On Their Own: The Single Woman, Feminism, and Self-Help in British Women’s Print Culture (1850-1900)

by

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ABSTRACT

ON THEIR OWN:
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Cultural and historical accounts of self-help literature typically describe its development and focus in terms of the autonomous, public male subject of the nineteenth century. This literary study recognizes that as masculine self-help discourse became widely accessible in the mid-nineteenth century, mid-Victorian feminist novels, periodicals, and tracts developed versions of self-help that disrupted the dominant cultural view that the single female was helpless and “redundant” if she did not become a wife and mother. I argue that the dual focus of Victorian self-help discourse on the ability to help oneself and others was attractive for Victorian feminist writers who needed to manipulate the terms of the domestic ideal of woman as influential helpmeet, if women’s independence and civic duty were to be made culturally palatable.

Chapter One focuses on how Dinah Mulock Craik drew on self-help values popularized in mid-century articles and collective biographies by Samuel Smiles, while rejecting the genre of biography for its invasiveness into female lives. By imagining a deformed single artist heroine in the context of her 1851 bildungsroman, Olive, Craik highlighted and contested the objectification of women within Victorian culture while reproducing other forms of female difference based on dominant constructions of class, sexuality, and race. Chapter Two extends formal and thematic considerations of self-help discourse to a comparison of masculine colonial accounts of class-climbing and the projection of a self-reliant, yet deeply unstable, domestic female by Maria Rye.
and the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society. Chapter Three exerts critical pressure on the tension between individual and mutual help by charting the debate that raged between liberal individualism and collectivism in the labour movement, particularly in *The Women’s Union Journal*. Returning to a focus on the binary of female aberrance and normalcy within Victorian culture, Chapter Four analyzes late-century case studies of nervous illnesses alongside Ella Hepworth Dixon’s 1894 New Woman novel that promoted self-help for women as desirable yet unattainable in a society still largely structured around the domestic ideal. At its broadest, this dissertation explores points of convergence and departure between Victorian masculine and feminine self-help texts, and touches on reverberations of this Victorian discourse in today’s self-help works directed at women in Western culture.
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Introduction

ON THEIR OWN

While Bridget Jones is in the first glowing stages of dating Mark Darcy in Helen Fielding’s novel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999), her girlfriend Sharon, nicknamed “Shaz,” rings her up while Mark Darcy is standing in the heroine’s living room. As Bridget desperately tries to get Sharon off the phone so she can get back to her date, Sharon expounds on the latest theory of male sexuality that she has picked up from the self-help book *What Men Want*, at which point Bridget interrupts, “Shaz, can I call you back later?” When Bridget recounts this telephone conversation in her diary, she describes the heated argument that ensued between Sharon and herself on the topic of feminism:

Next thing Shaz was accusing me of being obsessed with men when I was supposed to be a feminist. So I said, if she was supposed to be so uninterested in them, why was she reading a book called *What Men Want*? It was all turning into a hideously unfeminist manbased row when we realized it was ridiculous and said we’d see each other tomorrow. (Fielding 16)

This passage from the sequel to *Bridget Jones’s Diary* highlights a contradiction that runs throughout both novels but especially in the second work. Bridget and her friends label themselves as feminists, a term that Bridget interprets as the ability to stand on one’s “own two feet” (215; 231) without needing a man (299), but their bookshelves are chock-
full with self-help titles like *Beyond Co-dependency with a Man Who Can’t Commit, Loving Your Separated Man Without Losing Your Mind, Happy to Be Single, How to Find Your Perfect Partner in Thirty Days,* and *Buddhism Made Simple.*

Helen Fielding’s series draws attention to an enigmatic ideological gap that exists between feminism and the enormous modern-day self-help market that is aimed at a twenty to thirty-something single female demographic. Whether intentionally or not, Fielding’s astute observation of the contradictory position of the modern woman—who is determined to stand alone without the need of a man while still feeling driven, partly by culture, to find a meaningful loving heterosexual relationship—meant that she was able to cash in hugely on the self-help market. Her anonymous column on Bridget Jones, a sarcastic, 30-something Londoner who worried about her career, love life, weight, and nicotine and alcohol consumption, became a regular column in the British newspaper *The Independent* and, later, in *The Telegraph,* receiving a mass readership, which was followed by her successful novels and their movie adaptations. *Bridget Jones* is just one of various examples of bestselling print forms turned Hollywood Blockbusters aimed at the single or newly divorced woman seeking emotional and spiritual fulfillment—*Under the Tuscan Sun, He’s Just Not that Into You,* and *Eat, Pray, Love* being some other recent examples. As Stephanie Merritt noted in 2008, “Self-help and advice is one of the biggest genres in publishing, netting over £50m per annum in the UK for the past four years” (Merritt), while the U.S. self-help market in 2008—the books, CDs, seminars, coaching and stress-management programs—was an 11-billion dollar industry (Lindner). Of course a great deal of the self-help market is aimed at a general audience and covers a range of topics, including physical and mental health, financial management, beauty makeovers
and home improvement, and spirituality. Nonetheless, recent literature on self-help books suggests that a considerable section of the industry is directed at women. As Joann Klimkiewicz noted in an article on self-help relationship books in *The Toronto Star* in 2006, “According to Barnes & Noble, 80 per cent of those who buy books on relationships are women. Relationship books for women outsell those for men by a ratio of 4 to 1” (L4).1

I bring up the example of *Bridget Jones*, in particular, because Fielding’s works draw attention to the problematic relationship between feminism and the self-help industry. As cultural feminist Cynthia Schrager wrote of the targeted woman of popular self-help titles in the nineties: “Economically independent, professionally successful, and desperately in need of a man, this ‘contemporary woman’ is what might be called the tragic heroine of feminism” (178). In the mid-nineties, Victoria Leto DeFrancisco suggested that the proliferation of self-help works at a time when women seemed to be elevating their social status “smack[ed] of feminist backlash” (108). She argued that the self-help industry focused on “the individual psyche, and on intimate heterosexual relations” (109) while leaving “women in a social and political void” (109).2

Yet there is another perplexing point that critics note in relation to the privatized, psychological thrust of today’s self-help literature. The self-help narrative tradition began with texts that were concerned with the socio-political role of men in the public sphere

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1 This is the most recent statistic provided on women’s self-help books. In the nineties, Schrager offered a vague estimate of the amount that women spent on this type of literature, indicating that “self-help books for women have become a multi-billion dollar publishing phenomenon” (177). Detailed statistical analyses on this segment of the publishing industry are lacking, a fact that points to the type of social science research that is required in this field of study.

2 DeFrancisco outlines these points in the introduction of a special issue on self-help literature in *Women’s Studies in Communication* (1995), particularly in reference to the feminist critic Susan Faludi and contributors to the issue, such as Claudia de Lima Costa and Miriam Pillar Grossi.
(Schrager 178; DeFrancisco 108)—Ben Franklin, Horatio Alger, and Dale Carnegie being amongst the most famous American writers of self-help for men from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries—but in the last decades of the twentieth century, most self-help forms were aimed at the twenty to thirty-something woman who sought psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing, quite often through love. In 2005, Micki McGee similarly noted the disconnect between the historical focus of self-hep on the public male and the recent proliferation of forms devoted to makeovers and self-transformation: “In the place of the traditional notion of the self-made man, a construct that is gendered in its basic formation, . . . the belabored self presents itself as overworked both as the subject and as the object of its own efforts at self-improvement” (16). According to McGee, the movement away from a nineteenth-century fixation on the autonomous, public male subject towards today’s focus on the “belaboured self” (16) in search of “self-transformation” (17) can be attributed to immense sociopolitical changes that occurred in the latter part of the twentieth century as a result of the renegotiation of gender roles and the growing instability of job markets within Western culture (14).

Although McGee suggests that the current fixation on self-transformation within the self-help market is aimed at both men and women, a significant part of the “makeover culture” that she describes—the onslaught of recent television shows and print literature pitched at achieving self-transformation through plastic surgery, diet, exercise, or other forms of self-scrutiny such as spiritual exploration—is both directed at and attracts a wide female audience.

My doctoral thesis addresses the gap in critical understanding of the shift between early self-help works aimed at masculine independence and civic duty and today’s
proliferation of self-help forms directed at the female subject. Contrary to what Schrager, De Franciso, and McGee suggest, I point out that the early tradition of self-help literature was not solely aimed at a male subject, nor was it bereft of examples directed at improving the sociopolitical status of women. This dissertation focuses on British women’s nineteenth-century self-help novels, tracts, and periodical writings ranging from the late 1840s until the early 1900s that resisted cultural representations of the helpless “redundant” single woman, and that projected various forms of female self-helpfulness in areas of private and public life, including intellectual and professional development, as well as personal and physical well-being. This project supplements critical investigation into the well-known British Victorian tradition of self-help, especially the many popular articles and collective biographies that Samuel Smiles penned on masculine improvement of the self and society throughout the Victorian period, by analyzing how Victorian women’s rights advocates employed the discourse of self-help to argue for greater individual autonomy and public roles for women. Although a sustained attention to the relationship between Victorian self-help works for women and the overwhelmingly diverse self-help industry of today is beyond the scope of my project, the closing of each chapter, as well as my conclusion, analyzes the similarities and differences between Victorian women’s self-help works and modern self-help print forms for women. These continuities and divergences demand evaluation if theorists and writers of popular culture are to engage seriously in the cultural work of recognizing and realizing the feminist potentialities of this popular discourse.3

3 The phrase “cultural work” was first coined by Tompkins in her seminal Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860; this term has since been widely utilized in literary and cultural studies. In this book, Tompkins counteracted the assessments of the critical literary establishment that popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels were hampered by their formal weaknesses and low-
Interestingly, the story of the Victorian self-help tradition for women begins with the uneasy status of heterosexual relationships within British culture during this period. According to the 1851 British census, 750,000 unmarried women had no financial support from men (Vicinus 4; Showalter “Dinah Mulock Craik” 12), a number that increased throughout the Victorian era for many reasons, among them, male emigration, the postponement of middle-class marriage for economic reasons, male patronization of female prostitutes, and celibacy (Showalter 12). This surplus of unmarried women in Britain incited national debate over the “problem” of the single middle-class female who was obliged to work for a living because she had failed to fulfill the only culturally acceptable womanly roles of marriage and motherhood. As neither a wife nor a mother, the single middle-class woman constituted a figure of considerable anxiety in Victorian culture because she had the legal right to her own money and property, and she threatened male dominance within the public sphere if she needed paid work to attain these material benefits. The single middle-class female presented Victorian women’s rights advocates with both an opportunity and dilemma: she was an important figure of representation through which these women could argue for and ratify women’s increasing independence and autonomy, but at the same time, her subjectivity had to be carefully articulated in relationship to domesticity in order to be made culturally palatable. Some of the central questions of this dissertation include: How did British women’s self-help brow appeal. She argued of these novels: “I see them as doing a certain kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation, and value them for that reason. I see their plots and characters as providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions” (200). Throughout this thesis I also note that self-help literary forms have often been derided for being formally weak and apolitical, especially by twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics, when these forms have commented upon and shaped certain aspects of social reality. I believe that there is also much cultural work for critics and writers to perform in terms of analyzing popular literature genres for the way that they have historically shaped culture and society, particularly political movements, like feminism.
literature draw on the ideology and formal features of Smiles’s and other self-help texts for working-class men, and in what ways did it differ from these masculine examples? How did this literature define women’s social and economic positions within and against the politics of liberalism? Finally, how is self-help discourse implicated in the central contradictions and philosophical trends of first-wave feminism?

I argue that Victorian self-help discourse, with its dual imperative of self-improvement and preparing the individual for a public role in society, was an attractive discourse through which Victorian feminist writers could attest to women’s capacity for economic and personal fulfillment, and help women begin to realize these aims. Victorian feminist writers carefully couched the self-help aims of individual agency and public duty within the terms of morality and altruism that were perceived as fundamental female values within domestic ideology. At the same time, self-help discourse bore no simple relation to the changing social and material conditions for real women within Victorian culture, but rather it was both informed by and contributed to the reproduction of Victorian ideology, a process that involved the interdependence of representation and material conditions.

My understanding of the role of discourse within ideological formation is informed by Mary Poovey who, by way of Foucault, Jameson, and others, argues:

. . . every text works; as an ensemble of specific discursive practices and as the outgrowth of a determinate mode of production, every text participates in a complex social activity. Part of the work that texts perform is the reproduction of ideology; texts give the values and structures of values that constitute ideology
body—that is, they embody them for and in the subjects who read. (Uneven Developments 17)

As Poovey notes, ideologies exist not only as ideas but are given concrete form in “the practices and social institutions that govern people’s social relations and that, in so doing, constitute both the experience of social relations and the nature of subjectivity” (3). As a system of ideas and institutions, Victorian gender ideology was uneven both in the sense of being experienced differently by individuals who were positioned differently within the social formation (by sex, class, or race, for example) and in the sense of being articulated differently by the different institutions, discourses, and practices that it both constituted and was constituted by. (3)

As a discourse that both drew from and contributed to the continual remaking of Victorian gender ideology, self-help functioned within a spectrum of flexibility by virtue of the different positioning of individuals, institutions, and practices within ideology. For example, many middle-class male and female reformers associated with the Magdalene asylums for young, working-class prostitutes, unwed mothers, and wayward females viewed these institutions as a means of self-help for these women that would restore them to domestic roles either within their own families or as household servants.4 As Linda Mahood notes, in the Annual Report of the Glasgow Magdalene Institution of 1867, the

4 As the Glasgow University Special Collections website notes, the Magdalene asylums were initiated in the early nineteenth century in response to increasing worries regarding venereal disease and the moral health of Britain. The women in the Magdalene asylums “were generally termed as prostitutes; however, it should be noted that this term was used in a very loose manner encompassing not only women who sold sex for money but also single mothers, socialists, mill girls and girls dressed ‘immorally.’” These various types of females were taught how to support themselves through industrial training, mainly working in the asylum laundries. They were also fed a strong dose of Christian morality in order to make them recognize that they were sinners.
directors described their institution as “not only a refuge to unfortunates, but what is of
still more consequence, it is a training school for them in good conduct and in some
homely branch of usefulness and of what many prove remunerative occupation” (qtd. in
Mahood 91). However, while the institution’s middle-class managers applauded their
program of restoring sexually deviant working-class females to domestic roles, 35
percent of the inmates were recorded as having left of their own accord or secretly, or as
having been dismissed for bad behaviour. Mahood contends that many of the women who
left the institution probably did so because they had grown up in working-class
communities that accepted premarital sex, pregnancy, and prostitution as normal:
“Generalizations about subjective attitudes towards sexuality are always difficult to
make, but in this case it is possible that these women would not have recognized
themselves as subjects of the discourse, although they may have recognized that it
applied to other women” (101). Mahood’s comment implies the degree to which the
middle-class managers and working-class inmates bore different relations to Victorian
discourse and the system of beliefs and institutions that it informed by virtue of these
individuals’ class positioning.

If the managers of Magdalene asylums projected notions of self-help in terms of
their inmates’ ability to conform to middle-class standards of domesticity, in other
contexts self-help was represented as the purview of middle-class women and their ability
to disseminate feminine virtues to disadvantaged others in Victorian society. For

5 The Glasgow University Special Collections website also provides The Fifth Annual Report of the
Magdalene Institution, Glasgow of Dec. 28th, 1864. This document, in contrast to the 1867 report, avoids
describing the self-help aims of the institution, rather concentrating primarily on the preventative measures
against vice: “It has been customary of late to devote the first part of our Report to the Reformatory
Department of our Society’s work, but it has been deemed wise on this occasion to give prominence to the
Repressive or Preventative branch, as being in itself the more important of the two” (5). This report focuses
particularly on the corruptive influence of the Glasgow Fair and public houses.
instance, in the introduction to *Working Women of the Last Half Century* (1854), a text that touted the achievements of female middle-class teachers, artists and philanthropists, Clara Lucas Balfour wrote,

> The wretched victims of the seducer’s arts can only be saved from perdition of soul and body by woman coming to her rescue—not scornfully ‘passing by the other side,’ or hypocritically pretending to ignore the existence of such wretchedness. [. . .] The miserable inebriate, the most humiliating of all spectacles, whether among the rich or the poor, appeals to woman to give to society the benefit of her pure example, so that the national and domestic sin of intemperance, the prolific parent of so many other sins, may be overcome. (5)

In Balfour’s work, “woman” stands for the heroic female middle-class woman who proves her capacity for self-help in terms of her ability to aid wretched fallen women and drunkards through her spiritual kindness and purity.

In other works, the idea of self-help is particularly directed at single middle-class women and their ability to stand “on their own” without depending on a man for support, thus reflecting one of the central Victorian feminist arguments concerning redundant woman that is also echoed in the title of this study. In “How to be Happy, Though Single” (1891) on employment for single women, Celia Carew writes:

> Such an one may depend upon it that, in her attempt at self-helpfulness, she will not be the less appreciated by those men whose approbation is worth having. A woman who can help herself is more likely to be a help-meet to her husband than the old typical parasitic plant, which drops without support; and he is more likely to offer respect and admiration to a wife who has the power (even if it be
unnecessary to exercise it) to add to the income, than to one who can do nothing.

This passage implies the instability of self-help discourse in the manner that “help” goes through various mutations. Carew suggests that the “self-helpfulness” of the single woman potentially makes her more attractive to male suitors as a wifely “helpmeet,” a term that, in turn, contrasts with the image of “the old typical parasitic plant” or ornamental woman who is completely helpless or unable to stand on her own. Carew’s article also suggests that the self-reliant middle-class wife might, if necessary, be able to “add to the income,” which would garner an additional amount of respect and admiration from her husband. Carew’s suggestion that a married middle-class woman might be complied to find paid employment in the marriage was uncommon in Victorian examples of self-help, even during the late nineteenth century when this work was written. Normally Victorian feminists represented self-help values as important for young women to prepare them for potential lives of singlehood or the possibility of having to support themselves later on in life as widows. Of course several Victorian middle-class women writers worked while being married, but this fact was regularly downplayed in feminist works, which were careful to represent forms of paid work for middle-class women as something that was performed outside of marriage.

Victorian “Separate Spheres” and the Single Woman

The precarious position of the single middle-class woman in Victorian Britain must be understood in relationship to the entrenched ideology of the incommensurability of the sexes and the separate spheres in Victorian culture. In the late eighteenth century, Jean Jacques Rousseau’s seminal treatise Émile: or on Education (1762) famously projected a masculine ideal, “Émile,” whose autonomy and democratic freedoms in reformed society depended upon an education that developed his natural capacities for
reason and sensibility. By contrast, Rousseau held that the ideal woman “Sophy” was naturally disposed to dependence and sensibility; conformity to these capacities were to be the only aims of female education: “To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young” (Rousseau 328). Rousseau warned that women lacked the reasoning capacities to control their sexuality; therefore, they “must be subject all their lives to the most constant and severe restraint, which is that of decorum . . . we should teach them above all things to lay a due restraint on themselves” (332). According to Rousseau, there would be no end to the evils women could cause unless the family and women’s role as mothers became fundamental to the structure of a new society. The bourgeois woman’s ability to exercise decorum and modesty was supposed to help protect a new, progressive bourgeois man against excessive lust should his reason happen to fail him.

This view that men and women were sexually and intellectually incommensurable beings—men being fitted for individuality and public duty, and women for the contentment of men and the domestic household—was propagated in many Victorian literary contexts, notably in Coventry Patmore’s poem that coined the most famous phrase associated with the self-sacrificing, sentimental, and spiritual bourgeois woman, “The Angel in the House” (1854). In Canto III of this work, the male lover of the poem and the object of his affection, “Honoria,” are described, as in Rousseau, in completely opposite terms; the male protagonist’s strength and honour are juxtaposed with the passive and devoted Honoria whose eyes reflects her adoration for the hero. She
resembles a gentle queen who does not even recognize her dominion over his heart, only wanting to be loved in return: “His merits in her presence grow, / To match the promise in her eyes, [. . .] He notes how queens of sweetness still / Neglect their crowns, and stoop to mate; / How, self-consign’d with lavish will, / They ask but love proportionate” (Patmore 5-6, 29-32). John Ruskin’s essay “Of Queen’s Gardens” (1865), like Patmore’s poem, celebrates the image of a self-consigned queen who reigns over the home, while the bourgeois male prospers in the public sphere. Ruskin suggests that it is the responsibility of the domestic bourgeois woman to provide her husband with the much-needed spiritual and emotional reprieve from the harshness of public life: “Her great function is Praise: she enters into no context, but infallibly judges the crown of contest [. . .] This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division” (37). Semiotically, the bourgeois woman actually stands in for the home; she validates the reign of the bourgeois man who has triumphed through contest and competition over other weaker opponents in the capitalist economy. Moreover, she obliterates any notion of an economic domain of interest within the domestic sphere.

Of course some women did not agree with such projections of the “natural” differences among the sexes and viewed the kingly role of men as nothing more than a despotic rule designed to keep women down. Although the term “feminist” did not enter into popular use until the 1890s, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is commonly recognized as an early feminist tract that attributed feminine physical and moral weaknesses to women’s cultural upbringing rather than to nature. This work attacked Rousseau’s definition of womanhood, arguing that men were
tyrannical kings to subject women to their control, and suggested that men’s enjoyment of their natural freedom hinged on recognizing women’s shared right to freedom: 7

Let not men then in the pride of power, use the same argument that tyrannic kings and venal ministers have used, and fallaciously assert that woman ought to be subject because she has always been so.—But, when man, governed by reasonable laws, enjoys his natural freedom, let him despise woman, if she did not share it with him; and till that glorious period arrives, in descanting the folly of the sex, let him not overlook his own. (157-8)

Wollstonecraft went on to concede that women “may have different duties to fulfill” (165), especially in their capacities of raising children and inculcating morals in the domestic sphere (163), but she claimed that these were “human duties,” thus investing female roles with intellectual and social importance and not as mere outcomes of women’s natural servitude to men. Rather than completely overturning the separate spheres model that came to rule late-eighteenth-century patriarchal ideology, Wollstonecraft capitalized on Rousseau’s vision of the family as the locus of female development and moral improvement in order to argue for women’s role as human subjects in society: “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make them, as part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world” (158). As Linda Colley notes, if as Rousseau had suggested, women were guardians of social morality, Wollstonecraft thought they must have some right of access to the political: “Wollstonecraft saw the potential in

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7 For other discussions of how Wollstonecraft exposes the fallacy of cultural definitions of female “nature,” especially in Rousseau, see Kaplan’s “Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism,” Colley’s Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837, and Caine’s English Feminism.
Rousseau’s arguments very clearly and was careful to construct her claims for women’s rights in the Vindication out of their contribution to the family” (273).

Wollstonecraft’s reformulation of domesticity as the foundation for women’s private and public roles as human subjects also circulated in Victorian feminist literature of the 1850s. As Barbara Caine notes, the 1850s and 1860s saw the emergence of the first women’s movement in Britain:

Beginning with a petition to reform the laws which oppressed married women and deprived them of any property, the early feminist activists soon turned their attention to expanding the range of employment to women, to improving secondary education and making higher education accessible to women, and then to suffrage (88).

As Caine suggests, these and later Victorian feminists capitalized on the language of domestic ideology as a basis for asserting the differences between men and women, “not in terms of women’s inadequacy, but rather in terms of their distinctive merits and virtues. It was this ideology which enabled them to claim a significant place in the public and private spheres” (113). Reflecting this feminist mobilization of domestic ideology, an article anonymously published in the *Englishwoman’s Review* in 1876 champions women’s “mother influence and the benefit that would accrue to society by their more general adoption of public duties” (270), arguing that women should have places “not only on the School Boards, but on Workhouse Committees, in jails, on Boards of Health and Town Councils, on juries, in science, and in the law” (270).

Women’s maternal and moral influence in society, however, proved to be complicated ideological ground on which Victorian feminists often differed radically in
opinion. As Caine notes, nineteenth-century feminism is a complicated and vexed area of study because, even though many feminists agreed about “the basic structures of women’s oppression, there was considerable disagreement over how best to deal with women’s need for autonomy, and for rights and recognition both in terms of their familial and domestic life and in the economic and political spheres” (102). In this article she writes, “some women’s rights advocates argue exclusively in favour of all which is likely to make women better mothers, or better companions for men, but they seem incapable of judging of a woman as a human being by herself” (219). In contrast to this group of women, “On the other hand, there are advocates who speak with some slight contempt of maternity, in whose advocacy there appears to me little evidence of depth of thought, or tenderness, or wisdom, and which bespeaks a dry, hard, unimaginative conception of human life” (219). According to Butler, these disparate groups of women’s rights advocates—the one validating women only on account of their motherhood and domesticity and the other urging women to become indistinguishable from men—are both faulty, specifically in relationship to the surplus of single women in Victorian culture. She states of the first group, “When it is urged upon them that the women who do and must stand alone are counted by millions, they are perplexed, but only fall back on expressions of fear lest a masculine race of women should be produced, if we admit any theories respecting them apart from conjugal and maternal relationships” (219). The approach of radical advocates is also faulty because “they imagine that the only hope for themselves is to push into the ranks of men . . . in order that they may compete with them on their own ground” (220). Adopting a middle ground between these feminist approaches, Butler promotes the values of self-help—education for all, independence, and mutual help. She maintains that it is possible to attain a common standard of

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8 As Caine notes, nineteenth-century feminism is a complicated and vexed area of study because, even though many feminists agreed about “the basic structures of women’s oppression, there was considerable disagreement over how best to deal with women’s need for autonomy, and for rights and recognition both in terms of their familial and domestic life and in the economic and political spheres” (102).
excellence in education for man and woman “not by usurpation on either hand, nor by servile imitation, but by the action of each upon each, by mutual teaching and help” (220).⁹

What I am interested in is how many Victorian women’s rights advocates utilized many of the same self-help ideals that circulated in masculine texts of the period in order to mould a popular form of feminism that neither restricted women’s roles to the domestic sphere nor posed outright competition to the masculine bid for public power. While I might have charted the history of female conduct literature as forms of self-help for women, and focused on the hugely influential *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (1850) and other domestic texts, such as Penelope Harpur Strutt’s *Self-Help for Ladies* (1877), these do not typify the middle-ground feminism that was aimed at the Victorian redundant woman. Having said this, I devote considerable space to Catharine Parr Traill’s domestic guidebook *The Backwoods of Canada* (1837) in my second chapter on the Female Middle Class Emigration Society, a feminist organization founded by Maria Rye, because Traill’s widely popular book of household hints provided crucial knowledge for middle-class female emigrants, many of whom worked in domestic roles in the New World and aspired to become mistresses of their own households. Other feminist efforts on behalf of women’s employment and moral influence, however, bear a more ambivalent relationship with domesticity. For example, Emma Paterson, who led the first women’s trade union movement, and the journalist and novelist Ella Hepworth

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⁹ Butler’s famous crusade for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts that legislated the enforced inspection of any woman suspected of being a prostitute also drew on the language of self-help in order to articulate her evangelical belief in the interdependence of men and women in the “human family” (*Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture* x) and to argue for the transformation of the inequality between the sexes within the capitalist industrial economy (xv).
Dixon, pushed against traditional notions of female philanthropy and domesticity, while still promoting the basic self-help strains of individuality and mutual cooperation.

The main writers in my study—Dinah Mulock Craik, Maria Rye and the Female-Middle-Class Emigration Society, Emma Paterson, and Ella Hepworth Dixon—represent a range of feminists who were influential in their day, but whose works have either been dismissed as second-rate or have been overlooked in Victorian feminist literary studies until fairly recently.¹⁰ One reason for the lack of prominence of these women in Victorian studies, I would suggest, is that their works incorporate the popular discourse of self-help, a rhetoric that contributes to the middle-of-the-road approach of these works, thus making them less provocative to the modern reader than more extreme positions. One of the strongest cases in point is Emma Paterson; her visionary yet temperate approach to women’s trade unionism has often been noted in history texts, yet her passionate editorials and efforts to include working-class voices in *The Women’s Union Journal*

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¹⁰ The second-wave feminist movement inspired a reconsideration of forgotten female works, Craik’s novels and tracts being the focus of Showalter’s “Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment” (1975), Mitchell’s *Dinah Mulock Craik* (1983), and Foster’s *Victorian Women’s Fiction* (1985). While these critics recognized the feminist overtones of Craik’s works, the literary quality of Craik’s writing was regarded somewhat distastefully, as is especially apparent in Showalter’s double-edged appraisal of the Victorian author: “In fact, Dinah Mulock Craik excelled at the peculiar combination of didacticism and subversive feminism, which at much more developed levels of intellect, characterized the novels of Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot” (6). More recently, Juliet Shields “The Races of Women” (2007), Silvana Colella’s “Gifts and Interests” (2007), and Kiran Mascarenhas’ “John Halifax, Gentleman” (2009) resist categorizing Craik’s novels as second-rate, instead focusing on the fascinating relations among disability, gender, racial hybridity, and capitalism in her early works. With the increasing attention that has been paid to British colonialism and imperialism in recent years, Maria Rye’s letters and work with the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society have been considered in recent studies, such as Faymonville’s “‘Waste Not, Want Not’” (1998), Diamond’s *Emigration and Empire* (1999), Gothard’s *Blue China* (2001), and Myers *Antipodal England* (2009). Ella Hepworth Dixon’s status as a novelist and journalist has also featured strongly in feminist studies that rediscovered the forgotten body of New Women works in the 1990s. See Ardis’s *New Women, New Novels* (1990), Pykett’s *The Improper Feminine* (1992), Flint’s *The Woman Reader* (1993), Ledger’s *The New Woman* (1997), and Fehlbaum’s *Ella Hepworth Dixon* (2005).
remain largely unknown. I would suggest that, as modern readers, we are often more compelled by overtly political works that may indeed not be the best sources for understanding our cultural history; we must see past what strikes us as worthy of critical attention and look at popular forms that, to this day, crucially inform our cultural experience.

Methodology

My understanding of how Victorian feminists utilized the language of self-help owes a great deal to Michel Foucault’s post-structuralist view that wherever there is power, there is resistance or the operation of an alternative discourse with its own definitions and norms of behaviour. As Foucault writes in _The History of Sexuality_, “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (11). The system of ideas and institutions that made up Victorian middle-class ideology, as Poovey notes, was always open to revision and to the development of oppositional formulations (_Uneven Developments_ 3). Within Victorian feminism, self-help operates as a counter-discourse to the dominant social formation of separate spheres, yet at the same time, it defines new norms and power relations based on women’s domestic influence in society. Although my dissertation focuses on the discourse of self-help and its relationship to Victorian feminism, I pay attention to how feminist self-help discourse binds with other institutions and discourses, such as Victorian medicine—particularly medical epistemology on

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11 See in particular Coates and Goldman for references to Paterson’s shy and unassuming personality. While these writers acknowledge Paterson’s integral role in initiating the Women’s Protective and Provident League and editing _The Women’s Union Journal_, neither examines her writings.
disability, race, and sexuality—and the Victorian literary establishment—especially narrative conventions and genres—in order to challenge Victorian gender ideology and fashion new power relations within Victorian feminism.

Theories of embodiment provide a useful critical lens for defining the multiple ways that self-help discourse is deployed to both challenge and reproduce relations of normativity and aberrance within interdependent social formations of disability, illness, gender, and genre. These studies of embodiment encompass works in disability studies by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Lennard Davis, and Martha Stoddard Holmes, in addition to critical studies of the medical case history by Tod Chambers and Jason Tougaw. Theories of feminist individualism, especially the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Jenny Sharpe, also provide a framework for considering how Victorian feminists posited the middle-class woman in ways that depended on the otherness of women of different national, racial, class, and sexual designations. Coupled with these studies, works on British women’s colonialism, such as Antoinette Burton’s *Burdens of History*, Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather*, and Jennifer Henderson’s *Settler Feminism and Race Making in Canada* offer insight into the contentious and ambiguous position of the single middle-class female emigrant within British colonialism. Faced with limited employment opportunities in the colonial setting, these women typically worked either as governesses or as domestic home “helps,” and utilized self-help as a means to rhetorically manage class and racial threats in the more fluid social context of the colonies, not always with success. Recent critical studies on the history and culture of liberalism by Elaine Hadley, L. Susan Brown, and Lisa H. Schwartzman also aid in understanding the
ways in which self-help discourse was occasionally employed to undercut the authority of the middle-class individualist and to aim for a more collectivist approach.

My approach also draws on the formalist reading practices of concentrating on conventions of narrative—metaphor, image, narrative perspective, plot, and genre—and how they help constitute both meaning and Victorian models of female subjectivity. At the same time, I acknowledge that definitions of genre have historically contributed to the marginalization of certain modes of artistic production. My understanding of the politics of representation that are bound up in genre, canon formation, and interpretation is informed by Regenia Gagnier’s contention that “the production of the literary canon, the consumption, or meaning, of imaginative literature, and the status of the literary community’s cultural capital are within the realm of politics” (26). Margaret Beetham’s work on periodical literature also effectively highlights how periodical literature has been traditionally undervalued and under-theorized in comparison to single works of Victorian fiction or nonfiction because the heterogeneity of authorial voices within periodical literature conflicts with the dominant practice within literary studies of “situat[ing] a work within the oeuvre of a particular author” (97). According to Beetham, “the changes of format from serialized to volume novel or from single article to collection” are significant because they signal towards the “rescue” of singular texts within the publishing and academic establishments, a practice that has actually led to the further materiality of reading practices and to the hierarchization of genres: “This has two aspects: rescue into the book form, which is physically more stable, and—equally important—rescue from the periodical into a recognized genre: fiction or poetry or essay” (97). This understanding of periodical literature as a multifaceted genre with its own
unique set of cultural and material practices is an important reminder that many Victorian periodicals contained serialized novels, other forms of fiction and poetry, as well as nonfictional forms, which meant that writers, publishers, and readers encountered greater heterogeneity of literary forms and meanings and engaged in more complex processes of cultural and ideological production than has typically been recognized.

Recently, Dallas Liddle has noted that Victorian periodicals continue to prove challenging for many literary critics in terms of their generic and representational structures:

many scholars still assume that periodicals did not have separate or significant genre forms of their own. Rather remarkably, many critics trained to recognize the finest grains of formal and generic structure in poetry and the novel, and to interpret their influence with theoretical sophistication, still treat periodical ‘sources’ as if they expect such texts to provide transparent access to the thoughts of their writers—or, still more oddly, to the thoughts of their original readers.

Such unexamined assumptions have hampered the work of Victorianists since our earliest attempts to understand the forms of Victorian prose nonfiction. (4), I examine novels, tracts, medical case histories, as well as letters, articles, essays, and fiction that appear side-by-side within periodicals in order to chart the continuities and divergences among genres in the major debates surrounding the single woman. In doing so, I problematize traditional designations of Victorian self-help literature as being primarily comprised of forms of nonfiction that are inferior in terms of their literary style and apolitical middle-class values. Christopher Clausen recognizes such critical assessments of Smiles’s mid-Victorian bestseller _Self-Help_, noting that this work “has
frequently been an object of derision since the moment of its first publication” for its clumsy organization and tone, as well its middle-class values (3). He defines the cultural importance of Smiles’s text in terms of its practical instruction for “how to join the middle classes”:

To write a book telling working-class people that they merit the respect of others, should respect themselves, and can improve their lives through individual effort may be objectionable from the point of view of the revolutionary who wishes instead to abolish economic and social inequality at a stroke, but there is nothing inherently hypocritical or patronizing about it. [ . . . ] Enough mid-Victorians did in fact rise through such disciplines to validate similar ambitions for their contemporaries. (7)

But while Clausen acknowledges the mass public appeal and economic potential bound up in Smiles’s text, he indirectly perpetuates the cultural assessments of Smiles’s *Self-Help* as a non-literary and apolitical middle-class work. He fails to consider how the formal conventions of *Self-Help* might have appealed to the sensibilities of its mass audience, or how the middle-class perspective of this text contrasts with the overtly radical political overtones of Smiles’s earlier literary output. As I will show in the next section, the Victorian self-help tradition, which achieved mass popularity with *Self-Help*, implicated various points of view (even within Smiles’s own oeuvre) that engaged with the changing socio-political conditions of Victorian culture.

**Self-Help as a Cultural Movement**

A thorough examination of the provenance of self-help as a cultural movement in the nineteenth century would necessitate the consideration of many articles, letters to the
editor, and fictional texts in middle-class and working-class periodicals, as well as tracts and novels. Given the boundaries of this study, I must limit my contextualization of Smilesian self-help and the explosion of feminist self-help texts in the middle of the nineteenth century to a consideration of various political, economic, and social forces out of which mid-century self-help emerged. This summary will provide important groundwork for later chapters dealing with the employment of women in Victorian Britain, particularly with the establishment of women’s trade unionism in Britain.

The years leading up to Queen Victoria’s coronation in 1837 marked an incendiary time for labour and trade agitations in Britain. As current feminist historians, such as Sally Mitchell, Jutta Schwarzkopf and Katrina Honeyman have noted, working-class people played important yet often distinct roles in these struggles based on gender difference. The enfranchisement of middle-class men under the 1832 Reform Bill infuriated working-class men, and the year 1837 saw the onset of a serious depression that spurred the working classes to push for parliamentary reform as a means of alleviating their plight. In 1837-8, male and female Chartists en masse rioted for the ‘People’s Charter,’ which incorporated a range of political reforms. Chartist women united with their male counterparts against what Chartists termed ‘class legislation’ which, in their view, “was the cause underlying mass unemployment, starvation-level wages, high taxation and large-scale female and infant labour, all of which combined to render more difficult women’s fulfillment of their domestic responsibilities” (Schwarzkopf 121). The central aim of the charter—to achieve universal suffrage for

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12 These reforms included annual parliaments, voting rights for all adult men, the end of property qualifications for members of the House of Commons, voting by secret ballot, equal electoral districts, and salaries for members of Parliament so that men without private wealth could afford to run and be elected (Mitchell 6).
men—placed women at the margins of the movement, although many females supported Chartism because they believed that the franchise for working-class men would lead to improvements in working women’s lives.

Economic depression in the early part of the 1840s threw many people out of work. The Corn Laws imposed tariffs on imported grains in order to protect the English market, and these taxes made bread unaffordable for most people, for “If there had been no import duty, English bread would have been made from cheaper grain produced in European countries with longer growing seasons” (Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* 5). During the 1840s, female participation in Chartism began to fall away as male Chartists manipulated domestic ideology in an attempt to convince the British parliament of their worthiness for male suffrage, to push for factory and ‘protective’ legislation that would limit female competition in the workplace, and to bar women’s involvement and interests from trade union and Chartist meetings (Honeyman 130-1).

Owenite socialism, a political movement that developed in the 1820s largely under the influence of Robert Owen, also significantly contributed to trade unionist efforts in the 1830s and 1840s. According to Barbara Taylor, the Owenite movement spawned the earliest forms of feminist writing that manifested as letters to the editor, articles, and tracts that appeared in the working-class press. However, these feminist efforts were suppressed by the end of the forties through the increasing power of middle-class domestic ideology within Victorian culture and working-class men’s wielding of this ideology in order to counteract working women’s economic competition with them. At the beginning of the movement, Owenites supported a gradual transition from capitalism into a socialist society in which co-operation and moral perfectability would
phase out competition, money, private property ownership, sexual inequality, and the traditional family unit. Many socialist men and women participated in trade unionism in order to initiate co-operative stores and practices that would eliminate the exploitative practices of capitalist masters and middle-men and work towards a socialist future. The short-lived Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (1833-1834), a conglomerate of new and old trade unions in England, attracted thousands of workers, including many women workers, “who produced goods for the Labour Exchanges, ran co-operative shops (one of London’s first co-operative shops was a woman-run operation, selling tea and coffee), and organized co-operative workshops” (Taylor 88).

Women’s participation in the consolidated union led to the development of various female unions and successful strikes of female shoemakers, weavers and washerwomen. Labour initiatives often proved to be divisive, however, on gender issues because the prevalence of cheap female labour disrupted not only the status and dominance of male craftsmen, but also the conventional organization of domestic relationships “in which men functioned primarily as breadwinners and women primarily as family servicers, integrating household tasks with casual wage-earning activities” (Taylor 104). Many men resisted female competition, contending that the home, not the factory, was women’s sphere.

See Taylor’s chapter “Women and the New Science of Society,” which discusses each of these aims in the context of various tracts, such as Owen’s *The Book of the New World*, William Thompson’s *Appeal of One-Half the Human Race*, and Frances Morrison’s *The Influence of the present Marriage System upon the Character and Interests of Females contrasted with that proposed by Robert Owen*. Taylor notes that it must be acknowledged that Owen was not much of a feminist compared to some of his socialist contemporaries: “All his major pronouncements on social policy . . . contained sentiments promising women an egalitarian future, but even these writings displayed none of the passionate indignation which was to be found in the propaganda of the women Socialists or in the works of men like Thompson.”

Honeyman and Taylor point out that the strike of nine thousand London tailors in April, 1834, was an attack not only on female competition but on female paid work, as the male workers agitated for higher
It was within this shaky political and economic climate, marked by intense divisions between the working and middle classes and the ongoing suppression of women’s rights, that Samuel Smiles began to develop his philosophy of self-help. In 1838, Smiles, who had decided to abandon his career as a doctor and become a full-time writer for the cause of political change, was invited to become the editor of the *Leeds Times*, a radical liberal weekly publication that sold 3,500 copies a week (*Samuel Smiles*). Smiles penned a number of editorials that railed against British food taxation laws, in addition to the Poor Law instituted in 1834, which ordered the unemployed, able-bodied poor to enter workhouses. Although he conceded that “Many there are, whose poverty arises from their own doings or undoings” (“The Late Division”), Smiles placed the primary blame on the government for the oppression of the working classes, calling for political reform:

> The necessity for a change in the political and social arrangements of society becomes every day more and more imminent . . . There is something fearfully rotten in a state, when its aged labourers, whose best days have been spent in adding to the wealth of society, have to be pent up at the last to die in workhouses—when workmen have to steal for food, and artisans and their

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15 Gender biases extended in the 1840s into “every sector in which older sexual hierarchies were being destabilized” (Taylor 111). Referring to Nancy Tomes’s “A ‘Torrent of Abuse’: Crimes of Violence Between Working-Class Men and Women in London, 1840-1875,” and Engels’ *Working Class* (1844), a tract on the Manchester working population, Taylor notes that the presence of the wage-earning wife in the working-class household was often viewed in terms of inciting masculine violence or leading to other forms of male and female degradation (111). Engels, however, as Taylor notes, was by no means a supporter of housebound, dependent womanhood, viewing the reign of the wage-working wife over the unemployed working-class man as an inversion of the inhumane rule of husbands over wives.

16 Smiles was editor of the *Leeds Times* until 1842. As Asa Briggs and Alex Tyrrell note, Leeds was a hub of labour and political activity.
families are oft-times compelled to beg from door to door for bread [. . .]” (“The Late Division”).

Smiles’s early literary output was diverse in approach; some of his articles promoted the individualistic principle of the free will and its power to rise above difficult circumstances, while others championed the communitarian principle that one’s material circumstances and abilities were determined by the state.

For example, in “Money Versus Worth” (1842), Smiles identifies the individual as the starting point for wider social and political change and celebrates the idealistic individualism of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “He [Emerson] teaches the nobility of manhood, the dignity of labour, the honourableness of industry, economy, and the domestic virtues. The new ideas, he maintains, are forcing their way into all minds—and in time must modify all laws and institution.” In “Self-Culture,” Smiles also provides commentary on another espousal of individualism, the Unitarian William Ellery Channing, whose introductory address to the Franklin lectures in Boston is replicated in the body of the article. Smiles explains that

The object of the address is to enforce on man the duty of self-culture—the self-education of the moral, religious, and the intellectual parts of our nature, and to make man reverence the pure, the noble, and the Beautiful [. . .] The simple fact of God’s having bestowed on all men the gifts or reason, benevolence, and sensibility to moral and physical beauty, is of itself a sufficient revelation of his will that all men should cultivate them. (“Self-Culture”)

As various twentieth- and twenty-first century critics have noted, Smiles, like many liberal reformers and Victorian feminists of the day, was strongly informed by radical
Unitarian beliefs in the interdependence of individual self-improvement and social change. Smiles’s articles on individualism are also infused with the religious beliefs of his Calvinist upbringing, namely in their insistence on the divine importance of hard work and self-reliance; however, going further than the Calvinist and Unitarian traditions, Smiles argued that the human will was free and that men could alter their circumstances in life, even their class.

As Harold Perkin notes, Smiles helped fashion the mid-Victorian entrepreneurial ideal of the honest, hardworking, and peaceful gentleman whose self-help would lead to happiness on earth and in heaven. Fundamental to this ideal was also the secular Utilitarian notion that service towards others was integral to fulfilling “the universal test of the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Perkin 287). Smiles avoided placing onus purely on the individual for social change; he also supported the communitarian belief that broader political and economic transformation was needed before the people could realize their potential as citizens. Encouraging a peaceful alliance between the middle and working classes, Smiles urged middle-class politicians and voters to push for

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17 See Travers, Gleadle, Cowman and Jackson, and Caine for discussions of the role of radical Unitarianism within Victorian liberal reform and feminism.

18 Smiles was a lapsed Calvinist who rejected the Calvinist belief that God alone determined one’s station in life. See Travers for a discussion of the influence of another lapsed Calvinist, Thomas Carlyle, on Smiles’s works. Smiles adopted the term “self-help” from Carlyle, quoted him liberally, and shared many views in common with this thinker, such as the notion that biography was a form of history, that there was a social and spiritual value to work, and that there was a moral purpose to life (Travers 164).

19 See Smiles’s article “Parvenues” (1854) on class climbing. Smiles writes that “all our great men, without exception, are parvenus. Our poets, our sculptors, our painters, our authors, are all men who have risen from the ranks” (186).

20 For Smiles’s sympathetic discussions of Owenism, Chartism, and his vision for a middle and working-class alliance, see “Prospects of Persecution” (1841) and “Union of the Middle and Working Class” (1842).
“the extension of the Suffrage to the working classes” (“Union of the Middle and Working Class”).

In Smiles’s view, any initiative directed at the improvement of the working class was faulty unless it acknowledged the need for political and economic change. He was particularly critical of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, a London Whig association that published numerous scientific and moral tracts for the working classes from the 1820s to the 1840s. As early forms of self-help, these texts attempted to quell the radical political and social unrest that had ensued from industrialization, and to inculcate in working men a desire for self-education and a sense of responsibility for their future.21 According to Smiles, the SDUK had put

*the cart before the horse.* These teachers of Useful Knowledge proceeded upon the supposition that the classes to which they addressed, *had anything to save,* over and above supplying their animal necessities. They also assumed (what is very far indeed from the truth) that the condition of the British labouring classes is a very superior condition; and that their poverty is the result, not of bad social and political institutions, but of their own improvidence, idleness, imprudent marriages and bad domestic arrangement. (‘The Approaching Grand Feast of Gridiron!’)

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21 See Booth, Travers, Amigoni, Tyrrell, and Perkin for a discussion of the SDUK and its production of early forms of self-help. As Travers and Tyrrell point out, while Smiles criticized the SDUK, he acknowledged in his *Autobiography* (1905) that the SDUK publication *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* by G. L. Craik (1834) strongly influenced his writing. In *Self-Help*, Smiles imparted Craik’s lesson that “the most important results in daily life” came through the energetic use of ordinary qualities (Craik 398). Booth and Perkin also refer to the Mechanics’ Institutes, another group that, much like the SDUK, was committed to working-class education. According to Perkin, the brand of education offered at the Mechanics’ institutes, in contrast to the SDUK’s scientific tracts, was more elementary—based around religion and morality—because the middle-class facilitators of these institutes feared that higher education for the poor would potentially assist the working-class people to rise above their station, thereby threatening middle-class superiority.
But by the late 1840s, Smiles ceased to push for a middle and working-class alliance or to rail against middle- and upper-class liberals for blaming the working classes for their own oppression. By this time, the government had responded to working-class frustrations insofar as it had passed the Ten Hour Bill in 1847, which limited the work day for women and children under eighteen years of age to ten hours a day, and it had repealed the Corn Laws in 1849. The Chartist movement dissolved with its aim towards universal suffrage unrealized. From the 1850s to the 1860s, England enjoyed a period of relative prosperity and peace; “real wages (i.e., the amount of goods that can be bought with a day’s earnings) may have doubled, since better transportation lowered the cost of food and factory production made clothing, shoes, and household goods much less expensive” (Mitchell, Daily Life in Victorian England 10). In 1859, William Gladstone’s Liberals came into power, and championed classical liberalism, which opposed state intervention in economic affairs, supported free trade, competition, and individual initiative as the key to success. Smiles’s Self-Help (1859) opened with one of John Stuart Mill’s most famous statements of liberal individualism, “The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it” (qtd. in Smiles, Self-Help 1).

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22 According to Briggs, Travers, and Tyrrell, a variety of factors contributed to the writer’s eschewal of radical politics in the 1850s: the dissolution of Chartism; the fact that a middle- and working-class alliance failed to take hold; his leaving Leeds, a hub of labour and political activity; and the overnight success of Self-Help.

23 The passing of these laws as well as the dying down of Chartist activity contributed to why Britain managed to avoid a revolution in 1848, a year in which almost every major European nation faced a revolutionary upsurge.

24 This focus on individual self-help rather than state interference is especially obvious in the passage: “Whatever is done for men or classes, to a certain extent takes away the stimulus and necessity of doing for themselves; and where men are subjected to over-guidance and over-government, the inevitable tendency is to render them comparatively helpless” (35).
previous writings, he placed responsibility on individuals rather than the state for their 
economic and social successes or failures.  

*Self-Help*, which sold more than a quarter of a million copies in Smiles’s lifetime 
(Briggs 7), merges the journalistic form of the opinion editorial with the genre of 
collective biography, a literary form that had already become popularized as a 
pedagogical tool in the earlier self-help writings of the SDUK (Booth, *How to Make It as 
a Woman* 73). *Self-Help* alternates between passages that expound on the tenets of self- 
help and short illustrative biographies of famous men in a range of predominantly 
middle-class professions. Some of these biographical subjects are Sir Richard Arkwright, 
the cotton manufacturer; James Watt, the inventor of the steam engine; Benjamin West, 
the painter; and Sir Walter Scott, the poet and novelist. Smiles emphasizes these 
individuals’ moral achievements above their wealth and success and extends the 
possibility for moral improvement to all men: “Even the humblest person . . . has a 
present as well as a future influence upon the well-being of his country; for his life and 
character pass unconsciously into the lives of others, and propagate good example for all 
time to come” (Smiles 39). 

Many working and middle-class men wrote to Smiles testifying to the efficacy of 
his book, such as a working man in Exeter who claimed that the book had “instructed and 
helped him greatly” and that he wished that “every working man would read them 
[Smiles’s works] through and ponder them well” (qtd. in Briggs 18). A Dublin 
tradesman, who later became a Roman Catholic priest, was so inspired by Smiles that he

25 See especially “Chapter X—Money: It’s Use and Abuse” in *Self-Help* for Smiles’s criticisms of avarice, 
middle class “respectability,” and the middle classes’ aping of upper-class manners. In this chapter, Smiles 
contends that all men should take pride in their work, no matter the form of labour, and improve themselves 
through self-education.
took to writing the self-help writer’s name alongside his own on his letters and shop bills: “Many of my customers addressed me by your name as well as by my own, and I answered to one equally with the other” (qtd. in Briggs 19).  

As Smiles was fashioning his tremendously popular version of liberal individualism, another social reformer who was long-acquainted with the political efforts of Owenite Socialism and Chartism, penned a bestselling socialist version of co-operative self-help. George Holyoake, editor of the working-class journal *The Reasoner*, wrote *Self-Help by the People: Thirty-Three Years of Co-operation in Rochdale* (1857), a tract that charted the activities of the Society of Equitable Pioneers in Rochdale, Lancashire, from 1844-1857. Like Smiles’s work, Holyoake’s text employs an editorial style, but rather than incorporating biographies that attest to the achievements of individual men, it draws on other forms of representation popularized during the nineteenth century, including charts and statistics, to illustrate how the Pioneers collectively turned capitalism towards their own ends by selling merchandise at the usual prices and distributing the profits in the form of a periodic dividend proportionate to their purchases. The preface to the sixth edition in 1867 emphasizes the empirical value and collective appeal of Holyoake’s tract by excerpting a passage from an article by William Cooper attesting to the work’s considerable readership among Britain’s working classes. In 1863, Cooper wrote in the *Daily News* that 251 of England’s 332 Co-operative Societies had been established since the text’s publication, and that he had “heard several

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26 See Brigg’s preface to *Self-Help* for various other Victorian testimonials from professionals and working-class men.

27 As Harold Perkin notes, statistical analysis achieved powerful representational and institutional status, with “the establishment of the Statistical Office of the Board of Trade and the Registrar-General’s Office in 1837, and the founding of the Statistical Section of the British Association in 1833” (326). The empirical method was applied to a vast range of social problems within Victorian culture (326).
persons ascribe the origin of their now prosperous Society to reading the History. Not fewer than 500 or 600 copies were sold in Rochdale. It was bought and read by a few working men in every town in the United Kingdom” (qtd. in Preface, *Self Help for the People*).

As a work that concentrates on the collective rather than the individual in its style and content, Holyoake’s tract also pays more attention to women than Smiles’s *Self-Help*, for in the latter work “humble apprentices who rise to become masters of many men have little time for wives or children; few women are mentioned among the narratives of persevering enterprise” (Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman* 78). Holyoake associates women’s capacity for self-reliance and thrift in the home with the moral code that the Rochdale Pioneers had taught to families, and he acknowledges that women were key contributors to co-operative initiatives (Holyoake 44):

But to starve your household when you can help it, to prevent them being starved one day when you cannot help it, implies good sense, strength of will, and courageous foresight, which many women certainly display, but which is yet so rare a quality that one cannot but marvel and applaud the Rochdale Co-operators, who have taught so many families the art of getting out of debt, and inspired them with the pride of keeping out. (45)

Yet the apparent difference between Holyoake and Smiles in terms of their textual treatment of women is not absolute, for in other contexts, Smiles similarly praises women for their domestic influence within the home. According to the critic Alex Tyrrell, Smiles held a personal and professional acquaintance with the feminist writers and publishers, Eliza Cook and Mary Howitt; Smiles penned various articles on self-help for women that
appeared in radical middle-class publications, like Eliza Cook’s Journal and Howitt’s People’s Journal in the 1850s. For example in “Men and Women—Education of the Sexes,” Smiles writes that “We rejoice to see the elevation of woman occupy so large a share of public attention . . . The comfort and happiness of every household depend on the kind of woman that governs there” (98). Like Holyoake, Smiles avows women’s intelligence, will power, and thriftiness in their roles as wives and mothers, yet scarcely mentions paid employment for women. Just as Holyoake makes only passing mention to women working in the Rochdale store, in another article, “Employment of Young Women,” Smiles ratifies factory work as an appropriate form of work, but only for single working-class women who are saving for marriage.

Middle-class feminists went further than these male self-help writers to mould versions of self-help on behalf of women. In the context of the cultural debate surrounding the “redundant” middle-class female, they manipulated various popular self-help notions, including independence and self-sufficiency, as well as the domestically-oriented self-help values of mutual help and morality, in order to argue for an expansion of women’s employment and civic duty beyond the domestic sphere. The connection between Victorian masculine and feminist versions of self-help, I would suggest, cannot be understood as one of straightforward influence; feminist self-help works did not merely respond to the masculine self-help tradition, for these women were influenced by many discourses, and masculine self-help writers were also strongly influenced by a wide range of forms written by men and women. This interrelationship between masculine and feminist forms of self-help is perhaps best understood in terms of what Tessa Elizabeth

28 See Tyrrell’s “Samuel Smiles and the Woman Question in Early Victorian Britain” for a discussion of Smiles’s personal and professional acquaintance with various mid-Victorian feminist writers and publishers.
Jordan and Jo-Ann Wallace describe, by way of N. Katherine Hayles, as “the feedback loop,” a concept that points towards the “all-at-onceness of discursive formations” (Jordan and Wallace 229). According to Jordan and Wallace, this concept of the feedback loop, like Foucault’s notion of the “systems of simultaneity” (228), precludes “easy cause-and-effect models of historical analysis” or “a logic of influence” (229). Adapting this concept, I would suggest that the Victorian feminist self-help literature that emerged in the mid-Victorian period was not a mere effect or outgrowth of the masculine self-help tradition, but rather these works were interdependent and co-existent with multiple other discourses implicated within Victorian ideological formulation.

**Chapter Summary**

In Chapter 1, “‘A Faithful and Most Loving Mother’: Disability, Self-Help, and Cultural Maternalism,” I question the degree to which Victorian collective biographies presented more possibilities for self-help for females, as Alison Booth suggests in *How to Make it as a Woman*, the only full-length study of Victorian self-help works for women. This chapter explores the mid-Victorian feminist author Dinah Mulock Craik’s decision to employ the female bildungsroman form in *Olive: A Young Woman’s Triumph Over Adversity* (1850), in order to flesh out the ideal of a feminist individualist who embodies both the capacity for self-dependence and the cultural role of motherhood lauded in other women’s self-help works of the period. I also examine the binary of normalcy and aberrance as encompassed in the figure of the disfigured single artist heroine and in her relation to other female types marked by sexual, class, and racial difference. Turning to recent examples and criticism of self-help, I discuss how traces of these problematic
inscriptions of feminist individualism still profoundly shape cultural definitions of femininity and women’s perceptions of themselves.

Chapter 2, “Self-made Maids, Hardy Pioneers, and the Narratives of Self-Help” addresses a shortcoming of recent scholarship on mid-Victorian British emigrant narratives of success, namely its inattention to gendered articulations of self-help. Apart from masculine emigrant narratives of success, another story of self-help emerged for single middle-class women in 1862, with Maria S. Rye’s establishment of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society (FMCES). This organization aimed to convince a sceptical British and colonial public that single women could find financial independence abroad as governesses or as a better class of domestic servants, referred to as “helps.”

This chapter explores how the letters and articles published by the FMCES utilized different rhetorical tactics from masculine emigration texts in order to manage anxieties surrounding the single woman’s gender, class, and racial positioning within colonial culture. I also examine less positive letters on female emigration housed in the FMCES archives in London, England, in addition to the little-known novel Ella Norman; Or, a Woman’s Perils (1864) by Elizabeth Murray for the ways they contradicted the FMCES female colonial ideal. I then note the ways that the troubling paradox of the self-made maid assumes different mutations in today’s self-help representations of Western women.

In Chapter 3, “Two Branches of the Same Tree: Individualism, Collectivism, and Self-Help in Women’s Trade Unionist Literature,” I focus on the formal beginnings of women’s trade unionism in Britain, under Emma Paterson’s tenure as the leader of the Women’s Protective and Provident League (WPPL) and editor of the league’s main publishing organ, The Women’s Union Journal (1874-1884). This chapter examines the
debate between individualism and collectivism in male and female trade unionist versions of self-help, and analyzes the tension between these philosophies in reports, editorials, and in the novella *Mary Ormond; Trade Unionist* published in *The Women’s Union Journal*. I finally touch on the ongoing importance within twenty-first-century feminism and self-help texts to push for new theoretical frameworks that balance the concerns of the individual with the problems of systemic oppression of women and other groups.

Chapter 4, “Nervousness, the Case Study, and Self-Help in Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman*” points out that the “rest cure” developed by American physician Silas Weir Mitchell and taken up by British contemporaries, such as William S. Playfair, for the treatment of neurasthenia and hysteria has typically been interpreted by recent critics as a remedy that was meant to restore married women to their wifely and mothering duties.29 Another group of women, however, constituted an important contingent of late-Victorian nerve cases: young unmarried women. Their well-being was a matter of cultural anxiety, especially at a time when the New Woman revolted against conventional notions of marriage and motherhood. This chapter examines the tension between Mitchell and Playfair’s medical model of self-help that attempted to rehabilitate women to appropriate feminine roles and Ella Hepworth Dixon’s use of the genre of the case study to disrupt the empirical value of late-century nerve cases and to promote a feminist model of autonomy and mutual cooperation in her New Woman novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894). Turning to today’s self-help

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29 See the critics Kelly and Bassuk who examine the “rest cure” in connection to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s canonical short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* in which a depressed married heroine undergoes a strict regimen of rest and feeding, a process that drives her practically insane. Gilman’s story has often been cited as a feminist indictment of this patriarchal remedy for married female patients during the late-Victorian period. See Schuster for a discussion of other notable married patients who underwent the “rest cure,” including writer Amelia Gere Mason, and essayist and homemaker Sarah Butler Wister.
texts on anxiety and depression, I focus on how they often overlook the influences of
gender socialization and oppression in these mental conditions even though masculine
essentialist theory and clinical approaches to sexual difference still influence women’s
range of movement and opportunities.

In the conclusion, I consider how self-help forms that proposed remedies for
women’s emotional and psychological problems came under attack by feminists within
and beyond the academy during the 1990s. Feminists criticized the apolitical character of
this “recovery” movement and championed earlier consciousness-raising self-help works
of the 1970s. I also consider the overlaps and inconsistencies between today’s self-help
forms and Victorian self-help texts, and touch on the ways in which current works, as
well as the understanding of Victorian feminism, have been influenced by the debates
surrounding “recovery” and “consciousness-raising” in the 1990s.

An intensive look at the Victorian discourse of self-help for women allows one to
map key literary and ideological trends of first-wave feminism. Firstly, the development
of feminist individualism in the 1850s and 1860s relied strongly upon liberal self-help
values of economic independence, personal autonomy, and mutual help. Paradoxically,
the feminist individualist was consolidated within the terms of Victorian domestic
ideology and in relationship to women of different class, racial, and sexual designations,
the female bildungsroman being a powerful literary form that could ratify this
individualist against other inferior female character types. The structure of female
individualism shifted during women trade unionist debates of the 1870s and 1880s as
feminist periodical literature and fiction became bifurcated, both forms embodying
individualistic and communitarian perspectives, as well as working- and middle-class
coadjutors in the trade unionist fight. Finally, at the fin-de-siècle and into the beginning of the twentieth century, efforts towards female independence and mutual help were continually frustrated as the sexually isolated figure of the New Woman was caught between a Victorian society that pathologized active female self-help and an emergent modernity in which women might realize their individual and collective potential.

Conclusion

It is fascinating to me that over a century has passed since the publication of Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman*, and yet there is much indication in the self-help industry that women in Western culture have not yet realized how to live as sexually, psychologically, and emotionally fulfilled individuals. Obviously a considerable number of women identify with characters like Bridget Jones and her friend, Sharon, who suffer from perpetual internal conflict as they search for a life partner yet desire to stand on their own two feet. Bombarded with cultural images of themselves as efficient workers and household managers, many women work a double shift holding down full-time jobs as well as shouldering most of the responsibilities within the home, desperately trying to figure out how to be “superwomen” on all fronts. Many still look to popular cultural forms for echoes of their own struggles in the examples of fictional and real women who are trying to find balance. It is my feeling that the uneven and contradictory inscriptions of Victorian self-help and first-wave feminism have much to teach modern Western women about the courage and difficulty bound up in first-wave feminism, as these early feminists attempted to define themselves as subjects in a society in which they held no legal or political status as people, along with “criminals, idiots, and minors.”
These early feminist works can also inform women today about the powerful contributions of discursive practices in the shaping of systems of beliefs and institutions, and the compromises that women are still willing to make to become the people that others are telling them to be rather than imagining new options for themselves. The act of wielding and interpreting forms of representation has material consequences. Only when women push themselves to understand the ongoing contradictions and hierarchies within culture will they be able to challenge them textually, socially, and institutionally. Then, they might begin to fulfill what the feminist bell hooks refers to as “the longing of self-recovery” (32-3)—a longing that, as Schrager notes, involves an “ongoing process of self-making” that is socially constituted, that straddles multiple axes of difference in a culture organized hierarchically according to those axes, and that serves as a basis for challenging those hierarchies through political action” (189). It is my view that the relationship between popular culture and feminism needs to be taken seriously if women are to engage in the important and political process of self-making.
Chapter 1

“A FAITHFUL AND MOST LOVING MOTHER”: DISABILITY, SELF-HELP, AND CULTURAL MATERNALISM IN DINAH CRAIK’S 0LIVE

The mid-Victorian female bildungsroman engaged closely with popular mid-Victorian discourses of self-help that debated what single women should be and do. Dinah Mulock Craik’s mid-nineteenth-century novel of female development, Olive: A Young Girl’s Triumph Over Prejudice (1850), fashioned a model of self-help for unmarried women at a time when Victorians discussed solutions for the large surplus of single women in Britain. In Olive, the heroine is born with a congenital deformity, an “elevation of the shoulders shortening the neck” (23), which causes no physical pain or discomfort. Rather, Olive’s defect places her outside normative standards of female beauty and the marriage market, and she acts out her desire for personal beauty and love by becoming a visual artist and helping others. The heroine’s disability functions as a trope that highlights and challenges the disadvantaged position of all women as a result of their shared objectification and subordination by patriarchal culture. The female characters who aspire to normative standards of feminine beauty and conduct end up alienated and unhappy, while Olive, who appears “other” by virtue of her disability, single status, and working role, achieves economic, social, and romantic fulfillment. Like other early feminist texts of its day, this novel attempts to create a sympathetic bond
among many women. However, it also inscribes the cultural maternal role and social hierarchies that stabilized early middle-class feminist individualism and that still inform notions of what women should be and do. The role of Craik’s novel and other Victorian self-help works within feminist literary history warrants further analysis if female agency and selfhood are to be more fully imagined for many women, who continue to turn to cultural forms like self-help for purposes of personal empowerment and autonomy.

Craik’s *Olive* addressed self-help for the single woman precisely at the time when the 1851 British Census identified a surplus of 750,000 single women, and Victorians debated solutions to this “problem.” For early middle-class feminists, the plight of financially distressed single middle-class women was a pressing matter of women’s rights that spurred them to agitate against existing gender norms and to demand more working opportunities for these women. Olive’s disability marks a powerful allegory for women’s political status and struggle towards emancipation

As Judith Butler notes, both the linguistic representation of women and the pursuit of political representation for women have historically hinged on and reproduced the assumption that there is an ontological identity shared by all women. However, rather than connoting a stable signifier or common identity, the term *women* “even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety” (4). Feminism has opened itself up to “charges of gross misrepresentation” based on this tendency towards articulating a stable subject (6). According to Butler, this globalizing gesture has “spawned a number of criticisms from women who claim that the category of ‘women’ is normative and exclusionary and is invoked with the unmarked dimensions of class and racial privilege intact” (19). *Olive* exemplifies a fascinating tension that undergirds the
category of women in feminist politics: the vexed and complicated relationship of normalcy and difference. Olive’s defectiveness in relation to normative values of feminine beauty and dependence allows her to become an artist and motherly figure, while the female characters who aspire towards normative femininity appear more socially and emotionally disabled than Olive. The protagonist’s achievement of the values of early feminist individualism depends not only on her sense of difference from other women, but also on her ability to act as a role model for other women. This complex relationship of difference and normativity, which stabilizes Olive as a female subject, also intersects with representations of class and race, which function to consolidate the white middle-class woman’s attainment of early feminist individualism and to exclude women of other class and racial positions.

The simultaneous effect of agitating for increased female autonomy and bonds among women while also inscribing the dominance of white, middle-class feminist individualism is a central contradiction of both Craik’s novel and female self-help texts, and indeed of early feminism. As Lynda Nead writes, in the early Victorian feminist’s mission to help other women, “one woman’s emancipation can be another’s subordination” (197). This contradiction has taken on other problematic manifestations within the history of Western feminism, and has been criticized by various feminists as supporting an assumed universal female identity that privileged the voices and experiences of white middle-class women. The “third wave” of feminism has often been credited with drawing attention to previously overlooked differences of women’s experiences on the basis of other categories of positioning, such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, but as Jordan and Wallace note, many “second-wave” feminists also
recognized the implications of constructions of race and class. For example, in 1968, Shulamith Firestone urged feminists to agitate against capitalism and racism, and in the 1970s “The Feminists,” a radical feminist group pointed out the exclusion of working-class women within feminism (Jordan and Wallace 222). The categorization of the major ideological developments within feminism into different “waves” has also come under scrutiny by feminist scholars for its tendency to package feminism into a linear design in which each wave is superior to the last.30 Craik’s novel provides rich ground for analyzing the representational categorizations of women and feminism, which, to this day, are problematic as they often reproduce ideas of uniformity rather than attesting to the multiplicity of women’s lives and the existence of many feminisms.

In the mid-nineteen seventies and early eighties, feminist scholars rediscovered Craik’s novel *Olive*, along with Craik’s extensive popular texts for women, which had been previously overshadowed by Craik’s most famous novel, *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856). Sally Mitchell’s study of Craik—the only full-length treatment of the author’s works—argues that *Olive*’s “emotional power” is that of *Jane Eyre* “twisted one degree tighter,” as the novel attests to “everywoman’s sense that her body is imperfect” (30-1). Elaine Showalter and Shirley Foster note that *Olive* is an overtly didactic and political novel, and align the protagonist’s disability with her “otherness” as a single woman, an artist, or with her mixed-race status as a woman of Scottish and English descent.31 More

30 See the recent anthology of feminist essays, *Not Drowning But Waving*, in particular Jordan and Wallace’s “Waves, Tangles, Archaeologies, and Loops,” Groeneveld’s “Not a Postfeminism Feminist,” Okeke-Ihejirika and Rack’s “Between the Waves,” and Susan Brown’s “School/work, Home/work.” All of these essays address, from a variety of approaches, the vexed nature of the “wave” metaphor and its inability to account for the many gaps, overlaps, and inconsistencies within feminism.

31 Critics often interpret Craik as a second-rate, popular novelist who bears a somewhat ambiguous role to feminism. Foster notes Craik’s ambivalent connection to feminism, namely how the author eschewed any connection to the women’s movement, particularly in *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women*. Showalter
recently, critics, including Cora Kaplan, Juliet Shields, and Antonia Losano have focused on the interrelationships among disability, racial hybridity, and feminism in Olive. I focus on the way Craik’s novel engages with discourses of self-help for women in periodical literature and biographies because this approach offers a new way of understanding the politics of representation bound up in the critical reception, form, and content of this work. Self-help narratives, which typically feature an individual’s struggle to overcome economic and social adversity, were respected literary forms for representing male subjects (Booth 78) and contributed to the success of Craik’s John Halifax, Gentleman.

The nineteenth-century critic R. H. Hutton contended that by focusing on the development of a male hero “Craik does not limit herself to domestic conversations [. . .] she includes a larger range of events,—the influence of world successes and failures” (481). However with the proliferation of self-help biographies for women, “critics began to narrow the definition of literature and to draw a distinction between elite and popular audiences” (Booth 73). This historical designation of women’s self-help works, I would suggest, has played an unrecognized and important role in the critical receptions of Craik’s writing as a sentimental and didactic feminist work. Craik’s novels for women, while popular, never achieved the success of John Halifax, Gentleman and eventually fell into obscurity; her models of self-help for women were not nearly so palatable to the mid-nineteenth-century literary establishment, who labeled these novels unrealistic and sentimental.

Today, self-help literature continues to be looked upon as a broadly popular form of self-deception appealing mainly to women (77). Nineteenth-century self-help literature designates Craik’s novels and periodical writing as examples of popular feminist works, arguing that Craik delivers “a peculiar blend of didacticism and subversive feminism, which at much more developed levels of intellect, characterized the novels of other female writers including Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot” (6).
for women, for its incorporation of traditional values of mothering, in addition to less
conventional ideas of female autonomy and agency, has also been overlooked by recent
feminist critics, despite its provision of insight into the didactic, sentimental, and political
strains in Victorian feminist works. It is my view that Victorian self-help discourses
contribute to the tensions between conventional concepts of women’s roles and more
overt feminist tendencies that characterize Craik’s bildungsroman and other early
feminist works. They provide further understanding of Jane Tompkins’s important
contention that “it is possible to see the sentimental novel not as an artifice, but as a
political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and
attempts to mold the values of its time” (129).

This chapter focuses on the relationship between Olive’s disability and self-help
literature for women, as this literary form concentrates on women’s disabilities by virtue
of their gender oppression and involves the tension between difference and normalcy that
typifies the white middle-class individual. I will begin with discussing a feminist tradition
of self-help texts that emerged in the 1850s during the time in which Smiles was
propagating versions of self-help for women in periodicals and his most famous work
directed at men, Self-Help (1859). I then proceed to an analysis of Olive, drawing on
theories of feminist individualism and disability theory. Craik’s mid-Victorian novel, I
suggest, provides a rich context for analyzing the female bildungsroman’s engagement
with other largely critically ignored cultural forms, such as discourses of self-help for
women, which were also invested in matters of female subjectivity. The cultural dialogue
between such forms provides crucial insight into the problematic inscription of white,
middle-class female individualism that has become a prominent concern of Western feminist debates.

**Self-Help in Mid-Victorian Women’s Nonfiction and Fiction**

Samuel Smiles’s insistence that “We must ourselves be and do” was as an injunction to put into practice one’s intellectual learning for the betterment of others (*Self-Help* 314), a notion that corresponded with Victorian feminist notions of work as a moral imperative. During the 1850s, Smiles penned various articles about self-help for women, which appeared in inexpensive, widely circulated periodicals such as *Eliza Cook’s Journal* (Tyrrell 94). In “Men and Women—Education of the Sexes” (1850), Smiles condemns the socialization of men and women, pointing out its distorting and debilitating effect on both sexes: “Too unsympathetic and too selfish, he grows up a harsh and distorted character [. . .] she grows up to womanhood, leaning to one side, wanting strength to stand by herself; helpless, frivolous, and often miserable” (97). He particularly criticizes the pressure on women to cultivate “female accomplishments” solely to attract husbands who will ease their helplessness. By recommending that both sexes aim towards values of mutual caring and self-dependence (97), Smiles refutes the supposedly innate and incommensurable differences between the sexes. Like feminists of the day, Smiles also linked the role of wife and mother to national progress, stating, “The comfort and happiness of every household depend on the kind of woman that governs there; and the upbringing of children everywhere is almost entirely in their hands” (97).

The types of views projected in Smiles’s self-help literature have been noted in relation to discourses of self-help found in the feminist nonfiction of Barbara Leigh Smith, Bessie Rainer Parkes, Jessie Boucherett, Josephine Butler, and Frances Power
Cobbe (Tyrrell; Cowman and Jackson; Rodrick). Many of these works respond to the surplus of single women in Britain, a matter that had already inspired various cultural representations during the 1840s, and was reinforced by the 1851 British Census. These articles and tracts argue for increasing working and educational opportunities, particularly for unmarried middle-class women who were not traditionally expected to pursue intellectual and paid working roles. For example, in *Hints on Self-help for Young Women* (1863), Jessie Boucherett resists the view enforced by the conservative W. R. Greg in “Why are Women Redundant?” (1862) that women ought to be shipped to the colonies where there was an abundance of men (53). She blames single middle-class women’s so-called female redundancy on the “sins of their fathers” (48), and maintains that middle-class men who cannot leave their daughters a fortune ought to teach them a trade (48). By affording single middle-class women more working opportunities,

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32 For a discussion of the similarities and differences between Smiles’s *Self-Help* and Boucherett’s *Self-Help; A Book for Young Women*, see Cowman and Jackson’s *Women and Work Culture*. Cowman and Jackson also examine self-help ideals in Bessie Rayner Parke’s “What Can Educated Women Do? Part II,” published in *The English Woman’s Journal*, and in Barbara Leigh Smith’s *Women and Work*. See Tyrrell’s “Samuel Smiles and the Woman Question in Early Victorian Britain” for an analysis of the relationship between Smiles’s periodical writings and Bessie Rayner Parkes’s *Remarks on the Education of Girls*. Tyrrell also discusses Smiles’s personal and professional acquaintance with early feminist writers and publishers, such as Eliza Cook and Mary Howitt. Although Rodrick does not specifically compare Smilesian self-help to the works of Victorian women’s rights advocates, she nonetheless cites a few early feminist texts as examples of self-help, including Frances Power Cobbe’s *Essays on the Pursuits of Women*, Bessie Rayner Parke’s *Essays on Women’s Work*, and Josephine Butler’s *Women’s Work and Women’s Culture*.

33 Two popular images of redundant women in the early 1840s were Thomas Hood’s poem “The Song of the Shirt” (1843) about a poor widow and seamstress living in wretched conditions, and Richard Redgrave’s oil painting “The Poor Teacher” (1844). In the late forties, *Jane Eyre* (1847) became another widely acknowledged portrayal of the single middle-class governess.

34 Greg’s famous 1862 article “Why Are Women Redundant?” enforces the dominant cultural perception that unmarried middle-class women present a serious social problem. He claims that single working-class women, by contrast, “are in no sense redundant; we have not to cudgel our brains to find a niche or an occupation for them” (53).
Boucherett writes that “the position of women will begin to improve, and this superfluous of helpless, miserable creatures will gradually diminish till it ceases to exist” (48).

Perhaps the most incisive rebuttal to Greg’s proposal to ship single middle-class females to the colonies is Frances Power Cobbe’s article “What Shall We Do with our Old Maids?” (1862). Cobbe paraphrases Greg’s central argument that the growing number of celibate females is a “disease” that must be remedied through promoting the “vocation” of marriage at any cost. She outlines Greg’s proposed solutions for celibacy: deporting women to the colonies as prospective brides; enforcing “a stricter morality on men” (60), which refers to discouraging the male patronization of prostitutes; and ceasing all efforts of “mistaken philanthropy,” which means eliminating employment initiatives for women that render their lives “more false and unnatural” (60). Exposing the fallacy of Greg’s argument, Cobbe insists that marriages based around the notion of vocation or “interest” are seldom happy, but “sources of nothing but wretchedness” (61). She argues that marriage must be based around “free choice” and “love,” and that “it is only on the standing-ground of a happy and independent celibacy that a woman can really make a free choice in marriage” (63).

35 As Susan Hamilton notes, Cobbe’s article was published in the mainstream publication Fraser’s Magazine, and caught the attention of Barbara Leigh Smith and the ladies of Langham Place (“Making History with Frances Power Cobbe 447). Contrary to much feminist criticism that focuses primarily on the importance of the specialized feminist press, Hamilton’s extensive work on Frances Power Cobbe focuses on how this writer transmits feminism beyond the feminist community into the wider audiences of mainstream newspapers and periodicals, presenting different issues connected to the Woman Question—marriage, divorce, redundancy, spousal abuse, among others—from a feminist approach. In the introduction to her edited anthology ‘Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors,’ Hamilton argues that Victorian mainstream writing by a woman, no matter if she was a feminist or anti-feminist, “tells us something about the state of Victorian feminism, its growing status, its emerging political and cultural authority, through its ability to command a stake in public debates on women’s issues, whether as active commentator or as object of commentary” (xii). Dinah Mulock Craik, while not writing as often for the mainstream press as Cobbe and some of the other women that Hamilton cites, published the self-help tract A Woman’s Thoughts About Women first as a series of articles in the mainstream publication Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal, as well as other pieces of short fiction in this periodical and Sharpe’s London Magazine. Craik’s widespread publication of articles and fiction meant that she too disseminated her own feminist perspective on the Woman Question beyond the specialized feminist press.
As a single woman into her late thirties, Dinah Mulock Craik was particularly invested in the topic of female redundancy. She supported herself, her mother, and siblings for many years after her father, a Baptist minister, deserted the family. Craik penned her own self-help tract, *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (1857), which urges readers to take a pragmatic view of the disproportionate number of single women in England, since “. . . one-half of our women are *obliged* to take care of themselves—obliged to look solely to themselves for maintenance, position, occupation, amusement, reputation, life” (29). This work focuses on professions for middle-class women, in addition to the plight of domestic servants and prostitutes.

While such notions of self-help for single, middle-class women frequently appear in Craik’s non-fiction and fiction, Craik’s incorporation of self-help ideals has typically been discussed in relation to her most popular novel, *John Halifax, Gentleman*. Elaine Showalter and Sally Mitchell argue that its disabled male narrator Phineas Fletcher resembles the single woman in many of Craik’s other texts. Both long after the leadership and individualism exhibited by the male protagonist (18; 47 *Dinah Mulock Craik*). In *Olive*, Craik combines both characters in its heroine and fashions a model of self-help for women. Similar to Smiles’s critique of the debilitating nature of gender socialization, Craik creates a deformed heroine that emphasizes women’s disempowerment based on their shared objectification and gender discrimination. She adds another dimension, however, by suggesting that the white, middle-class woman, as epitomized by Olive, can triumph over prejudice against women.

Like other women’s self-help texts of the day, the novel criticizes cultural standards of womanly beauty, and promotes the importance of female self-dependence,
not only in terms of paid work, but also in the sense of occupying one’s time with moral and intellectual pursuits. It also promotes marriages of love as the best outcome for single women, and emphasizes women’s cultural rather than natural role as mother, extending the potential for maternal nurturing and morally instructive roles to all women. The concept “cultural maternalism,” as I will term it here, draws on Martha Vicinus’s important study *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920*. According to Vicinus, reformers who pushed for increased autonomy and working opportunities for single women often emphasized female workers’ abilities to mother the needy, the friendless, and weak (38). Adopting status quo concepts associated with the traditional family, such as the view that middle-class women ought to be caring and moral mothers, “gave single women permission to behave independently” (43). The model of female excellence endorsed by mid-Victorian feminists, as Vicinus suggests, combined traditional ideas about women’s morality and nurturance with assertions of their independence and personal strength (89). As I will show throughout this chapter, Craik extends the potential for maternal nurturing and morally instructive roles to all women. Rather than accentuating anxieties surrounding women’s maternity, the propagation of undesirable traits, or women’s sexual deviance, as was common in novels featuring disabled female characters,36 Craik challenges the supposedly natural and innate role of mothering and indicates all women should aspire towards a culturally maternal role.

*Olive: A Young Girl’s Triumph Over Prejudice*

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36 See in particular Holmes and Lacom for discussions of the preoccupation with female maternity and heredity in novels that incorporate disabled characters.
Following *Olive*’s release in 1850, the reviews reflected cultural anxieties surrounding female artistic production, a central concern of Craik’s novel, as Olive’s disability challenges the otherness ascribed to the female worker, particularly the female artist. A reviewer in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* failed to notice the novel’s political overtones, referring to Craik’s work simply as “the story of a Model Woman, not owing her power to superficial or sensuous attractions, but to the high, holy, and yet simple character of her mind and affections” (“A Novel of the Season” 4). In the *North British Review*, R. H. Hutton similarly praised Craik’s novel for its attentions to everyday life and its moral message. However, Hutton also judged the novel harshly for its various interrelating stories and its weak character portrayals of men. In reference to *Olive* and *John Halifax, Gentleman*, he writes that the “defect” appears in their multiple plot threads, which might be acceptable in the context of biography because “in real life, and by one greater than any artist, they were so threaded together. But there is no such excuse for a fictitious biography that does not form an artistic whole” (472). Hutton finds the female voice particularly unnerving for the way it weaves together the respective plot strands and depicts a singular life, a role which he maintains God does the best and, next to God, the male author. He implies that women artists may be adept at the details of their “natural” domestic sphere, but they must be “defective” and “artificial” when it comes to science and realism, which are masculine domains (477).37

37 Some nineteenth-century reviewers of women’s fiction, such as Henry Lewes and George Eliot, praised serious women writers, as Hutton does the realist author Jane Austen. However, like Hutton, they associated the artificiality of plot, characters, and form with the efforts of inferior female novelists. The twentieth-century critic Russell Perkin suggests that Dinah Mulock Craik would have fallen under George Eliot’s category of “lady novelist” in her review “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (26). He argues that such derogatory designations edged a woman writer like Craik out of the field and hindered her from achieving recognition as a serious writer (24). Various twentieth- and twenty-first critics, such as Langbauer, Pykett, and Tompkins, examine how realism has traditionally been viewed as a male artistic
Ironically, Hutton’s language points to the cultural association between female artistic production and deformity, a relationship that Craik attempts to highlight and refute in *Olive*. He also compares her novel to a biography, a form that Craik distrusted for the manner in which it sensationalized and misrepresented the lives of female artists. In the article “Literary Ghouls,” Craik assumes the persona of an artist ghoul, who has spoken to the ghost of Charlotte Brontë about Elizabeth Gaskell’s biographical account of her life. She expresses a degree of enthusiasm for biographies because of their ability to represent “Everything that is great and noble, virtuous and heroic in any author’s life . . . for the comfort, instruction, and example of later generations” (“Literary Ghouls” 115). However, she also expresses anxiety about the form, and suggests that “there probably was not ever a true biography written of a woman, for the intricacies of female nature are incomprehensible except to a woman; and any biographer of real womanly feeling, if even she found them out, would never dream of publishing them” (116). Craik concludes that women like Brontë, who were private about their artistic lives and who suffered many familial problems, should not be written about, for their lives “can administer no possible lesson except of tacit, hopeless endurance” (117).

Alison Booth observes that self-help texts for women often incorporated collective biographies of living and dead women and offered more possibilities for women than novelistic conventions, since they were informed by the more diverse circumstances of social reality (*How to Make It as a Woman* 61). The line between romance and realism was often blurred in such works and the moral tone, ambiguous (72). As Booth notes, “Even British predecessors in moral writing, education, and reform
could be controversial as models” (72). Booth’s observations are astute, for even Clara Lucas Balfour’s *Working Women of the Last Half-Century* (1854), which portrays the philanthropic efforts of Christian British women, often gestures towards less straightforwardly moral qualities, as Balfour refers to Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s reckless spirit (158) and her controversial writing as “debatable ground for careful analysis of character” (140). Although Craik’s criticism of biography is not overt in *Olive*, as it is in “Literary Ghouls,” the novel implies that the female characters whose life stories are molded by others end up unhappy, while Olive’s self-help is integral to her contentment and success. Craik’s investment in the agency of her female characters also gestures towards her role as an author. For Craik, the fictional story of a female artist’s life denotes a powerful form for fashioning an ideal political and moral model for women.

Craik’s text implies the shared objectification of all women and encourages women to become active, creative, and moral agents, but ultimately privileges the white, middle-class woman as an individual by relegating dependent middle-class women, like Olive’s mother, and women of other racial, class, and sexual designations to positions of ‘otherness.’ Cora Kaplan notes that in early feminist texts the difference between disparate women is at least as important as the difference between men and women: “If texts by women reveal a ‘hidden’ sympathy between women, as radical feminist critics often assert, they equally express positive femininity through hostile and denigrating representations of women” (“Pandora’s Box” 167). Characterization in *Olive* arguably functions in the manner that Kaplan attributes to other early feminist texts, as speaking

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38 Amigoni similarly notes that nineteenth-century writers often incorporated elements of romance as well as realism in biographies, even in works that were explicitly moral or evangelical in tone (20).
“from the position of a class-specific femininity,” a subjective role that takes the reader on a tour “of a waxworks of other subjects-in-process—the characters of the text” (162).39 This inscription of early feminist middle-class individualism is deeply unstable, for as Kaplan contends, the formulation of feminist individualism in early feminist novels relies upon the subordination of other sexual, class, and racial subjectivities (168).40

Craik posits Olive as a female individual particularly in relationship to three other female characters: Elspie, Olive’s Scottish working-class nurse, who rears the young heroine; Sybilla, Olive’s own mother, who epitomizes middle-class standards of womanly beauty; and Christal, a mixed-race fallen woman, who eventually cares for orphans at a nunnery. The heroine’s status as a female subject hinges on a tension between difference and normativity that exists in her relationships with other women. Her defectiveness allows her to achieve artistic agency and to care for others in need, while the other women, who subscribe to cultural norms of feminine beauty and conduct, appear undeveloped and dependent. Even though all of these female characters progress towards culturally maternal roles, their apparent unity as maternal women actually

39 See also Fraiman’s Unbecoming Woman, for an interpretation of female characterization in the context of the female bildungsroman. Fraiman identifies the “blurring or decentering of the major narrative by alternative stories of female destiny” (10) as characteristic of the Victorian female bildungsroman. My analysis, by contrast, views Craik’s incorporation of various women’s stories as the means through which Craik attempts to consolidate Olive’s status as a white middle-class female role model.

40 As Sharpe notes, being a mid-Victorian female individual was a contradiction of terms insofar as women could not vote and were often economically dependent (46). She argues that Jane Eyre “clears a space for a new female subjectivity, the domestic individual, but it does so by grounding ‘woman’s mission’ in the moral and racial superiority of the colonist as civilizer” (28). The paradox of being a domestic individual is resolved by defining the English woman in relation to women of different racial and national designations instead of to men (46). According to Spivak, white feminist texts were concerned with making human beings in two senses, as individuals and as individualists. The first sense, she describes as “domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as ‘companionate love’” the second as “the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social-mission (176-77). Craik’s formulation of early feminist individualism is not invested in women’s sexual reproduction but in women’s ability to fulfill a cultural mothering role, a position epitomized by the white middle-class woman in relation to class, racial, and sexually deviant others. Kaplan’s focus on how early feminist texts fashion feminist individualism through differences among women in terms of class, and sexual behavior, as well as race, is more pertinent to my interpretation of Craik’s text.
obscures the ways in which femininity intersects with notions of sexual behavior, class, and racial difference. Olive’s status as a white British female subject actually reproduces various divisions among women in terms of class, race, and sexuality. The heroine’s final step towards becoming a stepmother to Ailie Gwynne, a white British middle-class and sexually pure girl, reinforces that the values of feminist individualism can only be passed on to subsequent generations of females of the same racial, class, and sexual status.

This gesturing toward a shared identification among women, but also the exclusion of female “others” from the values of early feminist individualism, is established at the beginning of the text, just before the doctor informs Sybilla of Olive’s defect. The working-class nurse Elspie assumes an instructive role as storyteller when Sybilla asks Elspie to tell her the “histories” of “the remarkable women in the Rothesay family” (11), so that she might “find one to be a namesake for my baby” (11). Elspie lacks the capacity to fulfill this role, however, for she appears less invested in the morality of these so-called histories than in feeling “pleased and important” in telling them, and in distracting her mistress from discovering her baby’s defect (11). Many of Elspie’s anecdotes are romantic and tragic stories of women whose beauty became their undoing, such as the story of Lady Isobel who was cursed to die young and unmarried, as a result of lowering her lover from her window with her golden hair, which led to him being killed by her father (11). Lady Isobel’s so-called history resembles accounts of famous women in collective biographies on beauty and heroism penned during the 1850s. One notable writer of such works was the renowned Shakespearean critic, Mary Cowden Clarke, whose collective biography *World-Noted Women*, as Richard Altick notes, is a book that would have been found in many parlours of middle-class homes in the mid-
nineteenth century (150-1). Clarke’s account of the beautiful and intellectually gifted twelfth-century French Abbess, Heloise, contains the fairy-tale elements of Lady Isobel’s story—an exquisite, young woman, a male suitor, and a threatened and punitive male guardian figure. Heloise’s uncle castrated her male tutor, Abelard, after learning that Heloise was pregnant with Abelard’s child and that the young man would not marry her. Clarke presents Heloise’s story as a “tragical history” (129) of female endurance and devotion, given that this woman was forced to bear years of solitude in a nunnery. Like Clarke, Craik aims to impart a warning about the sexually and morally damaging consequences of female beauty; however, Craik implies a degree of skepticism towards forms of life story, in this case the histories recounted by the working-class nurse. The questionable nature of the histories that Elspie recounts is emphasized by the fact that Sybilla, too, fails at the task of interpreting nurse’s stories. Instead of receiving Elspie’s accounts as cautionary moral tales, Sybilla holds firmly to standards of womanly beauty, professing “My child shall be both beautiful and beloved” (11).

Craik allots a degree of agency to the working-class nurse, as Elspie understands the damaging impacts of standards of beauty. When the doctor arrives at the end of the scene to inform Sybilla of her baby’s deformity, the nurse urges the doctor to be forthright with his news: “Ye’re just a fule, man!—ye’ll kill her. Say your say at once!” (13). However, Elspie lacks the power to resist the doctor’s scientific gaze, a form of the patriarchal objectification of women’s bodies that, as Ann B. Shteir and Bernard Lightman argue, is closely aligned with the aestheticizing erotic gaze (35). Historically, the objectification of women’s bodies by the male gaze has been a dominant feature of visual culture, science, and social systems that have defined women’s bodies in terms of
normative and aberrant femininity (Shteir and Lightman xviii; 367). Although Elspie acts as a physical support to the poor mother as Sybilla faints into her arms, she fails to provide her mistress with the emotional and intellectual strength to receive the doctor’s news that Olive is deformed. The spurned and neglected child becomes the focus of Elspie’s sympathy, as is apparent when Captain Rothesay arrives home from Jamaica to meet his daughter and learns that Sybilla has kept Olive’s deformity a secret. As Elspie leads Olive into the study to meet her father, the little girl appears “less like a child than a woman dwarfed into childhood” (23). Noting Olive’s deformity, Angus looks at his daughter “with a gaze of frenzied unbelief” and puts “his hand before his eyes, as if to shut out the sight” (23-4). Even though Elspie whisks the little girl away from her father’s gaze and her mother’s shame, the nurse is unable to prevent Olive from being wounded by her father’s reaction: “Olive saw the gesture. Young as she was, it went deep to her child’s soul. Elspie saw it too, and without bestowing a second glance on her master or his wife, she snatched up the child and hurried from the room” (24).41 In this passage, the patriarchal gaze directed at the female body appears psychologically damaging, but this feature of women’s oppression unites females of different class positions.

Such a passage also points to the inextricability of nineteenth-century representations of physical disability from notions of femininity. As critics examining disability in the Victorian context have noted, tropes of disability were implicated in the two-sex model that entered into scientific, political, and cultural discourses in the late

41 Such a parent-child relationship similarly develops in Jane Eyre between Jane and the servant Bessie in the hostile home of the Reeds. As Michie notes in The Flesh Made Word, the kinship between the working-class woman and Jane is never completely dissolved given the double-bind placed on Jane due to her working, middle-class woman’s body which associates her simultaneously with middle-class womanliness and with the working-class woman (47). Given Olive’s eventual role as a single, female artist, she is similarly tied to the middle-class and the working-class woman. However, Elspie’s shortcomings as a working-class motherly figure actually contribute to stabilizing Olive’s position as a role model to other middle-class women.
eighteenth century, wherein men and women were perceived to be different and incommensurable sexes (Lacom “It is More than Lame”, 192; Losano 180). According to Thomas Laqueur, this male, middle-class ideological model also retained earlier notions of women’s inferiority, for example Aristotle’s contention that the female body was deformed (Making Sex 151). Cultural shifts during the industrial revolution, including changes from an agrarian economy to mechanization, the dissolution of aristocratic power, and agitation by men and women of the working and middle classes for autonomy, led to the emergence of this two-sex model that was meant to shore up the norm of middle-class male subject (152). The production of knowledge exploded during this period into many institutionalized fields and discourses that obsessively categorized and debated the economic and social positions of all people in relation to this paradigm. The so-called incommensurability of the sexes aligned femininity with defectiveness, dependence, and the private domestic sphere, while masculinity was aligned with strength, independence, and the public world of work.

Martha Stoddard Holmes similarly argues that the differences between abled and disabled bodies in Victorian culture were often construed in relation to ideas about what “naturally” characterized each gender (94). Disabled female characters often appear as prepubescent children or as signs of disease and sexuality, “especially in light of the powerful and dangerous primacy of the mother’s body in Victorian theories of impairment and its genesis” (Holmes 69). Lacom also notes that disabled characters were often emblematic of cultural fears surrounding motherhood and heredity, appearing as ciphers of sexual deviance, such as Madeline Neroni in Barchester Towers, or of female passionlessness, such as Maria in Harriet Martineau’s Deerbrook (“It is More than
Lame”” 191). Craik’s depiction of Olive does not capitulate to other nineteenth-century representations of disabled female characters as signs of sexual deviance, female sexlessness, or childhood necessity. The novel resists highlighting Victorian anxieties surrounding disabled mothers and heredity, but rather emphasizes cultural mothering as a value that should be embraced by all women. However, while cultural maternalism appears to unite women of different classes, the working-class woman is ultimately unsuccessful in this role. Elspie is unable to influence Olive’s parents to love the little girl, and even feels jealous that they may co-opt her role. In spite of her generally positive portrayal of Elspie, Craik suggests that the “poor simple Scotswoman” (7) is guided by superstitious belief and by her “selfish love” to remain the child’s sole parent (27).

At this early juncture in the novel, the power of female agency and the ability to guide and influence others is accorded not to Elspie but to Olive, who is described as angelic, persevering, and nurturing. She appears to Sybilla in a dream as an angel holding a green olive branch, and leads her over rough terrain until they reach a beautiful valley. The child assures her mother, “You are quite safe now” (12). Such a passage implies Craik’s reworking of the ideal of the domestic angel. This largely middle-class Victorian notion supported the image of the dependent middle-class wife in the domestic sphere as a spiritual refuge for her husband from the public and potentially morally corruptive world of work. As Linda Colley suggests, there was contrary evidence to this domestic ideal in Victorian culture, since the “boundaries supposedly separating men and women were, in fact, unstable and becoming more so” (250). Craik’s representation of Olive as an angel guiding her mother through the wilderness implies this blurring of boundaries.

42 See also Thomson’s Extraordinary Bodies, a text focusing on representations of disability in American sentimental fiction and other cultural forms, for an analysis of the relationship between representations of disability and femininity.
between the domestic and the public, as the author replaces the ideal of the white middle-class angel in the house with the image of the single middle-class female individualist who leads herself and other women into the world.

Elspie’s death during Olive’s childhood makes room for the middle-class Angus and Sybilla Rothesay to assume parental roles, particularly Sybilla Rothesay, who learns how to love her daughter in spite of her disability and to become a better mother, thus entering a process of development towards a cultural maternal role. Sybilla’s womanly “dependence” and her role as “sweet plaything” (32), and Angus’s “dignified, cold” manly looks and personality (20) initially lead the characters into a loveless marriage and prevent them from loving Olive (47). Compared to her beautiful and frivolous mother, Olive appears a “thoughtful girl,” and Angus Rothesay claims that he can talk to her “as to a sensible woman” (52). He reserves important matters of discussion for his daughter, such as when he speaks of Olive’s financial assets to attract a husband, to which a young and embarrassed Olive responds, “I shall not marry, papa.” (53). Rather than reassure his daughter of the contrary, Angus looks at Olive “earnestly, mournfully” and says, “I had forgotten . . . Of course she will never marry. Poor child—poor child!” (53). Olive associates Angus’s look with his recoiling gaze when she was a little girl, noting that “in the look was something which struck on Olive’s memory as though she had seen it before” (65). Craik ultimately links these scenes with Angus’s wild look during a drunken escapade in which he is preoccupied with Olive’s destiny in terms of marriage. During this incident, Angus initially boasts that Olive will be a rich heiress and will marry, dismissing beauties as “fools and worse” (74). However, when Olive reprimands her father for his drunkenness and neglect of his family, he rashly turns on Olive,
castigating her for being deformed and rejecting her role as his daughter: “My daughter! How dare you call yourself so, you white-faced, mean-looking hunchback” (76). This textual moment calls attention to the impaired judgment and degrading efforts of men to fixate and control women like objects, whether or not they are beautiful. When women resist men through language, men debase women’s bodies and abilities, asserting that they are inferior to men. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write, historically female agency has been disfigured in this manner, as men have claimed that “all women were inexorably and inescapably monstrous, in the flesh as well as in the spirit” (606). Even though Angus claims to be able to speak to Olive as a sensible woman, once Olive voices her displeasure with her father’s actions, Angus dismisses her as his daughter and berates her physical appearance.

Craik makes visible the disfigurement that was regularly attributed to women’s bodies and to any woman who deviated from a position of dependency (Losano 183). As well as underscoring how women are disfigured by men, Olive’s deformity also highlights and undermines the cultural expectation that women be beautiful objects to be desired and adored by men. As Kathy Psomiades observes, Victorian notions of femininity and artistic depictions of beautiful women bore a complex relationship in bourgeois culture. The tendency of the male gaze to conflate the beautiful feminine figures depicted in aestheticist paintings with real women was paralleled “by the tendency of ‘Aesthetic’ women to dress and behave as if they were images” (133). Olive’s father Angus Rothesay exemplifies this male propensity to view women as ornamental objects, while Olive’s mother Sybilla Rothesay resembles the aesthetic ideal of womanhood that “Any poet, painter, or sculptor, would certainly have raved about” (7)
and that “all the men, in every age, have run mad for the same” (8). Craik criticizes the aestheticizing patriarchal gaze that induces Olive’s mother to become an ornamental object, “A sweet plaything . . . a thing sighed for, snatched, caressed, wearied of, neglected, scorned!” (32), and that influences Olive’s father to look upon his daughter as a “mean-looking hunchback” (76). Olive’s defect functions as a trope; as a figure of speech, a trope twists the idea which comes directly to mind when a word is used (McLaughlin 80), and often functions politically “to question values and oppose them with new systems of thought and value” (89). Her “defect” twists and stretches the meaning of the word to highlight and refute the disadvantaged position of women resulting from their shared subordination according to dominant perceptions of female disfigurement and beauty.

Like Angus Rothesay, Sybilla is similarly obsessed with attractiveness and concerned with her daughter’s marriageability; however, as an unhappy and stunningly attractive woman, she begins to identify with her deformed daughter and to learn how to become a better mother. The change in the women’s relationship occurs the night of Olive’s first ball and ‘coming out’ into society. Before Olive leaves for the ball, Sybilla drapes a fur mantle around her daughter’s shoulders, and guides Olive to the mirror to see the completion of her outfit. Sybilla notes her daughter’s defect beside her own beauty: “Still it was there. As Mrs. Rothesay looked at the swanlike curves of her own figure, and then at her daughter’s, she would almost have resigned her once-cherished, but now disregarded beauty, could she have bestowed that gift upon her beloved child” (63). The mother realizes the value of aesthetic perfection and wishes she could impart it to Olive, an act she attempts by placing the mantle on Olive’s shoulders. The fur stole is a
metaphor for the inheritance of womanly beauty, and Olive rejects it, albeit unconsciously, as useless: “Tis a pretty little mantle, but why must I wear it, mamma?—the night is not cold” (63). Reacting to her mother, we are told, “unconsciously”, since “the defect in her shape rarely crossed her mind” (63), Olive is poised for a path of self-help, as she appears uninterested in inheriting female beauty and entirely unconscious of the limitations of being a woman. Finally removing the stole from Olive’s shoulders, Sybilla says, “Dear, if you see other girls prettier, or more admired, more noticed than yourself, never mind! Olive is mamma’s pet—always” (63). The mother’s removal of the mantle metaphorically links with the realization that beauty is a superficial trapping that may have caught a husband, but it did not keep him. The scene concludes with a more removed, omniscient, authorial voice: “Oh, blessed adversity! Oh, sweetness taught by suffering! How marvelous was the change wrought in the mother’s heart!” (63).

Sybilla’s scrutiny of herself and her daughter in the mirror momentarily strips the mother of her ego; in the Lacanian sense, the ego is a function of mastery that drives one to imagine oneself as the bounded, whole, and complete other in the mirror, where there is actually a fragmented, chaotic body. As Sybilla compares her beautiful reflection to the image of her daughter’s deformed figure, she recognizes that beauty is ephemeral; she experiences a disintegration of her sense of self as she identifies with the other.43

43 See Lacan’s Écrits: A Selection. According to Lacan, the mirror stage involves a child’s identification with its own image, and occurs between six and eighteen months of age. The structures of the ego are established as the child misrecognizes a unified ideal-I where there is actually a fragmented body (2-3). The mirror stage establishes the “imaginary order,” leads to narcissistic fantasies, and continues to assert its influence on a subject even after it enters the symbolic order. The fantasy image of oneself can be filled by role models or anyone we set up as a mirror for ourselves (151). In this fascinating mirror scene in Craik’s novel, I suggest that Sybilla’s ego and narcissistic fantasies fall away, at least momentarily, as she compares her own beautiful image against Olive’s disfigurement, and realizes that beauty is ephemeral and in no way guaranteed her husband’s love or her sense of personal completion. In contrast to her mother, Olive does not appear hampered by a developed ego or narcissistic fantasies, therefore possessing a stronger sense of self.
Extending this Lacanian interpretation to a feminist framework, I would suggest Sybilla feels a proleptic sense of suffering for her daughter as a result of women’s shared positioning as the “other” within an economy of sexual difference. Within this system, a female’s value is solely determined by whether or not she is acknowledged as desirable in the eyes of men.

In spite of her development towards becoming a more empathic and caring maternal figure, Sybilla continues to interpret Olive’s lack of beauty as God’s way of punishing her, a sentiment that wounds Olive much like her father’s gaze. Olive returns from the ball feeling dejected after a group of girls referred to her as an ‘old maid’ and her best friend, a pretty and flighty girl, Sara Derewent, drew attention to Olive’s difference to other girls, stating, “It does not signify to me, or to any of those who care for you; you are such a gentle little creature, we forget it all the time. But perhaps with strangers, especially with men who think so much about beauty, this defect—” (67). These passages emphasize that Olive’s “coming out” into society, which involves being inducted into courtship and the marriage market, is her moment to be evaluated for the first time as a woman, but instead of feeling validated, she feels defective next to the other girls whose beauty is valued by potential male suitors. When she tells her mother about learning of her difference to other girls, Sybilla exclaims, “Oh, Olive! How wretched you make me, to talk thus. Unhappy mother that I am! Why should Heaven have punished me thus?” (68). Sybilla immediately regrets her words, but the damage has been done to Olive, as her statement “brought back the look once written on her childish memory—grown faint, but never quite erased—her father’s first look. She understood it now” (68). Although Sybilla loves her daughter and is saddened by her exclusion, she has
internalized the patriarchal values placed on a woman’s appearance. Her words reinforce the sense of defectiveness that Olive’s father first instilled in his daughter through his gaze.

While Sybilla exhibits kindness towards Olive, she never evolves into the self-dependent and mothering individual that Olive becomes. Upon hearing about the failure of his investments overseas, Angus becomes seriously ill and dies, and it is Olive, rather than Sybilla, who assumes responsibility for Angus’s damaged business affairs. The daughter becomes an artist to repair her father’s name and to repay his debts to a clergyman, Harold Gwynne. She appears as the provider and a motherly figure to Sybilla, who “was a woman whom no force of circumstances can ever teach self-dependence or command . . . Olive watched, guided, and guarded the passive, yielding sorrow-stricken woman, as it were, with a mother’s care” (106). Financially distressed, Olive and her mother move into the oddly laid-out, crooked Woodford Cottage, which “save this slight peculiarity” (110) was a “grand old house—just suited for a dreamer, a poet, or an artist” (110). This unusual cottage is metonymical for Olive’s curvature of the spine, her changed financial circumstances, and her status as a single, female artist living outside the usual social patterns prescribed for women. An unattractive, surly male artist named Michael Vanbrugh also lives in this house, and at first eschews Olive’s request to be his apprentice, for he believes that women cannot be artists because they do not possess genius. Olive proves him wrong, however, through her “perseverance; and by an arduous toil from which most women would have shrunk, to make herself worthy of being ranked among those painters who are not of the passing hour, but for all time” (127). The heroine experiences fulfillment on various levels through her devotion to her mother, her
intellectual life, and the sale of her works, learning that “life might pass not merely in endurance, but in peace, without either of those blessings which in her early romance she deemed the chief of all—beauty and love. She felt that worth and genius were above them both” (128).

Olive’s process of intellectual and personal development at Woodford Cottage mirrors the process of female self-development described in various self-help texts for women, for its employment of self-help values, including self-dependence, perseverance, arduous toil, and genius. Craik’s portrait of Olive resembles biographical accounts of financially distressed single middle-class women in self-help books, who develop intellectually and artistically, acting as providers and comforts to their family.

An example of a self-sufficient, unmarried woman appears in Smiles’s account of the writer Harriet Martineau, who exhibits intellectual astuteness, productivity, and moral goodness, in spite of her deafness and invalidism. He writes that Martineau, an unmarried daughter of a middle-class family of slender means, “has throughout been a mainstay of support to herself and family” (“Harriet Martineau” 500). In contrast to Martineau’s physical disabilities, Olive’s deformity does not literally present a physical difficulty for the heroine, but rather reflects the social stigma attached to female workers in Victorian society. As Losano writes, “women artists or indeed any working women—were regularly considered doubly monstrous because of their participation in the masculine realm of art” (183). The middle-class female worker occupied an uneasy position, as many Victorians viewed women’s paid labour as physically and morally corrupting, and aligned it with prostitution (Uneven Developments Poovey 129; Michie The Flesh Made Word 31). By associating Olive’s self-dependence with her artistic creativity and care for
others, Craik counteracts the aberrance ascribed to middle-class female workers. She accentuates the importance of female artistic agency to Olive’s sense of well being. Indeed, Olive’s alienation from normative values of female beauty and dependence actually allows her to become an individual. As Craik writes, “That sense of personal imperfection which she deemed excluded her from a woman’s natural destiny, gave her freedom in her own” and later, “Olive could do many things with an independence that would have been impossible to beautiful and unguarded youth” (127). This tension of difference and normalcy, which underwrites Olive’s individuality, is reinforced through Olive’s relationship with her mother. Even though Sybilla learns to become a better mother to her child, her sole value as a beautiful object leaves her blind to her worth as a woman. Ironically, becoming literally blind, Sybilla remains completely dependent on Olive, who thrives outside the normative standards of womanly beauty and conduct.

The heroine’s status as an early feminist role model is finally reinforced through her relationship to Christal Manners, who is, in the terminology of the time, an “octoroon,” meaning that she is one-eighth African in origin and seven-eighths European. Like Christal, Olive is also a mixed-race woman, but of Scottish and English Heritage. The Highland Scots and the Irish were racialized by the English, and the connection between Olive’s disability and women of mixed race has gained critical attention in recent years. Juliet Shields contends that “Olive envisions a British identity that includes Celts while marginalizing, although not entirely excluding, non-European groups” (289). In the introduction to the 1996 Oxford edition of Olive, Kaplan suggests that Craik’s text aims towards an inclusive humanism of women of other racial backgrounds but, at the same time, ensures the dominance of the middle-class woman through the expendability
of mixed-race women (“Introduction” xxiii). As Kaplan and Shields attest, “defectiveness” was historically interpreted in relation to racial as well as other forms of difference. But, Olive’s defect is almost always described in feminized terms, as it appears in marked contrast with the Scottish Rothesay line, especially the long line of beautiful Rothesay female relatives (11), and Olive’s lovely English mother. These gendered associations with Olive’s deformity also foreshadow the miscegenation that occurs between Angus Rothesay and his mixed-race West Indian mistress, Celia Manners. Their offspring, Christal Manners, while not physically deformed, appears a morally aberrant woman next to the self-dependent and nurturing Olive. Even though both the protagonist and her half sister are mixed-race and literally related by blood, the women’s distinctive feminine roles, especially Olive’s position as a guardian to her half-sister, appear more central to Craik’s focus than the women’s shared experience of racial difference.

As Antoinette Burton argues, Victorian gender ideologies structured both early feminist and imperial ideologies. Feminists emphasized British women’s moral responsibility and authority over dependent clients, whom they “identified as the poor, the downtrodden, the socially redeemable—both at home and . . . in the empire” (61). Even though the dominant English frequently did categorize other peoples in the British Isles as other races, imperial discourse and feminist discourse often resorted to terms that were inclusive of all contemporary Britons (35; 52). The impulse to fashion a white, British middle-class female who acts as savior and nurturer of imperial “others” appears a central aim of self-help works for women. For example, Balfour refers to white middle-

44 See Thomson for a discussion of how representations of disability intermingle with other constructions such as race and sexuality “to create figures of otherness from the raw materials of bodily variation” (6).
class women of English, Scottish, and Irish extractions, suggesting that their shared oppression as women makes them particularly suited “to give to the over-burdened, the desolate, and the neglected” (6). She praises the abolitionist and missionary efforts of British women like Hannah Kilham, who developed written forms of African dialects, taught English, and rescued African slave girls. She states that Kilham was particularly suited for her work with African women and girls, for “As a woman [Hannah] would deeply feel the miseries of her own sex among heathens. Woman, the suffering sex by nature, is not less so by human oppression” (370). Characteristic of other self-help works, this text promotes a socially progressive message for its day, but prioritizes the position of the oppressed white, middle-class woman as social reformer. While pushing for the increased autonomy of racial others, the text employs stereotypes of various disadvantaged groups, including imprisoned women as “scarcely human” (13) working-class people as “savages,” (65), and African women as “heathens” (370) in order to justify the white, middle-class woman’s mission.

Craik similarly fashions a British middle-class heroine whose struggles to overcome gender oppression, as emphasized by her disfigurement, fit her for the task of reaching out to female others like Christal. With the help of a cold, intellectual man, Harold Gwynne, Olive “saves” Christal and sets her on a path of development towards cultural maternalism. Yet, Christal can only ever be in a process of personal growth, for

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45 The self-help writer and early feminist Boucherett does not focus as much as Balfour does on the white woman’s mission to save racial others. However, like Balfour, she highlights the oppression of the white, middle-class woman in relation to female slaves. She aligns the pressure of young middle-class women to marry to the position of the West Indian female slave: “the parents anger me who are slavebrokers; the daughters sadden me who are made slave negresses. Ah! Is it wonderful that those in their West Indian market-place must dance, laugh, speak, and sing till some lord of a plantation take them home with him; that these, I say, should be as slavishly treated as they are bought and sold!” (54). By equating the white, middle-class woman’s position to the West Indian female slave, Boucherett overlooks the inequality of the West Indian woman by virtue of her race and gender status. She also fails to acknowledge Britain’s role in the oppressive systems of slavery and imperialism abroad.
Craik characterizes her as a sexual and racial “other” which, in turn, reinforces Olive’s creative agency and maternalism as a white, middle-class female individual.

Olive first meets Christal Manners when she and Vanbrugh’s sister, Meliora, pay a charitable visit to one of his models, Celia Manners, a beautiful “quadroon” woman, who lives in poverty and is dying “of that anomalous disease called decline, in which the mind is the chief agent of the body’s decay” (130). Christal, the supposed niece of Celia Manners, resembles Celia with her “fierce black eyes—the very image of a half-tamed gipsy” (131), and informs the women that her parents, a rich lady and noble gentleman, “drowned together in the deep sea, years ago” (130). Craik’s deployment of images of wildness to describe Celia and Christal relegate these characters to inferior, racialized positions. Craik attempts to evoke sympathy for Celia’s objectified position, as Celia informs Olive and Meliora that women of mixed-race ancestry are “too pure for slavery, too tainted for freedom. Lovely, and taught all accomplishments that can ennoble beauty, brought up delicately, in wealth and luxury, they yet have no higher future than to be the white man’s passing toy—cherished, mocked, and spurned” (131). However, Craik’s focus is not on the commodification of African women’s bodies or the xenophobia surrounding miscegenation. Craik’s concern, rather, is the shared objectification of all women, for she employs practically identical terms to describe Celia’s objectified position as a racially mixed woman as she uses to describe Sybilla’s role as “a sweet plaything” (32). By equating these characters’ experience, Craik overlooks the potentially complex registers of Celia’s subject position, given the discrimination that actual Victorian mixed-race women endured on the basis of race and class as well as gender.
Years later, after studying abroad, Christal returns to London seeking a guardian, and feeling pity for the orphan, Olive invites Christal to move to the country with her and her mother. Craik notes Christal’s chief beauty—“a proud, arched, column-like neck, gliding into a well-set head, which she carries loftily” (149) and the manner in which she “amused the whole household with her vivacity” (153). Next to Christal’s haughty and fashionable ways, Olive’s pale golden curls that “veil that defect which . . . could never be entirely removed” (134) and her humble devotion “to her Art and to her mother” (184) appear spiritually superior. The material demands and loose morals of this heedless young woman stabilize Olive’s motherly role towards Christal. For example, when Olive advises Christal not to spend money frivolously on a horse, Christal loftily states, “There is a difference between an artist working for a livelihood and an independent lady” (183), to which Olive responds, “There is a difference; but, to my way of thinking, it is on the side of those gifted by Heaven, not those enriched by man” (183). Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon’s self-help tract *Women and Work* (1856) similarly justifies women’s working roles in relation to culturally maternal and moral roles by suggesting that young women should ask what they can do for others (269), and urging, “You are trying hard to make yourselves agreeable and attractive by dress and frivolity. . . Be the best that God has made you. Do not be contented to be charming and fascinating; be noble, be useful, be wise” (269). In the context of the female bildungsroman, Craik is able to flesh out the womanly weaknesses and strengths that Bodichon is only able to describe in her tract; Craik assigns sexually corrupt qualities to Christal in order to emphasize Olive as a culturally moral role model. Christal is not independent in terms of wealth or making sensible decisions, for she lives to be attractive to others, especially to a male tutor, Lyle
Derewent, and for the sole interest of obtaining a home and position (286). Olive’s creative and nurturing roles as an artist and guardian, by contrast, appear sanctioned by God, as does her own path towards romantic fulfillment, a subject that occupies the rest of the text.

Like Christal, Olive too becomes interested in a middle-class man, a cold, intellectual minister, Harold Gwynne. However, feeling “destined to pass through life alone and unloved!” (230), she does not attempt to win him through frivolous dress or charm as Christal does Lyle Derewent. Rather, Olive befriends Harold, a widower, who confides in her that he is an atheist and had never wanted to enter the clergy. He admits that he had become a minister in order to support the beautiful and fickle Sara Derewent, with whom he had fallen hopelessly in love and married: “For that I became a liar in the face of Heaven, of men, and of my own soul” (198). Restoring Harold’s faith in God, Olive becomes a moral guide and motherly figure to his young daughter, Ailie. The little girl relays Harold’s reverence for Olive one morning while sitting on the heroine’s knee: “Before he rode out this morning he . . . said I must learn all you taught me, and grow up a good woman, just like you” (240). Olive’s friendship with the Gwynnes, however, is not enough to consolidate her future as a wife and stepmother. Her romantic fulfillment and her embodiment as a maternal role model depend on the denigration of the fashionable “manners” and sexual morality of Christal Manners. Moreover, her future as a married woman and stepmother hinges on the relegation of Christal’s status to that of a racialized and fallen woman.

Upon discovering a letter penned years before by her father, Angus Rothesay, which she was instructed to open when she was “quite alone in the world” (270), Olive
learns that Christal’s so-called aunt was her father’s mistress, and that Christal Manners is her half-sister. Soon after learning this news, Olive receives an unexpected marriage proposal from Lyle Derewent, and Christal jealously confronts Olive, who notes “She looked, from head to foot, her mother’s child. Hate and love, melting and mingling together, flashed from her black, southern eyes” (285). Olive also recognizes in Christal’s eyes the look of their own father, as Olive had seen “the night he had called her by that opprobrious word which had planted the sense of personal humiliation in her heart for life” (284). During this confrontation, Olive is reminded of Celia’s agonizing passion as an objectified woman and Angus’s wounding objectification of Olive. As she thinks about the false story that Celia passed on to Christal of her birth, “rather than let the brand of illegitimate birth rest upon the poor innocent” (275), Olive realizes that Christal and her mother have also been morally wronged by Angus. Shuddering to think about the damage the truth may inflict on Christal, “Olive forgot everything in pity for the hapless girl—everything, save an awestruck sense of the crime which, as its necessary consequence, entailed such misery from generation to generation” (276). The fact that Olive meditates on how Celia had “impressed on her daughter’s mind a feigned story” (275) and the potential detrimental effects of the “true story” implies Craik’s anxieties surrounding the representation and interpretation of women’s lives. However, it also signals Craik’s own manipulation of artistic agency in the service of Olive’s obtaining all the advantages of white, middle-class female individualism, including romantic love.

As Cora Kaplan notes, “the eruption of Christal’s rage seems to be the narrative trigger that releases Olive from her ‘curse’ into Harold’s love” (Olive; Introduction xxiii). Kaplan points out that Olive’s survival, as with Jane Eyre’s, is dependent upon the mixed
race figure’s rage, which legitimizes Olive’s role as progenitor of her class and race (“Introduction” xxiii). Christal discovers Angus’s letter and attacks Olive, almost killing her, resembling Charlotte Brontë’s racially and sexually threatening Creole character Bertha Mason. Influenced by his growing love for Olive, Harold agrees to join with her in the fight to save Christal, acknowledging “I will silently guard Christal as if I had been her own brother—and yours” (295).

As Antonia Losano notes, Olive’s relationship to Harold is not really a sibling bond, but an economic and social tie that places her in a more autonomous position than was culturally experienced by most Victorian middle-class women in relation to middle-class men (195). Initially, Olive sells her art in order to repay a family debt owed to Harold, and after becoming friends with the Gwynnes, she insists that her Aunt Flora give Harold her inheritance since the Gwynne family has more need of the money than Olive. Olive’s rejection of her own inheritance is another way that Craik resists notions of filial inheritance and asserts her heroine’s capacity towards self-reliance and altruism. The heroine’s virtues are rewarded tenfold as she enters into a marriage of love with Harold and her money, willed to Harold Gwynne, comes into her possession: at the same time, Olive achieves independent property, for Aunt Flora leaves her niece her estate. The couple’s emotionally and financially gratifying partnership is further emphasized through their shared concern for Christal, whom they infantilize and save, thus solidifying their status as middle-class male and female liberal individuals.

Craik does not kill off her fallen woman. Rather, as did other early feminist writers of self-help, she presents Christal’s social fallenness as a pressing matter of

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46 Fallen women characters often die in the context of Victorian domestic fiction. This narrative strategy does not always support the moral punishment of sexually corrupt women, but rather sometimes serves as a
female redundancy, and proposes mutual sisterhood ties as a remedy for the divisions among women. These ties become predicated on a culturally maternal role that subdues the racialized and sexualized female “other.” Christal enters a nunnery in order to alienate herself from her family and the outside world, eventually caring for orphan girls, a role that helps her move toward a British middle-class female model of subjectivity. However, Christal cannot fully obtain this subject position; added to her list flaws is her Roman Catholicism, another form of difference that sets her apart from the heroine. Craik holds out the hope for Christal’s conversion, as she suggests that the young woman may yet enjoy a more fulfilling life outside of the convent’s walls, “not in barren solitude, but in the fruitful garden of God’s world” (329), yet Christal remains only ever in a process of personal and spiritual change. Economic, social, and romantic fulfillment rests solely with Olive and future generations of young, white middle-class Protestant women like Harold’s daughter, Ailie Gwynne.

Martha Stoddard Holmes argues that Craik’s assigning of artistic, marital, and mothering roles to her disabled woman character mirrors Ermine Williams’s position in Charlotte Yonge’s *The Clever Woman of the Family*. However, Ermine’s story is a political comment on the oppressive cultural expectations placed on women in Victorian society. The death of Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* is such an example. In other circumstances, the portrayal of a fallen woman’s demise appears sympathetic to women’s cultural oppression, but ultimately functions to support men’s fatherly influence and control over women. In *Bleak House*, a male guardian Mr. Jarndyce shapes the destiny of the heroine, Esther, an illegitimate daughter whose ineffectual mother, Lady Dedlock, suffers a pathetic end. Craik’s depiction of Christal as morally and physically degraded and in need of moral guidance resembles mid-Victorian feminist views of prostitutes in Victorian society. As Caine and Walkowitz suggest in their respective analyses of prostitution and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Victorian feminist activists like Josephine Butler depicted prostitutes as helpless women who were more sinned against than sinning, and in need of the help of middle-class women.

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47 Craik and other writers of self-help works for women represent fallen women as sisters in need of help and moral reform. Craik’s novel *A Life for a Life* and self-help tract *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women* offer this thesis, as do Balfour and Boucherett. This formulation of sisterhood often oscillates with more overtly hierarchical designations of the white middle-class woman, as cultural mother, and the fallen woman, as the wayward woman in need of guidance, especially in Craik.
relegated to a subplot, and her success in artistic and domestic roles exposes the follies and disastrous philanthropic self-help efforts of the protagonist Rachel. Ermine, as a capable, self-sufficient, earning woman, appears the extraordinary exception to the rule, while the average but aspiring woman, as represented by Rachel, is finally content to be a wife, rather than bent on improving herself and others. In contrast to Yonge, Craik aims to make the white middle-class female, who rises above her objectification and othering by patriarchal society, become the rule. When Harold declares that Olive is “beautiful in heart and mind, in form and soul” (319), the stigmatizing labels associated with her womanhood and her status as a single middle-class woman worker almost vanish, but never entirely, which implies the tension of difference and normalcy that undergirds Olive’s individuality. As she embraces her role as a wife and resolves to be “a faithful and most loving mother” (326) to Harold’s child, Olive appears as the quintessential role model who passes on values of early feminist individualism to the next generation of British middle-class women. This resolution agitates against the perceptions of natural inheritance bound up in the relationship between female heredity and disability in Victorian culture, as well as in the relationship between bloodlines and power. Rather, Craik fashions an ideal of cultural inheritance based on mutual understanding and love, but one that still limits this form of inheritance between members of the middle class.

Conclusion

Craik’s Olive imagines economic, social, and romantic fulfillment for the single woman at a time when Victorians debated solutions to female redundancy. The heroine’s disability functions as a trope that underscores and challenges the disadvantaged position of women by virtue of their shared objectification. Living at the margins of normative
standards of womanly beauty and conduct as a single, deformed, middle-class artist, Olive ends up the most capable and content, while the other female characters, who strive after beauty and dependence, appear more disabled than Olive. Artistic representation and cultural maternalism are crucial to Olive’s self-dependence, for she creates her own destiny and shapes the lives of others by being an artistic and nurturing woman. The other female characters, by contrast, lack agency and live by other people’s versions of their life stories which, I would suggest, must be interpreted in connection to Craik’s distrust of biography and Victorian perceptions of inheritance. Even though Craik’s female characters appear bonded through a cultural maternal ideal, their status as mothers relegates all other forms of female sexuality and subjectivity to positions of otherness and solidifies the white, middle-class woman as the feminist individualist who only passes on the benefits of independence and altruism to other white middle-class women.

While countering biography as an appropriate form of self-help for women, Craik’s novel reflects the values of various tracts and periodical writing that espoused self-help for women. Yet, in the format of the novel Craik was able to more fully flesh out appropriate and inappropriate forms of femininity through her characterizations and create an ideal role model for other women to follow. The cultural dialogue between self-help periodical writings and novels was shaped by and, importantly, shaped ideological notions of how women should be and function in the world, and contributed to the increasing social and economic autonomy of women. In Victorian culture, poor, middle-class women who could not rely on the financial security of marriage or family had to be able to help themselves, or turn themselves over to the protection of the Poor Law, which mandated that those who could not support themselves commit themselves to the prison-
like workhouse (Lacom, “The Time is Sick and Out of Joint” 547). These women suffered a double-bind in that they were expected to be self-supporting, but were also required to keep their labour out of public view. They occupied a liminal class-gender position in which they were associated with middle-class notions of womanliness, but also with images of the working-class woman’s body as public, sexual, and aberrant. In its deployment of the trope of disability, along with discourses of self-help, Craik’s bildungsroman resists cultural perceptions of middle-class women’s dependence and the defectiveness ascribed to the female worker. The novel ultimately replaces one set of normative feminine roles with another standard of white, middle-class feminist individualism that is more unconventional and inclusive than dominant notions of femininity, but that nonetheless still demands a degree of conformity.

*Olive* highlights the complex and contradictory inscriptions of early feminism. While pushing for more autonomy for women and challenging supposedly innate gender roles, early feminism reinforced marriage as the most viable outcome for women and the moral role of the mother as woman’s highest aim. While arguing for the unity of all women based on their shared objectification and gender subordination, it overlooked the diverse struggles of women based on distinctions of class, race, and sexual behavior, and secured the dominance of the white, middle-class female individual by reinforcing the differences among women.

Traces of these problematic inscriptions still profoundly shape cultural definitions of femininity and women’s perceptions of themselves. A plethora of popular self-help forms of the 1990s was aimed at the single, heterosexual and supposedly “postfeminist” woman who had achieved financial independence, yet who was in desperate search for a
man (Miller and McHoul 111; Schrager 178). Many multimedia forms of self-help that are popular today, including the television series and movie versions of *Sex and the City*, the “reality television” program *The Bachelor*, and books on living “purposely” as a single constitute a multi-million-dollar industry (McClanahan). Psychic unrest and women’s competition with other women feature prominently in many self-help forms that promulgate heteronormative notions of marriage. The women frequently view themselves as superior in relation to other females’ aberrant physical, sexual, and emotional behaviors. Even media forms offering alternatives to heteronormativity often present notions of femininity that reinforce hierarchies among women. As Lisa Blackman notes in her analysis of self-help and women’s magazines, the postfeminist single woman is often represented as able to stand alone, working on her self-confidence and achievements in her relationships and the workplace, “while the stories of her sisters who cannot or who are unable to achieve such success stand as cautionary tales, marked out as pathological and seen to lack the psychological and emotional capacities to effect their own self-transformation” (223). We do not live in a post-normative society any more than we live in a post-feminist society. As Cynthia D. Schrager writes, it is time to reclaim self-help literature as “an area of legitimate feminist analysis” (5). In order to push against essentialist notions of similarity and difference that still operate, we must examine the historical engagements between women’s artistic forms and self-help discourse, so that we might envision more inclusive feminist paradigms.

As I have illustrated in this chapter, women’s periodical literature and novels of the 1850s employed notions of self-help in order to both challenge and refashion existing notions of femininity and female employment but in ways that ultimately excluded
women marked by racial, class, and sexual differences. In the 1860s, the various cultural representations of self-help for single females in women’s periodical literature and tracts were accompanied by material attempts to improve the position of middle-class women, such as the Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women (SPEW) established by the famous Langham Place Group feminists. However, by 1862, SPEW and its various feminist employment initiatives had become flooded with applications for few positions, and it seemed that many poor middle-class women would have no choice but to look further afield for jobs. Langham Place Group member Maria Rye initiated the Female Middle Class Emigration Society, a philanthropic organization that helped secure paid passages for single middle-class women who were willing to work as governesses or as a higher class of domestic servants in the New World. As an organization that met with tremendous controversy within Britain and the colonies, the FMCES needed to argue on behalf of single middle-class women’s competence as workers as well as manage national fears of the colonial social conditions that threatened the sexual and racial purity as well as the class identity of these women. As a form that was popular in the feminist press and in masculine emigration literature, self-help discourse was again pressed into service, but this time in quite different rhetorical ways, to which I will now turn.
Chapter 2

SELF-MADE MAIDS, HARDY PIONEERS,
AND THE NARRATIVE OF SELF-HELP

A shortcoming of recent scholarship on mid-Victorian British emigrant narratives is its tendency to stress that self-help notions of success were important for emigrant men and women without attending to gendered articulations of self-help. As Robert Grant observes, emigration appraisals of those who were considered “fit and unfit” for the colonies were closely entwined with Samuel Smiles’s self-help philosophy that maintained that individual happiness and well-being depended upon “diligent self-culture, self-discipline, and self-control—and, above all, on that honest and upright performance of individual duty, which is the glory of manly character” (qtd. in Grant 179: ix.). However, Grant loses his particularity of focus on self-help as a male-centred philosophy when he asserts that the doctrine’s underlying presumption of a person’s desire “to better him or herself was completely consonant with the over-riding rhetoric of mid nineteenth-century colonial promotion permeating the whole field of this literature in the projection of the laborer’s progress from tenant to smallholder to successful landowner through hard work” (179-80). He fails to acknowledge that the process of rising from tenant to landowner was typically a male prerogative, or that self-help might
have meant something quite different for emigrant women. Francine Tolron similarly addresses how emigrant narratives often constitute “yet another tale of the British march of Progress” (169) with the yeoman, John Bull, as the hero at its centre, who adopts the imperialistic impetus to subdue the wilderness and recreate an ideal England in which a man can earn gentility through hard work and uprightness of character (169-70). While she initially focuses strictly on male working-class narratives, she ultimately extends New Zealand male emigrant accounts to the “collective psyche” of all New Zealanders “whose stuff is made up of earth, so to speak, the inheritors of the old archetypal Englishman who worked on the land before the dawn of the industrial era” (173). She overlooks how domestic concerns, rather than a sole focus on settling the land, might have informed female versions of success, and perpetuates an image of a collective psyche that is impervious to female contributions to colonial history.

Another story of the economically self-sufficient and moral individual emerged for single middle-class women in 1862, when Maria S. Rye began the Female Middle Class Emigration Society (FMCES) with the support of the Langham Place Group and the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (NAPSS). The FMCES reacted to the large surplus of poor “redundant” middle-class females in Britain who were never expected to marry or become mothers. It responded to the pathetic range of employment opportunities for these women, especially after various feminist initiatives, aimed at removing the social and economic barriers for women, became inundated with applications for a relatively small number of positions.48 The organization claimed that

48 For a discussion of other mid-Victorian British feminist organizations, such as the Society for Promoting Employment for Women, the Victoria Press, and the Telegraph Agency, and how they were overwhelmed by applications for limited working roles, see Clarke. In response to the meager employment opportunities for redundant women, Rye began the FMCES in 1862 and was associated with the society for its duration,
single women had a better chance of finding remunerative employment in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, or South Africa than at home, providing they were capable and willing to take on the domestic duties often required of colonial governesses, or to work as a better class of domestic servants, referred to as “helps,” if they could not find governess positions.  

49 Insisting that single females “must decide their own fate” and be self-reliant (Times), Maria Rye offered a vision of female independence that contrasted starkly with W. R. Greg’s conservative proposal in “Why are Women Redundant?” to transport female middle-class emigrants to the colonies where they could find husbands, 50 a practice that could be compared to shipping redundant populations to other

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49 For a discussion of the necessity of FMCES emigrants to fulfill domestic roles as governesses, or as a better class of domestic servants or “helps” see “Middle-class Female Emigration Impartially Considered” (1862) in The English Woman’s Journal, and Rye’s “Female Middle Class Emigration” (1862) published in the same periodical.

50 Greg cites the emigration of males, the postponement of middle-class marriage for economic reasons, prostitution, and celibacy as contributing to the excess of single women in Britain. He launches a particularly virulent attack at female independence as a key contributor to the surplus. See Frances Power Cobbe’s “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids” (1862) that exposes the logical fallacies of Greg’s arguments regarding the “redundancy” of single women. Cobbe voraciously argues that marriage is not a woman’s natural vocation, and that it should be a matter of free choice, not necessity. In Self-Help for Young Women (1863), Langham Place feminist Jessie Boucherett rejects the conservative cultural view, as expressed by Greg, that single middle-class women are at fault for failing to marry. She suggests that the perceived redundancy of these women is a product of the “social system” (46). Boucherett also refers to the FMCES in this tract, supporting the opportunities for female self-reliance and employment abroad. Another feminist associated with the Langham Place Group, Mary Taylor, dismissed W. R. Greg’s views on female emigration in Victoria Magazine in (1870). Like Boucherett, Taylor suggests that “redundancy” is a label that has been socially ascribed, and promotes active female self-help as a remedy for women’s poor conditions: “Those only preach a true morality who urge upon her the duty of looking to herself, and herself only, for subsistence, and the perfect right she has to make her life as ‘easy, pleasant, and lucrative’ as she can” (61). While Taylor enforces the necessity of improving working opportunities in England rather than female emigration in this article, she viewed female emigration as an option for young women. She
parts of the empire.\textsuperscript{51} The FMCES also countered colonial charges that they were transporting useless, educated husband-hunters to the colonies by emphasizing that the female emigrants were women of good character who would improve the colony as workers and educators.\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, they reacted to public fears about female sexual impropriety abroad by claiming to accept only “those whose characters were unblemished” (Rye, “Another Mail from Miss Rye” 269) and to supervise the women’s safe passage and attainment of “good situations” (“The Last News of the Emigrants” 183).

While various feminist critics have recognized how Maria Rye and the FMCES manipulated ideas of self-reliance and morality in order to establish the potential usefulness of single middle-class women in the colonial setting (Kranidis; Myers; Faymonville; Henderson), they have failed to contextualize these character values in relationship to masculine notions of self-help. This interpretative strategy is important because self-help discourse, which enticed prospective working-class male emigrants and sailed to New Zealand in 1845, and established a successful women’s clothing and drapery shop, returning to England in 1859 to pursue her literary ambitions (Hammerton 84).

\textsuperscript{51} This long-established practice of transporting Britain’s superfluous subjects began in the 1760s, with the transportation of British convicts mainly to Australia, but also to South Africa and the Americas. As Grant notes, “the transportation of British convicts to New South Wales ended in 1840; Van Diemen’s Land in 1853. The practice finally ceased in 1867, when the last convicts were dispatched to Western Australia” (184). Pauper emigration began after the Napoleonic Wars and continued for the rest of the century as a result of various social and economic upheavals, such as the Irish famine, forced land evictions in the Scottish highlands, and high unemployment rates during industrialization. For nineteenth-century objections to convict and pauper emigration, see Carter’s \textit{Victoria, the British El Dorado} (1870) and Murray’s \textit{Ella Norman; Or, a Woman’s Perils} (1864). Conversely, for a more supportive view of the potential of convicts and paupers to better themselves and contribute to colonial development, see Chisholm’s \textit{Emigration and Transportation Relatively Considered} (1847) and Strickland’s \textit{Twenty-seven Years in Canada West}.

\textsuperscript{52} Both the article “Another Mail from Miss Rye,” printed in \textit{The English Woman’s Journal}, and Boucherett cite angry colonial objections to the uselessness of educated women and their husband-hunting aspirations. \textit{The Women’s Union Journal} and Boucherett dismiss these objections on the grounds that the FMCES emigrants are women of good character who will improve the uneducated colony.
was reflected in many of their letters, was a powerful rhetorical tool for the FMCES and attractive to female emigrants who also yearned after self-sufficiency and independence in a new life abroad. The FMCES texts, like their male counterparts, presented themselves as truthful accounts of success in the New World, contributing to what Jennifer Henderson describes, by way of Foucault, as the role of veridical texts in “helping constitute the ‘social’ reality that they claim to be describing through discursive renderings of the ‘truth,’” and moulding subject positions associated with these versions of the truth (Henderson 56). Henderson, much in the way that Nancy Armstrong argues for the political value of domestic fiction, proposes that the term ‘veridical discourse,’ which Foucault applied to scientific texts, be extended to “those discourses that establish their truth claims on the basis of unmediated experience, and an authority predicated upon an alleged distance from power” (15). The rhetoric of self-help, with its focus on bettering an individual’s prospects through exercising character values, is one such discourse that appeared distant from politics, but that helped emigrants establish less rigid social distinctions than in Britain and new subject positions. However, while self-help discourse may have helped women to fashion more independence and a broader range of working opportunities and social experiences, it did not advertise itself as helping women realize class mobility or a significant increase in earning potential, benefits which are clearly outlined in masculine success narratives.

Within the more fluid social constructions of the colony, unmarried female emigrants occupied a liminal position as single women, not wives, and faced continual pressure from the British and colonial publics to maintain their sexual propriety, and retain their class distinction (Myers, “Performing the Voyage Out” 130), even in the face
of being employed in working-class roles (Diamond). The discourse of self-help, then, was deeply contradictory for women, as it constituted a rhetorical means for both widening the boundaries of single middle-class women’s opportunities and moral influence, and for managing ongoing cultural anxieties surrounding their sexuality and class. This paradoxical framework finds an important cultural precedent in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, a canonical novel of Victorian feminist individualism, in which the governess heroine’s capacity for self-education, independence, and domestic happiness is consolidated through her identification with and difference from various versions of Victorian womanhood and her taming of the imperially and morally degraded Rochester. Critics such as Kaplan, Sharpe, and Michie note that Jane Eyre’s status as an independent and moral woman is consolidated through her difference from various versions of Victorian womanhood, including the well-bred woman of shallow feminine accomplishments (as represented by Blanche Ingram), the public and vulgar-minded working-class female (as represented by Grace Poole), and the racially and sexually other woman, Bertha Mason. According to these critics, Jane also identifies with, yet adopts a more assertive form of individualism in relation to various other poor, educated middle-class female characters, such as Miss Temple, Helen Burns, and the Rivers sisters. They note that Jane’s final effort at consolidating her status as a feminist individual depends on her ability to morally reform the blind and unruly Rochester, who has been physically and morally damaged through his marriage to the racially and sexually degraded Creole woman, Bertha Mason.

Unsurprisingly, these narratives draw strongly on the Victorian convention of the fallen woman, a pervasive figure in the Victorian domestic novel and other cultural forms against which versions of the middle-class domestic female became ratified. They also employ the

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54 See Michie’s *Sororophobia*, Holmes’s *Fictions of Affliction*, and Mahood’s *The Magdalenes* for a discussion of female sexual fallenness in British literature and culture. The fallen woman was an extremely contentious figure in Victorian Britain, against which conservative British writers vaunted the domestic
convention of working-class inferiority, another idea that was also evoked and debated vociferously in the Victorian domestic novel and forms of social critique, and that crucially helped define the moral mission of women to improve others.55

The interpretation of racial otherness in the context of Victorian feminist individualism has also become a crucial area of scholarship in terms of understanding Victorian women’s contributions to British imperialism and colonialism. Jane Eyre’s individualism has been famously interpreted by postcolonial feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as dependent on the exclusion of the racially other woman, and reinterpreted by Jenny Sharpe as a triangular relationship in which the grounds for the speaking subject of feminist individualism passes through a series of racially-inflected metaphors and the ultimate silencing of the Indian female other (Sharpe 54). Both Spivak and Sharpe also recognize a latent, if undeveloped, imperialistic motivation in Jane Eyre to civilize the Indian woman, as is implied through Jane’s initial acquiescence to St. John’s proposal that she accompany him to India as his wife to help Christianize and reform Indian women. Feminist interpretations of female settler and emigrant literature have similarly argued that Victorian feminists validated their bid for individualism through their moral mission within British imperialism to redeem and civilize Indian women and indigenous others (Burton; McClintock; Chilton).

ideal of the angelic, self-denying, and moral woman, or conversely, feminists confirmed the capacity for women to rise above feminine weakness and exercise self-help. Many Victorian feminists, most famously, Josephine Butler, blamed masculine immorality for prostitution, and urged both morally-minded men and women to join her crusade to help save women and girls from this industry. See Butler’s Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture and Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade.

55 See Host for a discussion of how many Victorian aristocrats and conservative parliamentarians attempted to confirm the superiority of the upper- and middle-classes through the image of the violent masses, while many Victorian liberals privileged a middle-class model of self-help as the norm towards which the working classes should aspire.
Building on Sharpe, I would suggest that the fashioning of the FMCES female colonial individual rendered both indigenous women and men silent. As Mary E. of British Columbia wrote in 1862, “I am quite surrounded by Chinese and Indians. I was a little timid of them at first, but they are very harmless, and I do not fear them now” and a little further on in the letter, “There are very few white women here, so they are treated with politeness by all” (“The Last News of the Emigrants” 185). The female emigrant’s ability to establish her authority in the colonial environment relied on her rhetorically asserting her presence as a white woman who commanded the respect of racial others. Other colonial encounters, however, surface more frequently in FMCES literature and are managed more obviously through the middle-class female’s Christian moral and civilizing role. Being in the presence of working-class men, for example, necessitated that the female emigrants be able to govern themselves and avoid sexual involvement with these men, while the employment of these women by inferior Scots and Irish employers depended on these females’ ability to mitigate class and racial threats through improving others.

I will trace the struggles of the FMCES to establish a new feminist ideal of the self-made maid, as I have termed her, for the colonies by examining Maria Rye’s and the FMCES emigrant letters, which appeared in the Langham Place’s main publishing organ, *The English Woman’s Journal*, and by contextualizing these female self-help narratives in relation to various emigration works directed predominantly at men. Additionally, I will read against the grain of the published output of the FMCES by drawing on examples of unpublished letters that are part of an extensive FMCES archive housed at the Women’s Library in London, which contains the correspondences of 113 women.
assisted through the society. These selected letters attest to various negative points of the emigrant experience—the sickness, unemployment, poverty, loneliness, hard work, and crude employers—that were touched on, in varying degrees, by most of the FMCES emigrants, and proved unmanageable for a small contingent of them. I will then examine how these difficulties culminate in the little-known novel *Ella Norman; Or, a Woman’s Perils* (1864) by Elizabeth Murray, which criticizes the FMCES for leading single women to their moral ruin in Australia, and suggests that female self-help and the domestic plot are only possible in Britain.

I argue that male emigrant texts constitute more straightforward success narratives that deal with colonial anxieties through the language of mastery and exclusion, while the FMCES texts push for female independence within the terms of female domestic employment and moral influence, particularly in relation to the Victorian novelistic and cultural conventions of the fallen woman and working-class inferiority. The paradoxical structure of female self-help narratives embodies a number of contradictions that were informed, in part, by existing British cultural conventions but also by the new material relations of colonial experience. These included the realizing of female independence in the circumscribed fields of governessing and domestic service, the exercising of middle-class respectability even in the face of adapting to working-class roles, and the imparting of benevolence, often taking the form of superiority, in relation to marginalized others—contradictions that rendered such a woman difficult to make, and often hard to find. The story of the self-made maid, I argue, is deeply unstable, for it obfuscates the ways in which the more flexible constructions of gender, class, and race in the colonial context were actually limiting and unmanageable for many single middle-class females, always
threatening to disrupt the dominance of a unified social reality and feminist individualist subject for the colonies.

“The Right Sort of Woman”: The Letters of Maria Rye and the Emigrants

The greatest challenge facing the project of female emigration, as The English Woman’s Journal and the FMCES saw it, was convincing the British and colonial publics that the colonies had not obtained the services of “the right sort of women” (“Middle-Class Female Emigration Impartially Considered” 82). This type of female was projected as a single middle-class woman between the ages of 18 and 35, who could improve herself and colonial society through her superior education and values. The FMCES raised money for the passages of educated women who were expected to repay the society within a period of two years, once they were established abroad.56 In the early 1860s, colonial papers characterized single middle-class women as unwanted goods, both as workers or as wives. From a limiting and commoditizing perspective, a writer in the Melbourne Argus claimed in 1862: “There is no article, perhaps, in the labour market of less demand than governesses.” With regard to the chances of matrimony, he continued: “What shall we do with the articles which don’t ‘move off,’ and the goods which are found unsalable?” (qtd. in “Middle-Class Female Emigration Impartially Considered” 81-2). Such condemning statements were also prevalent in the British press, such as in the article “The Export Wife-Trade,” printed in The Saturday Review, which insisted that courtship proceeds as slowly in Australia as in England, and that a middle-class female becomes even more impoverished and unmarriageable abroad “for good looks are her

56 Between 1862 and 1882, the FMCES transported a total of 302 women to the colonies, a small percentage of the thousands of women who were assisted by emigration societies (Faymonville; Myers, “Performing the Voyage Out”). As these writers suggest, the survival of the FMCES in the face of immense public criticism was a significant cultural achievement.
stock in trade. She might as well go out fishing without bait, or shooting without powder, as attempt to fascinate a squatter with a starved face and ragged clothes” (276). The rhetorical challenge taken up by the FMCES and The English Woman’s Journal constituted nothing less than transforming the “wrong sort of woman,” the unwanted and superfluous woman, into the “right sort of woman.”

The first assertion that The English Woman’s Journal made in order to convince the British public of the viability of the FMCES was that it only offered “truthful accounts” of colonial experience, maintaining “that letters describing the voyage to, or the condition of, particular colonies, are likely to be in some respects more satisfactory than information received in books” (“Stray Letters on Emigration” 109). It also represented Maria Rye as an authority on female middle-class emigration and granted her space to “tell her own story” (“The Last News of the Emigrants” 180). The editors argued that Miss Rye possessed the same spirit of self-help as Mrs. Chisholm, a pioneer of assisted female emigration in the 1830s, and exemplified the first half of the Saxon expression—“If you want a thing done, do it yourself; if you don’t—send” (“The Last News of the Emigrants” 180). Unlike Caroline Chisholm, however, Rye was concerned with helping women find employment opportunities abroad, not just with women’s civilizing potential as future wives and guardians of colonial society (Diamond 56).

The supposed authenticity of FMCES literature and Rye’s authority as an emigration assister are questionable, however, based on what is left out of her accounts of female emigration. Notions of femininity, in addition to class, shape Rye’s letters in the way they gloss over the earning potential of the female emigrants. As wage-earning was often regarded as a degrading practice for Victorian middle-class women that was aligned
with working-class women’s employment, even prostitution, it needed to be dealt with delicately.\footnote{For discussions of how middle-class women workers, in particular, governesses, were associated with working-class women and prostitutes, see Poovey’s \textit{Uneven Developments} and Michie’s \textit{The Flesh Made Word}.} Additionally, the fact that women’s employment opportunities and earning capacity abroad were still limited and undervalued had to be suppressed in order to attract the support of prospective female emigrants and sponsors. Rye’s account of landing in Otago in March, 1863, fails to indicate the ratio of successful and unsuccessful placements, or to give any sense of how colonial rates of pay for women stack up against men’s wages, merely stating that “nearly all the girls (except about fourteen) have found places—the governesses at from 60\textpounds to 40\textpounds, and the servants from 40\textpounds to 20\textpounds” (Rye, “Another Mail from Miss Rye” 263).\footnote{Another FMCES installment, titled “Emigrants Who Have Started, and the Results” (1861), provides more detailed information on the difference between wages for women abroad opposed to in England. It indicates that female emigrants could expect to earn higher wages as governesses and servants in the colonies, but still gives no sense of what these numbers mean in terms of costs of living.} The fact that Rye neglects to mention any specifics regarding the costs of transformation, clothing, or how quickly the women could be expected to pay back their loans to the FMCES is likely because the group was arriving in Dunedin, Otago, during the gold rush when prices and wages were inflated, vacillating wildly, and therefore difficult to pin down. Rye makes only passing mention to the high cost of living in her account: “Provisions are very dear here, and the people have a saying that it costs 1\textpounds if you open your mouth, and 2\textpounds to shut it!” (265).

Contrastingly, Rev. A. Styleman Herring’s letters, published on behalf of the St. Paul’s emigration society of London in 1871, offer detailed information on living and travel costs, as well as on Canadian wages for male labourers, farmers, tradesmen, female housemaids, and cooks. The discrepancy between masculine and feminine wages is
strikingly obvious, as Herring notes that the lowest category of male earners, farm
labourers, earned 60 shillings per month with board and lodging, while housemaids
earned 25 shillings per month; male labourers received 2.4 times more wages than female
domestic servants.59 The only women wanted in the colonies, Herring suggests, are those
able to do domestic chores including sewing, cooking, cleaning, poultry management,
and milking.60 This sentiment is also reflected in Septimus Scrivener’s *Hints for
Emigrants* (1893): “A single woman with a few of these qualifications will not remain
long in single blessedness, unless she so wills it; she may soon become a happy wife and
the appreciated mistress of a snug farm” (6). While not castigating women for being
single, Scrivener’s text nevertheless insists that the only type of single women that his
Self-Help society will assist are good domestic servants (*Hints for Emigrants* 7; “With
the ‘Self-Help’ Emigrants” 9).

While emigration texts aimed at men often point to the need for female domestic
workers in the colonies, they typically only attest to the economic and social mobility of
male emigrants. Many adopt the rhetoric of self-help, implying that hard work,
temperance and Christian morality lead to success in the colony, such as a letter penned
by George W. in *Canada as a Field for Emigration* (1861): “At this moment I have
increased my property, by care and industry, under the blessing of an overruling
Providence, about ninefold, as I consider it worth little less than 3000l” (Fyfe 86). Many
also refer to the act of rising above difficulties and becoming self-made men. As Evelyn

59 See also Hill’s *The Poor Man’s Emigration Guide to Canada* (1863) and the Canadian Department of
Agriculture’s *Emigration to Canada* (1860) for comparable statistics on male and female working-class
wages.

60 These female domestic requirements are also referred to in Fyfe’s *Canada as a Field for Emigration*
(28), Herring’s *Letters from Abroad with Hints to Emigrants* (33), *Canada: the Land of Hope* (12), and
Hill’s *The Poor Man’s Emigration Guide to Canada* (40).
Pitfield Stirling Sturt wrote of his experience in Mount Gambier, Australia in 1853: — “When I fixed on the site of my new homestead I had not a shilling in the world; unfortunately, the boot was very much on the other leg, but thanks to the success attending sheep-farming I have outlived my difficulties” (374). 61

Rye’s account of New Zealand contains none of the remunerative guarantees of self-help found in George W.’s or Sturt’s letters. The material and social improvements for female emigrants remain ambiguous and secondary to the dominance of a domestic plot that focuses on women’s power to overcome difficulty through self-maintenance and positively influencing others. Because Rye and the FMCES promoted employment rather than marriage as the most optimal outcome for single women, Rye’s letter lacks an overarching love story. Nevertheless, it draws on the domestic fictional conventions of the threat of sexual falling and working-class inferiority, which the middle-class heroine, Rye, helps remedy through instilling in female emigrants and working-class men moral values.

These domestic plot elements are apparent in Rye’s description of a near-mutiny on the voyage to Otago, and how, in the days after this occurrence, Rye and her female protégées studied morality, and she assumed a leadership role with the sailors as their preacher. According to Rye, a disruption during the voyage transpired when a few female emigrants lingered past curfew to converse with sailors and single men on the main deck. After the women refused the captain’s orders to return to their quarters, “the hand-cuffs

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61 For other accounts of men who rose up from modest beginnings to becoming wealthy farmers, magistrates, and government officials, see Letters from Victorian Pioneers in the 1840s. Few letters in this 400-page collection admit any sense of failure. See in particular the letters penned by Alfred Taddy Thomson (325-331), a middle-class man, who describes the miseries of squatting in the Central Plains region of Wimmeria, Victoria.
were produced, and they were marched off to solitary confinement” (“Another Mail from Miss Rye” 261). Rye, who left her cabin to see what was happening, discovered that “the birds were caught and caged by the time I got on deck” (261). No sooner had the women been caught than the men grabbed their firearms and “demanded their liberation” (261). Rye’s reference to the women as “caged birds” reflects the Victorian cultural obsession with controlling female sexuality, especially aboard an emigrant ship in which the sexes and classes mingled more freely. As Jan Gothard notes, female emigrants had the status of commodities that required protection and safe delivery to their destination (134). A female emigrant’s ‘character’ or conduct aboard ship and in the colonies, as in Britain, was absolutely inextricable from her respectability as a woman and as a worker. If deviant female emigrants were free from admonition and became sexually fallen, they would be, quite literally, damaged goods.

While Rye admits that she and the other female emigrants were passive in the face of male violence and punitive action, as she states, “Oh how like rats in a hole we felt that night, and how wearily the hours passed, as with hot cheeks and parched mouths we sat or rather rolled about till daybreak” (“Another Mail from Miss Rye” 261), she soon illustrates how female morality manages to keep any further problems or threats of male violence at bay for the remainder of the journey. Rye drops her comparison of the second-class female passengers to lowly and skittish vermin that inhabit the vessel when she describes how these women emerge from their humble berths to become educated: “With the women we held classes every day at three o’clock, Bible lessons on Sunday, reading, writing, arithmetic, and work alternately every day, and singing and dancing at night, wind and weather permitting” (262.) She attests that “On board ship is a fine place
for studying character, and we were at school all the four months” (262). The italicized “we” in this passage sets the FMCES emigrants apart from other non-assisted emigrants aboard ship, and suggests that the voyage was an important time for self-improvement for all the females associated with the FMCES, Rye included. The more fluid gender and class boundaries aboard the ship allow the women to study character values and achieve an education, the like of which most of the passengers aboard ship, and especially the female emigrants, probably could not have received in Britain, as efforts toward self-help were typically the purview of men.

Rye soon differentiates herself from the other FMCES emigrants by proving her aptitude for ministering to working-class men, an action that places her in the position of philanthropic lady, and thus in a less assailable position than the female emigrants whose employable status makes them more morally and sexually suspect. She begins a prayer circle with the “motley, red, blue, and brown shirited crew, bare-footed men with curious peering eyes, a strange mixture of shy and cynical faces” (“Another Mail from Miss Rye” 262). The formerly reprobate crew members eventually become her “congregation” to whom she preaches one Sunday “a sermon out of my own head, spoken without book or notes” and, subsequently, sermons every Sunday for the remainder of the journey (262). These working men clean up their act in the presence of the philanthropic woman, both in terms of personal hygiene—the men come to church “ready and clean for me [Rye]” (262)—and in terms of moral improvement. Rye writes, “I had not been long with them before they were my men for the rest of the voyage, and the first cheer they gave after crossing the line was for their chaplain!” (262). She attributes the peacefulness of the
remainder of the journey to her abilities as a preacher and moral presence as a middle-class woman.

This sense that moral teaching and knowledge were the purview of middle-class teachers is hardly unique to Rye’s work, as it is also apparent in the literature of the Self-Help Emigration Society, a late-Victorian emigration society that concentrated mainly on assisting working-class men to Canada. In one of its reports “Off to Canada” (1893), the author Septimus Scrivener invests middle-class male emigration assisters like himself with the power to impart values of self-help that are meant to control various vices endemic in British and colonial culture:

Since no one room in the ship was large enough to contain all the passengers, we decided to hold on Sundays two simultaneous services morning and evening. On the afternoon of the 23rd, I held a Young Men’s Social Hour, when we discussed “Our Chief Dangers, and How to Avoid Them.” This general subject was chosen by them, as also the minor heads: 1) Moral fog; 2) Drinking; 3) Gambling; 4) Fighting; 5) Licentiousness; 6) Bad Company; 7) Selfishness. (“Off to Canada” 10)

According to Scrivener and other emigration works of the period, the vices listed in this passage impinged upon the potential of working-class men and their role in colonial development and imperial expansion. Unstated in this passage is the need to control and eliminate forms of behaviour that might otherwise compromise the racial superiority of working-class men and further degrade them to the level of paupers and indigenous others. Scrivener represents working-class men as willing partners in their moral

62 See also Carter’s Victoria, the British El Dorado (1870) and Sayers’s Letters from Victorian Pioneers for further references to the need to control vices, particularly alcoholism, in the colony.
education, as they choose the lecture topics, and he highlights emigrant letters that attest to how the values of sobriety and industriousness are fundamental to their financial security abroad (“The Old Country and the New”; “Report for the Year 1893”).

The main difference between Scrivener’s reference to ministry and Rye’s is that she occupies the pastoral role of minister and moral teacher, a practice that was unusual for a Victorian woman and even in many religious denominations to this day. In this position, she challenges the accepted role for a Victorian woman, plus instructs working-class men, thus retaining her class superiority. Rye challenges Victorian gender ideology mutedly, insofar as she becomes a female chaplain when there is presumably no male in this role; however, she never overtly challenges the system of patriarchy, for she avoids condemning the sexual double standard that leads the Captain to cage the female emigrants and not the sailors. Rye’s philanthropic role could be understood within the dynamics of power and resistance described in Foucault’s famous analysis of Jeremy Bentham’s panoptical nineteenth-century prison. If the main deck of the ship is a type of Benthamite prison, its rules, as enforced by the Captain, men like Scrivener, and women like Rye, were meant to institute measures of self-governance, to make emigrants watch themselves and others, thereby keeping behaviour in check. The centralized form of power—the supervisor in the central tower of Bentham’s prison or, in this case, on the deck—need not be visible to the prisoners, or to the female emigrants aboard the ship, to make them feel like they are being watched (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 470). As a floating microcosm of British society bound for a new world, the ship could be seen to shift gender and class boundaries in new directions, thus allowing new possibilities for
female influence that are nonetheless still contained within an overall patriarchal structure.\textsuperscript{63}

Rye’s ministry exemplifies the paradoxical structure of Victorian feminism, which carries over into the colonial context, and allows the middle-class female individualist to challenge a woman’s traditional role, yet only within the terms of female morality. The middle-class female’s ministerial influence on working-class men and her facilitation of white patriarchal relations finds its precedent in other Victorian feminist British domestic novels. For example, in Elizabeth Gaskell’s \textit{North and South} (1855), the heroine, Margaret Hale, assumes a more outspoken Christian role than the traditionally dependent and moral Victorian domestic female, but only insofar as she is able to influence the male factory worker Nicholas Higgins, and encourage more Christian and sympathetic patriarchal relations between the mill owner, John Thornton, and his workers. In Dinah Mulock Craik’s \textit{Olive} (1851), the disabled artist heroine similarly challenges Victorian moral anxieties and sexist attitudes surrounding the figures of the female writer and painter, and the female artist is likened to a preacher. However, rather than truly disrupting social hierarchies, Olive’s feminine moral example helps restore a disillusioned male preacher’s faith in God and inspires him to join her in saving her half-sister, a fallen working-class and racially other woman. As Janice Schroeder notes, in the 1860s, various Victorian feminists, including Rye, were also invited to attend the NAPSS, an organization representing men and women of various political and religious persuasions, to make public appeals that resembled sermons on issues like female

\footnote{Various twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics discuss philanthropy as a field of non-paid work in which women challenged traditional gender and class boundaries, as well as acted in disciplinary capacities towards other class, sexual, and racial groups. See Nead, Walkowitz, Mahood, Poovey, Caine, Sharpe, Burton, and Prochaska.}
emigration, marriage laws, and female employment (109). In the colonial context, Rye is permitted to go a step further than Victorian British heroines and feminists in that she organizes the religious services on her own.

If Rye fashioned herself and the female emigrant as a self-governing, moral woman, it must be asked whether or not the female emigrants represented themselves as the type of woman that Rye and the FMCES imagined. The English Woman’s Journal published several letters written by single female emigrants from the period of 1861-1862. As various critics have noted, the emigrant letters were collected as public records that were typically sent to members of the society and other patrons, including relatives, who had contributed to women’s journeys abroad (Hammerton; Clarke; Myers). The accounts published in the journal tend to be brief, optimistic, and written by middle-class women who attest to having been able to adapt to the new demands of the colony. For example, a woman A.R. writes in 1862: “For three months after Mrs. E’s confinement she was an invalid, and very much has entirely devolved on me, in the way of housekeeping and other things, which I never expected, but still I am very happy, and have never once regretted leaving my native land” (“The Last News of the Emigrants” 184).

A slightly longer letter written November 16, 1861, by a Brisbane immigrant, also expresses a willingness to do domestic work, reflecting Rye’s contention that the female emigrants had to be adaptable and “reconsider the question of domestic service, and not rush so blindly at teaching, and factories, and ‘genteel employments’” (Rye, “Female

64 Diamond notes how, in contrast to Rye’s public speaking on this voyage, Rye typically deferred to male politicians and philanthropists, allowing them to read her papers to the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in Britain.
Middle Class Emigration” 27). This letter also points to the disciplinary strategies that the FMCES emigrants adopted in order to ensure that they did not lose caste while performing domestic duties. The female emigrant explains how she took over the job of cooking for the other passengers, and “scolded the cooks, and talked about the rights of the people and demanded some rules about how and when the things were to be cooked” (“Stray Letters on Emigration” 113). Her list of grievances continues regarding the poor provisions, very tight quarters “leaving no room for crinolines,” drenched berths, wretched seasickness, and a night without a bed (114). Like Rye, this emigrant assumes a managerial role as she takes the liberty of instructing the working-class people around her. In contrast to Rye, this writer reports, “We suffered no annoyances from the sailors” and they were “always ready to lend a hand” (114); nonetheless, she similarly attributes the sailors’ good behaviour to the female emigrants’ cheerfulness aboard ship: “If they [the sailors] see you are willing to make the best of everything, they become willing to make the best of everything for you” (115). According to self-help discourse, cheerfulness was an important duty for all people, but was especially integral to women’s moral mission and influence within Victorian culture.

What these letters and indeed Rye’s account conceal are the inevitable tensions that ensued when a middle-class woman stepped outside of her conventional gendered and classed position as she assumed new domestic roles in the colony. Some of the letters held in the FMCES archives indicate the power struggle that resulted from a middle-class woman working in a servile position, especially when the employer was of a lower class than the female emigrant. To cross the great divide between middle-class female employments and domestic service, as Marion Diamond notes, was impossible in
England, but in the colonies boundaries were more fluid: “This class ambiguity was one of the great threats, and also one of the attractions, of colonial life” (83). As middle-class women typically possessed limited credentials for performing domestic duties, and were educated to believe that they were meant to improve working-class people, they often found being employed by working-class employers awkward and uncomfortable.

Miss Annie Davis of Sydney alludes to the disagreeableness of such as situation in 1867: “I wrote to you last when I was on the point of going inland to enter a situation;—it did not prove a very comfortable one as the people were vulgar” (“Records” 257). Another emigrant, Marion Hett of Hawkes Bay, New Zealand, expresses her relief at being spared a brief and potentially uncomfortable foray into domestic service in 1870:

Mrs. Sutton does not ask me to do anything but teach the children and keep their clothes in order, but 2 or 3 ladies called upon me in the first instance, who wanted helpers, but who said when they saw me, that they could not think of asking me to perform many of the duties which they should require. I got quite into a fright and had some thoughts of dressing myself as a servant and calling myself one, but now, having made a beginning, I do hope I may keep employed for so long a time as may be necessary. (“Records” 373)

While both of these letters indicate the difficulty involved in having to step into foreign domestic working situations, the second letter moreover suggests the practice of disguise involved in attempting to pass oneself as a working-class woman, a sort of cross-dressing gesturing towards the sense that class, like gender, is another form of identity that involves performativity. While Hett expresses relief that she can remain in the more
socially acceptable position of the middle-class governess, her letter highlights how identity can be destabilized, thus implying that both working-class and middle-class womanhood are regulatory fictions. Even though gender and class conformity often involved a tricky and uncomfortable performance for women, this combination of disguise and compromise is relatively invisible in working-class male narratives because masculinity, like whiteness, historically constituted a taken-for-granted normative category, and in terms of class, working men were not typically forced into roles that threatened a loss of caste.

Although many working-class artisans had to accept lower working-class positions abroad as farm labourers, these men did not risk losing their class status, and male emigrant texts typically portray low-paid labour as a brief passage in the working-class man’s path towards financial prosperity and social betterment. Moreover, for workmen there was no conflict between their class position and accepting remunerative employment, whereas for middle-class British women, traditional Victorian domestic ideology ostracized them for working in paid roles, and even British feminism suggested that they should only work in the private and proper middle-class domestic role of governess. Being a self-made maid in the colonies posed a new and difficult proposition for these women: upholding middle-class manners and values in any situation, even in the most despised field of working class labour, female domestic service. The FMCES could not possibly publish some emigrant letters because they too obviously undermined the

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65 My interpretation of this passage draws on Butler’s *Gender Trouble* which argues that “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33).
veracity of a female colonial individual who felt competent and superior as a middle-class woman while working in a paid domestic role. Rather, they only published accounts that attested to a female colonial individual who, in the face of the threats of sexual fallenness and working-class inferiority, could maintain British imperial middle-class norms and morality in the extended fields of employment and social experience. Cultural acceptance of this new female ideal absolutely hinged on letters that discursively fashioned the truth that they claimed to be describing.

“The only bird that sings during the winter”: Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada*

The purportedly “true” but deeply unstable story of the independent and morally influential colonial woman also circulated in female emigration guidebooks that attempted to instill values that would help women survive in the colony. Maria Rye read Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) when planning her first voyage to Upper Canada (*Single British Women Immigration*). However, as Moodie’s work dissuaded genteel women from coming to Canada, it is likely that her sister Catharine Parr Traill’s work *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), which instructed middle-class women in self-help values and what to expect in Upper Canada, would have found a greater readership among genteel female emigrants going to Canada. *The Backwoods of Canada* was extremely popular, enjoying many reprints by various British publishers throughout the 1850s and into the 1860s (Peterman xli).66

Traill’s work provided insight into a life towards which many of the female emigrants would have aspired: that of the middle-class mistress in charge of her own

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66 One middle-class English emigrant, Mrs. Edward Copleston, whose family could afford an unassisted passage to Canada, acknowledged Traill’s influence in her own guidebook *Canada: Why We Live in It, and Why We Like It* (1861). She attested, “My picture of North America was principally drawn from that charmingly written book *The Backwoods of Canada*” (5).
Canadian household. Although Rye and the FMCES stressed the importance of these women finding work abroad, if they found marriage partners, this was an acceptable possibility (Dreher 8). Rye’s main concern had been to relieve the problem of redundancy in Britain by balancing the sexes in the colonies. 67 Indeed, marriage was a common outcome for many single middle-class women in the colonies, which allowed them to leave their occupation and free up working positions for other female emigrants. For example, Kate Brind of Nelson, B.C., who became engaged in 1875, wrote to the society, “if any young lady was coming out about that time it would be worth while to write to Mrs. Edwards and recommend her, for I don’t think there is a governess to be had in Nelson” (“Records” 500).

Still, many colonials saw female emigration as a nonviable solution for female redundancy, especially as there was not especially a lack of women in Canada, particularly in Upper Canada. As Montreal resident J. E. Pell wrote to The Times in 1868: “I have no hesitation in saying women are not wanted in Canada; there are plenty to spare here; but the class who should fill the position of household servants prefer a bare living at anything else with their liberty. Consequently, good household servants, and they alone are needed” (12). In spite of Pell’s assertions that only loyal domestic servants were wanted, Rye continued to hold out Canada as a land of opportunity for any woman who was adaptable to the demands of the colony. Throughout the 1860s, Maria Rye secured assisted governmental passages to British Columbia and Upper Canada mainly for working-class women, but also for some middle-class women; some of these efforts were affiliated with the FMCES, while others were undertaken separately by Rye (Clarke 15).

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67 For a discussion of female emigration as a means to address the surplus of women in Britain, see Rye’s “The Colonies and their Requirements,” published in The English Woman’s Journal.
First published by Charles Knight of London, *The Backwoods of Canada* was part of a series sponsored by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK). The SDUK, an organization formed by liberal whigs in the 1820s, produced early inexpensive self-help tracts for working-class artisans and members of the working middle class. These publications emphasized self-education and self-culture, and inculcated values of independence, industry, and thrift (Tyrrell). Traill’s work *The Backwoods of Canada* and a later guidebook for working-class female emigrants, *The Female Emigrant’s Guide: And Hints on Canadian Housekeeping* (1854) were contemporaneous with English conduct manuals for women, such as Sarah Ellis’s series of works for women beginning with *The Women of England* (1839). However, as Carol Ballstadt notes, “In contrast to the English books, Mrs. Traill was concerned with useful arts rather than elegant manners, and doing for oneself rather than managing others. Accordingly her prose has the directness and lucidity of good instruction rather than the rhetoric and sentiment of feminine accomplishment” (x-xi). Both of Traill’s guidebooks for female emigrants touch on many of the same points; however, *The Backwoods of Canada* focuses on self-help for a middle-class female audience and thus would have been attractive to the middle-class female emigrants whom Rye assisted to Canada.

Similar to how *The Englishwoman’s Journal* fashioned Rye as an expert on female emigration, British reviews of *The Backwoods of Canada* described Traill as an energetic female emigrant and authority on the subject. *The Athenaeum*, for example, praised her work “for its spirit and truth” (138). Also supporting this position, Charles

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68 *The Female Emigrant’s Guide* was re-released as *The Canadian Settler’s Guide* (1854).

69 Traill’s book received similar praise in the *London Spectator* (Peterman xxxiv). A less positive review appeared in the *London Literary Gazette* on January 23, 1836. The reviewer admitted that, although the
Knight described in the foreword to Traill’s guidebook the “highspirited cheerfulness” of her account, yet its conscientious avoidance of giving new settlers or prospective emigrants unrealistic hopes (*The Backwoods of Canada* 1-2). However, far from Traill’s text being the “truth,” as Michael Peterman notes, “as she had done in several of her earlier works, she told her story in the form of a chronological series of letters to family and friends, and as she shaped her reminiscences, she deliberately altered details of her actual experiences” (xxvii). Some of these omissions and alterations included not revealing the economic problems that motivated the Traills’ departure from Britain, changing the name of the ship on which she and her husband sailed, and suggesting that it took fewer months than it actually did to move in to their own house in Douro. Peterman attests that “*The Backwoods of Canada* therefore, far from being a simple transcription of actual letters home,” is a carefully crafted narrative (xxvii).

This book, like Rye’s and the FMCES letters, adopts domestic narrative motifs in the colonial context; it offers an account of Traill improving herself through engaging in all forms of household work and learning about the Canadian landscape in her capacity as an amateur botanist and naturalist, roles outside of the norm for the middle-class woman. The way that imagery functions in Traill’s work, particularly in her representation of birds, foregrounds how the female settler adopts the colonial environment and its inhabitants as projects that facilitate self-development and colonial improvement. According to Ellen Moers, bird images in women’s writing often refer to different levels of female agency: they can refer to wild women who are caged or silenced, domesticated birds or “women who never get off the ground,” or to the process of self-realization and work might provide “some useful information” for the emigrant and “afford some amusement” for those who stayed in England, it lacked sustained “vivacity” and “matters of fact” that would really help the emigrant (qtd. in Peterman xxxiii).
finding one’s own voice or wings (250). Traill’s depiction of wildlife and birds, as D. M. R. Bentley notes, is emblematic for her “own industrious and Providential movement towards domestic independence” (Afterword 299). She utilizes both images of wild and domestic birds to establish the paradoxical notion of the boundlessness yet certainty of the British female emigrant’s identity if guided by God and self-help values. Following the trail of birds in *The Backwoods of Canada* points to the qualifications that female settlers must possess if they are to make it in the colony: cheerfulness, industriousness, and adaptability in all situations, but also being able to discipline others and maintain civility.

In Letter I, Traill establishes the moral tone of the text when she hints at the monotony of the journey, while also implying the new boundaries and personal growth that accompany the emigrants’ voyage to the new world, as represented by the migration of the sea fowl:

I love to watch these wanderers of the ocean, as they rise and fall with the rocking billows, or flit about our vessel; and often I wonder whence they came, to what distant shore they are bound . . . and then I recall to mind the words of the American poet, Bryant,— "He who from zone to zone Guides through the boundless air their certain flight, In the long way that I must tread alone Will guide my steps aright.” (7)

Traill’s appreciation of and identification with the sea fowl privilege a narrative of British morality rather than the story of patriarchal domination that is apparent in another famous emigration guidebook of the period, *Twenty-Seven Years in Canada West* by Traill’s brother-in-law, Major Samuel Strickland. Even though Traill lauded this text, excerpting

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70 See also D. M. R. Bentley’s “Breaking the ‘Cake of Custom’” in *Re(Dis)covering Our Foremothers.*
various passages from it in her own work, her perspective towards nature is far less
vviolent than Strickland’s. Any nature that lies in the middle-class male emigrant’s way is
something to shoot at, especially during the monotonous voyage to Canada:

    On the 26th of April, I saw a whale, and, boy-like, fired at the huge creature: the
    shot must have hit him, for he made the water fly in all directions.

    To vary the monotony of a sea-life, I sometimes played draughts with the mate,
    whom I always beat . . . On the following day I killed several birds, and saw two
    whales and many porpoises.” (Strickland 3-4).

Here, the environment appears as a playground for the immature and bored male
emigrant. Strickland frequently promotes the same self-help moral values as Traill, such
as in the following passage, “But let the steady, the industrious, the cheerful man go forth
in hope, and turn his talents to account in a new country, whose resources are not
confined to tillage alone [. . .] To the artizan, the hand-loom weaver, and the peasant,
Canada is indeed a true land of Goshen” (Strickland XI). However, self-help in this
context is about imperial mastery of colonial resources; it involves conquering weaker
opponents, whether this means the natural environment or other men playing the same
game.

    In contrast, Traill takes cues from the wild and domesticated birds around her on
how to adapt to colonial life. Her attention soon turns to the Captain’s caged goldfinch,
whose cheerful song and activity make him feel at home wherever he goes. Traill writes,
“‘It is all one to him whether his cage is at sea or on land, he is still at home,’ said the

    71 These self-help values also circulate strongly in other men’s guidebooks, such as Arthur Hill’s The Poor
Man’s Emigration Guide to Canada and Septimus Scriviner’s English Emigrants in Canada (1888), “With
the ‘Self-Help’ Emigrants” (1890), Here and There, Being the First Report of the Self-Help Emigration
Society (1886), and Hints to Emigrants (1892).
captain [. . .] I have already formed a friendship with the little captive. He never fails to
greet my approach with one of his sweetest songs . . .” (8). She suggests through the
image of the caged bird that limiting circumstances need not be imprisoning. If one keeps
busy and makes the best of it at sea or in the new world, everywhere is home, which is
exactly what she does as she seeks comfort in books and the sewing needle during the
monotonous journey. Unlike male emigrants whose only weapon against boredom is
transforming their environment into a gaming ground, as is evident in Strickland’s
account, Traill claims that at least she has something to do—“I really do pity men who
are not actively employed” (8). By engaging in familiar domestic activities, middle-class
female emigrants can occupy themselves and make any place feel like home.

Confining though her domestic role is aboard the ship, so long as the female
emigrant makes the best of it, she positively influences the men around her, and they, in
turn, make her surroundings more attractive. As the emigrant vessel approaches the
shore, the men’s raucous voices and behavior resemble the goldfinch’s noisiness and
restlessness (10). The bird’s connection to the middle-class female emigrant, however, is
reinforced when the restless men disembark on the rugged Isle of Bic, leaving Traill and
the caged bird behind on the ship. Although disappointed at not being able to disembark,
Traill, like the captain’s goldfinch, accepts the limitations of her surroundings and is later
rewarded for her patience by her husband who gives her flowers, and “The sailors had not
forgotten a green bough or two to adorn the ship, and the bird-cage was soon as bowery
as leaves could make it” (13). The female emigrant’s prospective role is emblematized in
the image of the bowery bird cage that transforms unattractive and challenging
circumstances into something bearable. As a marker of the middle-class woman’s cultural
improving role in the colony, the English bower stands for the portable domesticity which, as Janet Myers argues, emigrant women were supposed to transport with them and implement in the colonial setting.

The domestic role for middle-class women in the colonies, though, is more capacious than that exercised by most Victorian women of the leisure classes in Britain. Traill frequently describes in detail women working in domestic roles, and how to do all manner of things around the home, resembling a “Mrs. Beeton” or, in modern terms, a “Martha Stewart” of the backwoods. Spinning, baking bread, maple-syrup making, candle-molding, milking, and poultry keeping are described in detail as a fact of colonial life. In this early Victorian context, Traill does not go so far as to suggest that middle-class women could obtain paid work; women’s work never appears overtly monetary and, therefore, morally suspect. Female labour is not wholly confined to the domestic sphere, however, as Traill becomes self-educated as a botanist and naturalist. Transgressing the boundaries of typical female education and employment, Traill notes in Letter XIV how she has “promised to collect some of the most singular of our native flowers for one of the Professors of Botany in the Edinburgh University” (174). At the same time, she models botany within the appropriately feminine occupations of mothering and moral instruction, as she teaches her little boy “to look with love and admiration to that bountiful God who created and made flowers so fair to adorn and fructify this earth” (184).

In Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada (1838), Anna Brownell Jameson, while not offering as glowing an account of Canada as Traill does, similarly often perceives nature as capable of imparting moral lessons. Mourning the great
hardwood trees that have been razed for the building of new houses and pioneer settlements, Jameson notes that on one blackened stump, “as from some hidden source of vitality, sprang up a young green shoot, tall and flourishing, and fresh and leafy. I looked and thought of hope! Why, indeed, should we ever despair Can Heaven do for the blasted tree what it cannot do for the human heart” (232). She implies that the persistence of nature and the hope for a better future in the colony can be compared to the persistence of female vitality and happiness in the face of isolation. For Traill, identification with her natural surroundings, particularly with birds, is also capable of mitigating feelings of alienation. In Letter XIII, Traill reassures her family that she does not feel in exile, even during the harsh Canadian winter: “My spirits are as light as ever, and at times I feel a gaiety that bids defiance to all care” (150). Later on in the letter, Traill’s defiant gaiety links to the independent and plucky titmouse “being almost the only bird that sings during the winter” (161).

Traill also discusses wild birds as important forms of sustenance for Canadian settlers. Wild birds in this context operate as bartering chips in European and indigenous relations; they provide insight into how the middle-class woman attempts to retain amicable relations with the Chippewas but, at the same time, tames and disciplines indigenous others according to civilized British values. As Anne McClintock argues, the processes of imperialism and colonization were patriarchal insofar as white men ruled according to their own interests. Nonetheless, white women often occupied positions of “decided—if borrowed—power” over colonized women and men: “As such, white

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72 Although Jameson does not blatantly refer to her separation with her husband, the Attorney General of Upper Canada, this passage probably also alludes to the end of this romantic relationship and her emotional healing. Jameson candidly discusses throughout her text the deadening sense of boredom and homesickness she often feels in Canada, and the advantages of female energy, self-dependence, and cheerfulness, for overcoming these problems.
women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting” (McClintock 6). The middle-class mistress assumes a disciplinary function in the colony, as evident in letter X, when Traill recounts how she demanded a pair of ducks from a Chippewa hunter, Peter, after he obtained a piece of bread from her. When it came time for the payment of the ducks, Peter replied that she would receive the ducks “by-and-by” (Traill 118). The letter ends with Traill asserting her authority in the practice of bartering: “They rarely give you a direct promise. As it is not wise to let any one cheat you if you can prevent it, I coldly declined any further overtures to bartering with the Indians until my ducks made their appearance” (118). Through teaching Peter a lesson in colonial exchange, Traill exemplifies what Spivak describes as the female individualist’s contribution to the “worlding” of the third-world, whereby knowledge was only ever acknowledged to be transmitted in one direction, from Europeans to subaltern “others.”

Even though in other letters Traill speaks of the indigenous people’s harmlessness and Christian piety, she nevertheless implies European women’s civilizing influence over aboriginal others. For example, letter XIII recounts a missionary’s tale of a Chippewa man who, not long after the War of Independence, entered a widow’s home. After laying aside his weapons, the frightened woman relaxed and gave him a bed for the night, and her “hospitality” led him to visit her family whenever he was on the hunting grounds. Traill writes that this woman’s children “no longer terrified at his swarthy countenance and warlike weapons, would gather round his knees, admire the feathered pouch that contained his shot . . . whilst he would pat their heads, and bestow upon them an equal share of caresses with his deerhounds” (160). The story concludes matter-of-factly:
“some tribes have become nearly if not totally extinct in the Canadas” (160). This tale of the British woman’s Christian charitable behaviour towards the “swarthy” and “feathered” Chippewa might be one of Traill’s descriptive interpretations of a Canadian bird, not only in terms of its physical characteristics, but also its moral “character.” The white woman’s action of offering the Chippewa hunter a bed establishes a moral bond between him and her white family that, in turn, ratifies the whites’ assumption of the mantle of indigeneity as the first peoples die off. This transference of authority is purportedly done with the blessing of the indigenous peoples as emphasized by the Chippewa man’s benignant action of patting the children on the head.

This privileging of the domestic plot as the locus of the inheritance of indigeneity by white British culture, I would suggest, is replaced in the masculine counterpart to Traill’s text, Strickland’s guidebook, with the objectification of indigenous others. Strickland refers to indigenous peoples primarily in terms of how well they “behave themselves” in the European-driven tasks of chopping and farming (206), focusing not so much on the domestic bonds between the first peoples and the British but on the compliance of indigenous men in the British masculine project of colonizing the land. This tendency to objectify indigenous men in terms of their material usefulness is also evident in Robert Jamieson’s account of Melbourne, in Aug. 9, 1853, in which he states that “the natives were utterly inoffensive and willing, in their way, to be useful” (89). In other contexts, there is a sense that indigenous men are lazy and unhappy about working for their British masters and are destined to die off because of their inability to become civilized. According to Brantlinger, the discourse of indigenous extinction was rooted in the popular British colonial belief that “Native Americans seemed destined for extinction
because they were wild, free, and apparently incapable of becoming civilized” (*Dark Vanishings* 9). For example, a male settler John Hunter Patterson, admits in 1853 that, while he has attempted to reward indigenous men

> when they did exert themselves . . . I regret to add I found all my endeavours fruitless, and extraordinary to say, with civilization they are so fast decreasing from a constant warfare kept up amongst them, together with disease, that in an extraordinary short space of time I believe the race will become extinct. (153)

This passage reflects a tendency in masculine colonial texts to acknowledge aboriginal men’s work, albeit, as inferior to white men’s labour, but also to reinforce the uncivilized status of indigenous men and, therefore, sever them from the imperial British male success story. Embedded in this approach is anxiety over who owns the racial and masculine prerogative in the colony. This ultimate removal of indigenous men from the narrative of colonial development is achieved through rhetorical pronouncements of their inseparability from wild nature and the inevitability of their own extinction as a result of their inability to adapt to civilization.

In contrast to such accounts, Traill’s treatment of indigenous men as members of an impressionable and waning race is fuelled by a dual anxiety characteristic of the female emigrant experience, a fear of these men’s racial otherness but also their masculine potential to oppress women. In order to elide these fears, the middle-class female settler had to attest to being able to subdue and feminize these men. Within the colonial project, the white middle-class female also played a central role in ensuring white racial privilege through maintaining the Christian morals of white men. 73 As the famous philanthropist

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73 For further discussion of the gender and racial dynamics between female white settlers and indigenous men, see Adele’s Perry’s “Oh I’m Just Sick of the Faces of Men.” She argues that “white women were
Baroness Angela Burdett Coutts adamantly declared in support of female emigration to British Columbia in 1862: “religion and morality would be altogether ruined unless an emigration of white women from Great Britain took place” (“Stray Letters on Emigration 109). The female emigrants’ status as superior white women had to be rhetorically maintained at all costs in order to allay British and Colonial fears surrounding these women’s dangerous liminality and to validate their claims to independence in the New World.

*Ella Norman; Or, a Woman’s Perils*

Although Traill’s guidebook illustrates the white woman’s capacity to uplift settler men and subdue aboriginal others, Elizabeth Murray’s *Ella Norman; Or, a Woman’s Perils* (1864) abandons these claims and expresses concern for the white woman’s degradation. In Murray’s text, the English heroine, Ella Norman, is employed as a governess by a working-class Scottish family who threaten her own sense of racial and class superiority. The most dangerous aspect of the colonial experience for the single middle-class woman, however, proves to be sexual fallenness, which Ella encounters when she attempts to save a sexually degraded female emigrant. The figure of the fallen woman, of course, was pervasive in Victorian novelistic and cultural representations, and she embodied British anxieties surrounding female middle-class emigration. At the same time, this figure was connected to Australia’s history of convict transportation in the early

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According to *Orlando: Women’s Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*, Bourdett Coutts patronized many women’s causes, such as Urania Cottage, a home for fallen women that opened in 1847. The entry for Coutts in Wikipedia indicates that she also personally endowed many bishoprics, including the founding bishopric of British Columbia.
nineteenth-century, in particular, the deportation of British female prostitutes; these women were sent over to satisfy men’s sexual appetites and to fulfill the need for sexual reproduction once the penal colonial became a settler colony. This history made it difficult for even a single middle-class woman to emigrate to Australia without being associated with sexual impropriety. Murray’s novel offers up an antithetical nightmare to the colonial story of female independence and domesticity, as Ella’s sense of class, racial, and sexual purity is continually imperilled. Murray overtly attacks the philanthropic efforts of female emigration societies “not the less cruel in effect because mistaken, and meant for the best” (Preface). Domestic happiness for the single middle-class woman, she suggests, can only be achieved in England, as signalled by Ella’s return to England to marry her sweetheart, and the fallen middle-class woman’s restoration to England to find respectable work.

Murray, like Rye and the FMCES emigrants, drew on first-hand experience with emigration, as she had accompanied her husband, an army officer, and five sons to Melbourne in 1852. However, unlike these women, she had been wholly disenchanted with the emigrant experience, returning to England in 1859 and leaving behind her eldest son and husband. Instead of fashioning a first-person account of her experience, Murray attempted to present as objective an account of Australian society as possible through fiction: “[. . .] to make my characters representatives of the different sections of society, and, as such, utter the opinions which I have myself heard expressed by members of those various orders with whom I have been brought in contact, without in any way identifying these opinions with my own” (Preface). Murray’s attempt to present a true account of Australia through fiction is ironic and painfully flawed, as her novel offers one
continuous indictment of middle-class female emigration. In a reversal of the FMCES letters, which incorporated popular cultural conventions in order to both justify a broader range of opportunities for these women and their ability to uphold cultural norms, this text employs the same conventions, but in an effort to overturn the ideal of the self-made maid and to ratify Britain as the only viable social reality for middle-class women.

The British and Australian literary public saw Murray’s book as overwhelmingly one-sided in its castigation of Australia as a corrupt society. As a writer in The Saturday Review in 1864 sardonically wrote, “In short, for discomfort, for privation, for a hopeless dragging on of a miserable existence which before long ought either to kill or to uncivilize the sufferer, a gentleman or lady can find few places to go to like a flourishing gold colony” (2). The Melbourne publication The Age claimed that Mrs. Murray’s negative and exaggerated account of the colony was motivated by personal reasons, namely her receipt of far less money than she had expected from the Australian Legislature following her husband’s death (qtd. in Murray 407). Although the reviews dismissed Murray’s negative assessment of the colony itself, The Saturday Review admitted that the book may do some good “If it helps to teach intending emigrants or their friends and advisers, to look more thoughtfully at both sides of the question in weighing the advantages before settling in the various colonies” (2). Only the liberal publication The Athenaeum defended the women’s emigration societies, if somewhat tepidly, stating that Murray’s words were harsh towards “those ladies who devote their lives to the promotion of female emigration” (1). The reviews, while determined to contradict Murray’s negative perceptions of Australia as a corrupt penal colony, reflected the public discomfort surrounding female emigration.
Murray’s novel centres on a pretty and timid middle-class woman who emigrates with her mother and brother to Australia following her father’s death. Soon after the family arrives in Australia, Ella’s brother dies and, left without financial support, Ella’s mother begins drinking heavily and pressures her daughter to make a good marriage with a prospector, the nephew of an ex-convict, whom Ella finds extremely distasteful. The heroine’s resistance to marrying a working-class man with a corrupt family history resembles some of the anxieties surrounding courtship articulated in unpublished FMCES letters. Marriage was a common outcome for many single middle-class women in the colonies and was approved of by the FMCES as long as it was for love, not necessity (Dreher 8). However, the wide gulf between many male settlers and female emigrants, particularly in terms of class, made the choices seem extremely narrow to some women. As Miss I. U. Carey complains in an account written in 1867, “—a great many girls are left unmarried—the men who come out are the younger sons of poor families, many are very much addicted to drink. Just such men as no nice girl would marry—I fancy about 5 years back all the eligible men were picked up by the servant girls . . .” (“Records” 283). Ella Norman, like Miss Carey, refuses to marry the son of the ex-convict on grounds that “he drinks—drinks raw spirits in the morning” (14) which, in turn, leads her mother to push Ella into accepting the first teaching position she can find so that she can support her mother’s own alcoholism and over-spending.

Ella begins teaching at a school at St. Kilda, a job that soon terminates after she suffers from fever; after working in three other unsatisfactory positions, she obtains an occupation as a governess in the Australian bush. Finding this position proves to be no insurance, however, against the vulgar manners of the Celtic working classes who
constitute the nouveaux riches of the colony. Ella could be seen as occupying a liminal position, what Janet Myers, by way of Anne McClintock, refers to as the colonial governess’s status as “‘a threshold creature,’ precariously positioned not only by virtue of class, but also by virtue of education and race” (*Antipodal England* 116). According to McClintock, the colonial governess was “[g]raced with an education” that she did not have a chance to use (277): “Racially a member of the white elite, she was in reality a member of the serving class. She was protected by racial privilege but not by economic security” (277). Myers and McClintock point out the governess’s uncomfortable alignment with working-class and indigenous servants; in this case, Ella’s anxiety stems from having to work in a servile position for lower-class and racially inferior Irish and Scottish settlers. The rough Scottish family who end up employing her put little stock in Ella’s superior British education beyond its ability to facilitate their own class mobility, and to satisfy their bossy Irish relative who insists that “the bairns mun be leddies” (Murray 72).

Ella’s genteel middle-class manners and deportment contrast starkly with the McClaren’s Scottish household, which is hopelessly disorganized and incapable of improvement. Upon approaching the McClaren’s rural homestead, she is led through “a variety of tumble-down slab huts covered with bark—through dogs of all sorts and sizes, through turkeys, geese, ducks and hens, all outrivaling each other in noise” (68). As she enters the backdoor, she finds that the house fares little better; elements of the Australian bush infiltrate the inside, in the form of bark ceilings and gum tables, and her first supper consists of greasy mutton chops and potatoes still in their skins (70). The crude and disorganized features of the household are metonyms for her Scottish mistress’s
disproportionate and inferior racial and class characteristics, including a low forehead, sunken eyes, a shield-like chin, “a yellow parchment-like vacant face, unbroken in outline, save horizontally by the long narrow slit which served as a mouth, and perpendicularly by a small pinched nose—a face of stupid stolidity it would have been, but for the compression of the narrow bloodless lips” (71).

Such class and racial prejudice aimed at Irish and Scottish colonials resemble Rye’s own claims in a letter to The Times in 1862, that the female emigrants whom she assists, mostly English women, are “vastly superior to the hordes of wild Irish and fast young ladies who have hitherto started as emigrants” (14). While Rye champions the superior behavior and morality of her English female emigrants, Murray sees the markers of Ella’s class and racial superiority as useless in an uncivilized country. The McClaren children, Donald, Christina, and Jessie, possess the same uncouthness as their mother, even Jessie, a handsome and inquisitive girl whom Ella initially views as a promising pupil. On a ride with the girls in the bush, Ella encounters birds—“noisy ones they were; but their shrill, discordant sounds, to a musical ear, only made the scene less endurable” (122). The birds resemble the wild, untamed girls, a metonymical relationship that can be understood in terms of what Kay Schaffer describes as the British cultural practice of representing both the Australian bush and female convicts, especially prostitutes, as forms of aberrant femininity. As Schaffer notes, “The signifying force of the feminine as evil, the she-devil, operates to name both the land and its inhabitants. But convict women, all damned whores, were especially damned” (60). Although Christina and Jessie

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75 Drawing on Schaffer’s work, Barrett notes that the Australian bush embodies other female stereotypes in British and settler narratives: “The landscape, perhaps predictably, is depicted in feminine terms either as a cruel mother who threatens to destroy her son or as a dangerous virgin who leads man into deadly temptation” (86). Barrett argues that the late-Victorian Australian author Barbara Baynton challenges these
McClaren are not prostitutes in Murray’s novel, they nonetheless represent heedless adolescent girls, and given their class and racial backgrounds, as well as the early-nineteenth-century practice of transporting female prostitutes, middle-class Victorian readers would have likely associated these female characters with sexual deviance. The discordant surroundings of the bush and its wild inhabitants moreover emphasize Ella’s musical training as a governess and her purity at the levels of race, class, and sexuality. However, Ella’s superior status does not carry her far in the Australian bush, as is literally underscored by the fact that she is violently thrown into the dead branches of a tree while her pupils gallop off far ahead of her, past a local watering hole (124). This incident is diametrical to Rye’s idealistic portrayal of colonial governesses, printed in The English Woman’s Journal in 1862, in which she contends that “half-holidays and after lesson time would find them scampering across the plains on horseback with their young charges and companions, or busily engaged in some out-of-door cheerful occupation or amusement; really, and not nominally, one of the family” (“Female Middle Class Emigration” 25). Ella’s experience scampering in the bush on horseback produces any feeling but being part of the family.

The imperilled nature of middle-class femininity in the Australian landscape is thrown into further relief when Ella takes the opportunity to visit a sexually degraded middle-class woman, Bella, who, Ella has heard, works at the local pub in a clearing in the bush. Murraydevotes the remainder of the text to Ella’s attempts to rescue the fallen “Bella Dyce,” a reverend’s daughter named Mary Hawley, who had attended school with Ella in England. Ella learns that Bella Dyce came to Australia through the assistance of a

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representations in a couple of key ways: “the majority of her protagonists are female; the real danger comes not from the bush but from the men who inhabit it” (86).
female emigration society; however, counter to the expectations of the society, Bella lost her character and failed to support the ideal of sober and moral masculinity abroad as she became mistress to an abusive Australian pub manager. It turns out that Bella’s character had become damaged even before setting foot in the colony as she tells Ella the “sad but too common tale” (Murray 136) of being led astray during the voyage by a beautifully dressed, “ladylike” woman (139) who attempted to lure her into a life of prostitution in Australia. Murray’s fallen woman plot resonates with the deportation of female convicts in the early nineteenth century, a practice that was meant to redress the gender imbalance in the colony. If a woman was not a prostitute when she went on board the convict ship, she was understood to be one once she arrived in the colony because convict women were often used physically by the officers and crew.76 Within the context of assisted female emigration, Bella’s sexually degraded status also highlights the Victorian British anxiety that morally suspect emigrants or colonials could lure female emigrants to their ruin: “Sometimes other women were included amongst the ranks of ‘predators’, with a number of cases recorded over the years of older women ‘contaminating’ young single women—presumably seeking to recruit them for prostitution” (Gothard 130). This checkered history of female convict deportation, coupled with Victorian British fears of sexual impropriety in the colony, meant that single white middle-class women occupied a precarious position in Australian society.

Both Ella and Bella are similarly led astray by inferior colonials, Ella, in her many failed working positions in the colony and, quite literally, by the unruly Scottish

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76 See Carmichael who refers to liaisons between female convicts and ships’ officers and crew and how the convict ships themselves were considered to be floating brothels (283). Referring to the work of Anne Summers, he also discusses the enforced whoredom imposed upon female convicts once in the colony. Many women formed attachments with men and lived with them as their wives in order to protect themselves from the unwelcome attentions of other men (283).
McClaren children who leave her stranded in the bush, while Bella was lured into a world of vice as soon as she landed in Australia, ending up with a working-class man who abuses her. Each woman also shares the experience of being unknowingly followed to Australia by an English gentleman suitor, and each subsequently returns to England. As Tamara S. Wagner notes, the theme of return in Victorian British anti-emigration novels assumes many meanings; it may counter overly optimistic beliefs in colonial success stories (111) and reassure prospective emigrants that they were better off at home (111). Or, it may expose the impossibility of transporting home values to the colonies (114), the failure of resolving domestic British problems through the exportation of superfluous populations (114), or point to new dangerous forms of colonial identity that have the power to disrupt domesticity back home (114). The theme of return in Murray’s anti-emigration novel encompasses all of these meanings but the last, for rather than focusing on the potentially corruptive influence of emigrants returning home, Murray ratifies England as the only space in which domestic happiness can be restored.

Just as it is impossible for the superfluous female characters, Ella and Bella, to lead fulfilling lives or to instill middle-class values of domesticity in the colony, their lovers cannot resolve English domestic problems or inculcate gentlemanly values in the Australian context. For the males of the text, the domestic crisis that they fail to rectify in the colony hinges on inheritance and money matters. Bella’s former English lover,

77 See Wagner’s “Settling Back in at Home” for a wide-ranging discussion of how these meanings often work in combination and to specific gendered and generic effects in novels by Dickens, sensation fiction by Braddon and Collins, in domestic novels by Austen, Craik, and Brontë, and most specifically in Trollope’s John Caldigate. Wagner also touches on how portability plays out in the works of Australian novelist Marcus Clarke and New Zealand author Clara Cheeseman. Clarke’s work, rather than being a tale of emigrant return to England, charts the transportation of a disreputable Australian male settler to America, while in Cheeseman’s novel, a corrupt, rich settler returns to England but only to retrieve his elderly mother and bring her back to New Zealand.
Francis Pierrepoint, emigrates to Australia after learning that his late uncle, Lord Tiptree, never executed his will. Pierrepoint, “left penniless in the world, a cousin on the male side inheriting the title” (88), attempts to earn his fortune and find his love Mary Hawley, but comes to Melbourne only to have his hopes dashed:

Arrived as many had done before him, strong in hope, in self-reliance—strong in his own integrity of purpose—strong in his belief in the effect of honesty, of honest industry, and in all those points which the worldly religious, hold out to the young and inexperienced as the sure means of temporal advancement. Arrived to find all these so many stumbling blocks in his way. (103)

This passage suggests that in Australia, gentlemanly values of self-help are incapable of overcoming the vagaries of Victorian British inheritance practices and money matters. It questions the validity of masculine emigrant narratives of success, reflecting the failure of self-help discourse to obtain mastery and control over colonial threats, as is sometimes the case in male emigration narratives, in which expressions of defeat disrupt the so-called truths of masculine self-control and dominance that these texts typically propagate.

For example, a letter penned by Foster Fyans, a soldier, administrator, and magistrate in Geelong, describes the rampancy of venereal disease in the white and indigenous populations and the moral degeneracy of different classes of squatters, concluding, “For a new colony, only eighteen years inhabited, I consider that there is more vice than is to be found in any part of the world” (194).

While Fyans expresses a deep-seated fear of sexual intercourse and interbreeding between the British and aborigines, Murray brings to light a central anxiety underlying the domestic colonial female ideal: the loss of female character due to sexual immorality
and, in turn, the impossibility of finding respectable employment or improving the colony. Just as Francis Pierrepoint’s British moral values have no way of preparing him for colonial life, his opinion of Bella as a proper middle-class woman—an “angel” (85) and a “Madonna” (100)—cannot prepare him for her sexually degraded state. Peirrepoint only ever vaguely fears that “she may have to do something beneath her birth and education; [. . .] and he pictured her in various picturesque attitudes performing various domestic offices—she would be always lovely, do what she may” (101). Once he learns about Mary’s unfortunate fall, Francis abandons his dream of asking her to be his wife and returns to England, eventually marrying another woman.

This all-pervasive sense of colonial vice, and the middle-class Englishman’s defenselessness in the face of it, is also reiterated in the experience of Ella’s English suitor, a man named Maberley. He learns that a cultivated and moral Englishman cannot make it in Australia when a settler, Henry Townsend, warns him: “You must come down from your cherished pedestal of honour and integrity, and so forth, and lose your own identity, your self-respect, your best characteristics, before you can compete with men who cannot understand your feelings, or lump them as ‘bosh’” (346). Townsend suggests that gentlemen may emigrate to “India, to China, to America” (346), but must not go to Australia, reinforcing the notion that Australia’s history as a penal colony made it a treacherous destination for middle-class emigrants. Murray holds out no hope at all for middle-class female emigrants, when she indicates that Ella and her mother represent “two helpless women in this land of horrors” (12) and, as Jock, Pierrepoint’s friend, says of Bella: “That unfortunate girl is one among a thousand others who have fallen because they could not help themselves in this cursed colony” (284).
Only Britain itself offers any chance of female self-help, as Bella, the reformed fallen woman, agrees to “bury her past” (300) and look for respectable work in England, while Ella returns home as Mrs. Maberly, becoming a married mistress of an English household. Murray’s ultimate rejection of the domestic narrative of improvement in Australia, in particular her restoration of the domestic plot back to England, is not dissimilar to Anthony Trollope’s insistence in *John Caldigate* on the return of the middle-class female emigrant widow, Euphemia Smith, and the eponymous hero who was scandalously involved with her. In Trollope’s text, however, “whereas the eponymous hero is gradually reassimilated into British life through the resolution of the domestic marriage plot, Trollope’s female emigrant, Euphemia Smith, is not” (Myers, *Antipodal England* 63) and is arrested for falsely accusing Caldigate of bigamy. Trollope perceives that the single woman’s experience in Australia violates conventional gender roles so completely that she cannot be reabsorbed into British society, while Murray envisions employment or marriage as options for middle-class women in England, and even permits the fallen woman to access respectable employment in Britain.

Murray blames the false colonial “ladies” and abusive men, as well as the female philanthropists who assisted them to Australia, for the unfortunate fate of female emigrants. A considerable portion of the text ridicules an English woman, Lady Tiptree, who dreams of heading up her own emigration organization to ship prospective brides to Australia (370). Lady Tiptree also concerns herself with supporting efforts to civilize aborigines in Australia when, according to her grandson Charles, she would do better to assist the Tiptrees’ poor emigrant cousins, the Claverings, back to England: “I would sooner give my money to people I know, than to those nasty blacks, who eat people”
As a busy-body female philanthropist who overlooks the plight of her own kin, she resembles Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens’s *Bleak House*, a character Dickens modeled after the emigration assister Caroline Chisholm, who spends all of her time on philanthropic efforts to civilize Africans while overlooking the domestic disarray of her own household. Such overtly negative views of emigration and racist perceptions of the colony are also encapsulated in Alick Keith’s ridiculing rhyme on female emigration in Charlotte Yonge’s *The Clever Woman of the Family*: “His sister she went beyond the seas, / And died an old maid among black savages” (112). Murray’s novel, like Yonge’s, conservatively and emphatically maintains that the only safe position for a middle-class woman is outside the clutches of dangerous colonial influences.

Murray’s blatant rejection of the possibility of female self-help in the colony, coupled with her insistence on the middle-class woman’s better chances at independence and happiness in Britain, represents the experience of colonial failure and return to Britain that is gestured towards in some of the unpublished FMCES letters. In an account of Newcastle, New South Wales, in 1862, every bit as perilous as Ella Norman’s experience in Australia, Ellen Ireland describes the horrors of travelling second-class, her multiple illnesses, and experiences working for a series of difficult families, concluding that she intends “to go back to England once I pay back 20 pounds” (“Records” 15). Like other unpublished FMCES letters that disclosed the discomforts of colonial life for middle-class women, this version of the domestic plot endangered the FMCES enterprise. It had to be suppressed if the British and colonial publics were to be convinced by the rhetorical language of self-sufficiency and female morality that helped ratify the
redundant middle-class woman as a self-made maid who was fit for handling the evils of colonial life.

**Conclusion**

Self-help discourse was part and parcel of the British story of masculine success in the colonies; it also integrally informed and shaped the female colonial domestic narrative propagated by the FMCES. While male and female emigration works represented themselves as veridical texts, they were, in effect, carefully-structured fictions. The masculine narrative of achieving material and social mobility abroad depended on self-help discourse in order to exert rhetorical control over moral problems that were seen as endemic to/in working-class and indigenous cultures. Emigration texts directed at men only acknowledged the importance of women who were capable of adapting to domestic tasks. Single middle-class women doubly constrained by a lack of male protection and domestic work experience were excluded from male emigration texts and initiatives, because within the terms of Victorian ideology, these women were supposed to be wives and mothers, not economically and socially independent individuals.

The FMCES and those who saw a place for single middle-class woman in the colonies adapted the domestic plot, accommodated types of imagery and indigenous peoples that they had never before encountered, and interpreted them in terms of female self-development and women’s civilizing potential. The story of the middle-class colonial heroine was deeply unstable, however, at the levels of gender, class, and race, because it had to obscure various challenges for emigrant women: the limited nature of women’s colonial wages and working opportunities, the difficulty of maintaining class and racial
privilege while working in servile roles, and the sexual double standard that marked women and not men as being susceptible to losing their livelihood and social meaning through sexual fallenness. These instabilities are suppressed in Maria Rye’s and the FMCES letters published in *The English Woman’s Journal* and in Catharine Parr Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada*. They become clearer when examined alongside various unpublished FMCES letters and Murray’s novel.

These insecurities of female self-help works also come into view when read in relation to more direct stories of masculine domination. Robert Grant has noted that the British success story and “the trope of the hardy British pioneer” have reified in Commonwealth histories “the Canadian ‘man of the North,’ the New Zealand pioneer, and Australian bushman as blazing trails for later generations who might now see their history as a product of hardy pioneers who had proven the worth of those ‘fit’ to inhabit their new lands” (Grant 182-3). They have sanctioned

the relocation or outright destruction of indigenous populations, and the shaping of specifically European futures in distant lands that was to have a profound impact not only on the expectations of emigrants themselves but also on developing ideas of the colonial “nation,” colonial “people,” and colonial history that were to ramify well into the twentieth century. (182)

As Grant’s inattention to female articulations of success suggests, the male emigrant narrative of self-help continues to dominate perceptions of the settler experience insofar as it is interpreted as pivotal to the formation of colonial history and national identity. The female self-help narrative fashioned by the FMCES also profoundly contributed to
histories of colonialism by propagating and instituting practices of female moral instruction and disciplinary control.

Some important differences and similarities exist between this colonial feminist story and today’s feminist projections of the liberated woman who aspires towards possessing a professional career, the perfect man, a balance of eco- or philanthropic travel and relaxing resort vacations, exceptional children, and a beautiful house, all in an effort to live up to an ideal of female individualism. The main difference between Victorian feminist versions of self-help for emigrant females and much of today’s feminist self-help literature is that class, race, and sexuality are relatively absent concerns (Blackman 222); many current works do not rhetorically manage anxieties surrounding sexual aberrance, racial miscegenation, or loss of caste. At the same time, the failure of many modern feminist self-help works to acknowledge the ways that social constructions have had real material implications in the lives of actual women (Blackman 222) actually propagates a history of Western feminist colonialism, but in new mutations.

Elizabeth Gilbert’s recent popular memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, is a powerful example of a recent text centred on female self-transformation that is riddled with colonial feminist assumptions. Reeling from a recent divorce, Gilbert is paid as a journalist to go on a journey of self-discovery through Italy, India, and Indonesia where she indulges in food, spirituality, and a new romance. In the Southeast Asian portion of the trip, Gilbert engages in domestic work in order to transform herself into a ‘mystical’ female who “performs menial tasks as a way to achieve a constant meditative state” (190). Gilbert’s preoccupation with the spiritual potential of menial labour completely overlooks how these forms of work are rooted in a long history of gender, class, and racial oppression.
As Diyah Larasati notes, Gilbert engages in a “parasitic feminism” that feeds off “the invisible labour of women that makes possible her glamorous spiritualized loneliness” (Larasati 94). The heroine soon abandons these tasks to act as the social convenor at the Ashram, a volunteer role that is specifically the purview of the Western middle-class feminist. Interestingly, Gilbert’s paid employment as a writer and non-paid volunteer role as social convenor resemble the combination of paid and non-paid middle-class working roles that many Victorian feminist emigration advocates held out as a possibility for emigrant women, but which was ultimately impossible for many Victorian female emigrants to realize based on their circumscribed roles as domestic helps. The ideal of feminist individualism propagated by the independent and worldly traveller, Elizabeth Gilbert, similarly remains out of reach for many Western women, and reproduces many of the power imbalances apparent in colonial history.

Another recent feminist self-help book, *Seeking Happily Ever After* by Michelle Cove, similarly ignores the power dynamics embedded in volunteer work experiences abroad by merely presenting these as examples of Western feminist opportunity and freedom. She writes, “If you want to stay out late with the girls on Friday night, go ahead. If you want to take a sabbatical from work and volunteer at a coffee plantation in Costa Rica, no problem—as long as you can organize the details. You call the shots to your own life” (268). Cove makes no mention of the necessity of acquiring cultural sensitivity and historical understanding before volunteering in Costa Rica, but rather refers vaguely to the American single female’s ability to “organize the details” as if this were as easy as supplying pop and chips for a Friday night with the girls. In Cove’s work, as in Gilbert’s, volunteer work abroad appears little more than a form of consumer tourism that secures
the Western feminist’s self-fulfillment. In order to recognize the many blind spots in popular feminist self-help works of today, and to avoid perpetuating the power dynamics implicit in feminist individualism, it is important to note the ways that historical Western feminists have rhetorically managed cultural anxieties embedded in colonial experience. Such critical engagements serve as persuasive reminders for the continuing need to push for change.

In this chapter, I have explored the extremely fraught nature of female middle-class emigration in terms of the controversy it sparked in Britain and in the colonies, but also in the sense that the fluidity of social categories in the New World threatened to disrupt the dominant ideal of white feminist individualism. In contrast to the continual efforts of Maria Rye and the FMCES to mitigate threats to the female emigrants’ class and racial superiority, another feminist self-help initiative was soon to refocus feminist debates on female employment within Britain. The Women’s Protective and Provident League, established by Emma Paterson in 1874, challenged in various ways the middle-class superiority and individualism of self-help forms for men and women, and aimed for a more class-inclusive model. This is the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 3

TWO BRANCHES OF THE SAME TREE:
INDIVIDUALISM, COLLECTIVISM, AND SELF-HELP
IN WOMEN’S TRADE UNIONIST LITERATURE

When the founder of the Women’s Protective and Provident League (WPPL), Emma Paterson, died at 38 in 1886, worn out by diabetes and overwork, the organization’s main publishing organ, The Women’s Union Journal, credited this woman with helping instill values of self-help in a group of females who had never before been significantly credited with these powers:

Women accustomed to think themselves too weak and dependent, too “inferior”; women isolated and struggling for bare life, poverty stricken widows, with children perhaps, single women without friends,—how could they combine or do anything? Emma Paterson has taught hundreds of them—bookbinders, upholsteresses, dressmakers, machinists, tailoresses, and others—that they can do all this. She has given them a new life—shown them the noble idea of mutual help and service, redeemed many of them from a crushing sense of loneliness, and given them the power of organization and self-government. (“Mrs. Paterson” 118)
This tribute to Mrs. Paterson, the founder of women’s trade unionism in Britain, followed in the example of mid-Victorian feminist accounts of feminist individualism for the way it presented an image of an independent and altruistic middle-class female instructor and philanthropist. However, at the same time, it did not reflect the manner that mid-Victorian feminism privileged middle-class female labour and morality, or the ability of the middle-class women to morally save working-class women. The WPPL and The Women’s Union Journal represented a version of female mutual help and working women’s competence for self-governance that were largely absent from previous versions of feminist individualism.78

As various theorists have noted, feminist individualism of the mid-Victorian period was rooted in liberalism, a philosophy that has been heavily criticized for its assumption that the human individual is implicitly a man, its liberal ethics of a mind-body split that abstracts away from the realities of embodied existence, and its support of universal values that actually embody the interests of those in positions of power in a given social context.79

78 See Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” Sharpe’s “The Rise of Women in the Age of Progress: Jane Eyre,” and Kaplan’s “Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism” for critiques of feminist individualism, particularly in the context of Brontë’s Jane Eyre. As I have argued in Chapter 1, Craik’s Olive, as well as various other women’s mid-Victorian periodical texts, promotes the ideal of a single middle-class feminist individual whose superior philanthropic role hinges on the improvability and expendability of women of different class and racial distinctions.

79 See Hadley who describes all of these points as weaknesses of individualism. Schwartzman particularly addresses the abstract and universalizing aspects of liberal individualism, arguing that they embody the interests of those in power. She contends that the possibility of feminism to “reinterpret liberal concepts so that they come to embody the interests of the subordinated and the oppressed (such as women, people of color, workers, and lesbians and gays), is one way of shifting their actual content” (12). Green also holds out some hope for feminist interpretations of liberal individualism, citing Wollstonecraft and other thinkers who have combined reason and emotion: “This is a conception of a reasoned, passionate and embodied being, who strives to live in a world in which feelings are in harmony with justice. It implies a feminist ethic which takes seriously the humanist acceptance of an underlying human nature, and the possibility of the discovery of some truth, while at the same time incorporating the perception that we are embodied, emotional beings” (150). Brown argues that the most problematic component of liberal individualism is its
that Western feminism’s adaption of the values of individualism, such as freedom, autonomy, and self-interest within a capitalist marketplace, has been historically problematic because liberal individualism fails to account for specific power relations and social structures that bar certain groups and bodies from the liberal ideal. However, Victorian feminism, which these critics argue laid the basis for the individualistic focus of Western feminism, did not always correspond so neatly with the values of liberal individualism. Jane Lewis argues that first-wave feminism drew from both liberal individualist and collectivist ideas, and that recent critics have been often too quick to interpret most examples of nineteenth-century female social activism as promoting laissez-faire individualism, and conversely, examples of late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century activism, such as the Fabian socialism practiced by a woman like Beatrice Webb, as supporting state-focused collectivism. She writes, “Just as it has become impossible to talk about a single late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century feminism, so it is misleading to refer to a movement from a simple individualism to collectivism” (Lewis 1). Lewis claims to take a more nuanced perspective on these philosophical designations, arguing, in particular, for how nineteenth-century female activists drew on multiple individualisms, some rooted in Christian tradition, particularly Unitarianism, which supported the idea of the perfectability of man and society and social action (11), and others drawing on the tenets of Idealist philosophy, which stressed a commitment to ethical individualism (15). These individualisms, she suggests, “required

focus on “instrumental individualism,” which is “based on a belief in freedom as a means to achieve individual interests” (32). Nevertheless, she still invests a measure of hope in liberal philosophy as she states that there was another type of individualism often existing concurrently with instrumental individualism that has tremendous political potential: “existential individualism.” She defines this latter strain as upholding a vision of freedom encompassing the values of self-determination and autonomy, as well as a focus on collectivity (32).
the fulfilment of obligations to fellow citizens, rather than the atomic individualism characterized by the injunction to self-help” (15).

While agreeing with Lewis that it is important to avoid the over-simplified interpretation of a shift in late nineteenth-century feminism from individualism to collectivism, and to acknowledge multiple feminisms and individualisms, I would point out that she is guilty of the oversimplification that she condemns by viewing “self-help” philosophy purely in the light of competitive self-interest. While it is true that the doctrine of self-help popularized by Samuel Smiles and adapted by liberal feminism in the mid-Victorian period promoted the character values of self-reliance, thrift, and hard work that were supposed to allow one to prosper under the capitalist system, these individualistic models of self-help also warned against what Lewis terms “atomic individualism,” and argued for the importance of altruism and mutual help to mediate against capitalist greed. Moreover, collectivist models of self-help that promoted mutual help and co-operation also emerged in the 1850s, and engaged in contentious debate with individualistic models of self-help, especially when labour movement activities were at a high during the 1870s and 1880s. I would suggest that examining these forms of self-help is crucial to understanding the tension between Victorian individualism and communitarianism in this period, and avoiding the simplistic labelling of political modes of thought and movements against which Lewis warns.

This chapter examines debates between individualism and collectivism in men’s trade unionist literature, and then analyzes the tension between these philosophies in The Women’s Union Journal reports and editorials on various women’s labour issues, including the exclusion of working women by men’s unions, women’s low wages and
long hours, and their unhealthy working conditions under industrialization. *The Women’s Union Journal*, like labour literature for working men during this period, engaged in intense debate over individualist as opposed to collectivist models of self-help, and objected to the oppression of the working classes by upper-working-class small masters and middle-class industrialists. At the same time, this journal challenged how working women were undervalued under industrial capitalism and Victorian gender ideology, two interrelated systems that ratified women foremost as wives and mothers, and secondly, as workers. It also articulated a distrust of former models of female middle-class individualism by assessing and challenging middle-class women’s positions as teachers and philanthropists. I argue that the debate between individualism and collectivism in this journal results in a bifurcated model of self-help that attempts to balance individualist and communitarian concerns, in addition to working and middle-class heroines. This bifurcation is particularly obvious in a novella, *Mary Ormond, Trade Unionist*, that was serialized in fifteen chapters in *The Women’s Union Journal* from January 1881 until March 1882. This version of self-help called for various classes of women and men to cooperate in the fight against material inequalities, and involved a growing recognition that working-class women were important participants in the feminist struggle.

Important feminist historical studies on women’s involvement in industrialism and labour have charted women’s early contributions to Owenism (Taylor), Chartism (Schwarzkopf), or have addressed the complex interplay between gender and class in British labour history, primarily in the context of industrial and social problem literature (Neetens; Rosen; Bodenheimer; Zlotnick; Gallagher; Johnson; Thomson).\(^8^0\) Few studies

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\(^8^0\) These literary analyses focus typically on Victorian industrial middle-class novels—Dickens’s *Hard Times*, Brontë’s *Shirley*, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Helen Fleetwood*, Disraeli’s *Sybil*, Eliot’s *Felix Holt*,...
provide insight into the development of the WPPL, paying more attention to the efforts of Paterson’s successors Lady Emilia Dilke and Clementina Black, who served as secretaries of the Women’s Trade Union League, and Mary McArthur who, in the early twentieth century, amalgamated most of the small unions founded by the League into a general labour union ‘the National Federation of Women Workers.’ I focus on The Women’s Union Journal between the years of 1876 and 1886, during Emma Paterson’s tenure as editor, because this periodical constitutes a largely untapped archive that provides insight not only into women’s trade unionism, but also into the changing debates within Victorian feminism during this period, and how these movements, even if led predominantly by middle-class women, were not informed exclusively by middle-class women’s concerns and values.

**Historical Contextualization of Women’s Trade Unionism and Self-Help**

Before turning to how the discourse of self-help functions in The Women’s Union Journal, it is important to contextualize male and female Victorian trade unionism in this period and their respective employment of self-help philosophy to promote their own concerns. With the passing of the second Reform Bill in 1867, various important social and political gains were achieved for the working and middle classes and for women. The Reform Bill extended the suffrage to most middle-class men and the more prosperous

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81 While crediting Paterson with the initiation of the WPPL and The Women’s Union Journal, texts like Hamilton’s Women at Work (1941), Boone’s The Women’s Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America (1942), and Lewenhak’s Women and Trade Unions (1977) deal more extensively with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century women’s trade unionism. Only one study focuses on Paterson, Harold Goldman’s biography Emma Paterson; however, it concentrates almost exclusively on her life story and very little on her writing.
among the working class. As George Howell noted in 1889, it injected new energy into the Labour Movement because “Many of the candidates, who in the preceding Parliament had denounced them, had now to pledge themselves to support a measure of legalizing the unions and providing due protection to their property and funds” (405). Women’s status also improved in various ways even though John Stuart Mill’s proposal to substitute the word person for man was defeated in the passing of the Reform Bill. Propertied single women could vote for Poor Law officials and school board officials, while the Married Woman’s Property Law of 1870 gave wives some control over their earnings (Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* 11).

By 1873, however, many British people suffered from low prices, reduced wages, and the struggle to survive materially as the United States and many parts of Europe spiralled into the worst depression since the 1840s. Communitarian and individualist values often co-existed in uncomfortable tension in labour literature. For example, while George Holyoake’s tract Part I of *Self-Help for the People* (1858), celebrated the collective self-help of the Society of Equitable Pioneers who had initiated the first successful co-operative store in Rochdale, Lancashire, in 1844, by 1878 Holyoake complained that stores in Rochdale and in other parts of England at this time were “co-operative” in name only, because they had failed to share the profits among customers and workers. Holyoake’s friend, a renowned Christian Socialist, Edward Vinsittart Neale, expressed equal frustration in 1880 with the competitive individualism he saw in Rochdale and the co-operative movement: “Does ‘self-help mean to the co-operator anything more than it means to Dr. Smiles . . . whose interesting exposition of its results in the struggle of competition is said to have helped him to a handsome house?” (qtd. in
Backstrom 141). Neale branded the material success Smiles had achieved as selfish help; by contrast, he defined self-help as constituting the “mutual help of men united by the consciousness that they are working for a noble future, and by the firm faith that in promoting the general good they are doing what will most effectively promote their own well-being” (qtd. in Backstrom 141).

In the politically and economically unstable 1870s and 1880s, every group active in the labour movement attempted to lay claim to self-help philosophy. Trade unionists differentiated their collective version of self-help from socialist injunctions toward state aid. As George Howell pointed out in his summary of Trade Union Congresses from 1867 to 1889, “a struggle for supremacy” existed in the Trades Union Congress between the Socialists “who rely on State-Aid” and “old-fashioned” Unionists “who rely on self-help by associative effort” (418). In 1877, the anti-unionist journal, *Capital and Labour*, published by the National Federation of Employers, vehemently championed self-help as a doctrine of individualism, claiming that the only alternative paradigm was socialism: “Self-help is the only help which a man is entitled to take into his calculations. There is in theory another alternative. Some form of socialism would give a different aspect to human life—for a time. But in return for the benefits of a socialistic community each individual would have to surrender his freedom” (“As Between Man and Man” 352).

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82 Holyoake held out hope that the trade unionists could carry the principle of co-operation; he claimed “they will do it when they get advisers who can think above the level of strikes” (34). For other discussions of the mutual concerns of trade unionists and co-operators, plus their frequent disagreement over labour policy, see “Trade Unionism and Co-operation” (1879) and Hughes’s review of *The Conflicts of Labour and Capital* in *The Academy and Literature* (1878).

83 The article “Liberty and Property Defence League,” published in *John Bull* in 1885, similarly warned of the erosion of security of property, freedom of enterprise, and self-help under socialistic legislation, claiming that socialism would lead the population to starvation and death (417).
Female self-help initiatives and literature also became increasingly important means to counteract masculine agitation for regulation on women’s hours, the types of labour they could perform, and for female containment within the domestic sphere. A middle-class feminist activist, Emma Paterson had gained firsthand experience with the Victorian labour and feminist movements in her capacity as a clerk and as an assistant secretary for the Working Men’s Club and Institute Union in the 1860s, and as secretary of the Central Committee of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage in 1872 (“Emma Paterson” 1). In 1873, during her honeymoon in the United States with her husband, Thomas Paterson, a cabinet maker and unionist, she learned about the Female Umbrella Workers Union in New York, which convinced her to establish the WPPL. As a consultative body, the role of the WPPL was not to fund the women’s unions or dictate their actions, but to provide information and forums for discussion, which it did through establishing a lending library, lecture series, meetings, and recreational activities for women, including the first swimming lessons offered to working women in London. Over the next ten years, thirty unions for women emerged in locales across England and parts of Scotland, including bookbinders, upholsterers, tailoresses, dressmakers, and other unions, with many of which Paterson was personally involved. As I will show, the discourse of self-help for women in The Women’s Union Journal articulates itself within

84 See Honeyman, Coates, and Lewenhak for discussions of the ways in which factory legislation and domestic ideology attempted to limit paid female labour in the 1870s.

85 Paterson’s time with the suffrage organization was short-lived. While the suffragists appreciated her efficiency, they wanted “a fire-eater for public meetings, not an organizer” and asked her to leave (Coates 1), when, in later years, they were only too happy to have her as a guest speaker at their meetings (1). Inspired by feminist Emily Faithfull’s creation of the Victoria Press, Paterson also learned the printing trade during this time, later founding a cooperative Women’s Printing Society (WPS) in London.
this tension between individualist and collective philosophies of self-help in order to agitate for more gender- and class-inclusive versions of labour and feminism.

**Self-Help and Women’s Trade Unionism**

*The Women’s Union Journal* constituted rich textual ground in which general discussions of unionism and women’s unionism flourished throughout its existence from 1876 to 1890, enjoying a wide range of contributors, genres, and ideological positions.86 In its published reports of league, union, and TUC meetings, this periodical provides insight into the views of upper- and middle-class supporters of the WPPL, and working-class male and female unionists through the direct and indirect quotations of the proceedings. It also features articles written by clergymen, trade dispute arbitrators, and prominent feminists, and various editorials by a working-class writer who identifies as “A Factory Woman,” and opinion pieces and stories by John W. Overton (often referred to as J.W.O).87 This publication also frequently quotes or includes excerpts from a wide range of penny and half-penny newspapers, such as *Pall Mall Gazette, The Standard,* and *The Echo;* national and transnational newspapers, such as *The Times* and *New York Daily Tribune;* working-class labour and radical journals, such as *The Bee-Hive* (also known as *Industrial Review, Social and Political*) and *The Christian Socialist,* and women’s periodicals including *The Englishwomen’s Review* and the Boston publication, the *Women’s Journal.*

The reports, editorials, and novella which I will analyze cannot offer an exhaustive account of the WPPL and the trade unions. This archival selection necessarily

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86 In 1891, the periodical continued as the *Quarterly Report and Review,* and from 1891–1919 as the *Women’s Trade Union Review.*

87 Overton also wrote *Saul of Mitre Court: Being extracts from the Papers of Mr. Godshill,* which was printed in London for private circulation in 1879.
excludes the voices of many thousands of working women who did not join the women’s unions for financial, personal, or political reasons. Rather than claiming to offer the evidence of “experience” (Scott 20), a type of historical writing that, as Joan Scott warns, attempts to articulate an essentialist ontological account of groups typically excluded from history, I hope to show how the discourse of self-help is fundamentally part of the discursive processes by which social movements like women’s trade unionism and feminism are constituted and women’s subjectivities produced. Tension between individualist and communitarian views of self-help is characteristic not only of the journal’s nonfictional articles and editorials, but also plays out in the fictional work, contributing to the fashioning of a new trade unionism and feminism in which the relationship between the individual and the community is continually contested in an effort to achieve more equality for all British people, not just for select members of the middle class.

The ways in which self-help discourse figures in this journal represents a departure from the manner in which mid-century texts fashion a version of the female middle-class liberal subject who improved herself and others through self-help values including self-dependence, perseverance, self-culture, thrift, self-denial, and altruism. Paterson and other unionists often challenge the mindset of the middle classes and working-class men who believe they know what is best for the working classes, and credit working women with the ability to manage their own affairs. For example, in an article on a resolution moved by TUC Staffordshire delegate, Mr. Juggins, to prohibit girls under fourteen from working in the nail-making trade, Juggins’s views on female nail-making are quoted at length, followed by Mrs. Paterson’s objection to his resolution
and contention that working-class women are authorities on the labour issues that affect them. Juggins’s chief arguments against young females working in the nail trade include that the work is too rough, and that the girls must work side by side with men (“Women as Nail Makers” 99), objections that reflect the Victorian cultural “obsession with working-class women’s sexual morality and . . . that factory girls were sexually precocious and the factories hotbeds of promiscuity” (Johnson 5). Juggins also contends that wherever there is a predominance of women employed, the wages will be miserably low for women and men (“Women as Nail Makers” 100). Wages ought not to be determined by female labour, he argues, “because she [a woman] had only to support herself, and if she managed to get sufficient for that, she seemed to think she was earning a comfortable wage” (100). Juggins offers the flawed view that most women who work do not have dependents to support, a notion that can be interpreted in light of what Patricia E. Johnson and Katrina Honeyman note as the common attempt of working-class men to represent themselves as “breadwinners” and the majority of women as primarily domesticated non-waged workers, in order to push for their exclusion from the workplace. Unlike earlier self-help texts that focused on working roles for single women, particularly unmarried middle-class women, Paterson acknowledges that many British women, both single and married, have children and dependents who require their support.88

Paterson rejects Juggins’s resolution primarily by pointing out that low wages are not the fault of women but have resulted from “the keen competition among the small

88 See also Paterson’s “The Position of Women Engaged in Handicrafts,” which argues that the perception that women should be paid less than married men is a logical fallacy that presumes that all women who work are not the primary breadwinners and that all working men are married.
masters” (“Women as Nailmakers” 3), the “small masters” typically constituting working-class members of the labour aristocracy who occupied the same social strata as artisans and shopkeepers. As Sally Mitchell notes, the skilled artisanal class “formed a separate subclass within the working class, with differences in education, training, interests, and way of life. Artisans such as saddlers, shoemakers, bakers, and builders sometimes became employers and set up their own shops, thus occupying a borderline territory between working and middle classes” (Daily Life in Victorian England 15).

Paterson levels her attack at both corrupt working-class and middle-class masters through an interesting rhetorical move that privileges working-class understanding of the corruption of the working-class masters and middle-class female overseers, as this knowledge is expressed in a song. This manoeuvre points to the sense that artistic forms were every bit as important as nonfictional forms for laying the discursive groundwork for more inclusive unionist and feminist models. As Paterson indicates, John Coley’s “The Nailer’s Song” had been sung by workers in Staffordshire for the past seventy years, a printed copy of which she was only able to locate with the help of another league member, Miss Brown, and in this song “No women are mentioned as workers; only one as an employer; ‘as bad,’ unhappily, ‘as all the rest’” (“Women as Nailmakers” 3). A seemingly blithe and jocular rhyming song, it criticizes first the masters and then “a Lady in the trade / for a time she seemed the best. / But now, alas! We have to say / She’s as bad as all the rest” (3), and makes the pointed observations that management roles are not always restricted to male members of the labour aristocracy, but can be occupied by middle-class ladies too who, like the male masters, wield their power unfairly over working-class people.
Rather than employing a middle-class literary example as a teaching tool to instruct working people, Paterson invests this oral, working-class form with the power to point out the unfair practices of working-class and female managers and the need for men and women workers to come together to demand fairer wages. Ending the article with a reference to the collective “we” of the WPPL that differentiates this female organization from Mr. Juggins’s narrow views, Paterson invites men to broaden their understanding of women’s challenges as individuals and as a group by inviting them to join male unions: “We advise Mr. Juggins to invite the women to join his trade union, instead of trying to ‘ameliorate their condition’ by the harsh and undeviating operation of a law forbidding them to work” (3). She envisions a new social arrangement that will lead to more fairness not only between the classes, an outcome also desired among male unionists, but also more equitable relationships between men and women.

Paterson’s resistance to the nail makers’ resolution was not unusual. Indeed she routinely opposed restrictive legislation on female employment, such as the Factory and Workshops Acts Consolidation Commission in 1876, which regulated women’s workshop time at ten and a half hours per day (“Emma Paterson”; Gill; Coates). Her primary criticism of this act was not that women’s hours were reduced, but that such forms of regulation depressed wages and could never be as effective “as measures initiated and watched over by the workers themselves” (Paterson, “The Position of Women Engaged in Handicrafts” 4).

Various other writers in The Women’s Union Journal supported this view that working women could manage their own affairs. According to the report of the annual meeting of the WPPL in 1884, Mrs. Bowen, Assistant Secretary of the Portsmouth Stay
Workers’ Union, stated that most of the women’s unions had not required help or advice from anyone outside of the working classes: “They have done their work so successfully because those who founded, and those who carried them on, were the workers themselves, they knew the evils by personal contact, and therefore were best fitted to evolve the needed remedies” (“Annual Meeting of the League” 62). In the same report, Hodgson Pratt, who founded the International Arbitration and Peace Association, praised Mrs. Paterson for attempting to establish cooperation among all classes of women:

Mrs. Paterson, being placed midway between the actual workingwomen and their wealthier sisters; has succeeded (on the one hand) in arousing women to a sense of their duty to themselves and one another, and on the other hand, in arousing the class having more leisure, and wealth, to a sense of their duty to the former. (63)

This more collaborative model of self-help for women was not free from disagreement over what constituted self-help and bald self-interest, however. The debate oscillated often uneasily between individualistic and socialistic philosophies, as is particularly obvious in the context of editorials and opinion pieces in the journal. A regular contributor, Henry Crompton, a prominent lawyer and arbitrator for unions, refuted self-help ideals altogether because of their association with Samuel Smiles. His opinion column “The Union of Women,” printed in October, 1878, argues that

The true worship of success is the recognition of the succession of efforts; not the sham worship of success like that of Mr. Smiles who, in his books, idealises and glorifies the men who have got on in the world. Let us have faith in small efforts, in the patient, persevering discharge of humble duties. (65)
Hodgson maintains that self-help is really just another word for the “treader on others” (66), insisting that this competitive, individualistic philosophy is antithetical to the convictions of unionists who know that their “sole strength lies in association” (66). At least one angry reader, Ellen C. Clayton, took exception to Crompton’s views of Smiles’s self-help philosophy:

It has been said that Mr. Smiles, in idealizing and glorifying the success of such noble souls as these, has praised them for getting on in the world, and following Jago’s advice in gathering up the riches that success mostly—but not always—brings. Mr. Smiles has helped to idealize and glorify labour. He has helped to surround with a glamour the hard earned virtues of Industry, Perseverance, and Self Culture. (83)

In this editorial, Clayton places rhetorical pressure on the notion of “self-sacrifice,” a Christian value that Victorian domestic ideology deployed frequently, especially in reference to women, who were supposed to be self-denying and not self-seeking. She dismisses as a “hollow sham” Clayton’s religious and, arguably, masculine claim that it is self-sacrifice, not self-help, that leads men or women to unionize. While admitting that it is true that some people are driven by greed and narcissism, she concludes “such are not the people whose names glow from Mr. Smiles’s pages” (83). The same reverence that Clayton expresses for biographical sketches of distinguished individuals circulates elsewhere in the journal, such as in the column “Sketches of Eminent Women.” Mary Wortley Montagu’s support of the vaccine for smallpox, Adelaide Anne Procter’s desire

89 In another editorial “Live for Others,” published in The Women’s Union Journal in January, 1879, Crompton similarly derides the egoism of Smilesian self-help by adopting Thomas à Kempis’s Christian argument, “For whatever instance a person seeketh himself, there he falleth from love” (qtd. in Crompton 1).
to balance her own poetic interests with the greater good of society, and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous abolitionist novel comprise some of the illustrations, which follow in a tradition of Smilesian self-help biography and earlier self-help texts for middle-class women.  

The predominant type of self-help that circulates in this periodical, however, focuses more explicitly on trade unionism and communitarianism than on the positive social implications of individual achievement. A regular letter contributor, signing her epistles as “A Factory Woman,” addressed labour issues in relationship to other forms of female oppression, for example, the need for a domestic servants’ union that would counter the disgracefully low wages that drove women to prostitution (“Domestic Servants” 97). She argued for the dissolution of middle-class charitable practices of sending fallen women to penitentiaries and Magdalene houses without pressuring men of their classes to change. In another correspondence on May 1, 1884, “A Factory Woman” employs humour and sarcasm as rhetorical strategies, claiming to hate unions and to love paternalism in a manner that is ridiculous and, ultimately, represents the opposite of she really thinks. Her tongue is planted firmly in her cheek when she implies that the working man’s preference of “self-help and independence to the so-called charity of his masters” (“Picking Up Gold and Silver” 49) must mean that he is ungrateful to his masters who have given him religious freedom, free speech, free press, the franchise and education for his children, factory inspectors, and an employers’ liability act. Stating that the British working men now sit in Parliament making laws for their masters, she asks when will

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90 For discussions of how Victorian men and women revered biographies as pedagogical models that attested to the far-reaching implications of individual self-help, see David Amigoni’s *Victorian Biography* and Alison Booth’s “Men and Women of the Time: Victorian Prosopographies” and *How to Make it as a Woman*. 
“they ‘rest and be thankful?’ Why should trade unionists be so anxious to pull the
government labourer up to their own level, why give him the franchise the ‘serf of the
soil’ who has existed so long in mouldy cheese and rancid bacon, why take him from the
wet mud floor and leaky thatch?” (49). A Factory Woman assumes the audacious tone of
a member of the upper or middle classes by indicating that the poorest labourers should
not possess the vote, but at the same time, deploys visceral images of spoiled foods,
comprising the diet of the most humble working classes, to suggest, through sarcasm, that
the reasoning of the propertied classes is flawed and corrupt.

She goes on to suggest that working-class trade unionists have overlooked the
concerns of working-class women, launching her attack in support of working women at
specific workmen who write for the periodical. She states that while many male trade
unionists claim to be troubled by the destitution of many working-class women, judging
by the “published opinions of their own class, such as Caliban, London Artizan and
J.W.O in this Journal, higher wages to women working in trades would only lead them
into habits of extravagance. In addition to other depravities they might acquire a vicious
taste for beef and mutton” (49). This time, A Factory Woman gestures towards another
matter of rights, woman’s right to higher wages, and again utilizes food imagery but, in
this case, types of food that the poorest members of the working classes could never hope
to afford, particularly female workers with dependent family members. She exposes
working men’s argument that higher wages for females may lead to extravagant tastes as
biased and unfounded.

The philanthropy of middle-class masters towards working women, she suggests,
is also faulty, because it fails to address how middle-class men contribute to the
oppression of working-class females and keep these women trapped within professions such as prostitution: “We must not speak irreverently of the employers of female labour who from philanthropic motives do not pay high wages as many of the gentlemen subscribe handsomely to the noblest charities, refuges, homes, and penitentiaries for fallen women” (49). A Factory Woman’s castigation of working-class and middle-class men for their maltreatment of female workers mirrors Mrs. Paterson’s views that working-class male trade unionists like Mr. Juggins, who aimed to bar women from the nailmaking trade, as well as their middle-class masters, often treated women like second-class citizens rather than taking their grievances seriously.

The self-help model typically promoted in *The Women’s Union Journal* did not support the moral values of “saving” class or gender others, and saw the ironies of middle-class attempts to teach poor people the values of work and thrift, especially when the middle classes were, in many ways, responsible for the unfortunate conditions of many working-class people. Although “A Factory Woman” criticizes “J.W.O.” and some of the other working-class male contributors to the journal for hindering women’s access to better material conditions, J.W.O. actually shares this woman’s resentment towards condescending middle-class philanthropy and morality. In an instalment of “Flotsam” (1885), a long-running editorial, J.W.O. knocks Smiles’s book *Thrift* (1875), a text that paradoxically promotes co-operative stores, banking schemes for the working classes, and praises the work of the Rochdale Pioneers, but at the same time, derides workers’ strikes and opposes socialism, stating that capitalism, competition, and individualism are essential to the betterment of the nation (*Thrift* 205-7). J. W. O. writes of Smiles’s work—“A few years ago ‘Thrift’ was stumped a good deal in working-class districts. I
always thought it rather a superfluous work, and since the ‘depression’ set in lessons in
skinning flints have been less needed than ever” (“Flotsam” 100)—wryly suggesting that
Smiles’s self-help ideas of money management for the working classes are particularly
pointless and insulting during a period of depression. Laudning Christian Socialism for
instituting forms of co-operation, J. W. O. pays homage to the socialistic basis for co-
operation, which Smiles comfortably avoids in Thrift. J. W. O. warns of extreme forms of
aetheistic socialism that threaten more violent actions than strikes and remove the
possibility of materially improving one’s conditions (“Flotsam” 1884, 66). He views
trade unionism as a useful “buffer” between socialism and capitalism that recognizes
capitalists and workmen as “interdependent on each other” and that does not “hinder a
workman from becoming a capitalist” (“Flotsam” 1886, 64).

J.W.O.’s openness to Christian Socialism yet wariness of radical socialism align
themselves with Paterson’s political views as editor, as she frequently allotted space to
the Christian Socialist minister Stuart Headlam, printed Headlam’s The Church Reformer
through the Women’s Printing Society, and advertised The Christian Socialist newspaper.
However, when Headlam proposed a resolution at the league conference in 1886
suggesting that the WPPL focus more on the “protective” rather than the “provident” side
of trade unionism, and become more politically committed to the better distribution of
wealth, Paterson objected to it. While agreeing with the protective focus of Headlam’s
resolution, she stated that she could not support the second half because “it would make it
impossible for all persons who, like myself, are opposed to Socialism, to co-operate with
the League in future” (“The League Conference” 96). She claimed that the WPPL still
needed the support of well-to-do people, many of whom would withdraw their funds if
the resolution carried. Interestingly, J.W. Overton, also known as J. W. O., seconded Paterson’s objection.

The self-help propagated in the context of this periodical aimed for a middle ground between capitalist competition and total socialistic breakdown of capital and labour. J. W. O., like women writers for *The Women’s Union Journal*, envisioned a form of self-help in which middle- and working-class women would act as coadjutors in the fight for better working conditions and opportunities for women, and obtain male support for their cause. This model of self-help is perhaps most obvious in J. W. Overton’s novella *Mary Ormond, Trade Unionist* in which a typical plot motif of domestic fiction—the middle-class heroine who reforms a lesser, working-class character—is replaced with the co-development of middle-class and working-class heroines who secure widespread support for female trade unionism and other women’s issues. Overton’s work is unlike mid-Victorian industrial novels in that it does not concentrate primarily on the trade unionism of men or relegate working-class women to marginal or domestic positions. As Patricia Johnston notes, novels like Dickens’s *Hard Times*, Eliot’s *Felix Holt*, and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* and *Mary Barton*, in which women are typically killed off, mutilated, or sexually fallen, allocate working-class women to the margins of paid working experience, “revealing the power of domestic ideology and the ways in which working-class women continue to disrupt its compromises” (12).

Overton’s novella begins expectantly enough as a third-person narrative centering on a middle-class heroine, Mary, the daughter of a retired Dissenting Minister. However, the story quickly contradicts its focus on the individual heroine when Mary helps her widowed father compile a collective biography, a “History of Independency in England,”
which had “done much to bring out all the girl’s innate love of the brave and true by
giving it examples for emulation” (J. W. O., Mary Ormond 9). While putting together the
first draft, the old man falls into a slumber from which he never awakes (9). This moment
signals that the collective biography of eminent role models, a form that was lauded in
Smiles’s Self-Help as a basis for emulation and individual development, is a dying form.
The scene then jumps ahead to two years later when Mary moves to a small mill town,
Gunston, the site of her father’s former parish, and teaches Sunday School alongside
various working-class people. The third-person narrative position is co-opted by a first-
person narrator, one of the former Sunday School students, which reinforces a departure
from the third-person omniscient narrator of collective biographies and other industrial
novels, instead representing a voice from the working-class community itself.

What follows is a harsh indictment of the Sunday School system, a movement
which, according to Thomas Laqueur’s Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and
Working Class Culture, 1780-1850, obtained considerable working-class support to
cultivate in others self-help, self-improvement, and moral excellence, and had valuable
implications for the development of revolutionary consciousness in the working classes.
Praising the school inasmuch as “All these teachers were hard-working people who gave
up their Sunday peace and rest, in order to fight the powers of darkness” (29), the narrator
recounts how the superintendent, Sergeant Armlet, unfairly dismissed a teacher, Ellen
Wetherall, for leaving a public house at night with a young man, who turned out to be her
fiancé (38). He also tells of another young teacher, Ishmael Dinumite, who decided to
leave the Sunday School after hearing Mr. Armlet deliver the biblical reading “Servants
obey your masters” and a lecture inveighing against trade unionism. The narrator
recounts how Ishmael’s final warning to the Sunday School audience “to be careful how we accept the doctrine of Caesarism from such men, whether of the one kind or the other; a Caesar in a Sunday School is not wanted, but a man who combines or wishes to combine the functions of both Pope and Caesar is most to be dreaded” (102). Rather than viewing the Sunday School as a positive force in the community, as Laqueur suggests it was, the narrator points to the divisiveness and restrictiveness of the Sunday Schools in terms of gender and class relations, and evokes images of Papacy and totalitarianism, practices that the evangelical Sunday Schools traditionally revoked. He exposes the weaknesses of the Sunday School from the vantage point of having grown up within that system, and undercuts a key institution that could be said to propagate the self-help values of middle-class liberalism.

The text, however, does not completely dismiss the values of Reverend Ormond or Sunday Schools, and the advantageous effect they have had on Mary’s moral nature. The third-person narrator takes over again in order to access Mary’s history and her grandfather’s thoughts about Mary’s guardian, Great Aunt Griselda, a shopkeeper whose obsession with moneymaking contrasts starkly with Mary’s personal integrity. The narrator explains that the Reverend had been disappointed that his sister-in-law, a bright, generous woman, could have become so single-mindedly focused on her shop, telling Mary, “In truth the word did her much evil, but if she could have begun by wiping tears from the eyes of others, her own would be brighter to-day, if she had listened to tales of suffering she would still be able to hear clearly words of blessing” (49). Mary’s Great Aunt, the narrative conveys, has experienced much sadness because her husband and son,
both artisans, had been assassinated years earlier when they refused to join a union. In contrast to her sweet niece, Aunt Griselda is a bitter, mercenary woman:

The blow did not kill the now childless widow, it did worse, it paralysed her moral sense, it stopped her social life, and Mary’s heart is filled with despair when she sees how much of her love is taken amiss, how hard it is for sweet, pure, single-eyed affection to penetrate the slowly accumulated selfishness of long habit, in a lone man or woman. (50)

The assassination of Aunt Griselda’s husband and son by the strikers could be alluding to other labour strikes that ended in violence, such as the Glasgow cotton spinners’ strike in 1837 that ended in the murder of one nob (strike-breaker) in the Glasgow streets. This violent incident in Glasgow provided the model for the vindictive unionist John Barton’s assassination of Harry Carson in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and the initiation oath that Dandy Mick takes in Disraeli’s *Sybil*, which is the same that the Glasgow spinners were accused of using (Brantlinger, “The Case Against Trade Unions” 38-9). At the same time, Aunt Griselda’s bitterness over this event, and Mary’s despair at her aunt’s inability to accept her niece’s affection, points to a tension between a dominant principle of collectivist philosophy—that people’s attitudes, material conditions, and morals are determined by outward circumstances—and a tenet of individualism—that the free will has the power to alter these aspects of life or, conversely, wallow in them, as is the case with Aunt Griselda. As Catherine Gallagher

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91 Brantlinger cites Elizabeth Gaskell’s own acknowledgement that she modelled the assassination of Harry Carson after the Glasgow cotton spinners’ strike in *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (1966), 196. He also indicates that the oath that Dandy Mick takes in Disraeli’s *Sybil* is verbatim to the oath taken by the Glasgow spinners, which can be found in E. C. Tufnell’s *Character, Object, and the Effects of Trades’ Unions* (London, 1834), 74.
argues, the debate over determinism and free will was central in disputes over labour, both ideas often uncomfortably contained in single philosophies or works, as is the case in J. W. O.’s text.

Overton’s novella is not ultimately opposed to unionism, striking, or women working for their livelihood, as the above passages might imply. Successful union activity, it suggests, is synonymous with the combination of the artisanal class and the factory hands, especially the combination of middle- and working-class females, a possibility that townspeople like Sergeant Armlet and Great Aunt Griselda are too shortsighted to entertain. In contrast to earlier self-help works that privilege the middle classes as saviours of the working-classes, this text is bifurcated, both acknowledging the value of Mary’s liberal individualist background plus the need for more co-operation among the classes, as is obvious in the text’s equal emphasis on a working-class heroine, Ellen Wetherall, with whom Mary eventually lives and organizes a women’s union.92

The catalyst to this bifurcated focus and the heroines’ co-operation in women’s trade unionism is the evildoing of Pedo Clobber, a corrupt factory mechanic, who is also the cunning grandson of Great Aunt Griselda. After initially proposing to his cousin Mary, in an attempt to access her fortune, money that she does not actually possess, he moved on to asking Ellen Wetherall to marry him, who accepted him. Frustrated with her aunt’s and Pedo’s behaviour, Mary moves in with Ellen and both women work at the mill, Mary as a sign illustrator and Ellen as a factory hand. The fickle and opportunistic Pedo once again places his affections elsewhere, desiring to win the hand of Sergeant

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92 A precedent for this bifurcated structure is Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) in which the eponymous heroine’s story develops alongside and in combination with that of the raped and fallen working-class woman, Marion Erle. Aurora and Marion live together just as Mary and Ellen end up sharing a cottage.
Armlet’s daughter, and ends up terminating his romance with Ellen by influencing Armlet, one of the factory managers, to fire Ellen from the mill. As Ellen tells Mary, “First of all Mr. Pedo Clobber, who seems most anxious to please Mr. Armlet just now, shows his love for me by throwing my new machine out of gear on pretence of repairing it. I am put to an old-fashioned one badly adapted to the work. No appeal from that” (J. W. O., Mary Ormond 123). When Mary wonders aloud why women cannot have trade unions like men, Ellen replies, “Women have trade unions! Trade unions are wicked even for men, ain’t they? Didn’t Sergeant Armlet say so?’ asked Ellen, with a little sarcasm,—not much—for she was struck with surprise at the newness of the idea” (124).

In presenting both Mary’s naive proposition about women’s trade unions and Ellen’s equally ill-informed misconceptions about unions, this scene shows how, through dialogue, the women are really two branches of the same tree that draw energy and power from discussing the possibility of women’s unionism.

Mary and Ellen’s establishment of a woman’s union at the mill is a solution that was unthinkable in previous works of industrial fiction. Even though a novelist like Elizabeth Gaskell was sympathetic to the position of women, Gaskell only focused on male trade unionism, and feared the mob mentality of union strikes. Moreover, she resisted placing women in factory positions; Mary Barton is a seamstress instead of a factory hand at the insistence of her father, and Bessy Higgins leaves factory work after becoming seriously ill from the working conditions. A later industrial novel, Walter Besant’s All Sorts and Conditions of Men (1882), similar to Mary Ormond, considers the position of both male and female factory workers, and acknowledges the need for men’s and women’s unions (Neetens). However, as Wim Neeten’s points out, the unions’
activities are dictated solely by an upper-class man and woman who decide to lead their working-class brothers and sisters towards emancipation.

Mary Ormond, Trade Unionist, while supportive of working- and middle-class combination, distinctly resists a hierarchical model of class leadership, rather suggesting that the middle classes have much to learn from the working classes. As Overton writes,

Thus our young missionary standing on the shore of the great ocean of modern Industrialism, finds that she has more to learn than to teach [. . .] Beautiful and lofty and broad as her grandfather’s teaching had been, she began to suspect that it would have been more useful if his reading had taken the direction to which Sociologists point, and had his direct connection with workpeople been closer. (6)

This passage challenges the patronizing and paternalistic top-down approach of the middle classes, as exemplified by Mary’s grandfather, acknowledging that the working classes have much to teach them. It lauds the educational practices of “Sociologists,” possibly gesturing toward the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, (NAPSS) an organization that invited both British men and women of various political backgrounds and philosophical persuasions to present papers on social issues, and in fact, served as one of the first public forums in which Emma Paterson discussed women’s trade unionism (“The Young Contemptible” 14).

The text also suggests that women interested in unionism can learn much from the already established trade unionism of men, as Mary learns the principles of trade unionism in her courtship with Ishmael, which leads her to form a union at Thistledown Mill. Before her marriage, Mary discovers “the existence of a society in London which aimed at promoting such principles by the formation of Trade Societies for women” (J.
W. O., *Mary Ormond* 23), an organization that undeniably resembles the WPPL. Ellen Wetherall, Mary’s working-class female counterpart, is equally active in unionism, being at the head of the mill strike, and a speechmaker at the helm of other feminist issues, such as “The Married Woman’s Property Mill” (24). Mary and Ellen’s union and feminist activities also find respect and allegiance from the working-class first-person narrator who reappears at the end of the novella, this time revealing himself as “William,” and telling of his own sentimental attempts at wooing Ellen. While he waits for Ellen to return to her hometown, he attests to being happy with receiving invitations to tea from the Dinumites and meditating on Mary’s story—

a sweet girl who remembered that One had asked ‘How many loaves have ye?’ before preaching to the souls of those around him, and that He multiplied the loaves—the aim of every true Trade Unionist who wishes afterwards to preach and teach higher things (25).

This final passage reflects an impulse towards romantic Utopianism that also exists in the Besant’s social problem novel *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882), a narrative mode that, as Wim Neetens describes, is double-edged in its push for far-reaching measures of reform and working-class government within the couched terms of middle-class patronage of the working-class “lest it break through the safety boundaries of bourgeois hegemony” (262). Neetens argues, “Capital itself has to be produced in a feminized guise—cultured and compassionate—if it is not to be written out of the scenario altogether, and a heroic notion of bourgeois woman as moral savior and reconciler of classes is mobilized alongside the visionary and revolutionary urban aristocrat” (263).

Like Besant, Overton similarly attests to the middle-class female’s Christian morality, and
neither overtly criticizes Capitalism nor espouses Socialism, thus posing no obvious challenge to middle-class hegemony. In contrast to Besant’s novel, however, the image of the revolutionary urban aristocrat is nowhere to be found in this novella, and a first-person working-class narrator recognizes that all trade unionists, not just Mary, are capable of being Christ-like and sharing the wealth, thus offering a form of understanding that diverges from Besant’s privileging of aristocratic and middle-class patronage of the working classes. Embedded in this self-help model are the radical notions that a trade unionist can be of any gender or class designation and Christ-like, and that learning can be passed from the working- to the middle-classes— notions which point to the ideal of equality that underscores Christianity and unionism, philosophies and institutions that, in practice, rarely operate according to this ideal.

**Conclusion**

The manner in which self-help discourse is wielded in the context of *The Women’s Union Journal* provides important insight into the debate between individualism and collectivism that informed British women’s trade unionism and feminism of the 1870s and 1880s. The journal continually oscillated between offering individualistic sketches of heroic womanhood and objecting to such illustrations of individualism on the basis that they bolstered self-interest and not co-operative self-help. Within this tension between individualism and collectivism, the periodical articulated its own version of self-help that challenged the superiority of middle-class female woman, particularly in her role as moral teacher, and aimed for more gender- and class-inclusiveness. This tension is most obvious in J. W. Overton’s novella *Mary Ormond, Trade Unionist* and its divided focus on liberal individualist and collectivist forms of
knowledge, as well as on working- and middle-class heroines whose trade unionism and feminism earn masculine support. Overton’s vision of working- and middle-class females as coadjutors in the women’s trade union movement represents a distinct departure from other Victorian industrial and social problem fiction that consolidates middle-class power, particularly that of the middle-class female, through her ability to morally reform and help working-class others.

The various articulations of self-help in *The Women’s Union Journal* emphasize the degree to which British Victorian feminism cannot be easily classified as either individualist or communitarian, or even as one form of feminism. The deployment of character ideals such as mutual help and thrift in individualist and collectivist models of self-help also negates the critical impulse to categorize Smilesian self-help as a shallow form of capitalist self-interest, or collectivist forms as authentically communal. This tendency to deride Smiles’s individualism in comparison to collectivism is apparent in Philip Backstrom’s contention that the Christian socialist Neale used the term “self-help” “in the same way as it was used in Owenite days (prior to its perversion by Smiles) when it was understood to mean *collective* self-help” (140). The attempt of *The Women’s Union Journal* to fashion a form of self-help that disrupted the authority of middle-class females and recognized working-class women’s capacities for instruction and self-governance moreover challenges the critical understanding of such models as examples of middle-class hegemony. Even Michelle Tusun, who examines collectivity in the context of women’s trade unionism, falls into this common theoretical trap of viewing self-help and feminism along exclusively middle-class, hierarchical lines. Although I agree with Tusun’s statement that Emma Paterson’s co-operative Women’s Printing
Society “issued one of the first sustainable challenges to gendered hierarchies of work by
reforming capitalist business practices in order to provide new opportunities for women
workers” (102), I disagree with her contention that Paterson and other middle- and upper-
class women placed themselves primarily in maternal supervisory roles as employer-
patrons who looked after the interest of employees. The maternal ideal, apart from the
fact that many female workers were mothers, is practically absent in Emma Paterson’s
writing and in *The Woman’s Union Journal*, neither of which are examined with any
thoroughness in Tusan’s analysis.

Although I believe that it is important to recognize how forms of self-help often
privileged middle-class male and female subjects based on their ability to improve people
of other class and racial designations, at the same time, I also recognize that many
disenfranchised Victorians invested potential in self-help philosophy, viewing it as a
means of accessing a voice in Victorian society, a fact which undeniably accounts for the
contentiousness and pervasiveness of this discourse. As has long been noted by feminist
theorists, a central paradoxical process of Victorian feminism is the deployment of
notions of character in order to challenge traditional boundaries while, at the same time,
reconsolidating relations of power along gender, class, and racial lines.93 Still, the values
of autonomy, freedom of expression, and equality that mid-Victorian feminists adapted
from liberalism prove attractive to various contemporary feminist thinkers who argue that
these values would be relevant if more attention were paid to social structures of power
and oppressed groups (Schwartzman 12; Brown, *The Politics of Individualism* 32), or to
emotion and the ability to imagine what it feels like to be the other (Green 168). Brown, a

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93 As I have pointed out throughout this study, critics such as Spivak, Kaplan, Sharpe, Brown, and
Schwartzman have discussed how the terms of liberal individualism were often made possible for middle-
class women through strategies of othering women of different racial, class, and sexual designations.
critic who draws equally on communitarian philosophy, pushes for an anarchist-feminism that would dismantle a structural component of liberalism that she refers to as “instrumental individualism,” which is “based on a belief in freedom as a means to achieve individual interests” (32). She promotes an “existential individualism” that upholds a vision of freedom encompassing the values of self-determination and autonomy (32). This latter perception of freedom, Brown argues, appropriately embraces collective groups: “Freedom as an end in itself, depends on social respect and cooperation: all must be free if one is to be free. Competition between self-interested owners of real property and property in the person can never result in the freedom of all because it inevitably results in relations of domination and subordination” (32).

Beyond the context of academic feminism, in which contemporary theorists such as Brown, Schwartzman, and Green acknowledge the need for feminist philosophy to further integrate notions of collectivism and individualism, popular feminist self-help works often limit their considerations of these ideas to interpersonal relationships. The focus of these popular works is primarily on the satisfaction of individual happiness and well-being. This approach is most evident in modern popular studies and guidebooks directed at single women, especially since many unmarried females often feel stigmatized and lonely based on their uncoupled status. In The New Single Woman, E. Kay Trimberger outlines six major points that will improve the lives of today’s single woman: a home that nurtures her, satisfying work, comfort with her sexuality, relationships with younger generations, a network of friends and family, and a community primarily established through her friendship networks (xviii). The last three points strongly refer to the importance of friendships to personal welfare rather than any sense of wider need for
political solidarity among women. In her guidebook for single women, Michelle Cove also emphasizes “You need a support system too. [. . .] Good friends shouldn’t be expected to guess what you need; but they should try to give it to you once you have told them and if they can, and vise versa” (292).

In the context of popular feminist works that address a more general female audience, there is sometimes inducement for women to cooperate in forms of activism, but the concentration is still more often on self-empowerment and how interpersonal relationships contribute to self-understanding. A bestselling self-help title that occasionally adopts a political feminist approach is *O: The Oprah Magazine*. “The 2010 O Power List,” published in the October 2010 issue, presents short sketches on the far-reaching efforts of twenty women of different ages, races, and sexualities in various fields, including the military, law, the arts, environmental and social activism, and education. The purpose of these sketches is to inspire other women to use their own skills to contribute to lasting changes for those who have been marginalized and dispossessed. Yet, in the same issue, the importance of dealing with unproductive relationships is also highlighted in the article “With Frenemies Like These” in which Kelly Valen, author of *The Twisted Sisterhood*, discusses why women frequently tear each other down and how to break the cycle (150). This piece focuses on the often fraught nature of intimate female bonds and how to fix them rather than on how women sometimes contribute to their own marginalization and inequality within patriarchy; the article’s concentration on interpersonal relationships typifies much of the content of *O*.94 In a manner similar to *O*

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94 Dr. Phil McGraw’s column on managing interpersonal relationships appears regularly in *O: The Oprah Magazine*, as well as Suze Orman’s advice column on managing personal and family money affairs. See the May 2011 issue for “May We Help You,” an article on perfecting the fine art of psychological self-
magazine, Lisa Bloom’s bestseller *Think: Straight Talk for Women to Stay Smart in a Dumbed-Down World* frequently refers to the necessity of working on familial relationships (146) and friendships (146; 208), but ultimately takes a stronger stand than *O* on feminist issues. Bloom vehemently argues for the need for Western feminists to look beyond themselves, towards the living conditions of women around the world:

I implore you to use that fat new brain of yours for self-improvement, sure, but also for the good of others. Use it for improving the world around you. Let me be specific: Use it to help desperately needy girls across the planet, the ones who didn’t have the good fortune to be born us, the ones who yearn to be more than ‘stupid things,’ the ones who wish they had the privilege of complaining about the reading assignment, the mean science teacher, or the pop quiz. (122)

Bloom’s mixing of the second pronoun “you” with the collective pronoun “us” in this passage implies a dual recognition of Western women as individuals and as members of a collective. Yet, one important point remains unsaid in Bloom’s argument: the implied “them” of the above passage, the “needy girls” and women in other parts of the world, are integrally part of “us,” and have something valuable to teach Western women about our own emotional and intellectual oversights. In spite of this weakness in Bloom’s work, this book stands out as one example of feminist self-help literature that recognizes the broad political implications of feminism.

Victorian women’s trade unionism may not have addressed the many forms of discrimination against women both within and beyond British borders, but they nonetheless attacked various levels of inequality. In the pages of *The Women’s Union* defense, and the July 2011 issue for the article “The Helping Tic,” which discusses how to manage the normative female tendency towards helpfulness.
Journal, women’s trade unionists combated the disparities that arose through competition between men and women, the working-class and middle-classes, and aimed towards a more collective feminist ideal. They attempted to place working-class and middle-class women on a more even playing field, recognizing that both groups had the ability to act simultaneously as teachers and learners. This accomplishment was enormous in an extremely class-conscious society. As feminists continue to push for new theoretical frameworks that balance the concerns of the individual with the problems of systemic oppression of women and other groups, The Women’s Union Journal serves as an important historical precedent for this type of thoughtful feminist re-shaping of dominant ideologies and women’s place in society.

While this chapter has focused on the ways that the WPPL and The Women’s Union Journal made advances towards combining women’s individual and collective concerns, the next chapter looks at how such efforts were frequently frustrated in the late-Victorian era. As large numbers of unmarried females entered the cities and fields of employment that had become opened to women, and more and more women became politically active in suffrage and other organizations, conservative Victorians increasingly demonized women’s entrance into public life. The unstable literary and cultural construct of the “New Woman,” a type of female that embodied personal empowerment and political activism, was frequently defended by feminists and pathologized by patriarchal professionals in many fields. Cultural perceptions of female health and illness were closely tied to notions of female domesticity and became complex ideological territory around which this battle was waged. As I turn in my last chapter to Ella Hepworth
Dixon’s New Woman novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, I will examine this conflictual ground and what it meant for feminism at the dawning of a new century.
Chapter 4  

NERVOUSNESS, THE CASE STUDY, AND SELF-HELP  
IN ELLA HEPWORTH DIXON’S *THE STORY OF A MODERN* 

The “rest cure” developed by American psychologist Silas Weir Mitchell was a popular late-nineteenth-century remedy for neurasthenia and hysteria, particularly as these conditions appeared in married women. According to Mitchell and his British contemporary, William S. Playfair, the rest cure was supposed to allow physically and mentally weak female patients to gain weight, increase their energy, resume menstruation, exercise moral self-control, and become rehabilitated to traditional wife and mothering roles, which were the ultimate goals of the treatment (Kelly 48-9).95 Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s canonical story “The Yellow Wallpaper” famously condemned Mitchell’s methods for forcing women to accept the limitations of domestic roles. Its female protagonist, a writer, wife of a doctor, and a mother, is ordered to live for six weeks in an ugly bedroom and follow a strict regimen of rest and feeding during a serious bout of depression, a process that drives her practically insane as she becomes obsessed with untangling the pattern of the dingy yellow wallpaper. Gilman’s story has been often cited as a feminist indictment of the patriarchal rest cure (Kelly; Bassuk; 

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95 According to Mitchell, his theories had been “thoroughly discussed by the British Medical Association, and warmly endorsed by William Playfair, of London, Ross, of Manchester, Coghill, and others” (Mitchell, *Fat and Blood* 10).
Showalter), and has spurred critical investigation into the lives and writing of other late-Victorian married women who underwent this treatment. Another group of women, however, constituted an important contingent of late-Victorian nerve cases: young unmarried women. Their well-being was a matter of pressing cultural anxiety, especially at a time when more and more females revolted against conventional notions of marriage and motherhood as viable choices for women.

By the end of the Victorian period, the large surplus of single adult women “without male protection, support, and guidance” in Victorian Britain (Showalter, “Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment” 11) had reached over one million. The vast number of unmarried middle-class women, in particular, became a matter of national concern because Victorian domestic ideology maintained that these women were supposed to be wives and mothers, not workers. Victorian feminists from the 1850s to the 1870s rejected the labels of “redundancy” and “superfluity” that were culturally imposed on single women because of their failure to marry, and developed self-help literature that agitated for better educational and working opportunities for middle-class women, as well as argued for their ability to help disadvantaged others. At the same time, these feminist works upheld the traditional institutions of marriage and motherhood, as they maintained that these positions were the most optimal outcomes for a woman, providing these were a matter of free choice, not necessity. The 1880s and 1890s marked a new phase in

96 See Schuster for a discussion of Mitchell’s married patients, writer Amelia Gere Mason and essayist and homemaker Sarah Butler Wister.

97 Self-help ideals for women circulated in mid-Victorian novels, collective biographies, and tracts. Some of these works included Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847), Dinah Mulock Craik’s Olive (1850), A Woman’s Thoughts About Women (1857), Clara Lucas Balfour’s Working Women of the Last Half Century: The Lesson of their Lives (1854), Jessie Boucherett’s Self-Help for Young Women (1863), Bessie Rayner Parkes’s Essays on Women’s Work (1865), Josephine Butler’s Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture (1869), and Mary Taylor’s article “Redundant Women” (1870), published in Victoria Magazine.
feminism that proved to be deeply threatening to Victorian domestic ideology, as middle-
class women entered the urban workforce en masse in new professional roles as 
journalists, playwrights, post-office workers, and typists, and developed new networks of 
support with other women through shared living arrangements and social and political 
organizations.  

This increase in female urban employment and women’s support networks was 
explained through the discursive figure of the “New Woman,” an unstable idea of 
womanhood that was described as “variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a 
popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional 
construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women’s 
movement” (Ledger 1). Proponents of traditional Victorian domestic ideology fought 
back against these images of female self-sufficiency and co-operation with their own 
version of a mentally and sexually deranged New Woman. For example, in an article in 
Blackwood’s in 1895, the male critic Hugh Stutfield derided feminist works of fiction that 
championed the figure of the New Woman, castigating New Woman works as 
“neuropathic,” “hysterical,” and preoccupied with “one field—that of sex” (834). In 
contrast to Stutfield’s vitriolic assessment of the New Woman, medical texts on nervous 
diseases avoided labelling female neurasthenics and hysterics as New Women and even 
conceded that soldiers, businessmen, and male professionals could also suffer from these 
diseases. Nonetheless, they were obsessed with the ill-effects of mental labour and urban 
life on female sexuality.

98 See Vicinus for a discussion of how single women were active participants in various feminist initiatives, 
including the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, the fight for women’s suffrage, and the development 
of nursing and other educational institutions. She also refers to the importance of female friendship and 
shared living arrangements for women in the late nineteenth century.
Doctors suggested that the New Woman could effect social degeneration because the energy she devoted to her brain made her susceptible to nervousness and the loss of reproductive ability (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 40). S. W. Mitchell inveighed against the long hours, lack of physical exercise, and poor ventilation in girls’ schools and women’s colleges, and demanded a stronger presence of women on school boards so that “the claims of maturing womanhood are considered and attended to” (*Wear and Tear* 56). Although appearing to support improvements to female education, Mitchell actually resisted any type of female learning that deviated from the task of fitting young women for domestic roles:

> It were better not to educate girls at all between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, unless it can be done with careful reference to their bodily health. To-day, the American woman is, to speak plainly, too often physically unfit for her duties as woman, and is perhaps of all civilized females the least qualified to undertake those weightier tasks which tax so heavily the nervous system of man. She is not fairly up to what nature asks from her as wife and mother. (57)

Mitchell’s British contemporary William Playfair similarly promoted educational reforms for the amelioration of female health, such as physical exercise, rational dress, and periods of leisure, but these reforms were meant primarily to help young women develop coping strategies for their cultural and biological roles as wives and mothers. He presented a narrow view of female intellectual study, indicating that nervous young

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99 According to Mitchell, the North American climate also made American women particularly susceptible to nervous disorders and ill-adapted for strenuous intellectual study. He admitted in a textual note that the widespread nervousness of women had also been remarked in other countries: “Since I wrote this little book I have had reason to believe that some of the mischiefs of which I complain are in active operation in other lands than ours” (57).
women should be forced to cease their studies or else they may seriously damage their reproductive systems, as was the case of one young patient whose menstruation had ceased for a year (Playfair, “Remarks on the Education and Training of Girls” 1410).

Mitchell and Playfair presented specific case histories that highlighted their patients’ disturbing and aberrant somatic symptoms and interpreted these women’s rehabilitation exclusively within the boundaries of appropriate femininity. For example, one of Playfair’s cases was the account of a highly educated, unmarried woman whose symptoms included periodic seizures that “had all the appearance of an epileptic paroxysm. The left arm and both legs are paralyzed, and devoid of sensation” (qtd. in Mitchell, Fat and Blood 169). Playfair dropped all mention of the woman’s intellectual attainments at the end of the case study, concluding that after undergoing the rest cure, the woman participated happily in middle-class sociability and “without a trace of the illnesses which rendered her existence a burden to herself and her friends” (qtd. in Fat and Blood 170). Occasionally, a woman would realize the domestic ideal of marriage after treatment. As Playfair wrote enthusiastically about one of his unmarried patients, aged 31, who suffered from “the usual train of uterine symptoms” (qtd. in Fat and Blood 155):

On February 1 she went to the sea-side, looking rosy, fat, and healthy, and has since returned to her home in the country, where she remains perfectly strong and well. A few days ago she came to town, a long railway journey, on purpose to announce to me her approaching marriage. (qtd. in Mitchell Fat and Blood 158)

100 Nervousness, neurasthenia, and hysteria shared many of the same symptoms, and were frequently discussed side by side in relation to the rest cure, as is evident in Playfair’s “Remarks on the Systemic Treatment of Aggravated Hysteria and Certain Allied Forms of Neurasthenic Disease” and S. W. Mitchell’s Wear and Tear.
While marriage represented the best outcome for a middle-class woman, Mitchell recognized that some women had to work out of necessity, which was the situation for Miss C., who initially suffered back pain, fatigue, anemia, and weight loss after nursing her mother through typhoid fever and becoming “for support, a clerk, [who] did for two years eight hours’ work daily” (178). Mitchell indicated that after taking two and half months off from work, the woman was able to return to work and enjoy it (178). At the same time, he failed to acknowledge that such a long absence from work would have undoubtedly been at a great financial cost for the woman.

Ironically, these texts, in addition to *Self-Help for Nervous Women* by Mitchell’s son, John K. Mitchell, presented the rest cure as a means of self-help for women that would allow single females to retain their self-control, resume proper sexual functioning, and appropriate social interaction with family and friends. This form of self-help was antithetical to the blend of individualistic and collectivist self-help values, such as self-sufficiency and mutual co-operation among all classes of women, that were promoted in late-Victorian feminist texts. In this chapter, I focus on how this medical model of self-help exists in tension with the feminist model of self-help in Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1895). In Dixon’s novel, the heroine Mary Erle struggles to pursue a career first in fine art, and then in the field of journalism, following her father’s death, a process that affords her with self-sufficiency and close female friendship, but also contributes to her development of nervous symptoms as she encounters various male professionals who restrict notions of female self-help to acceptable forms of femininity.
Drawing on recent criticism on the cultural overlaps between the case history and the Victorian novel, I explore how Dixon incorporates conventions of the case history form—anonymous pronouns, third-person narrative perspective, and close observation—to disrupt this scientific form’s objectification of women and to present assertive forms of female subjectivity. Instead of providing a detailed account of her heroine’s process of recovery from an abnormal state of nervousness to a normative model of femininity, as do rest cure case histories, Dixon provides insight into Mary Erle’s childhood experiences that have led to her normative socialization as a woman and to her weak physical and psychological constitution. Dixon then moves from this case history story-within-a-story to create various novelistic scenes that illustrate the strain that Mary suffers as men continually pathologize her efforts towards independence and artistic expression, and present normative domestic femininity as the only means towards women’s happiness and good health. Dixon also develops scenes that highlight the importance of mutual cooperation among women especially in the face of patriarchal scapegoating of women in late-Victorian society. While Dixon promotes self-help values of independence and collective self-help as a possibility for a female-led future, Mary’s final status as a nervous and sexually isolated woman, I argue, points to the political and psychic unrest that characterize the New Woman’s ambiguous position at the end of the century.

**The Case History in the late-Victorian Novel**

While Dixon’s use of medical discourse in *The Story of the Modern Woman* has been noted by various critics, it has been interpreted primarily in relation to the role of doctors in this novel. For example, Lori Duin Kelly contends that the figure of the doctor
in Dixon’s text “sheds light on late Victorian anxieties with the objectifying views and practices of men, in general, and he is exposed as a huge hypocrite” (111). Lyn Pykett associates Dixon’s character Dr. Dunlop Strange with Sarah Grand’s character Dr. Dan Slane in The Beth Book, arguing that they function “as bearers of disease and disorder, rather than their curers” (155). Dixon’s utilization of the case study has been noted only by Erin Williams in her analysis of female celibacy and the suburban landscape in Dixon’s novel. She observes that “By presenting Mary’s past experiences in a clinical light, this narrative-within-the-narrative of the case-study aims at diagnosing her present state, where her brain has become ‘stultified’” (Williams 274). Williams soon drops this line of inquiry; however, it is an important critical matter that I will develop in this chapter, because the medical case history not only played an integral cultural role in observing and defining women’s mental health but also constituted an important textual and ideological form that late-feminist writers adapted for their own ends. As Ann Heilmann notes, in The Heavenly Twins, the author Sarah Grand constructs Dr. Galbraith’s first-person medical study of his hysterical wife, Evadne, so that she might carefully direct “her readers to her own, feminist reading of Evadne’s mental illness as a result of the promise of passivity exacted by her first husband” (130). Dixon’s novel also challenges patriarchal expectations of female passivity, but goes further to highlight the social constructedness of femininity by incorporating detailed observations of childhood experience and gender socialization that are typically absent in late-Victorian nerve cases.

According to Thomas Laqueur, the case study is a “humanitarian narrative” that emerged alongside other humanitarian forms, such as the realist novel, the autopsy, and the journalistic account, in order to fulfill the Enlightenment call to observe and explain
in systematic ways the mysteries of the natural and social worlds (Laqueur, “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative” 177). The case history and the realist novel were meant to inspire in their readers an empathic and moral response (177). As Tod Chambers notes, “On the one hand, they [the novel and case history] worked as rhetoric, justifying the representation of morbidity and suffering, but they were also a call to arms. They asked audiences to have faith in empiricism and to participate in forging, again in Laqueur’s words ‘the causal links between an evil, a victim, and a benefactor’” (qtd. in Chambers 5: 177). Yet, as Meegan Kennedy notes, the novel occupied more emotional and ethical registers than the case history, and often expressed skepticism about scientific methods (par. 10). It extended clinical ways of describing and judging to contexts beyond the singular human subject, “whether it be a person, a landscape, a social system—or the efficacy of a particular style of housekeeping, the popularity of purchased pastries in a small town, or rumors of a bank failure” (par. 11). Kennedy’s points are astute, for Dixon’s novel goes beyond focusing on a single individual subject by relating in disturbing and evocative detail the normative socialization of women and domestic pressures that contribute to women’s nervous illnesses.

The novel also challenges the relationship between normality and abnormality itself, a relationship that, as Jason Tougaw notes, is crucially implicated in the Victorian case study and the realist novel, not only in terms of the author’s representation and the audience’s interpretation of the hero or heroine’s subjectivity, but also in terms of the readers’ interpretation of themselves (20). He writes, “Our stories document our difference from the norm, and our sense of self is inextricably tied to the idea that physical and psychic pathology propels us, like Dorian Gray, inexorably toward death”
Adapting Tougaw’s observations to Dixon’s novel, I would suggest that the vicissitudes of the heroine’s story are meant to connect to the difficulties that actual Victorian women encountered as they attempted to carve out a life and sense of self in a patriarchal culture that was not receptive to individuality and self-help in women. A central fixation of Dixon’s novel is with how the modern fin-de-siècle woman is forced to progress inexorably towards death under the shadowy patriarchal projections of abnormality and illness.

Tougaw’s study and the aforementioned critical studies of the case history and the Victorian novel neglect, however, to consider late-Victorian feminist texts, which is a crucial oversight, since feminist New Woman works were centrally concerned with how medical texts, in addition to other forms of patriarchal culture, labelled the New Woman as hysterical and sexually aberrant. The often demeaning representations of the New Woman in Victorian culture may account for Dixon’s avoidance of this term in her text, a decision that Valerie Fehlbaum interprets as Dixon’s effort “to diversify, rather than restrict, the image of the modern woman” (125). Dixon’s relentless effort to agitate against reductive patriarchal definitions of femininity has nonetheless led Fehlbaum, Kelly, Pyket, Williams and others to interpret Dixon’s novel as a New Woman work. The Story of a Modern Woman, like other New Woman texts, I suggest, agitates for a new reality in which late-century women can realize their individual and collective potential, but the possibility of which often seems frustratingly and painfully unclear.

The Case of “The Woman”

The first way that Dixon’s challenges patriarchal binaries of female illness and health, abnormality and normality, is by contrasting Mary Erle’s mechanical and
emotionless reaction to the death of her father, an eminent science professor, to the overblown emotional reactions of other fictional heroines in the same predicament. The opening chapter of the novel, aptly named “An End and a Beginning,” introduces the topic of female nervousness with a description of Mary writing to friends and family about her father’s sudden death and how, while she wrote, “a great nerve in her forehead went tick, tick, tick” (Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* 43). But, the symptoms of Mary’s nervousness include a sense of “detachment” (44) and going through the motions of life mechanically (45), which contrast markedly with the stereotypical images she had read about “In innumerable novels. . . [where] the heroine, in a house of mourning, lies on the bed for days and steadily refuses to eat” (45). This juxtaposition of Mary’s reaction to her father’s death and novelistic representations of female nervousness contributes to a metafictional moment that suggests that Dixon’s novel adopts a markedly different perspective to female nervousness than most Victorian novels.¹⁰¹

The notion that a woman could experience neurasthenic symptoms after undergoing a shock also circulates in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century rest cure literature. For example, S. W. Mitchell describes the sad case of a married woman who suffered attacks of fainting, blindness, and deafness after losing a few children in childbirth and experiencing “several severe shocks from the deaths of near relatives” (*Fat and Blood* 162). Although the sickness or death of a loved one could contribute to extreme cases of neurasthenia, J. K. Mitchell notes that sometimes “ridiculous” events could trigger a female’s susceptibility to illness, as was the situation of a woman whose husband bought her “a dress which she thought costly beyond his means. She worried

¹⁰¹ At the same time, as Chambers and Kennedy argue, Victorian literature incorporated and often criticized medical discourse of the day which, I would suggest, is part of Dixon’s intent here.
and fretted and fussed about it until she ended in a state of nervous depression, which she was a twelve-month getting over” (*Self-Help for Nervous Women* 45). Dixon’s novel counteracts the propensity of Victorian novels and medical culture to interpret women as delicate beings who were capable of slipping from a state of female health and domesticity into over-emotionality and helplessness. Mary’s reaction to her father’s death in no way reaches the pitch of female melodrama or ridiculousness that is attached to female nervous illness in other Victorian novels or in popular medical literature of the day.

Mary’s ability to proceed mechanically about her life and execute domestic tasks, including looking after the details of her father’s estate and worrying about her younger brother Jimmie with “a mother’s feelings” (49), actually connects her with most Victorian women who go about their dreary lives uncomplainingly. Mary’s association with the normative rather than the aberrant position of women is solidified after she completes her household tasks the evening of her father’s funeral, and visits the kitchen maid. This woman reminds Mary of “many women she had seen: ladies, mothers of large families, who sat and sewed with just such an expression of unquestioning resignation” (49). She recognizes that the maid represents “not so much a woman, but The Woman at her monotonous toil” (49), a moment of realization that universalizes the experience of all Victorian women regardless of class boundaries.102 Mary’s own “unquestioning

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102 The shared experience of all women, regardless of class, was a popular theme in late-century feminism. See Walkowitz for a discussion of how the feminist agitation for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1870s and 1880s inspired later feminists to adopt “an ideal of sisterhood and female solidarity that transcended class barriers” (253). Murray’s introduction to Mary Taylor’s late-nineteenth-century self-help novel *Miss Miles* (1895) also discusses how late-nineteenth-century texts often promote strong inter-class sisterhood relations.
resignation” to continue performing domestic tasks links her with “The Woman” of Victorian culture.

Mary’s case history, spanning Chapters II-IV, charts the social conditioning that has led her to develop from a child into “The Woman” of British culture, a figure who, although not emotionally distraught and hysterical, is unwell. At this point, the third-person narrative assumes a further layer of detachment, as emphasized by the chapter titles comprising the parts of the case history—“Chapter II: A Child,” “Chapter III: Wonderings,” and “Chapter IV: A Young Girl”—and by the fact that Mary’s name is only mentioned twice at the very start of this tripartite section. These narrative strategies that work towards creating a clinical, objective perspective bothered one reviewer who stated in *The Athenaeum* in 1894, “The anecdotes of her childhood might well be spared. It is an ungraceful habit to refer to any poor heroine as ‘the girl’ so many times on every page, and really at last suggest maid-of-all work associations” (195). The reviewer’s charges against Dixon for treating her heroine like a déclassé subject dissociate her text from other Victorian female bildungsromans that privilege the thoughts and feelings of the middle-class heroine, such as the first-person narrative of *Jane Eyre*. Dixon’s aim is to comment on the situation of most women in British culture instead of developing a female middle-class individualist like Jane Eyre whose powers of self-expression and domestic management are meant to inspire a middle-class audience. Dixon employs the conventions of anonymity and a detached third-person perspective in order to illustrate the heroine’s process of depersonalization through her socialization to gender norms, thus providing a reversal on the scientific process that employs these conventions in order to
probe into the disturbing details of aberrant femininity and to reinforce a normative domestic ideal.

“Chapter II: The Child” marks the beginning of this process of depersonalization. The heroine appears at her most individuated, as she is described as a child who revelled at the wonders of nature, especially “the fat, hairy caterpillars which hung about the pear tree” (50); who loved, much to her mother and nurse’s chagrin, keeping a ball of putty in the pocket of her pinafore “for putty is useful in a thousand ways, and is, besides, so thrillingly delicious to feel surreptitiously in the recesses of one’s pocket” (51); and who held “the foolish, over-dressed, uninteresting tribe” of dolls in high scorn, preferring guns and wooden boats for pretend naval battles with the neighbourhood boys (51). The third-person narrator often assumes a position that appears curiously close to the heroine’s own subjective position as a child, as the narrator frequently slides from past tense to present, and provides insight into the heroine’s intellectual and emotional responses as a child as she experienced the individuality and freedom normally reserved for boys. While the narrative voice resembles the clinician’s for its use of particular detail, it falls outside of the clinical perspective in the important respect of detailing subjective experience. As Randy Stoecker notes, feminists have long identified the distant and objective clinical perspective with masculine domination; they have interpreted the scientist as a subject who enacts a detached and objective way of recording and interpreting the object, natural phenomena, and women, all of which fall under the category of “Nature” (95-6). By piecing together the visceral perceptions and feelings that comprise the heroine’s subjective experience, the narrator counteracts the tendency of medical case histories to objectify women and judge their wellness or illness.
exclusively in terms of their ability or inability to perform household duties and be self-sacrificing, which were deemed natural behaviours for women.

The narrative account of Mary’s childhood soon turns to the limiting feminine roles that clash with the heroine’s individualistic understanding of the world, but that she adopts once she learns to enact these roles. The limiting nature of wifely and maternal roles is embodied in the character of Mary’s mother, who endures headaches, weakness, and travels to Italy in an attempt to recover from her illness (Dixon 52), all of which resemble the tribulations of a neurasthenic patient. The child has difficulty rectifying her visceral understanding of the world with others’ interpretations of her mother as an angel, particularly after her mother dies. Again, the third-person narrator assumes a position that is close to the heroine’s, as it recounts that the child could not picture her mother as an angel in heaven: “she always remembered her in many flounces, with a head-ache; and certainly, no, certainly, mummy never had any wings out of her back” (52). Here the image of “the angel” refers not only to the status of Mary’s mother in heaven, but also to the Victorian domestic ideal of the angel in the house. In accordance with Judith Butler’s contention that gender is performed, the child subsequently begins to dress up in pretty white gowns and engage in role-playing as a bride, which leads her to reason, albeit innocently and without real knowledge of the domestic angel, that “she could be a wife and have a halo too” (53). The narrative highlights the inscription of angelic femininity that is continually projected onto and performed by Victorian women and that may well have contributed to Mary’s mother’s nervous illness under which she “sank early out of ken” (52).
The implication that female socialization could inhibit women’s ability to thrive and cope in the world is not wholly absent from late-century texts on nervous illnesses, as John K. Mitchell warns that a woman’s virtues of unselfishness and sympathy (Self-Help for Nervous Women 24), as well as “the continual or exclusive occupation with the small and uninspiring details of domestic management” (25), may lead her “to exaggerate the importance of trifles, is apt to cultivate worries, and to end, at best, in losing her sense of menial and moral perspective, exaggerating small faults of her own or others into crimes” (26). But while Mitchell admits that women’s domestic roles could contribute to their illnesses, he provides no alternative to domestic pursuits, and blames women for their over-emotionalism, suggesting that they merely need to exercise more self-control.

Mary’s case history, by contrast, cites women’s limited choices, not their tendency towards emotionalism, as the reason for their psychological and physical ailments, as becomes obvious when the girl moves to Germany to live with family friends, the Ottilies. Her experience at the Ottilies highlights the inconsistency and neglect of female education in Victorian society, as Professor Ottilie, who is responsible for Mary’s education, devotes little attention to his female student. Much like Mary’s father, he is an absent figure who is totally absorbed in his scientific work at the university, sharing Professor’s Erle’s devotion to an all-embracing cult—“to wit, worship of Truth” (Dixon 59). Up until this point in the heroine’s life, her education has consisted of a range of fiction, poetry, and philosophy—The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, Wuthering Heights, Villette, Hans Christian Andersen, Émile, Le Contrait Social, David

103 The inadequacy of female education was a common topic in Victorian feminist texts. See Boucherett’s Self-Help for Young Women (1863), which criticizes Victorian society and fathers, in particular, for failing to ensure that their daughters receive an adequate education. See also Butler’s The Education and Employment of Women.
The young woman's knowledge about the injustices of the world, particularly those affecting women, is acquired through her reading of George Sand's *Indiana*. Fräulein Ottilie reads the girl a passage from the novel, a work that explores the fate of women trapped in loveless marriages (Dixon 61). Presumably affected by the painful content of Sand’s novel, the girl falls sick with typhoid fever after listening to the passage, and is left vulnerable to other forms of illness, namely as Fraulin Ottelie warned, those induced by love.

Upon returning to England as “The Young Girl” in Chapter VI, Mary suffers from her first experience of a broken heart and discovers that she possesses no outlets for overcoming her lack of motivation and will: “Had she been a boy, she was aware that she might have made an effort to break the maddening silence; have stifled her sorrow with dissipation, with travel, or hard work. As it was, the trivial round of civilized feminine existence made her, in those days, almost an automaton” (66). The heroine’s devolution from a young and vibrant individual into a self-resigned, mechanical woman of British culture is further consolidated through her feelings of being “one of those much-observed bacilli” that is objectified by the scientific eye:

Yet there she was, fixed down under her little case, while the world kept a coldly observant eye upon her. Ah, the torture of the young—the young who are always
unhappy, and whose little lives are continually coming to a full stop, with chapters that cease bluntly, brutally, without reason and without explanation!

(66).

In this passage, the woman of British culture appears as nothing more than a scientific text inexorably drawing towards a pointless end, an image that is reinforced by the fact that the heroine eventually throws herself into her father’s scientific work as his research assistant, thus assuming the role of a passive helpmeet, rather than an active subject. She commits herself to helping her father complete a great scientific work much in the way that George Eliot’s heroine Dorothea Brooke aids her elderly husband with his obsessive project The Key to all Mythologies. But while Causabon dies before his great work is finished, Professor Erle dies after completing his work “of a clot of blood in the brain, of overwork, and overstrain” (69), resembling the male neurasthenic of rest cure texts. Patriarchal science that treats females at the best as automatons, the narrative suggests, is as unhealthy for patriarchs as it is for females. The final sentence, “And in the tall, darkened house in Harley Street, the child who had played, the girl who had danced, died too” (69), relates back to Dixon’s reference to “An End and a Beginning” at the start of the novel. It points to the end of the female subject’s development and her objectification as “The Woman” in the patriarchally defined space of the domestic sphere, but it also signals that the heroine is on the cusp of leaving behind her father’s house and his scientific work to enter a new stage of female self-definition.

**Masculine Pathologization of Female Independence and Self-Help**

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104 See Mitchell’s *Wear and Tear* and *Fat and Blood* for various descriptions and case studies of male neurasthenics.
The typical structure of a third-person, past-tense novel resumes following the heroine’s case history, which signals a new chapter in Mary Erle’s life that involves her attempt to define herself against, and in relationship to, patriarchal constructions of femininity. Professor Erle’s death irrevocably changes the heroine’s relationship to domesticity, for despite her father’s eminence in the scientific community, she has been left with a meager inheritance. Significantly, Mary decides to move outside of her father’s house to some lodgings in Bulstrode Street, near the Central London School of Art, where she hopes to pursue her own form of self-expression by training to become an artist. However, Mary’s efforts towards creativity and defining her own future are frustrated when Vincent Hemming, a friend who had long ago “obtained the sympathy of her father” (78) as a potential suitor, arrives to help her pack. A conservative politician who claims to support the education and enfranchisement of women, Hemming feels distinctly relieved when Mary announces her intention of adopting art as a profession, since “Painting, especially in water colours, he considered an eminently ladylike occupation” (79). Vincent’s support of the feminine pursuit of painting bears an interesting resemblance to the physician J. K. Mitchell’s contention that photography was an appropriate form of self-help for women: “The immense interest of a camera, well used, and the fascination of developing and printing your own negatives, every one will admit who has experienced it [. . .] think what endless opportunities may be found in the flowers by the wayside” (Self-Help for Nervous Women 64). Similarly, Vincent’s relief that Mary wishes to pursue fine art and not an unfeminine career relates to J. K. Mitchell’s contention that other intellectual forms of employment were detrimental to female well-being—“female teachers being victims of that most nerve-wrecking of all
forms of work” (18)—an argument that resembles his father’s and William Playfair’s resignations about higher education for women.

In Vincent’s patriarchal view, as in literature on female nervousness, serious efforts towards female intellectual development and autonomy hedge on dangerous territory. When Mary asks him to help her choose from an array of philosophical and literary works (Dixon 80), it appears that intellectualism in women makes a patriarchal professional like Vincent distinctly uncomfortable:

Vincent Hemming, whatever he had meant to do when he entered the dismantled drawing-room, was fairly carried away by the spectacle of Mary’s childish face and busy, nervous little hands rearranging her destiny in her own decided fashion. It touched him, and at the same time irritated him, producing the feeling that, as a man, he was bound to interfere. (81)

Vincent’s solution for overcoming his discomfort with Mary’s efforts to rearrange the intellectual contents of her father’s house is to express his love for her and objectify her—“‘Dear heart, I have always wanted you,’ said a changed, thick voice in her ear, and in the next instant two arms encircled her, and two lips crushed against hers” (81). As the remainder of the scene unfolds, Mary’s feminist values of intellectual development and self-help are trumped by patriarchal constructions of female submissiveness and domesticity that are supposed to make women sexually appealing to men:

Why, why must it be? Only a minute ago and she had been ready to face the world alone, to be herself, to express herself, to work out her own destiny. . . . The demands of the flesh clamoured louder than those of the spirit. [. . .] His hands,
which held her two wrists as they stood there gazing at each other, felt like links of iron. (82)

Vincent’s entrapment of Mary within the heterosexual agreement of a marriage proposal is intimately connected to the medical profession’s projection of nervousness onto women and its attempt to restore them to their domestic duties. Although Vincent, like the Mitchells and Playfair, superficially claims to support higher education for women and women’s work, in practice he too promotes female confinement.

The hypocrisy of Vincent Hemming’s position towards women is made all the more clear by the fact that as soon as he declares his love for Mary, he announces that he is going away for the better part of a year to conduct research for his book on the Woman Question. While Vincent is abroad, Mary’s attempts to work out her own destiny and express herself continue to be frustrated. She learns that the Central London School of Art is not what she had hoped it would be, with its drab interior and uninspiring instructor who never pushes the students to improve their skills. She comes to believe that there is truth in her best friend Alison Ives’s contention that the only place where female artists actually work is in a serious French art studio (73; 78): “It had already begun to dawn upon Mary that the whole thing was a foolish pretence at work” (88). A slightly older and fashionable young woman, Alison helps poor women from London’s East-end with domestic skills and exposes them to art museums in the city while rejecting the practice of slumming, which she likens to being a poser among the working-class. Alison and Mary’s apprehensions about the viability of becoming a female artist in England turn out to be accurate, as Mary is not accepted by the Royal Academy, and never experiences the
success enjoyed by other students, particularly her male colleague and friend, Perry Jackson, who paints stereotypical female forms in a highly aesthetic style.\textsuperscript{105}

At Perry’s urging, Mary decides to try to write a short story to accompany one of his drawings of “a beautiful young woman in a balldress reading a love-letter” (103) that will appear in the magazine \textit{Illustrations}. This assignment effectively introduces Mary to journalism, a career that became popular for middle-class women in the late Victorian period, but a field that proves almost as limiting for the heroine as fine art. As Mary walks home one evening through Regent’s Park, she sees scope for short stories in the dissatisfied faces that surround her, namely as she notices “a young woman, with restless eyes and a hard mouth, keeping a rendezvous with a lover who had not yet appeared” (105). Perry’s formulaic picture, however, leaves Mary with not much to go on—“What had girls in ball-dresses got to do with life...” (106). What she really feels drawn to write about is “the injustice” that she had noted as a child in her favourite works of literature, in particular, the patriarchal injustice towards women: “‘If that tawdry looking girl would write down her story,’ thought Mary, as she passed her, ‘we should have another masterpiece! It is because they suffer so that women have written supremely good fiction’” (106). However, as a beginner in her craft, Mary does not yet possess the skill to produce a work of serious fiction; nor do the men around her want her to obtain this skill. The editor at \textit{The Illustrations} informs her that the only reason he decides to accept her story is because her “‘late father’s name carries weight with a certain section

\textsuperscript{105} See the short story by Dixon, “Condemned” which is similarly about a young art student, Jeanne Dumeny, who faces the frustration of not being accepted into a French art salon, while another female student, who is rumoured to be engaged to one of the art instructors, becomes a great success.
of the public” (108). Mary also secures a monthly “Society” column for The Fan, but again, only because she knows Alison’s mother, Lady Jane Ives, and some other fashionable people that the male editor would like to grace the pages of this column.

Despite the nepotism in the field of journalism and the shallow nature of her writing assignments, Mary is “very proud of those thirty-six pounds” that she could make yearly (116), and is excited to inform Vincent of her new career. The night of Vincent’s supposed arrival Mary waits for him at Regent’s Park at the same time as the girl with the hard mouth waits again for her lover (116), and later returns to her shabby apartment to wait for him there. Vincent fails to show up until the following night and, in a mirroring of the previous scene in her father’s house, he pathologizes Mary’s efforts towards determining her own destiny, as he gathers “her up in his arms, the little, pale face, on which overwork had already told” (120). Ignoring Mary’s sarcastic reaction to being stood up, he redirects her attention towards her health: “What’s the matter with you, little one? You look fatigued. I am afraid this sultry weather is too much for you; you must go away. We must get the roses back to those pale cheeks” (121). In a final gesture that absolves Vincent of all responsibility and indicates his noncommittal attitude towards Mary, he dashes off a note the next day that blames the signs of her being visibly upset on her intellectual efforts:

I rejoice to think that you are continuing your literary and artistic studies with your usual courage and energy. Only I implore you to consider your health.

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106 As Fehlbaum notes, the importance that the editor ascribes to the name of Mary’s father may be a reference to the influence of Dixon’s father on her own journalism career. William Hepworth Dixon was editor of the Athenaeum, while Ella Hepworth Dixon wrote for Woman, The Lady’s Pictorial, and edited The Englishwoman from 1895-1896.
mental and physical . . . Remember that work which entails a drain on both the imagination and the feelings is more exhausting than you perhaps imagine (126).

Vincent’s reaction to Mary is nothing other than a “textbook” representation of a rest cure prescription for female recovery, as he recommends that Mary go away, watch her health, and limit her intellectual efforts. He blames Mary for her own dissatisfaction, a sentiment that late-century rest cure medical texts take one step further by suggesting that nervous women have the ability to negatively impact entire domestic households. As J. K. Mitchell writes, “My phrase may seem outrageously strong, but only the doctor knows what one of these self-made invalids can do to make a household wretched” (125). In order for women to reverse their own disastrous efforts at making themselves and others miserable, Mitchell suggests that they should adopt a different form of self-help that hinges on learning “self-control” of their emotions (41; 157). Mitchell’s father, S. W. Mitchell, similarly promotes “self-control” (Fat and Blood 40; 59) as well as “the moral methods of obtaining confidence and insuring a childlike acquiescence in every needed measure” (183).

Such ironic injunctions for women to exercise self-help by retaining their self-control and acting appropriately submissive are arguably implicit in Vincent’s proposal and advice to Mary. Mary’s inability to perform submissiveness also contributes to the fact that Vincent is unfaithful to her, turning his attentions to a rich heiress, Violet

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107 Ebbard’s How to Restore Life-Giving Energy to Sufferers from Sexual Neurasthenia (1903) adopts a self-help approach to forms of neurasthenia that were thought to be induced by masturbation. He focuses on the doctor’s role to perform moral “Suggestion” while patients are in a semi-conscious state in order to strengthen their willpower. Ebbard was a follower of the Nancy School that opposed Charcot’s exclusive focus on the somatic mechanism of nervous symptoms, focusing instead on the psychic nature of nervous diseases. The Mitchells regarded “Suggestion” suspiciously, believing that hypnotism could be detrimental and lead to criminal activity in patients, while Ebbard countered such objections to his approach by maintaining that he never placed his patients in a fully hypnotic state. See also Schofield’s The Force of Mind that discusses the differences between Weir Mitchell’s rest cure approach and that of “Suggestion.” Schofield is critical of Mitchell’s rigid attention to the physical routine for neurasthenics while conceding that Playfair recognizes the role of the mind in cases of neurasthenia.
Higgins. The masculine desire to quell feminine efforts at assertiveness is also what impels Mary’s friend Perry Jackson to conclude after Mary rejects his marriage proposal that “He would like to have saved her from the struggle of the woman who works, from the fret and the fever, the dreary fight for existence” (136).

Although Mary suffers from the physical and mental strains of writing for a living, which include weakness, fatigue, and insomnia (132-33), she suffers more from attempting to exercise feminine self-control at all times, which is especially clear when she attends the theatre one evening and discovers that Vincent Hemming is with Violet Higgins. In an image that hearkens back to Mary’s feeling of being a specimen under a microscope, she feels under the observant eye of the public as a comedy unfolds both onstage and off, and she makes “an effort—an effort which completely prostrated her next day—to look smiling, calm, imperturbable. Why, the very fabric of society was based on that acquiescent feminine smile. She like other women before her, must learn her fate with the eyes of the world fixed curiously upon her” (142). This attempt to exercise feminine complacency and cheerfulness at all costs takes its toll on her nerves and prompts her to seek medical advice from Dr. Danby, her family physician. Danby speaks to her gravely about her hereditary background, the industrial effects of living in the city, and finally, of the fact that many young women fail to marry and stay in the home: “There is something wrong somewhere [. . .] with our boasted civilization. It’s all unnatural. Not fit, not fit for girls” (144). Danby’s view that it is natural and healthy for young women to marry and lead domestic lives resembles the character Dr. Dan Slane’s

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108 See also Dixon’s story “One Doubtful Hour,” the title piece of a collection of stories published in 1904, which also deals with the theme of female self-control and acquiescence. In this story the heroine’s effort to remain placid in the face of public disappointment leads to her complete nihilism as she later gasses herself in her bedroom.
initial reaction to visiting a sick young woman, Bertha, in Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book*:

“The girl’s hysterical, that’s what she is; and I know what I’d like to prescribe for her, and that’s a husband. Hee-hee! Soon cure her hysteric!” (247). Yet Dr. Slane’s approach to female health is more oppressive than Dr. Danby’s, as Slane inspects prostitutes for venereal disease at a lock hospital and carries on an affair with Bertha while his wife, Beth, suffers from “a ruined constitution and corroded mind” due to her husband’s misogyny (518). In contrast to Slane, Danby exerts a more subtle form of patriarchal control through prescribing a program of recovery resembling the rest cure; he recommends a complete change of scene, the noxious tonic of “Arsenic, iron, and strychnine,” and begs Mary to become appropriately submissive and self-sacrificing—“to take care of yourself, to think of others” (144).

Mary receives this advice with silence and incredulity since leaving work is not a viable option for her, and she wonders whom she is obliged to think of, her brother Jimmie who would likely marry young, or her Aunt Julia, who thinks she has gone to the devil by becoming a journalist (144). She associates Dr. Danby’s advice with her male editor’s contention that women should only write, “The banal, the pretty-pretty, the obvious!” Thinking about her medicine, she concludes ironically: “We’ve got to be dosed with poisons to make us fit to sit at a desk and write—twaddle” (148). This conflation of the artistic limitations on women’s writing with healthy female domesticity is particularly obvious when Mary meets with her editor about a novel that she is supposed to have

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109 The rest cure involved a change of location from the patient’s ordinary patterns in the home; confinement in bed for six weeks; the avoidance of intellectual stimulation, including reading and writing; an exclusive diet of milk, administered in four-ounce doses every two hours; a mixture of sulphate of strychnia, iron and arsenic three times a day; deep massage and the administering of electric currents so the muscles would not grow slack and flabby.
serialized in his magazine. This “three-volume novel on the old lines” formulaically begins with a man dying in hospital and a forged will; proceeds to a ball and a picnic; and ends with an elopement, which is prevented through the death of one of the lovers (130). Mary’s editor insists that the novel, as it stands, will not do because “The British public doesn’t expect them [novels] to be like life” (147); he asserts that she will be successful only if she cultivates “a thoroughly breezy, healthy tone” (147), a tone that Mary admits she has difficulty capturing because “the truth is so supremely attractive” (147) and she had aimed to capture “a little bit of real observation” (147). Here the scientific connotations of “observation” and “truth” correspond to how Victorian realism capitalized on clinical ways of seeing; however, the implication is that members of the male publishing establishment denigrate women’s attempts at realism.111

The heroine notes that there is a clear gap between the wholesome, domestic lives that women are supposed to write about and the “unedifying matter” of actual lives that is “served red hot, at the street corners” (146). Her male colleagues cannot get enough of a divorce scandal involving a flirtatious woman, Lady Blaythewaite, who struck up an affair with a man while attending one of Lady Jane Ives’s soirées. Dixon uncovers the hypocrisy of the Victorian publishing establishment that prospers through publicizing the sordid details of domestic affairs while also dosing female authors and readers with false and insipid versions of female domesticity. Mary’s efforts towards

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110 The editor’s demand for healthy domestic fiction corresponds with Phegley’s contention that Victorian family literary magazines conceptualized domestic fiction as more ideal than real, as offering role models for middle-class audiences that would improve the cultural health of the nation (24).

111 Nineteenth-century reviewers of women’s fiction, such as Henry Lewes, George Eliot, and Richard Holt Hutton praised serious women writers like Jane Austen for the realism within her novels. However, they associated the artificiality of plot and characters, as well as lesser forms of romantic fiction, sentimentalism, and melodrama with the inferior efforts of female novelists. Various twentieth- and twenty-first critics, such as Langbauer, Pykett, Tompkins, and Phegley examine how realism has traditionally been viewed as a male artistic domain, and how popular forms have been viewed as lesser, female genres.
obtaining economic and artistic fulfillment exist in continual conflict with masculine notions of female health that maintain that any form of expression and behaviour lying outside of normative domestic forms of femininity is abnormal.

**The “Social Trade Unionism” of Women and the Female Scapegoat**

The novel finally counters the aberrance that male professionals ascribe to non-domestic forms of femininity by showing how domestic unhappiness is the plight of women in British culture. It achieves this through illustrating Alison Ives and Mary’s shared struggle to realize the value of female co-operation in a patriarchal society that continually scapegoats women. As Dixon indicated in an interview with W. T. Stead printed in *The Review of Reviews* in 1894, her book “is a plea for a kind of moral and social trade-unionism among women” (74). Dixon’s reference to trade unionism refers to the ethos of collective self-help that the Women’s Protective and Provident League fostered from the mid-1870s into the 1890s in order to emphasize the partnership of working- and middle-class women in the struggle for women workers’ rights, but in this novel, this ethos focuses particularly on social and moral issues. At times Alison and Mary assume an air of superiority in relationship to working-class women, especially in their involvement with an unmarried, pregnant working-class woman, Evelina, whose plight Alison regards with a mixture of sympathy and humour as she helps Evelina plan her wedding (74), an impression that Mary also shares when she attends the wedding (161). This hierarchical relationship between the middle-class female benefactoresses and Evelina resembles the tendency of mid-Victorian feminist individualism to reaffirm the capability of the middle-class female in relationship to the helplessness of working-class women. But at the same time, Alison acknowledges the possibility of learning from
working-class women—“Anyway, it will probably do me more good than it will them” (71)—which was a new collectivist aspect of self-help discourse in late-century women’s trade unionism.

Mary’s desire to write about women’s struggles merges with Alison’s interest in collective self-help, especially when Mary is accompanied by her friend and Alison’s fiancé, Dr. Dunlop Strange, while she conducts research for her novel at Whitechapel Hospital. It is here that Dr. Strange, a specialist in nervous diseases known for his excellent bedside manner, encounters patient “Number Twenty-seven,” a young woman suffering from tuberculosis who had been pulled out of the Thames after attempting to commit suicide (151).112 Dixon pushes against the anonymous labelling of Number Twenty-seven, as well as the diagnosis that objectifies her as a case history, by revealing that she is the sad young woman whom Mary had seen in Regent’s Park waiting for her lover. The patient’s uncanny reaction to Dr. Strange—“Oh Lord, are you here?”—and Strange’s dismissive remark—“Poor creature! She mistakes me for someone else”—also spark “a curious kind of nausea” in Alison (152) to go back and learn more about this young woman, beyond just her nameless identity and diagnosis (152). Assuming an investigative role akin to Mary’s journalistic one, Alison visits Number Twenty-seven on her deathbed, and learns that Dr. Strange had previously had an affair with the young woman, which leads her to confront Strange about the patient and, subsequently, break off with him. While Strange squirms to absolve himself of any blame for the young woman’s distressing mental and physical condition by stating, “Dear Miss Alison, those are terrible cases. They are cankerous evils, eating away the very life of our social

112 See Lawlor and Meyer for discussions of how tuberculosis was often associated with melancholy and disappointed love in Victorian culture.
system” (159), Alison maintains that, “on the contrary, Number Twenty-seven is the martyr of civilisation” (160). As Steve Farmer notes, “So, as she does with Vincent Hemming, Dixon uses Strange to underscore her outrage with the moral and sexual double standard in late-century Victorian England” (29).

Alison subsequently becomes very ill with tuberculosis, a fact that the family doctor interprets as possibly having being caused by a psychological shock. It is during Alison’s rapid decline that both she and Mary share a powerful moment of lucidity about how all women need to support each other. After Alison exacts from Mary the promise that she will never hurt another woman, Mary replies “Yes [. . .] our time is dawning—at last. All we modern women are going to help each other, not to hinder. And there’s a great deal to do!” (Dixon 164). Mary’s commitment to this notion of female mutual help and solidarity, however, is also juxtaposed with her feeling of being completely alone and “a moral starveling, whose natural instincts were to be pinched, repressed, and neatly trimmed in conformity with the rules of the higher civilization” (170). She feels guilty that her friend who did so much for other women should die before her and ponders the other “Beautiful noble, helpful lives” of women who have been annihilated in patriarchal society (172). It is not until five years after Alison’s death that Mary finds the opportunity to fulfill her promise to never hurt another woman when Vincent Hemming visits the heroine again at her apartment and begs her to emigrate with him to a remote part of France where she can be his mistress. In almost a mirroring of their previous meeting, Hemming focuses on Mary’s paleness, delicacy, and incapacity for intellectual work (180), and holds “her two wrists like a vice” (182). However, this time Mary is capable of

113 The idea that momentous distress could cause various diseases including tuberculosis was a common medical view and is discussed in Mitchell’s *Self-Help for Nervous Women*. 
refusing Vincent’s proposal because she is able to imagine the pain that his wife will feel: “It is not that I mind what people would say—that’s nothing. It isn’t that I don’t love you. I have always loved you—but it’s the other woman—your wife. I can’t, I won’t deliberately injure another woman. [...] Oh, the torture of women’s lives—the helplessness, the impotence, the emptiness!” (184).

This invocation of female suffering as the bond that unites all women and that could inspire them towards a moral response on behalf of other women is a thread that runs throughout self-help writing and feminism from the mid-nineteenth-century and into the fin-de-siècle. Yet, more than in previous self-help writings, Dixon’s novel shows how this sense of female solidarity that is produced through the common experience of female suffering is distinctly problematic as it demands that a woman sacrifice a part of herself—her sexuality—because it cannot be exercised in a society that has not yet moved past the patriarchal structure of domestic femininity. The modern woman is psychologically fractured as she struggles with one part of herself that desires sexual fulfillment, whatever the cost, and another that knows the inchoate desires of female existence within patriarchy. A tug of war between these components of herself occurs when, after Vincent has left, Mary stares into the mirror and initially grapples with an image of defiant female sexuality, and then “When she raised her head again, the eyes were no longer triumphant. They were reproachful. ‘Who am I? Why am I here?’ they asked: ‘To live is to suffer; why do you let me live?’” (189). Ann Ardis indicates that this moment constitutes the traumatic position of the New Woman at the beginning of the

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114 For other references to the shared experience of female suffering, see Craik’s Olive (1850), Balfour’s Working Women of the Last Half Century (1854), Parkes’s Essays on Woman’s Work (1865), Butler’s Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture (1869), Werner’s “Review” (1884), and Sibthorp’s “Woman in the Dawning Day” (1899).
modernist period: “Because Hemming is not offering her the opportunity to ‘be herself’ in a sexual relationship with him—she will be his ‘little girl’ if she goes with him to the continent—Mary responds to the trauma of a split perception of herself by rejecting one self and claiming the other” (112). I would suggest that this moment points to the deeply ambiguous position of the modern woman at the end of the century as she rejects the Victorian domestic female ideal, yet faces the inevitability of living as a sexually isolated woman who yearns after a feminist truth that does not yet exist.

If there is a sense that such a form of feminist truth is possible, it is at the end of the novel, when Mary thinks about her father “who had been blamed and reviled and stoned by the public, and who had worked solely and single-heartedly for Truth’s sake” (189). While Mary idealizes her father’s striving towards Truth, she also rejects the false attestations of patriarchal culture by burning Vincent’s photo and love letters. Deciding to revisit her father’s grave at Highgate cemetery, Mary urges a stonemason to fix the faded engraving on her father’s tombstone—“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield!” (191).\(^\text{115}\) This inscription resembles the mid-century mantras of self-help that were meant to apply to male artisans, industrialists, and scientists who would lead the Victorian era, but in this case, the mantra is reinscribed on behalf of the modern female writer who will lead the next generation. The novel, which began with her father’s burial and Mary and her brother gazing hopefully out at the “big, and brutal, and strong” (48) masculine city, ends with an image of Mary, the virgin, as a female Christ figure as “The sunset touched her face, her hand, the flush of hawthorn above her head” (192). This final evocation of a

\(^{115}\) As Farmer notes, this line is taken from Tennyson’s dramatic monologue “Ulysses” (1833). Farmer suggests that “If a reader wishes to see hope in the end of the novel, this line seems to indicate Mary’s resolve and endurance” (189).
female Christ figure closely connects to the iconography of the Women’s Social and Political Union and its publishing organ Votes for Women, for example in Lady Constance Lytton’s various accounts of her imprisonment and forcible feeding that led to her identification as a female Christ figure.¹¹⁶ Lytton’s status as a martyr and saviour figure also inspired the suffragette fiction writer Gertrude Colmore to fictionalize Lytton’s experience in Suffragette Sally. Just as the female suffrage campaign claimed it was ushering in a new reality that would involve much pain and promise, Dixon’s final scene carries both a note of hope and despair that, as Kate Flint notes, reflects the ambivalence of New Woman endings (35). Whether or not the modern woman will play an integral role in the rebirth of humanity remains ambiguous as “the radiance of her face was blotted out as she began to plod homeward in the twilight of the suburban road” (192).

Conclusion

The fin-de-siècle heroine effectively has one foot in the Victorian period, as she deals with the continuing truths of masculine pathologization and scapegoating of women, and another foot in the Modern period, as she asks the existential questions of who she is and why she is here, and as she strives with a mixture of hope and despair towards a new reality in which women can thrive as sexual and emotional beings. Although Dixon’s novel draws on and undercuts medical rest cure literature, the ambiguous nature of the heroine’s story also relates to the ambivalence of Freud’s early case histories of female hysterics. Freud and Breuer’s study of the hysterical Anna O., also

¹¹⁶ See Lytton’s “A Message to Friends and Foes” (1910) and “A Speech by Lady Constance Lytton Delivered at the Queen’s Hall” (1910). See also Hartman’s analysis of how the WSPU commonly drew on Christian iconography and the idea of conversion in order to articulate the political, spiritual, and moral awakening that many women experienced while committing themselves to the suffrage cause.
known as Bertha Pappenheim, appeared in 1895, one year after the publication of Dixon’s novel; however, the theory of the unconscious was not accepted by the British and American psychiatric medical establishment until after World War I. Freud and Breuer focused on the family as the psychical framework for the sexual drives of the unconscious and advocated the “talking cure,” which involved women’s ability to talk about past experiences, childhood memories, and dreams, and provided them with a degree of agency in the management of hysterical symptoms (Showalter, The Female Malady 158). Freud’s subsequent work with the hysteric, “Dora”, or Ida Bauer, has represented a particularly ambivalent case for twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists who note the tension between Dora’s agitation against male authority—epitomized by her decision to quit Freud three months into treatment—and her eventual conformity to marriage and motherhood, living the remainder of her life unhappily within domesticity. In 1975, the psychoanalytic feminists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément debated the meaning of Dora’s case history, Cixous celebrating Dora as a figure of resistance within patriarchy and Clément interpreting Dora as a figure of subjection, a victim to the oppressive social and sexual structures around her. The difference in these theorists’ viewpoints, argues Steve Vine, signals “the ideological ambivalence within hysteria itself; for female hysteria is legible as an ambivalent sign both of women’s

117 S. W. Mitchell rejected the role of childhood sexuality and unconscious drives in hysteria and neurasthenia, describing Freud’s writings as “filthy things that could be consigned to the fire” (qtd. in Veith 53).

118 In the simplest sense, the main incidents of Dora’s narrative include: Dora’s father’s affair with a close family friend, Frau K., during her adolescence; her parents’ disbelief that Frau K.’s husband, Herr K., attempted to seduce her; and the fact that Herr K. had previously attempted to seduce a middle-class woman of lower social standing than Dora, the governess of his household.
subjection and resistance within patriarchy, a dual mark of containment and contest” (185). While Dixon’s story of Mary Erle, unlike Freud’s case history of Dora, does not focus on the sexual dynamics of the family or include a marriage ending, I would suggest that Mary’s experience of nervousness reflects both her defiance of patriarchy and her victimization, as she discovers there is no choice but to live as a sexually isolated woman based on the inhibiting structures surrounding her.

Dora’s case history has also sparked debate among theorists regarding its generic conventions. Steven Marcus argues that Freud transformed the Victorian case history from a linear and distanced third-person form into a multi-narrative structure that resembled an experimental modernist novel. Susan Katz counters Marcus’s argument, contending that Freud deployed conventions of Victorian fiction and culture as he prepared Dora for a socially and psychologically acceptable form of Victorian middle-class femininity, namely marriage. According to Katz, Dora’s expressions of rebelliousness nonetheless exceed the conventional boundaries of domesticity that circulate in the Victorian novel and medical case history. Katz’s interpretation is adept; Freud cannot maintain the Victorian domestic conventions he attempts to inscribe because Dora’s subjective reactions lie outside of the objectives of his treatment. From a reversed approach, Dixon cannot maintain a consistent example of the modern woman’s independent and collective sense of female subjectivity because Victorian conventions of femininity impinge on feminist efforts towards self-help and linger on into modern life.

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119 See also Gallop’s discussion of Dora’s ambivalence in terms of sexuality, her projection of various roles on to Freud, and Freud’s own uneasiness as Dora’s analyst and interpreter of her case history. According to Gallop, Dora ambiguously embodies both the feminine imaginary and masculine symbolic modes.

120 Freud hoped that Dora could be “reclaimed once more by the realities of life” (Freud 122) and was pleased to report a few years after her treatment that she had been married.
Dixon’s novel holds up the self-help values of individualism and collective self-help as a reality towards which women can strive, but which seems frustratingly far away given women’s continual objectification within Victorian culture. Dixon’s novel fails to offer a model of success like earlier feminist examples of self-help, such as Dinah Mulock Craik’s *Olive*, which fashions a deformed heroine who overcomes prejudice, obtains artistic and economic success, as well as conforms to Victorian cultural values of marriage and motherhood. While Dixon and Craik suggest that the conventions of normative femininity contribute to psychological and physical illnesses in women, Craik simply shifts the existing norms and holds up Olive as a new norm towards which other middle-class women can aspire. Dixon, by contrast, suggests that there can be no happiness for any modern woman until the dawning of a new feminist age.

Since Dixon’s day, a number of feminist aims have been achieved for women, such as the suffrage, equal access to higher education, and entrance into fields of employment that were previously closed to them. Perhaps because of these gains for women, self-help texts on mental health focus little on the influences of gender socialization and oppression on anxiety and depression. Some of this literature is careful to highlight that higher levels of anxiety and depression occur in women than in men, such as *The Female Brain* by neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine, a popular science text categorized under the self-help section in bookstores. Brizendine points out that adult women are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression and anxiety—“This troubling phenomenon exists across cultures, from Europe, North America, and Asia to the Middle East” (132). However, various self-help writers, such as Edward J. Bourne, Lucinda

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121 According to Edmund J. Bourne, “anxiety disorders are the number one mental health problem among American women and are second only to alcohol and drug abuse among men” (1).
Bassett, and Jeffrey Brantley, focus on anxiety and depression as it occurs across the general population, and argue that the underlying causes involve a combination of hereditary, neurobiological, and predisposing childhood experiences related to parenting. Reflecting the multi-faceted causes of anxiety and depression, they adopt a holistic approach to treatment, devoting sections of their texts to physical exercise and diet; medication; cognitive therapy, which involves replacing fearful self-talk with more realistic thinking; and mindfulness practice, which involves simply witnessing ongoing thoughts and feelings moment to moment without judgment.

While Brizendine concedes that environmental factors do play a role in depression, she argues more strongly for the neurobiological influence in mental disorders and illnesses, an argument that she admits contradicts her previous feminist stance, “the typical 1970s stance that the patriarchy of Western culture must have been the culprit” (2). Rather than limiting her study specifically to mental illness, she incorporates various case studies to illustrate how girls and women are hardwired to be more emotional, linguistic, communal, and nurturing. She concludes the book with the assertion that it is time for men and women to stop maintaining a male norm that undervalues women’s real biological differences and “the powerful sex-specific strengths and talents of the female brain” (61). Women’s many options in contemporary culture, she insists, “give women the gift of using their female brains to create a new paradigm for the way they manage their professional, reproductive, and personal lives” (162). What Brizendine attempts to do is to reclaim essentialist theories of female ways of thinking and being in order to argue for their absolute centrality in a new feminist paradigm. Her approach is problematic, however, because it tends to refer to “women” as a self-evident
and universal category without accounting for all of the axes of difference—class, culture, ethnicity, nationality, to name a few—that inform a woman’s individual emotional and psychological lives in addition to gender and sex. Brizendine leaves unexamined too many important questions, the like of which are nicely encapsulated in Diana Fuss’s critique of Tania Modleski’s essay “Feminism and the Power of Interpretation”:

Exactly which readers is Modleski speaking for, to, and about? Does she propose to rescue all female readers, including ‘third world’ readers, lesbian readers, and working-class readers? Are not some female readers materially more empowered than others, by virtue of class, race, national, or other criteria? For that matter, are not some female readers more empowered than some male readers? (28)

These same types of questions, I suggest, must be directed at a text like Brizendine’s that embarks on a project of female empowerment, which attempts to reclaim women’s ways of thinking and feeling, as if the category of “women” and their ways of being were universal.

While Fuss warns against the universalizing assumptions that often accompany unqualified, essentialist usages of the terms “women” or “female experience,” she suggests that essentialism can sometimes be effective as a political strategy or “lever of displacement,” for example in the work of French feminist, Luce Irigaray (72). As Fuss notes, Irigaray’s essentialist approach works because she pays particular attention to the manner in which “woman” has been historically a site of contradiction in Aristotelian and in dominant patriarchal lines of thinking: woman has an essence that is based on biological matter, but also woman properly has no essence other than “to facilitate man’s
actualizing of his inner potential” (72). The power of Irigaray’s theory is that she always keeps contradiction in the forefront of her approach; she reopens the possibility of a woman having an essence of her own without “actually prescribing what that essence might be, or without precluding the possibility that a subject might possess multiple essences which may even contradict or compete with one another” (72). Irigaray also straddles a global politics that addresses woman’s universal oppression and a local politics that recognizes “the specificity and complexity of each woman’s particular situation” (69). Fuss argues that this feminist thinker’s “essentialism works so well precisely because Irigaray both is and is not an essentialist; to sound a by now familiar theme, she is ‘both at once’” (70).\(^{122}\) This kind of rigorous “both at once” feminism that pays careful attention to women’s contradictory inscription within dominant patriarchal forms of thought, to the global and local concerns of feminist politics, in addition to the multiplicity of essence, is missing from Brizendine’s modern self-help text.

In the sense that Dixon’s novel challenges the ways that notions of female normalcy and aberrance, and health and illness, have been moulded by dominant Victorian patriarchal notions of domestic womanhood, it functions as a form of constructionist feminism. Yet, at the same time, the novel’s gesturing towards the

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\(^{122}\) See in particular Chapter 4 “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine” in Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*. In this chapter, Irigaray aims to destabilize the phallocratic order that was established through Western philosophical traditions (beginning with Plato) and inherited by Freudian psychoanalysis. In the phallocratic order, sexuality is defined only in respect to the masculine sex, thereby cancelling out “the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own ‘specificity’” (69). Irigaray argues that instead of pursuing the single path that this order has assigned to the feminine (76)—a process of reflection or mimesis—women might take part in a playful crossing back through the mirror (77), “which would allow woman to rediscover the place of her ‘self-affection’” (77). Irigaray’s notion of crossing involves movement both at sexual and discursive levels, and reinvokes her central thesis that a woman’s vaginal “two lips” are always touching, involving simultaneity and fluidity (79). The function of such movement “would thus be to cast phallocentrism, phallocratism, loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language” (80). In these terms, women’s movements (81) might potentially overturn the masculine exploitation of “the body-matter of women” (85), and allow women “to become ‘speaking subjects’” (85).
dawning of a new age in which women can realize their own personal and collective potential as artistic, sexual, and political beings, points to the possibility of many female essences. Dixon’s New Woman text is a provocative Victorian example of a “both at once” feminism.
Conclusion

REROUTING THE “SELF” IN “HELP”:
CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING, RECOVERY, AND FEMINISM

I have aimed to illustrate throughout this study that self-help was one important discourse that contributed to Victorian feminists’ ongoing reworking of Victorian domestic ideology within a constrained cultural milieu in which marriage and motherhood were the only acceptable choices for middle-class women. Cultural debate that raged over the surplus of “redundant” women within British society provided feminists with the opportunity to argue vehemently for greater educational and employment opportunities for women. The language of self-help, with its dual focus on individual and mutual help, was an attractive discourse for feminists because notions of public participation and autonomy could be couched within the terms of altruism and morality that were perceived as fundamental female values within domestic ideology. Few Victorian scholars have recognized the importance of the rhetoric of self-help within Victorian feminism; only one full-length study exists on Victorian self-help biographies for women and solely with a focus on the making of female subjectivities, not feminist
Victorian female discourses of self-help have been overshadowed by masculine self-help writers, such as Smiles, who have been often regarded dubiously by literary critics as purveyors of a uniform liberal subjectivity that excluded those who were not white, middle-class males. As Micki McGee pointedly notes of the ideal of the self-made man within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American culture,

While the mythology of the self-made man and the possibility of social mobility may have been viewed as revolutionary ideas when they emerged in the eighteenth century against the European background of traditional hierarchies and fixed social position acquired at birth, women and people of color were largely excluded from the fantasy. The mythology of the self-made man relied on their unacknowledged labor and servitude.

McGee is correct; yet in spite of these power dynamics in the American and British self-help traditions, it cannot be overlooked that a tremendous number of marginalized people within Victorian culture, including men and women of the working classes and middle-class women, did draw on this discourse to refashion dominant ideology and to work towards lasting material changes.

Feminism has had a long and troubled relationship with liberal individualism, of which self-help is a powerful discourse; feminist critics have long grappled with Mary Wollstonecraft’s adaptation of enlightenment values of rationality and reason—values

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123 Cowman and Jackson, Tyrrell, and Rodrick acknowledge the links between self-help discourse and Victorian feminism. In the only full-length study on the connections between self-help and female subjectivity, Booth casts a wide net, considering collective self-help biographies of women penned by men and women. She suggests that collective biographies for women contain immense variation in terms of social agenda.

124 As I have cited throughout the thesis, many scholars perceive Smilesian self-help in terms liberal individualism and middle-class masculinity. See in particular Booth, Lewis, Backstrom, and Hadley for these interpretations.
rooted in liberal individualism—to her arguments on behalf of the extension of women’s rights within education and public life. Some argue that Wollstonecraft’s adaptation of liberal ideology within a feminist framework had the negative effect of excluding emotion and caring, notions of collectivism, that were especially important to women given their roles within the family. Others contend that Wollstonecraft combined liberal individualist values with notions of collectivity all along, and that she remains important to understanding the individualistic and collectivist strains of feminism.

While liberalism and feminism may seem like uneasy bedfellows given the white masculinist overtones of much liberal philosophy, they are deeply intertwined and neither the assertion that feminism simply grew out of liberalism nor the claim that liberal philosophy did not draw from feminism can be made to the exclusion of the other. As Mary Poovey writes in *Making a Social Body*, “power is not merely monolithic or oppressive,” but many groups of people and many voices actually contributed to the making of liberal philosophy (18), and thus “the paradoxes and contradictions of the ‘liberal’ society were numerous” (24).

Apart from twentieth and twenty-first-century feminists’ discomfort with their relationship to liberalism, another reason that self-help may not be readily acknowledged as an important discourse within feminism is the fact that during the 1980s and 1990s, precisely when many Victorian texts were being recovered, feminists vociferously

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125 Kaplan’s “Pandora’s Box” is one such feminist text that suggests that Wollstonecraft associates affect with debased sexuality and creativity with rationality (155). Caíne’s *Mid-Victorian Feminism* similarly suggests that Wollstonecraft sets up masculine rationality as the highest standard of human achievement (89).

126 In contrast to feminist thinkers who believe Wollstonecraft suppresses passion and emotion, Green contends that the early feminist thinker represents both rationality and passion as complementary elements in the formation of a moral individual (99). Binhammer and Shteir similarly write that “Wollstonecraft is an interactionist, living and writing at the intense crossroads of nature and culture, reason and passion” (241).
debated whether or not the popular self-help cultural movement at that time was compatible with feminism. During the nineties, various feminists within and outside of the academy looked back at the consciousness-raising texts and groups for women during the 1970s as powerful forms of self-help for women. They felt frustrated that these political and collectivist strains of feminist self-help had been replaced in the 1980s with increasingly self-focused forms based around the Alcoholics Anonymous twelve-step model that framed all problems in terms of individual psychological illness and recovery. Other feminists of this period cited some consciousness-raising strains of self-help during the late eighties and early nineties that led them to be hopeful about the future of self-help within feminism. Today, a robust number of feminist self-help forms exist within a vast and varied self-help industry, some of which centre on how to lead a fulfilling life alone or in a couple, some that urge women to claim their creativity and power as individuals, and others that are aimed at the need for Western feminists to unite for wider political goals. Perhaps because of the vexed historical relationship between feminism and liberal individualism, and the tension between consciousness-raising and recovery-focused materials, the self-help literature of today is still marked by contradictions, some of which hearken back to the very beginnings of women’s self-help literature. This conclusion will begin with outlining the 1990s debate surrounding self-help literature in more detail, and then move on, with reference to each of my chapters, to discussing how notions of normativity and aberrance still operate in connection to traditional ideas of domestic femininity, but in different mutations, in self-help literature today.

**Consciousness-Raising Versus Recovery**
The early nineties marked a watershed moment within Western feminism when many feminists were coming to terms with a cultural backlash against feminism that had become apparent in the 1980s during a period of right-wing ideology. This backlash was apparent in the political sphere, for example with the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment and the attack on legalized abortion in the U.S. In addition, as Susan Faludi noted in *Backlash* (1991), popular culture forms, including newspapers, television shows, movies, advertisements, academic journals, and self-help books, all relayed a similar thesis: “You may be free and equal now, it says to women, but you have never been more miserable” (ix.) The backlash, Faludi suggested, was caused not simply by misogyny but “by the specific efforts of contemporary women to improve their status, efforts that have been interpreted time and again by men—especially men grappling with real threats to their economic and social well-being on other fronts—as spelling their own masculine doom” (xix).

While Faludi presented a primarily condemnatory view of self-help forms as contributing to the backlash against feminism, other feminists separated self-help works into two streams, one that extended the consciousness-raising of 1970s feminism, and the other based around the twelve-step “recovery” model that reinforced patriarchal forms of control. The cultural feminist Cynthia Schrager presented this viewpoint in 1993 by distinguishing popular 1970s feminist self-help classics, such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, from “postfeminist” 1980s examples, such as Robin Norwood’s *Women Who Love Too Much*. She argued that the first work operated “on a grassroots political model that promises to reclaim power from institutions to people through the dissemination of knowledge,” (180) while the latter work produced a female subject who conforms to
rather than challenges gender inequality and that signals the “continuity of contemporary women’s self-help literature with other patriarchal therapeutic discourses and practices” (180). Schrager argued for the possibility of reinstating the consciousness-raising of feminist discourse within the self-help movement. She located the potential for a feminist version of self-help in bell hooks’ notion of “self-recovery,” arguing that hooks “depathologizes and politicizes ‘self-recovery,’ making it the necessary basis for a radical politics that doesn’t simply identify structures of oppression but also works to change them” (189).

In 1997, Elaine Rapping provided a more extensive analysis than Schrager of some of the overlaps and differences between the self-help groups and forms associated with the 1970s feminist consciousness-raising movement (CR) and those associated with a “recovery” movement based on a long-established Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step model. According to Rapping, CR meetings resembled 12-step meetings in the sense that women testified to often hidden personal problems such as abusive male relatives and friends, body-image problems and disorders, and self-destructive behaviours (57). But the CR movement differed greatly from the 1980s brand of recovery for women in that it focused not only on the personal, but also on challenging the ideologies and institutions that were responsible for many forms of female suffering. The theory of CR was rooted in the phrase, “The personal is political,” which implied that the links between personal suffering and social and political forces had to be understood in order to effect social change (57). The feminist consciousness-raising movement helped facilitate women’s entrance into the workforce en masse, and the transformation of family and sexual

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127 Schrager highlights in particular overlaps between self-help recovery forms and Freud’s famous treatment of the patient Dora.
relations. However, the backlash and right-wing politics of the 1980s meant “many economic and social reforms that might have made such radical upheavals liberating have not accompanied these mind-boggling changes” (58). Many problems remained, such as the feminization of poverty, the struggle to establish affordable child care and healthcare, and the double work day in which women still did almost all housework and childcare, all of which made it unsurprising that many women—as recovery statistics demonstrated—were suffering from addictive disorders (58). Bestsellers such as Norwood’s *Women Who Love Too Much*, talk shows, magazines, and support groups gave birth to the many new labels—codependency, toxic families, addictive personality, inner child—that came to be understood and discussed in terms of Alcoholics Anonymous’ long-established ‘disease/addiction’ model (56). The recovery movement attributed women’s entrapment in abusive relationships to “a ‘disease’ rather than to the multitude of social and economic and cultural institutions and practices that socialize and enforce the sexist power relationships and self-images that form us all from birth” (58). While Rapping admitted that self-help was “a powerful, potentially revolutionary, social formation that can and has empowered many to speak and act in their own self-interest and for their own betterment,” she offered a note of warning about the recovery movement: “But it is dangerous to see such formations in a social and political vacuum and fail to evaluate their larger messages and goals in a holistic, political, and cultural context” (59).

Other feminist writers took a less reproachful look at the output of the 1980s self-help movement than Faludi, Schrager, or Rapping, recognizing some feminist forms of self-help that developed during this period. For example, Verta Taylor, in her 1996 study of self-help and postpartum depression, noted that while the antifeminist policies of the
Reagan administration and the backlash against feminism in the 1980s might have led to the fragmentation and dissolution of previous feminist coalitions, “this shift to a more hostile national political climate did not spell the death of feminism” (5). During this period in which many feminists thought that the death-knell of feminism had been sounded and a “postfeminist” period had begun (5), other feminist self-help organizations, such as Depression After Delivery (D.A.D.) and Postpartum Support International (PSI) had grown out of the consciousness-raising of the women’s health movement of the 1970s. These organizations aimed to establish support groups and literature for women struggling with postpartum depression as well as “to work for long-term institutional changes in the medical and mental health systems, the law, family, policy, and the society at large” (6). In the 1992 study *Women and Self-Help Culture: Reading Between the Lines*, Wendy Simonds also maintained that there were some feminist self-help forms, and she rejected Faludi’s dismissal of the 1980s self-help movement as evidence of a backlash against feminism. Simonds argued that any cultural activity involving mass, enthusiastic participation warrants critical attention about “how women think about ourselves and our lives” (3). Even the popular feminist Naomi Wolf who, according to Taylor, criticized self-help recovery works for contributing to women’s victimization (Taylor 7), acknowledged the feminist potential of self-help efforts in *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It* (Wolf 7). 

Today, there are a number of popular works for women that incorporate elements of self-help and feminism, such as *O: The Oprah Magazine*, which has a circulation of

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128 Wolf’s own works are routinely categorized under the self-help section on websites and in bookstores.
over two million,\textsuperscript{129} and \textit{Think: Straight Talk for Women to Stay Smart in a Dumbed-Down World} by legal analyst and journalist, Lisa Bloom, which spent weeks on the New York Times Bestseller List,\textsuperscript{130} to lesbian feminist forms that reach smaller, yet still considerable audiences, such as \textit{Curve} magazine, which has a readership of over 250,000.\textsuperscript{131} Not all of these works are obviously feminist or self-help; for example, while \textit{O} obviously integrates self-help discourse in its many advice columns, articles on self-transformation, and features on women who have claimed their own power to help change the lives of others, the word feminism rarely appears in this magazine. Even so, gestures towards the feminist movement are sometimes made, especially in historical references to women’s rights advocates, such as Sojourner Truth.\textsuperscript{132} In contrast to \textit{O}, \textit{Curve} is a more straightforwardly feminist magazine, but is less obviously about self-help, though articles such as “A DIY Valentine” and “Heart and Soul” on how to reconcile your spirituality and sexuality correspond with the elements of makeover culture and spirituality that are so common in today’s self-help discourse.\textsuperscript{133}

Like popular and academic feminist works of 1990s, magazines and guides focused on female self-empowerment sometimes indicate an uneasy relationship with the recovery movement or with the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century self-help

\textsuperscript{129} See the online source \textit{Consumer Magazines} published by the Audit Bureau of Circulations.

\textsuperscript{130} See the online \textit{New York Times Bestseller List}.

\textsuperscript{131} See \textit{Curve} on Magarena.com.

\textsuperscript{132} See Oprah Winfrey and Gayle King’s discussion “One Incredible Journey” in the June 2011 issue. Oprah refers to Sojourner Truth’s famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” For another direct reference to feminism see “Books that Made a Difference” in the May 2011 issue in which Ashley Judd cites bell hooks’ \textit{Feminist Theory: From Margin To Center} as one of her favourite books. Judd states, “Her courage and insight are really phenomenal. And hooks emphasizes that we always need to consider class and race when we discuss gender. She has the courage of her convictions and such emotional and intellectual autonomy. And she was so young—32—when she wrote it. It’s just remarkable” (172).

\textsuperscript{133} See in particular the Jan./Feb 2012 issue of \textit{Curve}. 
works of liberal individualism. For example, Bloom’s *Think* is clearly marketed as a self-help book, as Dr. Phil McGraw’s testimonial to the efficacy of Bloom’s book features prominently on the dust-jacket, yet the text also criticizes self-help forms for contributing to a plethora of popular culture forms that has undercut women’s ability to rely on their own wits to bring them through life’s struggles: “We, however, have lost confidence in our ability to think for ourselves, so we give our lives over to ‘experts’: therapists, life coaches, self-help gurus, talk radio blowhards” (Bloom 4). Here, Bloom makes veiled reference to the “recovery” forms of self-help, and later in the text when she criticizes the terms “codependent” and “enabler” (137). The recovery movement, she implies, still has a strong hold in contemporary culture as it is perpetuated with the advice of “self-help gurus.” One cannot help but think that Dr. Phil, the very man who endorses her book, is one of these “gurus” and “experts” whom she criticizes, a fact that makes one question how much Bloom indeed removes herself from this discourse of recovery.

Equally ambivalent is the way that writer Henry Alford engages with the idea of “self-help” in his article “Don’t Go Changin’” in *O*’s 2010 *Makeover Issue*. In this case, Alford at least partly accepts a long-established American tradition of self-help in which many things can be improved, including bodies, while he also implies that a measure of imperfection is acceptable and even to be encouraged:

In Egalitarian America, land of self-made men and women, land of self-improvement and self-help, we operate under the assumption that everything—from faces to moods to places—can be fixed or made better. Which, indeed, is often the case. But not always. Some things are interesting precisely because they are slightly off. Consider, if you will, some famous teeth—Lauren Hutton’s
This passage is marked by a series of problematic assumptions. Firstly, Alford’s uncritical assessment of an American self-help tradition in which whiteness and masculinity have often been the benchmarks of normativity sits oddly in the context of a magazine that routinely celebrates the national and international efforts of women of different ethnicities and sexualities. Secondly, Alford’s inclusion of Mike Tyson’s “mouth thicket” in his list of “famous teeth” fails to distract an informed reader from Mike Tyson’s questionable past highlighted by the controversial court case of the early 1990s in which Tyson was convicted of the rape of Desirée Washington. With a sleight of hand, Alford’s celebrates difference through focusing on a single physical feature while erasing the complicated relations of normalcy and aberrance embodied by Mike Tyson, a man who is enmeshed in a history of African American oppression by whites, a history of sexism that has led to generations of abuse against women, and a celebrity culture that often sensationalizes violent crimes even as it exonerates their rich and famous perpetrators. Alford’s superficial nod to difference places his article squarely within an apolitical, neoliberal self-help mode of discourse that leaves unexamined constructions of normalcy and aberrance and their real and damaging manifestations in society.

Embedded in both Alford’s and Bloom’s works is the sense that human beings, and especially women, often look to self-help forms to help them “fix” themselves in relation to social norms. At the same time, these authors suggest, if somewhat ambiguously, that self-help forms can also challenge and refashion existing notions of

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134 See in particular “The 2010 O Power List” in the October 2010 issue of O: The Oprah Magazine. This issue highlights 20 women of different ages, racial backgrounds, and sexualities who work across various sectors, such as the military, the law, the arts, environmental and social issues, and education.
what is deemed normal and abnormal. This continual redrawing of the boundaries of normalcy and difference, strongly and historically rooted in the Victorian separate spheres model, continues to this day. One hundred and sixty-odd years following the establishment of the first women’s rights movement, the contradictions that the Victorian domestic ideal of womanhood contributed to within Victorian culture and to which women’s self-help discourse responded, continue to have real repercussions for Western women and are challenged by today’s feminist self-help market, to varying degrees of success. Charting these echoes is important if the cultural work of establishing powerful forms of resisting the reproduction of damaging norms is to be taken seriously, especially within the study and practice of popular forms of writing.

In Chapter 1 “‘A Faithful and Most Loving Mother’: Disability, Self-Help, and Cultural Maternalism,” I noted how Dinah Mulock Craik’s Olive often functions at dual registers of normativity and aberrance. At the level of genre, Craik protects the sense of female privacy validated in the Victorian separate spheres model by avoiding forms of biography and life writing that probe into the personal and often hopeless nature of women’s lives. At the same time, Craik’s very status as female writer, as well as her choice to develop a disfigured artist heroine in the context of a female bildungroman, challenges conventional Victorian notions of female privacy and justifies female self-dependence and creativity. The disabled heroine’s status as a female individualist, I suggested, is also undergirded by a tension between normalcy and abnormality. While Olive’s disability highlights and challenges the objectification of women according to the norms of beauty and dependence that are rooted in domestic ideology, Olive’s defining character values—the capacity for morality and caring for others—allow her to fulfill a
culturally maternal role that resembles the Victorian domestic norm of motherhood. This
cultural maternalism ostensibly bonds Olive with a variety of female characters of
different racial and class backgrounds, but this ideal actually relegates all other forms of
subjectivity to positions of otherness and solidifies the white, middle-class woman as the
feminist individualist who only passes on the benefits of independence and altruism to
other white middle-class women. Turning briefly to modern mass-media forms of self-
help like *The Bachelor* and women’s magazines, I observed how traces of these
problematic inscriptions of feminist individualism still profoundly shape cultural
definitions of femininity and women’s perceptions of themselves.

Like Craik, some modern feminist self-help writers are also deeply aware of the
implications of genre for the representation of femininity. Contrary to Craik’s concern for
the way life writing forms might disrupt the “privacy” of women’s lives, some of today’s
feminist self-help writers express concern for the manner in which normative femininity
is perpetuated in fictional forms that have a powerful hold on the cultural imagination.
Michelle Cove points out that little girls grow up on Disney fairytale versions of “happily
ever after” (5), while “chick flicks” are versions of the same worn-out tales for women
(25). She argues that while women “understand logically these movies are fun and frothy
fiction, another part of [them] may be registering these movies as reality, and that’s a
problem (25). Cove prescribes various nonfictional forms of “reading replacement” for
women, suggesting *O: The Oprah Magazine* and various online magazines for single
women.
In a review published in December, 2011, in *Bitch*, Victoria J Sanders also suggests the connection between fairy-tale fictions and the perpetuation of damaging normative notions of gender and sexuality (Sanders 36-7). Sanders praises two recent feminist self-help books for single women that avoid the ideological traps of the heternormative marriage plot: “In the face of these pat conclusions, *Outdated* and *What You Really, Really Want* are even more powerful—voices of clarity that resist the idea that we should buy into the archaic sexism of fairy-tale romance, transactional dating, and heternormative notions of the ‘right’ way to express desire” (Sanders 56).

Interestingly, the “archaic sexism of fairy-tale romance” that Sanders describes is a matter that Craik also addresses in her characterization of Sybilla Rothesay, Olive’s beautiful mother, who for much of her life resembles a lonely and helpless princess in a castle. Craik’s novel pushes against this norm, insofar as it illustrates that a different kind of heroine can realize self-dependence and love, which was an uncommon possibility in Victorian culture as women frequently married out of necessity. Cove and Sanders, as well as the issue of *Bitch* in which Sanders’s article appears, hold out nonfictional rather than fictional forms of self-help as recommended reading, perhaps one reason being because of the ways that such works resist the normative conventions of romance.

The cultural value of female beauty and the exclusion of women who fail to fulfill traditional standards of body image are other concerns that modern-day feminists share with Victorian women’s rights advocates. Sometimes within modern-day

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135 *Bitch* is a feminist magazine that engages critically with mainstream media and popular culture.

136 *Bitch* also recommends predominantly documentary-style, rather than fictional, movies on women’s diverse experiences of sexuality and gender, such as Phoebe Hart’s film *Orchids: My Sex Adventure*, which charts Hart’s and her sister’s experiences with androgen insensitivity disorder, and Bobbie Birteffi and Beverly Kopf’s *Wish Me Away* which is about the public coming out of country singer Cheryl Wright.
publications the validation of different types of beauty is undercut by other advertisements and articles that capitulate to dominant norms which, in this day and age, veer more and more towards Botox injections, facelifts, and other forms of “corrective” surgeries. One example of this uneven approach to female body image appears in O, again in the September, 2010 Makeover Issue. In the article “Trading Faces,” author Jeryl Brunner tells of her experience undergoing numerous surgeries in an attempt to correct her cleft lip and palate. According to Brunner, by the time she was thirty, many of her coworkers were surprised to hear of her history, but this was little reassurance as she continued to undergo more surgeries. With each subsequent operation, she still saw imperfection every time she looked in the mirror, that is until she began working with Inner Faces, a group of young adults born with craniofacial conditions:

We wrote stories about our disabilities that we turned into plays and performed around New York. Once, after I told my story at a high school, a student wrote me this: ‘You have made me think about what it means to be a beautiful person, as you are, both inside and out.’ . . . Slowly I gave up trying to make Jeryl disappear and began to focus on what was good in me. (Brunner 197)

This article that ostensibly appears to be a powerful testimony of a woman with a craniofacial condition who learned to finally accept herself in spite of her difference from the norm, ends up being a fairly tepid, apolitical story about self-transformation, a point that becomes apparent when considering the advertisements in this issue—and in numerous issues of O magazine—devoted to Botox and plastic surgeries. Appearing fourteen pages before Brunner’s article is the photo of a beautiful African-American woman with the following caption beside her glowing, youthful-looking face: “Once You
Get It, You Really Get It.”—Why millions of women have experienced Botox Cosmetic” (Botox 183). While the Brunner article ostensibly rejects the effectiveness of surgical procedures for improving self-esteem, its apolitical focus on personal understanding links with the notion of “getting it” in the Botox ad.\(^{137}\)

The focus on self-transformation that is integral to \(O\)”s editorial approach and success often seems to dangerously promote what Naomi Wolf describes in her 1991 book, *The Beauty Myth*, as the effort of contemporary women’s magazines “to keep women consuming their advertisers’ products in pursuit of the total personal transformation in status that the consumer society offers men in the form of money” (29). Wolf explains how this cultural perpetuation of female self-transformation feeds into the professional beauty qualification of various fields, such as the airline industry, the restaurant industry, and the media, in which women’s youthful and attractive appearance often ensures employability.\(^{138}\) *O* seems in many ways to promote conformity to an ongoing code of professionalized beauty that Wolf described in the early 1990s. This magazine’s approach to body image also lags well-behind earlier consciousness-raising materials on this subject, such as *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1984. Wendy Sandford’s article “Body Image” in this publication still stands up as a relevant feminist

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\(^{137}\) See also Bailly’s short article “How Do You Feel About Your Face?” in the May 2011 issue. It features the before-picture of a very attractive fifty-something white woman and a much younger-looking after-photo of the same individual. In answer to the question posed in the article’s title, the caption under the second photo reads: “Pretty pleased, we hope. But if you wish your complexion looked a little fresher, or your skin felt a bit firmer, you have more options than ever—from makeup and creams to needles and lasers to scalpels and sutures. How far should you go? Your face, your call” (229). Bailly provides no caveats on socially-constructed norms of female beauty or the potential danger of these procedures, just short descriptions and pricing details.

\(^{138}\) See in particular Wolf’s discussion of the 1972 Human Rights Appeals Board decision in the Margarita St. Cross v. Playboy Club of New York that a woman’s “‘beauty’ was a bona fide qualification for employment” (32). See also her discussion of the anchorwoman Christine Craft’s 1983 suit against her ex-employers Metromedia Inc. for dismissing her because they claimed she was too old and unattractive (35).
analysis of many of the overlaps between notions of female body image and disability.

As one woman with a brittle bone condition told Sandford,

We are all made to feel that our role is firstly to be beautiful in a highly stereotyped way, secondly to be interesting and amusing company to men and thirdly, good servants. My experiences of finding that I was not necessarily any of those things is the experience of most women sooner or later. I have been lucky enough to discover that I am still a whole and worthwhile person and feel that all those dark years linked me profoundly to other women (7).

Such objectifying images of women as beautiful and amusing playthings for men are precisely those against which Victorian feminists attempted to agitate. Craik did so through creating a disfigured single female heroine who achieves self-dependence and happiness. However, there is a continual tension between difference and normalcy in the novel that is never resolved. Olive’s own capacity for self-help depends on the aberrance of other characters whose repeated efforts to fulfill cultural norms of beauty are damaging, especially in the case of Olive’s mixed-race, illegitimate half-sister, Christal Manners. Olive’s difference from Victorian cultural norms of beauty is also never absolute; her pale skin, golden hair, and meticulous attention to her physical appearance also align her with acceptable notions of domestic femininity. This binary of normalcy and abnormality persists in today’s feminist versions of self-help. The modern works that I have examined, like Craik’s mid-Victorian novel, adopt a contradictory approach, challenging traditional notions of female objectification and beauty yet, at the same time, reinforcing the importance of maintaining physical attractiveness. These texts differ from Craik’s, however, in their privileging of nonfictional over fictional forms, and in their
representation of non-white as well as white women in the roles of beautiful, assertive women.

In Chapter 2 “Self-made Maids, Hardy Pioneers, and the Narratives of Self-Help,” I examined the precarious position of the single middle-class woman within British and colonial culture. Langham Place member, Maria S. Rye initiated the FMCES in an attempt to extend the field of female employment beyond England’s borders. The FMCES fashioned the ideal of a capable, self-reliant colonial female who could work as a governess or as a better class of domestic servant, referred to as a “help.” The organization met with tremendous controversy at home and abroad, as the British public worried about threats to the single middle-class female emigrant’s class, sexuality, and race, and the colonies resisted receiving poor, genteel female governesses. The single middle-class woman was not only marginalized within Victorian British and colonial culture, but has also been overlooked in current scholarship centering on the masculine emigrant story of success as the dominant narrative in the formation of colonial history and national identity. The female self-help narrative fashioned by the FMCES also profoundly contributed to histories of colonialism by propagating and instituting practices of female moral instruction and disciplinary control.

I focused specifically on how the FMCES letters published in *The English Woman’s Journal* and Catharine Parr Traill’s guidebook *The Backwoods of Canada* managed anxieties surrounding female sexuality, loss of caste, and racial difference, by integrating the conventions of female sexual fallenness and working-class discipline that were perpetuated in the domestic novel and Victorian culture at large. These works’ integration of conventions of domesticity contrasted with male emigrant narratives of
success that dealt with colonial anxieties through the language of mastery and exclusion. I also looked at how other less positive portrayals of female emigration, such as unpublished FMCES letters and Elizabeth Murray’s novel *Ella Norman; Or, a Woman’s Perils* (1864), threatened the stability of the FMCES feminist ideal by suggesting that the domestic plot and self-help for women were only possible in Britain. Touching on current feminist narratives of volunteer/work abroad, such as Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* and Mary Cove’s *Seeking Happily Ever After*, I pointed out that while these works may not be concerned with loss of caste or racial otherness, they promote a similar combination of intellectual, domestic, and philanthropic work that was championed by the Victorian colonial ideal. Yet, given the position of privilege that the modern Western feminist occupies in many countries, today’s versions of feminist individualism tend to overlook the power dynamics and social conditions within different cultural contexts, rather articulating the feminist’s experience abroad in terms of self-transformation.

When considering more generally the uneasy position of Victorian single middle-class women, there have obviously been radical improvements in the ideological perceptions and social conditions of single women in Western culture. Women’s economic gains as a result of post-1960s feminism have made single life possible for more women. As E. Kay Trimberger writes in *The New Single Woman*, a book that functions as both sociological study and self-help book, the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s supported women’s break with conventional cultural expectations as well as facilitated women’s economic advances. According to Trimberger, “Today, never-married and divorced women over the age of thirty-five have higher personal earnings than married women. Despite a justified concern about the economic plight of
single mothers, 68 percent of these mothers are above the poverty line, and almost 40 percent are well off” (x). Even though many women can now financially sustain themselves and their dependents, Trimberger is quick to note that this form of independence is not the dominant culturally-sanctioned role for women: “Despite all the opportunities for education, careers, dating, and living that they have in their twenties, young women today have only one culturally sanctioned option for life after the age of thirty-five—as an egalitarian couple sharing work and family life” (xix). Over the course of her study, various women told her that they would feel better “in a culture that views their lives as normal and acceptable” (xxii). These feelings of exclusion are also noted by Cove: “On vulnerable days, it’s easy to buy into the idea that you have a major defect. After all, it sure seems easy for billions of other women around the world to get hitched and have babies. You’re a bright, lovely person. Why not you?” (2).

Some modern single women admit to feeling frustrated that the gains of feminism, which led them to focus on their careers and self-actualization, have cancelled out the possibility of becoming married and having children. For example, in Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough, Lori Gottlieb concedes that she “would not give back the gains of feminism for anything” (43), but points out that in the process of writing her book, she began to see a pattern in the lives of many single women who were unhappy about being unmarried: “We grew up believing that we could ‘have it all.’ ‘Having it all’ meant that we shouldn’t compromise in any area of life, including dating. Not compromising meant having high standards. The higher our standards, the more ‘empowered’ we were” (44). According to Gottlieb, women miss the opportunity for
marriage when it comes along because they keep expecting and looking for more in a man (47).

While Gottlieb practically adopts an antifeminist stance by suggesting that it is feminism’s fault that today’s independent woman cannot be satisfied, Bitch reviewer Victoria J. Sanders suggests that all the media hype about lonely independent women, particularly the state of lonely professional African-American woman (55), just reinforces limiting heteronormative standards of marriage and sexuality. Sanders highlights feminist self-help books for single women that are “useful—not only for unburdening yourself in the bedroom, but for understanding how the media’s panic over independent, educated women (black or otherwise) sends a chilling message to all women about the supposed dangers of enjoying one’s sexual, emotional, and financial freedom” (56). While differing in approach, Sanders, Gottlieb, Cove, and Trimberger all similarly point to the fact that although single women today may enjoy a level of independence that was unprecedented until recent decades, many women still feel out of place and discontented in a culture in which the cultural institutions of marriage and motherhood still dominantly shape female desires. These modern feminist works may seem to bear little connection to the efforts of mid-Victorian feminists to open up a field of female employment in the colonies. However, these texts suggest that despite the economic gains that today’s women enjoy as a result of feminism, many still feel marginalized and “other” in a manner that resembles the Victorian redundant woman’s discomfort within British culture.

In chapter 3, “Two Branches of the Same Tree: Individualism, Collectivism, and Self-Help in Women’s Trade Unionist Literature” I considered another group of women
who were doubly marginalized on the basis of their class distance from middle-class domestic ideology and their gender inferiority within their own class: working-class women. I focused on the formal beginnings of women’s trade unionism in Britain, namely under Emma Paterson’s tenure as the leader of the Women’s Protective and Provident League (WPPL) and editor of the league’s main publishing organ, *The Women’s Union Journal* (1874-1884). The WPPL attempted to include working-class and middle-class women as coadjutors in the union struggle, a markedly different approach from forms of feminist individualism that challenged the marginalization of single middle-class women by validating their ability to aid and discipline inferior “others.” *The Women’s Union Journal*, like male trade unionist literature of the day, engaged in intense debate over individualist as opposed to collectivist models of self-help, and objected to the oppression of the working classes by upper-working-class small masters and middle-class industrialists. At the same time, this journal challenged how working women were undervalued under industrial capitalism and Victorian gender ideology, two interrelated systems that ratified them foremost as wives and mothers, and secondly, as workers.

This chapter examined examples of male trade unionists literature, WPPL reports, editorials, and J. W. Overton’s novella *Mary Ormond; Trade Unionist* published in *The Women’s Union Journal*. I illustrated that the WPPL’s attempt to include individualist and collectivist concerns, as well as working-class and middle-class women, is especially apparent in the bifurcated structure of J. W. Overton’s novella *Mary Ormond; Trade Unionist*. Finally, I pointed to some popular feminist forms of self-help for women that indicate the importance of collectivism primarily at the levels of female friendship and
family support, rather than for the purpose of political activism. Even popular magazines like *O* that do acknowledge the activism of women, focus much more on intimate matters of self-transformation and interpersonal relationships.

If many popular feminist versions of self-help seem to concentrate on individual and social relationships, other feminist self-help publications, such as *Ms. Magazine*, suggest that because of a history of patriarchal gender oppression that delineated women’s normative roles within the domestic sphere, women still have not entered many traditionally male trades in large numbers,¹³⁹ and today many women work a double shift.¹⁴⁰ This magazine adopts a feminist individualist approach that identifies the individual as the starting point for wider social change, a tactic that differs from the WPPL’s bifurcated focus on the joint efforts of both working-class and middle-class women. This version of feminist individualism is considerably updated from mid-Victorian women’s versions of individualism in the sense that it centres on females of different racial backgrounds.

For example, Amanda Robb’s article “Making Change” in the Fall 2011 issue of *Ms.* highlights the individual efforts of one feminist activist in the agitation for improved trade legislation at the national and international level, particularly for the large, undervalued, and predominantly female field of employment, domestic service. Robb’s article centres on Anika Rahman, the CEO and president of the Ms. Foundation, a

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¹³⁹ For example, see Beyerstein’s article, “Jobs, Jobs, Jobs” in the Fall, 2011 issue of *Ms. Magazine*. According to Beyerstein, women accounted for 57 percent of the public-sector workforce in June 2009, but lost an astonishing 71 percent of the public-sector jobs eliminated between then and September 2011 (12). Since the economic depression, men have recovered jobs more quickly than women because many men have entered the trades; women comprise just 13% of the construction trade (12).

¹⁴⁰ See also Burk who discusses how proposed cuts to American medicare will impact women most strongly: “Without a safety net in place, family members would have to pick up the slack of caring for elders and the disabled. Want to guess who these double-shift caregivers would be? Women, of course, thus putting their paying jobs in jeopardy” (45).
philanthropic group that funds 135 organizations “working in the arenas of its [the foundation’s] historic ‘four pillars of change’: women’s health, ending violence, economic justice and building democracy” (34). This article foregrounds the general inequality of women workers in the United States, by stating that even though Rahman has lived in the U.S. for the past twenty years after living in the impoverished nation of Bangladesh, “the Bangladeshi native can still be stunned by gender inequalities in ‘the land of the free’” (34). Robb points out that “There’s that persistent wage gap, for example, that has U.S. women earning 77 cents to a man’s dollar, with African American women making significantly less and Latinas less still” (34). She suggests that under Rahman’s leadership, the Ms. Foundation has helped secure minimal employment guarantees for domestic workers in New York state, including “overtime after 40 hours of work a week, one day off every week, three paid days off a year and protection from harassment” (34). Although this article addresses the concerns of female domestic workers at home and abroad, in its weaving of Rahman’s unique individual perspective as a Bangladeshi native, as an immigrant in the United States, and as an expert in foreign affairs and law throughout the fabric of the article, it presents Rahman’s work on behalf of the collective in terms of feminist individualism.

*Curve* magazine for lesbian women also adopts a similar feminist individualist approach to *Ms.*, but centres on the unionist efforts of a white, British lesbian activist, Louise Ashwork. Sheryl Kay focuses on the extraordinary work of one female trade unionist in the international struggle for LGBT workers’ rights. Kay relates how Ashwork’s efforts in Blackpool, England, working for a local government agency that provided housing and other services for lesbians and gay men: “She helped create the
policy and educational materials, and then performed outreach into the community, working with the local police to combat homophobic harassment” (17). Today, Ashworth is an active member of an LGBT committee on UNISON, a trade union representing over 1.4 million public service workers in the U.K. and she is the International Officer for the LGBT division of the Labour party. Both Kay and Robb suggest that the economic situation for many women is still insecure and remains less stable than for men, as is evident in the ongoing wage disparity between men and women in Western culture, and the fight for equality within the workplace. While they address different types of workers—women employed in domestic forms of work and LGBT employees across the public sector—they both share the strategy of beginning with the individual before moving to the collective perspective. Although this was a strategy sometimes employed in the context of *The Women’s Union Journal* to acknowledge Emma Paterson’s status as the linchpin of women’s trade unionism in Britain, more often the publication acknowledged both working-class and middle-class women’s contributions to women’s trade unionism. While *Ms.* and *Curve* echo many of the concerns of *The Women’s Union Journal*, they differ in the respect of representing these issues in light of the extraordinary efforts of individual feminists rather than partnerships. This form of feminist individualist nonetheless casts a wider net than historical forms of individualism in its championing of non-white and non-heterosexual women.

In Chapter 4, “Nervousness, the Case Study, and Self-Help in Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman*” I focused on Ella Hepworth Dixon’s feminist response to late-Victorian doctors who enforced the “rest cure” as a remedy for women who deviated from acceptable forms of domestic femininity. The “rest cure,” developed
by American physician Silas Weir Mitchell for the treatment of neurasthenia and hysteria, has typically been interpreted by recent critics as a remedy that was meant to restore married women to their wifely and mothering duties. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s canonical short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* in which a depressed married heroine undergoes a strict regimen of rest and feeding, a process that drives her practically insane, has often been cited as a feminist indictment of this patriarchal remedy. Another group of women, however, constituted an important contingent of late-Victorian nerve cases: young unmarried women. Their well-being was a matter of cultural anxiety, especially at a time when the New Woman revolted against conventional notions of marriage and motherhood. S. W. Mitchell and the British physician William S. Playfair reinforced the aberrance of the New Woman by representing female nervous illnesses in graphic detail, and by promoting the rest cure as a means of self-help that would rehabilitate women to appropriate Victorian forms of femininity. This patriarchal model of self-help for women exists in tension with a feminist model of autonomy and mutual co-operation among women in Ella Hepworth Dixon’s New Woman novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894).

I examined how Dixon incorporates conventions of the case history in order to disrupt this scientific form’s objectification of women, and further creates scenes that highlight the masculine pathologization of female artistic production and the necessity of female mutual cooperation in the face of patriarchal scapegoating of women. Through employing these narrative tools, Dixon challenges medical literature that interprets nervous illnesses as symptomatic of female non-conformity, and she divulges the hypocrisy of male professionals who claim to have women’s interests at heart. While
Dixon promotes self-help values of independence and collective self-help as possibilities in a feminist future, Mary’s final status as a nervous and sexually isolated woman, I argued, points to the political and psychic unrest that characterize the New Woman’s ambiguous position at the end of the nineteenth century. I finally touched on how recent self-help texts on anxiety and depression often neglect to consider the influences of gender socialization and oppression in mental disorders, and in certain cases, reinforce essentialist views of women’s emotionalism. I emphasized the importance of recognizing the universalizing assumptions often implicated in essentialist approaches to women’s mental health, plus considered the possibility of a “both at once” feminism that balances essentialist and constructionist approaches.

If Dixon’s “case study” of her heroine comprises but one short part of a novel that is meant to illustrate Mary’s gender socialization and counteract the scientific objectification of women, today’s feminist self-help books for women often utilize the case study in an attempt to validate the many desires and experiences of real women. Perhaps because of the fairly recent institutionalization of the social sciences within academia and women’s immersion in these fields, various female self-help authors trained in the social sciences employ the case study form as a feminist tool. For example, E. Kay Trimberger, a sociologist and women’s studies professor, incorporates many case studies in her serious, but non-scholarly, study of the lives of forty-six single women between the period they were interviewed in the mid-nineties and when they were interviewed again seven to nine years later. Her study focuses on “a diverse group of middle-class white, African American, and Latina women over the age of thirty; some had never married, others were divorced, and half of them had children” (xii). During the
first set of interviews in the mid-nineties, the author was disconcerted to find that many of the women she interviewed were unhappy, which seemed to reflect dominant cultural perceptions at the time that women’s lives were in many ways more dissatisfied as a result of feminism. She found that the pressures that these women experienced while looking for a soul mate, and then becoming part of an egalitarian couple combining family and work—norms advocated by second-wave feminism—seemed to be taking a heavier toll on the self-confidence of single women today than the older ideal—that a career and conventional family life do not mix for women (xiii)

Interviewed the second time when they were in their forties and fifties, many of these women were living happy single lives as a result of being able to “patch together scraps of alternative values—gleaned from feminism, from the increasing acceptance of divorce and of women’s career successes, and from changing sexual norms” (xv).

Diversity is the picture that emerges between the carefully charted details of both sets of interviews. Some women actually became more conventional in their outlook to love and sexuality, such as Maria Cordoza, a single mother woman who went from preferring cohabitation to desiring emotional stability in marriage. Others became less conventional, such as Dorothy Sawyer, a woman who initially felt emotionally and financially vulnerable after her first husband had an affair but came to prefer the sexual freedom of being single. Other women redefined the traditionally solitary and often religious choice of celibacy in a new light, such as Nancy Dean, who described flamenco dancing as helping her express “sensuality, passion, desire, and emotions, all of which keep me a sexual being” (49).
In her guidebook for single women, Cove also incorporates various interviews that are analogous, yet not identical to, Trimberger’s use of case study discourse, reflecting a journalistic approach that is probably influenced by Cove’s experience working for many national magazines, including *Psychology Today*. Yet, the case study form is apparent in both the structural organization and content of the book, as the twelve chapters are all named after types of women that, according to Cove, really exist since she reifies each type with a representative interview. In a sense, the author’s strategy of defining different types of women is reductive, signalling a tendency to categorize women according to stereotypes rather than recognizing the diverse and ongoing process of subject-making that involves a complex interplay of representation, ideology, and materiality. In this way, her approach is an interesting variation on the historical efforts of patriarchal case studies; Cove’s examples of female types centre on normativity while Victorian case studies embodied abnormality, but both are regulated by normative constructions of femininity. Yet in another way, Cove also disrupts this stereotyped approach by providing subsequent interviews that reevaluate these types and represent other responses to being single.

For instance, the chapter “The Soul Mate Seeker” introduces thirty-three-year-old Shari, who has been ready to marry and have children for years. She has signed up for a local volunteer program in her community in hopes of meeting someone, but has not found “the one” and is frustrated. The chapter presents other examples of women who, like Shari, are preoccupied with finding a soul mate, but who have since moved on. A thirty-nine-year-old woman, Krista, admits to wasting too much time and money on diets and beauty products in an attempt to remain attractive to men: “Following beauty
suggestions made me feel like I was being proactive.’ She said it finally dawned on her, however, that ‘I don’t want to spend one more cent on European creams that reduce fine lines. I want to spend it on things that feed my soul, like a healing arts workshop or a replenishing yoga retreat’ (28). Krista’s example is reminiscent of the attempts that Victorian feminists made to move beyond dominant cultural perceptions that a woman’s “good looks were her stock in trade” or that the unmarried woman was “losing her looks.” However, this woman’s ability to move beyond type of “The Soul Mate Seeker,” outlined in the case study, is through “healing” and feeding “the soul,” a modern self-help response that differs distinctly from Mary Erle’s frustrated, yet nonetheless persistent, desire to break free from the boundaries of patriarchal forms and culture by producing a serious work of fiction and defining a new reality with other women.

This movement away from the Victorian feminist emphasis on self and others towards a more interiorized type of self-help has been gradual. Micki McGee suggests that a flooded labour market and uneasy economic times have led men and women to continually work on themselves, often in an attempt to remain employable and marriageable (12) or to allow one to thrive unaffected by the vagaries of the economy (16). This isolated approach to self-help, McGee points out, contrasts starkly with the 1970s consciousness-raising efforts of the Boston Women’s Health Collective, which provided an alternative to the authority of typically (at that time) male medical experts, and resulted in the publication of the 1971 bestselling Our Bodies, Ourselves. But this engaged, collective, and political notion of self-help has largely eroded. […] In less than thirty years, self-help, once synonymous
with mutual aid, has come to be understood not only as distinct from collective action but actually as its opposite. (18)

Judging from a self-help book like Cove’s that espouses resistance to the ways that women have been told their lives should look (56), and frequently incorporates interviews and opinions of women who self-identify as feminists (209; 210; 214; 218), one must ask if an individualized focus on nourishing and healing the soul, a theme to which the book frequently returns, can be compatible with a feminism politics? Even in Trimberger’s text that adopts an overtly feminist approach, its case studies repeatedly invoke images of self-transformation rather than collective social and political action. It seems to me that the terms of transformation, to which these self-help works for women frequently return, warrant a blue-hot level of critical intensity, for which I will turn to bell hooks’s *Talking Back: Thinking, Feminist, Thinking Black*.

In this text, it is as if hooks employs a hyperradiant lens, like a Fresnel lens in a lighthouse, through which she illuminates the patriarchal, clinical treatment of the notions of “recovery” and “transformation” that circulated in popular self-help books of the 1980s, particularly in Robin Norwood’s *Women Who Love Too Much*:

Norwood’s book is appealing precisely because it addresses in an essential way the longing for self-recovery. She uses this phrase not in a radical political sense but in the way it is used in mental health circles to identify individuals working to cope with various addictions. She speaks to the pain and anguish many women feel in personal relationships, particularly the pain heterosexual women feel in relationships with men. Yet she in no way acknowledges political realities, the oppression and domination of women” (34).
What is so powerful about hooks’s critique is the way she unsettles these words from their patriarchal moorings and reroutes them in feminist meanings:

This returns us to the issue of self-recovery, extending it to include models of personal transformation that address both the oppressor and the oppressed. [. . .]

For those of us who oppose and resist domination, whether we be dominated or dominators, there is the shared longing for personal transformation, for the remaking and reconstituting of ourselves so that we can be radical (32).

Many of today’s popular self-help works for women have recovered forms of feminist consciousness that were lost in the twelve-step recovery works of the 1980s in which, as hooks notes, acknowledgement of terms like “male domination” and “feminism” was overwhelmingly absent. Yet these current works’ frequent lapses into a more interiorized, reparative focus on the self should send out a call to feminist critics and writers to reroute the notions of the personal in the political, and the self in the more broadly political meanings of help.

As I have outlined in my comparison of Dixon’s New Woman novel and today’s studies and guidebooks directed at the single woman, today’s incorporation of the case study form and focus on self-transformation in some ways resemble historical patriarchal models of recovery, such as the rest cure, that Dixon worked to overturn. The frequent slippage of these modern texts into apolitical discussions of spiritual healing and self-transformation also contrasts with the dual focus on creativity and collectivism in Dixon’s late-Victorian novel, often aligning these current works with the recovery texts of the 1980s. Dixon’s text, by contrast, remains an early form of consciousness-raising that feminists can still look to for a personal and political example of self-help.
Conclusion

Self-help discourse and feminism have borne a long and often uneasy relationship. I have speculated that academic feminist scholars who recovered the writings of Victorian women’s rights activists in the 1980s and 1990s might have resisted analysing them as forms of self-help for two reasons: the uncomfortable relationship between feminism and liberalism, as a result of the latter’s perpetuation of the norm of a white masculine subject through discourses like self-help; and debates that raged within and outside of the academy regarding apolitical forms of self-recovery that had replaced earlier feminist consciousness-raising forms of self-help. I have suggested that Victorian feminist writers invested self-help discourse with a tremendous amount of rhetorical power for reshaping their society. These women’s oppression within Victorian culture meant that they approached and utilized this discourse in ways that were uniquely informed by their gender, and they wielded it to many different effects that often challenged and reproduced aspects of Victorian gender ideology. Feminists of today still employ self-help discourse in order to disrupt notions of female normalcy and aberrance that find their precedent in domestic ideology. If feminist critics and writers of popular culture are to reinstate the political meanings of “help” in “self,” it is important to further investigate the many uncomfortable, and sometimes incisive, forms that this popular discourse has assumed within the history of Western feminism.

As a whole, this study has outlined the ways that Victorian self-help discourse informed many of the problematic inscriptions of the early women’s rights movement, some of which have carried on into today in different mutations. The contradictory ways that self-help discourse plays out in the many texts that I have examined, and the manner
in which it is refracted differently under various lenses of class, race, gender, and sexuality, suggests that there are as many forms of self-help as there are feminisms. I have also outlined the ways that Victorian feminist self-help works have contributed to various politically provocative “both at once” constructions, such as the interdependence of self and society that is especially apparent in the WPPL’s attempt to balance individualism and collectivism, and in the dual formations of “hope and despair” and “constructionism and essentialism” that are particularly evident in Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman*. In placing this discourse at the centre of my study, I have also intentionally challenged the derisive and dismissive approach that modern-day literary scholars have often taken with popular genres, frequently viewing them as adroitly instructive of the middle-class values of the day, but as, otherwise, stylistically and politically banal. The types of literature that have often been dealt critical sleights of hand—the sentimental novel that a middle-class woman read in the parlour, the periodical that a factory worker shared among the pieceworkers, the glossy magazine that a modern woman casually flips through at the hairdresser’s—these forms have fundamentally shaped female subjectivity and women’s ways of being in the world, perhaps even more than radical political works because they reach a wider audience.

Victorian feminist writers invested these forms with tremendous potential for helping women realize their capacity for economic and personal fulfillment, and these writers often self-consciously reinterpreted masculine versions of self-help to their own formal and political ends. One of the most powerful examples of this is Dixon’s recasting of a line from Tennyson—“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield!” (qtd. in Dixon 191)—in the context of her New Woman novel that validates female authorship and
solidarity. This line is taken from Tennyson’s 1842 poem “Ulysses,” in which the
eponymous hero has returned to his kingdom Ithaca after fighting in the Trojan War.
Instead of finding happiness upon his return, Ulysses expresses discontentment with his
aged wife and savage subjects, plus a mixture of resignation and relief that his son
Telemachus will be an able inheritor of his throne. Though no longer invigorated with
youth, the king’s “gray spirit” still desires “To follow knowledge like a sinking star /
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought” (Tennyson 30-32), and Ulysses calls on his
mariners to join him on another quest, while making no promises as to the outcome of
their journey. This poem may seem like a departure from the masculine self-help
biographies and tracts that have been examined in this study, yet Tennyson’s focus on a
heroic individual, and his privileging of the pursuit of knowledge, whatever the
difficulties, are very much in line with the preoccupations of masculine self-help
literature. Mary Erle’s final insistence that this faded line from Tennyson be reinscribed
on her father’s grave signals a feminist effort to lay to rest the figure of the traditional
patriarchal hero who sacrifices his home life for knowledge and fame, as did both Mary’s
father and Ulysses in leaving their wives and children for long periods of time in order to
attain masculine goals of education and experience. Dixon’s heroine steadfastly commits
to a feminist vision of artistic development, as well as asserts the importance of female
solidarity with her avowal, “our time is dawning—at last. All we modern women are
going to help each other, not to hinder” (Dixon 164). She effectively reinterprets the
masculine quest for a new realm of personal and social understanding—which is also
encapsulated in Ulysses’ line, “Tis not too late to seek a newer world” (Tennyson 57)—
as within the purview of the modern woman.
In her act of restoring a heroic utterance to a state of legibility for her female audience, and in her effort to foreground the female voice typically silenced in dominant patriarchal narratives, Dixon engages in an early project of feminist recovery. Such literary forms of recovery within the history of Western feminism serve as powerful models for a feminist methodology that takes seriously under-examined cultural forms and their rerouting of dominant ideology in the pursuit of a newer world and newer subjects. My study has been committed to advancing one small, but important stride along this course.
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