

Textual Bodies in the Novels of Burney, Austen, Brontë, and Eliot

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Abstract

This thesis explores textual metaphors surrounding the female body in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels written by women. Spanning nearly 100 years, from Frances Burney's *Cecilia* (1782) and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) to Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2), I seek to trace a genealogy of female novelists who are interested in how the female body is treated as a textual object—a site of meaning that is both bound by male authority and subject to reading, interpretation, and revision from other characters and readers alike. My analysis employs a variety of theoretical frameworks—including gender studies, disability studies, and object studies—to demonstrate how this metaphor of woman-as-text merges the embodied experience of the heroine with the material conditions of text. I ultimately seek to illustrate how Burney, Austen, Brontë, and Eliot used the textualized female body to demonstrate the capacity for textual objects, novel forms, and language itself to not only reproduce subjectivity but also reflect the materiality of the female body.

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Introduction

The scene in Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) in which the heroine hides her secret letters from Mr. B by sewing "the contents of the papers...in my under-coat, about my hips" has come to epitomize eighteenth-century conceptions of the female body's connection to text and authority (227). As a girl depicted as "always scribbling" away at letters that, at any moment, threaten to be confiscated and their contents exposed, Pamela invites readings of troubled female authorship and agency (Richardson 22). However, her decision to clothe herself in the evidence of her private correspondence evokes broader implications surrounding text and the female body. By sewing her letters into her garment, Pamela unites her words and the sentiments they contain with her physical form, effectively fashioning any attempted siege of her letters as an invasion of her private body. As an epistolary novel comprised of the heroine's own writing, *Pamela* further troubles the line between public and private, subject and object, and heroine and novel. Thus, any discussion of the novel and the female body in this period naturally begins with Richardson, as both *Pamela* and its namesake heroine embody the merging of text and self that shaped eighteenth-century understandings of female subjectivity, privacy, sexuality, and identity.

Scholars have long noted the capacity for epistolary narratives like *Pamela* to blur the lines between text, subjectivity, and the body. As Elizabeth Cook notes in *Epistolary Bodies*, letters were "the emblem of the private...intimately identified with the body, especially a female body" (12). In *The Self and It*, Julie Park makes similar claims about the novel's ability to "embody an authentic human and predominantly female interiority" and present the "self as not only a textual construct but a deeply material one" (xix). The emergence of the epistolary genre, then, further shaped cultural understandings of the novel's role in reproducing subjective experience in material form, which Cook sees as constructing "the body-subject—the notion of

the self as represented and bounded by the body and what it does and makes,” notably the text it produces (12). Cook’s use of the word “bounded” here is apt, as it blends the material conditions of the novel with that of the body and establishes the subjective experience contained in both as inherently textual. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong describes how *Pamela* in particular ties language and materiality to the female body, claiming Richardson displaces “the conventionally desirable woman onto a written one” (14). By replacing the pleasure of “mastering her body” with the power of policing Pamela’s letters, Armstrong sees Richardson as producing a “new body,” similar to Cook’s “body-object,” that binds the sexualized female body with the material conditions of text (Armstrong 15; Cook 12). If *Pamela* is where the “new body”—both Armstrong’s textualized female body and Cook’s feminized textual body—emerges and takes on “erotic appeal,” then I seek to demonstrate how later authors, specifically women writers, use this framework to express issues of gendered embodiment that Richardson does not (Armstrong 15). Thus, this thesis argues that it is in the work of later female novelists such as Burney, Austen, Brontë, and Eliot where the social, political, and gendered implications of this merging of text and body can be truly felt and fully parsed.

This connection between text and the female body emerged long before the prominence of epistolary novels and has been applied to a range of literary forms. As Elena Lombardi discusses in *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante*, the “text-as-woman” concept has roots in early metaphysical poetry, in which the female “body-text” is fashioned as an object sexually exchanged between two men—“a male author who clothes his text in the necessary language” and a “male reader who is able to unveil the ‘naked truth’” (81). In this framework, authorship is figured as a process in which “a naked [and inherently feminine] text is dressed up for show,” and reading becomes a sexual act of undressing (Lombardi 80). Later conceptions of

female authorship retain these same physical, sexual connotations. As Catherine Gallagher discusses in her exploration of female authors in the long eighteenth-century, women like Aphra Behn had to confront portraits of the “professional woman author as prostitute” for the ways in which their body of work was similarly sold for public consumption (Gallagher 17). This embodied reading of authorship is aided by the Latin roots of the word *corpus*, which refers to a physical body or “corpse” but was more frequently applied to an author’s “body of literature” by the eighteenth century (*OED*). These gendered models of authorship entirely change the dynamic between author and text, yet, as Pamela Gilbert notes, in both models “the text is an extension of the woman’s body... the physical substance of a woman that is exposed in the marketplace” (23-25). Thus, the merging of text and the female body arises across a range of authorial identities and persists from the process of a text’s production to its consumption.

While there is a long history of scholarship exploring this “text-as-woman” metaphor, there is less attention to the implicit reversal of this pairing—understanding woman-as-text (Lombardi 81). The body itself is analyzed as a textual object across both queer and disability scholarship. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* set the stage for understanding gender as a reading of cultural signs— “a fantasy...inscribed on the surface of bodies” (174). In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson similarly argues that “disability is a reading of bodily peculiarities in the context of social power relations” (6). While such work has significantly shaped our cultural understandings of how bodies are classed and ascribed identities based on visual markers of gender and ability, to my knowledge there is little scholarship dedicated to how the textual nature of bodies can be examined beyond the act of reading. Thus, rather than discussing the material conditions of all bodies, I seek to reveal how the female body in particular is physically treated as a textual object. I employ the term “textual bodies” to illustrate

how this treatment moves beyond the concept of bodily reading and applies to a wider range of textual actions, including how the female body is read, revised, bound, dictated, erased, shelved away, printed, presented to an audience, and perused.

In this thesis, I will track the ways in which literary women across four novels—Cecilia Beverly in Frances Burney’s *Cecilia* (1782), Catherine Morland in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), and Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-2)—are all treated as textual objects. The fates of Cecilia, Catherine, Lucy, and Dorothea reflect the ways in which women, both on and off the page, are subject to scrutiny, denied bodily autonomy, and silenced under male authority. By exploring the inverse of this text-as-woman metaphor, and applying it specifically to an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century context, I hope to reveal how these four novelists make issues of female authority legible to their readership and do so in a way that ultimately empowers the women—heroines, authors, and readers alike—that find themselves textualized as often as they are sexualized.

I acknowledge that all of the novelists discussed in my thesis are white, middle-class British women who enjoyed some degree of publishing acclaim in their lifetimes and have received a lion’s share of scholarly attention after their deaths. However, the texts I have chosen to examine all engage with these novelists’ unrest in a world dominated by male authority, and their position as both women and professional writers allows them to explore this dual struggle for textual agency. As Jane Austen’s defense of the novel in *Northanger Abbey* professes, at the turn of the nineteenth-century, both female authors and their novels were “an injured body” (60). While later Victorian women writers enjoy some degree of literary celebrity, the century that divides these four women is constantly concerned with the treatment of this “body,” which can

be seen in their anonymous publishing practices. Burney publishes her first novel entirely anonymously while Austen opts for the illusive and diminutive attribution of “By a Lady” for the first edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, an epithet which is replaced—on subsequent title pages—by a declaration identifying her as the “Author” of her previous works. Into the nineteenth-century, Charlotte Brontë publishes each of her novels with the androgynous pseudonym “Currer Bell,” and George Eliot, of course, is the enduring and unmistakably male moniker of Mary Ann Evans. This persistent anonymity and androgyny in their publishing practices reveals more than a desire to obscure identity. Rather, it speaks to a society that values male authority, an attitude these authors are determined to deconstruct, if not in their own embodied realities, then at least through the material conditions of their heroines.

I begin with Frances Burney’s *Cecilia* (1782) to explore how this woman-as-text metaphor manifests in the act of bodily reading. Following Richardson’s *Pamela* and Burney’s own epistolary novel, *Evelina* (1778), *Cecilia* is similarly concerned with the letter’s capacity to contain and reproduce female subjectivity. This connection is blurred in *Cecilia* as the heroine’s body becomes an object of constant attention and surveillance, with other characters attempting to read and interpret Cecilia’s affective responses. I argue that to resist this bodily reading, Cecilia begins to resemble the form of a letter—an object whose contents are sealed and disclosed to a specific reader—before becoming entirely illegible in her madness. I incorporate Voyant, a digital humanities tool for computational textual analysis, to demonstrate how this change in Cecilia’s textual body can be traced in the use of certain affective language.

I then explore how Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, which directly references *Cecilia* in its defense of novels, adopts this concept of textual bodies and applies it to the late eighteenth-century literary landscape and marriage market. With a mock gothic plot woven into its satirical

sentimental framework, *Northanger Abbey* is a novel that is deeply interested in genre and the culture of novel reading. With a quixotic heroine, the novel is also engaged in understandings of female impressionability. Merging these contexts with the novel's marriage plot, I argue that Austen frames Catherine as a textual body that is not only shaped by the novels she reads but directly revised and rewritten by Henry Tilney. I analyze scenes in which Henry corrects Catherine's language, constructs her into his fiction, and tempers her reading habits to illustrate how he revises her as both a worthy marriage partner and marketable manuscript. By framing Henry as an author and Catherine as his pliant textual body, Austen counters popular critiques of the novel, challenges notions of female malleability, and reveals the scrutiny women receive in both matters of marriage and literary production.

Moving into the nineteenth century, I situate Charlotte Brontë's notorious distaste for Austen's characters and subjects as a broader dissatisfaction with her lack of engagement with the body. I argue that *Villette* places this concept of textual bodies in conversation with Victorian-era changes in the classification and institutionalization of disabled bodies and minds. Written just after major reforms and asylum openings in London, as well as Brontë's own portrait of female madness in *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* is necessarily interested in the way we interpret bodies through markers of gender, race, and ability. I seek to read Lucy Snowe as a revision of Bertha Mason, a more tempered portrait of female mental illness that Brontë "textualizes" in order to reveal the ways in which nineteenth-century medical practices sought to read, interpret, and ultimately bind non-normative female bodies. I focus on the treatment of Lucy's writing desk as an extension of her physical body to demonstrate the ways in which its contents are perused, interpreted, and physically altered by Monsieur Emanuel and Dr. Bretton, ultimately

serving as a critique of how the female body is treated within institutional settings—medical, mental, and matrimonial.

Lastly, I look at George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, focusing on how Dorothea's married life with Edward Casaubon reveals the ways in which women are bound to domestic employments and barred from intellectual or social pursuits. I focus on how Dorothea's textual ambitions—her desire to acquire knowledge and find meaning by assisting the next Milton in the production of some great work—are thwarted in her union with Casaubon. I argue that the only textual body that Casaubon successfully binds during their marriage is Dorothea herself, confining her to his library, tasking her with the weight of finishing his failed book, and even restraining her after his death with a codicil that prevents her from marrying the man she desires. Will Ladislaw, however, offers Dorothea an alternative future for her textual body, seeing her as not a book he must bind but a living poem, a figure that he can enshrine and blazon. Both men, however, ultimately reveal the limitations placed upon women who desire purpose beyond marriage or endeavor to assume a textual form beyond an untouched volume or objectified poem.

All of these novels narratively unite body and text to shed light on the structures that seek to bind, dictate, and objectify the female subject. Though my analysis aims to situate these texts in a sort of genealogy, in which later novelists inherit and reproduce this woman-as-text metaphor as a way of both critiquing structures of male authority and engaging with their sister novelists, I do not wish to reduce them to mere copies of each other or century-old regurgitations of previous works. Rather, I seek to use the concept of textual bodies as a frame through which we can understand how female novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries engaged with the material conditions of women, both real and fictional, both novel-readers and novel-writers, to express issues of gender, sexuality, class, disability, and identity that pervade both centuries.

Chapter 1: “I would not lose a letter—a line—a word from you”: Reading the Female Body in

Cecilia

At the end of Frances Burney’s *Cecilia*, the eponymous heroine devolves into a state of madness that results in her fleeing her carriage, running through the streets of London, and eventually taking refuge in the shop of a local pawnbroker. The newspaper advertisement announcing her circumstances the following day reads as follows:

M A D N E S S

Whereas a crazy young lady, tall, fair complexioned, with blue eyes and light hair, ran into the Three Blue Balls, in——street, on Thursday night, the 2nd instant, and has been kept there since out of charity. She was dressed in a riding habit. Whoever she belongs to is desired to send after her immediately. She has been treated with the utmost care and tenderness. She talks much of some person by the name of Delvile.

N.B.—She had no money about her.

May, 1780.

The first edition text upholds this irregular spacing and typeface around the word “madness,” a deliberate and labor-intensive choice to demarcate this woman’s mental state through not only language itself but through the very design of the printed page. In this advertisement, Cecilia’s self is entirely subsumed in text; everything from her name, her high birth, and even her beauty has been effaced, this description presenting her as nothing more than a collection of letters arranged by block printers, pressed through ink, and presented to a readership in the hopes that someone may know better how to interpret her.

This advertisement, and the madness that prompts it, marks the pinnacle of a pattern of bodily reading that pervades the novel, the final stage of a series of textual transformations the heroine endures in her struggle for textual agency. The novel follows Cecilia’s journey as a

young heiress whose title and estate entirely rests on the preservation of her surname. As Cecilia navigates life under three troublesome guardians, she falls in love with son of an aristocratic family who refuses to take her name, and she must choose between economic independence or domestic happiness, a choice that many scholars see as the source of her eventual madness. Indeed, scholarship surrounding Cecilia's madness has focused on its social implications, with Claudia Johnson reading her as "a casualty of the patriarchal system" that "stripped her of her patrimony as well as her memory" and Margaret Anne Doody seeing her madness as "one of the symptoms of living under" the "puzzling pressures" of "class and money" (Johnson 142; Doody 119). However, rather than reading Cecilia's madness as an emotional response to the social conditions that bind her, I seek to read it, more specifically, as a physical change in her textual body—the heroine's final attempt at illegibility within a novel concerned with the material conditions of the self, the merging of text and body, and the relationship between novel and heroine, reader and voyeur.

As the height of emotional crisis in the novel, the madness scene follows a pattern of Cecilia's body being attributed these material, and specifically textual, traits. It also reflects an even larger history of the connection between textual objects and subjective experience. Julie Park's *The Self and It* explores this connection in the eighteenth century, claiming the rise in material culture was concurrent with the commodification of subjectivity. She argues that material objects, namely those involved in textual production, "pens, letters, bound books, and fictional narratives...not only mirrored and symbolized the self, but also became identifiable as the self itself" (xiii). Elizabeth Cook makes a similar assertion about the epistolary form, claiming letters not only "reflect a preexisting subjectivity but rather produce and organize it"

(7). However, while Park and Cook are more concerned with how eighteenth-century novel forms serve to reproduce subjectivity, particularly female subjectivity, I am more interested in how they reveal the *objectivity* of the female body. In other words, the eighteenth-century novel does not just commodify and produce subjectivity, it textualizes the subject; the heroine herself becomes the object being bound, read, and interpreted.

Frances Burney brought these issues of private body and public-facing narrative to the fore in her first and only epistolary novel, *Evelina*. Indeed, her most widely read novel seems a fitting choice for this lens, as the epistolary form implies a close connection between the heroine and text that she is, in part, producing. However, Burney's abandonment of this form in her next novelistic effort, *Cecilia*, in favor of free-indirect discourse, a narrative style she championed, signifies a strategic departure from the way the epistolary novel traditionally forged these sexual-textual connections within the female body. Thus, in order to view these issues of gender and materiality separately from the epistolary form, where text and body are much more explicitly tied, I have chosen to work chiefly with *Cecilia*.

I argue that Burney addresses these eighteenth-century notions of subjectivity and materiality by depicting Cecilia's trajectory as a textual body, not only a heroine inscribed in text to be consumed by an audience but also, in her own narrative, an object that is openly read, perused, and interpreted by other characters. Throughout my analysis, I will highlight scenes in which Cecilia's body is read by other characters, moments where they perceive her internal emotions by assessing changes in her exterior body, and moments where her movement, intentions, and physicality take on a textual nature. I will alternate between close-reading key scenes and analyzing larger trends with the assistance of Voyant, a digital humanities tool for

computational textual analysis, to ultimately argue that Cecilia's textual body evolves from an open book to a sealed letter as she begins to control the way that others read her (Sinclair and Rockwell). This conflation to text embodies the way that the female body is similarly bound, authorized, commodified, and consumed in both the realm of marriage and literary production.

Transferred from guardian to guardian—enlisted via a letter from her uncle—and bound to her fortune by only her name—determined via her uncle's codicil letter—Cecilia's life is entirely materially constructed, determined by ink on the page, forged from the authorial pen of her late uncle, the Jew who loans her money, the priest who signs her marriage document, Mr. Harrel's outgoing checks, Mr. Monckton's loans, and Mr. Eggleston's claim on her estate after reports of her marriage. Such conditions point to the way that, as a heroine, Cecilia is not only a "property of literary texts," but, as a woman, she is similarly "penned in" and "penned up" by male authority, as Gilbert and Gubar famously phrase it (13). Though *Cecilia*, the novel (the physical body of text), is written by a woman, Cecilia, the heroine (the textual body), is still bound by masculine authority, freely read and just as freely rewritten by their patriarchal pens. The novel ultimately presents this struggle for textual agency through Cecilia's evolution as a textual body, transforming from a text that is freely perused by others to one that is sealed off and directed for the eyes of a single reader, Mortimer Delvile, before ultimately becoming entirely illegible and unreachable in her madness.

"I read in your face the captivity of thousands"

From the very beginning of the novel, Burney's narrative style establishes Cecilia's body as a site of meaning to be extracted by both readers and other characters. While *Evelina's* epistolary nature provides a unique window into the heroine's private correspondence, Jane

Spencer argues that *Cecilia*'s free-indirect discourse actually gives a "closer rendition...of its heroine's thoughts and feelings" (23). *Cecilia*'s comparative third-person narration is part of Burney's attempt to "modulate the distance" between heroine and text and, in turn, heroine and reader (Frank 615). By incorporating this "distance" and making the audience more of an observer, Burney infuses her narration with an air of "theatricality," as Marcie Frank describes it, establishing a model of reader-as-voyeur that entirely changes how audiences interact with *Cecilia* (614). While *Evelina*'s letters do not allow for any reading outside of the physical text the heroine produces, *Cecilia* invites it. Interpretation of *Cecilia* requires a more conscious analysis of her body and its signs; thus, she becomes an extension of the text itself—another body that both audiences and other characters must read.

We see this difference at work from the very beginning of the novel. During her first party with the Harrels, readers are told that *Cecilia* is the "object of general regard," and later the narrator expresses her fatigue from "sitting as if merely an object to be gazed at" (Burney 23, 37). While the women ogle her dress, the men in attendance wager on "whether or not she was painted," one even claiming that "she rouged well" (Burney 23). By the end, they agree to "depend upon the colour of her cheeks by the beginning of April" to determine if they successfully read the source of her complexion (Burney 23). Not only does this scene highlight the way *Cecilia*'s exterior body is already being read by other characters, but it also illustrates how this third-person narrative style changes the way readers themselves interpret *Cecilia*'s body. Without the first-person reflection that an epistolary narrative provides, readers are barred from knowing the true nature of *Cecilia*'s complexion, whether she is indeed "painted" or if the "glowing" in her cheeks is an emotional response to the glances and comments being thrown

about her (Burney 23). Thus, Burney is getting her readers to take part in the type of bodily reading she will be deconstructing throughout the novel.

This narrative voyeurism is amplified in the masquerade scene when Cecilia arrives in “common dress” in a room full of masked attendees (Burney 106). In her analysis of eighteenth-century masquerades, Catherine Craft-Fairchild notes the “promiscuous blending” that is permitted when markers of class and gender are disguised in such settings, allowing women to temporarily transcend patriarchal structures (1). In this scene, however, Cecilia’s unshrouded face makes her “far more conspicuous...than any masquerade habit could have made her” (Burney 106). In this environment of obscurity, Cecilia is at her most visible, and this heightened visibility, coupled with the anonymity enjoyed by those around her, makes this the perfect opportunity for other characters to read her, as she notes “the abruptness with which the masks approached her, and the freedom with which they looked at or addressed her” (Burney 106). One by one, she is accosted by a series of masked male figures, most notably the black devil, the noble Don Quixote, and the chivalrous white domino. Their identities entirely unknown, they vie for Cecilia’s attention through silent displays of possession, the black devil holding her captive in her seat while the other men attempt to free her from his confines. This display further establishes Cecilia as “an object of general attention,” exacerbated by the fact that, in her confinement to the black devil, she “could neither speak nor be spoken to,” relegating her entirely to her status as object (Burney 109). Thus, rather than a moment of revelry in her obscured identity, Cecilia’s masquerade becomes a “submission to, not subversion of, the dominant economy” (Craft-Fairchild 4).

It also becomes a moment where, as Elena Lombardi suggests, “reading and gazing are one...the woman’s face, turning into a page on which words are written and read” (105). Even when seemingly freed from the black devil’s grasp, Cecilia is not spared the same objectification, as her temporary savior, the white domino, proclaims, “you have, doubtless, been the aggressor...for I *read* in your face the captivity of thousands” (Burney 112). Not only is this the first instance in the novel of the verb “read” being applied to the female body, but it also establishes the type of bodily reading Cecilia will be subjected to. Rather than consulting her actions or words, the white domino solely interprets her physical body, reasoning that she must be “a very mischievous sort of person” to captivate these men with her beauty, despite her evident efforts to avoid attention (Burney 112). When it is revealed that the white domino is actually Mortimer Delvile, this scene solidifies him as not only Cecilia’s savior and future suitor but also her primary reader.

“If I colour now...”

Throughout the novel, Cecilia’s body is not only presented as an object to be gazed at but, increasingly, a text to be read, which is chiefly done by interpreting the unconscious changing of her complexion, what Lady Honoria calls her “trick of colouring” (Burney 542). Using Voyant’s ability to track word frequencies and collocations reveals that variations of the word “colour” appear 60 times throughout the novel. Of these instances, 51 are in reference to a character’s complexion, and 37 of those are applied to Cecilia specifically. Similarly, the word “blush” appears 46 times, 21 of which indicate a visible change in Cecilia’s complexion. As a sentimental novel, *Cecilia* is part of an era of literature characterized by emotional excess, what Claudia Johnson calls “egregious affectivity” (1). Johnson’s *Equivocal Beings* argues that this

“affectivity” has chiefly political implications, and while she focuses on Burney’s *Camilla*, her analysis rings true for *Cecilia*: “what and how one feels is a matter of public consequence, and as such is subject to...other people’s surveillance” (2). In *Cecilia*, the sentimental “surveillance” that Johnson describes here also has textual implications, resulting in a practice of bodily reading that renders the female body as an object whose contents can be freely perused and meaning freely interpreted (2).

This reading of female affectivity persists across eighteenth-century prose, poetry, and conduct literature, where coloring is presented as a reflection of a woman’s moral purity. Outward coloring is traditionally seen as a mark of internal virtue, with the modesty of Milton’s Eve conveyed in the image of her “blushing like the Morn” before the Fall of Man or the purity of Richardson’s Pamela projected in her form being “all covered with blushes” at her master’s insinuations (Milton 8.510–11; Richardson 52). In Burney’s fiction, however, changes in a heroine’s complexion accompany a variety of emotional states, express both an excess and an absence of color, and often rapidly alternate between reactions. Beyond just modest blushing, Cecilia’s color varies widely, “now reddening with indignation, now turning pale with apprehension” (Burney 760). In another scene, she is described as “changing colour every moment from the variety of her emotions” or, as Lady Honoria comically describes it, “she’s red and white, and white and red half a dozen times in a minute” (Burney 783, 491). As Johnson suggests, within the sentimental novel, “surveillance” of these bodily signs replaces Cecilia’s own words and actions; thus, her complexion serves as a surrogate for speech—the words that mark her textual body and inscribe her internal emotions onto her physical form. However, both the excess and variety of Cecilia’s emotions threatens to disrupt the delicate “sentimental

economy,” which dictates that a woman must both “have and conceal her feeling” (Johnson 156). Conduct books from the period, such as James Fordyce’s essay “On Female Meekness” (1767), demonstrate the precariousness of this sentimental balance, stating a blush “pleases most when it is left looked for,” yet admitting men “cannot bear its being long absent” (210). However, Fordyce also warns ladies against feigning their complexions, claiming “dispositions at once mild and virtuous require neither disguise nor heightening” (223). Thus, while moderate coloring conveys the marks of a modest heroine, too much blushing suggests the admission of indelicate ideas, and the absence of a blush conveys an absence of feeling, which similarly threatens the “sentimental economy” (Johnson 156).

Cecilia’s “trick of colouring” stands to have more dangerous implications, then, and when it becomes clear that other characters may read her complexion either too easily or entirely inaccurately, she must find ways to inhibit their reading without conscious control over her coloring (Burney 542). For example, instances when Cecilia’s emotions are revealed through her “colouring” are often also moments when she chooses to refrain from speaking, such as when she “coloured, and “was silent” when Delvile hints at her fear of his attraction to Miss Belfield and later when she “coloured, and made no answer” when Dr. Lyster references her closeness to young Delvile (Burney 570, 688). Using Voyant’s tool for context and collocations shows that the word “silent” also arises as the primary, positive collocate word for “colour,” meaning they often appear in close proximity to each other, particularly in the second half of the novel. Once again, Cecilia’s complexion communicates what is typically conveyed through language. This also suggests that, even in moments when she is helpless to obscure her changing complexion,

Cecilia can at least refrain from any verbal confirmation of her feelings, which is the first way she begins to limit others' reading of her.

Cecilia's concern for the legibility of her emotions truly surfaces when her relationship with young Delvile stands to be "universally discovered" by other characters, particularly Mrs. Delvile (Burney 558). When Delvile presents Cecilia with a letter from Biddulph that discloses her observed emotions towards him, recalling how "at the sound of your name, she blushes; at the mention of your illness, she turns pale," she realizes the extent to which her body can be interpreted by others, struggling "to find herself...by her own emotions betrayed" (Burney 558). This scene follows shortly after a meeting with Mrs. Delvile, where she is similarly able to discern Cecilia's love for her son by reading the changes in her complexion, observing the "glowing cheek" and evident "colouring and trembling" of her auditor as she relays her hope for Delvile's future union (Burney 501, 500). The descriptions of Cecilia's mental turmoil following this discovery are full of terms indicative of not just uncertainty but also low visibility: "some fearful *mystery*, some cruel *obscurity*, still *clouded* all her prospects, and not merely *obstructed* her view of the future, but made what was immediately before her gloomy and *indistinct*" [my emphasis] (Burney 501). Though her thoughts are painted in language of obscurity, they are clearly visible on her exterior body, for while Cecilia's mind is most hazy with uncertainty, Mrs. Delvile's eyes are most perceptive in their observations, able to "read...the state of her mind" with "such penetrating keenness, that they rather made discoveries than enquiries" (Burney 501). When Mrs. Delvile, certain of Cecilia's affection towards her son, remarks that, after Mortimer is married, "no care will remain in the heart of his mother...than the disposal of my amiable Cecilia," Cecilia knows her feelings for young Delvile have been "too obviously discovered" in

her emotional excess—a fact that not only threatens to mar her modesty but also harm her maternal kinship with Mrs. Delvile (Burney 502).

“I would not lose a letter—a line—a word from you”

After Mrs. Delvile, Lady Honoria, and even Biddulph successfully suspect Cecilia’s feelings for Mortimer Delvile, Cecilia begins to fear the “discernment” of others, the ways in which her emotions are so easily read and, in turn, the extent to which her contents may be revealed to others, particularly as she pursues her courtship with Delvile against both the wishes of his parents and will of her uncle (Burney 502). To prevent their secret partnership from being published to the world, Cecilia must transform her textual body from open book to sealed letter—an object whose meaning is not only inscribed by the sender but implicitly enclosed and directed to a specific reader, in this case Mortimer Delvile. The relationship between Cecilia and young Delvile necessarily takes on a more textual nature as they both leave St. James Square in the end of Book VI. Voyant’s tools for tracking word frequencies reveals that the use of words like “letter,” “send,” and “read” all peak in the following volume, shown in **Figure 1**. Across all volumes, however, the word “receive” appears more frequently than “send,” and “read” is more prevalent than “write” or “reply,” suggesting that Cecilia is taking a more passive role in her correspondence with Delvile, due in part to her hesitations surrounding their union but perhaps also due to a change in the patterns of her expression.

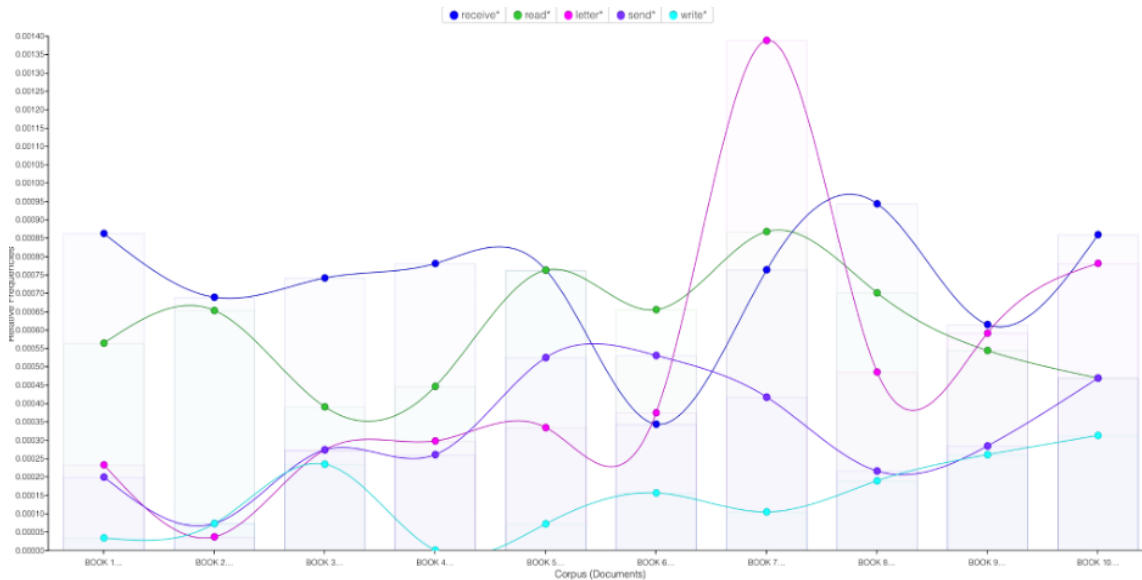


Figure 1. This figure shows the relative frequency of textual words “receive,” “read,” “letter,” “send,” and “write” across the 10 books in *Cecilia*.

Thus, just as Cecilia is beginning to inhibit other characters’ reading of her, Delvile is most insistent that she remains legible to him, as they struggle to reconcile their central conflict in the novel—the issue of Cecilia’s surname. When Delvile unexpectedly calls on Cecilia while she happens to be writing a letter to him, he implores her to “write still...I would not lose a letter—a line—a word from you, for all the world can offer me!” pressing his desire to be able to read her (Burney 837). He then struggles to explain his unanticipated visit, eventually asking “Have you pen and ink here?...I will begin a letter myself,” as he opts to write his explanation rather than speak it before admitting “Fool! I could have done this without coming!” (Burney 837). In this exchange, Delvile chooses to keep their correspondence rooted in text, despite being not only in the same room but, at this point in the novel, secretly married. By placing the emphasis on physically inscribing, rather than simply communicating his message, Mortimer enacts the textual tension that taints their union—Cecilia’s refusal to write the name Delvile. Not

only does he want to be able to read her, then, but he also wants her to direct herself to him, to sign his name upon her textual body, marking her as a letter that bears his name and whose contents are solely disclosed to him. His anxiety is warranted, for, while their second ceremony is successful in making them “actually married,” Cecilia still fails to acknowledge her new surname when Mr. Eggleston’s man comes to inquire after her reported union. When asked to say her name, Cecilia attempts to obscure her marriage:

“Well, sir,” cried she with some hesitation, “you can scarce have come to this house, without knowing that its owner is Cecilia Beverley.”

“That, madam, is your maiden name.”

“My maiden name?” cried she, starting.

“Are you not married, madam?”

“Married, sir?” she repeated, while her cheeks were the colour of scarlet. (850)

Though Cecilia does not directly disavow her marriage in this exchange, she also fails to accept her married name, claiming that “to acknowledge it in her present situation, would involve her in difficulties innumerable,” despite knowingly breaking her uncle’s codicil (Burney 851).

After the revelation that even Mr. Eggleston has heard reports of her marriage, Cecilia must not only increasingly direct herself to Delvile, but also become more emotionally sealed for other readers. Returning to Voyant’s word trend tool, positive emotion words like “happy” are relatively consistent, following the expected pattern of dipping during the novel’s central conflict and rising again at the conclusion of the marriage plot. However, the use of words indicative of outward bodily reactions associated with the same emotion such as “laugh” and “smile” show a massive decline in use by the last volume. Similar patterns emerge with words like “blush” and

“colour,” as shown in **Figure 2**. While the frequency of the word “colour” appears to dip only slightly in the fifth and final volume, a closer look at the context reveals that it is often replaced with words like “colourless” and “without colour”. Similarly, the use of the word “blush” appears to decrease significantly in the last volume, and context reveals that it is also more frequently applied to other characters, such as Miss Belfield. Meanwhile, Cecilia’s descriptions are replaced with words like “colourless,” “pale,” and “blank,” all indicative of an absence of color.

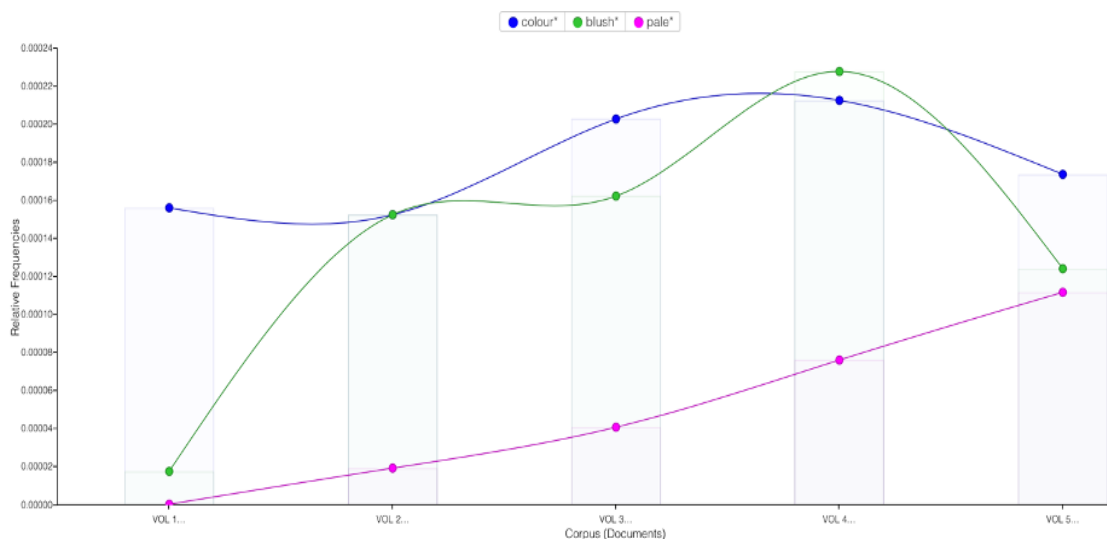


Figure 2. This figure shows the relative frequency of affective words “colour,” “blush,” “pale” across the 5 volumes in *Cecilia*.

Cecilia’s increasing insensibility results in a sort of affective “blankness,” as James Noggle describes it, a willful erasure of her body’s signs as she learns to “sort her voluntary from her involuntary actions and feelings” (99). Recalling Yeazell’s descriptions of the blush, a “perfectly blank consciousness,” or a total absence of color, is “neither possible nor desired” (Yeazell 76). By erasing the visual signs of a “modest heroine,” Cecilia’s blankness becomes threatening within a genre characterized by emotional excess (Yeazell 76). It is no surprise, then, that the use of words like “madness,” “crazy,” and “insanity” also peak in the final book, temporally tying

this downward trend in emotional legibility to Cecilia's decline into madness, demonstrated in

Figure 3.

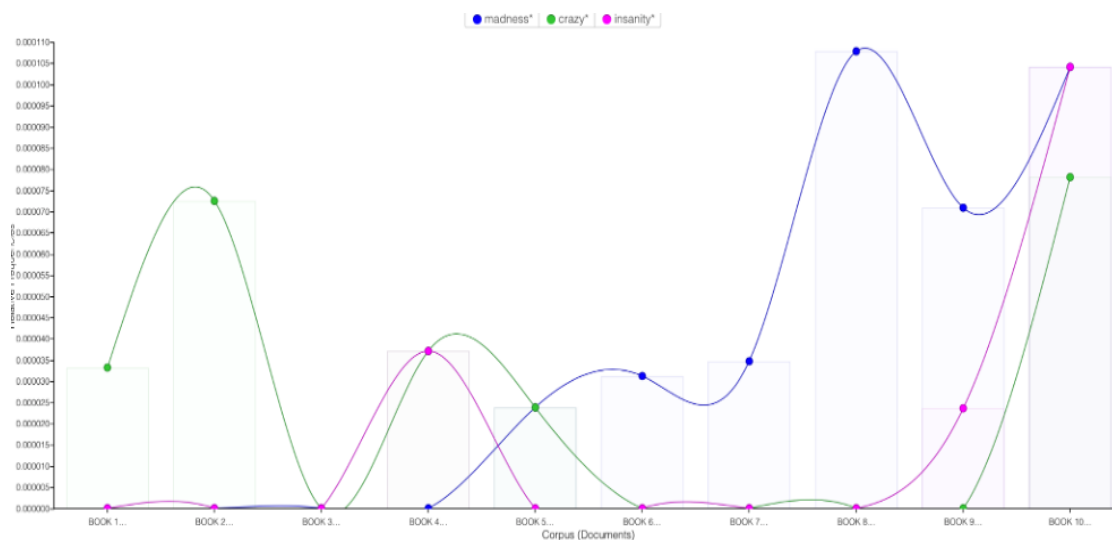


Figure 3. This figure shows the relative frequency of “madness,” “crazy” and “insanity” across the 10 books in *Cecilia*.

Though Cecilia becomes more difficult to read as she seals herself off from others, she continues to be presented as a textual object, for, as she directs herself to Delvile, she remains bound within his textual authority. This change becomes evident when Mr. Monckton persuades Cecilia to call off her marriage to Delvile after their hasty engagement, which leads her to promptly send him away with a letter expressing her “terror” towards the “promise I have made” (Burney 584). However, when she discovers Monckton’s ill-success in his endeavor, Cecilia resolves that the only way to communicate her urgent message to Delvile is by taking the place of the letter that Monckton failed to deliver and “hastening to London herself” (Burney 589). Inscribed with this urgent information, Cecilia orders a chaise specifically equipped with “post-horses for speed,” believing a “postilion” may best deliver her promptly (Burney 589-90). According to the *OED*, in the late eighteenth century, post-horses were secured “for the use of

post-riders, or for hire by travelers” who desired a speedy journey. This choice of transportation, then, not only conveys Cecilia’s urgency to reach Delvile but also establishes the epistolary nature of her passage, presenting her as both passenger and piece of post.

Cecilia is not only taking charge in relaying her message to Delvile but also assuming the role of the letter itself. When she passes Monckton on his return passage, he assures Cecilia the letter was left at their designed meeting place the following morning, but she is firm in her position: “tomorrow morning will be too late...*I must*, therefore, go to town,” Burney’s emphasis highlighting Cecilia’s embodiment of the letter’s role (Burney 590). Intent on delivering her message, Cecilia was “anxious only to hasten her journey” and “indifferent to everything, save what retarded it,” a disregard for others that was uncharacteristic of her (Burney 591). Even when passing an overturned chaise containing her acquaintance, Miss Larolles, Cecilia desires the postillion to “drive on with all speed” (Burney 591). During the interactions that follow, Cecilia remains in “painful silence...too occupied by her own affairs, to listen or answer,” as she is “wholly employed upon...her approaching meeting with Delvile” (Burney 593, 596-97). Cecilia is now solely directed towards Delvile and socially sealed off from others, shrouded in silence for fear the party will discover the true nature of her “business...in London” (Burney 597).

“...her cheeks without colour, her eyes without meaning”

Cecilia’s attempt to seal herself from others and direct herself only to Delvile begins to break down when he fails, or rather refuses, to read her. After Delvile unexpectedly encounters Cecilia at the Belfields’ and immediately draws incriminating conclusions about her presence there, Cecilia scrambles to form an explanation, imploring Delvile to “let me speak and hear to

be understood” (Burney 887). However, without listening to her, Delvile urges her coachman to “drive on, postilion!” as he resolves to confront Belfield alone (Burney 888). Separated from Delvile and unable to explain her reason for being at the house of the very man with whom she was rumored to have “an improper connection,” Cecilia becomes a wayward letter desperate to reach an unknown destination (Burney 889). After searching vainly for Delvile at the Belfields’, St. James’s-square, and a coffee-house the men reportedly fled to, each time arriving just after Delvile had departed, Cecilia becomes increasingly intent on delivering her message. Even when the post-horses must stop for rest, Cecilia, ceaseless in her pursuit, “jumped out of the carriage with intention to run down the street” to find Delvile (Burney 895). However, an intoxicated coachman halts her movements, seizing her by the arm until he acquires his payment. Her rising “frenzy” in being thus detained and once again unable to deliver her urgent message to Delvile, which could now cost him his life, ultimately results in her full textual breakdown: “with strength hitherto unknown to her, she forcibly disengaged herself from her persecutors” (Burney 896). Though her body is released from their grasp, her mind becomes similarly arrested by her search for Delvile, describing how “she forgot her situation, her intention, and herself; the single idea of Delvile’s danger took sole possession of her mind” (Burney 896). Shouting Delvile’s name through the streets, Cecilia is stripped down to nothing but the contents of her message and the name of its intended recipient, forgetting any other “intention” and even “herself” (Burney 896). The pursuit that follows is marked by an inhuman quickness, describing how Cecilia “scarce felt her own motion; she seemed as if endued with supernatural speed, gliding from place to place, from street to street” to deliver her message to Delvile, the swiftness, expansiveness, and attentiveness of her movements mimicking the passage of the post (Burney 897).

When Cecilia is eventually detained by a townspeople, she is searched for “a letter, or paper” that may identify her (Burney 898). Unclear of her contents, they know only that she “talked of Delvile without cessation” (Burney 899). Like a letter directed towards Delvile, Cecilia’s meaning remains sealed, and the only text intelligible from her exterior is the name of her desired correspondent. Just as Delvile desired, then, her textual body is both solely directed towards him and bears his name. This imagery continues as the shop owners, certain that Cecilia is “decidedly insane,” lock her in a room, where she spends the night “calling upon Delvile without intermission” (Burney 898). In this state, sealed in “a place of confinement, without light, without knowledge where she was, and not a human being near her,” Cecilia is not only an undelivered letter but the very contents sealed away inside, enclosed and illegible like the message that propels her towards Delvile.

The newspaper advertisement that announces her presence the next day reflects this transformation into pure text. Who was once Miss Beverly, the heiress whose name, fortune, and beauty spoke for themselves, is now degraded to the title of “M A D N E S S...a crazy young lady” who “talks much of some person by the name of Delvile” (Burney 901). In her state of complete illegibility, Cecilia is reduced entirely to text, “drawn up and sent to the printer of the Daily Advertiser,” not only embodied in an arrangement of letters but the single word “madness” (Burney 901). When her friend Albany discovers her, Cecilia raves about her secret union and appears to communicate strictly through textual metaphors: “no one will listen to me...it has been *sealed*...with blood, and to-morrow it will be *signed* with murder,” as Albany urges the company to “*compose* her,” again establishing her fate as something “signed” and “sealed” with

the actions of men, who also take part in composing Cecilia's textual body [my emphasis] (Burney 903).

When Delvile finally arrives after seeing the announcement, Cecilia does not instantly reveal the contents of her urgent message as expected; instead, her distracted state presents her as no longer a letter, but a blank page or, at the very least, a text that has been entirely effaced. Delvile finds her "perfectly quiet," "motionless," "pale," and "lifeless," her message remaining perfectly sealed despite being united with her intended recipient (Burney 912-13). The body that was once so easily read with its constant "colouring" is now "void of all expression, her cheeks without colour, her eyes without meaning" (Burney 918). These descriptions, all reflecting a resounding silence, stillness, and emotionlessness, simultaneously present her as pure textual object, a "pale" and "lifeless" collection of pages, but also an entirely unreadable one, "insensible" and "without meaning" (Burney 913, 918). In a self-reflective moment that continues these textual connotations, Delvile fears he is "the author of this scene of woe" repeatedly presenting her as a textual object in part forged by his pen (Burney 912).

Cecilia's madness, however, has many authors. As a young woman bound to her inheritance by a single line from her late uncle's hand, Cecilia's story was ultimately a struggle for her own authority, an attempt to not only rewrite the text that binds her but also dictate the text that is inscribed on her through marriage. After being read and misread so frequently and, in turn, attempting to seal herself off from others, Cecilia's madness succeeds in entirely encrypting her text; for the first time in the novel, her body becomes fully illegible. Bound by male authority and inscribed with strict notions of modesty, as Cecilia becomes more emotionally sealed, she increasingly loses herself, before she is stripped down to nothing but Delvile's name and the

message she holds for him, symbolic of the way that, after their marriage, she entirely sacrifices her textual autonomy. By inscribing her name as Cecilia Delvile, she not only effectively erases her family name but also effaces her title, her estate, her money, and, along with it, her agency. Thus, her final union with Delvile is marked by absence, describing her “imperfect” happiness and “portionless” fate, resigned to a “general felicity...partial evil with chearfullest resignation” (Burney 941). These ending sentences disrupt a genre that thrives on the unity of marriage; rather than concluding with a sense of completeness, the novel closes with imperfection, partiality, and loss, emphasizing all that Cecilia erased in her marriage to Delvile, his name serving as a “blot” on Cecilia’s identity, the mark of the next male pen that will dictate her textual body (Burney 675).

Chapter 2: “It is only a novel”: Revising Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*

Burney’s portrait of textual embodiment in *Cecilia* was not lost on later female novelists, as Jane Austen lists *Cecilia* among her list of works in which “the greatest powers of the mind are displayed” in chapter 5 of *Northanger Abbey* (60). In this chapter, Austen unfolds her famous defense of the novel, which seeks to venerate long-undervalued works of female novelists such as “*Cecilia*, *Camilla*, and *Belinda*” above the works of “Milton, Pope...Prior...and Sterne,” who have already been “eulogized by a thousand pens” (60). Featuring two of Burney’s novels in this list, Austen had a very public appreciation for her sister novelist and naturally shared in what Kristina Straub calls her “duplicitous desires—to be both a human and woman” and, more radically, author and woman (60). As Claudia Johnson discusses in *Equivocal Beings*, like Burney, Austen felt herself subject to an increasing “critical gaze...as the very concept of authority itself became more vexed” (143). *Northanger Abbey*, perhaps Austen’s most fraught publication—undergoing multiple rounds of revisions after years in the hands of an unwilling publisher—uses the concept of textual bodies to express these authorial anxieties through an equally fraught marriage plot.

Everything from *Northanger Abbey*’s posthumous publication to its plot brings these issues of authority and literacy to the fore. First drafted sixteen years after *Cecilia*, the novel follows Catherine Morland, an unlikely heroine whose taste for novel reading leads her to misread situations and the intentions of those around her. Her first visit to Bath brings with it all the marks of a sentimental novel: trips to the pump room and theater, the company of a fast female friend, the attention of a handsome clergyman of a respectable family, and even an unsavory marriage proposal. However, the second volume takes a Gothic turn when Catherine

visits Northanger Abbey—the family home of the aforementioned clergyman, Henry Tilney—and her quixotic reading habits lead her to fancy an unflattering fiction about Henry’s father. The novel fuses these fictional cliches with a very real marriage plot, following both Catherine’s journey as a reader and, like Cecilia, her evolution as a textual body. However, while Burney was concerned with how Cecilia’s textual body is *read* by others, Austen is more interested in how Catherine’s textual body is written upon and revised, exploring the extent to which both her consumption of novels and her relationship with Mr. Tilney shape her contents. Ultimately, both novels show the limits of female self-authorization; whether bound by an uncle’s codicil or within a lover’s fiction, both heroines struggle for agency in a world where women are nothing more than a product of a male pen.

Northanger Abbey presents this struggle for authority in every aspect of Catherine story. For example, during a scene in which Catherine discusses her fondness for Radcliffe’s novels with Henry and Eleanor Tilney, professing “do not you think *Udolpho* the nicest book in the world?” Henry corrects her, “The nicest—by which I suppose you mean the neatest. *That* must depend upon the binding” (Austen 121). This is one of many instances in the novel in which Henry attempts to refine Catherine’s taste, judgement, or behavior, but what is notable about this scene is his specific emphasis on her “incorrectness of language,” which Miss Tilney claims he is “forever finding fault with” (Austen 121). This shift into altering Catherine’s language—the very text she employs to construct her meaning—turns Henry’s loving instruction into a deliberate practice of linguistic revision. While Catherine had previously proved pliant to Henry’s lectures on the picturesque, her insistence in this scene that “I did not mean to say anything wrong; but it *is* a nice book?” captures her confusion that his discretion would extend to her very diction

(Austen 122). Within a novel characterized by what Claudia Johnson calls its “self-consciousness” as a novel, this moment of textual tension is intentional; it is meant to highlight the gendered hierarchies embedded in the relationship between Catherine and Henry (30).

Scholars have long critiqued Austen’s foregrounding of these gender dynamics in her fictions, with Gilbert and Gubar conflating her plots into “the taming...of a rebellious, imaginative girl who is amorously mastered by a sensible man” (154). They cite Henry Tilney as the prime example of Austen’s tendency to temper her heroine with an “older and wiser man who has been her teacher and her advisor,” a trope similarly embodied by Mr. Knightley and Edmund Bertram (154). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also famously critiques the rigid hierarchies of Austen’s marriages, confused by the persistent interest in “the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson” (315). However, Henry’s actions in the scene described above, in which he decides “the word ‘nicest’...did not suit him,” reflect more than a mere pattern of masculine instruction across Austen’s fictional worlds, for, as Jacqueline Pearson notes, “more than any other Austen lovers, Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney’s relationship grows through discussions of gender, language and textuality” (Austen 121; Pearson 211). As Pearson emphasizes, I argue that this scene highlights the uniquely textual nature of the relationship between Catherine and Henry, which Austen uses to weave her meta-commentary on the culture of novel-reading and novel-writing into the very fabric of the marriage plot. Thus, their union is not just one of naïve heroine and tutor-like suitor, quixotic character and refined reader, but also textual body and authorial figure, revealing the gendered hierarchies implicit in both the institution of marriage and process of literary production.

Initially drafted just before the turn of the century, though not fully published until two decades later, *Northanger Abbey* stands at the cusp of a rapidly expanding and evolving literary marketplace, as its rocky composition and publication history can attest. Scholars have long noted the “disharmony between the Bath and the Gothic episodes” in *Northanger Abbey*; while some reason that sections of the novel were subject to major revisions, others speculate the gothic portions were added years later (Emden 280). Austen’s advertisement of the novel even offers an apology for “those parts of the work which thirteen years have made comparatively obsolete,” not only acknowledging the blend of genres the novel commands but also making it clear that she was attempting a very timely commentary on the novel at the turn of the century (Austen 1). However, I argue that the palimpsest-like nature of the novel—the ways in which Austen’s revisions and additions are seemingly indelible—is part of what preserves *Northanger Abbey* as a product of the institutions she was attempting to critique.

Indeed, *Northanger Abbey* not only stands as a testament to the scrutiny received by female novelists but also a commentary on the refinement typically undergone by the heroine. Like many prior female novelists, Austen centers her fiction on her heroine’s happy union; in *Northanger Abbey*, however, she makes more visible the textual hierarchies often implicit in these relationships. As Kristina Straub notes in *Divided Fictions*, as the genre of the novel grew more popular, so did the idea that “human subjects” could “become malleable as social texts,” and gendered power structures of the period made it clear that these “social texts” were primarily women, both within and outside the realm of fiction, who were dictated and authorized by an authorial male figure (44). Referencing Burney’s *Evelina*, Straub sees the fate of a heroine as one “transformed from feminine object to subjective consciousness” while also acknowledging that

such subjectivity was also “entirely and, indeed, morbidly reactive to male initiative” (1). These gendered structures of power have long been imbricated in the process of textual production. Gilbert and Gubar famously describe authorship in terms of “literary paternity”—the image of the male “author/father” who is the sole “owner/possessor” of the “the subjects of his text...the figures, scenes, and events....he has both incarnated in black and white and ‘bound’ in cloth or leather” (6). This description is reminiscent of Elena Lombardi’s account of textual production as the creation of a feminized “body-text” (80). In both accounts, both author and reader are male figures, alternating control over the female body/text. However, by the mid- to late eighteenth century, women were considered “malleable” to not only male authority but to texts themselves, which the popularity of novels like Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) exemplifies. As Jodi Wyett argues, “the figure of the female quixote,” which *Northanger Abbey* parodies, “had become a symbol of women readers’ susceptibility to print,” and I argue that this “susceptibility to print” extended to women’s perceived impressionability as textual bodies themselves or, as Straub put it, their malleability as “social texts” (Wyett 272; Straub 44).

Thus, in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen is not only pushing back against negative perceptions of the novel and breaking down “gendered binaries between good and bad reading,” but also questioning the notion of female malleability implicit in these textual metaphors (Wyett 262). By presenting a clear hierarchy of authorial action and textual reaction between Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney, Austen stages this popular perception of women as social texts, posing her heroine as a textual body that is pliant to her hero’s every suggestion. As both suitor and authorial figure, Henry Tilney attempts to revise Catherine’s language, temper her genre, and rewrite her as a figure in his own fiction to make her marketable as both a literary subject and

marriage partner. Throughout my analysis, I will be applying language typically reserved for textual objects—including read, revise, write upon, and genre—to the physical body of the heroine. Without reducing my framing of these textual metaphors to a mere matter of semantics, I employ this language strategically to reveal Catherine’s dual identity as both a fictional heroine constructed by Austen and presented via her satirical narrator and also, within the realm of the novel, a real woman who becomes a product of Henry Tilney’s authoring.

Female “imbecility”: Catherine as a textual body

From the very beginning of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen directly engages with her work as a piece of fiction, inviting readers to not only consider the genre conventions she will be critiquing but also position her novel against its predecessors by proclaiming that “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine” (Austen 37). Opening with a description of her heroine’s non-conformity, Austen suggests that to be a heroine is to be more than a figure bound to fiction, evoking a specific set of character traits Catherine must attain before she can be rewarded in the marriage plot. Certainly, Catherine’s apparent want of beauty and wit makes her an unusual Austen heroine, and her fondness of “all of boys’ play,” hatred of “confinement and cleanliness,” and incompetence in all productive pastimes makes her deficient in seemingly all feminine qualities (Austen 37-39). We can discern from the narrator’s account of Catherine’s plainness, ignorance, and awkwardness that the model heroine Austen is evoking is founded on exceptionalism, both in feminine pursuits such as drawing, writing, and dressing as well as beauty. While Catherine’s development brings improvement in her complexion and figure, the narrator stresses that there is still “by nature

nothing heroic about her,” suggesting some other intervention must take place to transform her from “heroine in training” to a proper participant in the marriage plot (Austen 39).

The use of “nature” here is intriguing, as it raises questions about the origin of personhood and evokes the language of Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Austen’s narrator seems to assert that heroines are not born and instead must be shaped, a notion that mirrors Locke’s concept of the *tabula rasa*. By the eighteenth century, Locke’s *tabula rasa* was shifting the way people perceived how consciousness and personhood forms: “Let us then suppose the mind...to be like white paper with nothing written on it. How then does it come to be written on? From where does it get...all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience” (18). The textual metaphor Locke employs here is dually useful in understanding the relationship between Catherine and Henry, not only accounting for the metaphorical framework of my reading—Catherine’s initial blankness and Henry’s role in revising her—but also establishing the empiricist ideology that separates Henry’s rational reading from Catherine’s over-imagination. The narrator’s claim that there was “by nature nothing heroic about her” presents Catherine as similarly blank, a sheet of “white paper” primed to be written upon (Austen 39). Apart from the material affordances of the blankness metaphor in understanding the heroine as a text that is written upon by a male figure, Robert Duschinsky claims Locke’s concept has wrongly become a “rhetorical extreme...an image of utter human malleability” (509). He proposes a more accurate translation as the “formlessness prior to text” or even “the erasure of text...to make room for something new” (510). Duschinsky’s reading is perhaps more fitting for Catherine, whose childhood of “intellectual poverty” and voracious reading of Gothic novels

have left her, though not entirely blank, in some way formless or in need of revision (Austen 97). Austen's narrator leaves no room for conjecture as to the form such intervention will take, stating "Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way," suggesting such a figure is the only way to rewrite her as a worthy heroine (Austen 41).

The empiricism of Locke and other Enlightenment figures is embodied by Henry Tilney, and the investigation and reason it promotes serves as a masculine revision to the surface-level, quixotic reading that Catherine exhibits as well as a reflection of the increasing anti-novel discourse in the second half of the century. Many eighteenth-century essays like Vicessimus Knox's "On Novel Reading" (1778) warn of the novel's capacity to "corrupt a mind unseasoned by experience" and urge young readers to "defer the perusal" of such works "till the judgment is mature". Though Knox's essay does not directly address the issue of gender, his condemnation of "Romances" in particular suggests that his concern is targeted at female readers, as "Romance has traditionally been considered a woman's form" (Langbauer 66). However, while women's impressionability was cautioned in the realm of fiction, their malleability was encouraged in matters of marriage, as Henry Tilney himself remarks "a teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing" (Austen 175). Austen's narrator similarly ruminates that "imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms" (125). Thus, while women's impressionability as readers was criticized, their malleability as marriage partners was valued, and in both views, women are seemingly not in control of their own contents.

Henry as an author

While scholars have historically thought of Henry Tilney as a tutor figure, one of many of Austen's heroes who subdue the girlish whims of the heroine, his emphasis on Catherine's

reading habits and verbal presentations mark his instructions as specifically textual. If Catherine is presented as “a heroine in training,” a character who must be revised to fulfill her role, Henry Tilney is depicted as the perfect editor to do so. He is described as a man who “could never be wrong” and whose meaning “must always be just” (Austen 124). This peculiar emphasis on Henry’s correctness and justness of meaning, rather than his figure or fine manners, establishes him as not only the ideal suitor but the perfect figure to enact the revision Catherine requires. Another example of Austen’s instructive male characters, Mr. Knightley, similarly “loves to find fault” with Emma, employing the same language as Eleanor in describing Mr. Tilney’s propensity for “finding fault” with her language (*Emma* 654; NA 122). Mr. Knightley also similarly laments Emma’s lack of a “course of steady reading” (671). However, Mr. Knightley’s instructions are often limited to checking Emma’s pridefulness, rarely extending to the minutiae of her choice of words, bestowing Henry Tilney a uniquely authorial power, even among Austen’s most instructive male characters.

Evidence of Henry’s “authoring” emerges in his very first interaction with Catherine in Bath. After their first dance together, Henry engages in a mock dialogue with Catherine that is meant to mimic the customary first meeting between characters in a novel:

“I have hitherto been very remiss, madam, in the proper attentions of a partner here.”

...

Then forming his features into a set smile, and affectedly softening his voice, he added, with a simpering air, “Have you been long in Bath, madam?”

“About a week, sir,” replied Catherine, trying not to laugh.

“Really!” with affected astonishment.

“Why should you be surprised, sir?”

“Why, indeed!” said he, in his natural tone. “But some emotion must appear to be raised by your reply, and surprise is more easily assumed, and not less reasonable than any other. Now let us go on.” (48-49).

Within this scripted exchange, Henry casts himself and Catherine as fictional characters rather than newly acquainted strangers, already posing her as a participant in his fancied encounter. After constructing this fiction, Henry then jokes about the “poor figure” he will make in Catherine’s journal the following day—momentarily alternating their roles by imagining himself as the one inscribed by Catherine’s authority (Austen 49). Even when imagining how Catherine would make her accounts of him, however, Henry tells her what she “ought” to write in her journal, retaining his authority over her own story: “I danced with a very agreeable young man...had a great deal of conversation with him—seems a most extraordinary genius—hope I may know more of him. *That*, madam, is what I wish you to say” (Austen 50). In this single scene, Henry not only forges a fictive space for him and Catherine to inhabit but also extends his authorial discretion to the contents of Catherine’s own journal—a textual object that the narrator gives no indication that Catherine actually keeps but Henry himself acknowledges is an “essential” and “particularly feminine” practice (Austen 50). Despite his conviction in the importance of “journalizing” in a young woman’s attainment of the “easy style of writing for which ladies are so generally celebrated,” Henry does not hesitate to dictate the contents of Catherine’s journal, which previews how he will later treat her as a textual body (Austen 50).

This sort of dictation and linguistic correction, which is also reflected in the opening discussion of the word “nice” continues to pervade Henry and Catherine’s relationship. It later

surfaces when the pair enter in a debate about reading history. Catherine calls it a “torment of little boys and girls” while Henry weighs that writers of history “are perfectly well qualified to torment readers of the most advanced reason and mature time of life. I use the verb ‘to torment’ ... instead of ‘to instruct,’ supposing them to be now admitted as synonymous” (Austen 123). While Henry intends to mock her conflation of the two words, Catherine defends her diction: “You think me foolish to call instruction a torment, but if you had been as much used as myself to hear poor little children first learning their letters and then learning to spell...you would allow that to torment and to instruct might sometimes be used as synonymous words” (Austen 124). Like her earlier remark that *Udolfo* “is a nice book, and why should I not call it so?” Catherine pushes back at Henry’s linguistic revisions, proving that she is not the image of “utter human malleability” as Henry hopes (Duschinsky 509).

Beyond this deliberate dictation, Henry also casts himself as the authority of Catherine’s fictions. This is most evident during Catherine’s first trip to the abbey, in which Mr. Tilney plays up her gothic expectations, believing it to be “a fine old place, just like what one reads about” (Austen 161). Henry then weaves a tale about “all the horrors that a building such as ‘what one reads about’ may produce,” including an “ancient housekeeper,” “gloomy passages,” and a deserted apartment that is “undoubtedly haunted” (Austen 161-62). While Catherine acknowledges the impossibility of any gothic adventures at the abbey, reasoning that “there would be so many people in the house—and besides, it has never been uninhabited and left deserted for years,” by the end of Henry’s tale, her fears are redoubled: “Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful! This is just like a book!” (Austen 162). Jodi Wyatt reads this moment as evidence of Henry’s “authoring,” not only toying with Catherine’s susceptibility by evoking the

conventions of gothic fiction but effectively “writing” his own, goaded by his reader’s evident absorption in remarks like “Well, go on” and “Well, what then?” (Wyett 268; Austen 162, 163). However, while Wyett’s perspective of Henry’s authorship relies on Catherine’s status *as a reader*, I argue that it is better understood by his perception of her *as a character*.

While Catherine is often presented as a quixotic extreme, she is clearly able to recognize herself as a listener of Henry’s story, not an actor in it. Her encouragement for Henry to “go on” with his tale not only suggests her readerly absorption but also, more likely, her “eagerness” in hearing Henry’s account (Austen 163). She is also able to distance herself from his narrative, interjecting that “No, indeed; I should be too much frightened to do any such thing” and insisting “But it cannot really happen to me” (Austen 163). However, as Henry constructs his fiction, rather than referencing Catherine as a reader, he casts her as his character: “Unable of course to repress *your* curiosity in so favourable a moment for indulging it, *you* will instantly arise, and throwing *your* dressing-gown around *you*, proceed to examine this mystery” (Austen 162). Henry’s use of second-person narratorial perspective specifically speculates about Catherine’s own experience as an inhabitant in the abbey and encourages her to imagine that her interactions with the dreadful housekeeper Dorothea are as real as their present conversation.

This distinction again enforces a clear hierarchy between the author and “the subjects of his text” (Gilbert and Gubar 6). Henry consistently casts Catherine as a product of his fiction, not a consumer of it, requiring her to experience what Gilbert and Gubar consider the fate of all women, particularly the literary women of the nineteenth-century: “the fall from authority into the acceptance of one’s status as a mere character” (161). Catherine’s eventual quixotic breakdown in the abbey, then, is not just a result of her poor reading habits but potentially a

response to the realization that she is not in control of her own story. In positioning himself as an authorial figure, Henry initiates Catherine's "fallen female state of a person without a history, without a name of her own, without a story of significance she could herself author" (Gilbert and Gubar 147). It is no surprise, then, that she allows herself to enact the sort of adventures she reads about. In an alternative reading of *Northanger Abbey*, E.J. Clery refashions the dominant plot of the novel as one guided by Henry's story: "A clergyman from a high-ranking family, a second son, rejected paternal pressure and marries for love" (335). Reversing the narrative in this way reveals the extent to which "the exigence of...male destinies drive forward the female plot" (335). It is Henry's own authorial agency, though unspoken, that determines Catherine's story, for, in Henry's own words, as in marriage and dancing, "man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal" (Austen 95). It is perhaps Catherine's acquiesce as a product of Henry's fiction that she allows him to begin to revise her textual body.

Revising Catherine's genre

The most apparent display of Henry's authoring comes not from his fondness for inventing fictions for Catherine to inhabit nor his propensity for correcting her language but rather his desire to temper her genre. In applying the term "genre" to Catherine, I expand the concept of textual bodies to take its most material, and indeed most metaphorical, shape to understand how Henry's reading instruction not only cures Catherine of her quixotic tendencies but also changes the nature of her contents to make her more marketable as both marriage partner and manuscript. Henry has historically been painted as the foil to Catherine's quixotic nature, an idealized reader who professes to have read "hundreds and hundreds" of novels and is also "fond of history" (Austen 123). He is far from Knox's imagined "man of application"—who, after

directing his attention to “severer study,” finds “the fungous productions of the common Novel-wright...too insignificant to attract his notice,” for Henry recounts how he read *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) “in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time,” proving himself to be as engrossed in such sensational fiction as Catherine is in his own gothic tale (Austen 124).

Henry does not frown on absorptive reading, then, for, as we can see from their trip to the abbey, Henry often fuels Catherine’s quixotism. Like a gothic novelist himself, “he is amused by the interest he had raised” and is encouraged to continue his tale until absorption in his fiction results in real life action (Austen 164). The problem, then, is not that Catherine is “fond of that type of reading” but rather that she “does not much like any others,” and if women are perceived as being highly impressionable to the contents of the books they consume, then Catherine’s sole diet of gothic novels leaves her highly susceptible to their intrigue (Austen 122).

When Henry realizes that novels are the only type of reading that does not “wearing or vex” Catherine, he must revise her judgement by erasing her tendency towards intrigue and reinscribing her with his standard of empirical observation (Austen 122). This change becomes evident when Catherine expresses the gravest instance of her over-imagination to Henry, revealing that she had entertained the notion that General Tilney was not only an antagonistic husband and father but also the savage murderer of his late wife. Henry responds with uncharacteristic seriousness: “consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained...Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?” (Austen 195-196).

While scholars have traditionally read this moment as Henry curing Catherine’s quixotic reading habits, his language here casts him as more of an author than a model reader. His concern for “the ideas” that Catherine had “been admitting” into her contents establishes her body as his

textual object, a work that he cannot allow to seriously entertain any gothic visions or romantic notions.

By revising Catherine's contents in this way, Henry reinforces Austen's description of both novel readers and novel writer as "an injured body" (60). As Austen's defense of the novel concedes, just as a heroine who accidentally takes "up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust," real life women, when discovered reading a novel, are conditioned to lay "down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame" (Austen 60). This reality is reflected in Austen's own novel, filled with characters like John Thorpe who, when asked if he had "ever read *Udolpho*" proclaims such novels to be "full of nonsense" and "the stupidest thing in creation," before foolishly stipulating that "Mrs. Radcliffe's...are worth reading" (Austen 71). Thorpe's mistake here illustrates the cultural sentiment towards novel reading, entirely dismissing a work as "nonsense" by name and reputation alone, merely guessing at "what sort of stuff" is comprised in a volume based on its genre (Austen 71). As Austen's narrator further laments, "had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of the *Spectator*, instead of [a novel], how proudly would she have produced the book, and told its name" (60). Henry's correcting of Catherine's romantic visions at the abbey, then, is more than the anticipated "taming...of a rebellious, imaginative girl" exhibited by most Austenian couples; rather, it is his final act of authorial revision (Gilbert and Gubar 154). By altering her genre to display less over-sentimentality or gothic intrigue, he makes her more marketable in the current literary climate—transforming her into a volume that any heroine could proudly produce and proclaim the name of.

After Austen's efforts to legitimize the form of the novel, Henry's final lecture to Catherine reads as more of a consigned censorship than a successful revision. Indeed, Austen's defense of the novel stands in startling contrast to Henry's dismissal of it. What the narrator upholds as a form in which "the greatest powers of the mind are displayed," Henry relegates to a mere "embellishment" to his more serious study (Austen 60, 122). In similar contrast, while Henry is "fond of history," the narrator regards it as full of "improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation which no longer concern anyone living" (Austen 122). However, it is the very qualities that draw Henry to history that he uses to revise Catherine's judgment in this scene. To rid her of her false notions about his father, he counters her readerly intrigue with his standard of empiricism: "What have you been judging from?...Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you" (Austen 196). Henry returns to Locke's notion of learning through knowledge and experience, values that are mirrored in Henry's fondness for histories, which "display imagination without raising interest" and recount stories that "actually pass under one's own observation"—positioning the empirical nature of history opposite to Radcliffian gothic, where hidden "specters, dark secrets, and mysterious manuscripts" routinely pass below observation (Austen 122; Pearson 213).

Catherine's shame at her folly is evident, and Henry's lecture marks the end of her romantic visions at the abbey, reclaiming it from the "Catholic settings of Ann Radcliffe's gothic novels" it was in Catherine's imagination to the "Georgian country home" it represents for Henry (Benis 180). This scene of shame is characteristic for Austen's heroines, and as Ashly Bennett suggests, it plays a "revisionary, mediating role" when applied to the act of reading as it is here,

claiming that “an Austen heroine who is consistently mortified...enacts less a repressive and more a revisionary” stance (381). Thus, shaming Catherine is not only Henry’s final stage of revision but also a vicarious process of authorial mediation. By tempering Catherine’s invention with reason, Henry not only revises the sensibility of his “social text” and potential marriage partner, but Austen also negotiates “sensibility’s extremes” within her own novel (Bennett 380). On both sides, the emphasis is on revision, and both Henry and Austen are assured that the textual body they are shaping and producing is one that is marketable, as either a literary work or marriage partner—capturing the scrutiny women receive in both spheres.

Drafted just before the turn of the century—when both novels and their readership were “an injured body”—*Northanger Abbey* captures the increasing cultural concern with women’s place in the literary sphere, using the frame of a satirical quixote narrative to cloud her more subversive goals of defending the form of the novel, legitimizing feminized genres, and critiquing notions of female impressionability (Austen 60). Austen merges the novel’s metacommentary on female authorship and readership with a marriage plot whose participants embody the very textual hierarchies she is challenging. Far more than a quixotic reader of Radcliffian novels, Catherine Morland is a textual object herself—a “heroine in training” that is not only, quite literally, a figure inscribed in text to be perused by an audience but also, within her own story, a woman who is scrutinized and revised by the authorial pen of Henry Tilney. Pliant to his every suggestion and eager to erase the “evidences of her folly,” Catherine’s body serves as Mr. Tilney’s manuscript, as he attempts to alter her language, temper her overly imaginative nature, and rewrite the very fictions that comprise her quixotic fancies at the abbey (Austen 174). By his hand, her textual body is erased and rewritten, transformed from “heroine

in training” to worthy marriage partner, from quixotic reader to refined text. By the end of the novel, Catherine’s palimpsest-like state stands as not only a reflection of the perceived materiality of women’s bodies but also a critique of gendered power structures implicit in both the act of artistic creation, from author to text, and the institution of marriage, man and wife.

Chapter 3: “his nose was lost to view amongst my papers”: *Villette*, Disability, and the Ransacked Writing Desk

While Austen had an outward approbation of Burney’s work and specifically references *Cecilia* in *Northanger Abbey*, placing Charlotte Brontë in this genealogy of female novelists requires more of a leap, as Brontë was famously critical of Austen. After being recommended *Pride and Prejudice* by George Henry Lewes, literary critic and longtime partner of George Eliot, it is evident that Brontë does not share in his esteem of her: “Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point” (Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë* 337). In response, Lewes urges Brontë to recognize Austen as “one of...the greatest painters of human character,” remarkably similar to Austen’s own reflection on Burney and Edgeworth, whose work she attributes “the most thorough knowledge of human nature” (Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë* 338; Austen 60). However, it is not Austen’s understanding of character that Brontë finds unsatisfactory but rather the types of characters she documents, remarking that “she does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well” (Leavis 10-11). Brontë most concisely communicates her distaste for Austen’s writing by describing her fiction in terms of a human face, finding in her work “an accurate, daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face...but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy” (*Life of Charlotte Brontë* 338). By rendering Austen’s corpus in these bodily terms, Brontë also suggests a larger criticism of how Austen treats the body itself.

Despite Brontë’s harsh reception of Austen and the fact that their lives overlapped by only a single year, the two novelists were nevertheless in conversation with each other. Indeed, Brontë makes Sedgewick’s conflated Austen narrative of “Girl Being Taught a Lesson” even more explicit, as her lovers are always embroiled in education and separated by a power

imbalance: a professor and his pupil in *The Professor*, a tutor and his student in *Shirley*, a wealthy employer and his governess in *Jane Eyre*, an experienced teacher and his subordinate in *Villette*. Like Austen, Brontë is interested in how the classed and gendered hierarchies that pervade these pairings reflect a larger, cultural desire for female malleability and docility, epitomized by Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House," which would be published a single year after her own *Villette*. However, aligning more with Burney, Brontë also returns to the notion of legibility, interested in the ways in which the female body is read and falsely interpreted by other characters. Departing from both Burney and Austen, however, Brontë longs to look past "genteel English people" in their "carefully-fenced, highly-cultivated garden(s)" and instead peer into the lives of those of low birth and station, those wrought by tragedy, embroiled in passion, plagued by madness, and ostracized by their disfigurement, poverty, or ethnicity (Leavis 10). Brontë brings the prior novelists' interest in the textualized female body into conversation with evolving, Victorian-era conceptions of normalcy, class, disability, and identity.

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* is the perfect example of how she reimagines the concept of textual bodies with particular concern for readings constructed of marginalized bodies, which she presents in the "bright, vivid physiognomy" of Lucy Snowe. As a young woman who enters the world with "no relations," Lucy assumes a number of different stigmatized identities, including "orphan," "nameless," and "nobody's daughter," "liminal" statuses that, as Sarah Gilead notes, evoked a less than human origin in the Victorian period (Brontë 143; Gilead 302). Lucy's social exclusion is exacerbated when she takes a teaching position in the Rue Fossette, a girls' school situated in the French-speaking city of Villette. In this environment, where "equality is much practised," everything from Lucy's Englishness, her Protestant faith, her plainness, her age, and

her “easily-deranged temperament” set her apart from her spritely young pupils (Brontë 81, 306). Over the course of the novel, Lucy’s “deranged” disposition and obscure origins subject her to scrutiny, surveillance, and loss of autonomy through the figures of Monsieur Emanuel and Dr. Graham Bretton. In their respective roles as professor and physician, both men frame the Rue Fossette into an oppressive, asylum-like setting where Lucy’s body is presented as an object open to their perusal, revision, and interpretation. Thus, *Villette* merges the prior novels’ interest in the ways in which the female body is read and revised with new nineteenth-century treatment and classification of disabled bodies, serving as a critique of how the mad female body is categorized, classed, and confined.

Brontë’s interest in the ways in which we interpret marginalized bodies is best demonstrated by the scene in *Villette* in which Lucy witnesses a performance by the actress Vashti during a trip to the theater with Graham Bretton. Lucy’s reading of Vashi’s performance exhibits the ways in which all bodies are a constant performance of constructed identities:

I thought it was only a woman, though an unique woman, who moved in might and grace before this multitude. By-and-by I recognised my mistake. Behold! I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. These evil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength—for she was but a frail creature; ... how wildly they shook her with their passions of the pit! They wrote HELL on her straight, haughty brow. They tuned her voice to the note of torment. They writhed her regal face to a demoniac mask. Hate and Murder and Madness incarnate she stood.

(Brontë 250)

Lucy’s account of Vashti’s staged suffering occupies another two pages of the novel and is followed rather pointedly by the line, “What thought Dr. Graham of this being?” (Brontë 250).

Lucy's concern for how Dr. Bretton reads this figure is fitting, as generations of readers and scholars alike have struggled to account for this scene. Vlasta Vranjes argues that the Vashti scene is central to the novel's exploration of "English cosmopolitanism," demonstrating the "exclusion of the other" in a context that values ethnic and gender binaries (325). Lanya Lamouria claims Vashti represents "a female activist" being suppressed and silenced amid the Revolution of 1848 (405). More recently, Eun Shim has read Vashti as a confirmation of Lucy's genderqueerness, stunned as she is by this figure who is "neither of man nor woman" (Shim 249; Brontë 250). What scholars can agree on is this scene's significance in a novel that is keenly interested in the ways in which we read bodies, how we interpret markers of gender, race, and ability to ascribe identity and meaning.

What I believe has been overlooked in this scene is its possible allusions to another Brontë figure fitting of the title "Madness incarnate" (Brontë 250). Reading this scene, it is easy to be transported back to Thornfield Hall, where "demoniac" laughter emanated from the chambers of Bertha Mason, a figure who Jane similarly struggles to interpret: "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell" (*Jane Eyre* 290). In both novels, readers are presented with parallel scenes of the heroine confronting the spectacle of a mad and racialized female body, but what is for Jane a scene of horror is, for Lucy, a moment of evident interest and, arguably, recognition. However, the Vashti scene does not simply rewrite Bertha Mason; rather, it stages the sort of corrosive bodily reading Lucy is similarly subjected to and ultimately critiques the ways in which deviant bodies—racialized, disabled, mad, queer—are read, interpreted, and, essentially, rewritten by the institutions that seek to bind them. I employ this textual language to illustrate the way Brontë, like the earlier female novelists I have examined, presents the physical body as a textual body—an object deeply encoded with meaning

that may be extracted and interpreted by onlookers. Though Brontë gestures towards larger cultural concerns about how the Victorian era classified and treated bodily difference, she centers her concern on the mad female body. Thus, I will be analyzing moments in the novel where the female body is treated as a textual object to illustrate how Lucy's reading of Vashti's body, and, in turn, other characters' reading of Lucy's body, is meant to revise our reading of the mad body in the Victorian novel.

How does the Vashti scene change if we read Vashti as what she is—a book, a string of textual signs bound up and presented for our discerning eyes, a body ripe for interpretation? Returning to the scene with this lens, we recognize Vashti as a figure “rigid in resistance...draped in pale antique folds” threatening to be “torn in shreds” as she attempts to “cut through the pulpy mass” of her confines (Brontë 250). Perhaps she is not a “devil” at all, but merely a collection of “frail” pages whose “tragedy” is being leafed through by the ruthless, researching eyes of the audience (250-51). Vashti reads as a woman not only struggling to escape the confines of a physical book, to “cut through the pulpy mass” and “antique folds” that bind her, but also evade the interpretation of her readers, an audience who literally *writes* “the name HELL on her...brow,” inscribing upon her false titles such as “Madness incarnate,” “devil,” “creature,” and “Death” itself (250-51). Read in this way, Vashti embodies Lucy's central conflict in the novel, the ways in which her body is similarly read, surveilled, confined, and falsely interpreted, anticipating the way that she too comes to feel like “scarcely a substance herself” (251).

Throughout the novel, Lucy's body receives a similar sort of scrutiny, acting as the vessel through which Brontë can critique how women, specifically women with mental illness, are treated within institutional settings, from educational, medical, and matrimonial. Unlike her

animalistic accounts of Bertha Mason and demoniac descriptions of Vashti, through Lucy, Brontë presents us with a far more tempered portrait of mental illness—what is diagnosed by Dr. John Bretton as “a nervous disorder” but Lucy herself calls a “soon-depressed and easily-deranged temperament” (Brontë 242, 306). Scholars have also attempted a variety of interpretative readings of Lucy’s mental illness. Talia Schaffer reads it as the side effects of Lucy constantly having to “perform her surface self” and sacrifice her “core self” in her role as a teacher (268-89). Elisha Cohn reads it as mere “antisociality” in a novel that uses “suspended animation” to reflect Lucy’s “suspended agency” (845, 849). Elaine Showalter suggests it draws from the demands of the “governess trade,” which made women “especially anxious and vulnerable,” even linking “the lunacy of the governess to overstudy and...unrequited love” (164). Reading Lucy’s mental ailments as either purely metaphorical or strictly socially determined, however, not only diminishes their potency but negates Brontë’s embodied treatment of them.

Thus, drawing on Elizabeth J. Donaldson’s reading of Bertha’s madness, in which she combats the “madness-as-feminist-rebellion metaphor,” I seek to read Lucy’s mental illness not as a mere projection of female subjugation but rather as a genuine engagement with the ways in which we interpret the tormented female mind and disabled female body (15). Such a reading is encouraged by the fact that Lucy’s mental ailments are always suffused with embodied language, describing her “deadly weariness” and “paralyzed despair,” mental pain that “stuns” and “roused” (Brontë 224). Such descriptions transfer her mental experiences to bodily reactions, suggesting what Margaret Price calls a “bodymind” connection (Brontë 224; Price 269). These corporeal connections also serve to counter nineteenth-century skepticism surrounding “the mad body,” for, if, as Donna Haraway suggests, “bodies are perfectly ‘real,’ and nothing about

corporealization is ‘merely’ fiction,” then describing Lucy’s mental illness in bodily terms effectively makes her suffering “real” (Donaldson 26; Haraway 142).

However, I am less interested in how readers interpret Lucy’s illness and far more concerned with how other characters read her. Indeed, the entire cast of characters is defined by their treatment of her body, each reflecting the way their respective institution interprets and seeks to rewrite the mad body. Madame Beck acts as the asylum superintendent, always monitoring Lucy’s movements, destroying her opportunities for sexual agency, and, at times, even sedating her. Dr. John Bretton embodies the male physician figure, seeking to both classify and pacify her various mental fixations. Monsieur Emanuel plays the puritanical professor, evaluating Lucy’s mind and body to discern her every fault and correct each imperfection. Even Geneva and Polly represent the ideal winners of the marriage plot, malleable, doll-like figures that consistently cast Lucy’s otherness in high relief. For my purposes here, I will primarily be focusing on how Dr. Bretton and Monsieur Emanuel read, interpret, and attempt to revise Lucy’s body.

Published in 1853, *Villette* was written in the wake of the “increasing medicalization of bodies and minds” with the passing of the Lunatics Act in 1845 and the opening of Earlswood Asylum in 1847 (Bolt et al. 4). As treatment became more institutionalized, the grim asylum settings of the eighteenth century were replaced with a more “homelike therapeutic environment” wherein patients were encouraged “to develop self-control, self-respect, patience, and industry” (Showalter 158). Such goals are not unlike that of the school Lucy finds herself in, where Paul Emanuel similarly professes to value “self-control” in his pupils and sees that his lessons proceed with “order and industry” (Brontë 302, 80). These new asylums, however, also emphasized

“classification” and “surveillance,” promoting both an emphasis on bodily reading and an interest in interpretation.

Barred of the asylum’s overt brutality, Brontë’s depiction of the Rue Fossette more subtly captures the way the female body is surveilled and shelved away in such settings. For example, on her first day teaching Lucy describes her pupils as sitting “neatly arrayed, orderly and expectant,” each clad in a “clear white muslin dress” and arranged in tight rows of “lits d-ange” [angel beds] (Brontë 326, 125, 116). Her descriptions not only illustrate this asylum-like structure and sameness but also evoke the image of freshly bound books arranged on a shelf, establishing the way the female body will be treated throughout the novel. A similar image emerges when Monsieur Emanuel points Lucy to a window overlooking the school grounds where he sits “reading for hours together...My book is this garden; its contents are human nature—female human nature” (Brontë 351). Describing the school yard as a book and the students its contents, Emanuel not only frames the female body as a text to be read, but an object he may peruse at his leisure, tying the oppressive watchfulness of the Rue Fossette with textual connotations.

Though Lucy is not a student, she is subjected to this same degree of surveillance, often appearing as more of a patient than a professor. For example, at one point in the novel Lucy weeps alone in a classroom when she is horrified to find Monsieur Emanuel watching her through the window, remarking, “This was a strange house, where no corner was sacred from intrusion, where no tear could be shed, nor a thought pondered, but a spy was at hand to note and to divine” (Brontë 225). The suggestion that her “thoughts” as well as “tears” can be perceived by onlookers reveals her fears that her mental state is being interpreted as much as her physical

form. Dr. Bretton elicits a similar response when he implores Lucy to speak of her vision of the nun. With the scrutiny of a medical professional, he describes himself as a “conjurer,” professing “I read...all you would conceal...You may hide it, but I can possess it any moment I choose” (Brontë 242). His testament to “read” and “possess” her thoughts again makes Lucy’s mental state tangible and her body perfectly legible to him (Brontë 242).

Later in the novel, this surveillance is replaced with more overt bodily reading. When Lucy receives a long-awaited letter from Dr. Bretton, Monsieur Emanuel presses her: “Ah! it is too good to read at once; you save it, as...I used to save a peach whose bloom was very ripe?” (Brontë 235). Though Lucy remains silent, the “suddenly-rising warmth” in her face reveals the truth in his words. He presses her further: “...in reading that letter; you will open it when alone—n’est-ce pas [isn’t it so]? Ah! a smile answers,” reading the signs of her body in place of her own words just as Delvile did for Cecilia (Brontë 235). He then leaves her to read the letter privately, confidently professing to “read the billet’s tenor in [her] eyes” (Brontë 235). Lucy barely speaks for much of this exchange, yet Emanuel is able to read both the contents of her letter and the sentiments of her heart in her physical body, again rendering her body as his textual object.

Monsieur Emanuel’s intertwining of body and text is perhaps best understood by analyzing his treatment of Lucy’s writing desk. Containing her books, personal notes, and letters from Dr. John Bretton, who Lucy spends much of the novel in love with, her writing desk becomes not only a repository for her private sentiments but an extension of her physical body. Despite Lucy’s insistence that her correspondence with Dr. Bretton was “merely a friend’s letter,” Emanuel decides to conduct a more thorough investigation of her private body by

perusing the contents of her desk. Lucy witnesses this unwarranted reading firsthand, describing how “his olive hand held my desk open, his nose was lost to view amongst my papers” (Brontë 331). Brontë describes this breach of Lucy’s desk in notably bodily terms, emphasizing Emanuel’s “hand” and “nose,” even evoking his exposed form when describing how his typical “attire of ceremony” had been “discarded” and his “perverse *bonnet-grec* lay on the floor” (Brontë 331). These physical qualities coupled with Lucy’s application of first-person pronouns—“my papers” instead of the desk’s papers—makes this moment read as not only an invasion of privacy but a sensual spectacle. Lucy describes how “Now I knew, and I had long known, that that hand of M. Emanuel’s was on the most intimate terms with my desk; that it raised and lowered the lid, ransacked and arranged the contents, almost as familiarly as my own” (Brontë 331). The word “intimate” here as well as the violence conveyed in the word “ransacked” continue to frame the writing desk as a proxy of Lucy’s physical body. The sexual undertones implied in Emanuel’s investigations make this a far more explicit, and potentially violent, merging of text and body than the other heroines experienced. He is not only reading Lucy’s letters and rearranging her contents but demonstrating that her body, like those of the girls across the school grounds, is freely open to his perusal and interpretation.

Despite the clarity of the picture presented by this scene, Brontë clouds what Emanuel is actually doing; he is not only reading Lucy’s body, seeking to understand it by perusing her private letters, but he is also leaving evidence of his unsolicited reading by, ironically, leaving behind books. Lucy describes how “Between a sallow dictionary and worn-out grammar book would magically grow a fresh interesting new work,” what she describes as “treasures” (Brontë 332). Once again, the symbol of the book becomes key to Emanuel’s relationship with Lucy.

Replacing her “sallow,” “worn-out” copies with “handsome volumes” not only serves to distract Lucy from the breach of her private body but also demonstrates the type of revision Emanuel seeks to apply to her physical form, treating her no differently than the volumes that fill her desk (Brontë 332). He not only curates the contents of Lucy’s desk but actively critiques it, as Lucy recounts finding “exercises left overnight full of faults” the “next morning carefully corrected,” applying his own authorial pen to her metaphorical body (Brontë 332).

These same revisionist practices extend to Lucy’s physical body and are imbricated in Monsieur Emanuel’s role as a teacher. Lucy explains how “he liked me to commit faults,” for, by instructing her, he could assume a “tyrannical” power over her, remarkably reminiscent of Tilney’s belief that “a teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing” (Brontë 337-38; Austen 175). Lucy describes Emanuel’s teaching process like an excruciating birth, watching knowledge “struggle into life” without offering “to foster” until the fetal mind proved itself worthy (Brontë 338). This embodied language, connecting learning to the process of human formation, equates knowledge with a state of physical completeness and vitality, positing Emanuel as one who upholds standards of bodily normativity. Certainly, his scrutiny goes beyond a teacher marking the gaps in his pupil’s knowledge, as Lucy describes his eyes as “ruthless researchers” that “discerned...the barren places of the spirit...its hidden false curves...the twisted spine, the malformed limb... and far worse the stain or disfigurement they have perhaps brought on themselves” (Brontë 325). Once again, this embodied language suggests that Emanuel perceives Lucy’s intellectual and mental shortcomings as physical abnormalities, a notion that is further demonstrated when he evaluates her performance in certain subjects. Lucy describes how “he took me in hand, examined me first, and found me, I need not

say, abundantly deficient” (Brontë 339). His evaluation of her mental capabilities posits her as an object to be held, turned about, and scrutinized to find defects, another “worn out” volume he seeks to cast out and replace, an exercise he longs to mark-up and correct (Brontë 339). In Emanuel’s estimation, the gaps in Lucy’s knowledge reflect the imperfections in her mental and physical constitution, and, in teaching her arithmetic or French, he is attempting to revise and reform or, like Henry Tilney, rewrite her mind.

Dr. Graham Bretton attempts to interpret Lucy’s textual body even more explicitly. The male physician figure has a long history of attempting to understand, cure, and quell the tormented female mind. As Mary Poovey notes in her exploration of nineteenth-century medical treatment of women, such interest in the female mind arose from a desire to control it, explaining that the use of anesthetics allowed male doctors to “read his patients silenced body” so that he may “know—so as to master—the female body” (140). Indeed, Dr. Bretton considers himself a master at reading Lucy’s condition, using the “detective faculties” of his profession to diagnose her as suffering from a “nervous disorder” that caused her to see a vision of the nun in the attic, calling her encounter with the figure nothing but a “spectral illusion...resulting from a long-continued mental conflict” (Brontë 241-43). It is not until this diagnosis that Lucy even considers the possibility that she had fabricated the image of the nun, saying with horror “you think, then...that she came out of my brain?” (Brontë 243). This encounter positions Dr. Bretton as the authority on classifying Lucy’s mental state, demonstrating the belief that, when women entered a state of hysteria, or left the “state of nature,” her body could no longer “interpret its own condition more truthfully than a doctor’s medical expertise” (Poovey 140). The apparition of the nun, then, becomes the manifestation of Lucy’s mental ailments, and Dr. Bretton dutifully

pledges to keep her away, “to oppose her” (Brontë 247). His proposed remedy frames her mental illness as an illusion that he can simply erase or blot away (Brontë 243). The irony, of course, is that Lucy’s spectral nun is eventually revealed to be the very real figure of Monsieur de Hamal, who donned an old cloak to hide himself during a secret visit to Ginevra Fanshawe. The realization of this ruse, rather than dismissing Lucy’s mental ailments as mere fictions, serves to bring substance to them. Returning to Haraway’s idea of “corporealization,” giving flesh to the figure of the nun grants validity to Lucy’s mental state and posits it properly as an embodied experience (141). It also reinforces Lucy as the authority of her own body, wresting the reins of her mental state from the hands of the male physician.

Both the evaluations Monsieur Emanuel enacts and the diagnoses Dr. Bretton offers are their attempts to interpret Lucy’s textual body, a desire that is exacerbated by her bodily difference. Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory* deconstructs the constant reading and misreading of bodies, like Lucy’s, that are “out of place,” claiming that such bodies are subject to closer inspection, which has already been witnessed by the lack of privacy allowed Lucy, but also much more likely to have false identities ascribed to them (118). Lucy ruminates on this phenomenon in language that is remarkably reminiscent of McRuer’s claim:

What contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed! Madame Beck esteemed me learned and blue; Miss Fanshawe, caustic, ironic, and cynical...Professor Paul Emanuel...intimating his opinion that mine was rather a fiery and rash nature, adventurous, indocile, and audacious. I smiled at them all. (Brontë 292-93)

While not as incriminating as the titles imposed on Vashti, these estimations of Lucy are equally erroneous. The note that she simply “smiled at them all” reveals the absurdity of these false and conflicting identities, none of them suggesting an understanding or acceptance of Lucy’s true self. In a cast of characters defined by their skills in perception and knack for reading the female body, none of them have managed to properly interpret Lucy, suggesting that it is the invasive and reductive ways in which these characters, and the institutions they represent, read, categorize, and class bodies that needs revision.

While both men endeavor to interpret Lucy’s textual body in different ways, with Emanuel with an instructor’s eye on improvement and Dr. Bretton with a physician’s aim of rehabilitation, they both attempt a form of revision. Unlike the previous heroines, though, Lucy proves to be far less malleable, withstanding their unwarranted reading but ultimately resisting any attempts to rewrite her. For example, when reflecting on Emanuel’s persistence in instructing her, she protests, “Whatever my powers—feminine or the contrary—God had given them, and I felt resolute to be ashamed of no faculty of His bestowal” (Brontë 340). Later, she physically pushes back against Emanuel’s instruction by “gathering an armful of his books,” pouring them “at his feet,” and professing, “Teach me no more. I never asked to be made learned, and you compel me very profoundly to be learned is not happiness” (Brontë 341). In Monsieur Emanuel’s presence, where knowledge is equated with physical completeness, Lucy’s defiance to being “made learned” is also a resistance to any sort of revision (Brontë 341, 242). Additionally, the act of removing “his books out of [her] desk” and pouring “them into a heap...at his feet” serves to sever the pattern of objectification, revision, and unwarranted bodily reading they have come to represent for Lucy (Brontë 341). She proves equally resistant to Dr.

Bretton's reading of her. When composing a letter to him, she describes writing "two answers—one for my own relief, the other for Graham's perusal," actively editing the textual representation of her feelings and thus controlling his reading of her, despite the "detective faculties" of his profession (Brontë 241).

The authority Lucy exercises over her textual body not only separates her from the previous heroines but also from the other women in the novel, Polly and Ginevra. Lucy regularly describes Polly as a "doll" and "model," both titles suggesting her willingness to be molded by another's will, evident both in her adoration for her father and later attachment to Graham Bretton (Brontë 2, 256). While Polly embodies this doll-like submission, Ginevra exhibits a desirable imbecility, which Henry Tilney notes is "a great enhancement of [a woman's] personal charms" (Austen 125). It is this malleability, matched with their beauty, that sets Polly and Ginevra up to be winners of the marriage plot, both marrying Graham Bretton and Monsieur de Hamal respectively. Lucy, however, is unable to understand that it is their openness to the very revisions she rejects that allow them to assume this fate, thinking of Ginevra "The doll—the puppet—the manikin...Is it possible that fine generous gentleman...promises to protect your flimsy person and feckless mind through the storms and struggles of life...Who gave you that power?... Does it lie all in your beauty?" (Brontë 145). Though Lucy's resistance ultimately excludes her from such a fate, Brontë establishes a new avenue for the heroine's textual body, one in which self-authority is valued over pursuits of matrimony.

Despite Charlotte Brontë's contested portrayal of female mental illness in *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* is a novel that gives due attention to the madwoman in the attic, seemingly melding "plain Jane" with her monstrous mirror self (Gilbert & Gubar 336). Through Lucy Snowe, Brontë engages with the embodied realities of women that are read as disabled by depicting the

constant attempts at interpretation, insistence on revision, and exclusion from marriage plots and motherhood such characters are frequently subjected to. The end of the novel—in which Lucy accepts the fate readers have long lamented for Jane Eyre by becoming the sole mistress of a small school—allows her to escape the attempts at revisions enforced on her at the Rue Fossette. By physically escaping the institution, both medical and matrimonial, Lucy becomes the authority of her own body. Thus, by the end of the novel, while she does not join in the happy fates of prior heroines, she resists all attempts to rewrite her. Like the great Vashti, “she stood before her audience neither yielding to, nor enduring, nor, in finite measure, resenting it” (Brontë 251).

Chapter 4: The “...immovable imitation” of a Woman: Books and Bodies in *Middlemarch*

“How enviable it is to be a classic! When a verse in the Iliad bears six different meanings and nobody knows which is the right, a commentator finds this equivocalness in itself admirable!”

– George Eliot, *Letters*

Nearly 20 years after Brontë’s *Villette*, George Eliot similarly wrestles with the restrictions of textual interpretation. In a letter to Sarah Hennell, Eliot remarks on the “enviable...equivocalness” of classic texts, whose verses contain such multiplicities of meaning that scholars like her own Mr. Casaubon spend lifetimes attempting to reconcile a single “right” interpretation. Elizabeth Hale reads Eliot’s rumination on “equivocalness” as evidence of her distaste for those who desire to “fix meaning” in texts or, like Casaubon, endeavor to “dissect and see through them” (235). Staging Casaubon’s scholarship as a desire to “dissect” seemingly “dead” bodies of ancient text is fitting, as Roger Travis similarly compares his textual labors to Lydgate’s medical ones: “As Lydgate...works on the corruptions and contaminations of the body, Casaubon might have worked on corruptions and contaminations of text” (Hale 235; Travis 368). This framing not only illustrates Casaubon’s anatomical approach to his scholarship but also gestures to his textual approach to his domestic life with Dorothea Brooke. Like Dr. Bretton’s diagnoses, Tilney’s verbal corrections, or Delvile’s misreadings, Eliot speaks to a concern for the male desire to maintain a purity of meaning within the female body/text, and no character makes this more explicit than *Middlemarch*’s Mr. Casaubon.

Though *Middlemarch* is often described as a novel about everything—so much so that scholars like Gillian Beer find it easier to write about “What’s Not in *Middlemarch*”—at the heart of the novel is an entanglement of lives full of ambition, love, and regret. The life that both

opens and punctuates the novel is that of Dorothea Brooke, a beautiful yet puritanical young woman who longs to make her life meaningful by assisting a learned man in the production of his “great work” (Eliot 25). This desire leads her into a hasty marriage with the aging, failed academic Edward Casaubon—a man whose ideas, unknown to Dorothea, are as “withered” as and “impotent” as his physical body (Eliot 458). Indeed, of all the male characters this thesis explores, Casaubon makes this merging of text and body most explicit, as he not only frames ancient texts as cadavers but directly fashions Dorothea as living text—perhaps the only body he can hope to “shape” and “bind” enough for his intellectual labors “to be given to the world” (Eliot 459). Like the previous heroines, Dorothea is similarly presented as a malleable textual object. However, unlike the other heroines, Dorothea explicitly seeks the authority of men, recognizing marriage to a learned man as the only way she can “make her life greatly effective” (Eliot 63). Rather than emphasizing unwarranted reading, revision, or interpretation, then, Dorothea’s textual trajectory takes far more material form, as her marriage to Casaubon, and eventual relationship with Will Ladislaw, submit her to a physical confinement, obligation, and objectification and that mirror the process of book binding. Dorothea’s metaphorical binding—first by Casaubon’s intellectual labors and later by Will Ladislaw’s poetic imagination—critiques the ways in which women are physically confined and inhibited by the “imperfect social state” that surrounds them (Eliot 795).

With the novel’s distant setting in 1829-1832, and Casaubon’s even more antiquated notions about textual production, *Middlemarch* engages with the same discussions of female autonomy and textual agency that Burney, Austen, and Brontë foregrounded. However, Eliot takes this woman-as-text metaphor to the extreme in the life of Dorothea Brooke. From the

beginning, Casaubon's matrimonial intentions entirely align with his intellectual ones, and he sees in Dorothea a way to rectify his failed textual project, *The Key to all Mythologies*, finding in her a surrogate to deliver his impotent theories or, perhaps, an alternative textual body that proves more malleable, more willingly bound. I argue that Dorothea's arch—in which she goes from the “formless” mock heroine Miss Brooke, the untouched volume Mrs. Casaubon, and, eventually, to Dorothea Ladislaw—the fully realized “poem” Will labels her as at the end of Book 2—is entirely predicated on her malleability, mobility, and, indeed, her textuality (Eliot 29, 217). However, I will not be focusing on the reading or revision of Dorothea's body but rather on the physical aspects of her transformation into text, the ways in which, like Casaubon's other intellectual labors, he similarly seeks to bind her, confine her to his library, and keep her free of “contamination” under the authorial pen of Will Ladislaw, ambitions which, after Casaubon's death, ultimately make Dorothea the second book that he fails to compile.

In discussing Dorothea's textuality, I not only understand her body as a malleable object subject to perusal and but also as site of meaning that invites interpretation. Anna Antonopoulos has conducted similar readings of the female mystic body. She discusses the use of Catherine of Genoa's burning body as a “symbolic pyre of transcendence and union with the divine” and attributes this same symbolism to Saint Teresa's “flaming heart” (Antonopoulos 186). Indeed, both the prelude's framing of the Saint Teresa and later references to Dorothea's tendency to “seek martyrdom” suggest the heroine's longing to make her body a similar site of meaning (Eliot 9). At the beginning of the novel, Dorothea is perfectly primed to fill this role, her “large eyes,” “open, ardent” nature, and decided plainness make her the perfect vehicle with which to imbue her body with the same ascetic, religious meaning contained by those of Saint Teresa and

Antigone (Eliot 11, 12). In the very first paragraph, her body is already beginning to take on this meaning in both textual and religious terms, as the narrator describes her “profile” and “provincial garments” as giving her “the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible,—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of today’s newspaper” (Eliot 3). The juxtaposition between Dorothea either appearing as austere as “a fine quotation from the Bible” or as common as “a paragraph of today’s newspaper” establishes her textual potential in the opening of the novel (Eliot 3). With the right author, or perhaps the right reader, she could come to fulfill the either interpretation.

Perhaps it is these very qualities that made Henry James, in his review of *Middlemarch*, express that he felt he could peer “straight into the unfathomable eyes” and instantly grasp the “beautiful spirit of Dorothea Brooke” (163). James describes Dorothea as a “perfect flower,” more open to the reader than “the less unfolded blossoms” of Eliot’s sister novelists (163). However, in framing her as a perfect, fully blossomed flower, James attributes a sense of completeness, fullness, and definiteness to Dorothea that the heroine would not ascribe to herself. Rather, all of Dorothea’s personal ambitions and matrimonial intentions are centered around her perceived incompleteness and emptiness. The narrator describes how she had a “great mental need” and a “soul-hunger” that could only be satisfied by “the completest knowledge,” and she saw marriage as the only deliverance “from her own ignorance” (Eliot 29). Conversely, she believes in Casaubon’s ability to “reconcile complete knowledge” and fulfill a “great work” that is all “indefiniteness” to her (Eliot 26, 13, 29). Dorothea believes that the only way to “make her life greatly effective” is by acquiring knowledge and meaning, which she conceives of in exclusively textual forms: “to read aloud Greek and Latin...as Milton’s daughters did their

father,” to “copy and extract” at Casaubon’s orders, to “write” to his “dictation” (Eliot 30, 63, 194). She eagerly, almost feverishly, pursues these textual labors, such as when Mr. Brooke finds her “deep in one of the pamphlets which had some marginal manuscript of Mr. Casaubon’s, — taking it in...as she might have taken in the scent of a fresh bouquet after a dry, hot, dreary walk” (Eliot 38-39). Dorothea believes that “taking in” Casaubon’s text will allow her to obtain the knowledge and purpose she desires.

Dorothea sees herself as an empty or incomplete page, and, in consuming text, she hopes to be imbued with knowledge, which evolves into a mistaken desire to become a text herself. The textual nature of her ambitions becomes more explicit when the narrator describes Dorothea’s longing for a “*binding* theory which could...give the remotest sources of knowledge some bearing on her action,” the textual connotations of the word “binding” suggesting her physical manifestation into a text [my emphasis] (Eliot 85). The narrator further explains how “she did not wish to deck herself with knowledge,” but rather, like the Saint Teresa, create a textual body “under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience,” such as Mr. Casaubon (Eliot 85). Thus, it is no surprise that the figures Dorothea reveres and desires—the “dignified...Locke, the “instructive...Milton, “the judicious Hooker,” the “great...Pascal”— are not only scholars or religious thinkers but authors, men who managed to command and compile text (Eliot 18, 25, 12, 30). If Dorothea believes that “text, whether of prophet or of poet, expands for whatever we can put into it,” then marriage to such a man could allow him to expand her mind, take it from a “walled-in maze of small paths” to the “grandest path,” make a whole “lake” from “her little pool” (Eliot 50, 30, 26). Dorothea’s ambitions to be inscribed with knowledge, bound by theory, and dictated by a discerning scholarly figure all point to her desire to not only

be the “lamp-holder,” “reader,” or “secretary” to the next Milton, but become the very text he can shape, bind, and “fit to a little shelf” (Eliot 20, 19, 21, 25). In this way, her epic ambitions for the use of her body are inextricable from her role as a wife, and it is only after her marriage to Casaubon that she begins to realize that she found “no sacred poet” (Eliot 7).

While Dorothea is presented as an aspiring textual body, Mr. Casaubon, too, is depicted in explicitly textual terms, as the narrator describes how “his memory...was a volume,” his blood all “semicolons and parenthesis” (Eliot 27,70). He presents his addresses to Dorothea in terms that are equally textual, coming to her with a life that “however short in the sequel, has no backward pages whereon, if you chose to turn them, you will find records such as might justly cause you either bitterness or shame” (Eliot 44). Like Dorothea, he sees marriage as both a way to secure “domestic delights” and further his intellectual pursuits, which, in his case, manifests in the completion of his decades-long intellectual project, *The Key to all Mythologies* (Eliot 33). His project is obviously a textual one; he plans to “condense” his extensive notes, reconcile the “erratic mythical fragments,” and eradicate the “corruptions” inherent in the genealogy of manuscripts (Eliot 25). However, it is also, as Roger Travis points out, “a project of purification,” attempting to construct a “family tree of manuscripts” to uncover an illusory, uncorrupted archetype (369).

The genealogical metaphors underlying his scholarship also point to his other goal in marrying Dorothea—to “leave behind that copy of himself that seemed so urgent of a man” and account for his ill-success in “issuing copies of his mythological key” (Eliot 269). Not only can Dorothea produce little Casaubons, but she can also assist him in the formation of his other copy, believing that “he had found even more than he demanded; she might really be such a helpmate”

(Eliot 269). In this way, his domestic interests are entirely imbricated with his scholarly ambitions, and at the heart of both is a desire to shape text and produce a bound object from the body of Dorothea. In marrying Dorothea, Casaubon “thought of annexing happiness with a lovely young bride” and now believed “that his happiness was going to begin” (Eliot 271). Attempting to discover in Dorothea a single, illusory path to happiness, Casaubon seeks to form her into *The Key to all Felicities*. While Casaubon may not originally intend to bind her the same way as his unfinished book, he does see her as someone that can help him produce, and later bear, his text.

Not only is Casaubon’s book presented as a supplement for a child, but his authorship is often paired with the language of birth and pregnancy. His studying is consistently referred to as a “lonely labour,” and he often sits “brooding over...the autumnal unripeness of his scholarship” (Eliot 459, 401). These descriptions only compound with the other reproductive terms that double as intellectual processes such as “conception” and “pregnant,” both of which have links to the production of ideas. Both the womb and the authorial mind, then, are bound by the same processes of creation and production, a concept with roots in the early modern period, when, as Lisa Walter notes, “the mind, like the womb, was a liminal space where...new forms were created and entered the world whether in the form of textual production or children” (128). By the nineteenth-century, however, authorship was more frequently figured as what Gilbert and Gubar call “literary paternity,” the image of an author as a father, a “patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (6). Within such a framework, a man who “lacked generative literary power becomes like a eunuch—or like a woman” (Gilbert and Gubar 10). Framing Casaubon’s intellectual endeavors in female reproductive terms, then, Eliot not only

conveys the outdatedness of his studies but also the impotence of his theories. He is attempting an act of creation without the “phallic pen,” accounting for his failure to bear any “new forms,” textual or biological (Gilbert and Gubar 6; Walter 128). To further emphasize the impossibility of his book’s conception, Eliot stages Casaubon’s physical state as that of a pregnant body. When he sits awake on the last night of his life, the narrator describes how Casaubon “felt some uneasiness in a reclining posture” and later felt “ambition breathing hardly under the pressure of self-distrust, the goal receding, and the heavier limbs” (Eliot 456, 459). With restless discomfort, labored breathing, and swollen limbs, his body bears the marks of not only pregnancy but a troubled labor.

These descriptions come moments after Casaubon asks Dorothea to “carry out my wishes...and apply yourself to do what I should desire” in the case of his death, which Dorothea instantly interprets as a request to finish his book, to bear and rear the “copy” he failed to produce (Eliot 457, 269). The reproductive metaphors are almost overused as Dorothea contemplates her answer, realizing that her husband’s body can no longer keep “the embryos of truth a-breathing” and make “the seed of all tradition” bear the fruit of his discoveries (Eliot 458). Dorothea, too, conceives of his authorship as reproduction but also recognizes it as hopeless and miscarried, describing his work as already “withered in the birth like an elfin child” (Eliot 458). Dorothea’s recognition of the impotence of Casaubon’s project is astute, for, as Elizabeth Hale notes, “copying is not creation, and it is not procreation. Casaubon is fundamentally mistaken about the process of being a teacher, and a parent, and a scholar,” all roles that require him to construct, compose, and cultivate bodies, whether textual or biological (Hale 230).

The biological connection to his intellectual labors is important, as it emphasizes the textual transformation Dorothea must undergo if she complies with his wishes. Dorothea recognizes her role as a surrogate for his failed book, “the only hope left that his labours...could be given to the world” (Eliot 459). She also imagines her task as a sort of motherhood, anticipating the “days, and months, and years” she would spend sorting through his “mixed heaps of material” attempting to rear a completed form. However, Dorothea knows Casaubon’s notes are nothing more than “fragments...from crushed ruins,” and the only textual body that would be bound within the Lowick library would be her own (Eliot 458). While Dorothea once imagined that her textual labors under Casaubon would grant her freedom and clarity, “deliver her from her girlish subjugation,” and show her “how it was possible to live a grand life,” the lifetime of “sorting” and “sifting” she faces after Casaubon’s death is, conversely, one of confinement and confusion (Eliot 29, 458). Picturing herself combing through the “crushed ruins” of his work, she imagines a life, quite literally, entombed with the “shattered mummies” of Casaubon’s scattered notes, a life spent, like him, “buried in books” and “living too much with the dead” (Eliot 458, 39, 19). However, hers would not be a voluntary entombment. Rather, it would be “a new yoke,” a future “fettered” to his “close library,” a life both bound *to* his failed book and bound *like* his failed book (Eliot 457, 549, 460).

In positing Dorothea as the surrogate of his lifeless *Key to all Mythologies*, Casaubon also condemns her to become his next text. The line between text and self are blurred for Dorothea, as she faces a life spent rearing a body of work that is already “thirty years in preparation,” a being that is older than Dorothea herself (Eliot 404). Indeed, more than the mother to his failed book, Dorothea threatens to become another “immovable imitation of a

book” that clings to the shelves of the Lowick library (Eliot 264). As she contemplates her decision to finish his book, Dorothea begins to physically resemble one. As she arises the morning following Casaubon’s request to complete his book, her maid Tantripp remarks, “I never saw you look so pale...But always smelling those leather books, what can be expected,” suggesting that her colorless complexion has begun to resemble the pages of a book from too much time in the dim, “disenchanted,” and “deadened” aspect of Casaubon’s library (Eliot 460, 265). When Dorothea first returns to Lowick after her honeymoon, similar language is used to describe how her complexion was changed by the conditions of Casaubon’s library: “Her blooming full-pulsed youth...made itself one with the chill, colorless, narrowed landscape” of “never-read books” (Eliot 265).

Not only is she beginning to look like a book, she even appears to become as motionless and lifeless as one, as the narrator describes “she was too weak...to do anything but submit completely...She sat still and let Tantripp put on her bonnet and shawl, a passivity which was unusual with her” (Eliot 460). With her flesh as pale as parchment and her body as passive as an unread book, when Tantripp finishes “tying the bonnet,” it is as if Dorothea’s binding has been complete (Eliot 460). Reading this scene of dressing as one of book binding is not far-fetched, as, in 1830, it was increasingly common for books to be bound in cloth with a cover that was “plain and unassuming,” and since we are told in the very first line of the novel of Dorothea’s “poor dress” and “plain garments,” it is likely that the “bonnet and shawl” she is shrouded in in this scene are similarly “bare of style” (River Campus Libraries, Eliot 9). Unlike the “bright colors and elaborate ornamentation” characteristic of book bindings at the time of the novel’s production, Dorothea is markedly unadorned, as seen in her refusal to “wear ornaments” in the

first chapter of the novel, making her physically reminiscent of books that were produced at the time of the novel's setting (Butler 25; Eliot 15).

If we hesitate to read this as the moment in which Dorothea is bound, however, it is perhaps more aptly described as the state just before binding. In his account of nineteenth-century bookbinding techniques, James Green describes how the printer's servant would first "fold the sheets and sew them together with a single simple stitch," resulting in a pamphlet (615). A pamphlet, he explains, was a document that "occupied a sort of limbo between bound and unbound," which perhaps more fittingly describes Dorothea's state at this point in the novel (Green 615). It is in this pamphlet-like state that Dorothea oscillates between bound and unbound, momentarily free yet certain in the fact that she must commit herself to Casaubon's failed project. The narrator describes Dorothea's "highly-strung feeling" as she "foresaw that she must bind herself," further evoking the image of her pages being tightly sewn and ready for the cover, or conference with Casaubon, that would officially "bind" her (Eliot 461). Eliot's choice of the word "bind" here not only communicates the fact that Dorothea "was fettered" but also makes explicit her fears of becoming another book confined to Casaubon's library (Eliot 461). Earlier in the novel, the narrator expresses that "Dorothea too might have been shut up in the library without the presence of visitors," suggesting that, since her marriage, her waking hours were already chiefly spent confined like an untouched volume on Casaubon's shelves (Eliot 313). Even her narrow escape from her binding is framed in passivity, for, when Dorothea resolves to commit herself to finishing his book, she finds Casaubon unresponsive before she can deliver her promise. The news of his death is communicated by the line "Dorothea never gave her answer," active phrasing that appears to give Dorothea agency in her decision but ultimately

mocks her entirely passive escape from the entrapment she committed herself to, potentially foreshadowing that she was not yet free (Eliot 462).

Reeling in her pamphlet-like state after Casaubon's death, Dorothea is left with a decision, to either complete her binding by finishing Casaubon's book posthumously or break free of her stitches and let loose her pages. However, both fates are comparatively painful for Dorothea, requiring her to either disobey her husband's dying wish or commit herself to a similar death. A.D. Nuttall offers an apt description for Dorothea's dilemma: "When she is widowed, Dorothea feels committed to the construction of a tomb...The book is the tomb, but whose tomb is it? Who is inside? Not only the author...but the widow also" (33). Framing the completion of Casaubon's book as a "promise to erect a tomb with his name upon it," Eliot conveys Dorothea's mutual entombment, mirroring Tantripp's earlier wish to see "every book in that library...built into a caticom" (Eliot 473, 461). Nuttall's image of Dorothea inside the tomb is fitting, for when she returns to Lowick library for the first time after his death, she undergoes a funeral-like procession. However, instead of constructing Casaubon's tomb and joining in his fate, Dorothea decides to put her textual body to rest. She looks upon the library as "the mute memorial of a forgotten faith," and her re-entry to it as Casaubon's widow reads less like a commemoration of her husband's life and more like the procession of her own burial. She first reflects on the memory of the "eighteen months of her married life" and then arranges the burial site by "carefully rang[ing] all the note-books" (Eliot 473). Finally, she inscribes her response to his *Synoptical Tabulation*, saying "I could not use it. Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in," writing the epitaph to lay her textual body to rest (Eliot 473). She then "enclosed and sealed" the remains and deposited them

“in her *own* desk,” marking this as not only a response to Casaubon but the departure of his version of her textual self [my emphasis] (Eliot 473).

However, finding herself free of one man’s bind, Dorothea soon finds that “the cold grasp” Casaubon wishes to keep on her life not only involves the completion of his unfinished book but also his desire for textual purity, exemplified by the codicil to his will that stipulates that she cannot marry Will Ladislaw, Casaubon’s much younger cousin who falls in love with Dorothea from the very beginning of the novel (Eliot 472). If Casaubon approaches Dorothea’s textual body with the same “stemmatic” strategies that Travis identifies in his scholarship, then he does not only wish to bind her and confine her to his library but also to discover in her an original archetype that he seeks to keep free of “corruptions” from the pen of another author (368). Additionally, if, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, “the pen” is “a metaphorical penis,” then Casaubon’s codicil forbidding Dorothea’s marriage to Will is both textually and sexually binding (3). Because Dorothea is Casaubon’s last hope of securing and binding a pure textual object in his career, the codicil to his will endeavors to keep his manuscript free from corruption or revision.

His authorial intentions are clear, as Casaubon regards Will not with “the common jealousy of a winter-born husband” but rather the deeper vein of resentment he reserves for “Carp & Company” or “Pike and Tench” his contemporary critics who recognize the impotence of his theories and mock his mistranslations of Latin (Eliot 404, 272). In this way, Casaubon’s jealousy in his marriage is closely tied to his anxieties of authorship, as he claims that people knowing that “he did not find marriage blissful...would be as bad as letting Carp and Brasenose generally, know how backward he was in organizing the matter for his *Key to all Mythologies*”

(Eliot 272). More than these coteremporaries, though, it is Will Ladislaw who most threatens Casaubon's project, as he is the first to suggest to Dorothea that "the labor of her husband's life might be void," effectively turning her from his most pliable text to his "most cutting and irritating" critic (Eliot 202, 196). If marriage to Dorothea was meant to be Casaubon's *Key to all Felicities*, then he is stung by "sores of self-doubt" when he begins to identify her as not another one of his texts but one of his critics, as the narrator reflects that "he knew little of Dorothea's sensations" yet "at present they were comparable in strength to his own sensibilities about Carp's criticisms" (Eliot 363, 409).

Their domestic disputes, then, take on a textual tone. When Dorothea approaches Casaubon about supplying Will with a portion of her income, he responds as an inflexible author rather than a spiteful husband: "What I now wish you to understand is, that I accept no *revision*, still less *dictation* within that range of affairs...It is not for you to interfere between me and Mr. Ladislaw, and still less to encourage... a *criticism* on my procedure" [my emphasis] (Eliot 363). As Casaubon fears, Will's rival pen has revised and corrupted Dorothea's native devotedness, "replaced...worship by the most exasperating of all criticism" (Eliot 195). Casaubon has no doubts about the author of such alterations in Dorothea's behavior, claiming "she was ready to be attached to Will and be pliant to his suggestions," as the two never met without her "bringing away from it some new troublesome impressions" (Eliot 403). This language frames Dorothea as a "pliant" textual body that is receiving "new impressions" by a rival author, recalling Tilney's revisions of Catherine. If, as Casaubon believes, Will's words have already begun to rewrite Dorothea's mind, then the codicil to his will is meant to keep him from further corrupting her textual body by discouraging her from committing to his failed mythological key.

However, Will not only offers a critical perspective on Casaubon's scholarship but also an alternative way of viewing Dorothea's textual body. While Dorothea imagines Casaubon as a superior mind toiling away on a great work, she, perhaps with equal idealism, imagines Will as a passionate poet. When discussing his future vocation, Dorothea proposes "perhaps you will be a poet," and later Mr. Brooke claims, "He seems to me a kind of Shelley" (Eliot 217, 346). While it is never intimated that he actually writes poetry in the novel, Eliot consistently frames his relationship with Dorothea as a poet and his muse. Will famously tells Dorothea "You *are* a poem" while in Rome, first establishing this dynamic (Eliot 217). Later in the novel, Will likens their discussions to the "intercourse between Dante and Beatrice or Petrarch and Laura," aligning himself to the role of poet and Dorothea to the muse whose likeness is eternalized in verse (Eliot 348). This poetic connection encapsulates the way Will performs a sort of blazon in his view of Dorothea. When he spots her in Rome seated near the sculpture of Ariadne, he gazes upon her as Petrarch would his muse; her hand "pillowed her cheek," her braided hair made a "halo of her face," her "large eyes" were a "streak of sunlight" (Eliot 184). This language emblazons Dorothea's body, a poetic technique that, as Moira Baker notes, has the effect of "(dis)embodying female power" in an attempt "to master it, textually, at least, if not sexually" (7). Like Casaubon, then, Will's use of Dorothea's textual body similarly threatens to bind her.

However, Will's purpose with Dorothea's body, though similarly textual, ultimately attempts to free her rather than confine her; where Casaubon seeks to dictate and bind, Will seeks to revere and enshrine. Mr. Brooke notes Will's "enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, emancipation," and he endeavors to offer that for Dorothea (Eliot 346). While confined to Casaubon's "close library," the narrator explains that "seeing Will occasionally was like a lunette

opened in the wall of her prison, giving her a glimpse of the sunny air” (Eliot 348). Will’s poetic passion also serves as a humorous foil to Casaubon’s feelings for Dorothea, as he feels certain “that poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion” during their courtship (Eliot 63). Thus, while the life Will offers is not without fetters, the love he promises Dorothea is entirely antithetical to what she has with Casaubon. Rather than Casaubon’s “immovable imitation of a book,” Dorothea could instead become Will’s living embodiment of a poem, allowing her to at least amass the meaning she so long for her body to take (Eliot 264).

However, both men ultimately fail to transform Dorothea’s textual body in the way she desires. From the beginning, even more than martyrdom, knowledge, or purpose, Dorothea longs for freedom. Her frustration manifests in terms of entrapment; hers was a nature confined by “bands of narrow teaching” and “hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses” (Eliot 29). While she originally attempts to escape such restraints by allowing Casaubon’s superior mind to author her and later relies on Will’s poetic imagination to immortalize her, both ultimately fail to lead her to the “epic life” she envisions (Eliot 7). As the prelude foretells, Dorothea found no “sacred poet” that would “make her life greatly effective,” and she persists in the “formlessness” and “indefiniteness” that plagued her from the beginning of the novel (Eliot 7, 29). By the end, she is neither Casaubon’s *Key to all Felicities* nor Will’s poem; she is “a bit of ink and paper” that was never “laid open under the one pair of eyes which have knowledge enough to turn it into the opening of a catastrophe” (Eliot 340).

While there is an abundance of scholarship dedicated to what Dorothea truly wants—common love or an epic life, marriage or martyrdom, self-authorship over dictation—perhaps the best diagnosis of Dorothea’s desire is that provided by Lydgate: “She wants perfect freedom, I

think, more than any other prescription” (Eliot 471). What she gets from her marriage to Will, however, is a fate “absorbed into the life of another,” a physical dematerialization that extends to Dorothea’s impact on her world (Eliot 793). Though her good deeds were “incalculably diffusive,” her spirit was “not widely visible,” her acts “unhistoric,” her life “hidden,” and her tomb left “unvisited” (Eliot 795). Her ending bespeaks a woman who quite literally fails to make her mark on the world as indelible as those of the Saint Teresa or Antigone. Evoking these figures in the final paragraph of the novel, Eliot reminds readers of Dorothea’s failure to authorize any story of her own. Such an ending forces readers to wonder if there really is a fulfilling future outside of male authority, facing either a premature entombment alongside Casaubon and his ill-fated mythological key or existence as a mere love object in Will Ladislaw’s more remarkable life (Eliot 8, 795).

Conclusion

Recalling the image of Pamela sewing her letters into her petticoat, each of these novelists performs a similar sort of handiwork, binding the body of their heroines with the material conditions of text to produce a narrative fabric that strategically blends the two. Employing the concept of textual bodies in unique ways—Cecilia as Delvile's sealed letter, Catherine as Tilney's revised manuscript, Lucy as Emanuel's cast-out grammar book, Dorothea as Casaubon's untouched volume—they all masterfully render how the sexualized female subject comes to resemble a textualized object, a material body similarly bound by male authority and commodified in an all-consuming social and literary marketplace. While Pamela's fusion of text and body protects her, she also stands as a product of destructive male desire, becoming the image of an utter lack of autonomy and the emblem of the objectified female body. Thus, unlike Richardson, later female novelists like Burney, Austen, Brontë, and Eliot explored how this body-as-text metaphor could be used to express issues related to gendered embodiment. To this end, they focus not on their heroines' active interlacing of text and body, as Pamela exhibits, but rather on the far more pervasive ways in which their heroines are passively rendered as textual bodies, subject to unwarranted reading, revision, interpretation, and binding by the authorial presence of each novel's prominent male characters.

How does our reading of these novels, and the broader corpus of women's writing in this period, change once we recognize the connections between text and the female body? For one, we engage with the heroine as not only a product of fiction but a reflection of the very real ways in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's plots were restricted by masculine authority, their conduct inscribed with expectations of modesty and sanity, their identities erased through marriage, their ambitions bound by domestic life—conditions that confine them to be

“fit to a little shelf” rather than free to dictate a story of their own (Eliot 25). We are also able to trace a clear genealogy in which these four novelists, though not always in direct conversation with each other, connect through their fraught positions as both women and professional authors and employ this concept of textual bodies in ways that speak to the culture and time they inhabit. Thus, through this metaphor of woman-as-text, we can gain a new perspective on how Burney understood modesty and money, how Austen regarded marriage and authorship, how Brontë conceived of disability and identity, and how Eliot perceived domestic obligation and textual production.

We can also expand this framework to engage with how other women writers used textual metaphors to explore issues of authorship, gender, and embodiment, offering a new perspective on Aphra Behn’s invitation to read Angelica Bianca’s body in *The Rover*, Charlotte Lennox’s portrait of utter female impressionability in *The Female Quixote*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s use of affect and handwriting in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, or even Jeannette Winterson’s evocative rumination on gender and materiality in *Written on the Body*. By recognizing the female body as a textual object, we better understand how Burney, Austen, Brontë, Eliot, and other woman writers engaged with the material conditions of women in their time and also encouraged critical engagement with how we read, interpret, bind, and commodify bodies today (Eliot 795). Even more broadly, we can confront how the material conditions and visual representations of bodies will continue to evolve and inform our cultural discourses surrounding gender, affect, ability, and identity.

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