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A Woman's Place: Historicizing the Persistence of the Gender Gap

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This thesis examines the distinction created between men and women in regards to their use of power in England through the Medieval (476-1492) and the Victorian periods (1837-1901). While women have displayed power through the ages, the nature of that power has traditionally been behind the scenes and relegated to the domestic sphere. As a result conceptions of femininity and masculinity confined women to a role not compatible with modern ideas of power and leadership. Present-day individuals are indoctrinated into this gender discourse through characterization of women in literature and gendered laws, which have been passed down since the Middle Ages. Due to England's status as an imperial power in the Victorian era, their conceptions of gender identity have continued to influence the entire western world and beyond into the present day.

A Liability for Women: Lingering Traditional Gender Roles

In 2020, the United States will celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. While women have made significant gains within those hundred years, the world still struggles with gender-based discrimination. So why does this discrimination persist? In order to answer this question, it is important to examine the formation of gender identity in medieval England and the Victorian Period to better understand the persistence of the gender gap in the western world today. In doing so, the distinctions created between men and women in regards to their use of power become clear, and prove that, despite drastically different historiographies, the Middle Ages and Victorian Era imply a continuity of women's exercise of power, rather than any sharp departure that can be seen by analyzing the eras in isolation from each other. Women's power, however, has generally taken a different form than men's, and as a result, it typically goes unnoticed – or even feared – by society. This ignorance and fear of women's power has helped to sustain the gender gap through centuries of history.

For the purposes of this thesis, power will be defined as either active or passive. Active power will encompass economic and political participation within the public sphere, whereas passive power will include women's ability to influence and manipulate the men in their lives privately. Despite pinpricks in history when women have exercised enormous active power, until the 20th century women were frequently confined to wielding passive power. In showing that passive power could be just as effective as a more traditionally recognized form of power it becomes clear that women have succeeded in exercising great influence on the public in some instances of history.

Despite this influence, however, women's use of passive power has often not been recognized by society as power at all. As a result, their status has remained relatively unchanged in relation to men who exercise a socially recognized – and respected – form of power.

When discussing medieval English women's power, it is generally accepted that they still had a relative degree of autonomy and authority in their lives, whereas Victorian English women are seen as having severe limitations placed on them. Even when wielded publicly, power was seen as a private affair. Despite this general consensus, there is some disagreement about exactly how powerful medieval English women were. Early gender histories of the period, such as Barbara Hanawalt's *The Ties That Bound*, illustrated a "Golden Age" for lower-class, medieval women in which marriages were partnerships, and men and women participated in community affairs on an equal footing; however, in more recent years, it has been suggested that women of all classes struggled to wield any legitimate authority – a theory touted by historian Sandy Bardsley, in her monograph, *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages*. Bardsley defines authority as a woman's ability to participate in the public sphere without need of a man's influence or aid. Women in the Middle Ages, despite having power, still needed a man's backing, and if they were granted true authority, it was often for only a short period of time. Along the same lines, Helen Jewell most effectively describes the trend in medieval English women's power by emphasizing its rise and fall based on a myriad of different factors, including region, class, and economy.¹ When taken as a whole, the historiography shows

¹Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 154-155; Sandy Bardsley, *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007), 193-194; Helen Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 19-23.

evidence that medieval English women experienced oppression at the hands of men, but also acted as powerful agents in their own affairs.

Wealthy women often had a better education and ample opportunity to run the household or even influence their husbands involved in politics; however, lower-class women were not as bound by gender roles and expectations. They were not usually trying to maintain a particular status in society.² Additionally, the shortage of men and the unstable economy which characterized medieval England due to disease and war made it easier for women of all classes to display more active forms of power. Many women became heiresses and widows, and working-class women often worked alongside their husbands in order to supplement income. In view of that, it became more common to see women participating in the political or economic sphere. So while historians have postulated that the medieval period was a golden age for women, it seems more accurate to say it was simply a time when women's active power flourished and was recognized by men. Women had already been powerful through their influence within the private sphere long before this supposed golden age, and they would be so long after, but in this particular period their power is publicly viewed, recorded, and passed down through primary sources.

Pockets of medieval England could certainly have been considered golden for a small number of women; however, historians must be vigilant in their understanding that this does not constitute a Golden Age for all medieval English women, nor is a periodic increase in women's power unusual in the study of gender history. There have been countless "golden ages" for women throughout history, very few of which have resulted

²Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, 19-23.

in permanent changes in the political, economic, and social power of a large majority of women.³

Illustrative of this concept is the considerable drop in women's power as political and economic stability was regained in England after the end of the War of the Roses and as outbreaks of the plague became less frequent. Allowances of power granted women out of necessity were curtailed, and as a result historians have claimed that instead of a golden age for women, Victorian England was characterized by restraints against them and an obsession with female virtue. Historians, such as Heidi Hartmann and Katrina Honeyman, emphasize how the social and cultural changes inspired by the Industrial Revolution created separate spheres for men and women. Fearing loss of economic opportunity to women who worked at cheaper rates, men began to push women out of the labor force. Additionally, new studies supposedly grounded in science and biology suggested women's frailty and incapacity in large part due to their reproductive organs.⁴

As a result, women were expected to remain within the home, the private sphere, while men interacted in the economic and political world, or the public sphere. Women's power fell back on its passive roots and influence over husbands and sons was how women participated publicly. This influence, however, was hardly trivial. Since women remained in the home, they were less prone to the corrupting nature of the outside world, and as they were tasked with raising the next generation of men, they could have

³Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, 19-23.

⁴Heidi I. Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," *Capital & Class* 3, no. 2 (July 1979): 11; Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialization in England, 1700-1870* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 57-60; Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Women and Leadership in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 71.

enormous influence. Indeed, historians do not refute women's power in the Victorian Era, but it took a decidedly different form from the power wielded in the Middle Ages.

By the end of the 19th century, women began to take advantage of their characterization as the empathetic, moral caretakers of the world. They extended this role into the public sphere, taking on labor reform, especially that in regards to women and children, and they began to refute the practice of coverture that had continued since the Middle Ages. The Women's Protective and Provident League was formed, which promoted women's trade unionism and in 1888, the Bryant and May's matchstick girls led a strike to protest poor working conditions.⁵ According to Karl Ittmann, it was not until the 1890s that this unionization coupled with the rise of the Independent Labour Party truly gave women the opportunity for active public participation. Even still, he claims that "the dominance of men at the top of both political and trade union groups limited women to a secondary role."⁶ His argument, however, that Victorian women still exercised some modicum of active power, even if that power was veiled as pertaining to women's duties within the private sphere, is supported by historians such as Mary Lyndon Shanley and Philippa Levine.⁷

In comparison with the Middle Ages, it is much rarer to see actively powerful women in the Victorian Era. Instead, their sphere of influence gravitates around the home and extends into active participation in economics and politics only when a woman's morality is needed to stem the corrupting force of industrialization. By the 19th

⁵Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2009), 14.

⁶Karl Ittmann, *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 137.

⁷Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 28, 189; Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1990), 82.

century, according to Thomas Laqueur, women and men had taken on definitively complementary roles. Sarah Stickney Ellis argued that women were “independent beings who [wielded] potentially enormous power in [their] own sphere,” but in doing so, she implied that “women’s politics must be the politics of morality...staking out a public arena of action grounded in the virtues of the female private sphere.”⁸ In this way, women’s active power became acceptable and easily controllable within Victorian society. Their passive power was the less predictable of the two forms.

Michel Foucault would claim that this categorization of women and women’s power is due to a discursive formation regarding sex. Foucault outlines a knowledge/power dynamic that goes hand in hand with Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. He describes how those in power are able to control the creation of knowledge or truth. The powerful, in their conversations and their writing, essentially created a binary relationship between the sexes in which men and women played complementary roles. Instead of people viewing this as a societal construct, it became seen as natural and scientific. As a result of controlling truth itself, these people necessarily reinforced their own power.⁹

Foucault and Gramsci do not see power as repressive though, believing it to be productive instead. Foucault postulates that power is omnipresent and constantly in motion. The truth created by those with a traditional position of power must be accepted and proliferated by the many despite the fact that the very truth they disperse might only

⁸Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 204-205.

⁹Jennifer J. Mease, “Postmodern/Poststructural Approaches,” *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication* (2016), 8.

benefit a few and might be restrictive to the very people that accept it.¹⁰ The public polices actions and thoughts according to the dominant discourse and the “organizational interests become manifest in individual behaviors.”¹¹ Individuals may adopt the discourse because in some ways it benefits them, despite the restrictions it also places on them. For women, the discourse of sex gave them a complementary role to men’s, and thus one that was described as absolutely essential to the functioning of society, regardless of the fact that it also made it difficult for them to exercise political and economic power. Even open resistance to the accepted discourse, according to Foucault and Judith Butler, essentially reaffirms the discourse as natural or dominant. Not only does going against the norm imply that the norm itself exists and is natural, but in many ways women have co-opted the discourse in order to pronounce their power.¹²

Since discourse plays such a significant role in the binary creation of sex and its effects, the primary source material for this thesis will rely heavily on literature and law. It is spoken and written communication that enables discursive formation, and it is clear through the analysis of contemporary texts, law codes, and legal proceedings that certain expectations became the norm for both men and women and were carried down through the precedent set by these texts.

According to Edward Said, discourse relied heavily on the “textual attitude” created by literature. He believed that if an individual read a text and found the material within it to be true, they would begin to rely on that text and its author as an authority.

¹⁰Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 94-96; Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *An Anthology of Western Marxism: From Lukacs and Gramsci to Socialist-Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 123.

¹¹Mease, “Postmodern/Poststructural Approaches,” 15.

¹²Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 176; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, 101.

Subsequent works by that author would also be read as truth, regardless of their content or focus, and as a result, academics, institutions, and government could be reinforced purely through the texts passed down from one reader to the next.¹³ While Said focuses largely on the discourse of Orientalism, Thomas Laqueur attributes this methodology to sex in his monograph *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, showing precisely how productive the written word could be in reinforcing and reshaping the expectations for each sex, whether that word was fictional or not.¹⁴

While it is this textual attitude which primarily informs the pages that follow, it is important to remember that a discourse is also sustained through performance. It is thought that most indicators of identity are performative, including sexuality and gender. A woman will perform a role based on what she thinks is required of her as a woman, and that very performance will reaffirm what comprises the definition of a woman or of femininity. A text may imply that women should remain in the home and place their husbands' needs above their own, but women must choose to perform this conception of women for it to proliferate. Again, as with Foucault, a performance can resist what the societal expectations for women are; however, that resistance tends to reinforce the concept that society's definition of women is the norm and this particular performance is outside of that.¹⁵ In other words, it helps to strengthen the discourse.

As described above, historians now recognize that the Middle Ages was not necessarily a unique Golden Age for women; however, in her monograph, *History Matters*, Judith M. Bennett argues that people have replaced this nostalgia with the presentist idea that the Golden Age for women is now. Yet, Bennett does not believe that

¹³Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 92-94.

¹⁴Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 17.

¹⁵Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 176-180.

women's rights follow a linear progression; a conclusion that becomes obvious when using Bennett's proposed "history-as-temporal-comparison" methodology in this thesis.¹⁶ Bennett hopes that this approach will prove that – at least in regards to gender studies – our era is most likely not unique or earth shattering.¹⁷

While it is true that huge strides in equality between the sexes have been made, there is still an incredible chasm to close. It has been argued that since women entered the scene as "wage earners" in the Middle Ages, there has been much more continuity, as opposed to transformation, for women's rights up to the present day. To put this in perspective, medieval women and modern-day women have both made on average only three-quarters of a man's wages, despite hundreds of years of supposed progress;¹⁸ therefore, it seems more likely that "the *forms* of patriarchal power might have changed more than its *degree*."¹⁹

Bennett's "patriarchal equilibrium" defines the idea that western social structures and institutions have been built on a system which inherently favors men who specifically conform to the accepted definition of masculinity. Though this system is harmful in many ways to women, and even some men, the public overwhelmingly supports it and each new generation is raised under its tenets.²⁰ Modern sexism, for instance, is much less obviously visible but can be seen in characterizations of working women as bossy, whereas men are described as assertive. It can be seen in expectations for women to both act as the primary caregivers of children while also holding a full-time

¹⁶Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 50.

¹⁷*Ibid*, 43.

¹⁸*Ibid*, 38-39, 43, 62.

¹⁹*Ibid*, 63.

²⁰*Ibid*, 55-56.

job, and it can be seen in women's own tendency to downplay their sacrifices for their families. While the argument that patriarchal power still exists in different forms is daunting in that it implies a near impossibility to break modern gender inequalities, it is no less deniable.

As a result, since the early 2000s, a new "fourth wave" feminism has arisen, and many fourth wave feminists work to solve the inequalities as well as prejudices and stereotypes which hinder women in positions of authority and those who attempt to have both a career and a family.²¹ The continuous insistence on the working world as the purview of men has kept the gender gap consistent, despite gains for women; thus, in order to not confuse gains for women as a closing of the gap, gender roles need to be analyzed across history, rather than confining them to any particular period.

This approach draws on Daniel Lord Smail's conception of Deep Time. There have periodically been major gains for women, one of which can be seen in the Middle Ages; however, according to Smail, these gains are often short-lived.²² When women's exercise of power is observed across a longer period of time, it becomes clear that government policies often grant women power in times of need and push them out when that need disappears.²³ In regards to women's rights, concessions granted to women in times of societal need – for instance, job and educational opportunities which opened to women during the manpower shortage of World War I – were often curtailed when that need disappeared. Jean Lipman-Blumen, an expert on modern social roles, believes that

²¹Nannerl O. Keohane, "A Fourth Wave?" *The Wilson Quarterly* 10, no. 5 (Winter 1986), 157.

²²Daniel Lord Smail, "Beyond the Longue Duree: Human History in Deep Time," *Perspectives on History* (December 2012), <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2012/the-future-of-the-discipline/beyond-the-longue-duree-human-history-in-deep-time> (accessed February 4, 2018).

²³Mary Lyndon Shanley, "Suffrage, Protective Labor Legislation, and Married Women's Property Laws in England," *Signs* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1986), 71.

“during times of stability, the stratification system acts as a social grid, keeping everyone in appropriate social, economic, and political niches,” although she claims this does not deny the importance of women’s power wielded through influence and manipulation. On the other hand, she claims that “crisis periods are renowned for the relative ease with which massive social changes occur.”²⁴ It is undeniable, that women’s participation in the workforce and in politics increased within the 20th century; however, it is more difficult to argue that women’s power in comparison with men’s increased as well. Once men returned from the warfront, they regained their precedence in the public sphere, so while women’s influence perhaps increased incrementally, men’s did as well sustaining the social gap between them.

Judith Butler, a gender theorist and philosopher, emphasizes that “gender intersects with race, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities,” and as a result, it would be impossible to assert that all women are always subject to all men.²⁵ Indeed, Harriet Taylor Mill came to the same conclusion stating that the only thing all women shared “was not any natural or biological or even historical commonality, but rather the condition of their legal, social, and economic subjugation.”²⁶ Regardless of the intersectionalities at play, “in the hierarchy of patriarchy, all men, whatever their rank...are bought off by being able to control *at least some* women [emphasis added].”²⁷ In the social hierarchy of Victorian England, not all women fell below all men; however, men always wielded control over some women.

This paper will work to keep this intersectionality in mind, focusing on the different

²⁴Jean Lipman-Blumen, *Gender Roles and Power* (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), 185.

²⁵Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6.

²⁶Lydia Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2014), xviii-xviii.

²⁷Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” 11.

experiences of English women across classes, regions, and marital statuses in hopes of showing the different constraints on their power and the acceptable ways in which they were allowed to wield it.

Regardless of the myriad intersectionalities and thus definitions of a woman, it is through discourse, and resistance which occurs within the very discourse it hopes to dispel, that conceptions and expectations of what a woman should be have been created. Consequently, while this discourse adapts and shifts as time progresses, it has also been accepted as truth – and thus as natural – by society. This discourse on sex is why the gender gap persists despite progress for women. The trend regarding women and power seems to hold continuously throughout the ages. While women’s use of active power might ebb and flow based on society’s needs, they are always exercising significant amounts of passive power and impacting society as a result. Unfortunately, because the discourse on gender has defined “women’s work as secondary to men’s” and denigrated “female characteristics/social need” in favor of “male characteristics/capitalist values,” women’s participation within the public sphere still causes discomfort in society and other forms of women’s power are not actually recognized as such at all.²⁸ This discomfort caused when women are able to exercise traditionally recognized forms of power is typically remedied by defining that woman as masculine and subversive to her sex.

The conceptualization of women and men as fundamentally different creatures who occupy different roles and spheres in society continues on to influence the 20th century and even carries into the 21st as well. Psychologists Lorraine Radtke and Henderikus Stam both believe that the supposedly natural difference associated with men

²⁸Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, 11.

and women “was often equated with women’s subordination or inadequacy.”²⁹ It was John Stuart Mill, however, who said “what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing.”³⁰ Women are expected to conform to the socially constructed definition of feminine; therefore, “women of all ages...are allegedly scripted to be ‘good women’, and that they have in compliance, smothered their passions, appetites and outrage.”³¹ It has been consistently proven that women do not and will not confine themselves to the Victorian definition of a good woman, and in the modern day their refusal to conform often goes unhindered; however, when their actions begin to threaten patriarchal order, the definitions of masculinity and femininity are applied. Women in medieval and Victorian England – and even in the modern western world – are often described as not feminine enough or even perhaps too masculine, when their actions are threatening to the established societal order.³² In this manner their power is undermined.

Not only is power undermined, but it can be argued that women’s contributions themselves are not thought of as translatable into power according to societal expectations. According to Lipman-Blumen, “women’s rewards are measured in private coinage...currencies with surprisingly little economic leverage or public power,” but even so, “women do in fact use their own resources in ways that shape society,” regardless of whether or not society is able to recognize them.³³ Unfortunately, the separation of the sexes did as much to heighten fear of women’s power as it did to curb it.

²⁹Lorraine H. Radtke and Henderikus J. Stam, eds. *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 5.

³⁰John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of the Rights of Women* (Indianapolis; Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1988), 22.

³¹Radtke and Stam, *Power/Gender*, 221.

³²Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 86.

³³Lipman-Blumen, *Gender Roles and Power*, 24-25.

Lipman-Blumen claims that “if women are cautioned to control their tongues, to leash their leadership, to remain within the domestic sphere, manipulation and indirection are their only alternatives.”³⁴ This reliance on manipulation mixed with “the careful division between female activities and male activities...did much to heighten...this apprehension of women as mysterious and deceptive objects,” in the words of Foucault.³⁵ As a result, women are both forced into using manipulation as a means of power and condemned for it in what Lipman-Blumen refers to as “classical ‘blame the victim’ tradition.”³⁶ This inconvenience of men not understanding women and their abilities, and thus fearing them, continues well into the 20th century; thus the discourse of “complementary and separate roles” has hindered society’s attempts to close the gender gap to this day, and it is even co-opted by many women as a means of feminism³⁷ – as Foucault would say, it is an excellent example of the resistance working within and reinforcing the discourse itself.

These discourses of gender and power which have been passed down, reformed, and reinforced through history have contributed to the ongoing struggle for true equality between the sexes in the present. According to Foucault, the problem cannot be solved by changing people’s beliefs or consciousnesses. Instead, the very “political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth” must be changed.³⁸ Patriarchal society has created “a reality of power for privileged people which delimits other people’s human freedoms,” and until that regime of truth and reality of power is altered, the gender gap

³⁴Lipman-Blumen, *Gender Roles and Power*, 91.

³⁵Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 160.

³⁶Lipman-Blumen, *Gender Roles and Power*, 91.

³⁷James M. Lindgren, *Preserving the Old Dominion: Historic Preservation and Virginia Traditionalism* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 69-70.

³⁸Radtke and Stam, *Power/Gender*, 53.

that has characterized western society since the Middle Ages will continue to persist.³⁹ The argument that this discourse has continuously confined women to a lesser status despite consistent displays of power and influence will be outlined in the following chapters.

The first chapter will provide a case study for women in medieval England, showing how the turmoil of the period allowed women's active power to grow. The second chapter will provide another case study, this time for women in Victorian England, showing the myriad ways in which society allowed women's skill with passive power to grow. Both chapters will show how power, regardless of its form, was wielded masterfully by women across the ages. They will also examine how the literature and law of the era was used to, perhaps subconsciously, proliferate acceptable roles and condemn certain characteristics for women. Even what was thought to be progressive, feminist literature was often still somehow reinforcing the patriarchal discourse. Finally, the last chapter will examine how the portrayal of women passed down in literature and law proceedings might have helped to contribute to the characterization of women and women's displays of power, and how this could have influenced and continue to influence the gender climate currently resisted by fourth-wave feminism.

³⁹Radtke and Stam, *Power/Gender*, 55.

A Shortage of Men: Women's Forays in Active Power

As illustrated in the previous section, the Middle Ages was seen as something of a Golden Age for women according to some historians. Indeed, the participation of women in the political and economic systems of medieval England was fairly extensive compared to later periods; however, when observed across time, there is an obvious pattern seen in the ability of women to wield power. It rises and falls in accordance with society's needs. In times of great instability and turmoil, women are often granted incredible power, meaning that these eras of increased female participation or power might be seen by some as "golden ages." The medieval period hardly counts as the only or the greatest.

Though there are times in history when women have exercised great power, their ability to do so is usually not protected by law; thus, when their active power begins to threaten men's economic or political potential, it is often stripped from them. Still, they continue to employ a considerable amount of passive power. This power of influence and manipulation, however, is rarely recognized by society as powerful. Medieval England provides an example of a time when women were able to actively wield power in the public sphere due to men's preoccupation with war; thus, the Middle Ages is seen as a golden age for women, because it is one of the odd times in history when women's contributions are both recognizable and recorded by men.

The predominant medieval concept of women was that they were inferior to men, and as a result, women were frequently not thought of as individuals in their own right, either in practice or in theory. In the pages that follow, women's methods of wielding power in the Middle Ages will be examined through contemporary literature and law

proceedings because, according to Eileen Power, “the medieval theory about women [was] bequeathed as a legacy to future generations and enshrined alike in law and literature...long after the forces behind it had ceased to be important and when the conditions which had accounted for it no longer existed.”⁴⁰ Perhaps in the Middle Ages there had been a justification to keep women out of leadership positions, namely in politics and economics, because there were pseudo-scientific studies which claimed their inferiority, and they received unequal access to education and training; however, those barriers were already beginning to slip in the Victorian Era. Women began receiving better access to education, and in the present day, those conditions simply do not exist. Yet, women still find it difficult to obtain equal footing with men, because they are inundated with conservative images and stereotypical characterizations of women as role models.

While the medieval period is often viewed as encompassing the years 476 to 1492, this particular study will focus primarily on the years after the Magna Carta in 1215 and will take an in-depth look at the instability caused in England due to war and the recurring outbreaks of the plague throughout the 14th and 15th centuries. It is clear that this instability due to war and illness raised women to new heights within the public community. Yet while it became almost necessary for men to accept women’s active power, those women who were powerful were frequently characterized as masculine or as a threat, specifically to the social order and the accepted discourse on gender, which outlined the role women were expected to play in society. When women’s power was accepted or embraced in the Middle Ages, it was seen as a decidedly male action.

⁴⁰Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*. Ed. M.M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 9.

Women were not acting naturally based on the characteristics of their sex, but subverting what it meant to be a woman.

In order to understand the various forms of English women's power in the Middle Ages, one must first have a basic knowledge of the legal status of women and the gendered property laws of England. English women were considered either *femme sole* or *femme covert*. *Femme sole* encompassed a number of what were known as singlewomen in medieval terms, which included never married women of adult age and widows among others. If a woman had *femme sole* status, she controlled her own property and her legal status was subordinate to no man's. *Femme covert*, on the other hand, encompassed married women whose legal status as a result was subordinate to her husband. Man and wife were seen as one legal entity under the control of the male partner; thus, married women had very few legal rights. The overwhelming majority of adult women fell under the category of *femme covert* and in many cases this severely limited the form married women's power could take in the Middle Ages. Legal status of their property reverted to the control of their husband, and women could not prosecute their husbands for perceived wrongdoing. In unwanted or forced marriages this posed a particular problem as women's property was mismanaged and squandered. Additionally, married women were prevented from creating wills without the permission of their husbands and were limited in passing on their wealth to other women. As a result of these restrictions, women's economic – and political power – suffered.⁴¹

⁴¹Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 344-345; Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 82-83.

Nevertheless, the war and disease which characterized the age made singlewomen a much more common sight and one which society was forced to accept and accommodate. This is exemplified in the Magna Carta which sets the stage for the growth in singlewomen's power in the Middle Ages. The Magna Carta was written by English barons and presented to King John to sign in the hopes of remedying years of political unrest. King John, and his predecessor Henry II, had experienced several crushing military defeats, were in severe debt, and were known to be cruel and greedy. After an attempt on King John's life in 1212, the English barons took advantage of the vulnerability of the crown and presented him with the charter in the hopes of curtailing the power of his rule in their favor. Their motivations were not altruistic, and they did not intentionally wish to increase women's power; however, several clauses were written into the document that specifically protected the wives, daughters, and sisters who might become wealthy widows during their lifetimes.⁴²

Prior to the Magna Carta, kings were known to take advantage of the vulnerability of widows. English kings were authorized to marry these women off for revenue or as a reward for loyal service. Wealthy widows who wished to stay single were also known to essentially bribe the king in order to remain so. Clauses 7 and 8 of the 1215 Magna Carta specified that a widow should receive her inheritance at the death of her husband without any interference. They also protected women from forced remarriage, so long as she first asked consent if she chose a partner herself. While the actions of the English barons were not meant for the benefit of their female relatives, but rather for the benefit of maintaining existing family wealth, these clauses in the Magna Carta indirectly enabled

⁴²Janet S. Loengard, "Introduction," *Magna Carta and the England of King John*, ed. Janet S. Loengard (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2010), 1-4.

the growth of women's legal protection.⁴³ Indeed, according to A.E. Dick Howard, the Magna Carta unintentionally laid the foundation on which arguments for individual rights were made by codifying the protections for the English barons into law. Various interpretations of the charter over the centuries would protect individual rights, including habeas corpus and free speech, and that protection would be extended to not only women, but merchants and the peasantry as well.⁴⁴

The Magna Carta, however, did not solve all problems of instability. In the 14th century, England entered into the Hundred Years' War with France, an event that threw the nation into political turmoil and affected the status of women. First of all, men were called up to fight and died in the war, leaving behind widows and daughters, singlewomen, as heiresses. Additionally, one of the vital causes of the Hundred Years' War was essentially a question over succession to the French throne – a question that had everything to do with women. Both the English Plantagenet and the French Valois families had a claim to the French throne when King Charles IV died without a direct male heir. His closest male relative was his sister's English son, Edward III of the Plantagenet line; however, according to French law a woman could not transmit the right to the throne. As a result, the throne was passed to Charles IV's cousin, Philip VI of the Valois family, through the male line.⁴⁵

⁴³Loengard, "What Did Magna Carta Mean to Widows," 134-135; R. Trevor Davis, *Documents Illustrating the History of Civilization in Medieval England (1066-1500)* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1969), 41-42.

⁴⁴A.E. Dick Howard, "Magna Carta Celebrates its 750th Year," *American Bar Association Journal* 51, no. 6 (June 1965), 529.

⁴⁵David Green, *The Hundred Years War: A People's History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 182; G. Templeman, "Edward III and the Beginnings of the Hundred Years War," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 2 (1952): 74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3678784> (accessed Mar 24, 2018).

The disagreement over women's power and rights of inheritance between the two nations threw Europe into a war that would persist on and off for over a hundred years. It is interesting to note that women's ability to pass divine right onto their sons was something that the English upheld, proving that English women had at least some measure of power; however, at this time, women had yet to inherit the English throne. Their political power did not yet extend to the crown even though, in some ways, it can be said that they were granted more than their French counterparts.

About a decade after the beginning of the Hundred Years' War, England's population was further devastated by an outbreak of the plague in 1347. At least a third of the population died, and Mary F. Hollingsworth and T.H. Hollingsworth have argued that men died at a higher rate than women. While the scarce creation and survival of death and burial records from the 14th century makes a demographic study of the plague difficult, there is evidence "that burials of adult males outnumbered those of the females during the plagues."⁴⁶

The third instance of instability and turmoil that characterized the medieval period was the War of the Roses, which broke out in 1455, merely two years after the end of the Hundred Years' War. The War of the Roses consisted of several civil wars fought for control of the English throne spurred on by two rival lines of the House of Plantagenet: The Yorks and the Lancasters. With instability rife from the Hundred Years' War and an incompetent Lancaster King, Henry VI, England was thrown into another war of succession – another war in which women played an important role. According to historian Sarah Gristwood, "the business of [women's] lives was power" with the men in

⁴⁶Mary F. Hollingsworth and T.H. Hollingsworth, "Plague Mortality Rates by Age and Sex in the Parish of St. Botolph's without Bishopsgate, London, 1603," *Population Studies* 25, no. 1 (Mar 1971): 135, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2172754> (accessed Mar 24, 2018).

their lives serving as the currency.⁴⁷ Many upper-class women had influence in the eventual outcome of the war, and others became heiresses or wealthy widows when their fathers, brothers, and husbands were felled.⁴⁸

While some heiresses found it prudent to remarry in a male-dominated world, according to historian David Green, there were plenty of examples of powerful, politically-motivated but single women who took advantage of new chances to travel, “a growing range of professions, increased...value of their labor, and...the chance to invest in land and property.”⁴⁹ The *femme sole*, made numerous by war and disease, were able to wield extensive active, or public, power both economically and politically. In the Parliamentary Petitions of the mid-15th century, a group of such women is mentioned alongside English and Welsh craftsmen who petitioned the king to prevent merchants from importing foreign goods, which were putting native peoples out of business. Prior to this period, most guilds did not allow women’s membership, making it significant that this petition specifically names both craftsmen and women. Working-class women had visibly entered into professions that might have been closed to them previously, and they were involved in the political environment of the time, demanding the same protection as their male peers.⁵⁰

The turmoil of the medieval period even opened up some political opportunities for *femme covert*. With the men of the household off to war, women temporarily assumed positions as head of the household, allowing them to petition the court on their own behalf and giving them an entry into political participation. This instance of the wife

⁴⁷Sarah Gristwood, *Blood Sisters: The Women Behind the Wars of the Roses* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), xxiii.

⁴⁸*Ibid*, xxiv.

⁴⁹Green, *The Hundred Years War*, 179-181.

⁵⁰Parliamentary Petitions, SC 8/29/1412, The National Archives, Kew.

becoming head of household can be seen several times throughout the 14th century. In one example, the case of the Poor Women v. The Sheriff of Northamptonshire, several wives petitioned the courts to let their husbands, imprisoned in Northampton castle, out on bail.⁵¹ While it is unclear exactly why their husbands had been imprisoned, the act of petitioning the court raises these women up as powerful figures within medieval society. It is likely, due to the emphasis on the social status of these women, that they needed their husbands released in order to sustain themselves and their families. Without their husbands' earning potential, they had lost economic power; however, without his physical presence, they had gained political power.

A petition by the women of London in the mid-14th century provides another example. Again these women petitioned the court on their own behalf, asking for the money owed to them by King Edward III who had taken their goods without payment and who had yet to pay their husbands for their military service.⁵² It is possible that these women were widows or that their husbands were still in service to the king; therefore, they had no male to stand on their behalf. Again they became head of household and took it upon themselves to provide for their families. In both instances above, these petitions were accepted by Parliament, implying that their utilization of this active form of power did not receive significant backlash.

Medieval English women did not only participate actively in politics, but in economics as well. In lower-class families, it had always been necessary for both men and women to work in order to support the family; however, the labor shortage after the

⁵¹Poor Women v. The Sheriff of Northamptonshire, C 1/68/46, The National Archives, Kew.

⁵²Parliamentary Petitions, SC 8/120/5983. The National Archives, Kew.

plague pushed many women into the workforce.⁵³ It became fundamentally necessary to rely on women's work, but women had little access to the tools, supplies, and training needed in order to establish themselves in most skilled trades; therefore, they often ended up in domestic work or, in the case of married women, unskilled labor that could be completed within the home.⁵⁴

According to Mary Howell "because production was located within the patriarchal structure of the household, women could participate in skilled labor only within the limits prescribed by male power."⁵⁵ The craftswomen mentioned above were one of the few exceptions, but women found other ways to utilize their skills. According to the court records from 1385, Elizabeth Moring employed several apprentices under the ruse of teaching them embroidery when she was actually running a brothel out of her husband's home. She supposedly forced these women "to live a lewd life, and to consort with friars, chaplains, and all other such men as desired to have their company."⁵⁶ Based on the records, Moring was running a rather profitable business, and the record neglects to mention her husband's reaction over the trial, causing the reader to wonder whether he was complicit in her actions. It is possible her business was drawing in a significant income, which was supporting her family, and her husband might have been supportive as a result. It seems unlikely he did not know this was happening in his own home.

⁵³Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 196; John Hatcher, "Women's Work Reconsidered: Gender and Wage Differentiation in late Medieval England," *Past & Present* no. 173 (Nov 2001): 192, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600844> (accessed Dec 4, 2017).

⁵⁴P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 334-335.

⁵⁵Judith M. Bennett, et al, *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 21.

⁵⁶Emilie Amt, ed., *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 211-212.

Women also practiced midwifery, sometimes for an income or an exchange of services; however, this role as midwife also provided them with a relatively revered status within the community. There is evidence that women were among the members of barber-surgeon guilds in York and London, although it is possible they were widows. Still, a widow was sometimes permitted to continue her husband's trade after his death.⁵⁷ Indeed, most women were expected to know basic family medicine in order to treat other women; however, once they presumed to act as a surgeon or treat outside their home, their actions were prohibited.⁵⁸ Possibly as a result of the prestige and power it garnered women and the reluctance of people to consult university trained – male – doctors as a result, men became wary of midwifery. In the mid-15th century, a petition was raised to Parliament which demanded, “that no woman use the practyse of Fisyk [medicine] undre the same payne of long emprisonement” along with a forty pound fine.⁵⁹ This petition makes it obvious that an attempt was made to prevent women from practicing medicine, and so any woman appearing to do so was automatically condemned even in times of crisis. Additionally, midwifery became inextricably tied to witchcraft; thus, the political and economic role women were able to fill as midwives was gradually stripped from them as it became associated with illegality and immorality.⁶⁰

Another means of earning an income, adopted by both single and married women, was to brew ale. This profession – that of brewsters or women who brewed ale for profit – was initially something that could be done at home with little training. Women often

⁵⁷Power, *Medieval Women*, 60.

⁵⁸*Ibid*, 86.

⁵⁹Bennett, et al, *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, 54.

⁶⁰Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1983), 275.

brewed the ale for their families anyway, so making a little extra and selling it was something that could be worked into their everyday schedules.⁶¹

Additionally, the brewer's guild was one of the few that accepted them. Their membership is extraordinary in that even in trades which were considered the sole responsibility of women, female guilds were rarely formed, and their membership in other guilds was often restricted. Take for example the silk industry, which was run almost entirely by women, and a more refined class of women as well. These women petitioned the crown in their own interest and took apprentices; however, there was no silkwomen's guild. The creation of these female guilds "would have threatened the authority of men as husbands, as guild masters, and as civic governors," but in a time characterized almost solely by war and plague, an exception was made in the brewer's guild, just as women's labor had become strongly integrated into the economic system.⁶²

A demand for labor corresponded with the fall in population caused by the Black Death, and as a result, women were welcomed as economic players. Women's wages even increased to about 75 percent of that of men doing the same work during this period. Brewing, and women's participation in guilds was a key indicator of this. With the return of stability and a steadily growing male population, women were exceedingly pushed out of lucrative, skilled fields, including that of brewing. Instead of a cottage industry, brewing was transformed into a skilled, large-scale enterprise that required capital, managerial power, and status that women simply could not maintain in a stable England. According to Shahar, "in Bristol it was stated that the employment of hired female labour was responsible for the fact that many men in this trade [belt and strap makers] could not

⁶¹Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 26, 44-47.

⁶²Power, *Medieval Women*, 61; Bennett, et al, *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, 21.

find work,” and thus women were discouraged from working so that jobs could go to men.⁶³

Thus, women did not exercise active power completely unchecked. An ordinance in the Coventry Michaelmas Leet of 1492 – at the very end of the medieval period – emphasized the dislike of tapsters. The term tapster refers to medieval women who sold ale on behalf of those who brewed it. The Leet specifies that “no person within this city from henceforth keep, hold, receive, or favour any tapster, or woman of evil name, fame, or condition with whom any contact is inclined to be sinful, pertaining to lechery...”⁶⁴ The War of the Roses was settled in 1485, and while it would be several decades until stability was reached in England, the nation began a concerted effort to regain the patriarchal order upset by the turmoil of medieval England. In order to push women out of the increasingly profitable field, brewsters and tapsters began to be characterized as witches, adulterers, or simply impious women in the contemporary literature of the era. This is reflected in this particular law laid down in the Michaelmas Leet.⁶⁵

Indeed, in Judith M. Bennett’s article “Misogyny, Popular Culture, and Women’s Work,” she emphasizes the importance of women’s portrayal in contemporary literature and how it “complemented and reflected other social and economic changes” in the era.⁶⁶ The portrayal of women in the popular works of the Middle Ages proliferated and reinforced the stereotypes of the moral and immoral woman. In an effort to establish

⁶³Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 198.

⁶⁴Mary Dormer Harris, Ed., *The Coventry Leet Book: Or Mayor’s Register, Containing the Records of the City Court Leet or View of Frankpledge, A.D. 1420-1555, with Divers Other Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1913), 545.

⁶⁵Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, 75; Judith M. Bennett, “Misogyny, Popular Culture, and Women’s Work,” *History Workshop* 31 (Spring 1991): 173, 177-178, 182, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4289063> (accessed Nov 23, 2017).

⁶⁶Bennett, “Misogyny, Popular Culture, and Women’s Work,” 178.

male domination over the profession of brewing, brewsters were often attacked in poetry. Fourteenth-century English author William Langland, for instance, described the brewster as a cheat. His “Rose the Regrater” breaks all sorts of measures set to ensure standardization of brewing and selling ale. Instead Rose mixes several kinds of cheap ale together, hides her best ale for wealthier customers, charges more than proclamations allow, and sells her ale in unapproved measures. His “Betoun the Brewster” is known for her sexuality and tempting men. Langland thus characterized the brewster as immoral, promiscuous, and conniving, and as his popular poetry was widely read, he influenced the ideas of society.⁶⁷

The question arises of why men felt so threatened by tapsters and brewsters, or any working women, singlewomen especially. A reasonable answer might be that some of these women were self-sustaining, and their presence weakened the patriarchal order of medieval England. Men were supposed to be in charge of economic stability, but these women were managing on their own and occupying jobs that men could have filled. By labeling them as sinful in literature and codifying that into law, men were able to eradicate any potential clientele for these women, making it impossible for them to earn a living on their own and highlighting marriage – and thus *femme covert* – as the only potential alternative.

This can certainly be seen in the Michaelmas Leet’s ordinance which states “that no singlewoman being in good health and strong of body to work...take or keep from henceforth houses or rooms to themselves...but that they go into service.”⁶⁸ The ordinance also placed a 20 shilling fine on anyone who allowed a single woman to rent a

⁶⁷Bennett, “Misogyny, Popular Culture, and Women’s Work,” 171-172.

⁶⁸Harris, *The Coventry Leet Book*, 545.

room from them. This made it almost impossible for single women to live on their own. Instead, it encouraged them to enter into the service of someone, typically in domestic service to a man, who would then have jurisdiction over them. This emphasizes the concept that single, working – possibly autonomous – women were a threat to medieval English men, especially as the male population began to recover from the disease and war that had decimated it.⁶⁹

The turmoil of the age made it significantly easier for women to exercise active power through economics and politics publicly, but that power began to wane towards the end of the medieval period. With the end of the War of the Roses and the creation of a steady stabilizing monarchy under Henry VII, men began to return home and wrest back control of politics and economics from women. Without this avenue of power, women nevertheless continued to wield a passive or private power that they had always controlled and which required no participation in politics or economics. This power often manifested itself in a woman's ability to manipulate the men in her life. Oftentimes this manipulation was carried out through a woman's sexuality; therefore, men became exceedingly wary of promiscuous women as can be seen in William Langland's manifestation of brewsters in his poetry.

Langland was not the only medieval author to comment on women's sexuality and the proper characteristics women should represent. The portrayal of women in the popular works of the Middle Ages proliferated and reinforced the ideas of what women should be and the dangerous characteristics they could adopt. Thomas Laqueur echoes this sentiment in his monograph *Making Sex*, going on to say that "Literature is not only a

⁶⁹Judith M. Bennett, "Compulsory Service in Late Medieval England," *Past & Present* 209 (November 2010): 45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40960932> (accessed Nov 23, 2017).

thwarted investigator but also an incorrigible perpetrator of the problem of sexuality...Not only do attitudes toward sexual difference generate and structure literary texts; texts generate sexual difference.”⁷⁰ As an investigator, literature has often been used, frequently by feminists, in order to challenge heteronormativity and imposed sexual identity, but not only has it been frustrated, it has also helped to reproduce, shape, and regulate contemporary perceptions of women and continues to do so as that literature is passed down through the centuries. Several examples of this will be made clear in the following pages.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is rife with mentions of loose women, including the Wife of Bath. In her prologue, she speaks openly and proudly about her sexuality, and at the end asks “Jesus to us send / Meek husbands, and young ones, and fresh in bed, / And good luck to outlive them that we wed. / And I pray Jesus to cut short the lives / Of those who’ll not be governed by their wives.”⁷¹ Not only does this excerpt portray women as sexual beings, but it also implies that they will use their sexuality in order to easily control men deceived by their beauty and demeanor. This was a direct warning to men about women’s deceitfulness.

In addition to her open promiscuity – which was believed to be a decidedly masculine trait – that permeates the pages of Chaucer, in the early-15th century Ellesmere manuscript, the illustration of the Wife of Bath appears to show her riding astride, rather than side-saddle as any well-respected woman of her stature would have done. This is a considerable indication that at least the illustrator of the manuscript seemed to perceive the Wife of Bath as exhibiting masculine traits, rather than feminine. When women

⁷⁰Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 17.

⁷¹Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 298.

began to appear insubordinate or threatened the established social order, they were characterized as different. As long as their power remained within the accepted societal structure, it remained unchallenged. Frequently, women were able to remain inconspicuous through their wielding of passive power; however, the Wife of Bath was too flippant with her power. Additionally, the Wife of Bath's passive power is depicted in a time of stabilization for England. Perhaps, her display of power might have been less offensive early in the medieval period during a time of greater crisis. Regardless, the frequent literature implying women's immoral ways indicates that there were other women whose sexual power was recognized and feared by the men around them.⁷²

The characterization of the Wife of Bath as masculine through the illustration and word choice in the Ellesmere manuscript also has a decidedly social impact. According to sociologist Allan G. Johnson, "femininity and masculinity are powerful weapons in social control that help maintain the patriarchal order. The truth of this is reflected in how inconsistently and unevenly they are applied, for they are invoked primarily when someone threatens patriarchy and its core values."⁷³ Portraying the Wife of Bath as overly masculine would have been a warning to her and to any woman who might find herself in a similar position. Regardless of her immoral characterization, it is obvious that the Wife of Bath had power and influence in convincing her various husbands to submit to her will.

However, Chaucer does not specifically condemn women's manipulation of sexual power. He is only condemning the Wife of Bath's usage of this power for what might be considered immoral reasons. For in the Second Nun's story, Chaucer seems to

⁷²Radtke and Stam, eds., *Power/Gender*, 5, 254.

⁷³Johnson, *The Gender Knot*, 87.

take a different approach. The Second Nun tells the story of Saint Cecelia, who upon marriage reveals to her new husband that as a Christian woman she has taken a vow of celibacy and begs him to understand her choice not to consummate the marriage physically. Her husband, and in turn his brother, are so in awe of the zeal with which she practices Christianity that they convert. After news of Cecelia's conversions reach government, she is brought before Almachius the Prefect. He demands to know why she was not afraid of his power, and she responds with "Your might...is scarce a thing to dread; / For power of every mortal man but is / Like to a bladder full of wind, ywis. / For with a needle's point, when it is blown, / Prick it, and all the pride of it comes down."⁷⁴ Cecelia is thus able to assert her own power over that of a powerful administrator, partially through the wielding of her sexuality and her religious beliefs in accordance with that sexuality.

According to Catherine Sanok, the formula exhibited in the Second Nun's tale of Cecelia is one common throughout medieval literature. This formula paints female saints as the epitome of integrity in that narrative poems about a female saint typically described the life of a young girl who refused the sexual advances of men in the hopes of remaining a good Christian. As a result, she was often tortured and martyred, but because of her devotion, her example would live on through the Church. In this manner, the literature which employed this formula reinforced and proliferated certain expectations for the ideal medieval English woman. Indeed, in the Second Nun's Tale, Cecelia's execution is ordered by Almachius, but after her death, Pope Urban grants her sainthood; thus, her piousness and sacrifice live on and inspire other women.

⁷⁴Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 438.

If society was unable to completely nullify women's passive power wielded through sexuality, then women must be conditioned to use that power only for good as exemplified by Cecelia, rather than the selfish reasons the Wife of Bath exemplifies. Women should "take the legends of female saints as examples for their own ethical and devotional practices;" thus literature, such as this, was ultimately "regulatory fiction," meant to teach women the correct path in life. Women who exhibited power in this pure manner were thus lauded for their works.⁷⁵ So Chaucer is able to fulfill two functions with his characterizations of medieval English women. He both condemns women's sexual desire and manipulation while praising pious women who promote a certain asexuality.

This dichotomy is ever present within the written works of the era. Indeed, manuals on witchcraft employed the same tactics in describing women's nature. For instance, the *Malleus Maleficarum* reaffirmed this duality, specifying that "when [women] are governed by a good spirit, they are most excellent in virtue; but when they are governed by an evil spirit, they indulge in the worst possible vices."⁷⁶ The manual gave voice to the already well-entrenched superstitions held during the Middle Ages, like the idea that women were "feebler both in mind and body" making it unsurprising "that they should come more under the spell of witchcraft" than men."⁷⁷

Not only did the manual emphasize women's feebleness and immorality, but it also alluded to women's ability to emasculate men. It warns that witches "can take away

⁷⁵Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), ix.

⁷⁶Heinrich Godfrey Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum, Or: The Hammer of Witches*, Montague Summers, trans. (London: John Rodker, 1928), 51.

⁷⁷*Ibid*, 53.

the male organ, not indeed by actually despoiling the human body of it.”⁷⁸ This provides incredible insight into the real fear of witches – their ability to control men. These women, some of whom were married, could easily hold sway over not only their own husbands but any other man as well. It is interesting, however, that this power is couched in witchcraft. The power women held over men could not have been considered natural by medieval standards, because they were thought to be such weak, feeble creatures. Instead, it was the devil that gave women this control.

The theoretical, written representations of medieval women are reflected back in the medieval courts as well. For example, the church courts tried Joan Beverley in 1481, claiming she was a witch and that she had bewitched two men in order to commit adultery with them. The court labeled her as a whore and a procuress who had disgraced her husband.⁷⁹ Not only does this case both reaffirm and spur on fear of women’s sexuality – and representations of that dangerous sexuality in literature – but by claiming Beverley was a witch, the courts place full blame on her, rather than on the men who committed adultery with her. It is impossible to know today whether Beverley truly lusted after and manipulated the men or whether the men took advantage of Beverley, sticking her with the blame. Indeed, women’s representation in literature could have made it much easier for men to avoid fault in such situations.

Accusations of witchcraft also point towards a restriction of women’s power. Oftentimes those accused of witchcraft were elderly widows, some of whom had distanced themselves from the community in order to avoid unwanted advances and those who would wish to take advantage. According to Richard Horsley, these single women –

⁷⁸Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 121.

⁷⁹P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women in England c. 1275-1525: Documentary Sources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 236.

especially those who had the means to support themselves through practices such as midwifery – were “a socially disruptive element.” These women were an easy target for those wanting to uphold the status quo and yet many of the most prominent English witch trials did not occur until after the turmoil of the 14th and 15th centuries. Most communities left their peculiar neighbors alone unless pressed to raise accusations against them by government officials. In effect, the witch-hunts helped men to regain control of authority after having relinquished it during political instability. Even the passive status of simply being a *femme sole* might be threatened in times of stability if it was thought to threaten the social order.⁸⁰

Alternatively, the literature of the age does not only criticize and sexualize women, but provides different perspectives. Take for example the translations and publications of Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, the man who took control of the English throne ending the War of the Roses. Lady Margaret’s translations of French works were extraordinarily popular in England with multiple reissues. Her translations would not be bested for almost a complete generation.⁸¹

As the mother of the king and a woman granted *femme sole* status despite her marriage⁸², Lady Margaret wielded a significant amount of political power. This can be seen in her arrangement of the marriage between her son and Elizabeth of York, uniting the two houses which had fought in the English Civil War. By uniting the York and

⁸⁰Richard A. Horsley, “Who Were the Witches?: The Social Roles of the Accused in the European Witch Trials,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1979), 689, 710, 712-713.

⁸¹Patricia Demers, “‘God May Open More than Man Maye Vnderstande:’ Lady Margaret Beaufort’s Translation of the De ‘Imitatione Christi,’” *Renaissance and Reformation* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 48-49, 55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43446635> (accessed Apr 1, 2018).

⁸²Lady Margaret Beaufort was granted *femme sole* status in 1485 by Parliament while married to Thomas Stanley. This was granted most likely on influence from her son for her help in winning him the throne. Her husband had also granted permission for her to live separately from him.

Lancastrian families, she effectively nullified any competing claim and ended the civil war for good. After stability was reestablished in England, the poet Samuel Daniel referred to Lady Margaret as “Mother, Author, Plotter, Counsellor.” The plotter and counselor titles are both interesting, considering that her contemporaries seemed to understand she had plotted for her son to take the throne, and then she had served as a counselor for the nation. The fact that Daniel would write of Margaret with such reverence and acceptance of her status as counselor illustrates that she was well-respected by her male peers and thus exercised authority in her own right. The next line of the poem continues, “of vnion, that didst both conceiue, beget, / And bring forth happinesse to this great State.” If this is interpreted as the union between Elizabeth and Henry, then Daniel is ultimately attributing the stability of the English state to Lady Margaret herself.⁸³

Lady Margaret’s own translations focused on religious texts, so despite her blatantly political power, in her public life, she chose to emulate the female saints of contemporary literature. Additionally, her translations were supposedly pleasing for an illiterate congregation to hear aloud; thus, her words were for the people. She essentially reaffirmed her “motherhood” status, not only to the King of England, but to the entirety of the English people. In a way, she was able to mask her active power within a more passive display of piety. This might have made her public power more palatable to medieval English men. In turn, Daniel’s use of the descriptor “mother” in his poem was

⁸³Gristwood, *Blood Sisters*, 163; Demers, ““God may open more than man maye vnderstande,”” 46.

not just to name her as Henry's mother, but as the mother of the people, and in many ways the early modern English nation.⁸⁴

Additionally, historian Caroline Dunn provides a wonderful example of how supposedly weak women were able to take control of their own lives in her monograph *Stolen Women in Medieval England*. By analyzing ravishments in court rolls from the Middle Ages, she illustrates that many abduction narratives feature women trying to escape bad marriages. These kidnappings often reveal domestic abuse and forced marriage in an era when divorce was not allowed and marriage was used as a means of creating familial alliances in the hopes of increasing power, property, and wealth. As a result, women manufactured their own "kidnappings," often by family members or lovers, in order to free themselves from an unhappy, sometimes dangerous, life. In many cases, abductions and ravishments brought to court were merely a means of publicizing an informal separation of wife and husband. Divorce might have been illegal, but it was not uncommon for couples to live separately and lead romantic lives with another.⁸⁵

In this case, these fake ravishments and abductions are considered a display of passive power wielded by women in that it was wielded with its true intention hidden from the public. Women orchestrated their own kidnappings, sometimes in order to force their desirable marriage partner upon society and sometimes to escape from marriages that had turned undesirable. They orchestrated exactly what they wanted under the pretense of their being taken advantage of. They ultimately were able to work within society's perceptions of women as weak and in need of protection in order to get what

⁸⁴Demers, "'God May Open More than Man Maye Vnderstande,'" 48-49, 55.

⁸⁵Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 16, 148, 158; P.J.P. Goldberg, *Communal Discord, Child Abduction and Rape in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 175; Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family, 1450-1700* (New York: Longman Group Ltd., 1984), 32, 97.

they wanted. While this is indeed passive power, it was no less powerful than a woman's blatant participation within politics or economics, and in some cases, it brought them further into the political and economic sphere. In taking control of their marriage partner, women might have been able to negotiate a coverture more favorable to them. Indeed, according to Dunn, true forced marriages often targeted wealthy heiresses and widows. While not extraordinarily frequent, forced marriages allowed men to subsume an heiress' wealth, as legally upon marriage her property would revert to the control of her husband. If women had a choice in their partner – or married for love – it seems realistic that they might have been able to maintain some measure of influence over whatever property they brought to the table within that marriage.⁸⁶

With this in mind, it becomes clear that passive and active forms of power could often be wrapped up within each other as exemplified above in Lady Margaret Beaufort and in fake ravishments and abductions. Women's employment of passive power might indeed reward them with a more public form of power evident in economics or politics. Couching their power in this passivity, however, seemed to allow women to wield that power without threatening or provoking the established social order, especially in times of England's instability. Their causes could be seen as noble by those who made the decision on women's nature and sphere. Truly, it was those in power – the clergy and aristocracy – that created the medieval theory on where women stood in society. Those who took a vow of celibacy and those “who could afford to regard its women as an ornamental asset” were the ones with the power to ascribe the supposedly natural – and contradictory – qualities of piousness, gentleness, coerciveness, and promiscuity to

⁸⁶Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 82-83, 86, 90.

women. As exemplified above, however, many women did not conform to these categories.⁸⁷

A certain level of influence and power is expected from women in the upper classes, such as Lady Beaufort, simply because of their social standing. Despite the categorization of women which comes from their very ranks, it is only natural for them to take some role, certainly in a passive sense through influence, but also actively within the very political structure of the nation. It is less expected for women in the lower and middling classes to wield power; however, it was probably more frequent simply because they did not have a choice. These classes did not have much sway in the very assignment of gender roles for the Middle Ages, and as a result, they often did not have the luxury to conform to such roles. Women needed to participate in economics and politics, either on account of their status as widows or heads of household with children to support or simply as providers of a supplementary income.

Still, prior to the Middle Ages, and long after, women had a passive power that they fell back on. They used their influence over their husbands and sons to play a role within society. Some women even hid their active power plays within their supposed passivity, playing on the medieval ideal of the pious, nonsexual woman to do so. In many ways this allowed their power to go unnoticed or allowed it to be deemed unthreatening to society. Regardless, if a woman's passive power became too outrageous, as with the Wife of Bath's blatant hyper-sexuality, it could be curtailed and explained simply by implying she was overly masculine, and not a lady at all. In some cases, women's independence as *femme sole*, even when passive, was threatened purely because it contradicted the medieval idea that men were expected to provide for women.

⁸⁷Power, *Medieval Women*, 9-10.

It becomes clear in the preceding pages that the instability caused by the plague and warfare which characterized the Middle Ages aided in normalizing to an extent the active power that women wielded during this time. Medieval men begrudgingly accepted manifestations of that active power, in that oftentimes it was a necessity warranted by manpower shortages and economic downturns, but they did not sit idly by. They worked to curtail women's power where they could through the law and literature. They characterized women as promiscuous, immoral, and deceitful, and these characterizations were passed down through each new generation. Characterizations of women in *The Canterbury Tales* still reach schoolchildren today. A simple online search brings up countless lesson plans on *Canterbury Tales* units, including essays written justifying the continued inclusion of the piece of literature in high school classes.⁸⁸

According to Shulamith Shahar, however, these manifestations hardly mean women had an inferior status. Shahar claims that there is plenty of misogynistic literature condemning women today, and yet their status is as close to equal with men as it has ever been. In any case, it is doubtless that their characterization as set and solidified within the medieval law codes and literature certainly had a lasting effect on society's perceptions of women.⁸⁹ In spite of that, and even as their active forms of power were curtailed nearing the end of the Middle Ages, women found ways to wield their power within the system. Unfortunately, as these were often private forms of power through

⁸⁸Santa Ana Unified School District, "The Road to Canterbury," Lesson Plan, September 17, 2013, <https://www.sausd.us/cms/lib/CA01000471/Centricity/Domain/106/ELA%20Grade%2012%20Road%20to%20Canterbury%20Unit.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2020); Donna Dermond, "Teaching the *Canterbury Tales* in American High Schools," <https://global.oup.com/booksites/content/0199259127/resources/usschools.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2020).

⁸⁹Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 7; Power, *Medieval Women*, 9.

persuasion of their husbands, they were rarely recognized by society as conventional forms of power at all. If anything, it was considered deceitful and immoral trickery, and its wielding did little to earn women a place amongst men as leaders. This drawback to passive power would continue to hinder English women on into the Victorian Era.

Stuck as the “Angel in the House”: Separate Spheres Emphasize Passive Power

As Eileen Power suggested in her monograph *Medieval Women*, the Middle Ages set the scene for the subordination of English women, but it was in the Victorian Period that separate roles for men and women were solidified. In contrast to the medieval period, the Victorian Era – the years of Queen Victoria’s reign from 1837 to 1901 – was typically thought to be much more restrictive for women, but with political reform, the social environment began to change near the end of the century. Regardless, with the solidification of gender roles, a distinct discourse on gender and power was created, and that discourse definitively shaped society’s perceptions of gender.

As the roles for women and men were more firmly established in the Victorian Era, upper middle class women – expected to remain in the home and away from corrupting forces – took on the responsibility of providing moral uplift for their families and society as a whole. As a result, their wielding of passive power became enormously influential due to their ability to guide their husbands down the moral path. Despite the incredible potential for women to influence politics through their moral superiority, it is unlikely that evidence of these influences have survived within the written record – in part because it is unlikely that their husbands recognized the power they were wielding at all. On the other hand, any active attempt from middle-class women to participate in politics and economics was done under the premise that women were simply helping guide society to what was good and right. Their active role was still couched in their moral superiority, and this significantly limited the very issues women could act upon. In this manner, men were able to foresee and control many of women’s active displays of power.

Working-class families also felt the pressure to aspire towards the middle-class conception of women, because it meant their social status was rising; however, it was easier said than done, as a woman's income was often needed to sustain the family. These working-class women most often exercised active power in the economic sphere, but were increasingly shamed and stigmatized for this participation.

While the early days of Victoria's reign were characterized by instability due to an attempt to acclimate to the new industrial economy, the Victorian period overall could be considered much more stable than the Middle Ages. With the growth of industry and the building of railroads especially, prosperity rose, and that prosperity – though significantly varied across the classes – did reach into the lives of the working class. Three reform bills of 1832, 1867, and 1884 extended the vote to most working-class men, and the 1884 bill removed the property qualification for service in the House of Commons so that the lower classes might receive representation. Despite this capacity for representation across the classes, however, the Reform Bill of 1832 introduced the word male into its text, further solidifying the fact that women's representation was thought to be unnecessary. According to Sally Mitchell, “this addition of male suggests that some lawmakers were beginning to realize that some women might want to claim the privilege.”⁹⁰ Here, there is a concerted effort by men to prevent women's political participation.⁹¹

Married women's power in Victorian England was constrained in much the same way it was during medieval times. The practice of coverture that characterized the Middle Ages continued through the 19th century and lingered even as several Married

⁹⁰Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2009), 3.

⁹¹*Ibid*, 3, 5-7, 10.

Women's Property Acts were passed in the latter decades of the century; thus, women and their property continued to fall under the jurisdiction of their husbands. Indeed, John Stuart Mill writes, "if she leaves her husband, she can take nothing with her, neither her children nor anything which is rightfully her own. If he chooses, he can compel her to return, by law, or by physical force; or he may content himself with seizing for his own use anything which she may earn..."⁹² Mary Lyndon Shanley suggests that coverture significantly restricted women's participation in the political sphere, because it was assumed that married women were already represented through their husbands.⁹³ Additionally, coverture acted as a constraint on women's attempts to push for social change and suffrage, because if their husbands disapproved of their actions, they could legally force them to stop.⁹⁴

Single women, as in medieval England, still had some modicum of active power. If they owned property, they were allowed to vote for some lesser-elected officials, including Poor Law officials and school board members, both of which – charity and childrearing – fell well within the private sphere allotted women. But as exemplified in Mill's *Subjection of the Rights of Women*, marriage was "the destination appointed by society for women, the prospect they are brought up to, and the object which it is intended should be sought by all of them."⁹⁵ Upon marriage, the two became one person under the law, meaning that whatever belonged to the wife was now the property of her

⁹²John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of the Rights of Women* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1988), 34.

⁹³Mary Lyndon Shanley, "Suffrage, Protective Labor Legislation, and Married Women's Property Laws in England, *Signs* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 72, 74.

⁹⁴Mill, *The Subjection of the Rights of Women*, 84.

⁹⁵*Ibid*, 31.

husband. Unfortunately, Mill is clear that the reverse was not the same; man's property never became his wife's.⁹⁶

This subordination, a precedent for which was strongly rooted in the Middle Ages, was further strengthened with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. With industrialization, craftsmanship – often learned by men through years of apprenticeship – was undermined by mechanization. Instead of paying skilled workmen an exorbitant wage, factories could get away with hiring unskilled women and children for a much cheaper fee, and as a result, men lost work and were threatened with losing their status as skilled craftsmen. In order to stem this threat to their livelihood, men instituted a series of strategies “designed either to exclude women from the workplace (or marginalise them within it), or to take control of the new technology and redefine the work process.”⁹⁷ Subsequently, these strategies created a hierarchy in which men became the primary breadwinner within the family unit and subsumed political authority as a result. This is illustrated through the creation of the “family wage” or a wage paid to men that was supposedly enough to support their whole family, making it theoretically unnecessary for women to work at all. Women's place, instead of taking jobs needed by men, was instead transferred to the home;⁹⁸ however, their role was deemed absolutely crucial to the functioning of society. With this discourse of complementary roles, it could be argued that women had significant power, but that power was under the control of men.

This creation of two separate spheres for the sexes – public for men, private for women – led to the adoption of Coventry Patmore's poem “The Angel in the House” as

⁹⁶Mill, *The Subjection of the Rights of Women*, 33.

⁹⁷Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialization in England*, 57.

⁹⁸Honeyman, *Women, Gender, and Industrialization in England*, 57-60; Hartmann, *The Unhappy Marriage*, 16.

the Victorian middle-classes' reference for what the ideal woman should resemble.⁹⁹

Patmore wrote the poem about his deceased wife, claiming "Her soul the glass of heaven's grace, / To which she leads me by the hand; / Or, briefly all the truth to say / To you, who briefly understand, / She is both heaven and the way."¹⁰⁰ Confined to the home, a conception of middle-class women was soon formulated in which they became the moral compass of society. While men had to venture into the immoral, dangerous, corrupt world each day, women were able to remain untainted by the problems of society. As a result, the ideal woman was moral and chaste.¹⁰¹

Additionally, according to Lydia Murdoch, "the poem celebrated marriage as a woman's supreme destiny and valorized her submissive devotion to the needs of her husband and children without regard for her own."¹⁰² Unlike in the medieval period when singlewomen were not unheard of, in the Victorian Era, the life of a woman was characterized almost completely by her marriage. Placing so much emphasis on marriage that it permeated the very literature adopted as popular ultimately reinforced the idea that women were incapable of meaningful participation in society.

This middle-class ideal of the woman was co-opted by the rest of Victorian society, especially as embodied by Queen Victoria. The queen may have been a strong political leader; however, over the course of 17 years, she gave birth to nine children. Many of her children went on to marry into other royal European families, and Victoria's grandchildren inherited many thrones. Consequently, she became known as the

⁹⁹Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, xxiv.

¹⁰⁰Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: Cassell & Company, Ltd., 1891), 169.

¹⁰¹Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, xxiv.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

“grandmother of Europe” and was seen as a “moral leader and model of family values.”¹⁰³

Neither were working-class men and women immune to the desires of the middle classes. Here Gramsci’s theory of hegemony comes into play. The lower classes certainly attempted to adopt the middle-class conception of the ideal woman where and when they could.¹⁰⁴ Achieving the ability for women to stay within the home was ultimately a status symbol that could raise the working classes’ social status. Women themselves accepted these restrictions against them, because in a time when loyalty to class was stronger than loyalty to sex, it meant their class standing was rising. Working in Marxist theory, historian Jane Humphries claims that this was due in large part to the significance of the family, which stemmed from the labor movement. Women helped to protect traditional family values, rather than subverting them.¹⁰⁵

Despite an aspiration to embody the “Angel in the House,” there were those who could not or would not conform. For instance, the labor of working-class women was needed in order to supplement family income regardless of the creation of the family wage. Still, in spite of a dire necessity for women’s work in order to keep families out of poverty, oftentimes the women themselves and the men around them were embarrassed and ashamed about that need. For Victorian men, it went against the definition of manliness which implied hard work and independence. When their wives were required to work, these men lost respect in the eyes of their peers. According to a late-19th century carpet weaver, reliance upon a wife’s earnings had “tendency to reduce [a man]

¹⁰³Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 11.

¹⁰⁴Gottlieb, *An Anthology of Western Marxism*, 123-128.

¹⁰⁵Shiman, *Women and Leadership in Nineteenth-Century England*, 70; Shanley, “Suffrage, Protective Labor Legislation, and Married Women’s Property Laws in England,” 71.

and create a littleness when he is no longer the bread-winner of the family.”¹⁰⁶

Resultantly, even though there was a need for them, there was little allowance in Victorian culture to respect working women, especially those who worked in the industrial sector.

Even as women began to organize labor unions, there was an extreme division amongst them in discussions of protective labor laws for women. Heidi Hartmann argues that these laws might have offered better working conditions for women; however, they “limited the participation of adult women in many ‘male’ jobs,” benefiting men of all classes and severely impacting women who needed the work in order to support their families.¹⁰⁷ Providing the alternative argument, Jane Humphries and Teresa Brennan believe that women themselves often benefited from restricting women’s participation in the labor force, because it truly meant the status – and potentially the standard of living – of the working-class family might rise.¹⁰⁸ Men might have been united across the classes in an attempt to subordinate women, but women were deeply divided down to whether or not they should even attempt to perform the same roles as men. Oftentimes, the women who did enter the political sphere did so to perform a job that men were ignoring. They used their active power to reaffirm their domesticity and, in the case of some protective labor laws, to curtail women’s ability to wield active economic power.

Yet women still continued to wield active power. In the second half of the century, they began a concerted push for suffrage, supported by some men like John Stuart Mill who claimed “that the only things which the existing law excludes women

¹⁰⁶John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family, and Empire* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Ltd., 2005), 36.

¹⁰⁷Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” 16.

¹⁰⁸Shanley, “Suffrage, Protective Labor Legislation, and Married Women’s Property Laws in England, 71.

from doing are the things which they have proved that they are able to do,” including participation in politics, which had been seen even prior to the Middle Ages.¹⁰⁹ During the debate over the 1867 Reform Bill, Mill proposed an amendment which would have replaced the word “man,” added in 1832, with person. The amendment was struck down by almost three to one.¹¹⁰ According to Member of Parliament, George Denman, the bill already technically included women in that previous legislation stated “the term ‘man’ should also incorporate women, and that ‘male person’ should be used in all legislation where the intention was gender-specific.”¹¹¹

In 1868, women used this as justification for *Chorlton v. Lings* claiming that women’s right to vote had never been explicitly taken away. Chief Justice Bovill, however, concluded that under common law, women were not allowed to vote, indicating that the word “man” would not have been used in the act if women’s suffrage was intended.¹¹² From this verdict, it can be argued that the use of “man” or “male person” was arbitrary in regards to actual practice. Shanley argues that there are several examples of gender-based changes to English laws, including the Married Women’s Property Acts, which did not affect women in practice. There were as many instances of an interpretation of the law providing for legal continuity as those that actually offered change for women.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹Mill, *The Subjections of the Rights of Women*, 57.

¹¹⁰Catherine Hall, et al, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 138.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*

¹¹²Kristin Kalsem, *In Contempt: Nineteenth-Century Women, Law, and Literature* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2012), 98-99.

¹¹³Shanley, “Suffrage, Protective Labor Legislation, and Married Women’s Property Laws in England, 75.

As with politics, many women continued to participate within the economic sphere as well. A significant number of young, unmarried women found work in factories and towns outside their original hometown, boarding in dormitories set up by the factories themselves. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* provides an interesting example of this new trend. After Tess' rape and pregnancy out of wedlock, she desperately tries to find work outside her hometown in order to get away from those who know her sins, but each time Tess leaves home for a fresh start, some new misfortune seems to befall her. In her analysis of the novel, Lucille Herbert believes this illustrates Hardy's distaste for the migrant worker trend happening in Victorian England due to industrialization. Hardy himself, staging all his novels in the vicinity of his hometown of Stinsford in Dorset, England, was known to be nostalgic about home.¹¹⁴

Tess also provides an interesting example of the dual or contrary discourse about women's sexuality described by Lyn Pykett. The ideal woman was indeed the Angel in the House, but as outlined above, a significant number of women could not conform to such ideals, typically out of necessity. Prostitution became linked to the problem of migrant workers and factory labor, and the prostitute threatened the sanctity of the home and heterosexual marriage. While Tess does not work in a factory, she is a young, unmarried woman who leaves home for work. She is subsequently raped and has a child out of wedlock. Many reformers believed that young women away from home were easily led into this lifestyle through seduction and abandonment.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 121-123; Lucille Herbert, "Hardy's Views in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*," *ELH* 37, no. 1 (March 1970): 88-89.

¹¹⁵Ittmann, *Work, Gender, and Family in Victorian England*, 152-153.

According to Lydia Murdoch, “stereotypical women fell into two extremes: they either lacked all sexual desire or were fully ‘fallen’ and corrupted by their sexuality;” thus, women could either be the asexual Angel in the House or overtly sexualized and corrupted.¹¹⁶ There was no alternative for them, so much so that a woman out alone at night might even be arrested and charged with solicitation regardless of her reason. They had little protection from the law and were expected to have an escort when out in public.¹¹⁷

Conforming to this binary conception of women, even though Tess was raped, she was still at fault and could not possibly aspire to the Angel in the House persona. Although she eventually married Angel Clare, upon finding out about her rape, he could not forgive her and abandoned her. He was a product of this discourse of sex, and despite the fact that Tess was not a prostitute, he condemned her as immoral based on the stringent Victorian binary of women’s sexuality. Ironically, it is revealed that Angel had willingly engaged in premarital sex; however, despite a Victorian expectation that men remain pure, John Tosh argues that “except for those men who came from devout or otherwise highly respectable families, commercial sex was a masculine rite of passage, and in many cases a routine erotic outlet.”¹¹⁸ Considering Angel was the son of a reverend, and thus should be considered coming from a devout and respectable family, perhaps Hardy is implying that even those men fell prey to this rite of passage. Angel’s abandonment of Tess then reaffirmed and strengthened Victorian reformers’ fear of migrant, young, unmarried women being led astray and also indicates that there were no

¹¹⁶Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 135.

¹¹⁷Shiman, *Women and Leadership in Nineteenth-Century England*, 70.

¹¹⁸Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 33.

consequences for men who engaged in the same. It proliferated the double-standard between men and women.

Thomas Hardy, however, seems to criticize this view of women's sexuality within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. He may be uncomfortable with the 19th-century trend towards finding work outside one's hometown, but he seems to defend Tess' virtue. On the title page, he goes so far as to label her a pure woman, implying that he takes a different stance from Angel and perhaps the rest of Victorian society. After Angel abandons Tess, he travels to Brazil. Unable to start a successful farming venture, Angel sets out for home after a time. On the return journey, he begins to wonder whether he was too rash in his decision to leave Tess and discusses it with a gentleman Hardy describes as well-traveled. The stranger, undoubtedly shaped by more cultures – and perhaps a different discourse – than Angel, tells him to forgive his wife and return to her.¹¹⁹

It seems as if Hardy had become disenchanted with the Victorian double standard for women. Hardy seems to suggest that other cultures perhaps have more open and accepting perspectives of women's sexuality and morality. At the end of the novel Tess finds herself imprisoned for the murder of Alec D'Urberville, her rapist, and while it is possible that Hardy's readers walked away with sympathy for Tess as a martyr and anger towards the binary she was shoved into in Victorian society, it is more likely that his writing reinforced the characterization of women as either wholesome or corrupt. Hardy might be making a concerted effort to change the discourse on sex, but he could also unintentionally be reaffirming it, especially with the implication of Tess' imprisonment at the end of the novel.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 397-399.

¹²⁰*Ibid*, 461.

Similar to Tess, the majority of women forced to find work in the factories and villages outside their hometown were probably not actively resisting the restrictions placed upon women. They worked purely out of necessity, but the introduction of the family wage and the decreased work opportunities for women made finding lucrative work difficult. In a distant reading analysis of twenty randomly selected cases from London's Old Bailey criminal court records dealing with women over the course of the 19th century, the most common types of crime are theft and fraud. This high rate of crimes of property illustrates the desperation women were feeling to support their families. Additionally, women incarcerated for theft were both married and single, meaning that although men might be considered the primary breadwinners, married women were often still needed to supplement income and possibly found it difficult to do so by legal means. Interestingly enough, there were fewer instances of single women being arrested for crimes of property. This could potentially be explained in that there were fewer cultural restrictions against their working. Although their virtue might be questioned, a good number of single women found jobs and boarded on the campuses of large factory operations.¹²¹

Another important observation about the criminal proceedings involving Victorian women is that they were most often referred to by their marital status or relationship to men. Frequently within the transcripts women were identified as married or unmarried and more specifically as daughters, sisters, wives, or widows of men. In the proceedings involving men, their specific crime is mentioned much more frequently than

¹²¹Tim Hitchcock, Robert Shoemaker, Clive Emsley, Sharon Howard and Jamie McLaughlin, *et al.*, *The Old Bailey Proceedings Online, 1674-1913* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 24 March 2012).

in women's cases.¹²² According to Kristen Kalsem, under coverture, men also took responsibility for crimes committed by their wives, but that in the English court system, it was the woman that was judged, rather than the crime itself.¹²³

Additionally, there are instances in the treatment of women within the court system which reaffirmed the binary discourse of the Victorian woman as either pure or immoral. An unwed mother whose child died was automatically assumed to be guilty of murder according to Victorian law, unless the mother could provide a witness who could swear the child was stillborn.¹²⁴ In Ann Higginbotham's examination of infanticide cases, she inferred that courts frequently assumed women accused of infanticide were lewd and immoral even if there was no real evidence of murder.¹²⁵

In the later Victorian Era, however, the court transcripts consulted do seem to refer less frequently to women's marital status. In the second half of the century, women began to push for more legal rights, and by the end of the century, women had formed labor unions and were protesting the medieval doctrine of coverture. It is possible that these changes resulted in less of a legal reason to constitute a woman's status by that of her male relatives and with women in control of their own economic livelihood and property, the responsibility of their crime would fall directly upon their shoulders rather than those of their male relatives.¹²⁶ Additionally, as the British Empire expanded throughout Victoria's reign, far more men left England than women, either for various

¹²²Tim Hitchcock, Robert Shoemaker, Clive Emsley, Sharon Howard and Jamie McLaughlin, *et al.*, *The Old Bailey Proceedings Online, 1674-1913* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 24 March 2012).

¹²³Kalsem, *In Contempt*, 22, 36.

¹²⁴*Ibid*, 34.

¹²⁵*Ibid*, 37.

¹²⁶Ittmann, *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England*, 137; Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, 42; Maeve E. Doggett, *Marriage, Wife-Beating and the Law in Victorian England* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 145.

colonies or as immigrants.¹²⁷ Women were having difficulty finding a husband, which could have also influenced women's increased push for representation and active power.

Regardless of this trend towards more autonomy at the end of the century, women were still largely under the protection of the men in their lives. In *The Mill on the Floss*, written by Mary Ann Evans under the pseudonym George Eliot, and first published in 1860, protagonist Maggie Tulliver falls under the supervision of her brother, Tom, and her father. Drawn to intellectualism, Maggie spends much of her adolescence and early adulthood hoping that her talents and intelligence will be recognized by the men in her life. When she meets Philip Wakem, she gets some of this acceptance and recognition; however, her father and brother forbid the courtship due to a dislike of the family. Maggie sneaks meetings with Philip anyway, but when caught by Tom, she is forced to give up this intellectualism she has sought in Philip.¹²⁸

Even in her conversations with Philip, Maggie struggles with her desire for more than what is expected from Victorian women. At one point, she says "I used to think I could never bear life if it kept on being the same every day, and I must always be doing things of no consequence, and never know anything greater"; however, Maggie continues, "but...I think...that some one who is wiser is taking care of [us]. Is it not right to resign ourselves entirely, whatever may be denied us?"¹²⁹ Maggie seems to be struggling with the expectation that women will remain within the private sphere, relegated to the roles of wife and mother. She fears a monotonous life; however, she also wonders – and supposedly finds peace in this – whether it is better to just let some higher power, someone wiser than her, guide her path. While Eliot implies that this wiser being

¹²⁷Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 14.

¹²⁸George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1908), 388-391.

¹²⁹*Ibid*, 371.

has a religious significance, it can also be interpreted as the men who are ultimately choosing Maggie's path for her.

Maggie acknowledges that by accepting the path suggested for her, she is being denied something perhaps fundamental to her existence. Philip seems to be one of the few men who wishes something more for Maggie, claiming that Maggie was "shutting [herself] up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism, which is only a way of escaping the pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers of [her] nature."¹³⁰ While Maggie is aware that Philip speaks the truth, she is still wary in that he hopes to convince her to marry him, another means of stifling her power and forcing her into a path provided her by Philip himself. She would move from the control of her father and brother to that of her husband. Marriage, according to Philippa Levine, "served merely to deepen women's dependent status and highlight the continued denial of their adult status."¹³¹

Maggie ends up following Tom's command not to consort any longer with Philip, perhaps resigning herself to the lifestyle she describes above. A while later, Maggie agrees to stay with her cousin, Lucy. She strikes up a close relationship with Lucy's suitor, Stephen, and when the two find themselves alone on a rowing trip down the river, Stephen asks Maggie to run away with him. While Maggie is wary of the suggestion, she does not want to be the cause of Stephen's suffering, and she is exhausted by the argument. She was "hardly conscious of having said or done anything decisive. All yielding is attended with a less vivid consciousness than resistance; it is the partial sleep of thought; it is the submergence of our own personality by another."¹³² Eliot seems to imply that Maggie is no longer her own person, that she is incapable of making her own

¹³⁰Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 372.

¹³¹Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, 42.

¹³²Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 534.

decisions. In fact, Eliot illustrates Maggie's inability to question the men in her life due to exhaustion and complacency at multiple points in the novel.

It seems as if Eliot, or rather Mary Ann Evans, is criticizing Victorian women's tendency toward acquiescence, rather than resistance to the status quo. Eliot's tone is certainly frustrated with Maggie for ending up in this situation, and Maggie does end up refusing to elope with Stephen in the end. Despite her refusal, however, her reputation is still ruined, and she is ostracized by her brother Tom, and Lucy and Philip as well. While Eliot ends up proving through Maggie's choices that women do have free will and should exercise it, she also places her protagonist in a precarious position for her actions. Foucault would probably use this example to show how Eliot is actually reinforcing the discourse despite her attempts to overturn the expectations society has set for Victorian women. Tom refuses to take Maggie back into his home as a result of her impropriety with Stephen, and leaves her without shelter or care. This was a considerable fear for many single women, and Eliot acknowledges this as a possible consequence.¹³³

Maggie is eventually forgiven by Lucy and Philip, and reconciles with Tom when the river floods. When the two set out to rescue Lucy from the flood, their boat capsizes and they drown in each other's arms, all forgiven.¹³⁴ In feminist literature, death is often a trope used to represent freedom from society's constraints and expectations. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has a similar ending for its titular character in that she is imprisoned but finds peace knowing that Angel will care for her family. It is possible that Eliot was freeing Maggie from control of men through her death, and through her reconciliation with all those significant in her life; however, Gayle Greene criticizes this use of death or

¹³³Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 554-555.

¹³⁴*Ibid*, 596-598.

madness to bring women freedom. It provides no realistic relevance for readers and has a detrimental effect on their lives.¹³⁵ It also seems to again reaffirm the discourse on women. There is no easy escape for women, not one that allows them to live happily and free in Victorian society; therefore, would it not simply be easier – as Maggie says – to accept their lot in life and conform to the standards of the Angel in the House? They should let those wiser and better able – and most likely men – lead them.

According to Sally Mitchell, George Eliot was one of the leading novelists of the Victorian period, indicating that *The Mill on the Floss* would have been widely circulated.¹³⁶ It is possible that Eliot's writing seems less critical of the Victorian ideal purely to reach a larger audience. Despite Maggie's death being her only path to freedom and her tendency towards complacency, she still provides a radical representation of the intellectual and actively powerful woman. On the other hand, John Stuart Mill claims that while literary women were beginning to speak out about their mistreatment in society, "they are themselves such artificial products, that their sentiments are compounded of a small element of individual observation and consciousness, and a very large one of acquired associations."¹³⁷ Mill thus implies that Mary Ann Evans herself was simply a product of the gender discourse. Even in her attempts to reveal or dispel the unequal roles outlined for men and women, she still cannot help but fall prey to the prevailing views of the day.

Published in 1847, *Jane Eyre* is the earliest of the Victorian works analyzed in this essay. Written by Charlotte Bronte, it was originally published under the pseudonym

¹³⁵Gayle Greene, "Feminist Fiction, Feminist Form," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 11, no. 2/3 (1990): 84.

¹³⁶Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 7.

¹³⁷Mill, *The Subjection of the Rights of Women*, 27.

Currer Bell. Mary Ann Evans and Charlotte Bronte most likely published under male pseudonyms to expand their readership. Bronte specifically refers to *Jane Eyre* as an autobiography edited by Bell, allowing the authorship to perhaps remain ambiguous. In this manner, she might have been able to appeal to readers who wanted an author knowledgeable about a woman's struggles and readers who felt men better capable of the written word.

In *Jane Eyre*, the titular character has a brutal childhood, orphaned at a young age, mistreated by her uncle's family, and finally sent to a boarding school left in disrepair. One of her only allies dies of tuberculosis due to the inhumane conditions of the school, an event that parallels Bronte's own life and the untimely deaths of her sisters at a badly managed school.¹³⁸ At both her aunt's house and the school, Jane is described as deceitful, already implanting the idea of what a respectable, virtuous woman is not in the mind of a child.¹³⁹ With the similarities to her own life, Bronte seems to be criticizing this binary characterization of women, or – at least in the case of Jane – the mischaracterization of a young, orphaned girl as immoral simply due to her circumstances. Since there was no middle ground between a moral and immoral woman, Jane was automatically thought to be immoral.

Despite this rocky start, Jane becomes a governess and eventually takes a job at Thornfield Hall teaching the young ward of Edward Rochester. As the book progresses, Jane and Edward fall in love, and Edward eventually proposes marriage. Before the two can be married, however, it is revealed that Edward already has a wife though she is thought to be mad and is kept locked away in Thornfield Hall. Edward still propositions

¹³⁸Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (New York: The New American Library, 1960), 85.

¹³⁹*Ibid*, 35-37.

Jane to live with him as his wife, regardless of the fact they cannot truly be married, but Jane cannot go against her principles and ends up leaving her love in the middle of the night to avoid doing so.¹⁴⁰ At this point, Jane becomes the virtuous woman, giving up her true love for her Christian principles; she truly upholds morality in the face of a man corrupted by society's influences.

After several misfortunes, Jane becomes heir to her uncle's fortune, finds friendly family members, and reunites with Edward Rochester. His wife had set the house on fire and committed suicide, badly injuring Edward himself.¹⁴¹ Despite his disfigurement, Jane confesses she still loves Edward, and the two are married, both achieving happy endings without compromising their ideals. Edward's first wife, Bertha Antoinetta Mason, provides the feminist trope of death being a release from the confinement to which society subjects women. Jane, on the other hand, despite perhaps outlandish ideas and her unusual childhood, ends up embodying the Angel in the House persona. She serves as the dutiful wife, caring for her ailing husband. At the birth of their first child, Edward has even regained some of the sight he had lost in the fire, perhaps suggesting that Jane's care and her love have enabled a miracle.¹⁴²

Grant Allen provides another interesting, and contradictory, characterization of Victorian women in *The Type-Writer Girl*, published near the end of Victoria's rule in 1897. Interestingly enough, Allen chose to publish his book under the female pseudonym, Olive Pratt Raynor. While many Victorian women, Charlotte Bronte and Mary Ann Evans included, chose to publish under male pseudonyms, most likely in order to inspire credibility as serious authors, it is interesting that Allen chose to publish as a

¹⁴⁰Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 321-324.

¹⁴¹*Ibid*, 430-431.

¹⁴²*Ibid*, 455.

woman. It is possible that he was hoping to reach a female readership specifically, and he felt that writing as a woman would lend him the credence needed for women to believe and relate to his words. But what exactly was he trying to tell women within the pages of his book?

Juliet Appleton, the protagonist of Allen's novel, had recently graduated from Girton College and lost her father. Faced with fending for herself financially, Juliet initially jumped between various economic ventures, beginning as a typewriter girl at a law office and then quickly turning to the commune lifestyle in the countryside. In both instances, she felt objectified by the men with whom she worked. Instead of being valued for her work, she was looked upon as a piece of ornamentation or pleasant company and companionship. In S. Brooke Cameron's analysis of Allen's work, she claims that Juliet's experiences with men in the work force suggested "that economic forces disrupt if not entirely displace romance."¹⁴³ Unlike in the novels outlined above, romance does not drive Juliet's life. Certainly, she desires to fall in love and find someone to spend her life with; however, her primary concern throughout the novel is how she will manage to make ends meet within the next week.

Eventually, Juliet does find a job she enjoys as a lady typewriter – rather than a typewriter girl – at a publishing office, and here she falls in love with her boss. This particular job notice catches Juliet's eye, because it refers to a lady typewriter, rather than her own choice of typewriter girl or her previous job as a Shorthand and Typewriter (female). She claims that employers should do their employees the courtesy of referring

¹⁴³S. Brooke Cameron, "Sister of the Type: The Feminist Collective in Grant Allen's 'The Typewriter Girl,'" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 40, no.1 (2012): 231.

to them as lady typewriters, instead of parenthetical females.¹⁴⁴ Juliet implies that lady infers more respect over a backhanded inference that the position should be for women only or the implied subordination of a girl's status.

Yet, despite the moniker of lady typewriter, as a member of the working class, she was hardly seen as a lady at all by the circles in which her boss ran. Juliet claims that the Lady Donisthorpe “attached an excessive importance to the after all somewhat negative quality of ladylikeness. The highest praise she could accord...was that of being ‘a perfect lady’...apart from the fact that it seems to imply a somewhat narrow standard.”¹⁴⁵ Juliet continues later on to say that “we can only be ‘perfect ladies’ on the Donisthorpe pattern by shutting our eyes, shutting our ears, and shutting our noses to most things around us.”¹⁴⁶ Indeed, this would be a very narrow standard for how woman could exemplify the perfect lady. Allen also, through Juliet, perfectly exemplifies the limitations placed on a lady in the Victorian Era. By conforming to the expectations set for them and shutting their eyes, ears, and nose, women are effectively cut off from participation in economics and politics. Asking someone not to observe might be considered the same as asking them not to form an opinion at all.

Despite Juliet's growing relationship with her boss as the novel progresses, she is primarily concerned with offering aid to her fellow women. For instance, when she crashes into Margaret Allerdyce while riding her bike, she very quickly develops a friendship with her and consequently feels protective of her. Additionally, she helps another typewriter girl who happens to be more down on her luck, offering her own quarters and typewriter for use despite barely knowing the woman.

¹⁴⁴Olive Pratt Raynor, *The Type-writer Girl* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd., 1897), 116-117.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid*, 184.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid*, 184-185.

The novel culminates in perhaps the most significant display of Juliet's loyalty to the female collective.¹⁴⁷ When confessing her love to her Romeo, he admits that he is conflicted, because he is already engaged to another. Juliet struggles herself with this pronouncement as Romeo claimed that he was young and foolish when he proposed, and that he has since realized he could never truly love her as he loved Juliet for all that she was, including her mind. Juliet initially wants to refuse Romeo's advances; however, she decides that neither he nor his fiancée could truly be happy with their current relationship so she encourages Romeo to call it off in order to be with her. Shortly thereafter, she runs back into her friend Margaret Allergyce, and it is revealed that she is in fact Romeo's betrothed. Feeling absolutely horrible having heard Margaret's side of the story, and still feeling protective of her due to their friendship, Juliet quickly offers to set things straight for Margaret. She tells Romeo that he must return to Margaret, and they must never see each other again. In the end, rather than fulfill her own desire – and ultimately one of the only avenues, and the most stable, available to women – she chooses to suffer and struggle in the hope that she does not deprive another woman of her happiness.

Juliet is then a strong representation of both passive and active feminine power. Her influence over Romeo's own decisions represents the traditional Victorian woman's reliance on manipulation and coercion of the men in their lives. Juliet's display of power, however, can be interpreted as benign in that it is upholding Victorian values. She is not using her power to corrupt her Romeo. On the other hand, Juliet finds success as a woman in the economic sphere. Even after leaving Romeo's publishing company, she still finds another typewriter job and continues to support herself.

¹⁴⁷Cameron, "Sister of the Type," 234.

Near the end, when Juliet is faced with giving up her love for the sake of Margaret's happiness, she beseeches John Stuart Mill to stand by her.¹⁴⁸ Published almost thirty years before Allen's novel, Mill's *The Subjection of the Rights of Women* seems to have had a profound impact on his writing. Juliet's own education and professionalism enables her to encourage and help other women to grow as well, building what Mill would have described as a more equitable society and one better off overall. Mill gives two explicit examples in his writing of how an equal treatment of women in matters of education, economics, and politics would only lead to a better way of life. First, he claims that if women are brought up with an education equal to men's, they would naturally "think or do something considerable themselves" and help both men and other women to do so as well.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, Mill complains that "young men of the greatest promise generally cease to improve as soon as they marry, and not improving, inevitably degenerate. If the wife does not push the husband forward, she always holds him back."¹⁵⁰ As a result, Mill believes that educating women, hearing their thoughts, and benefiting from their participation can only lead to a more inspired and motivated citizenry overall. This is exemplified through Juliet's success and the success of the women around her, and better yet, Allen offers an alternative to marriage for women. Juliet does not end up with her Romeo; however, she continues on as a typewriter girl and manages to support herself while encouraging other women as well.

But, if Juliet had married her Romeo, they would have been "equally paired, soul-wedded, each mirroring the other's mind, each respecting, admiring, reinforcing the

¹⁴⁸Raynor, *The Type-writer Girl*, 255.

¹⁴⁹Mill, *The Subjection of the Rights of Women*, 90.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid*, 102.

other” encouraging Mill’s theory on a more beneficial marriage.¹⁵¹ So while Allen provides an alternative to marriage, he also outlines a different sort of marriage than that espoused by the “Angel in the House.” He implies that a marriage should consist of two equals, rather than a wife meant to serve the husband. A wife could be “a thinking woman, with heart, soul, brain, courage – a woman who could face life full of intrepid self-reliance; a woman with nerve, audacity, spirit” rather than one who simply shuts their eyes, ears, and nose to the world around them.¹⁵² According to Philippa Levine, “one of the most remarkable features of Victorian feminism was its concerted attempt to remould rather than reject marital practice whilst at the same time not annul the worth of the single woman,” and it seems as if Allen hits the mark here in his characterization of Juliet.¹⁵³ He provides an example of a successful single woman and an alternative to the traditional Victorian marriage – one that parallels John Stuart Mill’s arguments.

Unfortunately, or perhaps not, Juliet does not end up with her Romeo, and he ends up in what might be considered a marriage of the typical Victorian sort. Margaret “would be the mistress of his house, a sort of superior pet bird, to be tricked out in fine feathers, to be coaxed, stroked, fondled; but not a wife.”¹⁵⁴ Theirs would not be a marriage of equals. So it is possible that in proposing loyalty to the female collective, Allen is also subconsciously negating Mill’s argument for more of a partnership and companionship in marriage.

It becomes clear that even in progressive Victorian literature, there are often mixed messages about women’s role and their use of power. In the four examples

¹⁵¹Raynor, *The Type-writer Girl*, 248.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁵³Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, 42.

¹⁵⁴Raynor, *The Type-writer Girl*, 248.

provided above, there is little, if any, display of political power; however, Tess, Jane, and Juliet all exemplify active power within the economic sphere at differing levels. On the contrary, none of these women are fighting for the right to work. They are doing so out of necessity, and all three women are seeking a marriage with varying degrees of effort. Even Maggie, although she balks at the idea, is thinking of a future marriage, reaffirming the Victorian purpose for women as wives; thus, women's active economic power becomes relatively unthreatening as it is simply a stopping-off point for women before they settle down in marriage. It is not meant as a permanent means of their independence. Jane is the only woman, of the four examples given, who ends up in a loving marriage, and yet, she still conforms to the idea of the Angel in the House, caring for her invalid husband. When the women exhibit passive power through the influence of the men in their lives, it is usually for a purpose of upstanding morality. They are not influencing votes or corrupting men, but upholding their virtue and encouraging respectability. However unintentional, these authors are still proliferating the contemporary discourse on gender and on what being a woman entails. Juliet comes the closest to actually upending the system as she remains single at the end of the novel – and neither dead nor imprisoned.

Furthermore, in the early decades of Victorian England, women faced many of the same legal constraints as their female counterparts from four centuries earlier. Legal reform did begin to occur for women, often through the aid of men like John Stuart Mill and Grant Allen; however, the enforcement and interpretation of those new laws “suggests that for long periods of time and on a wide variety of issues the state [had] accepted, enforced, and encouraged gender hierarchy in both public and domestic

relations.”¹⁵⁵ Whatever rights women won through law did not always carry over in practice. Most frequently, women’s forays into active power through politics could be attributed to their role as the moral compass of society. They participated in labor reform for women and children and in the local elections of officials representative of welfare and educational institutions.¹⁵⁶ In this manner, they were still representative of the Angel in the House.

Yet it is obvious changes were occurring in the latter half of the Victorian Period, and these changes should have been the catalyst for increased gender reform in the next one hundred years. Unfortunately, Sally Mitchell argues that “the domestic concerns of the last quarter of the [19th] century...were muted by the dramatic overseas expansion and the patriotic fervor created around imperialism.”¹⁵⁷ Change did begin to occur, but it happened slowly and gradually, and domestic change was not the focus. As this change was occurring, activists also had to deal with the extraordinary precedent set by the popular literature and law mentioned above. Even as 21st-century law sets new precedents, the characterization of women in literature remains today. While George Eliot and Grant Allen – whose works are arguably the most radical of those mentioned here – might have been more popular in Victorian England, many of these titles are still widely taught in schools today, including *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jane Eyre*. The continuing effect of this concept of rigid gender roles and its connection to power will be explored in the next chapter.

¹⁵⁵Shanley, “Suffrage, Protective Labor Legislation, and Married Women’s Property Laws in England,” 77.

¹⁵⁶Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 11; Shanley, “Suffrage, Protective Labor Legislation, and Married Women’s Property Laws in England,” 68-69; Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 204-205.

¹⁵⁷Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 14-15.

Still Fighting the Phantom: The Vestiges of the Gender Discourse

In 1931, when Virginia Woolf gave a speech to the National Society for Women's Service, she acknowledged feeling the effects of the Angel in the House characterization of women and the pressure on women to embody what were considered feminine traits. Woolf felt that as a woman she must constantly be self-aware in her work. There was a subconscious part of her that was saying "my dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure."¹⁵⁸ Woolf described her own battle with the Angel in the House, whom she believed she had defeated; however, she acknowledged that it is far harder to kill something within her own subconscious. The idea of how a woman should act would plague her writing throughout her career.

Literary critic Elaine Showalter, for instance, believes that Woolf had not truly killed the Angel in the House. She criticizes Woolf for writing androgynously instead of claiming her status as a woman. Showalter claims that "like other male properties – power, hierarchy, aggression, and anger – passion, we feel, is one Virginia Woolf is happy to renounce."¹⁵⁹ Woolf, instead of challenging the characterizations of masculinity and femininity, chose not to mention them at all. Woolf exemplifies Mill's criticism of Victorian authors above as her writing is still a product of the gender discourse.

Indeed, Woolf falls prey to the suicide trope used in feminist writing, drowning herself at the age of 59 after struggling with what was most likely manic depression

¹⁵⁸Virginia Woolf. "Professions for Women" (speech given to the Society for Women's Service, January 21, 1931).

¹⁵⁹Elaine Showalter, "Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers," *The Antioch Review* 50, no. 1/2 (Winter-Spring, 1992): 208.

during her lifetime. Showalter claims that “madness offers a woman a socially acceptable excuse for expressing anger and hostility...Madness hath its privileges, one of which is honesty.”¹⁶⁰ Woolf’s “madness” might have allowed her leeway to challenge the Angel in the House, but it does not seem to have completely set her free.

At the end of Woolf’s speech in 1931, she says that the female writer “has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against. And if this is so in literature, the freest of all professions for women, how is it in the new professions which you are now for the first time entering?”¹⁶¹ In her writing, even if she had defeated the Angel in the House, Woolf had to stay consistently aware of her tendency to self-police according to the gender discourse created by patriarchal society in order to keep the angel at bay. For those women entering fields for the first time, there was an even more difficult struggle against stereotypical perceptions of women from men, and against the very expectations that women themselves upheld subconsciously.

In modern society, though women have presumably entered most – if not all – of these fields, there is still an underlying assumption of women’s roles that significantly impacts them in their attempts to wield active power. This, in turn, makes it difficult for women to completely even the playing field in the political and economic spheres. For Virginia Woolf, it was important in 1931 that women discuss and define the different obstacles they faced; “for thus only can the labour be shared, the difficulties be

¹⁶⁰Showalter, “Killing the Angel in the House,” 212.

¹⁶¹Woolf, “Professions for Women.”

solved.”¹⁶² Only in revealing and naming the obstacles will society be able to face them head on, and only in working together can these obstacles be overcome.

Even if individual women were able to throw off the phantom of “appropriate femininity,” others must also be willing to accept a new discourse on gender. Modern women have entered into those new professions mentioned by Woolf, and they have made gains; however, they are still fighting that phantom within themselves and in society at large. Anthropologists Suzanne Clisby and Julia Holdsworth conducted a series of interviews on women’s education, training, and employment with British men and women between the years 2005 and 2013.¹⁶³ In one particular interview, when asked to describe what it meant to be a woman, one respondent said that “you’re never a good enough mother, you’re never a good enough cook or cleaner, you’re never good enough at doing your job...or maybe I’m just having a bad day.”¹⁶⁴ This woman clearly feels the effects of society’s expectations for women. They have been accepted into the economic sphere; however, they are still largely expected to perform the traditional domestic duties espoused within the Angel in the House. According to a questionnaire created by Clisby and Holdsworth and conducted in northern England, 67 percent of women respondents said they took primary responsibility for childcare and 88 percent said they did more than 50 percent of the housework whereas 50 percent said they did more than 75 percent. Moreover, within the economic sphere, those polled thought that men typically earned a higher wage and were given more leadership opportunities and respect.¹⁶⁵ In this

¹⁶²Woolf, “Professions for Women.”

¹⁶³Suzanne Clisby and Julia Holdsworth, *Gendering Women: Identity and Mental Wellbeing Through the Lifecourse* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2014), 12-13.

¹⁶⁴*Ibid*, 56.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid*, 64.

manner, western society is still hindered by a discourse on gender dating back to Victorian England and beyond.

It is important to point out, however, that the woman interviewed above is also constrained by the very discourse of which she is obviously aware. She knows that society's expectations for women are unfair, and yet she qualifies her statement, ending with "or maybe I'm just having a bad day" and laughing at herself. Clisby and Holdsworth ask: "Is this an example of lack of self-confidence, ultimately a lack of belief, however subconsciously, in her right to make such claims, even though these are claims she believes to be true? Or is it an example of a woman softening her message to render it less potentially objectionable in a society that, as she is aware, can be hostile to feminist analyses of women's lives?"¹⁶⁶ The respondent already subconsciously understands that it is not acceptable for women to complain. Their main worth, with its foundations in the separate spheres of the Victorian period, is found in the service they do for others. Consequently, they are expected to serve with a smile on their face, and so she qualifies her criticism on the double standard for men and women by implying that she is simply having a bad day.

Though equality legislation has been passed in England in the last several decades and continues to be passed, women as a whole still experience greater inequality than men; therefore, in practice, that legislation is often not effective. For instance, the British Equal Pay Act, introduced in the 1970s, did not prevent women from experiencing a 15 percent full-time pay gap at the time Clisby and Holdsworth were conducting their study in the early 2010s. Women who worked part-time experienced an even larger gap. Furthermore, the 1942 Beveridge Report, which helped create a welfare

¹⁶⁶Clisby and Holdsworth, *Gendering Women*, 56.

system in England, was still based on the Victorian idea of the “family wage,” meaning that women’s wages were considered supplementary at best. Lasting effects such as these have considerable influence on the way society, and women themselves, view their economic contributions.¹⁶⁷

Prevailing ideas of women’s economic contributions also affect their leadership roles and active political power. In England, women represent “only 10 per cent of directors in FTSE 100 companies, just under 23 per cent of Members of Parliament, 22 per cent of peers and only 12 per cent of local authority leaders.”¹⁶⁸ According to the Angel in the House ideal, women are not supposed to be ambitious. They are supposed to provide support in order to fulfill the needs of others, but they are rarely expected to proclaim needs and desires of their own. Not only does this impact the number of women who are rewarded with leadership positions, but it also has an effect on the very jobs into which women enter. In many of these occupations, women are indeed serving others, and there is little room for ambition and ladder-climbing.¹⁶⁹

What's more, ideas of what femininity encompassed and the role women were expected to play did not just affect English women. As the English empire grew, similar trends became visible in several regions, including in the United States with the idea of Republican Motherhood. Post-revolutionary attempts to build a federal government created similar conditions in the United States to those which industrialization had created in England. Many of the founding fathers believed that allowing women into the political sphere would discourage men from taking up new roles within the government. Still, women had played an instrumental role in the American Revolution and demanded

¹⁶⁷Clisby and Holdsworth, *Gendering Women*, 1, 156-157, 159.

¹⁶⁸*Ibid*, 158.

¹⁶⁹*Ibid*, 159.

acknowledgement. Republican Motherhood allowed women's domesticity to be interpreted as political participation without any actual change in gender roles.¹⁷⁰

Though many expectations remained the same, just as with English women, women in the United States were expected to take on responsibility for civic virtue and a major aspect of this was the education and training of the next generation. As a result, it was necessary for both British and American women to receive a formal education.¹⁷¹ While the right to a formal education was granted to women for the purposes of men, it would grant women the ability to better lobby for increased rights, including political and economic participation.

Still, just as with the Angel in the House, Republican Motherhood firmly placed the foundation for women's participation in society within the private sphere. Women were expected to cater to the needs of their husbands and children and instill morality within them.¹⁷² Basing women's representation on their relationships with men allowed others to ignore them as autonomous individuals. Consequently, women were not expected to have their own desires and this "discouraged females from displaying self-interest and political ambition – characteristics acceptable and often applauded in males."¹⁷³

These ideals of the Angel in the House and the Republican Mother were proliferated to society through literature such as that mentioned above; literature which is

¹⁷⁰Tammy R. Vigil, *Moms in Chief: The Rhetoric of Republican Motherhood and the Spouses of Presidential Nominees, 1992-2016* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 26.

¹⁷¹Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 7; Linda K. Kerber, "'Why Should Girls be Learned or Wise?': Education and Intellect in the Early Republic," in *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 199-200.

¹⁷²Vigil, *Moms in Chief*, 26-27.

¹⁷³*Ibid*, 27.

still heavily read – and even taught in schools – in the 21st century. While the United States was heavily influenced by British literature, they had their own works policing their actions as well. Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, published in two volumes between 1868 and 1869, struggled heavily with balancing domesticity and its restrictions. Regardless, Jo, who struggles with the cult of domesticity, does end up married in the end, even if it is a happy marriage of equals. The women in the novel end up in traditional female roles, which highlighted marriage, childcare, and morality.

Yet Jo’s eventual marriage is an interesting twist in a novel, which also seems to allow wildness and desire in women. As Jo is a semi-biographical iteration of Louisa May Alcott herself, it is surprising that Alcott married her off while she remained single throughout her life. According to Barbara Sicherman, after the first volume, Alcott received pressure from both her publisher and her audience to end the story with marriages for all the little women.¹⁷⁴ So while Alcott struggled to provide an alternative role for women, she was under incredible pressure from “The Angel in the House” and “Republican Motherhood” to proliferate a certain ideal for women. It might be said that she fought the phantom unsuccessfully.

In 1927, a *New York Times* article read “Little Women Leads Polls: Novel Rated ahead of Bible for Influence on High School Pupils,” placing *Little Women* as the most read work, the Bible coming in second with *The Pilgrim’s Progress* third.¹⁷⁵ In 2019, an Oscar-nominated, modern reimagining of *Little Women* was released in theaters, proliferating the same discourse albeit with a message which definitively exhibited

¹⁷⁴Barbara Sicherman, “Reading *Little Woman*,” In *Well-Read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 18-22.

¹⁷⁵Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 72-73.

women's power, both active and passive. Although there is nothing wrong with the roles praised in this literature, and they should undoubtedly be valued, with few alternative characterizations of women offered, the gender roles become subconsciously ingrained within the very foundation of society. These phantoms – and their corresponding expectations for masculinity – are not from a bygone age, but are currently influencing how women and men perceive each other.

The most recent examples of the impact of this gender discourse can be found in the modern political climate of the United States. Hillary Clinton's 2016 defeat, although she was practically groomed for the presidency, has its foundations in events that occurred long before the 2016 race, namely in the ideal characterization of women through the Angel in the House and Republican Motherhood. According to Tammy Vigil, the position of First Lady is fully expected by society, however subconsciously, to promote the values of domesticity and motherhood, as Queen Victoria often did in Victorian England. The very choice of the word "lady" to include in the moniker promotes what Juliet Appleton suggested in 1897: that the spouse of the president shut their eyes, ears, and nose to the political maneuverings of their husbands. Instead, they are charged with redecorating the White House and occasionally involving themselves in social reform or charitable activities which still heavily fall within the woman's prerogative as espoused by society. Using the 2016 presidential race as an example, Vigil cites a variety of media sources, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Times*, which believed that Melania Trump, despite not embodying the traditional aspects of Republican Motherhood, "would avoid participating in policy discussions, would never be accused of interfering with her husband's decision-making, and would focus on

her maternal functions over any sort of government involvement.”¹⁷⁶ Essentially, she would meet the gender expectations for the role. She would not involve herself in the public sphere or in the work of men where, by tradition, she had no right to be.¹⁷⁷

Hillary Clinton has rarely fit into the mold of society’s traditional idea of femininity. Long before Bill Clinton’s run for presidency, Hillary was blamed for not embodying “the traditional attributes of an Arkansas woman” and negatively impacting his reelection for governor of that state.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, despite Clinton’s non-conformity with traditional gender roles, her individual identity was largely subsumed by her husband’s until his goals were already achieved. As a result, Clinton is still judged, not in her own right, but by the actions of her husband.

According to the rule of Republican Motherhood, women were responsible for guiding their husbands and children toward morality. Bill Clinton’s moral transgressions during his own presidency “did not lead to doubts about his manliness but instead raised concerns about Hillary’s womanhood.”¹⁷⁹ In fact, many blamed Hillary Clinton’s personal ambition and “masculinity” for preventing her from fulfilling her duties as a wife. Her husband’s transgressions were thus used to argue against Clinton’s ability to take on the presidency. Note, however, that Bill’s impropriety simply reaffirmed his masculinity. While he faced public scrutiny, it was primarily Hillary who was continually held responsible for his actions. Bill was eventually acquitted of any crime by the Senate and served the remainder of his term in office.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶Vigil, *Moms in Chief*, 175.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid*, 38-39.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid*, 170.

¹⁷⁹*Ibid*, 175.

¹⁸⁰*Ibid*.

For the purposes of comparison, congresswoman Katie Hill resigned at the end of 2019 amid accusations of improper sexual relations with a congressional staffer. Hill's resignation comes after her ex-husband released nude photos of her to several media outlets; however, Hill's estranged husband is not being held responsible for her actions or for his own. While Hill denied the allegations of improper relations with a male staffer, she did admit to having a sexual relationship with a female staffer. Due to the sexual binary applied to women by the Angel in the House, Hill is condemned for her overt sexuality and for threatening heterosexual normativity as well. Bill Clinton, as a man, is simply fulfilling society's expectations for his gender. It is his wife who has failed in her role; however, no one but Hill is held responsible for her actions despite the fact that she was participating in consensual relationships revealed illegally to the public by her abusive ex-husband. While neither Bill Clinton's nor Hill's actions were appropriate, the double-standard is prevalent.¹⁸¹

Consequently, Hillary Clinton entered into the 2016 Presidential race with several strikes already against her. She did not conform to society's expectations of femininity and as a result she was responsible for the questionable morality of her husband's actions. These strikes were further accentuated by both overt sexism and the less obvious modern sexism. There have been countless gendered attacks against Clinton from the media, the public, and her opponents themselves. To provide several examples, the January 2014 *Time* magazine cover displayed an image of Clinton placing her heeled foot on an

¹⁸¹Heather Caygle, John Bresnahan, and Kyle Cheney, "Rep. Katie Hill to resign amid allegations of inappropriate relationships with staffers," *Politico* (October 27, 2019), <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/27/rep-katie-hill-to-resign-amid-allegations-of-inappropriate-relationships-with-staffers-000301> (accessed February 23, 2020).

emasculated man. The text read, “Can Anyone Stop Hillary?”¹⁸² This caricature of Clinton emphasizes a male fear that power-seeking, ambitious women are a threat to traditional concepts of masculinity and man’s role as breadwinner and authoritarian, much like the vast numbers of self-supporting women entering factories in industrializing England threatened male craftsmen and their concept of self. Again, society has been inculcated with images of women as demure and self-sacrificing, and Clinton’s non-conformity threatens this characterization, but her strength is not and should not be synonymous with the emasculation of men.

Another overtly sexist attack on Clinton came from Rudy Giuliani, former mayor of New York and attorney for President Donald Trump at the time this paper was written, when he defended Trump after allegations against the candidate for tax fraud. Giuliani co-opts a characterization of women as economically incompetent, claiming “Don’t you think a man who has this kind of economic genius is a lot better for the United States than a woman?”¹⁸³ According to Heldman, Conroy, and Ackerman, Giuliani implies that “a man who skirted taxes due to large business losses is still better than a woman.”¹⁸⁴ In this example, the medieval and Victorian concept of *femme covert* is alive and well. Women are not trusted with the management of money, and in a society still heavily based on the family wage, this characterization of women is not shocking. Despite the illegality of Trump’s actions, it illustrates business savvy whereas Clinton’s actions are not actually examined at all. Her sex illustrates her financial capacity, yet as exemplified in the

¹⁸²Caroline Heldman, Meredith Conroy, and Alissa R. Ackerman, *Sex and Gender in the 2016 Presidential Election* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2018), 76.

¹⁸³*Ibid*, 122.

¹⁸⁴*Ibid*.

previous chapters, women have been supporting their families financially since before the Middle Ages.

Additionally, in political campaigns a woman's appearance was more often targeted than her male opponents. In the 2016 presidential race, Trump attacked Carly Fiorina, stating that no one would vote for her primarily because of her looks.¹⁸⁵ Clinton also faced extreme scrutiny over her appearance. She faced what the political scientists have referred to as a double bind – similar to the binary applied to Victorian women – in which her appearance was used to frame “her as simultaneously too masculine (wearing pantsuits) and too feminine (purportedly lacking stamina).”¹⁸⁶

Scores of news outlets, ranging from political commentators to fashionistas, attacked Clinton for her pantsuits in the 2016 presidential race. As a woman, Clinton was faced with both looking feminine but proving her ability to handle what were deemed the more masculine presidential duties, including national security and the economy. The media characterized her, through her fashion choices, as alienating to not only men, but young women as well. As with the case of the Wife of Bath, Clinton's refusal to conform to traditional ideas of feminine dress were used to emphasize her masculinity to the public and her supposed inability to relate to other women. This characterization of Clinton as masculine, however, did not extend to matters of political ideology. Clinton was still not thought able to handle economic or security matters, and she was also characterized as too “cold” to handle the matters of healthcare and labor thought to be more in the feminine purview. While masculinity is typically something to aspire to in

¹⁸⁵Nicholas A. Valentino, Carly Wayne, and Marzia Oceno, “Mobilizing Sexism: The Interaction of Emotion and Gender Attitudes in the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82 (Special Issue 2018): 215.

¹⁸⁶Vigil, *Moms in Chief*, 169.

American culture, when a woman is described as masculine she is simply subverting social roles.¹⁸⁷ In Clinton's case, she fits into neither traditional role. Unfortunately, even this androgyny does her no favors, and she is hardly the only or first female politician to be imprisoned in this limbo. Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi were both described as masculine in appearance and the media characterized them as “‘ball-busting’ iron-fisted ladies who [were] over-compensating for their gender.”¹⁸⁸

In addition to overt sexism, Clinton was also a victim of the harder-to-identify attacks used by modern sexists. Modern sexism is defined as focusing “on the denial of gender discrimination, antagonism toward women who make demands for political and economic equality, and resentment about policies favoring women in hiring and promotion.”¹⁸⁹ In this manner, modern sexists can both reject negative stereotypes relating to women's role while also reinforcing gender discrimination.¹⁹⁰ For instance, Clinton was often accused of shouting or getting overly emotional about issues and in some cases about playing up the woman card, when gender was believed to have nothing to do with the debate.

The shouting accusation is interesting in that both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump were also known to speak passionately about their position, often in raised voices. According to Frida Ghitis, a world affairs analyst who regularly contributes to CNN and other news forums, “when Sanders shouts, it is because he is angry at the injustice in America, because he cares so much,” whereas in the case of Clinton, it is deemed a

¹⁸⁷Minita Sanghvi, *Gender and Political Marketing in the United States and the 2016 Presidential Election: An Analysis of Why She Lost* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 135-136.

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁸⁹Valentino, Wayne, and Ocen, “Mobilizing Sexism,” 218.

¹⁹⁰Heldman, Conroy, and Ackerman, *Sex and Gender in the 2016 Presidential Election*, 162-163.

character flaw.¹⁹¹ Clinton's passion is interpreted as overly emotional or sensitive, two traits, characterized as feminine, which are used to argue an individual's inability to serve as president. Hillary commented on the double standard herself, stating "I've been told to stop, and I quote, 'shouting about gun violence.' I'm not shouting. It's just that when women talk, some people think we're shouting."¹⁹² Thus, British and American women were still fighting the phantom created by the Angel in the House and Republican Motherhood well into the 21st century, and as the United States presidential race for 2020 continues, it is likely that the same constraints of femininity and masculinity will prevail, despite women having had direct, codified political participation for one hundred years.

Women have always wielded power in one manner or another, but until the last hundred years, women's active power has only been explicitly visible in times of great turmoil, like that exemplified in the Middle Ages. Typically, women wielded a more passive power through the influence and manipulation of the men in their lives. While this often garnered women incredible power, it went unrecognized and unrecorded. With the exception of some like John Stuart Mill, men usually did not acknowledge the women who had influenced their political ideologies.

Western women's roles and the idea of appropriate femininity were solidified during the Industrial Revolution in England. Separate spheres were ironed out for men and women, and women's primary role was relegated to the domestic sphere. In so doing, women were given an essential public role; however, any active display of power must remain within that sphere of domesticity. As a result, women's power was

¹⁹¹Sanghvi, *Gender and Political Marketing in the United States and the 2016 Presidential Election*, 136.

¹⁹²Michael Mario Albrecht, "Bernie Bros and the Gender Schism in the 2016 US Presidential Election," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 3 (2017): 511.

explicitly tied to social reform, the home, and welfare, and women themselves were expected to serve other people's needs not their own. They were expected to forego ambition for the greater good of society. This characterization was reaffirmed and passed down through contemporary literature and through gendered interpretations of the law. Even literature written in protest of these constraints on women continued to proclaim marriage and women's piety as popular themes. All of these factors coalesced to create the modern interpretation of femininity, which can be argued contributes to the gender gap today in regards to women in positions of power and leadership. The modern sexist argument that gender discrimination is a thing of the past is unfounded in the face of the gender discourse that still proliferates.

In fact, the word "feminine" has been used – and is sometimes still used – to express inferiority or backwardness. In regards to its imperial conquests, England had a major impact on the gender identities present within its empire. For instance, according to Afsaneh Najmabadi, in Qajar Iran, the "ideas of beauty were ungendered."¹⁹³ It was not until European influences that Iranian society became heteronormalized, and that women became dependents subject to male supervision. This occurred in large part, because of European judgment of the homosociality and homoeroticism present in Iranian culture, which caused the English to characterize Iranian men as too feminine.¹⁹⁴ England's gender influence within its empire is also exemplified by Indira Gandhi's treatment as described above and in the characterization of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and the eastern world as explained in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said argued that eastern women were believed to be creatures of male power fantasy, stating that

¹⁹³Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), 25.

¹⁹⁴*Ibid*, 38, 54, 108.

when described in literature on the Orient, women “express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing.”¹⁹⁵ These traits would indicate that men believed these women inferior to them, and when they described indigenous men as “feminine” this was inherently an insult and indicative of a belief that these men were also inferior to white men.

In the present, modern sexists have claimed that American society has become “too soft and feminine.”¹⁹⁶ Femininity is inherently used in this context to express inferiority. The nation is worse off simply because of its supposed femininity, and the term is interpreted to imply frailty, inability, and the potential for others to take advantage of the United States. In comparison, masculine terms are often used to imply strength and capability. How can the gender gap possibly close when people are still told to “man up” in reference to tackling a difficult task, which requires strength of body or mind? The very phrase conjures two images: one that depicts a woman incapable of completing the task, and one that shows a man completing it successfully. It is these images that society is constantly forced to compare, and there cannot be true gender equality until western society is able to break free from the constraining discourse of masculinity and femininity that extends back more than 800 years.

¹⁹⁵Said, *Orientalism*, 207.

¹⁹⁶Sanghvi, *Gender and Political Marketing in the United States and the 2016 Presidential Election*, 137.

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