the reigning standards of feminine beauty" (206). Her father tried to take her on a trip abroad to find a suitable husband, but she refused. She felt inadequate and disliked the idea of being flaunted and paraded. As she herself put it, "I know my own defects of person too well" (qtd. in Butler 187). Edgeworth's self-consciousness and awareness of society's objectification of women is the focus of Egenolf's article dealing with *Belinda* as "An Artful Composition" in which she explores Edgeworth's "concern about the role of women in late-eighteenth-century Britain" (323). Egenolf is questioning visual representations and assigned labels, such as the "fancy piece," showing Edgeworth's contempt of Rousseau's influence, as depicted in Hervey's trying to raise Virginia as his future wife following Rousseau's "wife-farm" principle. Egenolf looks at the projection of male fantasy upon women, conveying itself expressively in women's depiction in art and the resulting social attitude towards women.

Compared to Miss Broadhurst, Marian Halcombe has received ample critical attention. *The Woman in White*, Collins's most popular novel (R. Collins 131), was well received by both critics and audience despite Collins's jarring picture of the fate of women. The character of Marian has always intrigued critics. Many of them refer to D.A. Miller's article "*Cage Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White.*" Apart from delighting in the *ménage à trois* Collins created in this novel,

Miller and most of the other critics seem to agree that Marian's character is a challenge which should replace the traditional notion of femininity. Susan Balée claims that Marian subverts the usual gender roles and sexual stereotypes (201), calling her "a wonderful alternative of womankind," a promise of the future "new ideal of woman" (199). Marian is both a "positive portrayal of an old maid" and a "negative portrayal of the Victorian ideal" (Balée 204). Richard Collins thinks that Collins imagined her for that purpose: "Collins created an intertextual collage that questioned and subverted Victorian notions of gender" (137).

Despite that progress against gender stereotypes, many critics, instead of acknowledging her as a woman, treat Marian as a freak, an anomaly, a beautiful body with an ugly face. They essentially deprive her of her gender as certainly as the society depicted in *The Woman in White* deprives Marian of her experience in different stages of womanhood—she remains unwed. It is true that Collins may have been influenced by the exhibits, the so-called "spectacles" of bearded ladies and hermaphrodites held in London at the same time he wrote this novel. Julia Pastrana, "The Ugliest Woman in the World," a bearded lady, died in 1860 of childbirth (R. Collins 137, 140-141). So it may not be surprising that some critics treat Marian's ugliness as an equally serious "disability" — especially in the nineteenth-century marriage market.

In her article "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" Halberstam argues that "[the] discourse of ugliness [...] locates masculinity in females as abhorrent, repulsive, and unsustainable" (358). Ugly women are treated as irregularities if not abnormalities. Most of the scholarship on *The Woman in White* plays with the idea of homoeroticism and lesbianism. Miller claims that the "'phallic,' 'lesbian,' and 'male-identified' Marian" gets

converted “into the castrated, heterosexual ‘good angel’ of the Victorian household at the end” (125). I differ, since the main reason why she seems to be considered as a lesbian is her “ugly” manly face. Moreover, Miller explores her attraction to Fosco (128), and one could argue that she forms a strong attachment to Hartright. Nevertheless Marian’s ugliness does not merely “neuter” her in the eyes of the critics; they take the masculine signs, such as the moustache, to be signs of a more masculine soul pushing through her skin (Miller 127). In that valuation critics seem to deny female characters certain natural attributes, such as resolution and reason, a denial which contradicts what I see as the very purpose of Collins’s creation of Marian. Marian demonstrates that—apart from her looks—she should be considered a most desirable companion for a man.

In line with Egenolf’s reading of Edgeworth I will look at how female appearance affects men’s relationship to women by examining Colambre’s and Hartright’s first reactions when confronted with the appearance of Miss Broadhurst and Marian Halcombe. I will explore how they learn to appreciate those women in spite of their initial rejection, because of qualities which I consider to constitute a new ideal of British womanhood. I will contrast Miss Broadhurst and Marian with the beautiful friend and sister, Grace and Laura, both of whom work as a mirror reflecting male desire, demonstrating men’s perceptibility to female beauty. Edgeworth’s female protagonist conforms to the traditional notion of femininity and complies with social expectation. In contrast Edgeworth’s secondary female character, Miss Broadhurst, acts as an ambassador for women’s potential, foreshadowing what women might be allowed to become in the future. I claim that Edgeworth’s Miss Broadhurst paved the way for characters like Collins’s Marian Halcombe. Marian not only has to deal with the same

rejection within the marriage market because of her plainness, but she and Miss Broadhurst also share similar qualities and character traits. Both are put on a pedestal by their respective authors, both presented as examples for another ideal of womanhood opposed to the traditional notion of femininity.

The Traditional Ideal of British Womanhood

Edgeworth questions the traditional ideal of British womanhood represented by Grace, and Collins questions it even more in his depiction of Laura. Both Grace and Laura comply with Dr. Gregory's conventions of passivity, silence, reserve, and beauty to an extraordinary degree. Edgeworth's beautiful and demure Grace Nugent is orphaned and poor. Her reputation is tainted because her mother is believed to have had her outside wedlock. She is dependent on Colambre's family's goodwill, a dependence which echoes Edgeworth's own dependent domestic position (O'Connor 409). Grace is anything but an eligible match, nevertheless the epitome of Dr. Gregory's ideal woman.

Grace lacks the education of Miss Broadhurst and is hence required to listen passively as others discuss books. This acts to her advantage: her silence is an asset in the marriage market. Grace complies with Rousseau's expectations of passivity and the social etiquette of timidity and restraint for females. It does not hurt her appeal—exactly as Dr. Gregory predicts: “if you have any advantages of person or manner, and keep your own secret, he will probably give you credit for a great deal more than you possess” (29). The little she says delights Colambre, and makes him suspect more substance behind her quiet front: “[M]iss Nugent said every thing he wished to have said, and with all the propriety and delicacy with which he thought he could not have spoken” (13). Grace has other assets which comply with Dr. Gregory's ideals. Colambre watches her: “Beautiful

and graceful, yet so unconscious was she of her charms, that the eye of admiration could rest upon her without her perceiving it” (14). Her ignorance of her own attraction echoes yet another principle of Dr. Gregory: “One of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted at even the gaze of admiration” (25).

Likewise Laura Fairlie/Glyde is the ideal English woman in looks and conduct. She is introduced to us offstage. While Marian talks to Hartright, Laura is “in her own room, nursing that essential feminine malady, a slight headache” (33), which establishes her as a fragile, delicate feminine being. The first time the reader and Hartright actually meet Laura, she is displayed in a perfect setting—a pretty summerhouse—and she appears to be everything Marian had promised her to be. Later on Hartright draws a picture of her and she is indeed more a picture, an object, more an ideal of femininity than a mere mortal. Her looks are as they are expected to be by society and Hartright. Everything about her is soft and gentle, delicate and petite, faint and pale (49). May reaches an interesting conclusion from this text:

By contrast, there is never a trace of masculinity in Laura [...] “Her hair is so *faint* and so *pale* a brown – not flaxen, and *almost* as light; not golden, and yet *almost* glossy – that it *nearly* melts here and there into the *shadow* of the hat”; “the eyes are of that soft, limpid, turquoise blue, so often sung by the poets, *so seldom seen in real life.*” [May’s emphasis] Laura, in short, is scarcely there; it is she, this shadowy, quintessentially feminine creature [...] who becomes the true ghost of this text. (90)

She is the ghost of the past, the ideal woman of the earlier society, too insubstantial for the substantive present and the future.

Laura is sweet-tempered, demure, submissive. Hartright's reaction to her indicates she is everything he wants, before he even has a chance to get to know her character. Laura gives him the key to that character when she guarantees that she shall believe all that he will say to her (52). Whereas he immediately attributes this to her generous nature, her trust and her innocence, the less emotionally attached reader might call it gullibility, naïveté, a lack of caution, or at the least extreme passivity. Her childlike need for protection is underlined by the way Gilmore comforts her in her distress (146), and more dramatically by her being tucked in at night by Marian (167).

To question the merits of these two beautiful heroines who comply so fully with the traditional notion of British womanhood and femininity, Edgeworth and Collins created Miss Broadhurst and Marian Halcombe. Miss Broadhurst and Marian frankly lack the beauty of Grace and Laura. They lack the expected feminine appearance which would allow them to be the shining center of attention in the drawing room, to promote themselves in the marriage market. Yet Edgeworth and Collins endowed them with qualities of character which endear them to the readers, make them desirable companions, and ultimately help them gain the respect of the male protagonists.

The Initial Rejection of the Disinclined Voyeur

The reaction of both Colambre and Hartright when they first meet the disinclined voyeurs dramatizes an irony: the new ideal of womanhood is introduced by a negative reaction of the male protagonists. Colambre judges Miss Broadhurst's appearance severely after their first meeting, making an affected show of his indifference because he

knows his parents want him to marry her. Lady Clonbrony insists that Miss Broadhurst “is every thing you could wish for, except being a beauty” (25), weighing appearance against all the other attributes desired in a future wife. His indignant and revealing answer is, “you think that I can see no farther than a handsome face?” (25).

Colambre remembers meeting Miss Broadhurst—“the little plain girl, covered with diamonds, who was standing beside miss Nugent” (17). He has already judged Miss Broadhurst by her appearance—clearly nothing can be worse for a girl than to be plain, except to be ugly. Even mentioning the diamonds is a way to show his disdain for having to consider marrying her for her fortune; if she were beautiful, he probably would not have mentioned them, may not have noticed. His second take on Miss Broadhurst is her standing *beside Miss Nugent*—putting Miss Broadhurst in relation to Miss Nugent reveals his interest for that particular young lady, and shows once again how young marriageable women stand in competition with each other.

By contrast Colambre thought Miss Nugent “handsome, pleasing, graceful” at first. He does see her “superior intelligence” (Edgeworth 13), but immediately after that realization moves back to admiring the exterior, her “animation” and “eloquence of her countenance” (13). He reads everything good and virtuous into Grace’s exterior appearance, exactly as Roger interpreted Cynthia’s looks—luckily, Grace has more substance. He is so captivated by a beautiful woman that plain Miss Broadhurst stands no chance in competition for his feelings, even though Miss Nugent is poor and has an obscure past. Colambre habitually reads virtue into beautiful appearance. While traveling in Ireland he meets Lady Dashford and her daughter Isabel, a young widow displaying “charms of [...] soft sentimentality” (93), and falls prey to her beauty, even after being

warned severely about the mischief mother and daughter had done in many families (95). Only through a coincidence does he become a first-hand witness to Lady Isabel's mean and common character (121) and gets out of her and her mother's clutches. Trying to promote Miss Broadhurst, Lady Clonbrony overestimates her son: "You won't think her plain when you see more of her—that wears off—I thought her plain at first" (17). Seeing a woman more deeply, recognizing a superior character, would mean that he would have to possess the ability to ignore appearance.

Hartright's first encounter with Marian is more climactic. He is downright shocked by her appearance. When the reader first meets Marian, he sees her through the eyes of Hartright, and he looks at her unnoticed while she is standing at the window, her back turned to him:

The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed [*sic*] by stays. She had not heard my entrance into the room; and I allowed myself the luxury of admiring her for a few moments, before I moved one of the chairs near me, as the least embarrassing means of attracting her attention. She turned towards me immediately. The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. (31)

Her bearing and movement, unlike her features, are things Marian can control, and in them she is graceful and elegant. But the male voyeur is undeceived about her personal graces when he sees more of her as she approaches. As she gets closer there is distinct digression in Hartright's attraction to Marian: "She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!" (31)

There are dire consequences to Hartright's discovery: The moment he fully grasps her appearance, Marian mutates from an object—a beautiful woman—to a subject, and although he was highly interested and intrigued by her figure a minute before seeing her face, he will not look at her as an attractive young woman any longer: romance has become impossible. Richard Collins claims that "it is precisely because she is ugly" Marian is "not textually available as a wife for Walter" (152). Despite her lovely feminine form and carriage, Marian's face is enough to render her uninteresting. The most painful aspect of this scene is that the approaching Marian must have noticed the change in Hartright's facial expression, from highly expectant to repulsed and disappointed. Richard Collins claims that "[t]he more he stares at her, the less she is a woman and the more she becomes his metaphor for her, a statue, a work of art that only then can be compared to works of Nature. Wisely, Walter learns to see beyond the surface of the natural error of Marian's hermaphroditic ugliness, and to see instead the beauty of her moral accomplishments" (146).

Colambre and Hartright learn to value their respective disinclined voyeurs, and their initial reaction towards them gets reformed. They realize the strength and courage of

the women, and hold them in high esteem. Yet the physical repulsion makes a romantic relationship impossible. Once Colambre actually meets Miss Broadhurst and talks with her, he sees her depth, her humor, and her intellect. But this does not change his first impression of her or his emotional attachment to Grace. Hartright, although shocked by Marian's appearance, learns to value her as friend and as his confidant. He grows to love her not as a lover but as a sister.

This new ideal of womanhood broached by Edgeworth and Collins has many facets. The new ideal depicts honest women. They have rational minds, and good educations, which makes them intellectual equals to the men in the novels. These qualities are striking enough that the men learn to appreciate both Miss Broadhurst and Marian. Moreover, both women prove that they can be trusted, as they work alongside the male protagonist to ensure their pretty friend's happiness.

Honesty

The first characteristic to be explored is honesty. Honesty in a woman, though an asset to be desired in a companion and partner, was less welcome in the drawing room. Society suggested there were things young women might rather not be honest about, subjects they should not touch on. Both Miss Broadhurst and Marian, however, display honesty in their interaction with their male protagonists. They show that they know who they are and are frankly straightforward in their communication as well as in their appearance. They avoid pre-scripted and artificial conversations and don't hesitate to talk about subjects other young women stay away from. They have assertive and real voices. This honesty and openness seems to be admired by both Edgeworth and Collins, but it also makes these disinclined voyeurs vulnerable—a risk they take for the sake of honesty.

Miss Broadhurst demonstrates her honesty at Lady Clonbrony's gala. Aware of the plans the parents have made, and equally conscious of her own lack of appearance, Philippa Broadhurst shows up to her second meeting with Colambre in a plain dress, void of any diamonds or ornaments (Edgeworth 27), as if to say, "this is what you get, this is me, a woman, not diamonds or a fortune." Angela Esterhammer calls that look "self-conscious naturalness" in her paper on "The Scandal of Sincerity: Wordsworth, Byron, Landon." Miss Broadhurst knows that Colambre is sensitive to the awkward position they have been put in, but most importantly, she is as painfully aware of her looks—rather lack of looks—as Maria Edgeworth was of her own appearance. Miss Broadhurst knows that she is a "subject on display," yet contrary to the exhibitionist notion Beth Newman explores in her book *Subject on Display*, she does not seek to "strike others with admiration" (Newman 141). Her mother, on the other hand, knows as well as Mrs. Stanhope and Lady Delacour in *Belinda* that "publicity is an essential aspect of fashionable marriage, whether one is advertising an heiress or a less financially well-endowed woman" (MacFadyen 429). Therefore Miss Broadhurst needs to be displayed, must attend Lady Clonbrony's gala, and has to be in company of Colambre.

As part of her defiance about being "displayed," Miss Broadhurst flat-out refuses to be forced to play a game of chess with Colambre. That refusal indicates more than meets the eye. She claims to "know nothing of chess but the moves" (28), which is really all you need to know for starters. But she won't play games: more precisely, she will not play a strategy game against Colambre, rather insisting on being open and honest with him, refusing to play by the rules of society. She makes no secret of her age, scandalizing the ladies surrounding her since her openness means admitting she is older than the

bridegroom-to-be. Furthermore, she makes clear that she is well aware of the difference between lovers and suitors (Edgeworth 30), knowing that she had many suitors wooing her fortune, yet not one man to love her as what she is. She “thought that [...] [lord Colambre] understood her—that he was not inclined to court her for her fortune—that she would not be content with any suitor who was not a lover” (41). She is looking for love in marriage. Her confessions are bold, and the reader knows she risks a lot, but she also wins Colambre’s admiration (31). The very topics Miss Broadhurst chooses to talk about make some of the other females in the room uncomfortable. Lady Catharine, for instance, is “determined, if possible, to turn the conversation into a commonplace safe channel” (29).

Both Miss Broadhurst and Colambre are aiming for the companionate ideal, rejecting the older generation’s priorities. Lord Colambre has youth, birth, title, and education. Even though he will get a considerable inheritance once “old Quin” (Edgeworth 17) dies, he and his family are somewhat short of cash; thus it would be convenient for his parents if Colambre could marry into money. The older generation seems to think that finances matter more than beauty—Lord Clonbrony’s friend Sir Terence O’Fay states outright that “gold is the only true thing for a young man to look after in a wife” (23). Colambre has other aspirations: his idea of his future bride is opposed to his parents’ ideas. Influenced by the companionate ideal, he refuses to aim for a mercenary marriage: “I will never marry for money: marrying an heiress is not even a new way of paying old debts [...] *there is no* occasion to purchase [independence] by marriage. [...] I will do any thing [...] but marry for money, that I cannot do” (18). The young woman Colambre’s parents want him to marry, Miss Philippa Broadhurst,

obviously has enough money not to need to marry an heir. Her family—parvenus—would like her to marry a man with a title so they could climb the society ladder by means of their daughter's marriage. Miss Broadhurst, on the other hand, thinks that “bought rank is but a shabby thing [...] I would never buy a title” (31). This statement so directly echoes the disgust Colambre expresses at having to marry for money it demonstrates that Miss Broadhurst and Colambre have certain principles and ideals for their future in common, ideals linked to honesty in a relationship.

Marian is just as assertive and as open as Miss Broadhurst, sometimes much to her conversational partner's surprise. She too does not compromise honesty, even when her own family is involved. When she asks Hartright about his meeting with her uncle Mr. Fairlie, she realizes the uncomfortable situation Hartright finds himself in, as he cannot answer her question truly without possibly insulting her. Thus she admits to her uncle's state, saying, “I see in your face that he *was* particularly nervous; and, as I am amiably unwilling to throw you into the same condition, I ask no more” (48).

In her first conversation with Hartright, Marian is honest, outspoken, and unaffectedly natural. She makes him feel comfortable and welcome. Hartright realizes Marian has grace, the conduct of a highly-bred woman, a pleasant voice, brains, a beautiful figure, and compassion. She, like Miss Broadhurst, is endowed with a superior character, but without her fortune. She is honest about her financial situation, and articulates what Hartright must be thinking about her appearance, comparing herself negatively to her sister Laura, indicating her undesirability in the marriage market because of her appearance, her lack of dowry, her age:

Except that we are both orphans, we are in every respect as unlike each other as possible. My father was a poor man, and Miss Fairlie's father was a rich man. I have got nothing, and she has a fortune. I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am – Try some of that marmalade, Mr. Hartright, and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for yourself. (34)

Marian evaluates her actions according to expected feminine behavior, except that her implications are less constrained than other females'. It must have required real composure to articulate so calmly what she knew Hartright must be thinking. There may be a tendency in plainer women to acknowledge the unmistakable facts of their deficient appearance in order to avoid pity, and Marian would certainly avoid pity. Physical inferiority does not erase maternal or sexual desires, however; Holmes mentions in her study that Wilkie Collins suggests that disabled women have a “normal’ desire to be wives and mothers” (62). Marian unquestionably considers marriage as an option, however little her chance of it.

Rationality

Both Miss Broadhurst and Marian Halcombe act as rational beings, not solely led by emotions. They are clear-sighted about their situations, in the marriage market or otherwise, also about the people in their social circle. In the nineteenth century rationality was not considered part of a woman's character, let alone an asset. It was considered a manly trait, monopolized by the male part of society. Yet Edgeworth and Collins attribute

sufficient rationality to their disinclined voyeurs to make them capable of coping with the situations they find themselves in. Both characters rationalize their own emotional life, especially where it concerns the male protagonist. Aware that they cannot actively change their fate but have to be passive when it comes to their own interests, they accept the male protagonist's disinterestedness, and act on behalf of their pretty friends instead.

Miss Broadhurst is honest with Colambre, and he with her. Since he did not immediately upon finding her an heiress court her, she respects him. Her mother is aware of her daughter's dread of being an object bargained for, yet also perceives that her daughter would not be averse to advances from Colambre (Edgeworth 42). Considering a potential match with Colambre rationally, Miss Broadhurst realizes the economic and social advantages for both her parents and her potential husband—she will not allow her emotions to blind her, and thinks the situation through. She decides thoughtfully that she is opposed to being part of a transaction in which both her parents and her husband would get a bargain at her expense.

Miss Broadhurst quickly figures out that Colambre leaves town to avoid her. She “was not a young lady who could easily be deceived, even where her passions were concerned” (72). Realizing where his preferences may be, she courageously goes to her friend and competition and tells Miss Nugent openly that she has thought of Colambre, and that if he had preferred her, she would have “preferred him to any other person who has ever addressed [her]” (73)—hardly something many a young lady would admit so freely, especially after being rejected. She muses: “We are all of us, more or less, subject to the delusions of vanity, or hope, or love—I—even I!—who thought myself so clear-sighted, did not know how, with one flutter of his wings, Cupid can set the whole

atmosphere in motion; change the ... value, of every object; lead us into a *mirage*, and leave us in a dismal desert” (73). She admits her deeper feelings and her defeat, yet in her misery wants to assure her friend that she will be all right. She does not want Miss Nugent to feel sorry or guilty. She consciously decides to stand witness to the growing attachment of Colambre to Miss Nugent. “[C]lear-sighted” Miss Broadhurst rejects several eligible bachelors and noble admirers, though some of those rejections “would have broken [her mother’s] heart” (185). Put on the spot and pressed to make a decision she states: “That man who has the best friend, I dare say, will make the best husband!” (186), looking rationally for compatibility and loyalty, for the companionate ideal.

Despite Marian’s manly features, especially the reason and logic that are constantly referred to as manly traits, to act like a man is not an option for her. She does, however, encounter a situation in Glyde’s house in which she voices the wish to take action, to leave the passivity she is constrained to as a woman: “If I had been a man, I would have knocked him down on the threshold of his own door, and have left his house, [...] But I was only a woman” (249). She is a woman, and acts as such when she would much rather act otherwise, even if she is not always recognized as a member of the fair sex. Marian is in a difficult liminal position: “[Marian] is neither male nor female. She cannot do what males do, because she lacks a penis, and she cannot be the recipient of male desire, because she lacks the ability to attract men” (Balée 209). Marian’s reason pushes her further away from the traditional notion of femininity.

Fosco, one of the villains of the novel, recognizes Marian as what she is: a marvelous woman. He realizes her potential to be an equal partner exactly because of her rationality, her strength of mind and her intelligence. He appreciates what others would

consider “manly traits,” what initially removes Marian from the traditional notion of femininity, and he sees her passion and her potential for love. All these qualities make her an ideal and desirable companion in his eyes. Marian overhears him ridiculing Percival and his choice of spouse in favor of herself:

Where are your eyes? Can you look at Miss Halcombe, and not see that she has foresight and the resolution of a man? With that woman for my friend, I would snap these fingers of mine at the world. [...] This grand creature—I drink her health [...], [she] who stands in the strength of her love and courage [...] between us two, and that poor flimsy pretty blonde wife of yours—this magnificent woman whom I admire with all my soul [...] you drive to extremities, as if she was no sharper and no bolder than the rest of her sex. Percival! Percival! You deserve to fail, and you *have* failed. (330-331)

Fosco, with all his faults the one man who can see beneath the surface and recognize Marian’s superiority over Laura, castigates Percival with all the other English men, including the male protagonist Hartright, for choosing the mere shell. During Marian’s illness, Fosco gets hold of her diary and adds a postscript in which he lists Marian’s qualities which make her superior to her peers and a desirable and equal companion:

Admirable woman! I allude to Miss Halcombe. Stupendous effort! I refer to the Diary. Yes! these pages are amazing. The tact which I find here, the discretion, the rare courage, the wonderful power of memory, the accurate observation of character, the easy grace of style, the charming outbursts of

womanly feeling, have all inexpressibly increased my admiration of this sublime creature, of this magnificent Marian. [...] Under happier circumstances how worthy should I have been of Miss Halcombe—and how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME. The sentiments which animate my heart assure me that the lines I have just written express a Profound Truth. (343)

Marian articulates her relationship to Hartright, or at least her feelings towards him, less explicitly than Miss Broadhurst does. Though she likes him, she realizes his instant infatuation with Laura immediately. This knowledge sets boundaries for her feelings. Some critics believe that “Marian seems to have no interest whatsoever in marrying” (May 92). That conclusion is contradicted by Marian’s refusal to let Hartright read all of her diary, partly because of things written about him. Even in the passages the reader gets to see, she shows how high he is in her esteem, marking the day he leaves England as the day “we have parted with a true man; we have lost a faithful friend” (181), and mourning the fact that she has to burn his farewell letter for security reasons, “the last [letter] he may ever write to me” (186). This evokes the picture of another plain character, Brontë’s Lucy Snowe, who fawns over Dr. John’s letters to the point of burying them in a wall in the backyard of the boarding school rather than having strangers touch them. A weaker character would envy Laura for what has been bestowed upon her so freely and which has been denied to Marian, namely beauty and riches. But Marian devotes her life to the purpose of making Laura’s life as comfortable and as safe as possible. She becomes, according to Hartright, “the good angel of our lives” (643).

When Laura's fortune and her rank are in jeopardy, Hartright and her devoted sister Marian protect her interests and try to keep her out of harms way. Like Grace, Laura has the male protagonist and her plain female counterpart to look out for her interests. Again we find a devoted lover, Hartright, working his way through the mystery surrounding Laura's life and her marriage. He and her plain female rival, her ugly half-sister Marian, succeed in restoring her to her rank and fortune. Laura does little to help them. Though they are living in dire financial conditions, the little money they have is touched only "in Laura's interests and for Laura's sake" (441). If "a woman's femininity was best expressed in her dependence" (Balée 199), Laura must be one of the most feminine of women.

Education

Education, as far as the older generation seems to be concerned, is not a desirable asset in a young woman. Naïveté and ignorance, interpreted often as innocence, reinforce the superiority of men. Both O'Fay and Clonbrony speak of educated women, however rich, as not being a "favorite with gentlemen" (23). This accords with Dr. Gregory's advice to young women: "Be even cautious in displaying your good sense. It will be thought you assume a superiority over the rest of the company. But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and cultivated understanding" (28). But Edgeworth and Collins portray both Miss Broadhurst and Marian directly contrary to that notion, as educated beings with individual opinions and sound judgment. Miss Broadhurst has received an exceptional education. And Marian demonstrates her cultural awareness mainly through her disdain for the typical education young women

have access to—she still practices all the accomplishments, but does not consider them useful, never mind thinking highly of them.

Miss Broadhurst is depicted as well read, participating freely in conversations with men. Grace, who lacks the education, is forced to listen quietly and serve as a beautiful ornament to the room. But she admires education in others, “particularly in her friend miss Broadhurst. Miss Broadhurst had received all the advantages of education which money could procure, and had profited by them in a manner uncommon among those for whom they are purchased in such abundance” (44). Her education goes beyond parroting knowledge: “[S]he not only had many masters, and read many books, but had thought of what she read, and had supplied, by the strength and energy of her own mind, what cannot be acquired by the assistance of masters. Miss Nugent [...] looked up to her friend as to a superior being” (44). Miss Broadhurst is not passively educated because her parents had the financial means to allow her to do so; she strives for learning.

Marian exhibits her disdain for the usual feminine education many times. She does not value the accomplishments she is forced to practice and would rather spend her time with more useful things. Marian is far removed from the British ideal of womanhood. Wilkie Collins continually reminds us that this woman he has created with manly traits remains a “weaker” human being. The modern reader, however, sees in Marian real strength. She tries to act the part of the ideal English woman, restricting herself to the proper area of conduct and performing the expected occupations. She draws “as composedly as any woman in England” (35) for instance, although she dislikes drawing. Hartright comments on “Miss Halcombe’s lively resolution to see nothing but the ridiculous side of the Fine Arts, as practiced by herself, her sister, and ladies in

general” (52). During Marian’s conversations with Hartright, the reader is made aware of the harsh judgment Marian has for herself and other women—she calls herself as “inaccurate as women usually are” (34). It is not the first demeaning thing she says about her own sex, nor her last. “You see I don’t think much of my own sex [...] no woman does think much of her own sex, although few of them confess it as freely as I do” (33). This severe judgment has less to do with contempt for women, and more with contempt for what women are fashioned into, how their time is filled with useless occupations and accomplishments.

Trust, Determination, and Work

Ultimately the male protagonists learn to trust the disinclined voyeur and appreciate their help in working alongside men—they can rely on Miss Broadhurst’s good mind and Marian Halcombe’s determination. When Grace would have left the Clonbrony’s to avoid seeing Colambre again, in spite of the note he sends, it is Lady Berryl, the former Miss Broadhurst, whose “strength of mind, and positive determination” (245) convince her to wait for his arrival. Lady Berryl devotes herself to her friend in distress, calming her, saying “I go and see what you ought to do; and depend upon me for a true friend, in whose mind [...] duty is the first object” (245). Colambre even waits with his good news until Lady Berryl joins him and her husband. He seems to trust her to reveal to Grace her new status as legitimate heiress. When Grace faints, Lady Berryl comes to her friend’s aid with delicacy and patience, explaining that now she “may be every thing” to the Clonbrony’s, even their daughter (248), thus becoming a tool facilitating Grace’s and Colambre’s union.

Hartright learns to trust Marian and value her opinion. While they are hiding in London, Marian offers to take care of all household matters. She wants to do her share of work, in spite of being still shaken by her illness (442) with a face “changed as if years had passed over it [...] worn and wasted piteously” (418-419). She even promises Hartright that he “shall not regret, [...] that [he has] only a woman to help” (448). Men, apart from Fosco and Hartright, show their high esteem of Marian. Gilmore, the lawyer, attributes to her a “sensitive, vehement, passionate nature” (137); he demonstrates his high regard of her and her opinion several times throughout the novel. Hartright exhibits the same kind of trust, “Marian’s face was sadly worn and anxious. I saw who had known all the danger and born all the trouble, in my absence [...] Laura’s brighter looks and better spirits told me how carefully she had been spared all knowledge” (557). This implies not only that Laura had been spared, but that Marian cares deeply for Hartright, and he recognizes it.

Conclusion

The disinclined voyeurs depicted in Edgeworth’s and Collins’s novels get rejected based on their looks. This is not merely a matter of lack of attraction. In nineteenth-century society, even men like Hartright feared that the appearance of a woman like Marian’s would be reflected in their children. Hereditary transmission of impairment through the mother, especially in view of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* theories, were widely discussed in Victorian society, “theorized in remarkably fluid rhetorics” (Holmes 79). Darwinism was taken as far as claims that “[a]t the moment of conception does the mysterious virtue of the creative force transmit not only an impression of the physical being of the parents, but likewise the moral physiognomy ... that lies beneath its surface”

(article in the *London Lancet*, qtd. in Holmes 81). It is significant that there is no similar concern about Laura's weak nature and physis, her genes, which have already shown in several generations in her family. What about Laura's "nervous contraction" in her lip, her headaches, her tendency to be sickly if not even a hypochondriac as her uncle? Her father believed Sir Percival to be a good catch for his daughter, he probably was as gullible as Laura—she got her looks from him, why not his inability to judge? Her uncle—apart from being a hypochondriac—is a tyrant and despot in his passive-aggressive way, and those same weaknesses are in Laura's genes, and might also be handed down to posterity. So why would a man on Darwinian grounds choose Laura over Marian? To have pretty children? Physical appearance was more important than mental stability; it seems to have been considered as hereditary more harmful than psychological illnesses. The only advantage Laura has over Marian is her beauty.

Edgeworth earlier in the century adheres to an older ideal. Grace, the woman who gets to marry the male protagonist, is portrayed as the ideal of British womanhood in accordance with the ideals promoted by Rousseau, Dr. Gregory, and their disciples. Conservative as that fictional position is, let us not forget that by creating Miss Broadhurst, not yet in the spotlight as much as she deserves, Maria Edgeworth is paving the way for future more controversial female characters. As Mellor so astutely states, "Writing by women in the Romantic period constructed a new version of the ideal woman, one who was rational rather than emotional or sexual, one who participated in an egalitarian marriage" (107). Maria Edgeworth was certainly part of that movement, showing an "objective interest in human nature and the way it manifests itself in social custom" (Butler 239) in the way she sympathizes with Miss Broadhurst even as she

portrays her awareness of her marriage impediment—the lack of beauty. Miss Broadhurst is a representative of Edgeworth’s subtle feminist agenda in *The Absentee*, advocating revision of the beauty ideals of womanhood as imposed upon females of her time in favor of mind and character. Broadhurst aims for a companionate marriage. She chooses her husband. She is the notion of a new ideal: a woman with mental superiority and strength of character as supposed to a merely lovely maiden.

Collins, creating yet another ideal for womanhood, is more realistic as to Marian’s fate. She remains single because society was not ready to embrace the new ideal of womanhood. *The Woman in White* reveals the “social construct of gender” (R. Collins 136). Wilkie Collins’s exemplifies the thesis of the 1868 article “Plain Girls,” whose author claims that in literature, “[e]verything is done that could be done to persuade mankind that plain girls are, in reality, by far the most attractive of the lot” (195). Collins does this so successfully that although Marian Halcombe does not get married, her character intrigued many male readers so much that they did not hesitate to contact the author, proposing marriage to the woman Marian was fashioned after (Richard Collins 132). Marian is an ideal partner, and is shown to work hand-in-hand with Hartright. She is clearly an attractive partner in spite of lacking beautiful facial features. Both Edgeworth and Collins depict the disinclined voyeur to be a woman men should consider as a potential partner, a new ideal of womanhood opposed to the traditional notion of femininity.

IV. Settling for Less, or Solitary Life

In this last chapter I am taking both the second-choice woman and the disinclined voyeur a step further into novels written by two of the most famous female nineteenth-century novelists, Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. This chapter builds upon the two previous chapters inasmuch as the novels I examine portray both a second-choice woman and a disinclined voyeur. Jane Austen's Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is a second-choice woman—Collins proposes to her only on the rebound after getting rejected when he asked Elizabeth to marry him. Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) is a typical disinclined voyeur, so much a voyeur that critics such as Carter, Robbins, and Forsyth comment on her "strong tendencies toward voyeurism and exhibitionism" (Forsyth 18). Lucy has to witness her romantic ideal, Dr. John, courting Ginevra Fanshawe, whom she knows to be her inferior. Later she becomes the audience for his second more successful courtship and subsequent marriage. She is never really part of the happy Bretton and De Bassompierre circle, but an observer only.

Considering the positions of second-choice women and disinclined voyeurs, and considering how some authors idealized those women as discussed in the previous chapter, I now focus on a direct assessment of plainer women's fate. I examine how nineteenth-century authors engage with the new ideal of womanhood I discussed, demonstrating that the idealized qualities assigned to plainer women in some novels did not change their fate in the marriage market. Thus, the counter-ideal to the British idea of womanhood met in Edgeworth and Collins becomes irrelevant. Because that counter-ideal proves impractical within nineteenth-century society marriage realities, authors turn to a more sobering perspective on the fate of plainer women. Nevertheless the qualities

connected to the new ideal of womanhood allow plainer women to cope better with their fate and more rationally determine their future. I consider how second-choice women or disinclined voyeurs deal with their fate as plain nineteenth-century women and what choices they make based on the options life has to offer given the qualities I connected with the new ideal of womanhood to cope with their dilemma.

Both Austen and Brontë stay close to the painful truth in considering the realistic options open for plainer women. Plain women are seen by these authors to be at a disadvantage in the marriage market. Social conventions will not allow them to display their real assets—qualities such as intelligence, honesty, rationality, or education—to their advantage, thus leaving them few options. Plain women can either settle for less—if they get a lesser proposal—or prepare themselves for the solitary life, a life of professionalism looming over their future. The companionate ideal must be foregone in either situation. That practical necessity may be behind nineteenth-century authors' shift from women who settle for less in marriage to women who live alone in the professional world. I argue that there is a sense in which removing plain women from the marriage market liberates them by making their lives no longer dependent on men or marriage. Because appearance has less significance in the professional world they enter, they are not judged less by their looks than they were in the drawing room.

Both Austen and Brontë engage with the new character-oriented ideal of womanhood as discussed in the previous chapter. But instead of using that template, they react against it. The new ideal, as demonstrated in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Villette*, is simply not viable in the marriage market. Because second-choice women and disinclined voyeurs are rarely noticed because of their lack of appearance, and

consequently merge into the background, the idealized qualities—however real and dramatically present—do not get noticed either. Plain women’s tendency to merge into the background, their shadowy existence is especially visible in the character of Lucy Snowe. At the fête at the *pensionnat* Lucy remembers “feeling [herself] to be a mere *shadowy* spot on a field of light; the courage was not in me to put on a transparent white dress” (145). Instead she is wearing a “crape-like material of purple-gray – the colour, in short, of dun *mist*, lying on a moor in bloom [...] I had no flower, no jewel to relieve it; and, what was more, I had no natural rose of complexion [...] However, in this same gown of *shadow*, I felt at home” (145, emphasis added). Lucy fashions herself as a shadow, which is how she is perceived by most of her friends and acquaintances. She is so tentative there that usually men do not notice her as a woman, or at least not as a marriageable woman. Graham deems her as “inoffensive as a shadow” (351), which highlights his indifference to her and wounds Lucy. She lectures herself for letting his careless sentence get to her: “[y]ou are well habituated to be passed by as a shadow in Life’s sunshine” (371). On the day of the fête, Lucy states, “[w]e become oblivious of these deficiencies [of appearance] in the uniform routine of the daily drudgery, but they *will* force upon us their unwelcome blank of those bright occasions when beauty should shine” (145). Lucy does not shine, and she spends a major part of that day of joy in the attic amidst the dust of long-forgotten things. That attic seclusion reminds of other cloistered literary attics, such as Bertha Mason’s in *Thornfield*. While other women celebrate and show themselves in their best attire, Lucy is hidden away (148).

This attic emphasis suggests that second-choice women and disinclined voyeurs do not receive more attention from their social environment, never mind more

appreciation of their qualities. Yet those same qualities have their practical use: though they may not promote plainer women within the marriage market, they help them cope with their lack of success there through the few options left for them. Either they come to terms with having to settle for less, or they pursue a professional career, which will make it possible for them to live independently from the marriage market and men. Either course is a triumph of mind over body and emotions.

Austen and Brontë realize with painful clarity that plainer women do not have the same options their prettier peers do—life has less to offer to them: “Plain girls again expect less, and are prepared to accept less, in a lover” (“Plain Girls” 195). And most can expect no lover at all. Brontë, for instance, “knew from her own life that the redundant woman was more likely to undergo loneliness [...] than she was to marry” (Gendron 15). Austen and Brontë illustrate that both Charlotte and Lucy are rational enough not to expect too much of life, rather to live as best they can with the options open to them. Both have little chance for the ideal of married life, let alone the companionate ideal nineteenth-century women are trained for. Austen shows us a society in which marriage is the ultimate goal girls are raised to aim for, the objective every woman is trying to achieve. Brontë chooses a different path with Lucy, portraying a plain woman who enters professional life so that, however ambiguous her social standing, she is able to live independently. Brontë presents Lucy as an “agent of economic progress” (K. Brown 363). While Austen’s second-choice woman Charlotte Lucas can only find purpose in life through marriage, Lucy’s life is not defined by a man. Brontë turns professionalism into something positive, something which allows Lucy to keep her dignity and avoid

dependence on relatives. Removed from the marriage market, Lucy is liberated into a world where her lack of beauty retains less significance.

Examining the narrative of Charlotte Lucas, I look at her marriage prospects, her environment's expectations, her rationale for settling for less, and the relatively positive outcome of her decision. I pay attention to the importance of appearance in *Pride and Prejudice*, the limited options Charlotte has, and how she resigns herself to what life has to offer her, determined to make the best of her choices. In contrast Brontë promotes solitary life as a professional woman instead of settling for less in marriage: Lucy Snowe, cut off from the support of relatives, has to forge her own way in life. As marriage seems unlikely to her, she enters professional life, where she rises from the position of a companion to be the *directrice* of her own school, independent and successful. Both Charlotte Lucas and Lucy Snowe deal with their plain woman predicament through the qualities of intelligence and character which set them apart from their peers.

Critical Overview

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has provoked rich critical attention. There are decades of criticism on the change of heart wrought on both Darcy and Elizabeth, but the main themes in recent Austen criticism are marriageability and marriage ideals. *Pride and Prejudice* depicts a second-choice woman, Charlotte Lucas, whose literary position is emphasized by the fact that no one seems to write about her. Once more the second-choice woman figures as confidant, the best friend of Elizabeth Bennet, the beautiful romantic heroine the audience can identify with. Charlotte Lucas does not seem to get much other attention, which resembles the critical treatment Miss Broadhurst in *The Absentee* received. Although Charlotte Lucas gets acknowledged in most of the criticism

written on *Pride and Prejudice*, it is only for two or three scenes in the novel. First, she is mentioned as advising Elizabeth not to let her fancy for Wickham dictate her actions toward Darcy (Morgan 56). Then she gets negative attention for accepting Mr. Collins's proposal of marriage, an issue treated in Hyunsook Kim's "Marriage as Women's Economic Activity," which explores the conflict between social necessity and the individual choice of young marriageable women. Lastly Charlotte is usually discussed disapprovingly for her take on marriage—Wiesenfarth pronounces hers to be a mercenary marriage (268). Missy Dehn Kubitschek muses that Charlotte Lucas offers a lot more to discuss and should be further investigated (239), which is what I do. I situate myself within the discourse of marriage as affecting and as affected by society, but not focusing on Elizabeth Bennet's but rather on Charlotte Lucas's perspective, looking from the standpoint of a plain woman past her bloom. I am redeeming her nuptial choice by treating it as the best option available to her.

Just as with Austen criticism, most scholarship tries to situate Brontë's novels within a feminist framework. The majority of views devote critical attention to the plainness of Brontë's heroine in *Villette*—the importance of appearance in *Villette* can be compared in its prominence to scholarship on *Jane Eyre* or *The Woman in White*. Because appearance is such a central focal point in the novel, many critics, notably Janice Carlisle, examine Lucy's self-perception and her mirror images relative to Jane Eyre. Part of this anxiety centered on appearance involves studies about the male gaze, looks and looking in *Villette* (Robbins), and even voyeurism (Forsyth), which ties in nicely with my pronouncing Lucy to be a disinclined voyeur.

I focus my discussion of *Villette* on how Brontë rejects the pre-scripted marital ideal life of nineteenth-century women in favor of professionalism. Criticism treats Brontë's governesses as taboo-women (K. Brown 362) and claims she depicts work as a substitute for marriage (Fitz Gerald 111). Joan Fitz Gerald claims that Brontë prefers the option of professionalism to waiting around for a proposal (100). Lucy gets considered as an orphan, as plain woman, as undesirable, and finally as professional woman, which is where I focus. I look at Lucy's lack of marriageability and her way of coming to terms with her solitude, rising in the professional world as an independent woman. I claim that Brontë wants to open up professionalism for women, rather than see them settle for less in marriage. By taking Lucy out of the marriage market Brontë allows her heroine to avoid being dependent upon men.

The Futility of the New Ideal and Its Alternative Use

Because both Charlotte Lucas and Lucy Snowe get little notice, and are generally overlooked by the society they live in, their assets as admired in the new ideal of womanhood portrayed by Edgeworth and Collins are not fully recognized. Their sterling characters are not viable in the new companionate marriage market. Intelligence and honesty do not help to promote Charlotte or Lucy, never mind gain them admiration. Thus the qualities we have seen actuated in Miss Broadhurst and in Marian are used by Austen and Brontë in a way that enables plainer women to come to more practical terms with their fate.

Like Miss Broadhurst and Marian Halcombe, Charlotte Lucas and Lucy Snowe are depicted as educated young women. Austen claims that Charlotte Lucas was "intelligent" (13) and "well-educated" (84). She certainly is able to read people and

situations well: Charlotte has the capability to “interpret situations correctly” (Damstra 167), a gift other characters in the novel notably lack. She is the confidant Elizabeth tells all her “griefs” to (61), and “Charlotte and Mr. Bennet [...] have been the only intelligent people in Elizabeth’s environment” (Morgan 63). Lucy Snowe must have a general education similar to that of Charlotte and other women of her class. Yet throughout the novel she shows a resolve to learn—studying with M. Paul even though it is hard for her, consequently rising in the professional world to be a teacher and later the *directrice* of her own school.

Harriet Martineau alludes to the sparse education of young women in her essay “Female Industry” (1851) (26). Women’s education was neglected in part because it did not seem necessary for them, as they were supposed to get married. But in this new world of possible female professionalism “it has become essential for the welfare of women that they should, as far as possible, be taught that they may have a career open to them even if they never marry; and it is the duty of society to try to open them as many careers of the sort as are not incompatible with the distinctive peculiarities of a woman’s physical capacity” (“Plain Girls” 195).

This careerism is not without cost. We find the honesty displayed by Miss Broadhurst and Marian Halcombe severely toned down in Austen and Brontë. Even Edgeworth and Collins recognized that female honesty left their plain characters open and vulnerable, and worse, it did not help them any further in the marriage market. Austen and Brontë seem to have seen little practical use for openness and honesty in general society; hence their plainer characters practice a kind of selective honesty. They do not lie, but they do withhold. Honesty is undesirable in the marriage market because it

disrupts young women's artificial but socially appropriate performance when entering society. As Charlotte claims later, "[i]f the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other, or ever so similar before-hand, it does not advance their felicity in the least" (16)—it might actually work to a woman's disadvantage if her husband knows certain things before the marriage vows are spoken. Miss Broadhurst's friends, for instance, thought it unwise of her to disclose her age. It is much more important to avoid scaring away possible suitors than to be scrupulously honest.

Charlotte is very honest with herself about the motivation behind her marriage. She is open to her friend Elizabeth and explains the rationale behind her choice. However, she certainly withholds her critical assessment of her future husband from her own family and leaves Collins himself in the dark about the lack of emotional investment in him. Lucy, despite articulating her fears and her thoughts, is not open even with the reader, and fails to disclose crucial facts until late in the novel. This deceit is partly a self-protection, and partly because Lucy's thoughts matter so little in her social circle. Both Charlotte Lucas and Lucy Snowe candidly determine where honesty is appropriate and where it is better to curb that honesty for socially more acceptable purposes.

This leads to another quality Charlotte and Lucy share with Miss Broadhurst and Marian: a rational mind. Austen calls Charlotte a "sensible, intelligent young woman" (13). Lucy, too, is so level-headed a young woman that Mme Beck values her as a member of her staff, appreciating her prudent judgment, and Graham and Polly repeatedly seek her counsel. Both women shrewdly assess their own situation to determine their choices. When Lucy, for instance, takes her first job as a companion to an elder lady, she would prefer not to work in such a position if she could help it, but though

she “forced [herself] to *realize* evils [of such work], [she was] too prosaic to *idealize*, and consequently to exaggerate them” (41). Her mind will not allow her to deceive herself, so she recognizes the full extent of her desperate financial and emotional situation.

Rationality helps both women cope with their limited options. For Charlotte Lucas, the choices are marriage or spinsterhood. Lucy, on the other hand, has the option of professionalism. Both will have to work hard all their lives—one to make her marriage work as comfortably as possible, the other to maintain financial security.

Settling for Less

Austen reacts against the new ideal of womanhood by creating in Charlotte Lucas a character who—although in possession of many of the assets Edgeworth and Collins so admired in Miss Broadhurst and Marian—has no other option but to settle for less. She is not idealized as superior to her peers, but her friendship with Jane and especially Elizabeth shows her as intellectually equal to Austen’s beautiful heroine. But her lack of beauty deprives her of the options Jane and Elizabeth have. She resigns herself to settle for less because of the lack of other options. She thoughtfully compromises her integrity, reacting against the honesty upheld by Edgeworth and Collins by marrying for rational economic reasons rather than companionate ideals. Thus the qualities of character and intelligence promoted by the new ideal, rather than promoting companionate marriage, allow Charlotte to consider marriage as necessity rather than emotional fulfillment.

Austen appraises the Charlotte’s chances in the marriage market realistically, to show how her qualities of character and personality do not promote her enough. Her assets are irrelevant because largely ignored by the society she lives in, and especially by the young marriageable men, who spend their time wooing the beautiful older Miss Bennets or even

the brainless Lydia instead of enjoying Charlotte's more mature company. Yet Austen simultaneously shows how Charlotte uses qualities like honesty, intelligence, rationality, and determination to overcome her dilemma, resigning herself to her life with Mr. Collins, coming to terms with what life offers to a plain woman.

Charlotte is twenty-seven years old (Austen 13)—past her bloom. Her age alone shows us that she is too old to be an eligible match—she is what's left over from her generation of marriageable young women. Austen, too, shows how a woman Charlotte's age is in danger of being ridiculed for pursuing marriage. Although trained for marriage as the only purpose of life, women were considered absurd when still pursuing that purpose after their youth. In *Suffer and Be Still* Vicinus states that “[s]ociety trained woman for one function, marriage, and then mocked those who sought this idyllic state after having reached maturity” (xii).

Zangen sums the situation up: “[d]id young women have any real choice in an environment that valued marriage so much more than the single state; that ridiculed single women; that identified femaleness with the married state; that offered hardly any interesting job opportunities to single women?” (71). Bleak as Charlotte's marriage to Mr. Collins appears, there were gloomier options. Dr. Gregory writes in his *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774): “I am of the opinion, that you may attain a superior degree of happiness in a married state, to what you can possibly find in any other. I know the forlorn and unprotected situation of an old maid [...] the great difficulty of making a transformation with dignity and cheerfulness [*sic*], from the period of youth, beauty, admiration and respect, into the calm, silent, unnoticed retreat of declining years” (75-76). Charlotte does not expect happiness in a marriage, and is better aware than we of the

consequences and hardships solitary life has in store for women. She sees no other sensible option than to get married.

Charlotte is keenly aware of her lack of beauty, and consequently her lack of attraction for young men. Charlotte has not received a single proposal during her long years out in society. Her take on marriage is no longer romanticized, as it might have been during her first few years in the marriage market. She has a rather rational opinion on matrimony and consciously detaches herself emotionally, a detachment which appalls part of Austen's audience, the more so because nineteenth-century social conventions maintained that young women married for love only. Yet it is that very detachment that allows Charlotte to assess her situation objectively, looking at marriage from different perspectives—financially, emotionally, and socially.

One of the reasons Charlotte Lucas decides to settle for less is her family, who are anxious for her to get married. Once she is engaged, Charlotte's family is overjoyed because "Mr. Collins's present circumstances made it a most eligible match for their daughter, to whom they could give little fortune [...] The younger girls formed hopes of *coming out* a year or two sooner than they might have otherwise done; and the boys were relieved from their apprehension of Charlotte's dying an old maid" (83). All this harks discouragingly back to the earlier financial basis for marriage, which is obviously still alive and well and living in society. Charlotte's thoughts about her family's future lead her into considering the financial consequences of solitary life, which inevitably promotes marriage as the better choice—Charlotte knows that she will be dependent on her family, a financial burden on her parents and brothers, if she does not find a husband. Aileen Cho states that material reasons for marriage remained crucial, that matrimony

was a socially determined business for women in nineteenth-century society (547), and Kubitschek seconds this claim, saying that “[m]iddle-class women were socially destined to be dependent on men for financial support” (237).

Charlotte Lucas has a clear-eyed perception of her future and a realistic assessment of her chances at marriage. She calculates her chances within the marriage market rationally, rejecting the emotional aspects. She discloses her objective views on marriage in one of her moments of honesty to Elizabeth: “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other, or ever so similar before-hand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. [...] and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life” (16). She also claims that she has just as much chance at happiness as other women entering matrimony, telling Elizabeth that “when you have had time to *think* it all over, I hope you will be *satisfied* with what I have done. I am *not romantic* you know. I never was. I ask *only* a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life. I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state” (85, emphasis added). She is reinforcing how prudent her choice is. It is a head decision, a choice based on thought rather than emotions. Her rationality will not allow Charlotte to be a romantic—that would be a waste of energy and futile, creating unanswered desire and subsequent pain. Charlotte asks only for a financially stable future and a home, with which she will be satisfied. She settles for less.

Charlotte’s emotional detachment from men and her disenchantment with the whole institution of courtship and matrimony shows in her conscious attempt to get

Collins to propose. She “accepted [Collins] solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment” and “cared not how soon that establishment were gained” (83). She is emotionally not invested. Charlotte is not enthusiastic about her match, rather “composed” (83). She is aware that there are downsides as well as ups to her future:

[Charlotte’s] reflections were in general satisfactory. Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband – Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it. (84)

This passage represent in addition to Charlotte’s thoughts on her engagement Austen’s apologia for her decisions. It underscores Charlotte’s awareness of not being handsome and her reasoning for accepting Collins, though she knows him to be highly inferior in character. She does not deceive herself, accepting both her motivations for agreeing to marry him and the less pleasant aspects of her future. Kubitschek defends Charlotte’s choice, saying that “[i]n uniting with the foolish, unpleasant Mr. Collins, Charlotte dispenses with any enjoyment of a marriage. However, by marrying, she avoids being an unpaid servant in a brother’s household and secures her own home” (238).

Charlotte is a hard worker, whose resolve and determination helps her to make the best of what life has dealt her. Using those character qualities she makes her marriage

work just as consciously and rationally as she made it happen. In her letters to Elizabeth, Charlotte never complains. She has chosen her husband open-eyed: Charlotte “expressed herself on every point exactly as [Elizabeth] might have foreseen. She wrote cheerfully, seemed surrounded with comforts, and mentioned nothing she could not praise”—she “rationally softened” (98) the picture. Charlotte has arranged her new life consistent with her steady character: “[T]here was really a great air of comfort throughout” (105). Charlotte makes due with her life, consciously choosing to be as happy as is possible with Mr. Collins as a husband and Lady Catherine as a neighbor. Elizabeth redeems some of her earlier judgment on Charlotte when talking to Darcy and shows that she gained a certain understanding of Charlotte and her choices: “She is able to credit Charlotte’s sensible domestic arrangement as much as she delights in Mr. Collins’ absurdities” (Morgan 61).

Charlotte creates her own happiness, not as other literary characters do—defined by their relationship with their husbands—but centered on the life she herself creates. She does not regret the happiness she might have had in matrimony if she had had beauty or wealth to attract a more desirable husband. Charlotte’s choice is based on practical reasons, and she relinquishes hope for a companionate marriage with its equal partnership. But as a plain woman she has no chance for such a partnership in the first place, because no young man invests emotional energy in getting to know her sufficiently to recognize her good qualities. She settles for less knowing she cannot achieve more because of her want of appearance. Her rationality, her honesty with herself, and her determination make it possible for her to deal with her fate and be content.

Solitary Life

Lucy Snowe can be just as rational and as determined as Charlotte Lucas, but Brontë creates circumstances for her different from the picture Austen draws. There is a visible shift in how the subject of beauty is treated in the novels, similar to the shift between Edgeworth's Miss Broadhurst and Collins's Marian Halcombe: Plain Charlotte Lucas, who functions as a friend and companion to the beautiful heroine, is a secondary character, whereas plain Lucy Snowe is not only the female protagonist but also the narrator of *Villette*. Brontë moves the issue of limited options connected with the lack of beauty center stage. Moreover, she takes her own character seriously, while Austen does not protect Charlotte from ridicule. Charlotte enters matrimony knowing that many people who would in some ways have pitied her as an old maid ridicule her now for her choice in a husband.

Among the people who criticize and ridicule her choice is Mr. Bennet, a man just as convinced of his own judgment and opinions as his daughter Elizabeth, and a man married to a spouse equally foolish as with Mr. Collins: "It gratified him [...] to discover that Charlotte Lucas, whom he had been used to think tolerably sensible, was as foolish as his wife, and more foolish than his daughter!" (Austen 87). It is patently unfair that whatever Charlotte chooses she is either pitied as a burden on her family or mocked for her choice of husband. Instead of being recognized in her predicament, Charlotte is laughed at, even by critics such as Weinsheimer, who calls her marriage "the most pathetic" (408) of marriages in Austen's novel. That reading does not fit Austen's favorable description of Charlotte's character and the good reasons behind Charlotte's actions. She is never depicted as foolish or erring, whereas the people judging her, Mr.

Bennet and Elizabeth for instance, do err gravely in their judgment at times. James Sherry calls Charlotte's marriage a "miserable capitulation" (616), claiming that added to "Colonel Fitzwilliam's pathetic admission that younger sons cannot marry where they will" it shows how impossible it is to maintain "values like simple openness, candour, and kindness in a world dominated by their opposites" (616). This is the utter honesty which both Austen and Brontë reject when assessing the new ideal of marriage as too idealistic and potentially harmful to their plain characters.

The realistic depiction of plainer women in Brontë's *Villette* is drastically different from Austen's earlier treatment of them. *Villette* was written at the "very height of the nineteenth-century realist tradition" (Newsom 59). Lucy Snowe is utterly different from Charlotte Lucas, though they have one crucial thing in common, the lack of beauty. But Brontë does not portray Lucy in a way that will invite or even allow her audience to ridicule her and her fate. *Villette* is the story of a woman's struggle to forge an identity and to make a living. For Lucy, however much she denies herself to think of it, "the winning of love is inseparable from the struggle for identity" (Newsom 58). Yet love is depicted as so unattainable for women of her appearance that she cannot rely on matrimony to take care of her financial concerns.

Brontë's *Villette* with its unstable and foreign circumstances might be read as a reaction against novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*. Brontë did not necessarily like *Pride and Prejudice*. Responding to Mr. Lewes's reviews on "Recent Novels," Brontë wrote about Austen's novel: "An accurate, daguerrotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully-fenced, high-cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid, physiognomy [...] I should hardly like to live with her ladies

and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses” (Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë* vol. II 43). Thus Brontë creates the opposite of Austen’s world. Lucy does not live in secure and stable circumstances, hidden away in a small and protected community, but is sent out on an adventurous journey to find herself by facing new challenges. Granted, Lucy might have preferred to have a family like Charlotte’s instead of being orphaned, but then she would also have been bound to get married most likely, to settle for less.

From what the reader can gather Charlotte is plain, but Lucy might even be ugly. Unattractive and poor, she has no other choice than to seek employment, to try making a living. Brontë allows her character a steady improvement of situation achieved through her strength and her ability to face, however reluctantly, new challenges which lead her out of the domestic sphere. Without familial ties to bind her to a pre-scripted life, Lucy has the luxury of independence. Yet entering professional life removes her further from the possibility of marriage as she becomes a “tabooed” or unsexed woman (K. Brown 362). Fitz Gerald quotes Brontë’s *Shirley*, using Mrs. Pryor’s assessment of her situation: “society [...] regarded me as a ‘tabooed woman’ [...] I must ‘live alone’” (98). She also cites what Charlotte Brontë wrote in a letter to William S. Williams on the 12 of May 1848: “when [a woman’s] destiny isolates her, I suppose she must do what she can, complain as little, bear as much, work as well as possible” (109). Graham does not even recognize her, even though they meet repeatedly: “She faces [...] what women, because of their financial and emotional dependence fear most and what only the strongest learn to cope with: social isolation” (Baines 51). Lucy merges into the shadows, a working woman not even of the same class, let alone marriageable or attractive. This social exile

turns out to be a blessing in disguise, because it allows her to forge her own life independently, disconnected from social expectations such as marriage.

Professional Life

Women's access to professional life was a hot topic during Brontë's lifetime. Harriet Martineau and Frances Power Cobbe wrote about women's financial predicament, offering work as a solution to the problem of single women. Martineau states that "the need and the supply of female industry have gone on increasing, and latterly at an unparalleled rate, while our ideas, our language, and our arrangements have not altered in any corresponding degree" (13). Martineau accuses society of deceiving itself in its belief that there is no need for women to enter professional life. Cobbe agrees, although she claims that society should promote marriage to avoid masses of superfluous women, saying "[w]e must frankly accept this new state of things, and educate women and modify trade in accordance therewith, so as to make the conditions of celibacy as little injurious as possible" ("What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids" 60). The author of "Plain Girls" laments the "notion of feminine dependence on man, of the want of refinement in a woman who undertakes any active business or profession" (195). Cobbe seconds this opinion, promoting a true companionate ideal in which women will not settle for less because of the perceived need to get married:

Instead of leaving single women as helpless as possible, and their labour as ill rewarded—instead of dinning into their ears from childhood that marriage is their one vocation and concern in life, and securing afterwards if they miss it that they shall find no other vocation or concern;—instead of all this, we shall act exactly on the reverse principle. We shall make

single life so free and happy that they shall have not one temptation to change it save the only temptation which *ought* to determine them—namely, love. [...] we shall endeavour to give her such independence of all interested considerations that she may make it a choice, not indeed ‘cold and philosophic,’ but warm from the heart, and guided by heart and conscience only. (61-62)

Cobbe describes an ideal. If society were so ordered, settling for less, like Charlotte Lucas did, would become unnecessary because other options than marriage would be open for women. Marriage would grow closer to the companionate ideal, and if a woman would not have a chance for a companionate marriage she could rely on her own capability within the professional world.

Lucy has to look for work, to earn a living. Throughout the novel she strives to be independent and in control of her own life, which causes her, much to her own surprise, to get promoted and to move up within the professional hierarchy. Lucy first works as a companion for Miss Marchmont. When Miss Marchmont dies and Lucy finds herself once more looking for work, Lucy adventurously moves to the continent in the hope of finding employment there as a nursery maid. Hired by Madame Beck, the *directrice* of a *pensionnat* in Villette, she eventually has the option to start teaching English. She fears the new challenge, as a lot of contemporary women tend to shy away from the new professional world they had to conquer: “I might have [...] gone back to the nursery obscurity, and there, perhaps, mouldered for the rest of my life; but looking up at madame, I saw in her countenance a something that made me think twice [...] It seemed as if a challenge of strength between opposing gifts was given, and I suddenly felt all the

dishonour of my diffidence – all the pusillanimity of my slackness to aspire. ‘Will you,’ said she, ‘go backward or forward?’ [...] ‘En avant,’ I said” (85-86). *En avant*—to go forward is her decision. She chooses progress, even if it means that she has to leave the comfort zone the nursery offered. She “symbolically accepts the challenge of a professional life of action” (Baines 55).

Brontë is depicting the pioneer woman who entered the professional world at great personal cost. Fitz Gerald recounts how Brontë herself knew she had to work for her livelihood for the rest of her life: “Reason told her that teaching was the only career open to her, and yet she did not like the work” (94). This resembles Lucy’s hesitant attitude, but there is no recoiling from the challenge, as necessity demands it. But Lucy is content: “My time was now well and profitably filled up. What with teaching others and studying closely myself, I had hardly a spare moment. It was pleasant. I felt I was getting on; not lying the stagnant prey of mould and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen with constant use. Experience of a certain kind lay before me, on no narrow scale” (90).

Lucy never forgets the reason why she works: There is a lack of other options. She works because she has no other means to make a living, no personal beauty, no family to fall back on. Moreover, she has pride and does not want to accept charity, which is one of the reasons why she refuses the position as Polly’s companion (330). She would rather work for less at the school than to be a burden on relatives. Lucy’s dilemma and her thoughts on the subject of work become most visible when she is interrogated by Polly: “[D]o you really teach here, in Vilette?” ‘I really do.’ ‘And do you always like it?’ ‘Not always.’ ‘And why do you go on with it?’” (317). Polly in her innocence,

blessed with beauty, a loving father, and growing up in financially stable circumstances, cannot grasp why a young woman would work if she did not enjoy it. Polly's father intercepts the conversation: "If Miss Snowe were to blush and look confused, I should have to bid you hold your tongue [...] but she only smiles, so push her hard, multiply the cross-questions'" (317). He proceeds with the examination: "'Well, Miss Snowe, why do you go on with it?' 'Chiefly, I fear, for the sake of the money I get.' 'Not then from motives of pure philanthropy?'" (317).

Mr. Home knows well that Lucy is not working for charitable reasons, but he emphasizes that philanthropy was open to women who had the financial means and the leisure to do charity work. Women working for reasons of philanthropy would be acceptable in his society, but not women working out of necessity. Lucy's answer at once dispels that idealistic notion: "Rather for the roof of shelter I am thus enabled to keep over my head; and for the comfort of mind it gives me to think that while I can work for myself, I am spared the pain of being a burden to anybody" (317). Lucy divulges her need to work, her lack of other options. She works to survive in a world that has nothing else to offer her. Brontë shows her approval of Lucy's chosen path by Mr. Home's answer: "If my Polly ever came to experience the uncertain nature of this world's goods, I should like her to act as Lucy acts; to work for herself, that she might burden neither kith nor kin" (317).

The same admiration he feels for Lucy is reflected in her professional relationship with Mme Beck. Although Lucy finds frequent fault with Mme Beck, she cannot but admire the rationality, strength, and capability of this woman. Moreover she sees part of herself in Mme Beck—the solitary professional woman. Mme Beck is "efficient and

effective, a good role model to Lucy as a woman of business” (222). Although cold and void of emotions, she functions as an example of a successful woman: “[S]he had an important avocation, a real business to fill her time, divert her thoughts, and divide her interests. It is especially true that she possessed a genuine good sense which is not given to all women nor to all men; and by dint of these combined advantages she behaved wisely, she behaved well” (Brontë 116). Critics claim that Brontë depicts a struggle between work and love in all her novels (Johnson 619).

But Mme Beck, realizing that her feelings are not reciprocated, simply uses work to overcome her emotions. Brontë approves of her keeping herself busy as opposed to sitting around and waiting for a man to determine her life. She writes in a letter to William S. Williams on July 3, 1849: “Believe me—teachers may be hardworked, ill-paid and despised—but the girl who stays at home doing nothing is worse off than the hardest-wrought and worst-paid drudge of a school. Whenever I have seen, not merely in humble, but in affluent homes—families of daughters sitting waiting to be married, I have pitied them from my heart. It is doubtless well—very well—if fate decrees them a happy marriage—but if otherwise—give their existence some object—their time some occupation—or the peevishness of disappointment will infallibly degrade their natures” (Fitz Gerald 100). Lucy follows in Mme Beck’s footsteps inasmuch as she becomes *directrice* of her own *pensionnat* in the end. While her hopes of marriage are forever thwarted, she is able to cope with her fate because of her rationality and strength of character.

Beauty, Marriage, and Professional Life

As we have seen, in the nineteenth century beauty was considered to be a major asset for women in the marriage market. Appearance is highlighted in Austen's novel as a means to attract a suitor. Austen first wanted to publish the novel *Pride and Prejudice* under the title of *First Impressions*, a title which emphasizes the exterior aspects of people. A favorable first impression was the major means by which women were able to attract male attention and interest a potential suitor and future husband. On the very first page of the novel the importance of female appearance in connection with marriage is emphasized. Upon hearing Mrs. Bennet's outpourings about her hopes of Mr. Bingley possibly marrying one of her daughters, Mr. Bennet states coolly: "You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party" (3). Mr. Bennet is treating appearance as the main means to attract a suitor.

Austen creates Elizabeth as the beautiful heroine her readers can identify with. But Austen, much like Edgeworth, uses a secondary character, Charlotte Lucas, to make her audience aware of the less fortunate women who lack the beauty to entice a man of Darcy's significance or Bingley's charm. Mrs. Bennet states that Miss Lucas was the first to be asked by Bingley to dance, but "he did not admire her at all: indeed, nobody can" (9). Mrs. Bennet also discloses that "the Lucases are very good sort of girls, I assure you. It is a pity they are not handsome. Not that *I* think Charlotte so *very* plain—but then she is our particular friend" (30). Upon Bingley's reply that Charlotte "seems a very pleasant young woman" she answers "Oh! dear, yes;—but you must own she is very plain. Lady Lucas herself has often said so, and envied me Jane's beauty" (30). This judgment,

coming from the obviously prejudiced mother of five single girls, cannot be taken entirely serious—especially as Mrs. Bennet is depicted as a very foolish person. However Charlotte herself seems inclined to agree. When “praised” about having been Bingley’s first choice at the dance, she answers partly to humor Mrs. Bennet, but also with honesty, “but he seemed to like his second choice better” (13). Heading for matrimony, Charlotte is slave to the drawing-room impression she makes, trapped by the importance of beauty in the marriage market.

Similarly to Charlotte’s resigned settling for less, there is no conventional happy ending awaiting Lucy to comfort the audience. Plain and without connections, Lucy has no other option in life but to live solitary and work for her living. Breen affirms that, “Lucy Snowe stands alone at the end of her autobiography, much as she does at its beginning” (244), and Carter seconds that “she will never participate fully in the most legitimate role assigned to women within the patriarchal system—that of a wife” (6). In opposition to Austen, Brontë supports the idea that women can and should live self-reliant, not defined through their relationship with men. Brontë promotes a new generation of women, professional women, refusing to “uphold marriage” (K. Brown 380) as women’s only option, and, insisting women should certainly not be judged by appearance only. Whereas Charlotte’s marriage could be called “miserable capitulation” (Sherry 616), *Villette* is a story of relative success, because Lucy stays an independent person, rising in the professional world, not a slave of her appearance in the drawing room or victim to her financial predicament. Brontë makes it possible for her character to lead a solitary life, content and in reasonable comfort. She does not exclude the possibility of marriage completely, but demands a marriage based not on exterior aspects

but on compatibility and equality—a companionate marriage. She utterly rejects settling for less. She prefers women to spend their time profitably, like Lucy, instead of waiting for a proposal which might not come at all. The ideal script of a young woman's life according to the social conventions gets discarded for a more independent life which does not depend on men financially or even emotionally.

Baines claims that *Villette*'s main objective is “to present a woman who, though decidedly feminine, finds fulfillment in self-reliance. [...] Her ultimate triumph is the ability to cope with the loss of Paul and live her life constructively in the solitude that has been her special destiny” (58). Lucy Snowe is enabled to live constructively by her independence. Within the professional world Lucy is defined less through her looks than she would be in the marriage market. Thus Brontë depicts a certain liberation of Lucy, as removing her from the marriage market also means removing her from being a slave to the drawing room, where appearance counts more than a woman's character. Brontë allows Lucy to be an individual, as opposed to being defined by her association with men. She maintains her dignity because she is liberated body and mind, not dependent on anyone. In spite of her limited options as a plain woman, she refuses to settle for less.

V. Conclusion

This thesis provides only a limited glimpse, a small insight into the issue of plain and ugly female characters in nineteenth-century literature. It reveals patterns of plain female characters in the nineteenth-century novel, and the significance of beauty in society, demonstrating how authors depicted the shift in marriage ideals and how those changes influenced the marriage market. Novelists tried to convince their nineteenth-century audience, that there are more important aspects to women than their physical beauty or the lack of it, and that one cannot judge a woman by her appearance solely. Many writers seemed to be of the same mind as Charlotte Brontë, who claimed in conversation with her sisters that it is wrong to think that a heroine can only be made interesting through physical beauty; hence they tried to illuminate other aspects of women apart from their appearance. They exposed the companionate ideal as a farce, in reality not practicable in nineteenth-century society.

The new ideal, the idea of companionate marriage, limited parents' influence on their children's choice of spouse so that the choice lay now largely with young men. Unfortunately, young men and women were confined in getting to know each other by social conventions, their social interaction extremely restrained. Thus according to nineteenth-century authors, the companionate ideal was a charade, it simply did not work, as young men were not able to get to know the opposite gender well enough to determine whether or not they were compatible. Unable to get to know a young woman's character and her personality, they distinguished potential brides by appearance only. Hence female beauty gained importance in the marriage market.

Because marriage was evidently the only option open to women, the one vocation they were trained for, these shifting marriage values had enormous influence on women's lives. Their fate was irrevocably intertwined with it. This thesis shows how detrimental it was for women to plan their lives around marriage, to remain dependent on men, and to define who they were through their relationship with them. This dependence caused them to fret more about their looks than about the substance of their own character. Exterior aspects took precedence over mind and soul.

As demonstrated, there was a constant progress of women's detachment from men as the center of their lives. What this thesis implies and what needs to be explored further is women's increasing detachment from men through the nineteenth century, a detachment which in actuality makes the companionate ideal more possible. Disconnecting their lives and fate from men liberates women by removing them from the drawing-room restrictions, limits their being defined by their looks. At the beginning of the century women settled for less because married life was preferable to life as an old maid unless one had enough money to live in dignity as a spinster. The pressure to marry made the drawing room, social gatherings, and the display of appearance in the most becoming manner, clad in the most flattering attire, crucial. Women became slaves to fashion in order to become a wife and mother. Freed from the pressure to marry they were able to focus on their own progress and happiness.

Solitary life became a widely discussed subject of concern when people like Harriet Martineau and Frances Power Cobbe pointed out that it was delusional to think that every woman had the chance to get married, or was protected financially by a father or brother. To sustain themselves without male protection women had to move into the

professional life. Though a woman entering professional life had to give up her social standing, it also gave her the opportunity to create her own life. At the price of social exile, she could afford to maintain herself, and move out of the drawing room, which consequently liberated her from the pressure on feminine appearance. The new disposition to choose the single life opened up new perspectives which entailed positive consequences for the future of women.

One of the consequences was the rising importance of education, another area that could be explored in its connections to ugly or plain women. Women entering the professional world needed better schooling. The consequent push for further access to higher education opened up further opportunities. Better yet it made women more equal partners with men. Because they were more independent financially and emotionally that equalization made them better potential partners in a companionate marriage.

Cobbe was convinced that the key to more companionate marriages, and society's avoiding masses of superfluous women, was to allow women to live independently:

Instead of leaving single women as helpless as possible, and their labour as ill rewarded—instead of dinning into their ears from childhood that marriage is their one vocation and concern in life, and securing afterwards if they miss it that they shall find no other vocation or concern;—instead of all this, we shall act exactly on the reverse principle. We shall make single life so free and happy that they shall have not one temptation to change it save the only temptation which *ought* to determine them—namely, love. [...] we shall endeavour to give her such independence of all interested considerations that she may make it a choice, not indeed 'cold

and philosophic,' but warm from the heart, and guided by heart and conscience only. ("What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids" 61-62)

Nineteenth-century novelists promoted a similarly practical, an actual companionate ideal. When women are allowed to become whole as a person, they are able to be equal partners, ready for companionate love. This gives plain women opportunity to come to terms with what life has to offer them, to overcome their feelings of physical inferiority. Seeing their lives separately from their relationship with men allows them to build companionate relationships.

Patterns of marriageable young women lacking beauty such as the second-choice woman and the disinclined voyeur are only a small selection of types of plain women in literature. These have many sisters and subcategories which need to be explored. And even the types we have explored are used so extensively in nineteenth-century literature, they appear in almost every novel, and could be looked at more broadly. Many other authors apart from the five discussed here took it upon themselves to ponder the fate of plain and ugly women, choosing creative ways to introduce those less attractive females to their audience. Discarding sentimental tropes, they made it possible for their audience to sympathize with the fate of plainer women and to appreciate aspects in women apart from their appearance.

These patterns could be explored in other texts than the six novels I discussed in this thesis. One could include Frances Burney, whose novel *Camilla* features an especially interesting plain woman, Eugenia. Jane Austen alone has second-choice women in every single one of her novels, and quite a few disinclined voyeurs. Gaskell's *North and South* has Margaret Hale, who is described as both plain and as beautiful as a

queen—a paradox which would be interesting to analyze. Two of the most important novelists of the nineteenth century have been left out in this project: George Eliot and Charles Dickens. Eliot's *Middlemarch* alone offers its readers four different marriageable women. It would be interesting to explore what options they consider, and how they choose maritally, especially focusing on plain Mary Garth, one of Eliot's most appealing characters. *Daniel Deronda*, another Eliot novel, offers two competing women, Mirah and Gwendolen, as a case study for analyzing the ill effects beauty can have on a woman's character. Dickens has several second-choice women and disinclined voyeurs, for instance Agnes in *David Copperfield* and Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. Furthermore there are lesser known authors creating plain heroines, such as Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, who wrote *Olive*, the tale of a physically deformed female character whose analysis would lead into disability studies.

In a different direction from disability studies, this project could be further expanded into the notion of female friendship in the nineteenth century, juxtaposed with female competition. It would also be interesting to look at beauty as reinforcing artificiality—the coming out of a girl as a performance to be critiqued by society. It might also be possible to look solely at the mirror imagery and women facing the mirror asking the same question Snow White's stepmother asked hers. Or what about the theme of appearances in fairy tales in general, as in *Beauty and the Beast*, which was so popular during the nineteenth century? Further investigation could include plain men and how they are exposed or effected by beauty standards. Women's fear of being physically inferior, of being plain, should be explored more extensively, as it still influences our culture today. Women are still trapped with by the current beauty standard, and not until

they realize its influence in their lives can they liberate themselves and become whole, able, as Virginia Woolf would say, to tell the story of their bodies.

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