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Influence, Agency, and the Women of England: Victorian Ideology and the Works of Sarah Stickney Ellis

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INFLUENCE, AGENCY, AND THE WOMEN OF ENGLAND: VICTORIAN IDEOLOGY AND THE WORKS OF SARAH STICKNEY ELLIS

BY

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B.A., English and French, Chapman University, 2003
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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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To my mother, who taught me to look,
Patricia See, who taught me to see the bigger picture,
and Gail Turley Houston, who taught me to notice the nuances.

And

A la mémoire de Léon "Pouillette" Bürck, 1935-2011.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation discusses the works of Sarah Stickney Ellis in the context of Victorian culture and argues that Ellis's ideas about women, which have frequently been described as "anti-feminist" by twentieth and twenty-first century scholars, were often progressive and even proto-feminist. The first chapter discusses Ellis's writings on education, where she argues that girls require moral, physical, and intellectual training. This chapter demonstrates that Ellis, though not necessarily radical, is more liberal than she has been given credit for in terms of her educational scheme for women. The second chapter focuses on Ellis's views on courtships and engagements. Rather than persuading women to become meek and subservient wives, her recommendations for women before marriage clearly demonstrate that women should avoid matches where their own needs will not be met. She warns women away from self-sacrifice and instead emphasizes the importance of finding a man who will be able to fulfill his duties as a husband. Ultimately, she argues that women are better off remaining single than risking an unfortunate marriage. The third chapter focuses on Ellis's efforts to enlarge a woman's sphere of influence. Specifically, this chapter investigates the complex layers of rhetoric

that Ellis uses to maintain an overtly submissive stance while subversively promoting female empowerment. This strategy, which frames Ellis's most famous work, *The Women of England*, imitates the tactics Ellis suggests her readers might use with their husbands and other men. While consistently deprecating both herself and the role of women in general, she paradoxically argues that women are of utmost importance in Victorian society, and even assigns them more power than men. The final chapter examines Ellis's temperance fiction. This chapter focuses on *Family Secrets*, a collection of temperance tales Ellis published in 1842. In these stories, Ellis disrupts the ideology of separate spheres by suggesting that this philosophy is a cause of alcoholism. Through stories about drunken men and women, Ellis shows that society's arbitrary divide between public and private is dangerous. Thus, like her other writings, Ellis's temperance fiction expands a woman's sphere into the public arena. Simultaneously, she argues that men must participate in the domestic sphere.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Introduction

My first acquaintance with the works of Sarah Stickney Ellis came, as it surely does for most students and scholars of Victorian literature, in the form of a short excerpt in an anthology. The brief introduction to the text informed me that ~~"d~~despite her own success as a professional writer, Ellis insisted that women had to learn to repress their own desires and ambitions in order to serve others" (Fletcher 53). I now know that the introduction was surprisingly generous with Ellis, compared to many other brief introductions and references which categorize Ellis as anti-feminist without attempting to look any deeper at her works. Take, for example, the introduction in *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Victorian Era*, which states that Ellis ~~"r~~an a school for girls but did not support intellectual advancement for women" (96), or *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*, which claims that Ellis believed that ~~"f~~eminine education should cultivate what she called ‗the heart' rather than the intellectual faculties of her pupils" (1583). Nonetheless, at the time I sensed a sort of injustice in that representation of Ellis's teachings as focusing on self-denial and service. Indeed, the excerpt that followed, which focused on the ~~"m~~*oral power*" of women, seemed rather to suggest a way in which women might best serve themselves despite their inferior social and legal status in the Victorian period. After all, what could be more important for the Victorian wife than to be able to successfully influence her husband? What could ensure her happiness more than knowing that her husband would act rightly according to her own principles?

The idea of influence is a source of some contention in the Victorian period, since a wife's influence could be used to argue against a broadening of women's rights. The

anti-suffragists, for example, argued that ―women already enjoy greater influence in other ways, both public and private, than the franchise would give them" (Bryce, qtd in Harrison 81).[1] However, strengthening this influence can also be understood as a means of broadening a married woman's power within the existing legal system. Because of the latter possibility, there appeared to me to be something fascinating and wonderfully subversive in Ellis's lessons. After all, _men of influence' are understood as having great power; why should it be different for women? Certainly, in Ellis's works, influential women are effectively powerful women.

Even so, Ellis has developed what I can only classify as a bad reputation over the years. Despite being wildly popular in the nineteenth century, she has received almost no serious critical attention. Feminist recovery projects seem to have overlooked Ellis, perhaps because the genre she is best known for, the conduct manual, suggests a conservative ideology not fully in alignment with the goals of feminism. Thus, she has fallen into a strange state of being oft mentioned, rarely quoted, and almost never critically considered. Aside from the short anthologized excerpts from her conduct manuals, Ellis is rarely taught. A particularly poignant example of Ellis's fate is demonstrated by the 1973 collection of essays *Suffer and Be Still*, edited by Martha Vicinus, which took its title from Ellis's *The Daughters of England* but only actually mentions Ellis four times, and briefly at that. The three essays in Vicinus's book that quote Ellis give only a most cursory reading and focus on her ―tone of dutiful sacrifice" (Roberts in Vicinus 51). Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, sum up Ellis as ―that indefatigable writer of conduct books for Victorian

[1] See also Valerie Sanders's discussion of anti-feminism and influence in *Eve's Renegades*, 18-19.

girls" (344), and cast her in a wholly conservative light, as an author who believed that "enshrined within her home, a Victorian angel-woman should become her husband's holy refuge" (24). Meanwhile, they do not mention the fact that most of Ellis's works propose ways for women to make their own refuges, with or without a husband. Vicinus, Gilbert and Gubar, and the various anthology notes announcing Ellis as generally opposed to the advancement of women, are representative of the general perception of Ellis as extremely conservative.

This is not to say that these readings of Ellis are entirely wrong—rather, these earlier scholars have not given a complete picture. Certainly Vicinus does not misquote Ellis, who, in *The Daughters of England*, tells us that woman's "highest duty is so often to suffer, and be still; whose deepest enjoyments are all relative; who has nothing, and is nothing of herself" (*Daughters* 94). But where Vicinus and others have read statements such as these as tacit approbation of the role Victorian women were expected to play, these comments might better be understood as mere observations of social restraints that Ellis felt compelled to acknowledge. Indeed, in this specific instance, Ellis's description of the silent and suffering woman fuels her argument that women should read poetry. She does not tell women to be silent—she tells them that, limited as they may be in Victorian culture, poetry is a venue for expanding their sphere, for "setting the mind free, like a bird that has been caged, to spread its wings, and soar into the ethereal world" (*Daughters* 95). A close reading of Ellis's works makes it clear that it is necessary to distinguish between her observations of the traditional sphere of woman's influence, and what she imagined could and even should be included in that sphere. Although she recognized the limitations women suffered under, it is going too far to assume that she

endorsed these limitations. As will no doubt be clear throughout this work, Ellis was constantly striving to enlarge a woman's position in society.

While many scholars have overlooked this important distinction, a few have offered more generous readings of Ellis's writing. Marriane Thormählen, for example, in her 1994 article on the Brontë pseudonyms, notes "to her contemporaries, [Ellis's] advice on the education of girls could seem shockingly 'advanced'" (251). Daryl Ogden, in "Double Visions: Sarah Stickney Ellis, George Eliot, and the Politics of Domesticity" (1996), argues that "Ellis's 'theory' of domestic vision […] helped open up a politically important scopic space for Victorian women not only by formulating a theory of domestic praxis but also by providing a discourse of social power for women within the domestic sphere" (586). She goes on to argue that Ellis's writings influenced George Eliot's works. Henrietta Twycross-Martin's essays "Woman Supportive or Woman Manipulative? The 'Mrs Ellis' Woman" (1996) and "The Drunkard, the Brute and the Paterfamilias: The Temperance Fiction of the Early Victorian Writer Sarah Stickney Ellis" (1998) show Ellis to be more than a simple advocate of women's submission by demonstrating that Ellis's writings often show domestic strife rather than bliss, and give women permission to act in ways that might be perceived as unwomanly in order to remedy such domestic difficulties. Chase and Levenson, also, in *The Spectacle of Intimacy* (2000), attempt to "make Ellis strange again: she has been familiar for too long" (65) by pointing to several complexities in Ellis's life and writings that conflict with the assumption that her primary motive was always to mold young women into submissive wives. Although Chase and Levenson persist in reading Ellis's writings as asserting "woman's inferiority and her consignment to the space of home," (76) they also

recognize that ―her books endow women with more responsibilities, more meaning, expanded in each successive text" (82) and ultimately ―[t]rain] women for an independence" (85). While these few authors have suggested that Ellis is more complex and potentially more radical than the usual reading allows, the fact remains that Ellis and her works are largely misread and not sufficiently studied. The various anthologies published more recently than these articles but that continue to introduce Ellis as against women's intellectual education or anti-feminist speak to this dilemma.[2]

One of my goals in this work, therefore, is to demonstrate that the title ―antifeminist," which has been applied to Ellis with vigor by a wide range of scholars, is incorrect. As Valerie Sanders points out in the introduction to her book on so-called anti-feminist women writers, ―anti-feminism is difficult enough to define in the twentieth century, but in the nineteenth, it suffers from additional complications" (3). She goes on to say that ―at first glance, it appears to entail support of the separate spheres' ideology" although ―the picture is complicated […] by evidence that separate spheres' operated more as an ideal than as a fact" (4). In this sense, perhaps we might conceive of Ellis as an anti-feminist, since the ideology of separate spheres is evident in her writing, especially in her conduct manuals. However, particularly in Ellis's fiction, gendered separation of the private and public spheres is frequently undermined by moral complications that force characters to function in both spheres, regardless of gender. This disruption of the separate spheres ideology is one central aspect of my argument that Ellis cannot be classified as anti-feminist.

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[2] The use of the term ―antifeminist" to describe Sarah Ellis and her writings is fairly common even in recent scholarship, including Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* (2001), Karen Offen's ―Challenging Male Hegemony: Feminist Criticism and the Context of Women's Movements in the Age of European Revolutions and Counterrevolutions, 1789-1860" (2004), and Antonia Losano's *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* (2008).

For her purposes, Sanders settles upon a slightly different definition of anti-feminism, which also cannot be properly assigned to Ellis. Sanders defines anti-feminism as ―a conviction that women were designed (whether by ‗God' or ‗Nature') to be first and foremost wives and mothers, and that their social and political subordination is proper corollary of that position" (5). Ellis most definitely falls short of being anti-feminist by these standards. Certainly she discusses the roles of wives and mothers a great deal—since most women then, as now, eventually became both—but she does not argue that these roles are the ―first and foremost" objects of womanhood. Rather, the extensive amount of writing she devotes to encouraging women to remain single rather than risk a bad marriage speaks to the contrary. If Ellis makes any claim about what women should be, it is not about any specific role they must fulfill, but about the necessity of having high morals.

To my mind, anti-feminism in its simplest form works to limit women's roles. While it is clear that Ellis was not a voice for radical feminism in the nineteenth century, I argue that her works attempt to expand women's spheres, and cannot, therefore, be considered anti-feminist. Indeed, this tendency in Ellis's writing makes it forward-thinking on many levels. Through an examination of Ellis's works and popular Victorian ideology, this dissertation demonstrates the various ways in which Ellis's views on women were progressive for the early Victorian period.

Central to my argument that Ellis can be read as progressive, or even proto-feminist, are the notions of autonomy and agency, which are ever at the forefront in Ellis's works, although not expressed in these terms. I am indebted here to Joel Feinberg, for his discussion of autonomy, and Kathryn Abrams for her definition of feminist

agency. Feinberg demonstrates that absolute autonomy is impossible, since there are always aspects of an individual that s/he is unable to choose or change, such as genetics or place of birth. Instead, he argues that ―the ideal of the autonomous person is that of an authentic individual whose self-determination is as complete as is consistent with the requirement that he is, of course, a member of a community" (45). With this caveat in mind, Feinberg constructs a model of autonomy that includes, importantly, one's ability to work according to one's own moral system while resisting both control by others and one's own moral weaknesses . This type of autonomy, which encompasses moral authenticity and moral independence, is a fundamental aspect of Ellis's writings, wherein she argues that women not only should, but must be morally autonomous individuals. In this dissertation I return to the idea of autonomy, particularly as it pertains to Ellis's construction of appropriate female behavior.

Similarly, Ellis's model of femininity relies heavily on what can be described as feminist agency. Abrams argues that agency, in contrast to autonomy, ―manifests itself in various forms of self-definition and self-direction" (Abrams 806). Self-definition, according to Abrams, ―occurs, first, by becoming aware of the way that one's self, and one's self-conception, are socially constituted" (825). This idea is key not only in Ellis's construction of ideal women, who must acknowledge social influences in order to either affirm or resist them, but also for Ellis herself, whose self-definition is evident in the various ways in which she demonstrates an awareness of social norms while simultaneously negotiating and transforming them.

This transformation is a form of self-direction, the second aspect of agency, specifically what Abrams defines as ―transformative self-direction," which occurs ―in a

context in which a broader awareness of group-based oppression has made social transformation the actor's primary goal" (835). However, Abrams also defines another form of self-direction, "resistant self-direction," which is useful in terms of understanding how Ellis gives agency to her fictional characters, whose lives are not generally bound up in social transformation in the way that Ellis, as an author and public figure, necessarily is. Resistant self-direction, according to Abrams, occurs when women "pursue their own choices and plans in contexts where doing so evokes serious gender-based challenge" (832). Resistant self-direction as a form of agency is applicable in Ellis's works in the context of Victorian culture, where women, particularly middle-class women, are constrained by strict notions of a woman's place. Ellis's fictional characters, in performing the advice put forth in Ellis's conduct manuals, demonstrate agency as resistant self-direction in their choices to do such things as rejecting marriage proposals, maintaining financial independence, and working outside the home. For Ellis, agency, like autonomy, is a desirable trait in women. Indeed, in this sense Ellis's texts clearly present a feminist agenda, since she pushes her female readers to be autonomous agents. Otherwise stated, Ellis argues that women must act independently according to their individual moral compass, both with an awareness of social norms, and a willingness to resist those norms when necessary. If at times I appear to conflate autonomy and agency, it is only because Ellis, as an author focused on promoting a specific moral agenda, most often advocates agency on moral grounds.

In sum, this dissertation works to exhibit proto-feminist strands in Ellis's writings by focusing on how Ellis constructs autonomy and agency as core aspects of ideal

femininity, and by examining how Ellis's writings disrupt rigid divisions between public and private spheres and thus expand women's roles.

A Brief Biography

Although less than a dozen book and journal articles treating Ellis as a main subject have been published in the past four decades, in her day, Mrs. Ellis was a household term. Sarah Stickney was born in 1799 in Holderness, Yorkshire, the fifth child of William Stickney, a Quaker farmer, and his wife Esther. Esther Stickney died when Sarah was only four, an event that would affect Sarah's writing throughout her life. William Stickney remarried in 1808 and had four more children with his second wife. Although Sarah attended school for a few years, she was educated mainly at home. She helped raise her younger half-siblings, and, in the 1820s when the agricultural depression began to take its toll on William Stickney's finances, she sought ways to earn a living. She began by painting portraits and drawing, but when her artwork failed to pay enough, she turned to writing. In 1830 she published *The Negro Slave: A Tale Addressed to the Women of Great Britain*, and from then on she published a new work almost every year until her death.

Sarah Stickney first gained recognition as an author from the publications of *Pictures of Private Life* (1833-1837) and *The Poetry of Life* (1835). Although *The Poetry of Life,* which discusses aesthetics in art and nature, was not considered particularly original, reviewers praised it for showing ~~–re~~fined taste, and a well-cultured mind" (Adams 272). Nineteenth century biographers frequently cited *The Poetry of Life* as Ellis's best work. Meanwhile, *Pictures of Private Life*, a series of short stories, was

received as ―sweet, thoughtful, agreeable, and touching" (Clapp 263). Interestingly, the preface to *Pictures of Private Life* ―may have influenced George Eliot's discussion [of moral fiction] in chapter 17 of Adam Bede" (Twycross-Martin).

By the time she married William Ellis in 1837, Sarah was a well-established author. Reverend William Ellis was a Congregational minister and missionary. He trained to be a missionary with the London Missionary Society and from 1816 to 1824 he lived and worked with the organization in Polynesia, accompanied by his first wife, Mary Mercy Moor (they married just a few months before leaving for his first post in the South Sea Islands). Later he would publish several books based on his observations of Polynesian people. Years later, Sarah Ellis's temperance writings would mirror William Ellis's commentary on the effects of alcohol on the native people of Hawai'i.

The first Mrs. Ellis having died in 1835, William Ellis married Sarah Stickney in May of 1837, when they were 42 and 38 years old, respectively. The marriage coincided with Sarah's conversion to Congregationalism; although she was raised a Quaker, she chose to convert to her husband's religion. The marriage also made Sarah an instant parent. While Sarah and William Ellis never had children together, Sarah helped raise her four stepchildren. One of the four children, Mary, died shortly after the marriage, but Sarah seems to have developed a close relationship with the remaining three. The two remaining girls, Elizabeth and Annie eventually taught at Sarah Ellis's school, Rawdon House, and John Ellis expresses a great deal of praise for his stepmother in *Life of William Ellis*. When Annie died in 1862 (Elizabeth having preceded her to the grave in 1858), a bereaved friend commented, ―I believe Mrs. Ellis had largely to do with

moulding her character, and beautifying it, and if she is proud of nothing else, she may justly be proud of all her influence there" (*Life* 266).

The Ellises' marriage appears to have been a happy one. Although prior to her marriage Sarah expressed some concern—in one letter to her future husband she called herself a ~~–m~~iddle-aged independent woman," and wrote, ~~–t~~he kind of life I have led has tended very much to confirm a strength of will which, in my childhood, was, I believe, almost without equal. What will you do with such a companion?" (*Home Life* 75-6)—William Ellis was apparently supportive of his wife and her career. Her writing absorbed a great deal of her time, as John Ellis records in his father's biography, stating that in 1844 ~~–M~~rs. Ellis was also at this time (indeed, when was it otherwise?) busy with her pen" (*Life* 178). Nevertheless, John Ellis's descriptions of Sarah and William's marriage suggest that they were very happy.

By the mid-1840s, Ellis's career was flourishing. On top of writing, in 1844 Sarah Ellis and a friend opened a non-denominational girls' school, called Rawdon House School, in Hoddesdon, the small brewing town where the Ellises lived from 1841 until their deaths in 1872. Around the same time, Sarah and William assisted in founding a local temperance association in the town. Meanwhile, Sarah's conduct manual series, *The Women of England* (1839), *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Wives of England* (1843), and *The Mothers of England* (1843) was extremely popular, gaining attention from many corners. Reviews of her works appeared in numerous journals in England and America, including *The Christian Remembrancer*, *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, *The Church of England Quarterly Review*, *The Athenaeum*, *The Congregational Magazine*, *The American Biblical Repository, The Eclectic Review*, *Meliora*, *The Southern*

Quarterly Review and *The Quarterly Review*. In 1846, William Makepeace Thackeray began contributing a series to *Punch* titled "The Snobs of England, by one of themselves." The parody poked fun at, among other things, Ellis's conduct manuals, illustrating the cultural importance they had achieved. Other satirical pieces in *Punch* also took aim at Rawdon House School. These parodies indicate the extent to which Ellis was part of the popular culture at the time.

Also in 1846, when the Brontë sisters published their collection of poetry, Emily used the pseudonym Ellis Bell. It is unlikely we will ever know with certainty the source of Emily Brontë's pen name, but Marriane Thormählen offers a convincing argument for Sarah Stickney Ellis as the most probable source. References to Ellis and her works also appear in Jane Carlyle's letters.[3] By the time Ellis died in 1872, she had published over forty books, many of which were published in multiple editions in England and the United States. It is clear that Sarah Ellis's writings were widely read and discussed during the period, even if they have been largely forgotten in the last century.

Summary of Chapters

Aesthetically, Ellis's works may not figure amongst the great works of English literature—I will not attempt to make such an argument. However, Ellis's works were undeniably influential. Ellis was an important participant in an ongoing discussion about gender during the Victorian period. My goal in this dissertation is to give Ellis's works

[3]See Jane Carlyle's letters to Helen Welsh, August 18, 1846; John R. Stodart, September 30 1849; John A. Carlyle, late January 1850; and her journal, December 12, 1855. Her manner of referring to Ellis demonstrates an understanding that her readers are also familiar with Ellis's works, as in her letter to Helen Welsh, where she writes "I should like to see the perfectly *rational proper* Mrs Ellis of a woman that could have managed as well with me as this poor little Authoress [Geraldine Jewsbury]" (*CLO* 21: 18-19)

due critical attention in order to better understand her role in that discussion. Through a close reading of both her conduct manuals and some of her fiction, which has received almost no critical attention whatsoever in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I will demonstrate that Ellis's didactic works are not meant to teach women to be subservient or to or to limit their roles to the domestic sphere. Further, I will show that she cannot properly be called an ~~"a~~ntifeminist." Instead, I will argue that Ellis's chief goal is to offer women practical guidance on how to guarantee their happiness, maintain the greatest degree of agency, and even achieve positions of power, all within the constraints of Victorian society and law. I contend that rather than attempting to restrict women's roles, as some critics have argued, Ellis sought to broaden women's sphere of influence.

The first chapter in this work will discuss Ellis's views of girls' education. In both her non-fiction writings as well as at Rawdon House School, Ellis emphasized the importance of a broad education—one which encourages moral, physical, and intellectual strength. By comparing Ellis to Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as a number of Victorian sources on women's education, I will demonstrate that Ellis, though not necessarily radical, falls on the moderate end of the spectrum in terms of her educational scheme for women. The primary focus of the broad education she proposes is not simply to form good wives, as many critics have assumed. Instead, she strives to form independent women, who will not require men to sustain them. As her educational recommendations show, Ellis's ideal woman is physically, morally, and even financially self-reliant.

The second chapter focuses on Ellis's views on courtships and engagements. At the beginning of *The Wives of England,* Ellis offers a lengthy commentary on how one might avoid a bad marriage match. A close reading of this section, paired with a reading

of several of Ellis's works of fiction, reveals a great deal about Ellis's ideology concerning marriage. Rather than persuading women to become meek and subservient wives, her recommendations before marriage clearly demonstrate that women should avoid matches where their own needs will not be met. She warns women away from self-sacrifice and instead emphasizes the importance of finding a man who will be able to fulfill his duties as a husband. Ultimately, she argues that women are better off remaining single than risking an unfortunate marriage. This chapter directly refutes the perception that Ellis ~~a~~ssumed that a woman's goal in life was marriage and her vocation to bear and raise children" (Harrison 30).

Within the social and legal restraints of womanhood, and especially wifehood, a Victorian woman's ability to influence others becomes extremely important. In the third chapter I will discuss Ellis's efforts to enlarge a woman's sphere of influence. Specifically, this chapter will investigate the complex layers of rhetoric that Ellis uses to maintain an overtly submissive stance while subversively promoting female empowerment. This strategy, which frames Ellis's most famous work, *The Women of England*, imitates the tactics Ellis suggests her readers might use with their husbands and other men. While consistently deprecating both herself and the role of women in general, she paradoxically argues that women are of utmost importance in Victorian society, and even assigns them more power than men.

In the last chapter, I will look more closely at Ellis's temperance fiction. This chapter will focus on *Family Secrets, or hints for those who would make home happy*, a collection of temperance tales Ellis published in 1842. In these stories, Ellis disrupts the ideology of separate spheres by suggesting that this philosophy is a cause of alcoholism.

Through stories about drunken men and women, Ellis shows that the divide between public and private is dangerous. Thus, like her other writings, Ellis's temperance fiction expands a woman's sphere into the public arena. Simultaneously, she argues that men must participate in the domestic sphere.

Sarah Stickney Ellis is, I believe, a fascinating historical character. Despite the rather two-dimensional version of her that predominates scholarship, she was a woman of considerable depth. In my work on this project, she has repeatedly defied my expectations. The details of her life, from her pet monkey to her belief that she had a talent for mesmerism, paint an extraordinary picture of a woman who was anything but ~~"a~~ typical middleclass Englishwoman," as she is described in yet another anthology introduction (~~"T~~he Cult of Domesticity"). There are many aspects of Sarah Stickney Ellis and her writings that I will not discuss in this text but that deserve much greater attention. However, it is my hope that this dissertation will expand our understanding of Ellis's perspective on womanhood and inspire others to conduct further research on her life and works.

Chronology

1799 - Sarah Stickney born in Holderness, Yorkshire to William and Esther Stickney
1803 - Esther Stickney dies
1808 - William Stickney remarries
1813 - Begins study at Ackworth School
1816 - Leaves Ackworth School
1830 - *The Negro Slave: A Tale Addressed to the Women of Great Britain*
1832 - *Contrasts*, a series of drawings, published.
1833 - Publishes "The Young Hindoo" in *The Missionary; or Christian's New Years Gift 1833*.
Pictures of Private Life (1833-1837).
1835 - *The Poetry of Life*
1836 - *Home, or, The Iron Rule*
1837 - Marries William Ellis (b. 1794)
Pretension: A Novel (also published as *Pictures of Private Life, Third Series*)
1839 - *The Women of England*
1840 - Begins editing *Fisher's Juvenile Scrap-Book* (until 1848).
Sons of the Soil
1841 - Ellises move to Hoddesdon, Essex
Summer and Winter in the Pyrenees
1842 - *Family Secrets*
The Daughters of England
1843 - Begins editing *Fisher's Drawing-Room Scrap-Book* (until 1845)
A Voice from the Vintage, on the force of example
The Wives of England
The Mothers of England
Mrs. Ellis's Housekeeping Made Easy
1844 – Opens Rawdon House School with Isabella Hurry
1845 - *The Young Ladies' Reader*
Look to the end; or, The Bennets Abroad
1846 - *The Island Queen; a poem*
Temper and Temperament
1847 - *Prevention Better than Cure*
1848 - *Social Distinction: or, Hearts and Homes*
1849 - *Fireside Tales for the Young*
1850 – Begins editing *The Morning Call* (until 1852)
Pique
1852 - *Agatha Beaufort; or, Family Pride*
1854 - "Lectures Addressed to Young Ladies" in *Harpers*, July 1854.
The Value of Health
1855 - *My Brother, or, The Man of Many Friends*
1856 - *The Mother's Mistake*
The Education of Character
1858 - *Friends at their own fireside*
1859 - *The Mothers of Great Men*

The Widow Green and her Three Nieces
1860 - *Chapters on Wives*
Self-deception; or, The history of a human heart
1862 - *Janet: One of Many, a Story in Verse*
1863 - *The Brewer's Family*
Madagascar: its social and religious progress
1865 - *Share and Share Alike; or, The Grand Principle*
1866 - *The Beautiful in Nature & Art*
1868 - *Northern Roses*
1869 - *Education of the Heart: Women's Best Work*
1872 - Dies in Hoddesdon on June 16th, only one week after her husband (d. June 9th 1872)
The Melville family and their Bible readings
1873 – John Eimeo Ellis, William Ellis's son, publishes *Life of William Ellis*.
1881 - *The Brewer's Son* (posthumously)
1893 - *The Home Life and Letters of Mrs Ellis Compiled by her Nieces*

I

"The Making of Human Character"

Sarah Stickney Ellis on Women's Education

> Consequently, the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. (21)
>
> Mary Wollstonecraft
> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

> Human character, then, is of a threefold nature,—physical, intellectual, and moral. These three elements must always be combined, and considered, in the making of human character. (18)
>
> Sarah Stickney Ellis
> *The Education of Character*

> The young girl in the better classes of society should pass the year before puberty and some two years afterwards free from all exciting influences. […] Her mind should be occupied by a very moderate amount of study, with frequent intervals during school hours, of a few moments each, and to be spent, when possible, in the open air. There should be no studying at night under any circumstances. Each menstrual period should be passed in the recumbent posture until the system becomes accustomed to the new order of things, and the habit of regularity is full established. She should neither expose herself to cold nor over-exercise during the twenty-four hours before the expected period, and at the same time her lessons should be discontinued. (21)
>
> Thomas Addis Emmet
> *The Principles and Practice of Gynaecology*

In 1844, Sarah Stickney Ellis and her friend Isabella Hurry embarked on an ambitious project: they opened a boarding school. Rawdon House School, a non-denominational school for girls, gave Ellis the opportunity to put into practice some of her ideas about education. These ideas, already made public through Ellis's best-selling conduct manual series, *The Women of England* (1839), *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Wives of England* (1843) and *The Mothers of England* (1843), were not altogether conventional. Ellis criticized the traditional girls' education, which

emphasized subjects such as singing, painting, and foreign languages, but neglected what Ellis viewed as more important subjects, such as Christian morals and household duties. Yet Ellis's school, like her ideal of education, was not at all like the somber Lowood Institution of Charlotte Brontë's rendering. Instead, she also criticized an education that placed too much emphasis on practical housewifery. Rather than choose one model of education over another, Ellis sought to create a hybrid. While subject matter in girls' schools varied widely, the instruction was generally narrow. Ellis's educational plan, meanwhile, attempted to form well-rounded young women who were moral and adept in household duties, as well as being well read and generally accomplished according to the standards of the day.

Whether or not Rawdon House successfully achieved this goal, it is clear that Ellis hoped that a balanced education, an education which would fortify mind, body, and soul, would ultimately produce independent women; that is, women who do not require men to sustain them, whether physically, morally, or financially. In keeping with her desire that women should be independent, she also ultimately placed the responsibility of becoming an ideal woman on her students and readers themselves. Ellis's approach to girls' education demonstrates the extent to which her reputation as anti-feminist is unwarranted. Her emphasis on moral education works to ensure that women have moral autonomy and her demand for physical and intellectual education shows that these are key components in maintaining female agency. Although she remains conservative in some instances, such as in her insistence on instruction in housewifery, overall she extends the scope of women's education, and with it, the scope of women's roles in English society.

Ellis's belief that a well-rounded education would provide the most benefit to the girls at her school no doubt stemmed in part from her own education. Sarah Stickney spent only a few years in her early teens at a Quaker school in Ackworth, but was otherwise educated at home. Ackworth School was founded in 1779, under the leadership of Dr. John Fothergill and a committee of Friends from throughout England. The school was intended for Quaker children "whose parents are *not in affluence*" (*History of Ackworth School* 17). In Fothergill's words, the educational plan for the school was:

> that the principles we [Friends] profess be diligently inculcated, and due care taken to preserve the children from bad habits, and immoral conduct. That the English language, writing, and arithmetic, be carefully taught to both sexes; and that the girls be also instructed in housewifery, and useful needlework. (*History of Ackworth School* 14-15)

Despite the inclusion of religious principles in Fothergill's scheme, it appears that religion was not given substantial attention at the school until after Ellis left in 1816. *The History of Ackworth School* reports that before 1816 "there was not that *systematic* attention paid to instruction in the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, which its great importance required" (38). As far as morals are concerned, like many schools of the time, Ackworth used "the rod, the cane, and the ferula" (39) to maintain order. There is no record of Ellis's thoughts on the education she received at Ackworth, but overall it

appears that the educational scheme at the school was focused on basic skills and little more.

Luckily for Ellis, what was lacking in her education at school was filled by her father's efforts at home. Ellis's mother died when she was only four years old, and although her father remarried in 1808, when Ellis was about nine years old, it seems that her father continued to oversee her instruction. William Stickney, Sarah's father, whom she described as "a plain, self-educated, experimental, and […] philosophical farmer" (*Journal of William Stickney* 53), clearly viewed his daughter as an independent and capable woman, and encouraged her in pursuits beyond domestic affairs. He encouraged her to read literature, and from her journals as well as her novels we know that she read a broad range of authors. For example, in a letter to a friend in 1820 she writes, "The immortal Shakespeare is, and I think always will be my reigning favourite, but I cannot compare him with other authors. I read his inimitable plays over and over again, and find new beauties and new pleasure in them every time" (14). In the same letter, she expresses joy at the news that her friend has "become a reader, and consequently an admirer of Lord Byron's works," which Ellis describes as "dangerously delightful to a morbid and misanthropic mind," meaning, presumably, her own (14). Additionally, William Stickney provided his daughter with drawing and painting instruction. Her instruction in art and literature gave her skills which would eventually help her support the family through a financial crisis, first through artwork, then through writing. Further, the young Sarah Stickney's pursuits were not all of a domestic, or even ladylike, flair—she also spent a great deal of time outdoors. She was a skilled equestrian, riding and

even training horses. Overall, her education demonstrates a breadth not typical for girls in the early nineteenth century.

When William Ellis wrote to William Stickney to ask for Sarah's hand in marriage, Stickney's response made his thoughts on his daughter quite clear: "As to my consent," he wrote, "I consider that my daughter Sarah has attained to years of mature judgment and is better able to judge of her own religious belief and future prospects in life than I am for her" (Journal of William Stickney 54). Sarah was in her thirties by this time, but her father's response nevertheless betrays a great deal of respect for her. Her father regarded her as an independent woman, able to make sound decisions concerning her own future, which in marrying William Ellis included both her choice of husband and her choice of religion; Ellis was a Congregationalist, and Sarah converted.

Without a doubt, Sarah Stickney Ellis's education and life before marriage allowed her a broader perspective on a woman's duty than was typical of middle-class Victorian women, who frequently married young and with limited education or life experience. She saw the benefit of knowing basic household duties: she used this knowledge throughout her life. Ellis's emphasis on the importance of a practical domestic education very likely stemmed from her own training in housewifery at school as well as her experience helping to raise her four younger half-siblings. She also saw the benefit of being able to earn a living in those few corners of the market where middle class women were tolerated, such as art, needlework, and writing. Her experiences outdoors taught her the health benefits of regular exercise and fresh air. In all, the style of her own education is reflected in the recommendations in her works and at Rawdon House.

Sally Mitchell describes the private boarding school education of the period as dependent ~~–e~~ntirely on the proprietor's interests and abilities" (181). While this usually meant a relatively narrow course of study, at Ellis's school this meant breadth. The similarities between her life and the education plan laid forth in her writings and at Rawdon House suggest that she hoped to form more women like herself: domestically useful, morally superior, and perhaps most importantly, sufficiently able to make their own way, with or without a husband. Like Mary Wollstonecraft before her, Ellis suggests that these qualities will make women better wives. However, also like Wollstonecraft, Ellis's educational plan is, above all else, focused on giving women agency and making them more independent.

Intellectual Education

> It is Monday Morning work begun
> Our lessons we commence
> And learn our histories and the like
> With great intelligence.

So begins the week at Rawdon House, according to the journal of Miss Hawpton, who studied at the school in 1864. Hawpton's journal gives an interesting record of the studies that went on at Rawdon House. The subjects mentioned in her journal may surprise those who associate Ellis only with traditional domestic ideology. The journal, transcribed here in Appendix A, demonstrates the broad scope of education at Rawdon House. Hawpton describes the girls studying Greek history, dancing until they have ~~–a~~ching limbs and all disordered curls," and even listening to a lecture on volcanoes. While Ellis encouraged women to learn knitting, sewing, and other household duties, she

also clearly advocated an intellectual education far beyond what was usually considered necessary for girls.

In the mid-nineteenth century, both mental and physical exertions were often considered detrimental to the feminine constitution. Authors such as Charles Knowlton, in *Fruits of Philosophy* (1832), James MacGrigor Allan, and Thomas Addis Emmet advised that young women, especially during menstruation, refrain from any exerting activity, whether physical or mental. Women who indulged in excess study were believed to be likely to suffer from a variety of nervous disorders, almost always associated with their sex, and were also thought to produce weaker offspring.[1] Despite the growing popularity of girls' schools in the 1850s and 1860s[2], the idea that intellectual study was harmful to the female constitution persisted, even in medical literature. Mental activity was specifically thought to affect a woman's ability to fulfill what was considered her most important duty: reproduction. For example, Thomas Addis Emmet, in *The Principles and Practice of Gynaecology* (first edition, 1879), argued that ~~–t~~he ovaries will always be arrested in their growth if the brain is forced. Even when the course of study is comparatively moderate, functional disturbances are of too frequent observance to admit a doubt as to the cause" (Emmet 20). According to Emmet, a young woman's intellectual development should be all but prevented in order to allow for the appropriate development of the female sexual organs.

Ellis, however, shows no such concern about the dangers of intellectual study, either for herself or her students. While Ellis's beliefs were not singular—other

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[1] For a revealing look at Victorian perspectives on menstruation, see ~~–V~~ictorian Women and Menstruation" by Elaine Showalter and English Showalter.

[2] See Carol Dyhouse's *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, pages 40-78 for more on Victorian education.

advocates of intellectual education for girls included such notables as Josephine Butler, Frances Power Cobbe, and Dorothea Beale—they are at the very least demonstrably different from the conservative views of Emmet and others. If she shows any concern at all about the dangers of academic study for women, it is only that too much learning of this type might keep a woman from her other duties. However, she makes a much stronger argument for education as necessary for women to perform those duties. She goes so far as to equate ignorance with immorality, writing "it is often ignorance alone, which lays the foundation of many of those serious mistakes in opinion and conduct, for which we have to bear all the blame, and suffer all the consequences, of moral culpability" (*Daughters* 71). Inevitably, in Ellis's writing, every suggestion that intellectual education impedes a woman is followed by a more elaborate, and frequently more convincing, argument in favor of an extensive intellectual education. Among other things, she recommends the study of music, painting and poetry, but her discussion of the importance of learning foreign languages in *The Daughters of England* perhaps best demonstrates her stance on female education.

In 1825, Ellis writes to a friend about her older sister Hannah's love of studying Latin. Rather than arguing that the study is a waste of time for a woman, Ellis says, "Latin is to them [Hannah and her tutor] like honey to the bee, only they gather all the winter; what would I give for such a hobby?" (*Home Life* 21) Ellis does not seem to disapprove of her sister's hobby, even though it occupies so much of her time that "she seems to have neither heart nor eye for anything else" (21). It is clear that in her youth at least Ellis found academic pursuits to be an appealing form of engagement for women, even when the subject matter did not particularly attract her. She suggests that

disinterested study, learning for the sake of learning, is an acceptable activity for women. She also appears to find it perfectly natural that a woman can excel in the study of a subject such as Latin. Furthermore, there is no indication that she is concerned that this type of study will affect Hannah's health, whether reproductive or otherwise. Overall, Ellis's main response to Hannah's hobby is envy—she aspires to find an intellectual pursuit that might hold her attention to the same extent.

Interestingly, seventeen years later in *The Daughters of England*, Ellis writes:

> With regard to the time spent in the acquisition of languages, I fear I must incur the risk of being thought neither liberal nor enlightened; for I confess, I do not see the value of languages to a woman, except so far as they serve the purpose of conversation with persons of different countries, or acquaintance with the works of authors, whose essential excellencies cannot be translated into our own tongue. (*Daughters* 39)

Although Ellis initially suggests that she is hesitant to promote the study of foreign languages because for most women it seems a useless endeavor, this is actually a strategy she employs frequently when she intends to promote a more progressive point of view. Ellis backtracks on her own words only a few sentences later (if she has not already sufficiently done so in the second half of the sentence above), explaining that the study of dead languages ~~—m~~ay, however, be justly considered as a wholesome exercise to the mind, provided there is nothing better to be done" (39). She further concedes that:

> There is with some persons a peculiar gift for the acquisition of languages; and believing, as I do, that no gift is bestowed in vain, I would not presume to question the propriety of such young persons spending at least some portion of their lives, in endeavouring to acquire the power of doing for themselves, what has already been done for them (40).

As is frequently the case with Ellis, she follows her initially extremely conservative statement with an effective argument to the contrary. It appears, rather, that her point of view has not changed significantly since her comments about Hannah in 1825. In the end she argues that studying dead languages can be a healthy mental exercise for a woman with extra time, and that the study of modern languages is worthwhile for almost all women, since so many travel abroad, and since modern writers so often —indulge in the use of at least three languages, while professing to write in one, as to render it almost a necessary part of female education to learn both French and Italian" (40). Ultimately it seems that Ellis sees a great deal of value in learning foreign languages.

The study of languages is, above all else, important to Ellis because it allows women to read a broader range of texts. Reading is quite possibly the most important part of Ellis's educational scheme, since reading can serve a two-fold purpose of allowing a woman the opportunity to educate herself, as well as the chance to indulge in the aesthetic. Ellis believed that reading a variety of texts was of the utmost importance. While debates went on in the papers about the appropriate reading material for young women, Ellis gave her answer in the form of an anthology, *The Young Ladies' Reader; or, Extracts from Modern Authors* (1845). Ellis's introduction, aptly titled —The Art of

Reading Well as Connected with Social Improvement," is an invective on the failure of most schools to properly educate girls in the art of reading aloud. "The habit of reading aloud, and reading well, is most especially important to women," she argues, "because of the amount of time usually occupied by them in quiet and sedentary employments. Mind has very little to do with a vast proportion of these employements" (13). Ellis at once acknowledges that intellect is not important for most of a woman's duties, and argues that women should engage in more intellectual activities. She argues that reading aloud allows women to think outside of themselves—it keeps them from focusing too much on selfish thoughts. In this way, Ellis suggests that reading plays a role in maintaining a woman's morality.

However, the texts Ellis proposes are not necessarily of a "moral" nature. In fact, she specifically explains that this is not her purpose in compiling her anthology. Instead, she explains that the majority of the existing collections—those that are focused on teaching good morals—are "not in general calculated to be in the highest degree either attractive or interesting to young readers of the present day" (18-19). Thus, in order to render her anthology "really attractive," she chooses texts that "maintain a certain relation to popular feeling; and, to be rendered really interesting, [are] of such length as to be influential in the formation of true literary taste" (19). It seems that Ellis's goal is not to teach morals, but "taste." She even goes so far as to suggest that some "of the least objectionable" novels might be appropriate reading (16). Here it is clear that Ellis's principles are not altogether in alignment with the conventional belief that women's education should focus on moral decency and household duties. As a result, the anthology includes such diverse authors as Edmund Burke, Robert Southey, Washington

Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hannah More, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Charles Dickens, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Harriet Martineau. This diversity belies any notion that women should confine their intellectual pursuits to moral matters.

Ellis's recommendations for the intellectual education of girls are especially interesting because she appears to give merit to study for the sake of study. Frequently girls' education covered topics such as foreign languages and a dilettantish smattering of other subjects to prepare the students to be more engaging companions for men (Nelson 78). Ellis does not deny that this is a benefit of such an education, but she does not make this the ultimate purpose. In *The Education of Character* (1856), when Ellis writes, "Human character, then, is of a threefold nature,—physical, intellectual, and moral. These three elements must always be combined, and considered, in the making of human character," she allows for training in each of these areas to be beneficial to the overall balance of the individual learner (*Education* 18). It is worth noting too that she does not distinguish between men and women in this instance—intellect is important outside of gender. Ellis encourages intellectual pursuits for women for their own benefit, not for the benefit of their future husbands. This is important in establishing women as independent individuals.

Physical Education

Like Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote "I find that strength of mind has, in most cases, been accompanied by superior strength of body" (38), Ellis argued that physical activity was an essential part of a woman's life. Both authors couch their argument for

physical fitness in the idea that it will make women better wives. However, both are also clearly aware that a certain degree of strength also allows for a greater amount of independence. Both women are careful to demonstrate that feminine weakness is a detriment to both sexes. In Chapter Six of *The Daughters of England*, "Beauty, Health, and Temper," Ellis gives rules for keeping young women healthy in body as well as spirit. Her first rule, and arguably the most important, is simple: "let one hour every day, generally two, and sometimes three, be spent in taking exercise in the open air, either on horseback or on foot" (135). She stresses the importance of exercise by arguing that a great portion of physical illnesses, indeed, "all those disorders which in common parlance, and for want of a more definite and scientific name, are called bilious," are the result of a lack of physical activity (136). Ellis writes:

> Want of exercise, indigestion, and many other causes originating in the state of the body, have a powerful effect in destroying the sweetness of the temper; while habitual exercise, regular diet, and occasional change in air, are amongst the most certain means of restoring the temper from any temporary derangement. (142)

Ellis argues that insufficient attention to one's physical health not only leads to weak, sickly women, but perhaps worst of all, disagreeable ones. Ultimately, all of these attributes, even disagreeableness, risk diminishing a woman's power both over herself and others.

Ellis's idealization of physically healthy women opposes the popular Victorian association between woman's weakness and beauty. Helena Michie, in *The Flesh Made Word,* discusses the Victorian tendency to esteem physical weakness, thinness, and even anorexia as desirable feminine characteristics. Michie explains that "weakness and pallor became signs of beauty" (20). She goes on to note that "the most positive female characters in nineteenth-century novels are most often frail and weak," while "Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontës, and even George Eliot use plumpness in their female characters as a sign of a fallen nature" (22). Ellis resists this ideology by promoting a healthy, "regular diet," along with exercise—activities which are likely to produce robust, though perhaps not plump, women. She rejects feminine weakness as either ideal or innate; for Ellis, the ideal woman is strong enough to take care of herself and others. Further, Ellis argues that healthy women have "sweeter tempers," which is a most advantageous attribute in a woman if she is to succeed in persuading (read controlling) those around her to act as she desires.

For essentially these same reasons as Ellis, Wollstonecraft also criticizes the excessive physical constraint which she believes is prevalent in girls' schools. Without free exercise in the open air, Wollstonecraft laments:

> [T]he pure animal spirits, which make both mind and body shoot out, and unfold the tender blossoms of hope, are turned sour, and vented in the temper; else they mount to the brain, and sharpening the pitiful understanding before it gains proportionable strength, produce that pitiful

> cunning which disgracefully characterized the female mind (Wollstonecraft 164).

Although Ellis would not likely use the term ―pure animal spirits" to signify something wonderful, the gist of the two arguments is the same: physical imbalance leads to mental imbalance. Ellis effectively gives a slightly tamer version of Wollstonecraft's position. Significantly, in Chapter Four of *The Education of Character*, Ellis takes pains to explain that it is normal in children to be governed by the ―animal" instincts, but like many Victorian authors, she suggests that the animal side of human nature is something that must be controlled—if an adult is governed only by these instincts, he is, in Ellis's words, a ―savage" (*Education* 58). Thus Ellis's argument moves both ways: mental imbalance can also lead to physical imbalance. Both aspects of one's character must be strong or else one will be either sickly or savage.

It is interesting that, despite Victorian concerns that physical activity could have potentially dangerous effects on a young woman's morality, Ellis is so focused on the opposite problem. Indeed, she claims that a lack of physical activity is a cause of moral turpitude amongst young women. Afflicted with slight ailments as a result of physical inactivity, Ellis explains, ―we sometimes find a fretfulness and petulance […] which are as much at variance with the moral dignity of woman, as opposed to her religious influence" (*Daughters* 141). For Ellis, a woman's failure to take proper care of her physical health is also a failure in her duties as a woman. A weak woman will be less able to influence those around her, and it is a woman's influence that is her greatest power.

Ellis also uses the more conservative argument that it is a woman's part to take care of others, and as much as possible, not to be a burden. If, as a result of poor health brought about by her own carelessness, a woman becomes dependent on her family and friends, this is an inexcusable form of selfishness. Ellis explains that it is important for women

> to remember, that the constitution of the body, as well as that of the mind, is, in a good degree, of their own forming; that the season of youth is the time when the seeds of disease are most generally sown; and that no one thus circumstanced, can suffer a loss of health without inflicting the penalty of anxious solicitude, and, frequently, of unremitting personal exertion upon those by whom she is surrounded, or beloved (*Daughters* 134).

Her concern is almost identical to Wollstonecraft's statement in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that, "The baneful consequences which flow from inattention to health during infancy, and youth, extend further than is supposed—dependence of body naturally produces dependence of mind; and how can she be a good wife or mother, the greater part of whose time is employed to guard against or endure sickness?" (43). Both Ellis and Wollstonecraft argue that illnesses in adulthood often stem from inattention to health in youth. Further, both argue that these illnesses are injurious not only to the invalid, but also to those around her. Thus their arguments about the benefits of physical

exercise are parallel. Where the two women's argument about physical strength diverges, however, is in their explanation of who is at fault.

Although Ellis asks "for all the sins and the follies, and they are many, for which beauty has formed the excuse, has not man been the abettor, if not the cause?" (*Daughters* 123), her regimen makes women responsible for taking care of their own health. Since she describes women's constitutions as mainly "of their own forming," the power, and therefore the blame, is in their hands. Wollstonecraft, meanwhile, is less apt to blame women, and focuses more on the role men play in keeping women physically passive and weak. Ironically, in this way Ellis suggests that women have a greater degree of agency than Wollstonecraft allows. If Ellis's chief concern in the formation of young women is to give them the ability to sustain as great a degree of independence as possible, it is not surprising that she is so adamant in arguing for physical improvement. She argues that one's physical condition is something that a woman can control—in essence it is part of her sphere of influence—and she suggests that by maintaining a healthy body a woman can better control other parts of her life, since a sick woman is truly at the mercy of those around her. Thus Ellis's emphasis on physical health, which contrasts with Victorian norms, is a form of agency as resistant self-direction. Rather than abiding by the ideal of a fragile and therefore dependent woman, she encourages activities that will develop a woman's strength and independence.

Moral Education

At first glance, Ellis's emphasis on morality as an important aspect of women's education may seem to be the most conservative part of her plan, but even in this

department, her chief goal appears to be female independence. In Chapter Eleven of *The Daughters of England* Ellis writes, "the three great enemies to a woman's advancement in moral excellence" are "selfishness, vanity, and artifice, as opposed to her disinterestedness, simplicity of heart, and integrity" (241). For the most part, Ellis's approach to morality in this chapter is as expected: she focuses on the humble undertaking of good works as the best way for a woman to avoid selfishness, vanity and artifice. But while she promotes service, nowhere in this chapter is a hint of subservience. If anything, part of Ellis's recipe for morality involves maintaining independence. She argues for moral autonomy as a necessary aspect of a more broadly understood female morality. Dependence, she argues, is often a form of selfishness, while independence is required for a woman to maintain moral rectitude. This is partially because a dependent woman requires the service of others and an independent woman is able to serve, but it is also because a woman must behave according to certain moral principles regardless of the principles of others, particularly men, who may attempt to influence her.

By far the most interesting part of Ellis's lesson on morality is her discussion of integrity. Although she claims that integrity goes far beyond good business practice, she spends the last quarter of the chapter vehemently arguing that women need to be principled in their use of money. She writes, "I believe there is nothing in the usages of society more fatal to the interests of mankind, to the spiritual progress of individuals, or to the general wellbeing of the human soul, than laxity of principle as regards our pecuniary dealings with each other" (257). The genderless language in this passage suggests that business is an issue for both sexes, not only men, as is generally assumed,

nor only Ellis‘s female audience. Whereas participation in business is often considered outside of a woman‘s sphere, Ellis not only believes that women can be good businesswomen, she also makes good business sense central to feminine morality.

At first Ellis only seems occupied with explaining the dangers of incurring debt, especially a debt to a gentleman who is not a relative:

> In order to act out the principles of integrity in all their dignity, and all their purity, it is highly important, too, that young women should begin in early life to entertain a scrupulous delicacy with regard to incurring pecuniary obligations; and especially, never to throw themselves upon the politeness of gentlemen, to pay the minutest sum in the way of procuring for them gratification, or indulgence. (*Daughters* 258)

Implicit in this passage is the idea that a man may expect something from a woman, in return for paying her debts, which she is not prepared to give. But Ellis does not dwell on this topic. Rather than giving a lengthy commentary on sexual impropriety, she turns her discussion of integrity into an argument for feminine independence. Ultimately, she explains, ―if you have not the means of defraying your own charges, it is plain that you have no right to enjoy your pleasures at the expense of another" (258). Ellis argues for self-reliance above all else.

This financial self-reliance extends beyond simply avoiding debt. Ellis offers practical advice for conducting business transactions of all sorts. ―All matters of business," she writes, ―should also be adjusted as fairly, and as promptly, with friends

and near relations, as with strangers; and all things in such cases should be as clearly understood" (259). These "matters of business" might include gift giving, loans or even sales. This type of advice strays from the standard Victorian belief that women should not engage in business because it is morally dangerous. The ideology of separate spheres, as I will discuss at length in Chapter Three, was based largely on the idea that the public sphere had a corrupting effect, and that women could preserve not only their own morals, but also those of their husbands, by maintaining the morally superior sphere of the home. As Mary Poovey discusses in *Uneven Developments*, the public sphere, where business was transacted, was linked with ideas about male nature as "competitive, aggressive, and acquisitive," which stood in contrast to female nature which, governed by maternal instincts, was quite the opposite (Poovey 77). Indeed, disinterestedness and selflessness, virtues that Ellis extols, appear to directly oppose the tenants of capitalism. Nevertheless, Ellis suggests that engaging in business properly adds to one's integrity. Moreover, her advice is directed towards expanding a woman's economic independence while maintaining her virtue. To this extent, Ellis collapses the public and private spheres, acknowledging that the home and the marketplace necessarily overlap, but that this overlap need not be a corrupting influence.

Overall, Ellis's plan for female education aims to produce thoughtful, robust, independent women who are also morally superior. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft asks:

> Do passive indolent women make the best wives? Confining our discussion to the present moment of existence, let us see how such weak

> creatures perform their part? Do the women who, by the attainment of a few superficial accomplishments, have strengthened the prevailing prejudice, merely contribute to the happiness of their husbands? Do they display their charms merely to amuse them? And have women, who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience, sufficient character to manage a family or educate children? (Wollstonecraft 35)

Ellis's response is a resounding no. Considering the broad range of texts Ellis read, it seems likely that she was familiar with Mary Wollstonecraft. Although Wollstonecraft was very rarely mentioned in the mid-nineteenth century, she was nevertheless well known. Barbara Caine argues that while mid-Victorian authors distanced themselves from Wollstonecraft, largely because of William Godwin's account of her scandalous life, the handful of Victorian essays about Wollstonecraft show that she was "not so much unknown" but rather "carefully and consciously avoided" (Caine 262). Therefore, the absence of direct mention of Wollstonecraft in Ellis's writings is not necessarily due to any ignorance of Wollstonecraft's works. More likely, Ellis avoids mentioning Wollstonecraft because the public image of Wollstonecraft as a less-than-proper woman would undermine Ellis's own public image as an icon of morality. Meanwhile, Ellis's arguments for female education suggest that she is offering an updated version of Wollstonecraft, designed to appeal to Victorian sensibilities. Ellis's ideal woman is more than a pretty face; she has broad accomplishments that will allow her to survive with or without a husband. Moreover, as I will discuss at length in later chapters, the accomplishments that Ellis emphasizes most are intended not to make women more

amusing company, but to make them more influential. Ultimately, Ellis's women are in control of themselves as well as those around them; they have agency.

Northern Roses: The Importance of Self-reliance

Ellis's 1868 novel *Northern Roses: A Yorkshire Tale* not only reinforces Ellis's views on education; it also works to demonstrate more clearly the importance of self-reliance. Ellis defies Victorian norms in a variety of ways through the text, including her construction of women in relation to parental influence, horseback riding, domestic duty, marriage proposals, and financial issues. While environment plays a role in influencing the characters, in the end it is up to the young women themselves to gain an appropriate education, and from there, to direct their lives. The two female protagonists, Bessy Bell and Alice Gray, each demonstrate the effects of varying upbringings on character and the necessity for women to think and act autonomously.

Bessy Bell and Alice Gray are cousins, only six months apart in age, and have ~~–an~~ intimacy closer than is often found in sisters" (*Northern Roses* 1: 11). Their formal education has been almost identical: ~~–th~~ey had been sent to the same boarding-school at a little country town, and they had returned home together which much the same results, except for a slight difference in the line of their accomplishments" (1: 12). However, their education at home is radically different, and this contributes to their very different fates. In her description of the home life of the two girls, Ellis produces a cautionary tale for both young women and their parents, especially fathers, whose influence she emphasizes.

In terms of personalities, Bessy and Alice are very different. Bessy sings and plays boisterously, and enjoys public attention. In contrast, Alice also has more quiet achievements than her cousin; for example, instead of music she prefers painting. Alice's avoidance of showy displays of her skill is in keeping with Victorian standards of feminine modesty, while Bessy's behavior is described as being at times inappropriate. These differences appear to have their origins in the home-life of each girl; Ellis clearly shows how education outside of school can impact a young woman's future.

Early on, the novel suggests that the differences between the cousins are due in large part to the personalities and philosophies of their parents. Interestingly, Ellis deemphasizes the necessity of a mother in this text. Bessy comes from a large family, and her mother, Mrs. Bell, is too occupied with her other children to give Bessy, the eldest, much attention. At the start of the novel, Bessy has already "outgrown entirely the influence of her mother" (1: 71). Because it is too much trouble for her to control Bessy, Mrs. Bell avoids asking her daughter for help. Indeed, on the occasions when Bessy determines to make herself useful, "it was so much the opposite of help, that Mrs. Bell grew, in time, rather to prefer that her daughter should absent herself entirely when anything important had to be done" (1: 73). As a result, Bessy is essentially given no domestic responsibilities.

While Bessy is left to her own devices because her mother seems too preoccupied with other business to take care of her oldest daughter, Alice "was a motherless girl, and perhaps from that circumstance had early learned the necessity of greater caution in her own life and conduct" (16). Because her mother died shortly after Alice's birth, "she was a mere child when the management of her father's house was at first committed to her"

(1: 29). In comparison to Bessy, who has no responsibilities at home and therefore no knowledge of domestic economy and no ability to manage a household, Alice has more of these skills than can naturally be expected in a girl of her age. Although she has no mother to learn from, Alice receives a good education in housewifery while Bessy effectively receives none. This education is perhaps most important because Alice develops a degree of self-reliance, whereas Bessy is quite literally unable to take care of herself or her home.

Interestingly, although it is suggested that Bessy's mother is at part to blame for her daughter's wild behavior, Ellis lays a great deal of responsibility for the girls' differences on their fathers. Bessy's father, Tom, has "a constitutional tendency to jollification, good living, open-handedness, carelessness about the future" (1: 62-3). He has "no fear" about his children (1: 63). As long as they are happy he is not concerned about their future. He allows Bessy to ride in the hunt with the men, causing the neighbors to wonder "that her father did not take better care of her, or rather keep her more at home" (1: 14). Tom is either unable or unwilling to discipline his children, and for Bessy, this has dire consequences. She essentially takes after her father in his preference for pleasure and disregard for the future. These clearly represent traits that Ellis finds problematic in members of both sexes.

Alice's father, James Gray, is completely unlike his brother-in-law. Mr. Gray is "a man of great personal gravity and weight" (1: 64). Far from perfect, Mr. Gray is described as secretly power-hungry and self-interested. Yet he serves his community as a Methodist preacher and overall wishes his neighbors well. At the beginning of the novel, his children, Alice and her brother Robert, respect their father and value his opinion in all

things. Although his negative qualities nearly bring the family to ruin, Mr. Gray's grave approach to life clearly contributes to his daughter's more serious attitude. In comparing the two fathers and their daughters, Ellis demonstrates that a father's example can have a profound impact on his daughter.

Ellis's willingness to acknowledge the fathers' influence is unsurprising given what is known about her own life, but it also falls outside of Victorian norms. In *A Man's Place*, John Tosh notes, "fatherhood held a decidedly ambiguous position in the culture and practice of Victorian family life" (Tosh 79). This ambiguity, he argues, was largely due to fatherhood's "location in the private sphere" (79), which seemed at odds with the period's division of public and private spheres along gender lines. Claudia Nelson, in *Family Ties in Victorian England,* writes, "their major domestic responsibility was played out in the public rather than the private sphere: they were to earn the money that sustained the family" (Nelson 47). This model leaves the father's role in the home uncertain. Ellis demonstrates that the father's role as wage-earner was not the limit of his influence. Although she discusses how Tom Bell and James Grey provide for their families, it is actually their personalities, passed on to their children through day to day interactions, which have the most impact. Whereas Victorian parenting manuals intended for women generally placed emphasis on the influence of the mother's moral character on her children, the father's moral influence was seldom discussed. Nevertheless, it is clear in *Northern Roses* that fathers can have the same type of influence upon their children.

While Alice and Bessy both have characteristics that are influenced by their parents, both girls also demonstrate an essential point: it is up to the young woman to educate herself in the areas where her parents fail her. Bessy clearly does not take the

initiative in this area. Since her mother does not have time to educate her in domestic affairs, she is satisfied not to learn, and since her father willingly rides with her in the hunt, Bessy is pleased to follow. Alice specifically points to the absence of her mother as a reason for her sense of domestic duty as well as her independence. When she confronts Bessy about some behavior that she feels is inappropriate, she explains the source of her moral center:

> Remember I had no mother to watch over me, as you had. I was obliged to take care of myself. Perhaps, too, I was a naturally greater coward than you. However that might be, I believe that very early in life I acquired this habit—when I clearly saw a thing to be wrong, and did not want to do it because it was wrong, I went a long way round to get out of the way of it, I would not even look at it. (*Northern Roses* 2: 216)

Alice reproaches Bessy for not doing for herself what her parents were unable to do for her. It is Alice's independence that serves her best, while Bessy's complacency with regard to her moral and domestic education eventually causes her a great deal of grief.

Another aspect of the cousins' home life and education that Ellis uses to distinguish between them is their riding accomplishments. Despite the fact that both girls enjoy horseback riding, Ellis highlights differences in their riding that separate Bessy's unruly style from Alice's more appropriate behavior. When Bessy rides in the hunt, some find her handsome to look upon, while others ~~"s~~aid it was a scandal and a shame for a girl to throw her life away in that mad style" (1: 14). Although Alice is a ~~"c~~apital

horsewoman" (1: 12)—better than her cousin—she finds Bessy's participation in the hunt to be "utterly revolting to her tastes" (1: 15). While Ellis mentions horseback riding as an excellent means of physical exercise in *The Daughters of England*, in *Northern Roses* she takes the opportunity to distinguish between riding that is healthy and riding that is morally dangerous.

Ellis's focus on the horseback riding habits of the cousins can be read as a response to the "horsey woman" who became a central figure in debates on gender in the 1850s and 1860s. Horsewomen figured prominently in a variety of popular literature, from *Punch* to sensation novels. Alison Matthews David divides the frequent caricatures of horsewomen that appeared in *Punch* in the 1850s into two categories: the "husband-taming virago, a modern Atalanta who outpaced her suitors while her mount kicked sod in their face" and the "vain, fashion-conscious girl, whose horse's mane and tail matched her own chignons" (David 197). Bessy certainly appears to be the latter—she rides above all else in order to show off, and it isn't only her hairstyle that seems to match her horse. Ellis describes her in clearly horse-like terms, "riding with a jaunty kind of hat, and a profusion of rich brown hair floating on the wind in natural curls, her cheek flushed, her eyes flashing, and her white teeth gleaming" (1: 13). Bessy's horsiness accentuates her untamed character, at once beautiful and dangerous.

While *Punch* suggested that the reverse of the horsewoman of fashion was a masculine woman, Ellis attempts to prove otherwise. Alice's exceptional skill does not make her masculine at all. Instead, Ellis demonstrates that a woman can be a skilled horsewoman without losing her femininity; that is, a proper horsewoman does not necessarily conflict with the Victorian construction of femininity. Ellis ensures that

Alice's femininity is strictly under control. Gina Dorré, in *Victorian Fiction and the Cult of the Horse*, argues that ~~t~~he horse-riding heroine is an oft-used trope in Victorian fiction, employed to explore, incite, and often conciliate the contradictions written into middle-class women's traditional roles" (Dorré 80-1). Ellis uses her heroine to prove that a woman can fulfill traditional gender roles while also enjoying horseback riding. Through Alice she demonstrates that riding is an acceptable pastime for a young lady and need not affect her ability to perform her duties.

As the novel progresses, Alice repeatedly succeeds in the domestic sphere, which is eventually tied to her successes in the public sphere. Meanwhile, Bessy is constantly out of place. Above all, Alice's success is tied to her sense of duty—a concept that Bessy cares for very little. When a visitor, Captain Gordon, is injured at the hunt, although Bessy is at the scene of the accident, it is Alice who comes to the rescue and nurses him back to health. Captain Gordon remains at the Gray house for an extended period, during which Alice tends to him with enduring patience despite his less than admirable characteristics. She acknowledges her duty, saying ~~i~~it is our business to save him—my business" (1: 39). Later in the novel, Alice shows a similar sense of duty with regard to financial matters. In the broadest sense, Alice acts upon duty regularly by taking the initiative to do whatever is necessary wherever she sees a need. This attention to duty fulfills a conservative view of women's roles, but Ellis also uses duty as a gap for the exercise of moral autonomy. In the name of duty, Alice is able to assume authority and independence, thus undoing the conservative definition of duty as submission and obedience.

Bessy, much like her father, has very little sense of duty. Instead, she seeks enjoyment with little regard for consequences. While her fiancé, Alice's brother Robert, works long and hard to prepare their future home, Bessy plays with her dogs, rides horses, and worst of all, strikes up a relationship with the recovered Captain Gordon. Despite both Alice and Robert's warnings that her flirtation with Captain Gordon is unacceptable and may result in the end of her engagement, Bessy continues to spend more time visiting with the Captain than preparing for her marriage. She does not attend to any of the domestic affairs generally considered necessary before a wedding. Although Bessy genuinely means no harm by spending time with Gordon, she appears so thoroughly ambivalent about duty both with regard to her household and to her future husband that finally, after urging her repeatedly to break off her discourse with Captain Gordon, Robert calls off the engagement after catching Bessy once again alone in the man's company.

One way in which Bessy fails to achieve Ellis's ideal here can be described in terms of agency as self-definition. She does not, as Kathryn Abrams argues a feminist agent will, recognize ~~th~~he way that one's self, and one's self-conception, are socially constituted" (Abrams 825). Indeed, Bessy seems fully unaware of her societal position as a betrothed woman, and this lack of awareness makes it impossible for her actions to have meaning as a form of true resistance. Although Bessy is not exactly a fallen woman, her fate is similar precisely because she does not negotiate social constructs, and this inability to negotiate is due to an inability to recognize their very existence. In essence, Bessy lacks agency, and for this she pays the ultimate price.

Through Bessy, Ellis clearly issues a warning to her reader regarding the difference between fun and happiness. Bessy "had grasped enjoyment wherever she could find it, and she had dashed her happiness as thoughtlessly away" (3: 301). Because riding with Captain Gordon was more enjoyable than embroidering linens for her new home, Bessy ruins her chances of future happiness. In the end, the realization that Robert will no longer marry her proves too much for Bessy's constitution, and seemingly as a result of the broken engagement she becomes ill. After lingering for many months Bessy dies of an illness which resembles consumption, but which is most obviously linked to a broken heart. While this can be read as punishment for errant heroine, it also accentuates Bessy's lack of independence since she apparently cannot survive without Robert's love and furthermore proves unable to take care of her own health. Ellis goes so far as to suggest that Bessy's happiness in the hereafter may have been injured as well, stating that "there are no mourners at once so sad and so silent as those who cannot speak of a certain ground for Christian consolation" and Bessy's mourners "were all silent on this subject" (3: 301-2).

While Bessy's story in one respect reinforces certain conservative views on social interactions between men and women, the text also links Bessy's fate to her lack of both agency and autonomy. Bessy claims that she wishes to act morally, but she is easily swayed to do "wrong" by Captain Gordon. She does not exert moral independence (autonomy), but allows Captain Gordon to convince her repeatedly to meet him in private. This lack of autonomy is linked to both Bessy's broken engagement and her subsequent death. Bessy's punishment in the text cannot therefore be wholly attributed to

the fact of her clandestine meetings with Captain Gordon; instead, Bessy's death can be understood as Ellis's response to women who fail to act as autonomous agents.

Still, while Ellis may be read as conservative when it comes to social interactions between men and women, she is clearly radical when it comes to allowing women to make important decisions entirely independently. On three separate occasions Alice interacts with men who are not members of her family and makes decisions during those interactions without consulting her male relatives. In each instance, her actions are most commendable precisely because she functions autonomously by relying on her own moral compass, instead of allowing any man, family or otherwise, to influence her choices.

The first instance in which Alice's strength is tested occurs in the first section of the novel, during the period when Captain Gordon is recovering in Alice's care. When the Captain's behavior appears somewhat inappropriate, whether due to his suspect character or simply due to his illness, Alice ponders how to react:

> Sometimes she thought of consulting her brother, and then her womanly instinct came to her aid, and she kept the matter to herself, thinking—what was very true—that if she could not find out how it was best to act, her brother could not tell her. The simple thing was to act out her own individual convictions, to do right at the precise moment for acting, and to see with a discriminating eye what it was best to do, so as never to be surprised into a dilemma. (1: 108)

Alice determines to rely on herself, apparently realizing that she is more likely to act properly if she acts independently. Indeed, shortly after this point, when Captain Gordon proposes marriage, Alice quietly rejects him without ever letting anyone in her family know the proposal even occurred. She exercises moral autonomy in rejecting Captain Gordon based on her ―individual convictions," but this is also an instance where she demonstrates agency, since she chooses, with full awareness that social norms dictate that she ought to consult her father or brother, to self-direct.[3]

Later in the novel Alice is faced with another marriage proposal, and again she resists the temptation to allow a man's judgment to sway her. Slowly Alice begins to suspect that her father's finances are in disarray. Her suspicions are confirmed when her father's lawyer, an altogether slimy character named Mr. Spink, threatens to bring the family to ruin unless Alice agrees to marry him. Rather than being swayed either by fear of Mr. Spink or by concern for her family's future, Alice rejects Mr. Spink on the spot, declaring that she would prefer the workhouse to becoming his wife. While it appears that Mr. Gray had expected Alice to marry Mr. Spink, she maintains her independence not only by acting on her own moral principles but also by avoiding marriage to a man who would no doubt take advantage of the legal control marriage lends to a husband. Rather than criticizing Alice's decision to reject Mr. Spink against her father's wishes, Ellis presents Alice's display of moral autonomy as laudable.

Ellis's attention to financial issues in *The Daughters of England* is also echoed here, where the female characters must take care of the finances in the absence of competent men. Alice and Bessy's widowed grandmother, Mrs. Gray, serves as a role

[3] Alice's actions here are remarkably similar to Abram's example of resistant self-direction as a response to sexual harassment. See ―From Autonomy to Agency: Feminist Perspectives on Self-Direction" pages 833-4.

model in this respect. Alice regards her grandmother as ―one to trust more to her own judgment than to that of any other person" (3: 160). When her father asks Alice whether he can trust Mrs. Gray's lawyer, she responds, ―I don't think [grandmother] would consult a lawyer, so much as she would get him to do for her what she herself had planned" (3: 160). Ironically, Mr. Gray desperately needs to consult a lawyer because his financial affairs are spinning out of control. Thus, while Mrs. Gray demonstrates independence in controlling her financial affairs, Mr. Gray is dependent on others.

Ellis's position on women and wealth in *Northern Roses* reflects a consciousness of the significant numbers of women who, whether spinsters or widows, had control of their own wealth. Seventeen years before the publication of *Northern Roses*, the 1851 census revealed that over forty percent of women over twenty were either widows or spinsters, and in most cases these women were legally in charge of their own finances. David Green and Alastair Owens, in ―Gentlewomanly capitalism: Spinsters, widows, and wealth holding in England and Wales, c. 1800-1860," demonstrate the extent to which these women were involved in capitalist enterprises. Women constituted an important and growing percentage of investors in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, by 1840, 47.2 percent of investors in government securities were women (Green 524). Thus, while the ideology of the angel in the house may have excluded women from pecuniary affairs, reality pushed large numbers of women to be substantially involved in governing their own wealth. Ellis represents this reality in her text, and further represents the grandmother's mind for money as respectable and commendable. Mrs. Gray's financial understanding actually strengthens her position in the household, rather than damaging it.

When Alice discovers that her father's finances are in even worse condition than she imagined, and that he is actually on the brink of bankruptcy, she follows her grandmother's example and takes it upon herself to find a solution. Although she consults Robert, she quickly determines that her brother is too distraught after his break-up with Bessy to be truly useful. Her first act is to visit a new neighbor, Henry Staunton, who she believes may be on the brink of lending her father money which she knows cannot be repaid. Staunton is shocked to be visited by a woman so intent on candidly discussing financial matters, but he nevertheless takes her proposal—that he buy Mr. Gray's farm and rent it back to the family—seriously. Later, when Staunton speaks to Robert about the idea, Robert comments that Staunton ~~w~~would not consider [Alice] very competent to undertake any business transaction" (3: 153), but Staunton claims, ~~I~~think quite the contrary" (3: 154). In fact, rather than seeing her as ~~m~~eddling" or ~~b~~old," as Robert fears, Staunton admires Alice's initiative. In keeping with Ellis's advice in *Daughters* that women should never ~~th~~row themselves upon the politeness of gentlemen, to pay the minutest sum in the way of procuring for them gratification, or indulgence" (*Daughters* 258), when Staunton proposes marriage, Alice only agrees with the caveat that she will not marry him until all of her father's debts are paid. At the end of the novel Alice and Henry Staunton marry, apparently destined to be very happy because Alice has so scrupulously guarded her honor by paying off the debt without allowing Staunton to help.

Ellis rejects the fairy tale ending by ensuring that her heroine saves herself. Alice's independence in this regard not only demonstrates greater moral integrity, as Ellis suggests it should in *Daughters*, but it also wins her the love of a very worthy and

respectable man. There can be no doubt that *Northern Roses* is a typical moralistic domestic novel with a marriage ending, but the moral is perhaps not what we might expect. Nowhere does Ellis suggest that women should suffer in silence at the whim of the men in their lives, nor does she suggest that women ought to confine themselves to the kitchen and the parlor. Although Alice fulfills the expected domestic duties, her defining characteristic is her ability to think and act independently and with moral integrity. She demonstrates both moral autonomy and agency. Ultimately, these qualities prove significantly more important in ensuring her lifelong happiness than any other skill she possesses. Her triumph stands in stark contrast to Bessy's downfall, which is largely caused by Bessy's tendency to be too easily swayed by others.

Overall, Ellis's educational scheme is designed to give women the tools to act independently. She instructs her readers to learn how to take care of themselves physically, financially, and morally. In the end however, through Bessy and Alice, Ellis shows that even education only goes so far. The personal drive to be independent is also required. Ellis makes independence a moral imperative, and thereby opposes the conservative Victorian depiction of the ideal woman as subservient and obedient to father, brother, or husband. She allows women agency, but she also challenges them to use it.

This chapter has focused on the formation of independent women, but learning to be independent is only a part of the battle. Since, under the law of coverture, marriage stripped women of their financial and legal independence, entering the marriage state clearly posed a problem for an author like Ellis. Female agency is specifically threatened by Victorian marriage laws. The following two chapters will focus on how Ellis instructs

women to maintain agency and even gain power in marriage despite the imposed legal dependence that accompanied the title of wife.

II

Consensus Facit Nuptias:

Courtship, Broken Engagements, and Women's Needs

> It is one of the greatest misfortunes to which women are liable, that they cannot, consistently with female delicacy, cultivate, before an engagement is made, an acquaintance sufficiently intimate to lead to the discovery of certain facts which would at once decide the point, whether it was prudent to proceed further towards taking that step, which is universally acknowledged to be the most important in a woman's life. (12)
>
> Sarah Stickney Ellis
> *The Wives of England*

In *The Wives of England, their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (1843), Sarah Stickney Ellis laments the naiveté of so many young brides, who rush to the altar without sufficient knowledge of either their future husband or their future duties as a wife. While the quote above seems almost to foresee the modern concept of ~~"d~~dating," Ellis's concern stems largely from two of the important aspects of marriage in the Victorian period: the doctrine of separate spheres, which prevented most women from truly getting to know their fiancés before the wedding, and the near absence of divorce. Marriage was the ultimate commitment, not only to an individual but to wifehood and the Victorian dogma associated with that role. Although marriage was not a decision to be taken lightly, many women entered marriage with very limited knowledge of their partners.

In *Commentaries on the Laws of England,* William Blackstone lays out two simple criteria necessary for individuals to marry: they must be both able and willing. According to Blackstone, ~~"in~~ general, all persons are able to contract themselves in marriage, unless they labour under some particular disabilities and incapacities" (434).

Relation by blood or by marriage, want of age, want of consent from guardians, pre-existing marriages, or want of reason are the five chief grounds for determining that individuals cannot marry. Therefore, any two sane people of sufficient age, not related to one another and not already married, should be able to marry. As for willingness to marry, Blackstone cites the maxim "*consensus, non concubitus, facit nuptias*" (434), that is, "consent, not copulation, constitutes marriage." This principle was a double-edged sword in Victorian culture. On one hand, it allowed men to engage in intercourse with women without serious consequences. Premarital sex, though socially disastrous for middle and upper-class women, was with but few exceptions both legally and socially innocuous for men. On the other hand, the law benefited women by giving them the right to refuse to marry a man, regardless of her prior relationship with him. Since a woman lost most of her legal rights under coverture[1] and divorce was virtually not an option in the early Victorian period, a woman's right to reject a suitor is of key concern in her ability to control her own fate.

It is precisely this right to choose *not* to marry a man that Ellis focuses on in the first chapter of *The Wives of England,* as well as some of her fiction. Instead of furthering the conventional idea that women should always be self-sacrificing, surprisingly, much of Ellis's writing on courtship and engagements encourages women to put their own needs first when choosing a husband. She advocates egalitarian marriages, where mutual respect and influence benefit both husband and wife. Yet while she argues that women must seek husbands who will be their equals, her commentary suggests that such men are difficult to find. Therefore, her writing on courtship emphasizes practical

[1] Coverture describes the legal position of married women, at which time they are 'covered' by their husbands and have no separate legal identity. For more on coverture see page 64.

advice for choosing a partner who will treat his wife as an equal, despite the inequities in the law. In the absence of such a potential husband, she advocates celibacy.

So much of Ellis's writing about courtship focuses on bad marriages that it is something of a challenge to find her describing good men. Descriptions of good men are entirely missing from the first chapter of *The Wives of England*, but in a later chapter, "Characteristics of Men," and in the chapter "Love and Courtship" in *The Daughters of England*, a few can be found. Interestingly, Ellis's good men sound very much like the Victorian standard for "good women."

The "angel in the house,"[2] the Victorian icon of the domestic woman, was "a quasi-spiritual being selflessly dispensing love and moral guidance to her family, largely untroubled by wayward personal desires" (Adams 129). Although Ellis complicates this model in numerous ways, most noticeably in her admission that women cannot be completely selfless, in terms of action, Ellis's ideal woman is the traditional, loving and morally guiding woman. However, while the "angel in the house" was a feminine ideal in Victorian culture, Ellis's domestic angels are not necessarily female. While the specific term "angel in the house" came into use well after the publication of *The Wives of England*, Ellis uses the word angel to describe the best of both genders. She directly compares good men with angels, explaining:

> [I]n the character of a noble, enlightened, and truly good man, there is a power and a sublimity, so nearly approaching what we believe to be the

[2] This phrase comes from Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem *The Angel in the House*. Although the poem was published over a decade after *The Wives of England* (1843), the feminine ideal which has come to define the phrase "angel in the house" is an archetype found throughout Victorian literature. Alice Grey, in Ellis's *Northern Roses*, is one example of an "angel in the house".

> nature and capacity of angels, that as no feeling can exceed, so no language can describe, the degree of admiration and respect which the contemplation of such a man must excite. (*Wives* 65)

Just like the ―angel in the house," such male domestic angels wield an apparent power to positively influence those around them. Yet this statement leaves something wanting in the description of good men, since as Ellis says, ―no language" can suffice.

A few pages later Ellis elaborates on her sketch and states that ―the example and influence of a truly excellent man, are such as to render the very atmosphere in which he lives one of perpetual improvement and delight" (*Wives* 67). This depiction of a good man is almost identical to that of a good woman. First, the statement directly addresses the man's influence in the domestic sphere—the ―atmosphere in which he lives"—which both Ellis and the ―angel in the house" ideology generally regard as the woman's domain. Further, the mode of his influence, ―improvement and delight," is also associated with a woman's role as affectionate companion and moral guide. Men and women should morally and spiritually uplift those around them. Compare her descriptions of men to the description of a ―true English woman" in *The Women of England*:

> It is from the unseen, but active principle of disinterested love, ever working at her heart, that she enters, with a perception as delicate as might be supposed to belong to a ministering angel, into the peculiar feelings and tones of character influencing those around her, applying the magical key of sympathy to all they suffer or enjoy, to all they fear or hope, until she

> becomes identified as it were with their very being, blends her own existence with theirs, and makes her society essential to their highest earthly enjoyment. (*Women* 202-3)

Or Ellis's appeal at the end of *The Women of England*:

> [W]hen we contemplate the possibility of being the means of inducing others to enter with us, and those the most beloved of earth's treasure, surely it is worthy of our best energies—our most fervent zeal—our tear—our prayers—that we may so use our influence, and so employ our means, as that those whose happiness has been committed to our care, may partake with us in the enjoyment of the mansions of eternal rest. (*Women* 356)

The ideal woman, like the ideal man, is angelic; she brings happiness to those around her and exercises her influence for the moral and spiritual benefit of all. The noticeable similarity between Ellis's depictions of good men and women reinforces a sense of equality between the sexes. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Ellis frequently focuses on a woman's ability to soothe and elevate the men around her as a key difference between men and women. It is this feminine influence which makes women powerful in Ellis's eyes. Indeed, the fact that these representations are so similar, but that Ellis continually appeals to women to fulfill the moral role in the domestic sphere, suggests

that she considers women to be generally morally superior and that there are a disproportionately small number of good men available.

In *The Daughters of England,* Ellis also sheds some small light on how to identify a good potential husband. Here again equality is central; she writes, "~~—~~good men are accustomed to regard women as equal with themselves in their moral and religious character, and therefore they seldom speak of them with disrespect" (*Daughters* 230). She goes on to say, "~~—~~it may be set down as an almost certain rule, that the man who is respectful and affectionate to his mother and his sisters, will be so to his wife" (*Daughters* 230-1). This advice is more practical than the vague description of an angelic, sublime man in *Wives*. Here she gives her reader specific behaviors to watch for in a potential husband. Chiefly, the behavior which most recommends a man to a young woman is respect, which Ellis treats as an indicator of equality.

Ellis's views on courtship and egalitarian marriages are also evident in *Contrasts*, a collection of sketches she published in 1832. The collection is made up of ten pairs, with each pair showing a specific ~~c~~ontrast." One pair, titled ~~M~~Marriage a priori" and ~~M~~Marriage a posteriori" (shown above), clearly portrays an unequal marriage. In the first sketch, the aloof woman barely deigns to offer her hand to the courting gentleman. In the second drawing, depicting life after marriage, the inequity has reversed. Now the aloof woman is transformed into her husband's servant, while he has grown fat and apparently ill. In the second image, the husband holds his hand towards his wife in much the same manner of disdain as she has in the previous sketch. Ellis rejects both possibilities—neither husband nor wife should be more subservient or more affectionate than the other. In another pair of sketches, Ellis shows a more equitable courtship and marriage:

In the first image, the two young people are collecting flowers together. The man has made the woman a gift, but unlike the woman in ~~M~~Marriage a priori," the woman here

appears pleased to receive it. Further, rather than standing passively by while the man works to gain her attention, she is also actively engaged in collecting flowers. The second image depicts the couple in old age. While age marks the contrast between the two sketches, the couple still appears happy in the second. Here the wife offers the husband a seat by the fire, which he, smiling, accepts. The subtitles, taken from Robert Burns's "Auld Lang Syne," read "We twa hae run about the braes/And pu't the gowans fine./ But we've wandered mony a weary foot/ Sin auld lang syne." The quote, like the drawings, suggests that the two people have worked together throughout their lives. While the specific duties of the husband and wife differ, the idea that they should work together for their mutual benefit is central to Ellis's ideal marriage.

Woman's Influence and Equality

While a longer discussion of gender roles within marriage will come in the following chapter, for the purposes of this chapter it is necessary to give at least cursory attention to Ellis's ideology on this topic. Although she clearly advocates an egalitarian marriage, she also maintains certain traditional views on men's and women's roles. Following the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres, Ellis assumes that while husbands work in the public sphere, they are subject to a variety of corrupting influences, whereas wives reign in the domestic sphere, where they are protected from moral degradation. The domestic sphere becomes women's sphere of influence, which is the feminine equivalent of power. Here, the wife's influence must prevail against the immorality the husband encounters in the public sphere in order to maintain domestic order and bliss. Thus, while the ideal man may be a domestic angel, in practice it seems that men

generally require their wives‘ influence to maintain their morals. Ellis describes the roles of men and women in *The Daughters of England* as follows:

> I have already stated, that women, in their position in life, must be content to be inferior to men; but as their inferiority consists chiefly in their want of power, this deficiency is abundantly made up to them by their capability of exercising influence; it is made up to them also in other ways, incalculable in their number and extent, but in none so effectually as by that order of Divine Providence which places them, in a moral and religious point of view, on the same level with man. (14)

Although she acknowledges that the *position* of women is inferior, Ellis states that men and women are equal on moral and religious grounds, arguably the most important fields from a Christian perspective. While women lack physical or legal power in comparison to their male counterparts, their ability to influence is, in Ellis‘s description, essentially a form of power itself. Through her influence, a woman is able to help her husband maintain his moral character, and thus maintain the balance of equality Ellis describes. In this construction of an ideal marriage, influence is the prevailing factor.

Feminist critics have argued that describing a woman‘s power as ―influence‖ was a means for anti-feminist authors to keep women in the domestic sphere. Valerie Sanders, for example, argues that ―influence‖ was one way that ―anti-feminist writers tried to enthuse women with their moral mission‖ (18). She writes that ―anti-feminist writers at this time were astute enough to sense that women were dissatisfied with their

unimportant roles and that they aspired to political activity because domestic life seemed repetitive and unappealing," but that these writers were concerned with ~~th~~e inevitable slide into depravity if women were not at home diffusing a sound moral influence" (19). Ellis's definition of influence is more complex than Sanders's interpretation allows. While she does promote a moral mission and emphasizes influence as a means of achieving this mission, this is only one aspect of her discussion of influence. Within the domestic sphere, Ellis uses this idea to set women equal to men. In her writings it is clear that influence is not something which women diffuse, but active power women must wield not only to improve others, but most importantly, to benefit themselves. Indeed, influence is tied to female agency as it functions to aid women in self-direction. Further, as I will discuss at length in the next chapter, Ellis actually uses ~~in~~fluence" to support women's work outside of the domestic sphere. Rather than setting influence in opposition to rights, as Sanders argues, Ellis argues that influence in a good marriage—essentially an egalitarian marriage—is based on a mutual understanding of equal rights.[3]

A woman's power to influence her husband is inextricably bound to the issue of equality. Ultimately, the ideal marriage will be one of mutual influence for mutual benefit—both husband and wife should contribute equally to the relationship. In order for this sort of egalitarian marriage to work it is crucial that the husband regards both his wife's life and her point of view as equally important and valid as his own. Under these conditions, a wife can successfully influence her husband to act according to both their benefits, instead of only for his own.

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[3] In *Separate Spheres*, Brian Harrison discusses the belief in the extent of women's influence as a contributing factor in anti-suffragist arguments (81-84). Nancy Armstrong, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, discusses influence and the domestic economy.

Although Ellis offers a few descriptions of good men, it is not to be supposed that she is kind to men in *The Daughters of England* or *The Wives of England*. Her advice in both texts is to be weary of all suitors, and in *Daughters* she ultimately states that the lessons contained therein are useful regardless of whether a woman marries, and by suggesting that a single life is not only acceptable but sometimes even preferable. She writes:

> Still, I imagine there are few, if any, who never had a suitable or unsuitable offer, at some time in their lives; and wise indeed by comparison, are those, who rather than accept the latter, are content to enjoy the pleasures, and endure the sorrows, alone. Compare their lot for an instant with that of women who have married from unworthy motives. (*Daughters* 239)

For Ellis, being alone is nothing compared to the potential horrors of an unfortunate marriage. Thus, while she does occasionally point to men who are truly good potential husbands, on the whole it appears that these men are few and far between. In essence, there are very few men who are able to attain a level of moral character to set them equal to women. Overall, Ellis's discussion of men suggests that the majority of women are superior to the majority of men.

It is not particularly surprising, given this point of view, that Ellis spends an extensive amount of time attempting to dissuade young women from marriage. Because her ideal of marriage requires the husband treat the wife as an equal, even when Victorian

law does not, it is crucial that women exercise caution in choosing a mate. However, instead of dwelling on the inequities present in Victorian law, she uses the law to empower young women by emphasizing their most important right, the right to say ―I don't." This form of resistant self-direction not only gives women agency in choosing a mate, it also helps ensure continued agency after marriage.

Unfixing One's Doom: The Breach of Contract

Many of Ellis's texts work to empower women within Victorian social constraints, rather than attempting to change Victorian ideology about women. Within this context, it is clear that Ellis sees the right to reject a potential husband as perhaps the single most important legal right a woman has, since wifehood, for many women, is not only the most important role they will ever fill, but it might also be the last. In the first chapter of *The Wives of England*, appropriately titled ―Thoughts Before Marriage," Ellis gives women practical guidelines for choosing a husband. Above all, Ellis seeks to show her readers that no matter how equal the marriage may be in love and intellect, since wives are legally subordinate, choosing a husband carefully is of utmost importance.

Ellis's ideal marriage is apparently difficult to attain, since her perspective on marriage in *Wives* is surprisingly pessimistic. At least one half of early marriages, she tells us, ―fix the doom of women for this world, and sometimes for the next" (*Wives* 5). The reason, of course, that marriage had the potential to ―fix the doom of women" was in the laws concerning married women. First, the marriage laws were built on the concept of coverture, which, as Blackstone writes, meant that ―the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into

that of the husband" (Blackstone 442). Because married women had no separate legal identity, they also had no separate property, no custody rights, and no right to legal recourse on their own behalf. Blackstone explained that, "even the disabilities, which the wife lies under, are for the most part intended for her protection and benefit. So great a favourite is the female sex of the laws of England" (445). Despite the ostensibly protective nature of the laws, in truth they left women disturbingly vulnerable to bad husbands, who were legally within their rights if they chose to squander the family's money, prevent their wives from accessing the children, or even become physically abusive.[4]

The problematic amount of power a husband held over his wife was compounded by the fact that until 1857 obtaining a divorce was nearly impossible. An act of Parliament was required to end a valid marriage, a process that was both difficult and expensive. In the first half of the nineteenth century, less than ten divorces were granted per year. In those same fifty years, only three women successfully obtained parliamentary divorces (Mitchell 105). Because of the extreme rarity of divorces, it was reasonable for women to assume that, for better or worse, marriage would last until death.[5]

Meanwhile, divorce proceedings were generally well publicized; thus, even a woman sheltered from any personal acquaintance with an unfortunate match was most

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[4] According to Blackstone, "the law thought it reasonable to entrust him [the husband] with this power of restraining her [the wife], by domestic chastisement" (444). Although the law limited wife-beating to punishment within "reasonable bounds," the terms of the law were unclear. Until 1891 it remained legal to beat and imprison a wife. For more on this subject, see Maeve E. Doggett's *Marriage, Wife-Beating and the Law in Victorian England* and Mary Lyndon Shanley's *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England 1850-1895*.

[5] For more on Victorian Divorce and reform, see Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments,* pages 51-88, and Mary Lyndon Shanley's *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895.*

likely aware of the many ways which a marriage could go sour. In 1820, George IV attempted, unsuccessfully, to divorce Queen Caroline. He brought a Bill of Pains and Penalties against her to begin the proceedings. Daily, detailed accounts of the trial were published in newspapers across England. The government eventually withdrew the bill because it was passed with such a small minority, thus effectively acquitting the queen (Davidoff and Hall 151). Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, in *Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850*, cite the Queen Caroline affair as ~~"a~~ significant moment in terms of public attitudes to marriage and sexuality, an assertion of belief in the unblemished nature of English womanhood, an insistence that femininity meant virtue and honour" (Davidoff and Hall 155). But the affair also brought notice to the potential difficulties of marriage: George IV and Caroline's marriage was obviously unhappy, but other than living separately, there was no viable recourse.

Contemporary with Ellis's writings, another George and Caroline had a very public falling out. George Norton's attempt, in 1836, to divorce his wife, Caroline Norton, by accusing then Prime Minister Lord Melbourne of ~~"e~~riminal conversation"—the legal term for an affair—with Caroline, was a prime example of private unhappiness aired in a public forum. George Norton was physically abusive to his wife and refused to allow her access to their children; Caroline would subsequently publish pamphlets on child custody in 1837 and 1839.[6] Although Lord Melbourne was found innocent, the attempted divorce, followed by Caroline Norton's writings about child custody laws,

[6] Norton published *Separation of Mother and Child by the Law of Custody of Infants Considered* in 1837, followed by *A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor* in 1839 (under the pseudonym Pearce Stevenson). After the Infant Custody Bill became law in 1839, she turned her attention to property law and divorce in *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854) and *A Letter to the Queen on Lord Cransworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill* (1855).

demonstrated to an alarming degree the amount of power a husband had over his wife (Huddleston vii-xiv).

Despite the evident dangers of marriage, in 1843, when *The Wives of England* was published, getting married was still regarded as a woman's main purpose. Nevertheless, Ellis begins her manual by taking issue with this philosophy. Her first objection to traditional ideology is that while women take finding a husband as their primary goal, it is what a woman does with her entire life, married or single, that actually determines her ultimate worth. Instead of following the traditional line of thinking, Ellis writes "Marriage, like death, is too often looked upon as the *end*; whereas both are but the beginning of states of existence infinitely more important than that by which they were preceded, yet each taking from that their tone and character, and each proportioned in their enjoyment to the previous preparation which has been made for their happiness or misery" (*Wives* 3-4). Ellis is concerned with a woman's marriage as a period of her life during which she must successfully perform her duties as a wife, which she contrasts with the idea of a marriage as a simple event. The convoluted meaning of the word "marriage" itself demonstrates Ellis's dilemma, as marriage can refer to either (or both) the wedding itself or the duration of the married state. Ellis's writing here marks a significant break with the marriage plot, one of the most popular literary devices in eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature, where the wedding is indeed "the end." Rather than placing excessive emphasis on getting to the altar, Ellis focuses on life after

the wedding.[7] She argues that the wedding should not be the goal; instead, the true goal ought to be a successful and happy married life.

By considering marriage as a continuous state instead of a specific moment, Ellis expands the meaning of the marriage contract. She argues that choosing the right husband has a great deal to do with how well a woman can perform her duties in marriage: an unfortunate match might prevent a woman from successfully exerting her influence as a wife. Likewise, a poorly chosen husband may be unable to perform his duty towards his wife. In either case, the marriage contract is unfulfilled, yet the marriage cannot be dissolved. Returning to Ellis's statement that many marriages, "fix the doom of women for this world, and sometimes for the next" (*Wives* 5), it is clear that Ellis views such dysfunctional unions as potentially breaking with Christian morality. The damage to one's spiritual state that may occur from a poor match outweighs any damage, whether social or financial, that may occur from breaking off an engagement. Thus, by considering marriage as a lasting condition with moral ramifications, Ellis is able to move into a lengthy discussion of breaking the engagement contract while maintaining a position of moral authority. She argues that an ideal woman—a morally autonomous woman—will break off an engagement regardless of social strictures rather than enter into a marriage she knows will be unequal.

Using language not unlike Blackstone, Ellis outlines suitable reasons for breaking an engagement. Although she in many ways echoes Blackstone, Ellis noticeably avoids discussing the potential legal ramifications of such a decision. In part, Ellis is able to

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[7] From Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* to the works of Fanny Burney and Jane Austen, the marriage plot is pervasive in eighteenth-century British fiction. In the nineteenth century, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Charles Dickens were among the many authors to continue in this tradition.

skirt this issue by placing, in her discussion of marriage, God's law above man's law. Nevertheless, in Victorian England, breaking an engagement was technically illegal. Although an engagement was considered a legally binding contract, as Ginger Frost discusses in *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England*, ~~it~~ could not be enforced because the civil courts would not coerce marriage" (Frost 16). Instead, a formerly affianced man or woman could sue the would-be-spouse for damages. Therefore, while a woman could always avoid marriage by withdrawing consent, there was still a risk that she or her family could be forced to pay damages as a result. It seems somewhat strange that Ellis would avoid mentioning such an important detail, particularly since such cases were fairly present in the public mindset. Such trials, like divorce suits, were often discussed thoroughly in local newspapers[8] (Frost 8). Perhaps the most famous breach-of-promise suit, however, was a fictional one. Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), published seven years before Ellis's *Wives*, satirizes a breach-of-promise suit where an innocent man is forced to pay damages. The novel was such a success that the suit within ~~e~~ame to symbolize most of the alleged abuses of breach-of-promise suits" (Frost 3). If the existence of such suits was common knowledge, as it appears, why then would Ellis ignore the issue?

Aside from the moral argument against following through with an engagement to an ill-suited partner, another possible explanation for Ellis's omission is the fact that ~~a~~ person under twenty-one could sue but not be sued for a promise made before his or her majority" (Frost 17). It is possible that Ellis assumed the majority of her readership would be under twenty-one and therefore not legally liable. Given Ellis's own age at

[8] For a discussion of numerous examples of such trials, see Ginger Frost's *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class and Gender in Victorian England.*

marriage, however, it seems more likely that this omission is attributable to her overall goal of persuading young women against unfavorable matches. If women were afraid to break off an engagement because of the possible financial ramifications, they were destined to a fate worse than a fine: a lifetime of subjection to a less than ideal, possibly even tyrannical husband, or worse, an afterlife of punishment for failing to fulfill a Christian duty to that husband. Ellis seems to have deemed it rhetorically preferable to avoid mention of any legal impediments to a breach of contract in order to foreground the benefits of breaking an ill-conceived engagement.

While ignoring this aspect of English law, Ellis does explain how a young woman can navigate social laws to end an engagement to a less than suitable mate. Her advice here can be read as giving women the tools for resistant self-direction;[9] she argues for agency while acknowledging the social difficulties inherent in breaking an engagement. In some ways she is concurrently giving her readers reasons that would lend legal support to their decision to end an engagement were it ever to result in a lawsuit. Ellis's list of reasons to end an engagement can be broken in to two categories: illness and lack of affection or respect. However, both categories share one important similarity: where there is illness or want of affection, in Ellis's estimation it is impossible for an individual to fulfill the duties of either husband or wife. The potential breach of the marriage contract, not in a legal sense, but in a practical sense, which will have life-long repercussions, far outweighs any concern Ellis may have about the breach of promise prior to marriage.

[9] For a definition of resistant self-direction, see Introduction.

Unfitness for Marriage: Mental Illness, Alcoholism, and Physical Disability

Much like Blackstone, Ellis argues that illnesses, including insanity, are a sufficient reason to end an engagement. Here, therefore, her advice protects her readers from breach-of-promise suits without ever mentioning their existence. *Commentaries on the Laws of England* focuses on insanity as the main form of illness that would prevent a couple from marrying. In Blackstone's terms, one ~~in~~capacity is want of reason; without a competent share of which, as no other, so neither can the matrimonial contract be valid" (Blackstone 438). Similarly, Ellis writes ~~O~~ne of the most justifiable, and at the same time one of the most melancholy causes for such disunion, is the discovery of symptoms of insanity" (*Wives* 14). But Blackstone's ~~w~~want of reason" is intended to describe only lunatics, whereas Ellis expands this definition to include alcoholics and, in some instances, those with physical impairments. She also defines ~~re~~ason" so as to suggest that a man who is not receptive to his wife's influence is ~~u~~nreasonable." And, while Blackstone is concerned only with whether an individual has the capacity to understand the commitment involved in marriage, Ellis is also concerned with whether a man with certain impairments will be able to fulfill his role throughout married life.

Ellis defines ~~a~~ reasonable man" as ~~o~~ne who will give a candid hearing to arguments against his own preconceived opinions, and who, when he believes himself to have good cause for acting or thinking as he does, is yet willing to be shown a better cause for acting or thinking differently" (*Wives* 66). A reasonable man, therefore, is one who would be willing to listen to his wife's ideas and, if her judgment is sound, will act according to her orders. Effectively, a reasonable man can be influenced. Since, for Ellis, a wife's influence is the source of her power, it is extremely important for a woman

to choose a husband who can be influenced. Further, a good husband will be able to act according to his wife's influence.

One major cause of diminished capacity to "reason," according to Ellis's definition, is alcoholism. A man who is already under the influence of alcohol is less likely to be brought to reason under the influence of his wife. Indeed, both in *The Wives of England* and much of Ellis's fiction, Ellis considers alcoholism approximately on par with a mental illness. In her short story "Confessions of a Maniac" (1848), for example, the "maniac" in question is an alcoholic woman. The link between alcohol and madness also appears in other works in the mid-nineteenth century. For example, George Cruikshank's series of eight etching entitled "The Bottle" (1847) depicts the destruction of a happy family due to alcoholism; in the seventh illustration the husband murders his wife in a drunken rage, and in the final illustration "the bottle has done its work […] and has left the father a hopeless maniac." This series was followed by another collection, "The Drunkard's Children," (1848) which depicts the drunkard's son's arrest for robbery, subsequent deportation, and death, and the daughter's suicide. Both Ellis's works and Cruikshank's suggest that alcoholism and insanity are not only related, and also that the former can lead to the latter.

The link between alcoholism and insanity allows the legally acceptable basis for a breach of promise, "want of reason," to extend to alcoholism. In *Wives*, Ellis cautions women about men who indulge too much: "if in his estimation wine forms a prominent part of these enjoyments, let not the fear of the world's censure operate for one moment against your separating yourself from such a man" (20). Certainly Ellis believes that an individual, male or female, who consumes too much alcohol, cannot make good

decisions, as is evident in many of her short stories. The madwoman in ―Confessions of a Maniac," who repeatedly ruins her chances at happiness by turning to alcohol, is an excellent example of this. But Ellis also believes that a man who drinks cannot provide for his family as he ought to. This is a common theme in many of her stories, including ―Dangers of Dining Out," where the husband's slight premarital preference for wine devolves into full fledged chronic drunkenness within a few years of marriage, eventually driving the family to poverty and forcing his wife and children to earn a meager income by sewing.

―Dangers of Dining Out" (1848) demonstrates how scrupulously a woman must observe her future husband's habits in order to determine his fitness for marriage. The short story is the first in a collection entitled *Family Secrets; or Hints to Who Would Make Home Happy*. The didactic intentions of both the collection and the story are clear from the titles. The story begins with the happy wedding of Eleanor Stanley and ―a medical gentleman of the highest reputation," Frederick Bond (1: 8). After the wedding has taken place, Eleanor's father admits to his wife that he has some reservations about Frederick—―He is rather too fond of dining out" (1: 11). He goes on to explain, ―the love of dining out may lead to habits extremely objectionable in a medical man. He may, for instance, when called upon to act in some critical case, be altogether unnerved; and the mere fact of his being reputed a man too fond of wine, will be injurious to him as a doctor" (1: 11). Mrs. Stanley protests that dining out and drinking too much are not the same thing, but Mr. Stanley argues, ―They may be different at first, but they often lead to the same conclusion" (1: 11). Ellis gives no explanation for Mr. Stanley's decision to keep this fear to himself until after the marriage, but regardless of the father's failings in

this instance, the moral of the story is evident even at the beginning: a woman can only rely on herself to discover the potential faults in the man she plans to marry. Unfortunately for Eleanor, she does not recognize the signs of danger before marriage, and although she ultimately convinces her husband to give up drinking altogether, it is only after he has lost both wealth and honor. Frederick's drinking problems, which I will discuss more fully in chapter four, make him utterly incapable of providing for his family. If only Eleanor had understood the purport of his "dining out" prior to the wedding, she may have been saved a great deal of pain. In Ellis's estimation, alcohol consumption is likely to increase over time, and alcoholism is a significant barrier to marriage both because it impairs one's ability to make a rational decision, and because it impairs one's ability to fulfill his/her marital duties.

Ellis also cautions women against marrying a man who is physically ill. Here her central concern is that a physically disabled husband cannot provide for his wife, as she suggests when she argues, "Another justifiable reason for setting aside an engagement of marriage, or protracting the fulfilment of it, is a failure of health, especially when either this, or the kind of malady already noticed, induces an incapacity for business, and for the duties which generally devolve upon the master of a household" (*Wives* 15). Although Blackstone does not specifically address physical illness as a valid reason to end an engagement, in at least one court case for breach-of-promise, the courts ruled in favor of a woman who refused to marry on these grounds. In *Atchinson v. Baker* (1796), a man sued his ex-fiancée for breach-of-promise. The woman argued that the plaintiff was too ill to marry, and the court agreed, ruling in her favor (Frost 15). Thus, a legal precedence existed for ending an engagement on the grounds of physical illness. Further, Ellis

circles back to Blackstone's initial argument that "want of reason" in either party is a justified cause to prevent a marriage. Physical disability, she argues, may cause a want of reason in this particular area. Therefore, she explains that "in cases where the individual thus afflicted does not himself see the propriety of withdrawing from the engagement," it falls to the woman to end the attachment (*Wives* 15). Ellis admits that a woman may be reproached for ending such an engagement, but this is better "than if she plunged herself into all the lamentable consequences of a union with a man who wanted either mental or the physical capacity to keep her and her's [sic] from poverty and distress" (*Wives* 16). Ellis's recommendations for marriage here are for the benefit of her female readers; she is not educating them on how to make men happy, but encouraging them to seek happiness for themselves. She advocates agency despite opposing social mores. This seems a far cry from the version of Ellis so frequently put forth by feminist critics; rather than advocating self-sacrifice for an unfit man, she urges her female readers to consider their own needs first.

However, to a large extent Ellis deflects attention from this fact. When possible, she lends a sort of legal tone to her recommendations, which she claims are based on "the dictates of prudence" (*Wives* 16). She also dwells on the suffering of the woman who is forced to make this choice. This approach makes the selfishness she encourages much more palatable to both male and female audiences. She frames her argument in such a way as to suggest that most moral and proper thing to do is to break the engagement, and although she foresees that "the world will lavish its blame" on a woman who ends an engagement because of her fiancé's illness or disability, she simultaneously argues that the "world" is mistaken. Thus Ellis preserves the idea a woman should be self-sacrificing

(she will give up a marriage and risk the scorn of her friends) at the same time that she argues that a woman should put her own needs first (she should not settle for a husband who will not be able to provide for her). Although Ellis maintains separate spheres, she also suggests a degree of equality in that both husband and wife must be able to contribute to a marriage—though their contributions to their mutual happiness vary, a proper husband, like a proper wife, must be a helpmate.

One of Ellis's earliest works of fiction, "Marriage as it May Be" (1833), published as part of the collection *Pictures of Private Life,* specifically addresses the importance of equal contribution in marriage, and challenges the notion that a woman might "save" a man who is otherwise unfit for marriage. The story ultimately suggests that such seeming self-sacrifice is really vanity, and extremely dangerous at that. Unlike Eleanor Bond in "The Dangers of Dining Out," the protagonist of "Marriage as it May Be" is fully aware of her future husband's deficiencies prior to their wedding. The story is told in first person by the wife of Reverend Henry Wilton (her first name is never given). She describes her friendship, eventual engagement, and finally marriage to a man who, from the very beginning, is less than ideal.

The narrator is clear that her purpose is to warn others not to commit the folly of knowingly marrying a man who is unfit for marriage. Mrs. Wilton begins her story by explaining that she will give a history of "that most lamentable of all calamities—most irreparable of all misfortunes,—an _ill assorted marriage'" (*Pictures* 290). Just as she does in *Wives*, Ellis uses legal language to emphasize the importance of the story's message. Here, the phrase "most irreparable of all misfortunes" is offset with dashes for

added emphasis, and the word —irreparable" reminds the reader of the legal permanence of marriage.

Having established the rationale for telling her story, the speaker describes her friendship with the young Henry Wilton, who has a —good heart," coupled with —habits of dissipation" (291). Eventually he proposes marriage, but she declines because she —was at first a good deal surprised, that he who had always acknowledged such an immense inferiority on moral and religious grounds, should now esteem himself a fitting helpmate for me in the pilgrimage of life" (292). She recognizes that an acceptable husband should be a —fitting helpmate," and therefore rejects his proposals.

Later, however, the narrator's apparent rationality is undermined when we learn that she was engaged to another man, who called off their wedding. Thus, when Wilton proposes again he appears in a more favorable light. The narrator explains, —I was the more reckless what I sacrificed for the sake of helping others, and in an evil hour I promised to become his wife" (295). Although it is clear that her resistance is down due to her recent rejection, she also imagines that her marriage will help Wilton. She enters into marriage believing that she can save her husband from his degenerate lifestyle and mold him into a good husband.

She quickly discovers how wrong this belief is. Wilton proves a useless helpmate as early as the honeymoon. He meets a college friend during the honeymoon trip and chooses to dine (and drink) with this friend rather than joining his wife for a boat trip. Before she goes, he tells her, —take care of yourself' […] with many of those endearing expressions which people are wont to use when their hearts are not entirely with you" (299). He ignores his role as his wife's protector and leaves her to fend for herself. When

she returns from sailing on the lake, she finds her husband still at the table with his friend, ~~"d~~eranged by the lowest kind of excitement" (302). He lies to her, claiming that he looked for, but ~~"h~~e betrayed himself by a knowing wink at his companion, which seemed to say, _This is the way to manage a wife'" (302). Henry Wilton appears to perceive his role as limited to keeping his wife out of his way. The protagonist is horrified to discover that the marriage has had no effect on her husband. Indeed, she finds that the marriage has only served to degrade her, not to uplift him.

As the story continues, the protagonist is not only publicly humiliated in various scenes by her husband's intoxication and inappropriate behavior, she is also degraded in private by her inability to fulfill her duties. She is so incensed by his failure as a husband that she ultimately fails as a wife. She explains:

> How far my husband's character might have been improved by studious care and well-directed kindness, I am not able to say, for I acknowledge with shame and compunction, that this was a trial which I never made. Having trusted to his promise as a lover, I was piqued and wounded by his failure as a husband, and disappointed in no small degree on discovering, that neither my influence, my wishes, nor my example, were sufficient to win him over to a change of heart. (313-4)

The Wiltons' difficulties highlight an important message in Ellis's writing. Both people must be able to contribute equally to the welfare of a marriage; any lack on one side will result in a lack on the other as well. Without an egalitarian marriage wherein both

partners are concerned for the wellbeing of one another, and where, therefore, the wife can influence the husband for both their benefits, the partnership falls apart. By the end of ―Marriage as it May Be," it is clear that marriage may be very unpleasant. Ellis warns her readers again that nothing ―can be more blind and fatally delusive, than that which leads a vain woman to believe, that by marrying a vicious man, she shall be able to turn him from the error of his ways" (314). A man who is unfit to fulfill his duty as a husband at the beginning of a marriage is unlikely to become more fit over time; in other words, since he cannot be influenced he most likely will not improve. Thus Ellis cautions women against marrying any man about whom she has the slightest reservations on this ground.

Unhappily Ever After: Want of Affection

The second major reason Ellis gives for ending an engagement is lack of mutual affection. For women, Ellis argues that want of affection is a barrier to fulfilling a wife's duty. She writes, ―the duty of a wife is what no woman ever yet was able to render without affection" (*Wives* 10). She cautions her readers against marrying if they find themselves feeling sad as the marriage approaches, for this is a sign that ―you may not love him as a woman ought to love her husband" (*Wives* 10). A woman who does not love her husband will most likely fail in her duties, and be unhappy in the process.

Likewise, Ellis suggests that a man who does not love his wife will fail in his duty towards her. She encourages women to only marry a man whose behavior confirms his affection. She explains that ―woman's love may grow after marriage—a man's never. If, therefore, he is indifferent or unfaithful as a lover, what must be expected of him as a

husband?" (*Wives* 12). The problems associated with an unfaithful husband may be self-evident, but for Ellis, indifference is equally troublesome. Ellis's discussion of affection here doubles as a discussion of sexual attraction as an important aspect of marriage, particularly for men. Although Ellis clearly argues that women should feel ~~a~~affection" as well, she makes a point at arguing that it is especially important for men to be attracted to their wives. Not only may sexual indifference prevent a man from fulfilling the marriage contract in the bedroom, Ellis suggests that it also diminishes a wife's ability to control her husband. Just as an ~~u~~nreasonable" husband is unlikely to yield to his wife's influence, so too is an ~~in~~different" one unlikely to recognize his wife's domestic authority.

Mutual affection is also essential for Ellis because it establishes a basis for equality. Here Ellis reveals what may be considered a proto-feminist attitude toward marriage. Ellis is often accused of dwelling on women's inferiority, but a close reading of her chapter on engagements and courtship clearly shows that while she acknowledges the legal inferiority of women, this does not equate to a belief in the general inferiority of the sex. Ellis warns women away from husbands whose attitudes before marriage suggest that they may be a tyrannical rulers rather than doting partners. She writes, ~~I~~f he does not open his heart to her, but maintains a distant kind of authoritative manner, which shuts her out from sympathy and equality with himself, it is time for her to pause, and think seriously before she binds herself for life to that *worst of all slavery*, the fear of a husband" (*Wives* 13). There are two important messages here: first, a woman should expect her future husband to treat her as an equal, and second, fear is the most dangerous

sentiment one can feel towards her betrothed. Mutual love is an essential ingredient in forming equality within marriage and in preventing this fear from emerging.

The dangers of fearing one's husband are particularly evident in Ellis's 1850 novel *Pique: A Tale of English Aristocracy*. The novel follows Mildred Effingham through the last few months of her engagement and the first year of her marriage to Lord Alresford. Although Lord Alresford is a good man, Mildred fears him, largely because she does not understand him. Lack of communication and perceived mutual indifference jeopardize the couple's happiness.

At the beginning of *Pique*, Mildred is about to receive Lord Alresford, who is returning to England for their marriage after an absence of many years. Mildred and Lord Alresford's marriage has been arranged since Mildred was a young girl, and she has not seen him since she was a child. She is far from happy about the arrival of her betrothed, who she feels treats her with ~~–~~calm superiority of manner" in his letters (*Pique* 4). Ellis clearly sets up a dangerous situation in the first pages of *Pique* since Mildred does not believe that her fiancé sees her as an equal. Although her friend Helen suggests to Mildred that Lord Alresford's demeanor may be merited due to Mildred's own behavior, she also says that if Mildred is so displeased with the match ~~–~~it would be far more honorable and better principled to decline the engagement at once" (7). Helen, a source of wisdom and reason throughout the text, no doubt voices Ellis's belief that women should not marry if they have any doubt about their betrothed's affections.

Mildred refuses to take such a course since her father's right to his estates hinges on her marriage, based on an agreement made between her father and Lord Alresford's father almost a decade prior. This situation gives Ellis space to compare a woman's

obligation to her family with her obligation to herself and her own future happiness. Without directly addressing the issues associated with breach-of-promise suits, Ellis sheds light on the dilemma of a woman whose family's financial situation is tied to her engagement. Through Mildred, Ellis demonstrates that a woman should not put her family's happiness before her own in choosing a husband, because the results are likely to be disastrous.

Based on the suggestions Ellis puts forth in *The Wives of England*, it seems clear that Mildred is making a poor choice in marrying Lord Alresford. There is a serious want of affection on Mildred's part towards her fiancé, and Lord Alresford's attitude exudes the "distant, authoritative manner" of which Ellis warns her readers (*Wives* 13). Mildred feels that Lord Alresford has failed to treat her with "her own estimate of the devotion and deference due to her from her betrothed" (*Pique* 11). Lord Alresford's attitude towards Mildred is contrasted with the behavior of another apparent suitor, Colonel Sutherland, whose "homage and evident admiration of her beauty and wit" is much more appealing to Mildred (12). Nevertheless, after nearly causing the dissolution of the engagement through her insistence on spending time with Colonel Sutherland during Lord Alresford's visit, Mildred goes through with the wedding. She sets herself up for a miserable marriage where she is likely to be, in Ellis's words, a slave, if not to her husband, at least to her own fear of him.

Yet Ellis is sure to offer ample proof that Mildred's choice is her own. She demonstrates that women have agency by giving Mildred the choice to marry or not. Once Mildred determines that Colonel Sutherland is not prince charming, but engaged to marry another woman, she quickly consigns herself to her marriage. She informs Lord

Alresford that she is ―ready and willing to confirm our engagement" (109). Although Lord Alresford cautions her to think carefully, she insists that it is her ―most earnest desire to fulfil that compact in every respect" (114). Mildred even tells her father ―you have latterly vainly tried to dissuade me from this marriage, which you imagine utterly repugnant to me; but for my own free will I have persisted in it" (145). This suggests that her benevolent father is willing to give up his property in favor of his daughter's happiness and therefore helps reinforce the idea that a woman must put her own needs before her thoughts of her family when she chooses a husband. Ellis is also suggesting that truly caring parents ought not to force their daughters into marriages where there is no affection. In essence, she gives permission from a parental authority to end the engagement.

Meanwhile, Mildred's repetition of her consent reinforces Ellis's emphasis on marriage as a woman's choice. Mildred's language even takes on a legal tone when she states her intention to ―fulfil that compact" (114). Her consent to the marriage is therefore reminiscent of Blackstone—she reiterates that she acts of her own volition, therefore validating the marriage contract. This repetition also emphasizes Mildred's fault in the unhappiness that follows. Mildred's choice to marry Lord Alresford despite their problems shows that agency is problematic. Having power does not ensure happiness; rather, it gives women the opportunity to ruin their own lives. Lord Alresford is largely excused for his part in making Mildred miserable because she so clearly has brought her fate upon herself, while he has offered her ample opportunities to break the engagement. Mildred is not to be understood as Lord Alresford's victim nor as the victim of English society. If anything, Mildred is only a victim of her own romantic notions,

which lead her to believe that sacrificing herself for her family's property is noble, and that whatever difficulties may exist between herself and Lord Alresford during the engagement will disappear after the wedding.

Unsurprisingly, Mildred's marriage gets off to a rocky start. On their wedding night, Lord Alresford, aware of Mildred's unhappiness, sends her a letter in which he declares he will be nothing more to her than her ~~"~~best friend and brother" (149). Mildred perceives this as proof of his supreme indifference towards her, and supposes that he is angry with her still for her capricious entanglement with Colonel Sutherland prior to their marriage. Despite her growing affection for her husband, in scene after scene Mildred and Lord Alresford are further separated, largely due to Mildred's ~~"~~dread of his anger" (234). She becomes, as Ellis predicts in *Wives,* a slave to this fear. She is unable to communicate her feelings and thus the marriage cannot be the egalitarian ideal Ellis proposes. When Helen comes to visit Mildred six months after the wedding, Mildred can only tell her that ~~"~~suffering is too feeble a word to express all I have endured, and still endure" (278). Completely alienated from her husband, Mildred is utterly miserable.

At the end of the text, two things occur that resolve the plot: first, Mildred finally asserts herself, and second, she and her husband are at last on equal terms. After sixth months of carefully repressing her feelings and avoiding all opportunities to express her love to Lord Alresford, Mildred discovers that he intends to live separately from her. Lack of communication leads Lord Alresford to imagine that Mildred will be happier without him nearby, while in truth it is the distance already between them that is most upsetting to Mildred. With the letter concerning his imminent departure in hand, she ~~"~~firmly" enters the library and demands an explanation: ~~"~~And you are going? You

abandon, you leave me, Lord Alresford, without warning, without preparation? Is this well? Is it right?" (381) Her straightforward indignation at last prompts Lord Alresford to express himself, and after mutually affirming their love, their marriage is transformed into a happy union. The resolution of *Pique* demonstrates both what should have occurred before marriage, and what ought to continue after marriage. Throughout the novel Mildred imagines that her husband is indifferent towards her, and therefore she believes she has no influence. Since influence over others is, for Ellis, the chief power of a woman, Mildred believes she is failing as a wife. In this moment however, Mildred forces Lord Alresford to realize that he is failing in his duty as a husband; thus, she exerts her influence over him and causes him not only to remain but to admit that he loves her. The happy resolution of the novel is only possible after Mildred gains this influence in her marriage. In addition, it is only in this moment that Mildred makes her own needs clear to her husband. Lord Alresford attempts to act according to Mildred's desires throughout the novel, but because she never states plainly how she feels or what she wants, his efforts all go awry. Thus the novel reinforces not only the necessity for an egalitarian marriage, in which mutual influence benefits both, but also the necessity for women to acknowledge their own needs. Mildred's efforts to be entirely selfless throughout the novel, including in her decision to marry for her father's benefit, inevitably backfire because she is not taking care of herself.

In sum, Ellis's writing on courtship constructs an ideal marriage in which there is equal influence and equal understanding. Not only does Ellis expect women to choose men who they can influence, she also expects them to find men who are willing to be influenced. Nevertheless, the extensive attention Ellis pays to unfortunate marriages

clearly suggests that few men are capable of fulfilling the role of husband in a manner that meets her standards. The apparent dearth of truly acceptable potential husbands leads to an assumption that women are generally superior, which informs Ellis's discussion of marriage in all of her works. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Ellis's construction of wives and working women in *The Women of England* subversively creates a rhetoric of female superiority.

III

Subversive and Submissive

The Women of England and the Power of Influence

> Wherever oppression and cruelty met her view, her eye flashed with indignation, and her high soul rebelled against the shackles of society, which kept her, as a woman, feeble and helpless. (65-6)
>
> Sarah Stickney Ellis
> ―First Impressions,‖ in *Family Secrets*

In the short story ―First Impressions‖ (1842), Sarah Stickney Ellis describes young Margaret Allonby, who struggles with her position as a woman. Her feelings of being ―feeble and helpless‖ are largely a reaction to her family‘s loose morals, which are in contrast to her own right-minded principles. Only barely an adult, Margaret is unable to prevail upon her father, older brothers, or cousin to act according to her standards. She is frustrated by her inability to influence others. Margaret‘s dilemma gets to the root of the biggest difficulty for Ellis, as well as her most important message. Ellis constructs ―influence‖ as the source of a woman‘s power and frequently as a woman‘s moral duty. The convergence of duty and power allows Ellis to give women broad reign over the private sphere, and even space within the public sphere.

Although Ellis uses ―influence‖ in such a way that it frequently amounts to power, it is important to realize that this term, as used in Victorian writing about women, is a problematic synonym for power. Judith Lowder Newton, in *Women, Power, and Subversion,* rightfully points out that the ―debate over the ‗women question,‘ in addition to its mass production of theories about women‘s ‗mission,‘ ‗kingdom,‘ or ‗sphere,‘ gave an emphasis to the subject of women‘s power, and in particular to their influence, which was historically unprecedented‖ (Newton 2). According to Newton, most early Victorian

authors, Sarah Ellis among them, ―reject the notion that women have power, but they acknowledge the fact that women possess ‗enormous,' ‗immense,' or ‗vast' ‗influence'" (3-4) She goes on to say that the ―valorization of women's influence, […] was aimed at devaluing actions and capacities which we can only call other forms of power" (4). Newton even specifically uses Sarah Ellis in her argument that ―most centrally, of course, the power of control must be renounced" (5). Newton suggests that while influence is within a Victorian woman's grasp, power in terms of actual control was considered unacceptable.

In Ellis's writing influence and power are problematic terms because Ellis herself attempts to distinguish between them, but ultimately demonstrates that they result in the same thing; that is, contrary to Newton's assertion, both power and influence are forms of control. In *The Daughters of England*, for example, Ellis makes an effort to distinguish between power and influence, by arguing that women's ―inferiority consists chiefly in their want of power," but that ―this deficiency is abundantly made up to them by their capability of exercising influence" (14). However, in her fiction, it is evident that women's ―influence" is formidable, and frequently usurps or replaces men's power.[1] While it is clear that a Victorian woman's influence, in reality, was not comparable to the legal power assigned to men, Ellis consistently attempts to make these terms equivalent. It might be fairly stated that Ellis's construction of ―influence" gives women, particularly wives, much greater power than can reasonably or realistically be associated with their legal status. This is interesting, since it suggests that Ellis is more comfortable with female power than we might expect. At the same time, it remains troublesome because

[1] This will become particularly clear in the last section of this chapter, ―Malicious Manipulation or Caring Control." See this section for specific examples of women whose influence proves to be a stronger force than their husband's power.

Ellis's ideal female characters, who successfully manipulate men to the extent that they may as well have the power assigned to men themselves, set up a false paradigm that others have used to suggest that women do not need legal equality. However, since Ellis never directly addresses legal reform, it would be unjust to lay this charge before her. I argue that Ellis strives to make influence an effective means of control, largely synonymous with power, and that this move is central to Ellis's efforts to expand the socially accepted roles of Victorian women, but without any specific motive with regard to the legal position of women.

Still, it is worth commenting on two particularly important means of understanding the difference between influence and power as they relate to Ellis's works. The first is the subtle difference between the two that lies primarily in their mode of use, where power is an overt form of control while influence is subversive. Influence, which by definition means "the capacity or faculty of producing effects by insensible or invisible means, […] ascendancy, sway, control, or authority, not formally or overtly expressed," (OED) is clearly a form of control, rather than the renunciation of it as Newton proposes. But since influence produces effects without being felt, it allows women the possibility to control seemingly without overstepping their roles.

The second way in which we might understand the difference between power and influence is economic, and here there is a very real distinction due to Victorian law. As I discussed in the last chapter, under coverture married women lost their right to separate property and money. Thus, at the level of finances, men hold the power to control spending, while wives can only influence. Interestingly, even this distinction becomes blurred in Ellis's writings, because women's ability to influence leads to them having

control over the family's expenditures in spite of the law. Since Ellis's women control men through influence, they effectively gain financial power as well.

A thorough reading of Ellis's works forces us to question whether her insistence on the importance of women's influence is meant to devalue their role, as Newton argues, or if discussing "influence" rather than "power" is a rhetorical device employed to empower women without the risk of appearing too radical, either to her publishers or the public. While some Victorian writers no doubt used women's "influence" as a means to keep true authority in the hands of men, I argue that Ellis uses the term to give women control, albeit in frequently subversive ways. This is different than, for example, Ruskin's argument in "Of Queens' Gardens," where he states that the function of women "is a guiding, not a determining, function" (89) because Ruskin's construction of female influence suggests that it is ultimately up to the man to make the final decision, while Ellis's construction shows women making the decision and then using influence to make the men agree.

Essentially, Ellis uses "influence" rather than "power" as a form of self-direction.[2] Aware that claiming power for women falls outside of socially accepted norms (and thus, in Kathryn Abrams's sense, self-defining), Ellis uses influence to achieve agency. This rhetorical move demonstrates both resistant and transformative self-direction—resistant in that Ellis is negotiating the gender-based obstacles implicit in a Victorian woman's attempt to gain control, and transformative in that through writing publicly about influence, social transformation with regard to a woman's ability to control becomes one of her goals. Indeed, this chapter will show how Ellis's use of "influence," both the term

[2] For definitions of self-definition, self-direction, resistant self-direction, and transformative self-direction, see my Introduction and Kathryn Abrams, "From Autonomy to Agency: Feminist Perspectives on Self-Direction."

and the idea, works to expand women's roles in society and give her readers agency. It is also worth noting that while Ellis frequently discusses influence, the word "power" is not absent in her writing about women. Indeed, this chapter will show that power, or direct and overt control, contrary to Newton's argument, is fundamental in Ellis's vision of women's roles.

As I have discussed in the previous chapters, Ellis's second conduct manual, *The Daughters of England,* and the opening of her third, *The Wives of England*, focus on instructing young women for their future benefit. Essentially, Ellis's discussions of education and courtship focus on preparing women to have agency in their adult lives, whether as wives, spinsters, or widows. But these two texts are largely just elaborations on Ellis's first and most famous conduct manual, *The Women of England* (1839). While her later conduct manuals backtrack to discuss the formation of the ideal "woman of England," here she focuses, quite simply, on what that ideal is. *The Women of England* is a confusing assemblage of contradictions; the ideal woman is inferior, but also superior, her duties are insignificant, but of national importance, a woman's sphere is within the protected boundaries of home, but working outside the home can be an "unspeakable advantage" (*Women* 346). Ellis, too, becomes a contradiction, as she belittles her role as an author, while elevating herself to the role of an authority. Ultimately, the work offers a surprising rhetoric of female empowerment that is echoed in Ellis's fiction. Although Ellis frequently emphasizes female submission and inferiority, the subtext in *The Women of England*, as in Ellis's fiction, reads as the reverse. The ideal woman, for Ellis, is influential, powerful and superior. The text of *The Women of England*, like the model of womanhood it constructs, is also overtly submissive while simultaneously and

subversively stretching the boundaries of the perceived role of women within the Victorian era.

Apologetically Blameless: The Prefaces to *Pictures of Private Life* and *The Women of England*

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter discusses the strategies Victorian women novelists employed to deal with their tenuous social position. These women ~~f~~elt humiliated by the condescension of male critics and spoke intensely of their desire to avoid special treatment and achieve genuine excellence, but they were deeply anxious about the possibility of appearing unwomanly" (Showalter 21). One major mode of combating this dilemma was through ~~a~~ persistent self-deprecation of themselves as women, sometimes expressed as humility, sometimes as coy assurance-seeking, and sometimes as the purest self-hatred" (21). Through this self-deprecation, women writers attempt to reassert their femininity by constructing themselves as weak and inferior. Ellis employs similar tactics, particularly in her early works. She assumes an outward position of inferiority as a strategy to navigate her role as a writer, yet this inferiority only slightly veils a sense of superiority. Her superiority is largely the result of another tactic Ellis uses: in order to avoid the danger of ~~a~~ppearing unwomanly" (Showalter 21) Ellis argues that her writing constitutes appropriate woman's work because it is ~~a~~ means of moral instruction" (*Pictures* x).[3] Throughout her writing Ellis argues that one of the chief duties

[3] Showalter argues that many women authors, including Sarah Ellis, ~~h~~ad to overcome deep-seated guilt about authorship" (22). While I agree with Showalter's description of the methods women writers used to avoid the appearance of being ~~u~~nwomanly," I do not believe that Ellis felt guilty for taking up writing. On the contrary, I contend that while Ellis creates an authorial persona who is humble and apologetic, in her personal life she appears to have felt not only justified in writing, but also satisfied in her success.

of her sex is to serve others through moral influence. By arguing that her writing both in *The Women of England* and in her didactic fiction is a form of service meant to elevate the morals of her readers, she is able to circumvent criticism that her role as a writer is unwomanly. Through similar strategies she is able to create a model of femininity that is both culturally appropriate and empowering.

Six years prior to the publication of *The Women of England*, Ellis published her first book- length work, *Pictures of Private Life* (1833). The book includes four stories and a preface titled "An Apology for Fiction." In "An Apology for Fiction" Ellis states that she wishes to "offer in my own vindication some remarks upon the nature of fiction in general" (*Pictures* v). She goes on to argue, "although willing to allow that fictitious writing is the most humble means of moral instruction, I am still earnest in endeavouring to maintain its utility, especially on the ground that it finds its way to the dense multitude who close their eyes upon the introduction of purer light" (x). Although Ellis does not specifically address the propriety of writing as a woman—indeed, "Apology" does not address gender at all—she does set up writing as a potential venue for moral exercise. The absence of any reference to gender suggests that Ellis, like the women novelists Showalter discusses, is attempting "to avoid special treatment" as a woman (Showalter 21). She also expresses humility, a tactic that Showalter specifically mentions. But, while Ellis denigrates fiction in general, and especially expresses an abhorrence of any

fiction that does not serve a moral purpose, she also makes a place for her writing by arguing that she is serving the greater good of society through the text.[4]

This same argument predominates in the preface to *The Women of England*, except that here, rather than ignoring gender, Ellis uses it as a tool to strengthen her position as an authority. Ellis may have reconsidered the benefits of positioning herself as a woman writer after reading reviews of *Pictures of Private Life*. In a letter she received from editor and poet James Montgomery in 1834, he described how her gender, in his opinion, affected her renderings in the collection. He writes:

> Your females are such as none but one of their own sex could paint, and your men perhaps such as none but such a one would paint. For the ingenuousness with which you have let us into the secret of some of the infirmities of the former, we have to thank you, and to confess likewise, with shame, that you have shown quite enough of the worse traits of the baser sex. (*Home Life* 55)

[4] Incidentally, Henrietta Wycross-Martin suggests that Ellis's "An Apology for Fiction" may have influenced George Eliot's discussion of fiction in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*. The two texts have some striking similarities, particularly in their comparisons of fiction writing to painting, and in their justifications for describing flawed characters. Ellis writes that "virtue must be contrasted with vice," and "virtue when allied to clay, must not be complete, and without flaw, because that would be unnatural, and convey an idea of a superhuman being" (viii), while Eliot argues that it is "more needful that my heart should swell with loving admiration at some trait of gentle goodness in the faulty people who sit at the same hearth with me, or in the clergyman of my own parish, who is rather too corpulent and in other respects is not an Oberlin or a Tillotson, than at the deeds of heroes whom I shall never know except by hearsay, or at the sublimest abstract of all clerical graces that was ever conceived by an able novelist" (178).

Although Ellis may have preferred for her writing to be considered for its own merits, with a response such as this she could hardly fail to acknowledge that as a woman she had a special sphere of knowledge not available to men.

Whether from Montgomery's influence or some other source, Ellis clearly determined that her gender gave her an advantage as a conduct manual author. Ellis begins *The Women of England* by positioning herself as an appropriate model of womanhood *and* a professional writer through the preface, where she offers another extensive apology for writing. It might better be termed a defense or apologia, because it seems evident that Ellis is not truly apologetic, but is simply employing a rhetorical tactic to strengthen her claims. Ellis's efforts here are not unique—as Mary Poovey points out, women writing in the eighteenth century ~~a~~lmost always sought to justify their efforts as financially necessary, […] as thoroughly didactic, […] or as absolutely commonplace" (Poovey 39-40). Ironically, although financial need was probably the most important factor in driving her literary career, Ellis focuses on justifying her writing through the latter two tactics, by arguing that it is both didactic and commonplace.

In the first paragraph of *The Women of England* she writes, ~~I~~ feel that some apology is necessary for the presumption of inviting the attention of the public to a work, in which I have been compelled to enter into the apparently insignificant detail of familiar and ordinary life" (*Women* 1). Ellis constructs this apology in such a way that rather than saying that it is presumption for her to write because she is a woman, it is presumption to write on her chosen topic. Rather than self-deprecation, she is deprecating her topic. Even this deprecation, however, is undermined by her proposal that the topic is ~~a~~pparently insignificant," which implies that the topic is actually quite significant. Ellis

goes to some length to explain that her project in *The Women of England* is an important one. She exonerates herself for writing by explaining that since no such work has yet been written, she feels it is her duty to write. She claims that "we have no single work containing the particular minutiae of practical duty" (1). Because of this lack, Ellis claims that she felt "called upon" to write on the topic (1). The repetition of the idea of duty in referring both to the general topic of woman's duty and to Ellis's duty to instruct her audience—"the duty I have undertaken" (3)—conflates Ellis's task as a writer and her task as a woman. Thus Ellis is not stepping outside of the bounds of a woman's sphere, but extending the sphere to include writing, since the project of writing itself is construed as a form of feminine influence and a moral duty.

At the end of the preface to *The Women of England*, Ellis again appears contradictory, as she simultaneously denigrates her writing and elevates her topic. She ends her preface as follows:

> It is therefore solely to the cultivation of habits that I have confined my attention—to the minor morals of domestic life. And I have done this, because there are so many abler pens than mine employed in teaching and enforcing the essential truths of religion; because there is an evident tendency in society, as it exists in the present day, to overlook these minor points; and because it is impossible for them to be neglected, without serious injury to the Christian character. (6)

Through this preface Ellis first and foremost positions herself as inferior. She submits to the implied authority of the public, male and female, and perhaps more importantly, the authority of her (male) publishers, who will judge her work. She also acknowledges her inferior writing skills, which she says she only employs in this instance because there is seemingly no one else who will do the work. Her narrow subject matter also implies a sense of inferiority, in that she suggests that she will not venture beyond the confines of discussing domestic life, a topic that she, as a woman, is able to discuss without trespassing. Further, she proposes that she will not venture into a discussion of "essential truths of religion," although she claims that her work addresses issues that are important to "Christian character." Indeed, she is also constructing herself as a humble Christian woman through this effort. Finally, she suggests again that the subject itself is inferior by marking it with words such as "insignificant" and "minor." Overall, the passage is overtly humble and submissive.

Yet even as Ellis offers this apology for the text, she is simultaneously setting herself apart as an authority. At the same time that the importance of domestic affairs appears diminutive, she argues that it is "impossible for them to be neglected" (6). Further, without laying any specific claims as to her qualifications to write on the subject, by the virtue of her project, with its largely female intended audience, she suggests that she is more knowledgeable than other women—an idea which becomes more evident later in the text when she specifically identifies flaws in younger generations. Thus the preface as a whole enacts the role of women as Ellis will go on to describe it; it is apparently submissive but ultimately authoritative.

Submissively Superior: The Moral Economy

Ellis continues the pattern of alternating (or even overlapping) female inferiority and authority throughout *The Women of England*. She repeatedly states that women are inferior to men and that a "woman should feel her own inferiority" (223). The rationale for arguments that Ellis's writings are anti-feminist is evident in these moments, which serve as painful reminders of both the status of women in the Victorian period and Ellis's own need to fulfill certain expectations in her efforts to get published. Nevertheless, she develops an alternative system of personal worth wherein women are superior to men. In doing so, she develops not only her own authority, but an argument for the authority of all women based on the assumption that a combination of their social position and innate feminine qualities result in women's moral superiority. This moral superiority gives women space to become active participants in society, thus disrupting the traditionally accepted pairings of passivity with femininity and activity with masculinity. While Ellis eventually uses the presumed moral superiority of women to give them space in the public sphere, first she uses a woman's role within the domestic sphere to demonstrate women's power.

In the first chapter of *The Women of England*, "Characteristics of the Women of England," Ellis clarifies her own position as an authority on domestic and moral matters. Her authority is based, unsurprisingly, on influence. She clearly distinguishes between her generation and that of her young female audience (Ellis was about forty years old when *Women* was published). She tells her reader:

> I ought, perhaps, in strict propriety, to say what *were* their [the women of England's] characteristics; because I would justify the obtrusiveness of a work like this, by first premising that the women of England are deteriorating in their moral character, and that false notions of refinement are rendering them less influential, less useful, and less happy than they were. (10)

Although Ellis' emphasis on the importance of ~~–m~~oral character" is evident, what is perhaps more important is her assertion that the decline of this morality is causing women to lose influence, usefulness, and happiness. Young women, those of the generation following her own, are ~~–l~~ess influential," or to phrase it differently, less powerful than before because they are seeking power and influence through ~~–f~~alse notions of refinement," which is the wrong approach (10). Perhaps most importantly, her commentary suggests that women ought to be able to ~~–in~~fluence," and that such power is right and appropriate. Simultaneously, as is also suggested in the preface, Ellis's own superior knowledge and influence is implied. Thus Ellis both blames young women for their reduced position and uses this to her advantage in constructing her own authority.

Throughout her writings, Ellis emphasizes the importance of influence in maintaining a woman's position in society. Although Ellis's later writings suggest that intellectual pursuits can be appropriate and even benefit women in establishing their

influence, in *The Women of England*, arguably her most conservative work,[5] an academic education is especially problematic. Because men are already successful in intellectual studies, there is little or no place for women to rise above them in that arena. Meanwhile, morality, an area in which women may surpass men, is often forgotten when women seek to learn subjects such as Latin or Greek. Ellis therefore suggests that an education that over-emphasizes intellectual study causes women to become second to men not only in intellectual knowledge, but in morality as well. Without moral superiority, women lose the power they once held. She writes:

> When the cultivation of the mental faculties had so far advanced as to take precedence of the moral, by leaving no time for domestic usefulness, and the practice of personal exertion in the way of promoting general happiness, the character of the women of England assumed a different aspect, which is now beginning to tell upon society in the sickly sensibilities, the feeble frames, and the useless habits of the rising generation. (11)

Like her later conduct manuals, which argue for balance in women's education,[6] Ellis is concerned that too much emphasis on "mental faculties" means a lack of emphasis on moral duties. Here she does not take time to qualify her statements to the extent that she

[5] More work needs to be done on the trajectory of Ellis's writing over the span of her career; however, I believe that *The Women of England* is probably more conservative because it is her earliest work in this genre, and she was particularly concerned with getting published and selling enough copies. Later, having gathered some fame from *The Women of England*, she is more apt to write frankly about her views on women's education, including the benefit of intellectual study.

[6] See Chapter 1

does in *The Daughters of England;* she does not explain that an intellectual education has benefits.[7] Instead, her goal is to show that focusing on moral and domestic duties is necessary not because women are the lesser sex and ought not to trespass into the public sphere, but rather because by focusing on these duties women become empowered. Additionally, the emphasis on morality makes space for women to become active. The women who are not fulfilling their moral duties are described in terms of physical weakness. While the domestic ideal positioned women as passive spectators to the active social and political lives of men, Ellis constructs feminine morality in such a way as to place it at odds with passivity. Moral women must be strong enough, mentally, physically, and spiritually, to act, and this action need not be limited to the home.

Essentially, Ellis sets up an economic system wherein moral superiority is a form of wealth that endows its holder with power. This moral economy is set up in contrast to the capitalistic economy of the public sphere, which Ellis viewed as corrupting. Chase and Levenson describe this opposition in *The Spectacle of Intimacy,* where they argue that "we need to recognize the extent to which early Victorian home life appeared not only as distinct from the new economy but as its saving alternative" (Chase 76). While capitalism promotes gain through others' losses—in order for one to get money, someone else must lose it—the moral economy is one of helpfulness and kindness. Here, one gains by helping others, and there is no limit on the accrual of personal moral wealth, nor on the number of people who may share in and benefit from it. The dichotomy of moral versus monetary wealth was a prevalent discourse in the Victorian period, especially in

[7] Again, this difference between *The Women of England* and *The Daughters of England* may be the result of a shift in values between the two texts. However, given her appreciation for learning in her journals, even predating the publication of *The Women of England* (see Chapter 1), I am more inclined to judge her conservatism here as part of a constructed façade aimed to ensure publication and sales.

conduct manuals. Nancy Armstrong, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction,* writes that ―conduct books represented such an economy in opposition to one based on money" (Armstrong 81). Ellis uses this opposition, and the assumption that the moral economy is necessarily more important than the market economy, to give her female reader power as the governor of morality, since exercising moral influence is an appropriate vocation for women. In addition, women's superiority in the moral economy extends their power beyond the individual household, and onto a national level.

Ellis's belief in the power of women even on a national level is evident throughout the work. She tells her readers ―you have deep responsibilities, you have urgent claims; a nation's moral wealth is in your keeping" (*Women* 13). Later she repeats this idea in vigorous protest against anything but the most virtuous behavior, and asks ―who would not rather that English women should be guarded by a wall of scruples, than allowed to degenerate into less worthy, and less efficient supporters of their country's moral worth?" (35). Far from denigrating women, Ellis elevates them by arguing that moral character is of national importance.

The second chapter of Ellis' book, ―Influence of the Women of England" builds on the idea that women's power extends to a national level. She tells us that ―the immediate object of the present work is to show how intimate is the connexion which exists between the women of England, and the moral character maintained by their country in the scale of nations" (38). Then, at last, she begins to hint at the role of men—a role which up to this point she has entirely ignored, and on which she only rarely sheds any light at all. Here, however, in a brief moment of illumination, she writes:

> For a woman to undertake such a task [as writing *The Women of England*], may at first sight appear like an act of presumption; yet when it is considered that the appropriate business of men is to direct, and expatiate upon, those expansive and important measures for which their capabilities are more peculiarly adapted, and that to women belongs the minute and particular observance of all those trifles which fill up the sum of human happiness or misery, it may surely be deemed pardonable for a woman to solicit the serious attention of her own sex, while she endeavours to prove that it is the minor morals of domestic life which give the tone to English character, and that over this sphere of duty it is her peculiar province to preside. (38-39)

While this statement appears on one hand to uphold the idea of separate spheres, it also raises the domestic sphere to a level of such public importance that the division between domestic and public actually becomes blurred. Indeed, what could be more important than ~~th~~the sum of human happiness or misery"? Here it appears that Ellis' book is not so much meant as an instruction manual for girls, as it is a proof of the extensive importance of the female sex to society. Other conduct manuals functioned similarly, as Nancy Armstrong points out with several examples that ~~e~~either suggest or openly state that without the domestic woman the entire domestic framework would collapse" (Armstrong 82-83). However, Ellis takes this further and extends the collapse to the destruction of the whole of English morality and ~~c~~character." Describing the argument of Hannah More, a conduct book author of the early 1800s and one of Ellis's

predecessors, Armstrong tells us that ―if it is given to women to regulate the desires of men, then domestication constitutes a political force of no meager consequence" (Armstrong 90). Herein lies Ellis's argument: without a society of moral women, everything falls apart.

Ellis attempts to subdue this potentially radical voice with a qualifying statement. She adds ―Aware that the word *preside*, used as it is here, may produce a startling effect upon the ear of man, I must endeavour to bespeak his forbearance, by assuring him, that the highest aim of the writer does not extend beyond the act of warning the women of England back to their domestic duties" (*Women* 39). However, this weak attempt at qualification only seems to deflect attention away from more radical parts of her statement that deal with the national impact of women. Indeed, by adding this remark Ellis is pointing out a self-awareness concerning the possibly controversial view she is taking. The reader must therefore take into consideration the fact that Ellis is well aware that she is speaking contrary to the precepts of male English culture. Interestingly, Ellis uses the word ―act" to describe her work, reinforcing the association between morality and action. This further upsets gender roles by challenging the division between masculinity as active and femininity as passive.

There is also an issue with tone in this passage that is worth noting, since it is difficult to read this remark without finding in it a hint of insincerity. After all, only two sentences before she has told us that the ―immediate object of the present work" is something entirely different from the here stated ―highest aim." The credibility of this interjected plea for pardon is therefore quelled, and the careful reader must believe that her first thesis, that she will prove that the morality of women is of national

consequence, is her true thesis. Further, Ellis's definition of ~~"d~~omestic duties," as becomes clearer throughout the text, expands well beyond housekeeping. Thus we are made to understand that *The Women of England* will do much more than instruct women to remain silent and subservient fixtures in their households.

From here Ellis' argument turns, as she says it will, to the minute aspects of domesticity that constitute a moral lifestyle. Her counsels revolve chiefly around the idea of ~~"d~~isinterested kindness," the root of all _right' action. Developing this aspect of female nature is of the utmost importance to Ellis. Her emphasis on the motives behind women's action, rather than the action itself, helps to create a crack in the rigid Victorian scruples concerning proper women's behavior. Ellis argues that women should seek to help others without interest in personal gain, but what they can and even must do to help others is left open. Moreover, helping others is frequently a means of helping oneself (and vice versa); thus, certain apparently self-serving actions may still be construed as disinterested kindness, and disinterested kindness ultimately serves oneself. Ellis claims that the English woman is "~~m~~ost valued, admired, and beloved […] for her disinterested kindness" (64). A discussion of this is the bulk of *The Women of England,* which includes four chapters on "~~D~~omestic Habits, Consideration and Kindness" (174). Interestingly, Ellis seems to imply that women stand to gain the most if they focus their attention on "~~a~~ quick discernment of the character and feelings of those around us, and a benevolent desire to afford them as much pleasure, and spare them as much pain, as we can" (175). Although the focus should be on others, the end result is inevitably elevation of self, as this consideration for others is "~~o~~ne of the highest recommendations the female character can possess" (175). At this point, Ellis does not address the extent of

the activities that are acceptable acts of ~~–d~~isinterested kindness." Nevertheless, by placing motives above action in terms of importance, she sets herself up to expand women's roles significantly.

Women's elevation of self is also the saving grace for the husbands of England, whose public lives in commerce corrupt them outside the home. Chase and Levenson write that ~~–e~~rucially for Ellis, the terrible problem is not only that the public world […] has become a morally fallen domain; it is also that public life has begun to erode the integrity of men's private character" (Chase 78). To fight this problem, Ellis attempts to construct a domestic space in which the kindnesses of women can counteract the ill effects of the outside world. She describes how men are consumed by public life, which is tantamount to evil:

> We cannot believe of [men] that they are all gone over to the side of mammon, that there does not lurk in some corner of their hearts a secret longing to return; yet every morning brings the same hurried and indifferent parting, every evening the same jaded, speechless, welcomeless return – until we almost fail to recognize the man, in the machine. (*Women* 57)

It is precisely this degradation of men that makes women, the moral center of society, so vital. To counteract this degradation of men-turned-machine, it is ~~–th~~e especial duty of women to look around them, and see in what way they can counteract this evil, by calling back the attention of man to those sunnier spots in his existence, by which the

growth of his moral feelings have been encouraged, and his heart improved" (56). Women therefore become the moral educators. They are charged with ~~re~~deeming the character of English men from the mere animal, or rather, the mere mechanical state, into which, from the nature and urgency of their occupations, they are in danger of falling" (343). The use of this ~~m~~echanical" language to describe the world of commerce also serves to strengthen Ellis's assertion the home, contrary to the public sphere, is the abode of human morality.

Ellis dwells extensively on the benefits of fulfilling domestic duties, but more importantly she dwells on the importance of moral superiority in establishing a woman's place in society. Although she emphasizes moral influence within the domestic sphere, by placing the most stress on the more general theme of moral superiority, she makes space for women in other spheres. Resting on the well-established grounds that women are morally superior, Ellis is able to enlarge women's roles to encompass more than just their duties within the home. If a woman's moral duty is to act upon her principles, and to act with ~~d~~isinterested kindness," then her moral duty has the potential to lead her to act outside the domestic sphere.

Business Women and Women's Business

While Ellis is quite clear about her belief that commerce corrupts, she does offer one surprising exception. Most of Ellis's examples of how one might carry out disinterested kindness are as we would expect; she encourages women to properly respect their mothers, help with household chores, and show compassion towards servants. Where Ellis's commentary becomes particularly interesting however, is when

she brings up the subject of work outside the home for women. Throughout most of *The Women of England,* Ellis focuses on domestic affairs and upholding morality *within* the home. But, in her final chapter, she proposes that under certain circumstances a woman might best serve others by working outside the home. She is not opposed to women taking up work for pay, although she argues that it must be for the right reasons. Couching all her suggestions in terms of moral action, Ellis makes space for women to be both proper and public.

Ellis's own entry into the world of writing for pay explains a lot about her views on women and money. She began writing largely due to her family's financial problems. In the early 1830s William Stickney's farm was losing money and the family was strained financially. At the outset of her career she appears to have been somewhat reluctant; in 1831 she writes to a friend,[8] "I have some feeling left, though I have taken to writing little books and painting for money" (*Home Life* 43). She had published her first work, "The Negro Slave," (1830) at her own expense, but the story was slow to sell. Thus, when she began seeking a publisher for *Pictures of Private Life*, in 1831, she told the same friend, "I cannot afford to publish it, so that if the booksellers will not take it off my hands, it may go to the flames" (*Home Life* 43). For a time, both Sarah's and her father's finances looked even worse. Finally, in another letter in May of 1832, Sarah writes that she hopes her father can sell the farm, and reports some relief in the fact that her father had found a two-year position as a commissioner that would pay him well (*Home Life* 48). Meanwhile, her own situation apparently worsened further. Despite the publication of *Pictures of Private Life* in 1833, in 1834 she lamented that she had yet to earn much success as an author, telling another friend "my purse is very low, and it is

[8] The friend, "R.A" may also have been a relative—it is unclear in *Home Life and Letters*.

now a point of conscience with me not to encroach upon my father‘s for my pleasures” (58). That year, several of her writings for ―The Friendship‘s Offering” were rejected and she owed ―a very large bill at my publishers,” most likely for the publication of *Pictures* (59). The publishers in question, Smith and Elder, refused to purchase her next book, *Poetry of Life*, prompting her to write in her journal in March 1835:

> My own prospects worse and worse—more anxious than ever to make money—ignorant how. Unsettled about going from home, unsettled about everything. The demon of melancholy making me believe that my book will fail and only expose my folly and inability. ‗What to do?‘ No spiritual progress—earnest prayers not granted. (*Home Life* 60)

She not only feared having too little money, she also apparently feared a disapproving public. Successful book sales were a financial necessity. Ellis‘s anxieties about money prior to her marriage suggest several things. For one, it is evidence that Ellis considered her independence as extremely important. Ellis‘s perception that she is unsuccessful if she is unable to earn a living is also surprising in part because this standard of success is associated with proper Victorian masculinity, not femininity. Further, it seems probable, given the size of both her family and her close social circle, that she could have thrown herself upon the mercy of others, and lived quite comfortably. Her siblings and their families seem to have taken her in for substantial periods of time without considering it a burden. Nevertheless, her fear of dependency evidently outweighed any fears she had of looking foolish in her writings, since she continued writing even after receiving a

number of rejections. Perhaps more importantly, Ellis's focus in her journals on her financial situation forces us to consider the extent to which her early writings reflect what she believed the publishers would buy, as opposed to her own feelings. This helps to explain why, in *The Women of England*, she is noticeably more conservative than in her later conduct manuals. It also helps to explain many of the self-contradictions present in *The Women of England*.

Ellis's views on women and work may appear as one of these contradictions. However, with her own financial struggles behind her, it is little surprise that in *The Women of England* she argues that women of "slender means […] should consider it no degradation to render their activity conducive to the purpose of trade" (*Women* 344). She goes on with this discourse, telling her reader:

> It is a curious anomaly in the structure of modern society, that gentlemen may employ their hours of business in almost any degrading occupation and, if they have but the means of supporting a respectable establishment at home, may be gentlemen still; while, if a lady does but touch any article, no matter how delicate, in the way of trade, she loses caste, and ceases to be a lady. (345)

While acknowledging that this is how her culture perceives the working woman, by deeming it "a curious anomaly in the structure of modern society" Ellis also points out that this perception may be inaccurate. She argues against this Victorian social construction. Here we find Ellis actively engaging in transformative self-direction by

advocating social change that allows women greater agency. Ellis actually applauds working women, "who have the good sense and the moral courage to employ themselves […] rather than to remain idle and dependent" (345). In these cases, Ellis suggests, one is not ignoring her domestic duty, she is actually fulfilling it by helping support herself and her family.

By giving allowances for some women to work for pay, Ellis manages to get around what is perhaps the most problematic aspect of her work: the fact that she, a woman, has written and published it. It would be easy enough to call Ellis a hypocrite from the start, since she encourages her female readers to avoid the public sphere in order to uphold their morality, while she herself led an active public life. Yet Ellis must have foreseen this counterargument, and craftily qualified her advice for young women in such a way as to allow for her own writing career. Ellis clearly tells her readers that society shuns the working woman, but at the same time she suggests that connection with business in its varied forms is "by no means polluting to the touch, or degrading to the mind; and it would be an unspeakable advantage to hundreds of young females, if, instead of useless accomplishments, they could be instructed in these" (346). Essentially, she promotes resistant self-direction through an increased presence of women in the public sphere, which is ultimately transformative as well. By arguing that work is not degrading for women, Ellis seeks to undo the oppression of women caused by Victorian mores about working for pay. Interestingly, arguing that women who work for pay are not morally damaged directly contradicts the position Ellis takes on the effects of business upon men—while it is corrupting to men, it is morally uplifting for women. This may be partly explained by her suggestions for feminine employment; she

goes on to enumerate on career possibilities that are well suited to women, such as fancy millinery or engraving. For the final pages of a conduct book on domestic duty, this is an extraordinary position.

Ellis's logic in promoting careers for women without undermining her preceding three hundred pages about the importance of domestic duty, is simple: "the humblest occupation, undertaken from a sense of duty, becomes ennobled in the motive by which it is prompted" (350). This ideology essentially vindicates any woman who is employed to support herself or her family. Although the intended audience of *The Women of England* is middle class women, this line of thinking also undermines Victorian class ideologies that posit that lower class women are morally inferior because they are polluted by their position as employees. In one gesture therefore, Ellis takes on a radical perspective on women and work, and clears herself of any charges that she may have acted against her own words of advice by writing.

The final chapter of *The Women of England*, not only does Ellis suggest that women can work, a few paragraphs later she suggests that they can also be equal to men. After again denigrating young women who do not live up to her moral standards, she explains:

> I would not speak thus contemptuously of the familiar habits of my sex, if I did not know that they were capable of something better, and if I did not desire – as I desire their good and their happiness – that they would rouse themselves about this paltry littleness, and learn to become, what I am

> confident they might be, not only equal, but interesting and instructive companions to men. (352)

All at once she vindicates herself, proves her noble motives, and gestures towards equality. Obviously, she insists on seeing women in relation to men, but at the same time she only sees men in relation to women, without whom they would be uncivilized brutes.

Ellis ends *The Women of England* with another qualifying statement. If anything she has said has been inflammatory (and of course much of it has been), she brushes it aside by claiming to be working for the greater good. Her writing takes on the air of Christian charity, as she explains that women should improve themselves "that we may so use our influence, and so employ our means, as that those whose happiness has been committed to our care, may partake with us in the enjoyment of the mansions of eternal rest" (356). If anyone should object to her position on the role of women, she can truthfully claim that she was only acting in the best interest of the souls of her fellow humans. Here again, "influence," or women's "means," suggests subversive control. Additionally, the term "committed" suggests a lack of choice on the part of those who women care for, generally men and children. This ironic pairing reemphasizes that women's influence amounts to significant power over others. Disclaimers aside, however, it is impossible to ignore Ellis' declaration that women must garner more power in society on the basis of their moral superiority. While her means may seem opposed to the ideals of the women's rights movement, her end is essentially the same. Women can be equal and powerful, if they know where to seek the power.

This subversive subtext is most significant because it would have been recognizable to readers of the time. Henrietta Twycross-Martin discusses reactions to Ellis's conduct books in her article "Woman Supportive or Woman Manipulative?: The Mrs Ellis' woman." She notes that most "serious reviews of the 1840s […] tended to read her as entirely supportive of a domestic role for women that emphasized their service to others" (Twycross-Martin 113). However, she also points to the parodies of Ellis's works in *Punch*, "in which Mrs Ellis's ambiguities over power are shown up as female self-seeking, and moral influence for the mutual benefit of husband and wife is replaced by cunning manipulation" (114). Although *Punch* casts Ellis's advice in a negative light, it also demonstrates that Ellis's message of female empowerment was relatively transparent. Most of Ellis's readers would have understood that "service to others" was intended to help women serve themselves as well.

Malicious Manipulation or Caring Control: The Characterization of Women in *Social Distinction; or, Hearts and Homes*

In reading *The Women of England*, the line between appropriate female influence and blatant, dangerous manipulation is not always clear. There is no doubt that this ambiguity fueled the mockeries of Ellis in *Punch*. In Ellis's fiction, however, the difference is unmistakable. Both the very worst and the very best women have a great deal of control, but their use of this power divides them. Interestingly, Ellis does not blame women for helping themselves, only for hurting others. She advocates agency, but adheres to the basic moral principle of do no harm. *Social Distinction; or Hearts and Homes* follows the lives of Michael Staunton, his three children, and his

grandchildren. Through the various relationships in the novel, Ellis delineates the difference between maliciously manipulative women and controlling but good women.

Michael Staunton's daughter, Mrs. Ashley, and his grandson's wife, Dorothy, are the token "bad" women in the novel. Since Dorothy, as I will discuss shortly, is redeemed at the end of the text, Mrs. Ashley is by far the most malignant woman in the text. At the opening of the novel, Mrs. Ashley's husband is a successful businessman. Mrs. Ashley, therefore, has access to a fair amount of money, although she is never satisfied that it is enough for everything her household requires. She constantly manipulates her husband, through tears and through her children, whom she uses as pawns, until he gives her increasing sums of money for dresses, dishes, and the like. Slowly, her excess spending helps drive the family to ruin. Mr. Ashley's debt becomes overwhelming, but Mrs. Ashley cannot be made to understand the situation. The stress caused by his financial woes also leads Mr. Ashley to drink. Rather than trying to redeem her husband, however, Mrs. Ashley takes advantage of this weakness to cajole her husband in to giving her more and more money for unnecessary items. At one point, after his niece Kate Staunton has urged him to stand up to his wife, Mr. Ashley describes how his wife and children have attacked him again:

> "It is too late, my child," said Mr. Ashley, in a voice made womanly with wine and weakness. "They have come over me again, as they always do. I could have borne their kindness—they have tried that trick too often; but that talk about old times! Oh, Kate! Whenever you are married, treat your

> husband openly, honestly; don‘t make a fool of him, as your aunt does of me.” (*Social Distinction* 1: 95)

Mrs. Ashley‘s management of her husband amounts to exploitation. She knows he has a weakness for his children and for fond memories, and she uses this to secure what she wants, regardless of her husband‘s needs. When, at last, Mr. Ashley is bankrupt and the family loses everything, Mrs. Ashley finds a new living arrangement for herself and her children but actually abandons her husband. It falls to Kate to look after the fallen man, who becomes an alcoholic and is too mentally weak to do anything for himself. It is evident that Mrs. Ashley‘s behavior contributes a great deal to her husband‘s ruin, both financial and physical. Ellis makes it clear that Mrs. Ashley‘s success in drawing every penny possible from her husband‘s pockets does not represent an ideal marriage, although Mrs. Ashley‘s control is estimable. Because she uses this control for her own ends, namely to gain material goods, both Mrs. Ashley and her husband suffer in the end. Although she has agency, Mrs. Ashley is morally corrupt; thus, Ellis does not condone her actions.

Like Mrs. Ashley, Dorothy Dalrymple uses her power over others for material gain. She is never quite so malicious as Mrs. Ashley, but she seeks to please people in order to gain social distinction. Ultimately, she succeeds in securing Frederick Ashley, Mrs. Ashley‘s son, for her husband, and this marks her worst error. She chooses Frederick because he is wealthy and distinguished (Frederick is not affected by his father‘s bankruptcy), rather than choosing a husband whom she can love and respect. Indeed, she rejects another suitor who is clearly the better man because Frederick ~~h~~has

riches, and a splendid villa, and he is not hateful to me, only indifferent" (2: 3). Dorothy associates the wealth of her husband with the extent of her influence. She imagines that her marriage will afford her more opportunities to be admired, and with this a greater circle of followers who she can control. She does not consider how her husband might affect these schemes.

As it turns out, Dorothy's marriage is a catastrophe, particularly because she is unable to control Frederick. Rather than gaining social influence, she loses it. Frederick is tight with his money, thus preventing her from enjoying the one aspect of married life that she had imagined would bring her happiness. In no uncertain terms, Frederick makes it clear that he controls the finances, telling her, ~~"it~~ is *my choice* that your expenditure should be curtailed" and that ~~"my~~ money shall not be thrown away as it has been" (2: 149). Without sufficient funds from her husband to hold lavish parties and buy the latest fashions, Dorothy is unable to maintain her influence in the social sphere. Ironically, it is Dorothy's desire for greater influence that actually causes her to lose influence entirely. Ellis uses Dorothy to demonstrate that desiring influence for its own sake is unacceptable.

Although Dorothy's marriage is miserable, Frederick's death leaves her an opportunity to redeem herself. With Frederick's money finally in her hands, Dorothy turns from her previous ways and tries to find more charitable means of disposing of her wealth. She uses the majority of her money to help the senior Mr. Ashley, her father-in-law, pay off his debts. It is important to note, however, that Dorothy does not give up all of her money; she keeps just enough to be financially secure. Dorothy is praised for this decision, particularly by the lawyer, Mr. Langton, who, though a minor character, is represented as a moral and honorable voice of reason throughout the text. Mr. Langton

argues that ―self-love is a necessary part of our nature, without which we should be very worthless ourselves, and very troublesome to others" (2: 331). He goes on to tell Dorothy that he is ―glad […] to find that generosity has not altogether usurped the place of justice, and that you have left yourself at least independent" (2: 332). It is interesting that here Dorothy is praised for being selfish to a certain degree, despite the fact that her greed has been her undoing. However, Ellis successfully transforms this trait into a valuable characteristic by postulating that this form of selfishness is actually benevolence, since by maintaining her independence Dorothy will not impose on others.

Indeed, Dorothy's financial decisions after Frederick's death mirror those made by good women throughout the novel. Selfishness, inasmuch as it secures financial independence, is wholly esteemed throughout *Social Distinction*. Kate Staunton, the niece who cares for Mr. Ashley, stands out in the novel as an ideal woman largely due to her insistence on remaining independent. Kate is the orphaned granddaughter of Michael Staunton—his only grandchild by his deceased son. As an orphan, Kate is forced to be self-reliant, and Ellis plainly lauds Kate's ―selfish" manner:

> Thus, then, if Kate Staunton had a shade of self-love mixed up with the varied elements of her character, it operated in a very unobtrusive and inoffensive manner, assuming most frequently an aspect of independence, and making it one of the ruling principles of her life to trouble nobody. Had tidings been brought to Kate, that the house in which she lived was on fire, she was the very person who would have been discovered afterwards to have quietly made her escape, taking, in all probability, her clothes and

> her most valuable property along with her; or had there been fever raging in a poor family in the neighborhood, Kate would have devised some means of sending the sufferers relief, without going near them herself. The pity is, there are not a greater number of young ladies selfish in the same manner. (1: 99)

Selfishness as described here is female agency, and so far as selfishness allows a woman to be independent, Ellis argues that it is acceptable and even admirable. It worth noting that Kate's selfishness, unlike Mrs. Ashley's (or Dorothy's prior to Frederick's death) neither imposes on others nor harms others, and this difference separates good from bad. Similarly, Kate uses her ability to control others differently from Mrs. Ashley and Dorothy, and here again this makes her a better woman.

Because Kate is the descendent of Michael Staunton's only male heir, she stands to inherit a great deal. Mrs. Ashley, coveting her father's property, brings Kate to live with her family in an effort to secure a larger inheritance for herself. She hopes that Staunton will give her a larger portion in the will in return for her _kindness' to Kate. While this serves as another example of Mrs. Ashley's manipulative behavior, it also sets Kate up to do more service than might have been possible if she had lived with her grandfather. Mrs. Ashley is a horrible wife, but Kate dutifully cares for Mr. Ashley, attempting to abate some of the damage done to him by his wife. She supports her uncle with caring words from the beginning, urging him not to give in to his wife's whims and not to drink so heavily. Kate, like her aunt, gains a degree of control over Mr. Ashley, but to a very different effect:

> By her cheerful and attentive manner, and by her untiring, yet unobtrusive watchfulness, she had obtained a kind of mastery over him, so far as to enable him to resist some strong temptations, to which she now felt painfully that he would be cruelly exposed; and who would now be near to warn him of his danger, as she had often done, so gently and so playfully, that he scarcely felt the remonstrance a reproof? (1: 258)

The fact that Kate uses her ―mastery" over Mr. Ashley in an effort to protect him marks the main difference between her control and Mrs. Ashley's. Beyond this, like Mrs. Ashley, Kate is effectively a manipulator, since she directs his actions in a manner that is ―scarcely felt." Yet Ellis offers no remonstrance for this behavior—Kate's covert influence is appropriate.

While Kate's efforts to improve her uncle help demonstrate how Ellis constructs appropriate influence, it is Kate's independence which remains her defining trait throughout the novel. When she learns the extent of her uncle's debt, she finds work as a governess to help support him. Later, after finding shelter for her uncle in her step-grandmother's household, she helps her other aunt, Mrs. Lee, care for an invalid named Henry Egerton, all the while carefully economizing so as not to live beyond her means. At the very end of the novel, after she has inherited a substantial portion of her grandfather's estate, she is engaged to marry Egerton, who ―is not yet entitled to claim his reward," Kate, because he is still working to gain a sufficient living to support his future wife, despite the fact that her own money will more than suffice (2: 365). His trial

is not to become wealthier than his bride, but to demonstrate a moral strength and work ethic in keeping with Kate's own standards. The novel therefore closes on Kate's story with her noble fiancé working to ~~be~~ her equal in those qualifications which she, above most women, has learned to value at their real worth" (2: 365). Kate's industry successfully influences the man she loves to rise to her level, and in this way she holds power over him which will ultimately benefit them both.

Although Kate is the nearest thing to a heroine in *Social Distinction*, there is another woman who deserves some attention here. Margaret Staunton, the wife of Michael Staunton, is from a lower class background, yet this character reinforces the novel's message about the importance of female independence and the function of disinterested kindness. Margaret's entry into the family, which occurs before the novel begins, is described in simple terms:

> Just in proportion as Michael Staunton abhorred all falsehood and deception, his admiration and his praise were directed to honesty and truth. Acting upon this principle, he had married his servant for his second wife; because, as he said, he could not find another *honest* woman, and he could not live alone. (1: 2)

Staunton values virtue more than social standing, and it is evident that he could not have made a better choice than Margaret. She is idealized throughout the text, more so, even, than Kate, despite her more humble beginning.

Margaret's ability to influence others is repeatedly given as evidence of her worth. Many characters in the novel, including Kate, turn to Margaret for advice. Accordingly, she ~~o~~btained a value and an influence amongst those who knew her best, surpassing in a high degree what might have been supposed to attach to one so humble, and so little acquainted with the world" (2: 207). Despite her apparently limited sphere as a former servant and mistress of a relatively rural estate, Margaret's power therefore extends well beyond the domestic sphere. Her power over her husband is significant as well. He trusts her enough that she has broad reign in the household, and since she never abuses this power his trust in her only grows. Thus, by the end of his life, ~~s~~uch was the confidence of Michael Staunton in the integrity, economy, and good management of his wife, that had she chosen to do so, she might without question have made very extensive demands upon his property" (1: 271). Since Staunton is presented as a very reasonable and discerning man, the extent of Margaret's power establishes her as an excellent woman.

Nevertheless, Margaret's power is appropriately feminized through the lens of influence, since she exercises it subversively. For example, when Staunton is preparing his will, Margaret influences his decisions apparently without his perceiving of it. She helps ensure that he will leave his property to Kate, who she believes ~~t~~o possess the strongest claims upon his kindness and protection":

> Margaret became aware that an important purpose was gaining ground in her husband's mind, of which she had frequent hints, without being directly consulted on the subject, and which it was thus in her power to

> help forward, without appearing exactly to do so bold a thing as to advise (1: 326).

Ellis's choice of the word "power" rather than "influence" here speaks to the similarity of the two definitions as Ellis uses the terms. Margaret wields a great deal of power, which might rightly be called influence, and which ultimately means control. Indeed, in the last version of the will, Staunton leaves the final decision concerning the distribution of his wealth in the hands of both his wife and his lawyer, knowing full well that his wife wishes to give a portion of the property to his grandson, Arnold Lee, whom he does not deem worthy of the inheritance:

> [S]uch was the respect entertained by Michael Staunton for the opinion of his wife, and such his confidence in her impartial and unbiased feeling in a case of right and wrong, that in spite of his prejudices, he could not avoid a secret leaning toward her convictions, and he therefore left in her hands, without fear, the power of acting jointly with Mr. Langton according to their mutual convictions. (2: 356-7)

At the end of the novel, Margaret distributes the property as she believes is fit, with Arnold receiving a large portion of the money derived from the estate, and Kate receiving the house and the extensive lands. Margaret's power, therefore, amounts to a very real control over her husband's estate.

Margaret is arguably the ideal wife in every way—she is warm, nurturing, religious, and moral; she takes care of her husband and his family with absolute disinterested kindness. Even the most conservative-minded Victorian would be hard pressed to find fault in Margaret's character. Nevertheless, Margaret's ideas concerning women's roles reveal a surprisingly progressive attitude. While discussing Kate with the lawyer, Mr. Langton, she muses:

> I have sometimes wondered, if women were allowed to manage their own affairs a little more independently than they do, whether they would not learn to manage them better, and so bring about a great saving of trouble; for what with taking care of women, and watching them, and treating them like simpletons, and taking it for granted that they don't know how to do any thing—it seems to me that men take more upon their own hands than *they* can well manage, clever as they are. (2: 216)

In choosing the most faultless character to advocate female agency, particularly financial independence, Ellis strengthens her argument for expanding women's roles. Coming from Margaret, the idea that women are capable of more than society allows (and that men, moreover, might not be so capable) is more easily accepted.

It is also significant that both Kate and Margaret are wage earners at some point during their lives, but are clearly not degraded by this work. Similarly, the other arguably "good" woman in the novel, Betsy Burton, is a servant. Ellis sets these characters in opposition to Mrs. Ashley and Dorothy, who expect to be given what they

want, rather than expecting to work for it. Working for money is the morally proper choice for all three of these women at varying points in their lives, and they are therefore elevated by their industry, rather than suffering from being at a lower social standing. Furthermore, while Margaret clearly benefits from her marriage, she is not blamed for her rising social status because she does not blatantly promote herself.

Each in their own way, the four women I have discussed in this section struggle for control over their lives, their finances, and even other people, but the extent of their success varies depending on their motives. Dorothy and Mrs. Ashley both desire wealth and social distinction. Both of these women end up losing power as a result of these desires—Mrs. Ashley loses control by squandering her husband's wealth, and Dorothy loses control by marrying a man over whom she has no influence. Meanwhile, both Margaret and Kate work to influence those around them, but their goals in doing so always center around what they see as moral imperatives. Thus Kate works to rescue her uncle from financial ruin and alcoholism because she perceives this as her duty, and Margaret works to convince her husband of how best to dispose of his property because she believes that her opinion represents the morally correct decision. Kate and Margaret are not only more successful in maintaining their control; they also benefit from doing their duty towards their family and themselves. Their disinterested kindness, as Ellis suggests in *The Women of England*, elevates them as much or more than the objects of their benevolence. Ultimately the novel demonstrates the conflated meanings of power and influence in its insistence that women should be moral influences and its message that through moral duty women gain power. Kate and Margaret exercise influence effectively in the novel, and as a result they both have overt power over property. They

become empowered through their adherence to a strict set of morals that requires both autonomy and agency.

IV

Intemperance, Influence, and Separate Spheres

> His natural disposition was frank, and humane. The natives always spoke of him as good-natured, except when he was under the influence of ardent spirits; his manners were perfectly free, at the same time dignified, and always agreeable to those who were about him. (324)
>
> William Ellis
> Description of Kamehameha, King of the Sandwich Islands, from the *Journal of William Ellis*

> The case was widely different with the good-natured master of the house; and I now saw, for the first time, the influence that wine was capable of exerting, both over his appearance and his character. His whole manner, in fact, was changed. His words were no longer cautious and well chosen. He was no longer on his guard against receiving false impression. (1: 228)
>
> Sarah Stickney Ellis
> Description of Mr. Somerville in ~~"S~~Somerville Hall," part of the collection *Family Secrets*

In 1822, William Ellis visited Hawaii with a few members of the London Missionary Society in order to conduct ~~"a~~ survey of the religious state of the inhabitants of the island" (W. Ellis xi). Shortly thereafter, he wrote an account of his travels in which he described numerous encounters with members of the native population. Although he was generally impressed by the people he met, William Ellis found one major fault with the islanders: the prevalence of ~~"in~~ebriety, with all its demoralization, and attendant misery" (W. Ellis 275). Two decades later, temperance was a mission shared by both William and Sarah Ellis. The alcoholism that William Ellis scorned in the Hawaiian Islands appeared equally prevalent at home in England. In the 1840s, the couple participated in forming a temperance association in their hometown of Hoddesdon. In William Ellis's biography, his son, John Eimeo Ellis recalls that the

Ellises —humanely and zealously extended a helping hand in the task of individual reformation—a service for which many a reformed inebriate, many a heart-broken wife and famished children, to whose homes, through their instrumentality, happiness and plenty were restored, even yet bless their memory" (J. Ellis 179). The evils of alcohol became a prevalent theme in Sarah Ellis's fiction, but while some Victorian temperance authors based their stories on alcoholic family members, it seems that Sarah Ellis's inspiration came largely from her neighbors. Hoddesdon, a brewing town with its main street lined with pubs, offered ample fodder for Ellis's philanthropy as well as her temperance stories.

Nineteenth-century philanthropic efforts as a whole are an interesting place to begin a discussion of collapsing gendered spheres because philanthropy, although public in nature, relied heavily on female involvement. In *Family Fortunes*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall describe how philanthropy expanded women's roles:

> Philanthropic societies offered women opportunities, both to work with men and on their own. They might learn to administer, to organize, to deal with money beyond household expense, to speak at last in small meetings, to move around the town distributing tracts and visiting the poor, to write, to find new friends. Their efforts always rested on their special claim to moral authority and influence. (Davidoff 436)

Philanthropy allowed women to pursue roles in the public sphere that were otherwise closed to them. Despite the similarities between the philanthropic societies and

businesses in terms of finances, organization and leadership, philanthropy was linked to the domestic sphere and therefore considered within a woman's realm. Dorice Williams Elliott, in *The Angel Out of the House,* points to Hannah More's writings in the early nineteenth century as playing a "central role in naturalizing philanthropy as an extension of women's domestic duties" (55). Writiten some thirty years before Ellis, More's works both "upheld domestic ideology's prescription for women" and "posed an inherent challenge to that ideology's confinement of women within the private sphere of the home" (55). Although More's philanthropic interests lay primarily in caring for the poor, she helped pave the way for other forms of philanthropy to become venues for the public exercise of women's influence.

The temperance movement in particular flourished with female involvement. In *A Victorian Woman's Place*, Simon Morgan explains that because alcoholism was viewed as a moral issue that affected the family, "[w]omen were therefore strongly encouraged to support the temperance movement, and the temperance press were quick to argue that temperance was a 'woman's issue'" (99). Olive Banks, in *Faces of Feminism*, further argues that "there was an association between the temperance movement and feminism," although this association was less significant in Britain than in the United States[1] (19). Temperance, charitable work with the poor, became a nexus for women to enter into and reform the public sphere.

In her work with the temperance society in Hoddesdon, as in her writing about the effects of alcohol, Ellis was a participant in this public version of feminine influence.

[1] Banks also links feminism to anti-slavery efforts, which Ellis directly addressed in her early work "The Negro Slave." Additionally, Banks argues that the Quaker movement was a significant "source of feminism" (24). Here, then, is another possible link between Ellis and early feminism, since Ellis was a Quaker until her marriage at age 37.

Since such public efforts by women were generally accepted, or even met with approbation, temperance as a mission provides a convenient gap in the ideology of separate spheres. Ellis exploits this gap in her temperance fiction in much the same way as she exploits the moral ambiguities of women's involvement in work for pay that I discussed in Chapter Three. Thus, Ellis uses temperance to expand woman's role in society.

Ironically, while the temperance mission provided a space for women to become more active in the public sphere, an emphasis on domesticity figured prominently in its goals. The temperance movement sought to reform drunks, both female and male, in order to restore the damaged domestic space by leading the afflicted back to family and home. Consequently, the temperance mission stressed the domestic role of men as well as women. The strength of the gendered division of private and public spheres is therefore diminished in the face of temperance work, which simultaneously pushed women into public philanthropy and called men home to their families. For Ellis, therefore, temperance offered a doubly useful means of expanding gender roles, not only in its insistence on a wide sphere of feminine influence, but also in its desire to (re)domesticate men. Indeed, both of these trends are evident in her temperance fiction. Ellis's stories show intemperance as a destructive consequence of a too strict division of public and private life.

For a Victorian author and a woman, Sarah Stickney Ellis's descriptions of drunken debauchery are shockingly vivid.[2] Rather than playing coy in deference to the presumed innocence of her audience of young women, Ellis spares few details. Through the use of scare tactics, Ellis makes an effective argument for temperance. In this sense, Ellis's purpose is three-fold: first, she warns women away from alcohol because it diminishes their ability to exert influence over others; second, she warns against marrying men who have a propensity for alcohol because they are more difficult to influence; and third, she argues that it is the duty of every sober wife to restrain her husband from drinking. Invariably, Ellis's chief goal in her temperance writings, as in her other writings, is to secure for women a position of power both in their households and the world at large. But Ellis's temperance fiction achieves more than just this goal. In the first part of this chapter I will discuss the relationship between alcoholism and influence in Ellis's collection of temperance stories, *Family Secrets: Or, Hints to Those who would Make Home Happy* (1842). In the second half of this chapter, through an examination of these same stories, I will show how Ellis's temperance fiction, like the temperance movement itself, offers alternative constructions of gender that break down the ideology of separate spheres.

Under the Wrong Influence: Drunken Men and the Failure to Protect or Provide

Family Secrets begins with a story entitled "The Dangers of Dining Out." The protagonist, Eleanor, marries a medical man named Frederick who, as her father notes,

[2] Twycross-Martin, in "The Drunkard, the Brute and the Paterfamilias: The Temperance Fiction of the Early Victorian Writer Sarah Stickney Ellis," notes that "as a work of domestic fiction aimed at the religious middle classes in the early 1840s, *Family Secrets* seems to have been unusually graphic in dealing with middle-class violence and family disruption caused by alcoholism" (Twycross-Martin 13).

enjoys ―dining out" too much. Although Eleanor's father uses the phrase as a euphemism for drinking too much alcohol, the expression, like the difficulty of Eleanor's position, is multi-layered. ―Dining out" also refers to Frederick's tendency to be away from home, and consequently away from his wife's direct influence. Moreover, while dining out Frederick is influenced not only by alcohol, but also by his ―friends," who lack his wife's moral compass and sound reason. The ―dangers of dining out," then, comes to describe the various ways in which Eleanor loses influence. At the same time, alcohol abuse leaves Frederick unable to protect or provide for his family.

Initially, Frederick's drinking habit evolves prior to his marriage and outside of the home when he dines with his friends. Immediately following the wedding, Frederick ceases for a time to dine out with his friends. Instead, shortly after the wedding, Frederick decides to host a dinner party for the gentlemen friends of his bachelor days. It is at this early juncture that Eleanor begins losing influence in the domestic sphere. Against Frederick's wishes, Eleanor invites her younger sister and a friend to join her for the party. After dinner, however, she learns the reason why Frederick did not want women to come. When the ladies move to the drawing-room, the men continue drinking in the dining room, until, at an exceptionally late hour, they begin to emerge almost insensible with drunkenness. In the ensuing scene, Eleanor watches in horror as a small, drunken man harasses her sister:

> Eleanor looked on with astonishment equalled only by her indignation. The maternal feelings of an elder sister rose in her heart, and glowed upon her cheek, as she saw the poor girl struggling, almost in tears, beneath his

> familiar and insulting treatment. One of her attempts to escape had rent her white muslin frock from the top to the bottom, and her hair, which she usually wore arranged around her brow with classic order, was torn from its bandage, and lay loose and flowing upon her neck. (1: 26-27)

The scene disrupts the sanctity of the domestic space on several levels. The physical violence of the encounter is at odds with the notion that home is safe, and Eleanor's domestic authority is thoroughly undermined. The drawing-room very quickly becomes dangerous and out of control, rather than a setting for Eleanor's benevolent influence. The torn white frock and loose and flowing hair clearly add a sexual dimension to the assault and imply a loss of innocence that ought to have been protected in the private sphere. Further, instead of being the mistress of the domestic sphere, when Eleanor attempts to rescue her sister, she ends up becoming the next victim. The man turns on her and, ~~–se~~izing her hands, compelled her to perform various rapid evolutions around the drawing-room" (1: 27). Both sisters are therefore forced into inappropriately intimate contact with a stranger. The sexual implications of this scene suggest further damage caused by Frederick's drinking, both to Eleanor and her sister's honor, as well as to the general propriety of the household.

Eleanor's control of her household is also undermined because the servants gather at the door to watch the scene. Brian McCuskey discusses the complex situation of the servant who at once guards the master's privacy and is privy to the master's secrets. He explains that ~~–th~~e servant's underground is a place where novels unofficially interrogate – even as they officially install – the separation of private and public spheres" (363). This

interrogation is clear in "The Dangers of Dining Out," since Eleanor's servants, who cannot be entirely categorized as members of the public or private circle, ensure a public dimension to what otherwise may be a private scene. The servants' observation of this scene is troublesome not only because Eleanor's authority with the domestics is damaged by virtue of their seeing her in such a ridiculous and compromised position, but also because they may share what they have seen. The servants, along with the other female guest in attendance at the party, can and do go on to gossip about the evening, thus advertising to the neighborhood the fallen state of Eleanor's home. Thus Eleanor's position in the community, like her position at home, is also diminished; that is, she loses both public and private influence.

Although Eleanor is unable to control the scene, it is Frederick who truly fails in his duty as a husband. Still drinking in the dining room below, he does not come to his wife's aid. His intemperance quite literally incapacitates him, and this affects Eleanor the most: "That her husband should leave her to be the subject of such gross and violent insult" (1: 28). Frederick does not protect Eleanor; on the contrary, his love of drinking causes him to bring danger, in the form of both his drinking companions and the influence of the drink itself, into the home. Ellis shows that a drunken man is not only unable to protect his wife, but may even endanger her. During the party, Frederick's guests threaten his household while he is too inebriated to either notice or respond. After the party however, it is Frederick who appears threatening.

The frontispiece from Volume One of *Family Secrets,* depicting disorder in the drawing-room while the servants watch from the door.

Perhaps even more disturbing than the description of the party is the description Ellis gives of the situation after the guests have left. Alone, she writes, "the wife must bear the presence of her husband; and that hour of seclusion, that chamber of rest, in which the full hearts of the happy are accustomed to unburden themselves, must become the scene of horror and repulsion" (1: 29). Although Ellis does not give more detail than this, the "horror and repulsion" is sufficient to suggest several unpleasant possibilities, including marital rape. Once Frederick is asleep, Eleanor reflects further on her husband:

> She had been accustomed to feel safe, if she could but touch his hand, or know that he was within hearing of her voice; but there he lay, inanimate and gross, and she, the subject of indignity and insult, had no one to defend her—she, his once honoured wife, and mistress of his house, was left to be the plaything of rude men, and the object of pity to her own domestics. (1: 30)

Frederick's habits thoroughly upset the equilibrium of the household. He is no longer the protector of his wife and home, and Eleanor has lost some of her domestic authority. Further, Frederick's behavior clearly suggests that he does not respect his wife, and it has left Eleanor unable to trust or respect her husband in return. Thus, the basis for a successful marriage as Ellis describes in her conduct manuals is missing.[3] Frederick's intemperance therefore compromises the domestic sphere on two levels: the sanctity of the home (as a safe and moral space) and the sanctity of marriage (as an institution built upon mutual love and respect).

[3] See Chapter Three.

As the story continues, Frederick continues to fail as a protector and eventually fails as a provider as well. Alcohol prevents him from performing his duties as a doctor, until finally he loses all respect in the community and does little more than sit at home and drink all day. Instead, it falls to Eleanor and her children to provide for themselves as well as Frederick. Eleanor and her young daughters take in sewing, which pays just barely enough money for them to eat, for the son to attend school, and to pay off the wine merchant for Frederick's purchases. Yet Eleanor keeps both her work and her extensive economizing from Frederick—he continues to dine on meat, oblivious to the fact that his wife and children are eating only bread for dinner. His intemperance blinds him to his family's situation; his need for alcohol comes before his family's needs. Rather than the idealized relationship based on a mutual effort for mutual benefit that Ellis touts in her conduct manuals, this marriage is one-sided. Eleanor puts forth all of the effort while Frederick does nothing. Yet this also creates a gap in which Ellis can re-envision gender roles. The husband's failure allows, or even obliges, the wife to behave differently. Eleanor succeeds through taking in work for her family; this is clearly a good decision. Here again, as I discussed in chapter three, Ellis indicates that working for pay is laudable behavior for a woman of reduced means, as Eleanor is by virtue of her husband's addiction.

Where Eleanor is less successful, however, is in her decision not to directly and vehemently oppose her husband's drinking habit. Eleanor chooses to remain silent on the subject and, according to Ellis, this is her greatest flaw:

> It is, perhaps, not often that men complain of their wives for keeping silence in such cases. Speaking too much, or rather with too little regard to fitness of time and manner, is a far more frequent cause of offense. From this error Eleanor Bond was singularly exempt, but her punishment was not the less, that her fault consisted in an opposite extreme of conduct. (1:106)

While Ellis recognizes that men often do not appreciate wives who are especially vocal about their husbands' faults, she phrases this commentary in such a way as to avoid saying that such behavior on the part of wives is actually wrong. Husbands may be offended, but that is evidently preferable to remaining insensible of their faults. Ellis suggests that Eleanor ought to have spoken sooner to her husband. Instead, Eleanor's persistent silence only allows the problem to grow increasingly out of control. She fails to exercise her influence and instead performs the accepted role of the silent and suffering wife, which Ellis shows to be the wrong decision. Indeed, the turning point in the story begins when Frederick overhears Eleanor's prayers. It is her words that first awake in him an understanding of the damage he is causing the family. On the following day, one of his daughters reveals the whole truth of the family's situation to him, and Frederick at last swears off alcohol. The story undermines the idea that women should suffer in silence, but it is also clear that Frederick's conversion to abstinence comes only as a result of the influence from several sources, including his wife, children, and a family friend. Thus, it is apparent that while a husband's alcoholism may expand a woman's

agency as she takes control of affairs that would otherwise be her husband‘s responsibility, it also diminishes the strength of her influence over her husband.

The basic plot of Frederick‘s struggle with intemperance is repeated in multiple stories in *Family Secrets*. Over and over Ellis writes tales of men who visit with friends too much, who are too influenced by social situations, and who too readily drink in the company of other men. Although some of the women in these stories try harder than others to break their men from their habit, it is clear that a woman‘s influence is not sufficient in itself to reform an intemperate man. In ―First Impressions,‖ Owen Meredith‘s path to intemperance begins with his desire to socialize with his wife‘s father and brothers, all of whom are already heavy drinkers. His wife, Margaret, tries to convince him to stop, but his addiction has the greater influence and her pleading has no apparent effect. He finally gives up alcohol after a strange walk during which he sees how alcohol has destroyed other families in his village, and realizes that he is taking his wife and child down a similar path. Margaret‘s influence may help pave the way for his conversion, but it is insufficient on its own to actually effect a change.

In another story, ―Fireside Recollections,‖ a young woman named Edith unsuccessfully attempts to reform her drunkard father, whose alcoholism has led his own son to disown him. Meanwhile, her sister-in-law is having similar trouble with her husband, Edith‘s brother. Both women are interested in the temperance movement and abstain from drinking entirely, but they cannot seem to influence the men to abstain as well. The sister-in-law describes her failure to influence her husband, despite having ―reasoned with him, pleaded—prayed with him‖ (3: 377). The reason for the failure, she explains, is the more prevailing influence of society. All of her efforts are forgotten

—when he is again surrounded by the temptations presented by society" (3: 378). Like Frederick Bond, the brother in this story is too easily swayed by the wrong influence.

Finally, the men attend a temperance meeting and are so moved by the experience that they both sign temperance pledges. The broader influence of the temperance society is necessary to influence these men to abstain from alcohol. "Fireside Recollections," like the other stories, again shows that women alone are unable to reform intemperate men. The influence of alcohol, and the influence of society that promotes excessive drinking, repeatedly prevents women from exercising what Ellis suggests is their greatest power, that of influence.

While Ellis demonstrates that intemperance makes men difficult to influence, she simultaneously shows that intemperance in men allows or even obliges women to act with greater agency. The women in each of these stories struggle to convince their husbands and fathers to give up alcohol. However, the men's intemperance can be associated with a lack of male control, which is simultaneously dangerous and liberating for the women, who are able to act as the heads of their households in the stead of their incapacitated men. Yet Ellis's notion of female agency is complicated by her insistence that while male intemperance increases female autonomy, women should ultimately seek to prevent men from drinking. Thus it appears that while Ellis argues that women are capable of taking care of themselves, she also implicitly suggests that they should not have to do so. Here, again, we find Ellis's trademark duplicity: she acknowledges the traditional role of women as dependent but still argues for agency.

Unable to Influence: Drunken Women, Weakness, and Insanity

Of the ten stories in *Family Secrets*, six focus on intemperate men while only four deal with intemperate women. Although Ellis is much more prone to discuss alcoholism amongst men than amongst women, when she writes about women who drink some similarities become clear. Just as Ellis argues that alcohol makes men difficult to control, she also argues that alcohol makes women less able to control men. "The Favourite Child" and "Confessions of a Maniac" demonstrate that drinking reduces a woman's sphere of influence and her agency, and simultaneously suggest that a loss of agency and the inability to influence others can lead a woman to drink.

In "The Favourite Child," Isabel Vining is a sickly youngest daughter who has been pampered her entire life. After her mother's death, Isabel, now twenty-eight years old, resigns herself to marrying Mr. Ainsworth, a widowed father of three, simply to relieve her loneliness. Having been indulged her entire life, Isabel enters her marriage already accustomed to taking various cordials and draughts for any slight ailment. When she finds her new home less comfortable and her husband and step-daughters less welcoming than she had desired, her dependence on alcohol increases until it is out of control.

Isabel's pampered youth diminishes her influence from the outset of the story. When one of her new step-daughters offers Isabel the keys to the cupboards and storeroom, Isabel initially refuses to take that responsibility. Instead, she requests that the step-daughter bring her food and wine. Only when Isabel realizes that she is unable to influence her step-daughters into doing her bidding does she agree to take the keys, so that she might access the alcohol in the storeroom freely. For a time Isabel makes ample

use of the keys, using greater and greater amounts of alcohol to soothe and uplift her. At last, however, her husband discovers the missing bottles, and punishes her by ~~d~~diminishing her pecuniary allowance, and subjecting her to the most severe and humiliating deprivation of all free-agency in her domestic department" (1: 385). While Isabel was unsuccessful in controlling her husband and step-daughters at the outset of her marriage, once her intemperance is discovered, she loses even more control of her own situation. Not only does she lack influence, she lacks agency as well.

Isabel's recovery begins when she finds an outlet for her influence. Although she is initially forced into abstinence by her husband, when she forges a relationship with her sick youngest step-daughter she begins to choose to abstain from alcohol. The child, Matilda, proposes that she and Isabel should ~~t~~try to make each other better" (1: 398), meaning that they should help each other overcome their vices. At first Isabel is imperfect in her abstinence. She has occasional lapses and continually craves alcohol. Although the cravings continue, the lapses stop after Isabel first exercises agency and defies her husband. Believing that learning music will benefit Matilda, Isabel asks her husband for the money to purchase a piano. Her husband refuses, viewing such a purchase as extravagant ~~w~~when she had no object in view beyond that of imparting happiness to an obscure and profitless individual, or of elevating an humble fellow-being in the scale of moral agency" (1: 412). Isabel then waits for her husband to be absent and, selling her own jewelry to raise the funds, buys the piano herself. After this success—Matilda is extremely happy with the gift—Isabel is able to withstand temptation. Ellis links Isabel's agency in purchasing the piano to her strengthened moral autonomy in the face of her addiction.

Eventually, Isabel‘s complete recovery coincides with her opportunity to regain more complete agency and influence. At the end of the story Isabel‘s husband suffers a stroke that leaves him paralyzed. After this, Isabel becomes ―the most important person in her husband‘s family” (1: 426) and her husband leaves ―the management of [his wealth] more and more in her hands” (1: 428). Apparently simultaneously, Isabel loses the desire to drink. Thus the story draws a clear connection, although not necessarily a clear causal relationship, between influence and female alcoholism. Isabel initially loses the small amount of agency she has because she drinks, but when she gains more agency and influence than she has had at any previous point in the story, she no longer feels a need to drink. The story suggests, as do all of Ellis‘s writings, that a woman‘s role is to influence, but here alcoholism becomes a symptom of the imbalance in domestic power, which is only remedied when Isabel gains complete control of both the household and the wealth. The story‘s conclusion leads us to feel that in this new arrangement, where the wife has all of the power and the husband is reduced to a position ―more helpless than a child” (1: 423), is acceptable and possibly even preferable.

While ―The Favourite Child” ends with redemption and empowerment, ―Confessions of a Maniac” is a less optimistic cautionary tale. The story traces the life of Flora, a young woman who, like Isabel, first takes brandy as a medicine, but over time becomes increasingly dependent on alcoholic elixirs until she is finally committed to an asylum as an irremediable drunk. Flora‘s intemperance is tied to her growing inability to influence those around her, leading up to the moment where she loses all agency, including the ability even to control her own life.

"Confessions of a Maniac" is framed as an account by an unnamed visitor to an asylum who retells Flora's narrative in the first person, presumably as she has told it. At the opening of the Flora's story, her sphere of influence is growing outwards from her home. She begins to engage in philanthropic works, particularly "the patronage of village schools" (1: 140). When her father becomes ill, however, she renounces her work at the schools, "at least so far as related to [her] personal influence," in order to care for him. Although this implies that Flora continues to offer some financial assistance to the schools, the withdrawal of her "personal influence" significantly defines her removal from public life. Shortly after her father's death, it becomes clear that her younger sister, too, is dying, and so she continues to focus on her duties at home rather than extending her influence in the public sphere. It is during this stressful time that she begins to take brandy to sustain herself.

Because the beginnings of Flora's intemperance coincide with her confinement at home in order to care for her dying father and then sister, her lack of public influence may figure into her initial alcohol use, as I will discuss later. Regardless of the origins of her malady, however, it is clear that the more frequently she indulges in brandy, other liquors, or wine, the less influence she is able to either obtain or maintain. After her sister dies, her sister's husband Emile encourages Flora to return to her work with the schools. He tells her that her education and talent make it her duty, now that she has no others at home, to serve those who are less fortunate: "You have publicly acknowledged, and in some respects acted upon, a more especial call to honour your Savior's name. Your talents, your genius, all increase your influence; and your influence increases your responsibility" (1: 168). Emile specifically calls upon Flora to exercise her influence

outside of the home. This reinforces the idea that the public charity is an appropriate sphere for women's influence and a locus for expanding that influence outside the home.

But Flora does not return to her philanthropic efforts; instead she argues that her absence from the public sphere has made it impossible for her to return. She explains to her listener at the asylum that, "having once withdrawn myself from the sphere of action in which I took so conspicuous a part, I felt ashamed to enter upon it again in a manner less creditable or influential" (1: 173). Her logic here is clear, since she suggests that the public will look down on her for having withdrawn for a time, despite the entirely legitimate reason for her removal, of illnesses and death in the family. What is clear, from the broader context of the narrative, is that at the same time that she avoids returning to her work in the schools her addiction to alcohol is growing. Rather than an occasional drink, she describes her growing dependence on alcohol. She tells her listener that "the habit I had contracted of drowning myself in forgetfulness, grew upon me daily" (1: 174). Thus, her increased alcohol use coincides with her unwillingness or inability to be an influence in the community.

Over time Flora's drinking becomes more out of control, causing her to lose influence in more serious ways than through her simple absence from charity work. Above all else, Flora begins to lose agency. After Emile comes to visit her, she can only "indistinctly recollect" what occurred, and amongst the memories she can recall, the most distinct is that of "strange fits of laughter seizing me, […] mistakes which I had the sense to perceive, though not the sense to prevent" (1: 176). She is both unable to keep herself from drinking and unable to control her actions while under the influence. As it turns out, she ultimately is losing another type of influence through this behavior, since Emile

had intended to propose to her, but after his visit, in which he not only finds her drunk but also learns that she has been lying about her addiction, he determines that he can never marry her. Thus, her opportunity to be a wife, with all of the influence inherent to that position in Ellis's estimation, is lost.

Flora's agency and influence is even more compromised as she begins to appear drunk in public. She recalls that ~~th~~he boys of the village used to call after me, and that my servant joined in their laughter" (1: 189). Her loss of influence in the community at this point is even greater than the loss suffered through her absence from the schools. Equally important is the evident loss of influence over her own domestic affairs, since her servant is also engaged in mocking her. At last, in this fallen state, she is moved by Emile to the institution where the story's narrator finds her. Her imprisonment in the asylum represents, of course, the ultimate loss of agency and influence, since she neither controls her life nor has the means to influence anyone in the world at large.

Even the structure of the story, which frames Flora's account of her life with the narrative of the visitor at the asylum, diminishes her influence. She and her story are at the narrator's mercy—her visitor cannot be compelled to listen to the entire story and there is no certainty that it will be retold faithfully. Flora is unable to transmit her own story to the public; hence it is the narrator's retelling that works to influence the reader. The narrator also specifically diminishes Flora's influence by describing her story as a ~~fi~~t," which concludes with ~~a~~ piercing cry, the prelude of one of those dreadful paroxysms of disorder to which she was subject" (1: 190). Her insanity makes her an unreliable source, so that only the narrator's frame can be taken as the basis for the overall moral influence of the story. It is the narrator's imposed moral, ~~th~~at every

mental malady to which we are constitutionally liable, must necessarily be increased by the habits of intemperance," that concludes the story and ultimately informs the reader's interpretation, rather than any wisdom imparted by Flora (1: 191). In the end, the consequence of Flora's intemperance is a total loss of both influence and agency. Alcohol prevents her from having any control, even over her own body.

The loss of a woman's ability to influence brought about by alcoholism is evident in "The Favourite Child" and "Confessions of a Maniac." While it is obvious that the goal of these works, as with all temperance fiction, is to dissuade the reader from drinking, it is interesting that Ellis's main argument against alcohol use revolves around women's influence. The ideal power relationship between men and women that Ellis attempts to construct in her writings, wherein women are made equal to men through the successful exercise of influence, is disrupted by alcohol and it is this disruption, above any other negative effect, that Ellis focuses on most. This is true not only in these stories, but also in the stories about men. Thus we find that Ellis's temperance fiction serves to reinforce the importance of female influence as Ellis describes it in all of her writings. But while Ellis's argument for temperance is meant to uphold her system of gender roles, it simultaneously deconstructs the broadly understood Victorian system of separate spheres.

The Too-Private Woman and the Too-Public Man: Rethinking Separate Spheres

As I have discussed in Chapter Three, Ellis largely conforms to the ideology of separate spheres, according to which masculinity was associated with the public sphere, while femininity was associated with the private sphere. This ideology gives women the

ability to claim moral superiority based on their protected position, but the claim of moral superiority thereby creates a space for women to function in the public sphere. Similarly, Ellis's temperance fiction disrupts the separate spheres by demonstrating that an extreme division of private and public life is dangerous. In the stories included in *Family Secrets*, alcoholic men become too public, while alcoholic women become too private. These unhealthy models of masculinity and femininity suggest that too great a separation of men's and women's spheres is detrimental. Instead, these stories suggest that the so-called separate spheres must overlap.

Amanda Claybaugh, in *The Novel of Purpose*, argues that "women's temperance writings, as opposed to the more politic temperance speeches, also criticize the institution of marriage itself, specifically, the ways in which it constrains female autonomy" (Claybaugh 91). In addressing Ellis's works specifically, she points out that "[w]hat drunkenness reflects, then, is men's departure from the home and women's confinement within it" (97). But since Claybaugh's argument focuses on the failure of the marriage vows to adequately ensure that women were protected, it falls short in its analysis of the blurred separation of spheres that occurs in Ellis's temperance fiction. Moreover, Claybaugh implies that Ellis's critique of domesticity is accidental, and that Ellis "ends up saying more than she perhaps intends" (97). Yet Ellis's plot lines, which continually tie alcoholism to a dangerous division of public and private life, are too repetitive to be mere accident, and Ellis's critique of separate spheres is downright blatant. As a whole, *Family Secrets*, like the temperance movement, works to bring men back into the home while encouraging women to extend beyond its borders.

In "The Dangers of Dining Out," it is Frederick Bond's public activities that drive him to ruin. In "dining out" he is too public, too frequently absent from home, and all too likely to expose his weakness. At the same time, Frederick brings the "public" sphere into his home when he invites his friends to dinner. His home becomes a public space as his friends behave inappropriately while Eleanor's female guests and servants watch in combined horror and amusement. Ultimately Frederick's alcoholism becomes common knowledge throughout the town, at which point he ceases to have a truly "private" existence. Nevertheless, Frederick's redemption comes through his return to domesticity. He is left to care for his children while his wife is away, thus taking on domestic duties that might normally be considered feminine.

Claybaugh argues that it is the sight of his young son praying that causes Frederick to vow to never touch alcohol again (Claybaugh 96). However, the larger picture is one of a man's return to his domestic duty. In babysitting his own children Frederick realizes that he has responsibilities that he has shirked for too long. He reconnects with his family in the private sphere at the same time that he vows to abstain. His private life gives him the strength to remain sober, and it is only through sobriety that he can fulfill his domestic role. The story ends with a restoration of balance between private and public life; the effects of his abstinence, "were soon visible in the happiness of the family, in the restoration of his respectability, and in his peace of mind" (1: 130). Frederick is restored both privately to his status in the family, and publicly to his status as a physician. This equilibrium is also tied to Frederick's restored mental health. Thus the story demonstrates that public life and private life are inextricably linked, and that a healthy man must engage in both spheres.

The frontispiece of the second volume of *Family Secrets* also reinforces the male role in the domestic sphere. Like "The Dangers of Dining Out," the drawing suggests that the duties of a husband include hands on participation in raising the children.

While the observation that Ellis requires men to have a domestic presence may not seem particularly unexpected or progressive, the reverse, her insistence on a public life for women, is quite surprising. Combined, Ellis's stories work to draw both men and women back to a middle ground and it is here that the separate spheres begin to blend and blur. Just as an imbalance towards public life is linked to intemperance in men, Ellis's stories about intemperate women show them to be overly private. "Confessions of a Maniac" clearly demonstrates that a wholly private life for a woman is just as unhealthy as a very public life is for a man.

As I mentioned above, Flora begins to drink during a time when, due to her father's illness, she is more confined at home than usual. In order to devote herself more thoroughly to her domestic duties, she gives up her public life, specifically her work with the village schools, and takes care of her family. Thus restricted, Flora's health begins to fail. She explains that she "lost the power either to eat, or sleep, and had a constant gnawing pain under one shoulder" (1: 148). The doctors recommend brandy as a remedy, and this starts her on the downward path to both alcoholism and insanity. In this way Ellis shows that being overburdened with domestic duty and overly confined in the private sphere is detrimental to women's health, both physical and mental. This clearly upsets the idea that women should avoid the public sphere.

It is interesting that it is men, both Emile and the doctors, who initially push Flora to take the measures that lead to her insanity. Although Emile initially encourages Flora to work in the schools and encourages her to do so again after her father's and sister's deaths, while her father is ill it is Emile who argues that her "sphere of duty" (1: 142) is in her father's chamber. Although Flora does not wish to give up her charitable work,

she submits to Emile's authority. Similarly, she submits to the authority of the doctors when she begins to take brandy for her ailments. The play between a woman's influence and a too private existence is made more complex because the story suggests that even the well-intentioned influence of men can be detrimental. Ellis calls for female agency here, arguing that women ought to choose their own path. Had Flora continued working with the schools and allowed hired help to take care of her father, as she intended before Emile's interference, the story implies that her health would not have failed and she would not have required the advice of doctors in the first place. Thus, while female influence is the source of moral rectitude throughout Ellis's writings, male influence must be regarded with caution.

Flora becomes increasingly "private" in other ways as her alcoholism increases. She begins by hiding her drinking from both her sister and her sister's husband for the duration of her sister's illness. When, after the sister's death, Emile discovers that she takes brandy regularly and cautions her to stop entirely, she moves from hiding to outright lying. In her letters to Emile she assures him that she is abstaining, when in reality her 'dose' is growing all the time. She becomes increasingly secretive as her intemperance grows. Ironically, at the end of the story her privacy is imposed by the asylum, where she recounts her story "to the walls of her cell," regardless of the presence of an actual listener (1: 190). Her excessively private behavior eventually makes her unfit for any public existence. Thus, the story demonstrates not only that excessive adherence to the private sphere is unhealthy, but also that it is a slippery slope that can ultimately lead to insanity and obligatory confinement.

The final story in *Family Secrets*, ―Fireside Recollections," demonstrates how temperance as a social movement upsets separate spheres by bringing both men and women together in a sphere that is both public and private. The story is told in the first person by Edith, whose family has been torn apart by her father's intemperance. Edith's successful brother has disowned their father, but he has also developed a drinking problem of his own. While Edith struggles to deal with her father's alcoholism, her brother's wife finds herself in a similar situation with her husband. However, because the family has been fractured by the father's intemperance, at the beginning of the story Edith and her sister-in-law have never met.

The division of Edith's family underscores the idea that alcohol disrupts the private sphere, which appears throughout Ellis's temperance fiction. Here, the family is quite literally broken. However, it is the temperance movement that serves as a site for the reparation of the family. Edith and her sister-in-law meet for the first time by accident at the home of a mutual acquaintance who supports temperance. Edith's first sense of connection with her sister-in-law, before she even recognizes her as such, comes from the discovery that the woman is not only interested in the temperance cause, but has ―signed the pledge" (3: 359). Although the two women do not realize their relationship during the meeting, this paves the way for their later meetings in which both women confide about the intemperance of the men in their family. The topic of temperance serves as the site for rebuilding family bonds.

This goes further when the brother and father decide to attend a temperance meeting. Edith's brother decides to attend a temperance meeting, not for himself, but to give ―his sanction and encouragement to a means of moral and physical improvement,

which had already worked so wonderful a reformation amongst the people for whose interests he considered himself deeply responsible" (3: 381). Edith's father, hearing of his estranged son's intentions, decides to attend as well, but only because he sees an opportunity to vindictively expose his son as a fraud and a drunkard. Although neither man attends the meeting with the intention of becoming an adherent to temperance, in the end, both are converted. The brother is moved by the temperance meeting first, and, "stretching forth his white hand among the rest," he signs the pledge (3: 385-6). The father, then, is so moved by his son's action that in tears he attempts "to affix his name to the signature of my brother's" (3: 387). This act is significant not only in its indication that the men are reformed, but also in that the two names are joined on the pledge list, and thus the family is symbolically reunited as well. By the end of the story, the family's reconciliation is complete. Edith describes the family's newfound happiness as a result of temperance: "Again we are as one family; again we can receive the countenance of society without a blush; again we can ask a blessing from Heaven upon our daily life' (3: 397). Interestingly, while she points to the reparations within the domestic sphere brought about by temperance, she also acknowledges a public effect. Temperance not only mends the domestic sphere, it also repairs the family's standing in society.

While the domestic sphere is healed through the temperance mission, the temperance meeting in "Fireside Recollections" is itself an interesting space in terms of public and private life. Ellis's description of the assembly betrays the ambiguity of the meeting's 'sphere':

> The place of meeting was occupied by a strange and motley crowd, amongst which were thinly scattered here and there a few individuals slightly distinguished from the working class. For the most part, however, the assembly there met was composed of labourers and artisans, and of women and children, whose business seemed to be to listen to some new story, or to hear what people had to say upon a subject which came home to the understanding and the interests of all (3: 383).

Initially, this passage clearly suggests a public space since it is occupied by a ―motley crowd." Upon closer inspection, however, the crowd includes women and children, which is suggestive a more familial and domestic flavor. The description of the crowd's interest in listening as ―business" again implies a public activity, but this term in itself disrupts separate spheres since those engaged in this ―business" include both men and women. Finally, the subject of temperance comes ―home" to everyone at the meeting, again relocating temperance in the domestic space.[4] The temperance pledge, too, blurs public and private spheres. The pledge is obviously public—it serves as a declaration to the community of one's decision to abstain. Yet that decision is a private one, which influences one's domestic existence in important ways.

―Fireside Recollections" reinforces both the disruptive effects of alcohol on public and private life and the redemptive effects of less stringent separation of public and private spheres. Temperance serves as a blended space where men and women

[4] Although my purpose here is to discuss gender issues, it is worth noting that Ellis also breaks down class barriers in her writings. While her fiction in general frequently reinforces certain Victorian class stereotypes, it also acknowledges that, for better or worse, social status has very little to do with moral strength.

participate publicly in the business of the mission, which at its core is deeply concerned with morality and domesticity. Ellis rejects the images of the "public" man and the "private" woman in favor of this middle ground, where both genders participate equally. This alternative model of gender relations is represented as healthy, in contrast to the unhealthy representations of publicly drunk men and privately intoxicated women.

Temperance and Agency

Beyond disrupting the ideology of separate spheres, Ellis's temperance fiction also creates a gap that allows women greater agency. In part, temperance fiction creates a space for women to take on greater responsibilities both within a household and outside the home in response to the incompetence of men affected by alcoholism. Thus, similar to Ellis's argument that a woman can work outside the home to support herself without being degraded, here it is also clear that a woman can work outside the home to support her family if her husband is unable to provide due to his degenerate habits.[5]

But Ellis goes farther in *Family Secrets* by taking issue with social laws on a broader level. The temperance mission takes issue with a pervasive and accepted custom of social drinking and argues that adherence to this custom is detrimental. In "Fireside Recollections," Edith describes the speaker at the temperance meeting with some amazement: "I had never heard a human being, called as he had been out of darkness and degradation, inviting his fellow-creatures to break the bondage of custom, and to free themselves from the slavery of a cruel tyrant, who could rule them no longer than they chose to be slaves" (3: 385). This passage is significant in its construction because it is not the alcohol that is the cruel tyrant, but "custom." Ellis does not hesitate to take issue

[5] For more on women and work, see Chapter Three.

with social strictures and in doing so she empowers her readers, male and female, to resist as well.

While the passage above directly addresses the custom of social drinking, a few pages later Ellis claims that other customs may be equally detrimental. Edith's brother, reflecting on the benefits of the temperance society, argues "by the influence of example, and by the countenance of numbers, we are supported in our opposition to the spirit of the world, which, in this instance, as in so many others, offers but a shadow in exchange for real good" (3: 396). The temperance society allows people the opportunity to unite in opposition to social rules—"the spirit of the world"—and Ellis suggests that these social rules, including but not limited to drinking alcohol, are frequently wrong. Although she does not address the specific customs that she finds objectionable, this passage is reminiscent of Ellis's commentary on women and work in *The Women of England*, where she argues against that "curious anomaly in the structure of modern society" that causes women to lose standing if she works for pay (345).[6] In discussing both the benefit of women's work outside of the home and the dangers of social drinking, Ellis defies Victorian social rules.

The temperance mission fights against the belief that a certain degree of alcohol consumption is required at social gatherings, and thus advocates self-direction for both men and women in defying this norm and abstaining. But Ellis clearly makes agency an even greater necessity for women, who not only face social obstacles if they abstain entirely from alcohol, but who also deal with other, gender-based social obstacles when they seek to take care of themselves and their families. Interestingly, because Ellis constructs intemperance as a private malady for women and a public vice for men, the

[6] See Chapter Three.

stories in *Family Secrets* suggest that agency in terms of self-direction, whether resistant or transformative, is as difficult or more so for men than for women. It is the men who are more easily led to follow social norms and therefore into drinking alcohol. This helps explain why, in "Fireside Recollections," Edith and her sister-in-law determine to abstain from alcohol on their own, while the men require the assistance of the society. Perhaps ironically, this overlays with the public alcoholism of men and the private alcoholism of women in that social drinking for the gentlemen is socially acceptable and does not require agency, whereas the secretive alcoholism of women might be viewed as a form of resistant self-direction precisely because it not socially acceptable. This reinforces the sense that women are more capable of self-direction than men. However, because alcohol addiction obstructs moral autonomy, Ellis clearly does not advocate this form of self-direction.

Throughout Ellis's writings she calls for women to act based on their own principles and morals. As Twycross-Martin points out, "the picture Mrs Ellis paints of the home is not a reassuring one: both her conduct-books and her fiction focus on the gap between the ideology of patriarchal authority and the lived experience of women coping with men as they actually are" (9). But while Twycross-Martin tells us that this makes Ellis's "view of family dynamics both conservative and at the same time surprisingly disenchanted," what is truly surprising is the way in which Ellis's fiction is progressive in its advocacy of female agency (9). Ellis consistently rejects the construction of women as passive or submissive—the only woman who is truly passive in the stories I have discussed is Flora, the incurable alcoholic. The successful women in these stories are each active in their pursuit of a better life for themselves and their loved ones. Just as

Kathryn Abrams recognizes that battered women's efforts to "protect their children, [and] amass funds, information, and support," even when they are unable to end the abuse or rapidly exit the relationship, constitute forms of agency, Edith's adherence to temperance regardless of her father's opinion on the subject, Isabel's choice to purchase a piano for Matilda, and Eleanor's decision to work to support her children, are all forms of self-direction and agency. These activities all challenge Victorian gender-based ideology, by challenging the authority of father and husband, not to mention assumptions about middle-class women and work. Ellis's temperance fiction teaches women that they must exercise moral autonomy, that they must have agency, and ultimately that the ideology of gendered spheres cannot be understood in rigid terms.

Afterword

The primary aim of this dissertation has been to investigate the nuances in Sarah Stickney Ellis‘s construction of gender in order to demonstrate the extent to which her writings represent a perspective on womanhood that is progressive for the early Victorian period. Unlikely as it may seem coming from a twenty-first century feminist, I have come to think that, had I known Sarah Stickney Ellis in life, I would have liked her very much. In reading her letters, fiction, and conduct manuals, I have been confronted by an intensely complex woman. Independent, free-spirited, and persevering to the last, Ellis was the opposite of the wilting flower we so often associate with the Victorian woman. She was imperfect in her faith—her letters reveal surprising uncertainty in this domain, despite the Christian themes in her works. She was an ardent animal lover; she loved her dogs, cats, horses, and even a pet monkey. She believed she had a gift for mesmerism, and once used her talent to calm an injured maid so that the doctor could examine her. In short, Ellis was a little different, and her eccentricities are clearly at odds with the conventional attitudes that have been attributed to her. In writing about Ellis I have focused on gender largely because of Ellis‘s own emphasis on women‘s roles, as well as the prevalence of literary criticism that references Ellis‘s views on women without adequately addressing the complexities of those views.

My argument throughout this dissertation has been that the main goal in Ellis‘s writings is to give women more independence, more control, and more agency in a society where women were expected to be submissive and dependent. I began by looking at Ellis‘s writings on education—which are not, as some have said, meant to create perfectly subservient housewives—and showed that Ellis argues for a broad education

that will serve a woman regardless of her station. She wants her readers to be capable not only of taking care of a husband and house, but also the accounts and most importantly, herself. In the second chapter, I discussed Ellis's views on engagement and marriage, which are, to say the very least, disenchanted. Ellis makes an effective argument against most types of marriages, and leaves her reader with the impression that remaining single is frequently the best option for a woman. Ellis only approves of marriages where the woman is absolutely certain before her wedding that her husband will treat her as an equal. Given her hesitancy about advocating marriage, it is no wonder that Ellis makes such a big deal about the need to educate women so that they can be independent.

My third chapter deals more fully with the contradictions inherent in Ellis's writing. Ellis walks a fine line between influence and manipulation, authority and inferiority in her writing style, lifestyle, and her instructions to women. Even as she appears to construct women as inferior, the subtext of her works suggests that women are superior. I used the novel *Social Distinction; or Hearts and Homes* to demonstrate how Ellis, through her insistence on feminine superiority, expands women's roles, particularly in terms of money and work. She empowers women to take up work for pay, and encourages them to be knowledgeable and responsible when it comes to financial issues.

Finally, my last chapter discusses Ellis's construction of gender roles within her temperance fiction. This fiction is an interesting site for examining gender because it repeatedly breaks down the ideology of separate sphere. Temperance encourages women to take up the cause and participate in philanthropic work outside the home, and encourages intemperate men to give up the bottle and return home, to the domestic space. At the same time, the intemperate characters in Ellis's works demonstrate a too extreme

separation of spheres; the alcoholic men are too public, and the alcoholic women are too private. In these ways, Ellis's temperance stories undermine the gendered division of public and private spheres and suggest that both men and women should have a presence in both spheres.

In sum, I have argued that Ellis's works do not represent an extremely conservative or traditional perspective on women's roles. Instead, I have demonstrated that Ellis is often moderate or even progressive in her views. While it would be inaccurate to describe her as a radical feminist, it is clear that Ellis pushes to expand a woman's sphere of influence well beyond the confines of home. I have focused on gender in Ellis's writings because it is here that she seems to be most maligned by contemporary scholars. However, there are many other aspects of Ellis's works that also offer generous fodder for scholarship.

Although I have discussed works that span over thirty years I have not given much attention to the chronological trajectory of Ellis's writing. I have noted that Ellis's first conduct manual, *The Women of England*, follows a generally more traditional line in its representation of women's roles than *The Daughters of England* and *The Wives of England*, even though only four years separate the publication of the first, in 1839, and the last, in 1843. However, Ellis continued writing and publishing up until her death in 1872. It is likely, given both the length of time over which Ellis wrote and the significant legal changes to a woman's status that occurred during the intervening years, that some of her ideas concerning gender roles shifted over time. A study of these shifts would provide an interesting way of reading Ellis's works as well as a potentially fruitful means

of understanding the broader social changes that accompanied legal change in the mid-nineteenth century.

Aside from gender issues, Ellis's works also touch on a variety of other important topics that I have, in confining my dissertation to a discussion of women's roles, largely ignored. Ellis wrote a number of works on art and aesthetics, beginning with one of her first works, *The Poetry of Life* (1835), continuing in various prefaces, and leading up to one of her last works, *The Beautiful in Nature and Art* (1866). Twycross-Martin has proposed that Ellis's views on art may have influenced George Eliot (Twycross-Martin), and *The Poetry of Life* was one of Ellis's most well received works.[1] Ellis's writings on art may be of particular interest to those writing on art and morality in the Victorian era.

Similarly, Ellis's views on religion also merit some exploration. Her conversion from Quaker to Congregationalist at the time of her marriage—in her late thirties—raises interesting questions about her religious views. Despite the Christian aspect of her writings, Ellis's journals suggest that, like so many Victorian authors, Ellis's faith was not unshakable. Indeed, despite her broad statements about Christian duty, direct references to either Christianity or church attendance are limited in her works. Thus her works may be a noteworthy focal point for an investigation of Victorian morality and religion.

Ellis's works are also interesting from a post-colonialist perspective. Given William Ellis's career as a missionary, it is no surprise that empire plays a major role in Ellis's writing. Ellis directly addresses empire in works such as "The Island Queen; a poem" (1846) and *Madagascar: its social and religious progress* (1863). The excerpts

[1] See H.G. Adams

Ellis chose in compiling *The Young Ladies' Reader* (1845) are also remarkable on this front. For example, one passage in the reader, pulled from Inglis's "Tour through Switzerland, France, and the Pyrenees," describes the author conquering a mountain in the Pyrenees. Another passage, Dr. E.D. Clarke's "Description of the Pyramids," ends with each member of a party of English travelers to Egypt "busied in adding the inscription of his name" to the top of the pyramid (67). These passages work to demonstrate the strength of the British Empire; E.D. Clarke is quite literally exerting English influence on the pyramid as he carves his name into the peak. Other passages, such as "Book-binding in the Island of Eimeo" by William Ellis, and "Visit to a Missionary Station—South Africa," by Thomas Pringle, focus on efforts to spread Christianity. Overall, it becomes clear that Ellis's agenda of female influence based on feminine superiority spreads into an imperialist agenda based on British superiority.

Lastly, I have not devoted much attention to uncovering either the authors who influenced Ellis's works or the authors who Ellis may have influenced. Both of these avenues of research appear to me to have great potential. We know some of what Ellis read through her journals, her editorial work on Fisher's Drawing Room Scrapbook, and her choices in compiling *The Young Ladies Reader*. Exploring her reading tastes could help explain some of Ellis's ideas on issues as various as gender, art, and British colonialism. We also have some ideas of who may have read Ellis, including the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, and William Makepeace Thackeray. Examining these connections more closely would certainly help us better understand some of the great authors of the Victorian era.

I hope that my efforts in this work have demonstrated that Sarah Ellis deserves more critical attention that she has heretofore received. I have only dealt with a handful of her many writings, and only a few important themes in the selected works. There is much left to be said. There are issues of class and faith and gender that need much more attention. There are links between Ellis and her contemporaries still to be explored. Her connection to empire, especially given her marriage to a prominent missionary, lends many of her works to postcolonial readings. I have only scratched the surface of her influence on the Victorian period, not to mention the influences that affected her. I can only hope that future scholars will give Ellis more than a passing nod, and give her due credit, as she was a most *influential* woman of England.

Appendix

Partial transcription of the journal of Miss Hawpton,

a student at Rawdon House School.

Printed with permission from Lowood Museum, Hoddesdon, UK.

M.J. Hawpton
Rawdon House
Hoddesdon
1864

Work and days

At half past six in Rawdon House
Is heard the clanging bell
And what that awful sound potents
Alas! We know too well.

It rouses from their first sweet sleep
The slumbering one and all,
And soon Matilda favors us
With half hour candles small.

With dreadful sighs and fearful groans
Some sleepers hail the morn
And others turning in their beds
Scarce deign to give a yawn.

In half an hour the bell is heard
That summons them to prayers
And half undressed the girls are seen
Fast hurring [sic] down the stairs.

Then‘s heard the cry Ah wait for me
I cant [sic] my collar find
Oh Louisa please do come here
And hook my dress behind.

Oh but pray say shall we be late
I am in such a fright
I really cannot face the room
My hair is such a fright.

The servants bell the servants bell
Is echoed up the stairs
And fast the girls though all the room
Are rushing here and there.

Then prayers are over breakfast comes
Of bread and butter thick
And then the letters we receive
From Harry Ian and Dick

It is Monday Morning work begun
Our lessons we commence
And learn our histories and the like
With great intelligence.

Tis the day Edward Goodall comes
A little coat wears he
And drops about from girl to girl
As busy as a bee.

Then comes the dreary dismal walk
For pupils of Miss Taylor
With tales of colds and other woes
The wretched girls assail her.

But ah! Miss Taylor knows too well
The thoughts that lurk within
And says in accents firm and kind
There‘s naught to keep you in.

And there they walk through wind & day
And dirty drizzling weather
And coming in they sit before
Some meat like oily leather.

At half past three the school begins
It last for many an hour
And going into tea the [sic] feed
On bread and butter sour.

When tea is done Miss Taylor says
My dear‘s [sic] you‘ll have a treat
So each one to her room must go
And make herself quite neat.

A lecturer will come tonight

And Bernay‘s is his name
And if you don‘t improve yourselves
You will be much to blame.

And Mr Vine perhaps will come
And Mr Morris too
And mind you do not giggle dears
Or else they‘ll stare at you.

Miss Warner too will favour us
Irene Vine as well
Miss Morris too perhaps will come
The rest I cannot tell.

When tea is o‘er the first class will
Into the room proceed
And that you do not make a noise
Be sure my dears take heed.

The lectures done they go to bed
And chat beyond measure
And as they go up stairs they talk
of all the evenings pleasure.

This Tuesday morning we get up
Precisely as before
Then some go to the first class room
And o‘re [sic] Greek history pore [sic].

This is the day Miss Steel appears
Miss Taylor looks around
Says Jessie to your singing go
I hope your songs are found.

At four o‘clock the bell is heard
Within the marble hall
Which all the dancers who are dressed
To Madam Hope doth call.

The dancing lasts till six o‘clock
And soon the weary girls
Sit down to tea with aching limbs
And all disordered curls.

At last another day doth break
And Wednesday morning‘s here

And soon with Beauty in her hand
Frau Ellis doth appear.

At four o‘clock a hat is seen
Which towers above the gate
And then a hand uplifts the latch
For scuse [sic] he cannot wait.

He strides along the gravel walk
As quickly as he can
We see fast running in his wake
A little dried up man.

He is a german master bold
As gentle as a lamb
And what he most resembles is
A smoked up German ham.

He gives two lessons and at six
He quickly runs away
And this is all particular
That happens on this day.

Now Thursdays come the 1st class girls
Take pains to learn their Hume
And if they know it not alas
They quickly hear their doom.

Mr Ralmark stays all day
Full six feet high is he
He has a beard just like a bush
At least so it seems to me.

When tea is over all the girls
Make haste to do their sums
Full forty have they and they know
That Balls on Friday comes.

And then another day is done
And Friday morning dawns
Which like the four preceding ones
Is greeted with great yawns.

At ten o‘clock Vincelli comes
A French master is he
He first into the schoolroom goes

Then us he comes to see.

And after this we have our lunch
And then Balls doeth appear
And the first words he utters are
Good morning Mela [sic] dear.

And then for many an hour he stays
That is till two o‘clock
And then when all the girls are out
They into dinner flock.

Saturday morning comes at last
And working class as well
And after this we take a walk
At the ringing of the bell.

At three o‘clock the girls do write
Their letters one and all
Until the bell with clashing sound
Them unto tea doeth call.

At eight o‘clock the prayer bell rings
And each girl takes her seat
And Mademoiselle in accents shril [sic]
Shouts ~~“m~~ake your lockers neat”.

At nine o‘clock they go to bed
And put away clean clothes
And lony[?] hides all away
From combs to scarlet bows.

On Sunday morn they favor us
With half an hours more sleep
And when the clock strikes ½ 4
Fast out of bed they leap.

Composed by the Pink room young ladies

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