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Subversive Beauty - Victorian Bodies of Expression

Lisa Michelle Hoffman-Reyes

University of South Florida, lisahoffman@hotmail.com

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Subversive Beauty:
Victorian Bodies of Expression

by

Lisa Hoffman-Reyes

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
with a concentration in Literature
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Co-Major Professor: Marty Gould, Ph.D.
Co-Major Professor: Pat Rogers, Ph.D.
Maria Cizmic, Ph.D.
Annette Cozzi, Ph.D.

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DEDICATION

For Betty Eason and Susan Hoffman, two subversive beauties.

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation seeks to bring aesthetics into conversation with the epistemological concerns of three Victorian texts, in response to the prevalence of beautiful feminine faces and bodies in Victorian texts, their presence amplified through the use of copious description. I examine the ways that Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, and Robert Browning complicate traditional contemporary assumptions regarding behaviors and moralities through their constructions of feminine beauty. These writers challenge and dispute a variety of Victorian social norms imposed upon both men and women, most notably the mandate to adhere to prescribed behaviors that codify in order to regulate gender normativity.

My project begins with a historical review cataloging beauty's constructions and uses. Then, in Chapter two, I argue that Thomas Hardy elevates imperfect women through descriptions of their natural beauty in order to question and reject popular constructions of proper femininity. Chapter Three transitions from presentations of subversive feminine beauty offering a fairly straightforward disputation of contemporary values in Hardy, to shedding gender constraints in Oscar Wilde, as the author disputes gender rigidity by crafting beautiful men with "feminine" desires and by reassessing the desirability of women. Finally, Chapter Four notes the ways that Robert Browning artistically subverts Victorian literary conventions by rejecting the typical practice of objectifying women by his near-total absence of descriptions of female features, and by placing his emphasis on the spiritual life of his heroines.

My dissertation observes that given that beautiful images are so powerful, they could and did (as they still can and do) serve as a means of social control, and never more so than in

Victorian England, when details use, particularly in the construction of feminine bodies, so consistently and pervasively worked to exclude healthy female sexuality, to scorn and shame deviant masculinities, and to annihilate the feminine body.

Ultimately, though, the crux of my project is to detour away from traditional observations regarding the potential for objectification beauty allows, and to engage with Foucault's idea of a "reverse-discourse" which employs "the same vocabulary, using the same categories" as the dominant discourse. The central argument of my dissertation is that certain Victorian writers produced subversive texts which appropriated recognizable constructions of physical beauty in order to transform their societies toward a more just, more liberal, more compassionate morality.

With each of the three texts I examine, I work toward establishing that claim by situating the text within its historical and cultural context within the long nineteenth century. I also pay attention to how these writers engage and instruct the reader. This is integral to my central argument because if literary narratives offer the mode of transformation aimed at improving societies, then the act of reading, and the actor, the reader, must be the primary recipient of the message that the constructed beautiful body holds.

I have worked to illustrate the ways that by constructing characters possessing great physical beauty, and displaying or withholding descriptions of the crafted body, Victorian writers challenged, disputed, and supplanted a variety of nineteenth-century social norms. I claim and then support that beautiful characters functioned within literature as persuasive agents of change, subverting social norms by arousing and then inverting conventional associations between beauty and goodness.

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics is “not in the first place about art” but about the body and its “whole region of human perception and sensation” (Eagleton 13). Because beautiful objects powerfully affect the sensate body, Terry Eagleton discerns beauty’s use as a tool of political hegemony. With the power of beauty’s influence in mind, “The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artifact is thus inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order” (Eagleton 3). Because the body is so compelling, the human form pervades the cultural sphere, selling lifestyles, actions, and values. Human beauty, in particular, operates ubiquitously. Images of the beautiful body are both persistent and pliant; they defy attempts to malign them. When one formulation of beauty is rejected, another fills its place. An analysis of feminized beauty as depicted in Victorian literature reinforces the influence of this type of “aesthetic artifact,” wherein texts in various forms, from the visual to the literary, craft a new dominant ideology through the use of the beautiful body. Across genres, through the strategic implementation of feminine beauty, Victorian authors gave material form to their impressions regarding their society’s values, in adherence or at variance with contemporary culture.

Of the matter of beauty and its claim to power, it is no wonder that writers employ physical loveliness as that “recognizable appeal,” the “technique of expression... accessible in the highest possible degree” through which Wayne Booth argues an object gains significance (99). I argue that in many nineteenth-century literary works, including Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, *Teleny*, attributed to Oscar Wilde and others, and Robert Browning’s *The Ring*

and the Book, the feminized beautiful body draws the reader away from conventional conceptions of gender difference – figurations that serve a conservative, patriarchal, hetero-normative ideology – and toward a more compassionate, more inclusive value system.

Along with the role of what Terry Eagleton terms “the sensate life,” aesthetic feeling is commensurably a cerebral process propelled by psychological needs deeper than those driven by the pleasure of the senses.¹ Beauty accommodates the power that it does in part because the fulfillment of these needs is such an intensely moving experience. Indeed, our subjective desires, rendering us susceptible to the forces of the beautiful, are life-sustaining in nature. In the first volume of *Modern Painters*, John Ruskin affirms the influence and importance of beauty, but attributes the beautiful solely to God, wherein “a man of taste” discerns beauty by God’s directive:

Any material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful. Why we receive pleasure from some forms and colors, and not from others, is no more to be asked or answered than why we like sugar and dislike wormwood. The utmost subtilty of investigation will only lead us to ultimate instincts and principles of human nature, for which no farther reason can be given than the simple will of the Deity that we should be so created. We may, indeed, perceive, as far as we are acquainted with His nature, that we have been so constructed as, when in a healthy and cultivated state of mind, to derive pleasure from whatever things are illustrative of that nature...He

¹ I use the term “aesthetic” as Vernon Lee used it: “Separate expressions should be reserved for ‘that which has to do with art,’ and ‘that which has to do with the beautiful’; and since we already possess the perfectly intelligible adjective ‘artistic,’ there is every reason that the other adjective ‘aesthetic’ should be reserved for the designation of the phenomenon of beauty” (5).

who has followed up these natural laws of aversion and desire, rendering them more and more authoritative by constant obedience, so as to derive pleasure always from that which God originally intended should give him pleasure, and who derives the greatest possible sum of pleasure from any given object, is a man of taste.

Ruskin's absolute submission to God of all individual taste became progressively more problematic in light of new scientific theories regarding the way life propagates, a new consumerism that relied upon appeals to the senses, and new laws that sought to empower the individual as a self bearing personal agency. Increasingly, articulations of "The simple will of the deity" and "God's intention" failed to persuade large segments of the Victorian population.

Despite her regard for and debt to Ruskin's scholarship in her own work, Victorian novelist, theorist, and philosopher Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) found Ruskin's definition of beauty "dogmatic," over-simplistic, intellectually arrogant, and ultimately untenable as a treatise explaining aesthetic feeling (170). In *Beauty & Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*, as explanation for the uses of her and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson's findings, Lee discloses her goal of "render[ing] superfluous all recourse to a mysterious ultimate principle of supersensuous, not to say supernatural, origin" (156). Vernon Lee insisted that "beautiful spatial forms...present to us...a meaningful Rhythm of living," allowing for both "constraint" and "freer action" (40).² Lee noted the "utility" in beauty and asserted that beauty offers "a regulated progress of single activities to conflicts and of conflicts to resolutions" (40).³ From

² In her elegant treatise, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry illustrates that according to Homer and Dante, "Beauty is lifesaving...life-creating...life-altering" (32). Clearly, the invention of the idea regarding the transformative powers inherent in the beautiful does not belong to the Victorians, but as I hope to illustrate, literary depictions of beauty, in particular, became more affecting than ever before.

³ In insisting upon the utility of beauty, one finds echoes of John Ruskin in Lee's assertions. Also, as Carolyn Burdett points out, Lee wanted to remove aesthetics from associations with decadence and to argue for the health and necessity of beauty.

beauty emerges harmony, synchronicity, and human fulfillment. “All times and peoples...have bowed before beauty as a visible manifestation of the divine” (34-35), not to worship a distant God but to enter into sacred communion with earthly entities. In mid- to late-Victorian England, upon the decline of religious authority and the ascent of Darwinism and other notions of the origin of species, the suggestion inherent in beauty that order and virtue could be found in material form within this cosmos was particularly meaningful.

Herbert Spencer’s and Charles Darwin’s explanation of the evolutionary purposes for beauty were no less problematic for Lee, and she hoped that her “facts and theories” would “allow us to discard, as mere side issues, the doubtful assumptions concerning association of ideas and the play instinct, as well as the various attempts to account for notions of beauty and ugliness by reference to transmuted recognition of utility and inutility, to sexual selection, and to the survival of obsolete primeval activities” (156). This sense of beauty as constituting “a kind of holiday in life” is at variance with Lee’s belief, with which I agree, that our reactions to beauty “add their particular quality and force to the total phenomenon of consciousness” thereby provoking “fresh organic alterations (5, 28); in short, beauty is invested in the work of changing us. Our bodies and minds, poised to evolve in order to survive, are attracted to and then responsive toward the effects of the beautiful. Literary constructions of the beautiful draw us in, because we habitually seek spiritual transformation, and then beauty affects us as its revelations merge into our existing consciousness.⁴

⁴ Though Lee does address human beauty specifically in her theories, much of her assertions seemingly focus on pieces of art, but in actuality, in “Beauty and Ugliness,” Lee is rarely observing the art itself but instead she is observing the body of her “very dear friend and fellow-worker,” Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson, and noting the bodily changes Anstruther-Thomson was experiencing in the face of beauty (*Art and Man* 3). In her introduction to the posthumous publication of Anstruther-Thomson’s *Art and Man*, Lee describes her long-time friend and lover as “an exceptionally beautiful, strong, and beneficent creature...apt to be haloed round by our love and admiration, till the reality gets half-hidden round an image which, just because it is the stuff of our heart and the handiwork of our mind, can achieve more for us than could, perhaps, any really existing being” (3). I would insist that the “image” of the Anstruther-Thomson’s beautiful human body had as much or more to do with Lee’s

In his 1989 article about the beautiful human face, sociologist Anthony Synnott agrees with Lee's contentions regarding beauty and then complicates notions of beauty's divinity: "Beauty as physically attractive not only reflects Divine beauty, and inner moral beauty, but also inspires physical desire" (625). Sexual possibility accounts for a measure of the power of physical beauty and depictions of the beautiful body. At a basic biological level, attraction to the human body perpetuates life. But the body is rarely the end recipient of beauty. Lee offered her original contentions on the matters of beauty and utility in her essay, "Beauty and Ugliness" in 1897, co-authored with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson.⁵ Their early assertions focused on changes in the body one undergoes when confronted by an object of beauty: in posture, in breathing, in the beating of the heart. Ultimately, Lee found this activity of documenting primarily physical responses to beauty limiting and also problematic for producing credible scholarship that would contribute to the field of aesthetics in a way that could be taken seriously by other researchers in the field. Lee spent the next twelve years amending and revising her hypothesis. My examination of the uses of the beautiful, like Lee, is informed by the belief that the human imagination remains receptive to the power of beauty in relation to our individual pursuit of the divine. I would add to Lee's assertions that receptivity reveals a quest for the sublime, in the Burkean sense of the word. The thrall of beauty exists in beauty's tangent pleasure-giving capacity, but even more crucially, in its pull upon the imagination.

Today, Lee is best known for her application of the term "empathy," or *einfühlung*, in relation to aesthetic response. Empathy, she claimed, is "not a purely mental process" but

assertions regarding beauty as any "really existing" painting or sculpture they observed, standing together side-by-side. As Carolyn Burdett emphasizes, their non-procreative love also helps explain why Lee would rebuff Darwin's reproductive claims regarding the use of beauty, and why she rejected the aligning of beauty with decadence and frivolity, neither or which informed her powerful - life-affirming, as she describes it - love affair with Anstruther-Thomson.

⁵Carolyn Burdett offers an excellent full treatment of Vernon Lee's use of "empathy," her engagement with the aesthetic scholarship that precedes her, and her personal and working relationship with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson.

involves the stimulation of “actual muscular sensations and even objective bodily movements” (89).⁶ Lee considered empathy not in the abstract, but as a concept which could help answer “What can be the use, and consequently the reason for the development rather than the elimination” of our empathetic response to beauty (70). For what biological purpose do we seek to merge into the beautiful, and “What has aesthetic empathy been able to contribute to the survival of the individuals and of the races?” (70-71). Lee concludes that “in showing the reason for intuitive preferences and aversions connected with beauty and ugliness, psychological aesthetics will contribute to the general and applicable knowledge of that microcosm of complex and obscure movements which we call the human soul” (73-74). This occurs through empathy’s social functions, as a means of engendering communion, of stepping outside of oneself; as Lee claims, “aesthetic enjoyment makes one forget one’s own body” (109). Prompted by the sensations elicited by the beautiful, turning outward and imagining what another feels proves useful for changing minds and improving lives.⁷ Through the concept of empathy, Lee found a

⁶ Elaine Scarry recalls of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that both beautiful sights and sounds prompted “a ghostly sub-anatomical event in his teeth and gums” (4). A poll I have taken discloses that beauty, and particularly feminine beauty, affects people’s heart rate, respiration, expansion of scopes of thinking and feeling, sense of harmony and curiosity, engenders a desire “to move forward and to know more.” Of natural beauty’s “imperatives,” one person polled responded that “The first imperative is that we come to recognize the necessary conditions for that particular beauty to exist and seek to preserve them...The second imperative is that we recognize the commonality of those who share in that beauty...That shared experience of beauty unites us in a truth larger than ourselves.”

⁷ To the contention that beauty changes us, one can recall Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” translated by Stephen Mitchell:

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.
Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast’s fur:

way to make sense of what she had been grappling with all along. The effects of beauty benefit “the total organism,” and then society, by extension (109).

That art is capable of initiating these empathetic feelings speaks to the power of literary empathy, engendering the compassion through association which Hardy, Wilde, and Browning employ. Of narrative empathy, Blakey Vermeule contends that fictional characters are “the greatest practical-reasoning schemes ever invented. We use them to sort out basic moral problems or to practice new emotional situations. We use them to cut through masses of ambient cultural information” (xii). The human symbol world, as Vermeule terms it, is rich with the possibility to affect our behaviors as these literary representations tap into our “strange profusion of drives and desires” (2). We are “hailed” by literature in a variety of ways, as Vermeule labels the action, borrowing the term from Louis Althusser. Following this vocabulary of interpellation, I would assert that through the use of description and the employment of detail, the beautiful in literature functions ideally as the gesture that draws minds, stops readers, allows them to recognize themselves as the object of the summons, and to be influenced by the experience.

Victorian novels make use of copious description, wielding a prevalence of beautiful feminine faces and bodies, their presence amplified through the inclusion of extensive details.⁸

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

⁸ Nineteenth-century British novels attend to detail to such an extent that they are as often parodied as embraced. Sentences contain dozens, sometimes hundreds of words describing people, places, and things, but nowhere is description more pronounced than in the crafting of female physical beauty. Victorian novels, almost without exception, linger upon a beautiful face. This lies in stark contrast to eighteenth-century formulations of beauty. After 600+ pages of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, the reader has no idea what this maiden looks like, not even the color of her eyes. All that the text explains is that Pamela is fair. The reader stands on the periphery, making assumptions about her face and body. In contrast, Hardy describes Tess’s eyes: “Neither black nor blue nor grey nor violet; rather all those shades together, and a hundred others, which could be seen if one looked into their irises—shade behind shade--tint beyond tint--around pupils that had no bottom,” and that is just their color. The author catalogues their shape, what they express, and crucially, how they stay the same through various traumas within the text. I would argue that this is more of a Victorian convention than a result of Realism is fiction. Modern

Naomi Schor asserts that “The detail has until very recently been viewed in the West with suspicion if not downright hostility,” so that a story’s detail contributes to the “semantic network” bounded by the “ornamental” and the “everyday” in support of a “normative aesthetics” that is “not sexually neutral; it is an axiology carried into the field of representation the sexual hierarchies of the phallogentric cultural order,” to the detriment of women (3, 4). Schor argues that description necessarily denigrates women and removes them from the discourse of the sublime.⁹

I contend instead that certain novelists, notably Hardy, Wilde and his co-author’s of *Teleny*, and Browning subvert this common means of diminishing bodies, and instead elevate and envelope their characters in greatness through description. Particularly in a period of so many new visual apparatuses and opportunities for seeing,¹⁰ the textural components of beauty in literary characters could draw the reader in and affect them in blatant and covert ways. The uses of beauty to convey meaning through coded language functions, as Lefkowitz argues, to “translate the essential values of a text into a visual aesthetic... In description we find values and the self that fiction would mold us into becoming” (1, 2). George Eliot engaging in this kind of instrumental description throughout *Adam Bede*. Notable, in the “Two Bed-Chambers” scene which underscores the differences between Hetty Sorrel and Dinah Morris, Eliot describes the women in terms of their variant beautiful selves:

British literature retreats from and nearly abandons description through much of the twentieth century, though it far from relinquishes Realism.

⁹ This problem of the sublime necessarily denigrating the beautiful, which follows from a literal reading of eighteenth-century discourses addressing the matter, is taken up by Elaine Scarry, who claims that “this bifurcation” which has “dealt such a blow to beauty” was not intended to function in this way “by the original writers of the treatises nor by later writers on the sublime” (84). Scarry implies that initially, the sublime and the beautiful were meant to compliment each other, and that this along with “the political demotion of beauty” is misguided and based upon a profound misunderstanding of the value inherent in beauty” (84).

¹⁰ By seeing, I mean to refer to everything from the literal availability of light lent by new technologies in home lighting devices, to spectacles from Crystal Palace exhibitions to freak shows, to the free time with which one could view life in greater detail. Christ’s and Jordan’s *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* offers a collection of essays exploring the role of seeing and imagining for the Victorian reader.

What a strange contrast the two figures made! Visible enough in that mingled twilight and moonlight. Hetty, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glistening from her imaginary drama, her beautiful neck and arms bare, her hair hanging in a curly tangle down her back, and the baubles in her ears. Dinah, covered with her long white dress, her pale face full of subdued emotion, almost like a lovely corpse into which the soul has returned charged with sublimer secrets and a sublimer love.

(144)

The plot's trajectory, in service of Eliot's values, affirms for the reader that Dinah's powerful, immaculate whiteness benefits her and the rest of the characters in Hayslope far more than Hetty's rose-red loveliness. Through profuse descriptions of beautiful feminized bodies, combined with the conditions under which these descriptions were received, nineteenth-century readers were molded by the texts they consumed in unprecedented numbers. Consequently, Victorian heroes and heroines bearing non-traditional types of beauty became subversive agents of change among the middle-class readership, helping to overturn previous conceptions of virtue, morality, and decency, ideologies deeply embedded in descriptions of feminine characters.

The catalogue of nineteenth-century cultural data confirms that chastity, fragility, docility, and frigidity among other outwardly demure attributes were largely valued and often expected of women, and a survey of nineteenth-century feminine characters confirms this prevalence. Writers like Coventry Patmore perpetuated the sense that women were childlike creatures whose suitable occupation was to comfort and appease their husbands. Aesthetic depictions in art and literature frequently presented this kind of woman as the norm. Patmore's popular female ideal in his "Angel in the House" poems seems in many ways a non-person. As Lawrence Talairach-Vielmas asserts in his research regarding the fashioning of female bodies in

Victorian fiction, this type of “Angel” is the cliché “disembodied, ethereal Victorian ideal which haunts nineteenth-century fiction as an illusory model to which women were taught to aspire”

(9). Not only Patmore, but canonical authors such as Emily Brontë and Charles Dickens created more complicated but ultimately conforming women. Jane Eyre and Agnes Wickfield modeled proper feminine behavior, so that the “Angel in the House” was not only a character in a poem: “Women were led to conform to and to mold themselves in accordance with the dominant representations, ultimately questioning the possibility for women to be anything but reflection (Talairach-Vielmas 173).

Though recognizable and the object of widespread appeal, not all people and certainly not all writers ascribed to the idea of female subservency or perpetuated this trope of feminine ideal. In *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869, John Stuart Mill condemns “the legal subordination of one sex to the other, calling it “one of the chief hindrances to human improvement” and insisting that it “ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (1). Framing gender emancipation as a matter of utilitarian and moral importance, and insisting upon the need for cultural models, Mill equates the feminine plight as an enslavement which denigrates women, men, and the society that feeds the injustice through a dialectic of manipulation:

When we put together three things—first, the natural attraction between opposite sexes; secondly, the wife’s entire dependence on the husband, every privilege or pleasure she has being either his gift, or depending entirely on his will; and lastly that the principle object of human pursuit, consideration, and all objects of social ambition, can in general be sought or obtained by her only through him, it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star

of feminine education and formation of character. And, this great means of influence over the minds of women having been acquired, an instinct of selfishness made men avail themselves of it to the utmost as a means of holding women in subjection, by representing to them meekness, submissiveness, and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, as an essential part of sexual attractiveness. (15)

The “eminently artificial...nature of women – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others,” propagated by male-run social systems that construct docile feminine effigies for their own benefit troubled Mill greatly, as it troubled many of his admirers.

For Robert Browning, who “delighted in Mill” (Chesterton 56), the typical Victorian representation of women was distasteful and antithetical to his personal sensibilities, which were informed by “a powerful and penetrating feminism” (Brady 1). Upon reading the newspaper’s glowing review of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy, who called John Stuart Mill “one of the profoundest thinkers” of the nineteenth century, famously thanked Henry William Massingham, journalist and editor of *The Daily Chronicle*, by explaining his departure for standard descriptions of women: “Ever since I began to write...I have felt that the doll of English fiction must be demolished, if England is to have a school of fiction at all” (Millgate 67). Both in his dramatic productions such as “Salome” and “Lady Windermere’s Fan,” and as the editor of the periodical *The Woman’s World*, Oscar Wilde advocated for a fuller, more complicated treatment of both masculinity and femininity.¹¹ A range of thinkers and writers understood the

¹¹ Employing characteristic wit, Oscar Wilde included John Stuart Mill’s name in a list of whom not to read in a letter to the Editor of the Pall Mall Gazette (*Letters* 276), and in a letter to W.L. Courtney complimenting him on his “admirable” book about Mill, Wilde reiterated his opinion: “I gain nothing, I have gained nothing from him – an arid, dry man with moods of sentiment – a type that is poor, and, I fancy, common” (*Letters* 388). One senses that Wilde’s antagonism has more to do with Mill’s somewhat serious and stodgy Victorianism, which though magnanimous and liberal, was at odds with the posture of carelessness associated with the Aesthetes and Decadents, with whom Wilde is associated.

common depiction of women to be immoral, at worst and artistically limiting, at best. By employing beautiful features in traditional ways, but toward a different, more broadly based construction of gender, these writers utilized familiar textual language toward a new social ideal.

The language of physical beauty and the use of beautiful faces and bodies also functioned to shift interpretations of acceptable behavior among men. If Victorian social models and the predominant discourse prescribed one set of actions for women and forbid another, then this same society's edicts functioned in a far more restrictive manner towards men with "aberrant" desires. The burgeoning fields of science, medicine, and psychology posited theories of gender construction that made same-sex love seem anomalous and at variance with the functions of the healthy mind and body. Much of the surrounding discourse regarding gender anomalies were believed to be outwardly discernable, so that performing specific actions would theoretically manifest in bodily traits exposing the deeds of the individual. Elizabeth Lee explains that Victorian society sought to reveal these deeds by necessity: "Men were considered the active agents, who expended energy while women were sedentary, storing and conserving energy. Victorian theories of evolution believed that these feminine and masculine attributes traced back to the lowest forms of life" (Victorian Web). By aligning men and women with all other living organisms, the attribution of deviance to unexpected behaviors functioned as a matter of logic as well as a manner of judgment, and as a cause of great concern. Nineteenth-century convictions regarding gender variance relied upon a strict "dichotomy of temperament" determining feminine and masculine traits. What seems like misogyny and repression from a modern perspective at the time provided rudimentary explanations for biological unknowns.¹²

"According to the model," Lee surmises, "since men only concerned themselves with

¹² My sense is that gender construction which disadvantaged the feminine was not part of a nefarious plot to subjugate Victorian women. Instead, centuries of male domination in Western cultures fostered a climate wherein these types of theories would be proposed to begin with.

fertilization, they could also spend energies in other arenas,” whereas “woman's heavy role in pregnancy, menstruation..., and child-rearing left very little energy left for other pursuits. As a result, women's position in society came from biological evolution -- she had to stay at home in order to conserve her energy, while the man could and needed to go out and hunt or forage” (Lee). This seemingly archaic vernacular of hunting and foraging has interesting applications in Victorian England. The unique burst of productivity arising from the Industrial Revolution, as well as from the rapid expansion of the British empire required substantial effort. At the same time with the rise of the urban middle-class, the importance of home and home-keeping supported ideas that masculinized men and feminized women, both in behavior and in aspect. Literary representations of the healthy beautiful body, worked to negate the language and subsequent implications of disease, degeneracy, impotence, despair, and general undesirability of gender fluidity and same-sex love in the same way that beauty expanded ways of seeing women and their ideal roles and behaviors within society.

Nineteenth-century literary depictions of men were heavily coded, wherein the ambitions of the male “decadent” were aligned with that of the New Woman, and perceived of as profoundly threatening to established culture. Linda Dowling relates how reviewers felt compelled “to warn their readers of the evolutionary and worse, the revolutionary dangers to Victorian civilization embodied in the new avant-gardism. When they described their lurid vision of cultural apocalypse, critics of the ‘New’ inevitably adopted what had become a familiar journalistic vocabulary of crisis” (435). Physical expression, which had long helped establish acceptable performances of masculinity, acted as a litmus test for men whose behaviors did not conform to expected Victorian gender stereotypes. Imperial Britain was immersed in a particular kind of muscular Christian masculinity that left any appearance or gesture at variance suspect.

Conventional ideas of proper manhood were strictly upheld through the social policing of physical and behavioral traits. Gilbert notes that “Mid-Victorian imperial Britain often constructed its identity as active, healthy, and masculine versus foreign identities which were passive, fevered, or feminine” (2). This identification with womanliness clarifies both the role of the female and of the aberrant male in nineteenth-century medical, legal, and literary discourse. Kathy Psomiades is interested in the shaping of “deviant masculinities” and the ways in which “the representation of the beautiful woman or beautiful young man is caught up in larger ideological struggles and historical movements” (4, 5). She notes that through a similar use of language as the Victorian female beauty, feminized beautiful men were crafted with “language that lingers over the colors of flesh and hair, and by using similar conventions of representation – large eyes, languorous postures, full mouths, faces unobscured by beard or mustache – aestheticist art makes masculine and feminine bodies promise the fulfillment of desire in similar ways” (Psomiades 7). As the middle-class female was conditioned toward docility and submission, men who failed to display mastery over themselves and women were perceived as effeminate and maligned through associations with the female sex.

Ed Cohen explains the ways that text, or writing was used to indict the “degeneracy” of same-sex love and how it was also text, or writing that was warned against as a disperser of deviant ideals. Psychological treatises like those by Richard Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis “marked out the boundaries of sexual and gender norms” (10), bringing sexuality and gender performance into the public discourse. At the same time, newspapers were publishing full-page reviews of books like Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*, which “The Weekly Sun” called a “wise, sound, and necessary warning against the tendencies and perils of the age,” warning readers against “contemporary artistic and literary tendencies” which were ostensibly contaminating the

public with “the senseless stammering and babbling of deranged minds” (Cohen 15-16). “Healthy” middle-class masculinity was felt to be under attack by writers like Oscar Wilde, whose obscenity trial offered yet more opportunities to depict the “homosexual” as weak, ill, dangerous, and in need of correction. The language of chaos was evoked, as “Inevitably, the revolt of the New Woman and the decadent against what was ‘natural,’ their ‘warped’ and ‘morbid’ intellects, their extreme self-consciousness, seemed to their late-Victorian critics to isolate them in a chilly realm of sterility, asceticism, or cerebral lechery, cut off from the springs of instinctive reproductive life” (Dowling 446). Avant-garde writers working to complicate and naturalize depictions of men who defied British expectations of masculinity sought to “violate established notions of nature and the ‘natural’ in order to recover and legitimize for art precise the realm of private, self-ironic, and visceral experience which the bawdy of Joyce, the phallic consciousness of Lawrence, and the confessionalism of Lowell and Plath would so fully explore in the next century” (Dowling 450). Literary representations of the healthy beautiful body, worked to negate the language and subsequent implications of disease, degeneracy, impotence, despair, and general undesirability of gender fluidity and same-sex love in the same way that beauty expanded ways of seeing women and their ideal roles and behaviors within society.

Terry Eagleton believes that “one can find in the category of the aesthetic a way of gaining access to certain central questions of modern European thought – to light up, from that particular angle, a range of wider social, political and ethical issues” (1). This is certainly the work performed in the texts that I examine. Each text establishes the body as a bearer of meaning, and through different uses of the beautiful body, Hardy, Wilde and his co-authors, and Browning render their artistic creations in service to the social, political, and ethical problems about which they care deeply. In the case of their works, one discerns echoes of Vernon Lee,

whose interest in the social benefit of beauty leads her to revise Walter Pater's familiar refrain of "art for art's sake" and supplant it with "art, not for art's sake, but of art for the sake of life—art as one of the harmonious functions of existence. Harmonious, and in a sense harmonizing." Life itself is our incentive for moving toward constructions of beauty. When the beautiful is employed to produce literary works of social import, readers benefit from descriptions of beauty itself and from the importance of the messages beauty embodies.

Of the three texts my dissertation considers, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, published in 1891, offers the most forthright rejection of contemporary values. Chapter Two considers the various facets of Tess's beauty, what they signify, and how they fit into other patterns within the novel, in order to argue that Tess's physical beauty provides Hardy with a specific tool for examining problems with "morality" in Victorian England.

I explore what Hardy means to convey by imbuing his heroine with a particular kind of beauty, which is both recognizable (she is described, unambiguously, as incredibly beautiful) as well as divergent from the norm (she bears little resemblance to the Victorian heroines that precede her). Hardy intends to make his heroine reflective of life, a tragic mirror, a vessel of meaning, and Tess's loveliness allows him to not only draw the gaze but also to propose new definitions of morality and purity more in keeping with nature. Hardy constructs Tess with full awareness of the primal, instinctive, Darwinian power of the beautiful. I discuss Hardy in the context of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin, noting that his position is much more heavily steeped in science than religion, though the writer is certainly influenced by religious practices and beliefs. Tess is the essence of nature, as her beauty confirms, and when she commits acts that are considered morally transgressive by Victorian standards, Hardy insists that only social laws

are broken, inferring that perhaps these laws should be reexamined in order to establish a more positive world.

Hardy's heroic optimism shapes the vision and the artistry in *Tess*. I argue that Tess's naturalness is crafted as sublime in nature, and a fitting representative palate upon which to illustrate Hardy's philosophy. I suggest that Hardy's literature, and particularly his constructions of feminine beauty, require the resistant reader to adopt a new morality and way of conceptualizing purity. By employing the beautiful body, Hardy taps into the Victorian interest in art and science to situate Tess as recognizably ideal from the perspective of late nineteenth-century biological theory. The author redefines assumptions about what constitutes feminine virtue by linking notions of the ideal from the physical to the moral. Because Hardy places emphasis on Tess's physicality in order to reach these aims, the novel can be misinterpreted as exploitative, but I reject that reading in favor of a broader view of Hardy's project within its Victorian context. Hardy renders Tess spectacularly attractive, in order to develop the means through which she will be most compassionately perceived.

Ultimately, Hardy demonstrates new ways of seeing, and more humane approaches to being through his formulation of Tess's beauty. Angel Clare's personal revolution illustrates the benefits of recognizing Tess's imperfect goodness, noting how his awareness ennobles him. Readers witnessing Angel's growth are forced to consider the ways that new ways of seeing are possible and beneficial. My chapter asserts that the beautiful body of Tess acts as a tool for relaying the author's meliorist philosophies.

In advocating for new definitions of morality that close gender disparities, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* rode upon a wave of New Woman sentiment that was radical but still sympathetic to many. Chapter Three explores the more substantial challenge *Teleny*, published in 1893,

undertakes, wherein physical illustrations of men as well as the denaturalization of women serve to dispute the pathology of same-sex desire. Rita Felski notes that “late-nineteenth-century discourses often linked the feminized aesthete and the New Woman, twin symbols of the ‘decadence’ of the age and focal points of contemporary anxiety about changing gender roles” (1094). During this cultural moment, when bodies were assumed to expose the acts of their owners, when it was believed that “the human mouth gets distorted when used for vile purposes” (*Teleny* 45), the healthy and warm, the “heavenly figure” of René Teleny serves to reveal the absurd and the hypocritical in nineteenth-century formulations of homosexuality (43). As with Hardy, I examine the ways that the author or authors question configurations of the normal and redefine morality.

Though Teleny’s authorship officially remains unconfirmed, most scholars agree that Oscar Wilde, at the very least, acted as editor, and likely penned large portions of the text. Chapter Three briefly engages with the question of authorship and agrees with the analysis of a majority of critics suggesting about Wilde’s involvement as well as providing my own textual proofs. However, I primarily focus on the text itself and the way that beauty functions, like Tess, first to draw the reader in, and then to make beautiful what could improperly be deemed as ugly. *Teleny* takes the act of male same-sex consummation and imbues it with joy and music, creating rhapsody. The love affair at the center of the plot, constructed as celebratory and a boon to society, harnesses the power of beauty to redefine goodness and normality

Because *Teleny*’s scenes illustrate sexual activity, I will not pretend that Wilde and his co-writers wrote for a mainstream middle-class audience whom he sought to persuade. Instead, I claim that regardless of authorial intention, the beautiful, subversive bodies in the story do function in this way; this reinscription of same-sex desire is the cultural work beauty in the text

performs. As well, I will propose that the unnamed listener in the story, to whom the tale of Teleny's and Des Grieux's love is told, functions as a pseudo-society, albeit a sympathetic one. He acts as a receiver to whom philosophical proclamations regarding same-sex love can be addressed.

The rules of society that seek to keep the two men in the story apart create a dearth of beauty, engender a chaos, result in rape and suicide, and perpetuate a general ugliness that is juxtaposed beside the elevated, better, more beautiful selves Teleny and Des Grieux become when together. Again in this text, beauty functions as a marker of worth, and it is detectable in a variety of senses. This is consistent with both the conventions of the decadents and aesthetes, as well as the tenets of erotic literature, making Wilde the correct writer at the proper time writing in the ideal genre.

If Chapters Two and Three explore the abundance of descriptions of beauty in Victorian texts, Chapter Four examines Robert Browning's near absence of descriptions of the beautiful body in *The Ring and the Book*, published in 1868. In this text, the exclusion of details sketching the feminine form for the reader is startling. In a Victorian work that sets a woman as the centerpiece of nearly every stanza for 763 pages, the omission of description is rendered conspicuous for a number of reasons. Chapter Four is concerned with the rationale behind beauty's absence and with why this deficiency matters.

Chapter Four notes the role of feminine beauty as commodity. Twelve year old Pompilia Comparini's body is sold and then raped and tortured for the pleasure of her middle-aged husband, "a tradeoff of money for prestige, with the bridled girl as the gilded prize" (Brady 29). Issues of ownership lie at the core of Count Guido Franceschini's murder charge. Does Pompilia's life belong to her husband and cannot he do with her as he pleases? She is indeed his,

the court assures, and as long as she was inconstant, murder is justified. An examination of Franceschini's account of her physicality and an awareness of all that he excludes reveals much of Browning's distaste with the social order that privileges the Count over his beleaguered wife, and as such, it is Franceschini who is endlessly described. He is old, dark, short, and hairy, and Browning objectifies him instead through copious description, which this chapter details and analyzes.

By situating Browning's poem alongside the sensation novel, a genre obsessed with lush descriptions of female beauty, Mary Ellis Gibson aligns Pompilia alongside some of the most elaborately described women in literature. As in the sensation novel, "Browning shows how woman are made use of to insure the maintenance of the patriarchal society" (Brady 3).

Appearing, then, in the era of the sensation novel, the marked lack of descriptions of her face and body illustrate the ways in which Pompilia's plight, as part of a larger problem of violence of objectification against women, inform the text. Her case is best told through silences, and so this is the device that Browning employs. As Gibson establishes, much of Pompilia's most important communications regarding her torture take place in the ellipses between speech, just as physical description is muted and unspeakable in a text consumed with ugliness. I note how Pompilia's body becomes a primary mechanism for Browning to explore the efficacy of social order.

Pompilia's physical self is maybe the most important and the most telling of the beautiful women in my study as she is all and only body and voice, with no narrative intermediary. The poem reveals her spiritual beauty in detail but once Browning establishes the fact that she possesses beauty, Pompilia's features are quickly ignored and mostly serve to illustrate violation and disfigurement. Crafted by testimony, the descriptions of Pompilia that exist and the ones that are withheld establish and support the moral pulse of the text.

As with Hardy and Wilde, Browning frames this dearth of compassion as a fault in “seeing,” and to those possessing this fault, the poet withholds glimpses of Pompilia’s beauty to veil Pompilia from contemptibly deficient eyes. An inability to see instructs or maligns the would-be seer. Browning bestows upon Guiseppe Capponsacchi and Pope Innocent XII knowledge of the full beauty of Pompilia, and their earthly exaltation at the sight of her begets a spiritual transformation (10.1181). From their eyes, a new way of seeing is proposed to the reader, for whom a similar transformative experience takes place. This ocular realignment is consistent with adjustments in seeing apparent in the other chapter’s texts.

The following chapter makes use of this particular group of writers and these specific texts strategically. Hardy, Wilde, and Browning each overturn contemporary uses for and ways of describing feminine beauty toward different ends, but their works display compelling textual similarities. Each text links beauty to crime, to lost innocence, to secrecy, to violence, to broader issues of representation and epistemology. Throughout, I consider how configurations of the feminine characters in Hardy, Wilde, and Browning often mock Victorian sexual hypocritical and model more progressive notions of virtue. As well, these writers subvert the practice Schor describes, of using descriptions to diminish and objectify women in support of an oppressive status quo; instead, they each employ the beautiful as a conduit for social transformation.

CHAPTER ONE: VICTORIAN BEAUTY

How did the Victorians understand, negotiate, and extend the concept of “the beautiful”? What did beauty look like? What cultural work did beauty perform? My study will work to recount dominant representations of feminine beauty in the literature and art of the nineteenth century geared toward the middle class, and to examine the ways that these representations exclude natural feminine sexuality, work to differentiate the masculine from the feminine, and function destructively and even violently against women and men outside the norm. Though Victorian texts were often used in traditional ways to reinforce the social status quo, the century’s writers also appropriated beauty and profited from its uses, so that in addition to the profound organic benefits of the beautiful, literary heroines and heroes became persuasive mechanisms for social critique and change.

The Victorians inherited many of their fundamental ideas about beauty from eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy. Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* claims that beauty has little to do with proportionality of form.¹³ Burke’s insists upon the necessity of imperfection in assessing something as beautiful; beauty disdains fitness and usefulness, so that lispings, tottering, and blushing heightens rather than lessens feminine beauty. The hard virtues of “fortitude, justice, wisdom, and the like” fail to attract men and render them susceptible to love. Instead, beautiful persons “creep into the hearts” to lighten men’s “softer hours.” Beauty maintains “the

¹³ Though separated out by Burke in this way (as well as by Kant), Elaine Scarry observes that “most of the objects in both categories had formerly occupied a territory held under the inclusive rubric of beauty” (129). Scarry notes that classical conceptions of beauty were not limited to include only “the goodhearted and cheerful” (129). In light of associations of the sublime with the masculine and the beautiful with the feminine, the popularity and pervasiveness of this dichotomy offers an interesting commentary on shifting attitudes about women. This is not to suggest that the female Greek citizen was venerated above Victorian women; on the other hand, one runs across fewer Athena-type intellectual and skilled women in mainstream Victorian texts.

soft green of the soul.” Men rest their eyes and enmesh their lives with beautiful bodies and minds bearing “softer virtues,” including “easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality.” These ideal traits, borne in the feminine body, are “of less immediate and momentous concern for society, and of less dignity” (100).

For Burke, these inner qualities must be outwardly discernable, so that as one feels terror or awe when confronted with the sublime, the beautiful is observable and elicits agreeable feelings of sweetness and relaxation.¹⁴ Often, when we think of Burke, we imagine him engaging with the features of the natural world rather than with attractive physiognomy, but in fact, Burke himself conflates the two throughout his treatise; he consistently includes human bodies (Kings, Queens, and commoners) as objects for aesthetic consideration, and when he seems to omit the human form, he references it indirectly through his consistent personification of nature; if “the sublime is a rape” and “beauty is a lure,” then the natural world functions outside the norms of expected behaviors (Phillips xxiii). In fact, in many of his considerations, he begins with persons and not things: “Look at a man, or any other animal of prodigious strength, and what is your idea before reflection?” (60). In defining beauty, Burke evokes the feminine form specifically, as he asks the reader to observe that part of a beautiful woman “where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness, the softness, the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze through which the unsteady eye slides giddily” (104, 105). In this Section XV, “Gradual Variation,” Burke aligns female curves and angles with that of a dove, extending his penchant

¹⁴ Tellingly, Lefkowitz discerns that in the Victorian novel, “blankness of expression is most often perceived as beauty” (9). The invocation of the empty interiority is disturbing, but the implication of the corpse is even more so. Lefkowitz ties this configuration of beauty to femininity when she observes: “That the price of beauty is loss of character is a perception that has unequal consequences for the sexes. To say that a man has character is to admire what is unconventional about him; to say the same of a woman is to imply that she lacks beauty” (13). Because so much of a Victorian woman’s worth would have been tied up in ideas of beauty, the threat of ugliness as the consequence of expression carries particular significance.

for attributing nature, animals, and persons with similar aspects. He follows this up with Section XVI, “Delicacy,” wherein like particular vegetables, animals, myrtle, orange, almond, jessamine, and the vine, “the beauty of women” is specifically evoked and then lauded for its “weakness,” “delicacy,” and “timidity.”

Like many who discuss the beautiful, Burke places less emphasis upon the object or bodies and more upon the experience of processing beauty, an action associated solely with the viewer. The impressions that the beautiful arouse belong to the observer. Burke calls beauty not only an experience but a “social quality” wherein men, women, or animals “give a sense of joy and pleasure in beholding them...they inspire us with sentiments of tenderness and affection towards their person; we like to have them near us, and we enter into a kind of relation with them” (Burke 39). For Burke, then, the beautiful functions as a transaction rather than an object.

Vernon Lee, Victorian author and philosopher of aesthetics, carries the assertion farther, noting that the satisfaction or dissatisfaction an object elicits stems from “the interpretation of form according to the facts of our own inner experience, the attribution to form of modes of being, moving and feeling similar to our own” (17). She claims that our minds and bodies filter objects as a “projection of our own life into what we see” (17), and that this process and the end result have a potent impact on our lives. When we filter physically beautiful literary characters through our consciousness, they become more than themselves, but instead images which move us. Summarizing Lee’s findings, Carolyn Burdett expresses that beauty is born from and grows into “the stuff of conscious and unconscious selfhood, replete with feeling, woven into and from the fabric of language...beauty is not a quality of objects or of form – it is a process. It is us that

make beauty” (Burdett). Still, it follows that if beauty is recognizable, it must have distinguishing attributes.¹⁵

When people talk about feminine physical beauty, they are often referring to one kind of face and body, broadly speaking, which is both like and unlike formulations of beauty that precede it. As Darwin posits, “The men of each race prefer what they are accustomed to...and admire each characteristic carried to a moderate extreme” (584). The idea of a reference point from which beauty may be discerned is fortuitous for writers, who are able to engage with the beautiful through both attention to and “departures from convention...Because physical features have a spiritual worth, new characters capitalize on the feature-values supplied by the tradition” (Lefkowitz 19). Like the Victorian period itself, which “began by inventing the fetishistic cult of the domestic angel and ended with the ‘angels’ in bloomers, in offices, in higher education, and driving motorcars ideas,” conceptions as well as representations of ideal feminine beauty were anything but consistent (Reynolds 4-5).

Disparities in the portrayal of women’s bodies are a product of the real shifts that occur over decades, and also a product of the dualistic treatment and regard concerning feminine bodies, upon which scholars so frequently comment. Dinah Birch observes that “A double identity for femininity...was a central feature in nineteenth-century images of women – Cinderella and her ugly sisters...the good fairy and the wicked witch, Madonna and whore. Such divided ideas of women in the period are closely bound up with anxious and contradictory thinking about women’s bodies and what they might mean” (102-103). The intensely moral

¹⁵ Elaine Scarry’s important treatise, *On Beauty and Being Just*, also focuses on the transformative and, as she would argue (and I would agree), extremely positive (for the individual and for the world) effects of beauty. Physical beauty creates justice because it makes the viewer just, not because beauty itself contains such characteristics. In his poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo” Rainer Maria Rilke makes similar claims regarding the brilliance and dazzle of Apollo, leading him to proclaim, of the sight of beauty, “Here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life.”

Victorian ideal woman, then, relied upon her depraved foil to distinguish purity from woman's dark potential, and to situate feminine beauty, which no doubt holds sexual power, as something which must be approach and handled cautiously. Because of the utility of the doubling of femininity, the same traits distinguished as beautiful, and configured as outwardly displaying female "morality," also contain the antithesis of beauty: "Increasingly...the sexless ideal woman comes to contain her opposite, the dangerously sexualized and desiring woman" (Psomiades 5). Both positive and negative representations of women are marked by fantastic Victorian beauty, described in minute and instrumental detail.

Carefully chronicling the use of the detail in art and literature, Naomi Schor calls the nineteenth century "the golden age of the detail" (66). The use of detail in Victorian fiction functions more nefariously than even the convention of the blazon in Elizabethan and Petrarchan poetry. The blazon explicitly take the female body apart piece by piece. In its visibility, the blazon's uses are more easily intellectualized. Schor argues that nineteenth-century uses of detail in art and literature instead work by "dividing and dispersing the spectator's attention," wherein the detail "blocks the dynamic rush of the Imagination...induc[ing] anxiety rather than the elevating pleasure of the Sublime" (19). In this figuration, detail becomes a "deformity" as Schor discerns, and one that is aligned with the feminine. This moves the detail's uses beyond objectification to the function of denigration and damage. While I agree that detail functions in this way in traditional Victorian texts, writers like Hardy, Wilde, and Browning subvert the practice Schor describes, of using descriptions to diminish and objectify women in support of an oppressive status quo; instead, these three writers employ details of the beautiful as a conduit for social transformation. Engaging with and extending traditional notions of feminine beauty,

nineteenth-century writers harnessed the power of the beautiful to reject, invent, and reinscribe ideal femininity, feature by feature.

The Victorian fascination with women's hair illustrates the work feminine beauty performs in the period.¹⁶ Elisabeth Gitter discerns that "When the powerful woman of the Victorian imagination was an angel, her shining hair was her aureole or bower; when she was demonic, it became a glittering snare, web, or noose" (936). Gitter explores the ways that hair, and golden hair in particular, functions as a text in itself, with rich symbolic value, wherein hair can signify the strangling and entrapping of the male, as in the living hair of Hardy's Eustacia Vye, or in art such as John William Waterhouse's *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. I would assert that these representations reveal not only the danger but the vulnerability inherent in women's hair, metaphorically but also concretely. Hair acts like a leash or a handle, so that hair provides a means of physical control, as with a horse's mane.¹⁷ Also, as in Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," the head adorned with fragrant and magical tresses offers the haggard, alone, and palely-loitering knight-at-arms a space to "lay his garland," literally and metaphorically. The Victorian head of hair was sexualized as pubic, demonized as filth, and coveted as gold. Importantly, whether to denigrate it or possess it, the ascription of personal worth to a bodily trait like hair often functioned to control women through a process of social submission and normalization.

¹⁶ Other features lend themselves to this same work, skin, certainly, and I would argue, eyes, though I have found little scholarly work focused on Victorian eyes. One wonderful contemporary piece, published in the *Saturday Review* on February 18th, 1865 is titled "Eyes." It begins: "Ask in any game of question and answer, what is the most beautiful thing we can take in and consider at a glance; and amongst the various answers—a rose, a lily, a star, a pearl, a dew-drop, a crescent-moon, a butterfly, a swan, a white hand, a tress of golden hairs—perhaps the most popular would be the eye, the eye of an innocent child, or beautiful woman, or man of thought and genius." For three pages, it considers all that eyes can mean. Much of its argument is based in literature, with Eliot's *Adam Bede* as exemplary in its use of beautiful eyes.

¹⁷ Discussing the role hair plays in primitive and modern ritual, Gitter notes the historically-documented "impulse to mutilate or despoil the woman's hair, to "castrate" it, as Freud has pointed out. Male hair, of course, appears in folklore and bible stories, notably the hair of Samson.

In noting the Victorian cultural obsession with hair, Gitter claims that: “No other writers have lavished so much attention on the physical properties of women’s hair: its length, texture, color, style, curliness. There is scarcely a character in Victorian fiction whose hair is not described at least perfunctorily, and often a woman’s hair is described repeatedly and in considerable detail” (941). Through a common dialogue of what hair could mean, writers were able to employ this same recognizable trope toward unexpected purposes. Tess’s thick cable of twisted dark hair; the red hair of the gaunt, pock-marked prostitute in *Teleny*; Pompilia’s largely undescribed bounty of black hair – each of these instances of the constructed body occurs in the wake of, alongside, and among a wave of other representations of feminine coiffure, many with complicated and variable significances, commonly functioning in the service of men.¹⁸

While individual pieces of a woman’s body, such as her hair, are frequently deployed to support a misogynistic social system, traditional configurations of the feminine body as a whole likewise acts as the impetus for masculine domination, and situates the female as the victim of male aggression, as documented by John Stuart Mill in his 1869 essay “The Subjection of Women.” An abundance of potent representations of femininity were dispersed through newly accessible and plentiful written forums. In addition to, and more common than individual texts in circulation, the production and dispersal of periodicals surged in the nineteenth century, supplying middle-class men and women with commentary, fashion, poetry, prose, and advertisements, all of which modeled and affirmed the ingredients that constitute feminine

¹⁸ Investigating the mythos of Victorian hair, Gitter explores the various manifestations of Medusa appearing throughout the century. Gitter asserts that “The visual and emotional associations between hair and serpents are explored with relentless misogyny...Medusas are often Medusas only in “the guilty imagination of their tormenters...men, blind to the true qualities of the women they both love and hate, have manufactured femme fatales so that they may abuse them” (951). What is most interesting to me is that even when crafting “monsters,” men create Medusas who are often profoundly beautiful. Swinburne’s gender-bending Medusa particular fascinates, as a testament to the fluidity of both gender and beauty: “For Swinburne...the Medusa is beautiful but for him that may be because at her most potent she is no longer a woman. Her hair-serpents are not symbolically phallic but actually so: the phallic woman, as Swinburne imagines her, has thus successfully metamorphosed into a hermaphrodite, if not into a boy” (952).

beauty and how that beauty should present itself. An examination of the function of the beautiful in these works helps to reveal the ways in which the beautiful feminine or feminized body was used.

Kathryn Ledbetter discusses the encoding of feminine beauty in Victorian periodicals, and chronicles the “conservative feminine subjectivity” informing the portrayal of female beauty as “delicate, innocent but sensuous, intensely moral and emotional” (119). Reading *Heath’s Book of Beauty* (1845), Ledbetter notes the “domestic attributes of beauty” as catalogued by the engraved portraits, wherein “the models’ faces are very much alike, signifying the importance of outward signifiers of beauty” (126).¹⁹ Within these periodicals which featured “a mixed, unordered package of illustration, poetry, fiction, advice, short articles, and interesting sketches of all sorts” (127), masses of nineteenth-century middle-class British women encountered ideal representations of physicality to which they could aspire. Ledbetter describes how the whole of the book, from the gold edges and silks of its binding to its visual and written rhetoric contribute to the cryptology of proper femininity. Words “commonly found to connote feminine beauty” throughout the periodical’s pages “may include soft, gentle, quiet, graceful, kind, soothing, delicate, thoughtful, lovely, and polite” (Ledbetter 129-30). The poems within taught moral lessons espousing the value of the virginal embedded in ideas of the beautiful, the importance of patience, the desirability of marriage and domesticity, and upon perceived challenges to the traditional household later in the century, the peril inherent in concepts of the New Woman.

The Victorian annual *Heath’s Book of Beauty* flaunts the era’s unbridled fascination with beauty, as well as the dominant discourse’s skill in controlling and standardizing gender behaviors. In the 1840 volume of *Heath’s Book of Beauty*, the reader witnesses the way women’s

¹⁹ Ledbetter’s analysis of Heath’s volumes focuses primarily on 1845. When not referring to Ledbetter’s observations, my analysis focuses on the volume from 1840.

beauty emboldens and valorizes men in the poem and its accompanying plate, “On the Portrait of Lady Hume Campbell” (Fig. 1.1). Despite the fact that the woman in the plate is identified by name, the poem robs her of any particular identity or interiority. Her face becomes an emblem of nation, which is linked to the work of men.

Beauty is functioning in service to some other set of ideas. The poem’s argument is that
“Where battle we abide!...for Beauty and for Bard, / Such days are done! – the glory-starr’d!”
Beauty throngs...devoted we maintain!”



Figure 1.1. “Lady Hume Campbell,”
Heath’s Book of Beauty for 1840

With “God, and one lustrous look to aid, / The battle we abide!...for Beauty and for Bard, / Such days are done! – the glory-starr’d!” The beautiful British face recovers the chivalric impulse in the imperial British subject, and recalls a time of luster and conquest, “as ages back.” Britain’s military glorifications, the herald and pageantry remembered from former days, function in service to men. From the “deep faith” men drink “from yonder face” and from this oval-shaped ideal, “the Grace / and gladness still are ours.” The tender-eyed woman in the sketch is largely incidental, and hardly distinguishable from the Lady Bulkeley Philipps, the Marchioness of

Ailesbury, or the other beauty plates in the book. She is the innocence and opulence of Britain, the peace and prosperity of home on display in her silk and lace, dotted with English roses. Lady Hume Campbell provides an abstract incentive for the soldier's nostalgic regard; she functions as a symbol upon which he can project his aspirations and desires. In representation, she is both coveted and sexless – her hair is tamed, her body concealed, her glance “devoted” (126-27).

In contrast, women presented not ethereally but as possessing concretely sexual bodies were framed differently. If they were unmarried, mainstream discourse treated them as imperiled or threatening and in either case in need of correction. Poems like Christina Rossetti's allegorical “Goblin Market” portray the threat imposed by strange men and the danger the girl herself poses to innocents who have not “eaten the fruit.” Charles Dickens's novels regularly feature women for whom carnal knowledge signals their ruin. In *David Copperfield*, Little Em'ly seeks exile in Australia after her affair with Steerforth unleashes a chain of tragedies. Birch illustrates how in *Oliver Twist*, “The deep bleeding gash” that destroys Nancy the prostitute “is a lurid image of her female sexuality. The horror persistently recurs in Victorian writing, often in association with violent death” (111). This is certainly the case in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, wherein the beautiful innocent becomes sexual, then murderous, then dead.

In his work of 1870, “Dinah Consoling Hetty in Prison” (Fig. 1.2), Francis John Williamson captures the despair felt as a complication of non-marital sexual activity. Hetty's body is slumped, her head hangs, and her glance is cast down. The full curve of her sculpted breast is eroticized, sketched irreverently in contrast with Dinah's shape. While Dinah's hair is modestly concealed, Hetty's long tresses hang down her back and are visually extended by the billows in her skirt. Dinah towers over her cousin, in fulfillment of the moral dictates of the novel, though at variance with the textual details ascribed by Eliot. Her straight stance and her



Figure 1.2. "Dinah Consoling Hetty in Prison,"
<http://www.britishmuseum.org>

mild embrace, along with her Madonna-like face illustrate spotlessness and clean-conscience.²⁰

In the sculpture, as in the novel, the two female forms work mimetically to contrast two formulations of Victorian beauty, one loathsome and one advisable.

Along with the wealth of other nineteenth-century periodicals, Heath's volumes function in similar ways to traditional Victorian novels that place women at the center of the text. In both, the concept of the pure and the state of feminine immaculacy is lauded, hovered over, and dwelled upon, much as breasts and thighs are treated in Victorian pornography. This is not to suggest that Victorian reading material were simple caricatures designed to elicit predictable responses from a naïve readership. A review of nineteenth-century periodicals reveals provocative, covert, sometimes-humorous, often-entertaining representations of feminine beauty and the female form. The progressive range of concerns inherent in these representations,

²⁰ To me, this statue significantly misreads Dinah, in particular. Dinah possesses a warmth and passion lost in this statue's dead gaze. She seems to me, here, more Protestant than Methodist.

occurring across the century, announce the complicated tensions inherent in the sexual feminized body. Ultimately though, dominant images of ideal female beauty in poems, novels, and periodicals problematized at best and excluded at worst natural female sexuality, creating a dominant impression of innocence as quintessentially beautiful.

The April 1881 issue of *The St. James's Magazine*, features an account of an art critic's visit to an exhibition at the Graphic Gallery in the Strand, and his review of the faces on the canvases prompted him to examine "English v. French Ideas of Female Beauty," as the article is titled. The feeble and disappointing results, as he deems them, extend to both English and French works of art on display, but the English works, he declares, are most decidedly better; his critiques and compliments reveal beauty that is most valuable and complete in the 1880's: the loveliness inherent in the outwardly pure face.

The critic says that the French paintings are either "sensual" or "affected" or worse, "sensual and affected at once." They are "sickly" and "robust" by turns, revealing "only too plainly the luxurious license and fitful gaiety the feverish unrest and awful weariness of vicious life." Noting the role of art in crafting the French ideal of female beauty, the critic concludes that French artists "have nothing better to show than the tawdry boldness or the repulsive satiation and pitiable despair of the demi-monde." The critic sardonically claims that "the skill and dexterity" of the French artists have disclosed "with extraordinary force and emphasis the very characteristics which had been best suppressed." In these pronouncements, the critic disparages the sexuality imbued in the French images.

Conversely, the paintings "in the case of the British School" contain "not a single canvas which repels or disgusts." The distinctive feature in the English works is "refinement" so that "in looking at them the soul is carried up" and never down. "Every face is pure...there is never a

suggestion of evil or unworthy thought.” In speaking about the artistic renditions, the critic taps into national pride and also stereotypes of the decadent, lascivious French. He reports that the “skilled hands and trained heads” of the French fail to produce “fine art,” because “where is the heart?” This again conflates “heart,” to mean spiritual worth, with innocence and a lack of sexual knowledge. A British canvas exhibits the beauty of “the face of a woman whom one could trust...It is good, honest, loving, and masterly work; it is unobtrusive.” It would be difficult for the reader to imagine that the critic speaks only of art and not the subject and those whom it represents. In being “not so striking as their [French] rivals” on the whole, “the art-value” of the British faces is “by far the higher.” This confirms that even or especially in the creative realm of art, the quiet earnestness of purity, and crucially, its designation of “unobtrusiveness,” outrivals a gaudy, fleshly nature, and that this advantage manifests in the face (270-71).

If the majority of representations of beauty functioned to exclude natural feminine sexuality, Victorian cultural discourse worked equally as hard to differentiate the masculine from the feminine. Dinah Birch insists that “Victorian ideas about what it means to be human were inextricably entangled with constructions of gender” (102). This statement functions powerfully by claiming that it meant something different to be human depending on which gender a person was born. Also compelling is the requirement of strict gender identification that must exist in order to “be” one type of human or another. It acts even more suggestively in that to be less categorically gendered is to be less human. Most troubling is that much of nineteenth-century discourse, through at least the middle of the century, supports this claim, in nearly every field and discipline, including criminology, medicine, and the arts. The sexual union of two men or two women represented the ultimate contradiction against acceptable gender-prescribed behaviors, and consequently, inversion was treated as a crime, an illness, and a source of ridicule

and denigration. Many of the warnings against gender-based subversive sexual behavior were coded, whereby the body was framed as a palate upon which deviance would be exposed.

Ainsworth Magazine's July 1854 article titled "Ugliness," written by contributor Matthew Lynch, exhibits how the body, assumed to reveal morality and "goodness," wherein adherence to normative roles and the embrace of conventional sexual values, is figured through beauty and its opposite. The author employs subtle humor and unexpected dictums, so that language works in multiple fashions to affirm the nature and uses of beauty, and also to malign "feminine" attributes in men. With these gender mandates, Lynch distinguishes desirable traits in both sexes, sharpening the border between acceptable and aberrant gender characteristics. The import of the piece is that men are to be "men" (dignified, honorable) and women are to be "women" (amicable, beautiful); by moving toward these strict gender affirmations by way of the beautiful feminine body, this article accentuates the function of beauty and its circumferential vocabulary in nineteenth-century popular discourse.

"No man should be annoyed at being, what is termed ugly," asserts Lynch. Instead, it is the "handsome man" upon whom "we must look with a species of contempt" because male beauty places the face "in antagonism with the mind" – in short, it is unnatural. Why? Because it is womanly: "In females, we look for beautiful countenances, as being on par with, and in likeness to, their gentleness of mind." Men, instead, are like "the stately oak," marked with "grandeur, sublimity, or awfulness," while women along with children are "the flowers of human life." The implications of the analogy are evident. The tree is serious and important, while the flower is ornamental and auxiliary to "a giant, or noble-looking man." Lynch argues that "ugly men should be successful in winning the regards of females," as "Othello, black as he was [won] the heart of the beautiful Desdemona." The ugly man's face is "honest" and "plain-visaged," and

even “lighted up by the fire of genius.” This provides a “relief” to the female gazer and also an admonition and a warning: “Save us” Lynch beseeches “the gods,” from the feminine charms of “your plaid-painted, border-vested, big-cravated, moustached, Cologne-sprinkled, bejeweled brainless exquisite” (545-546).

A handsome man is heavily coded as effeminate, as “‘a pretty man, a pink-and-white Sir Brainless,’ the united work of a tailor, hatter, shoemaker, and perfumer! Heaven save the mark! Women know better” (547). Conventional moralists frequently aligned overly groomed men with deception, mental illness, spiritual emptiness, and general undesirability. If too untamed and animalistic, *Wuthering Height’s* Heathcliff is closer to the Victorian masculine ideal than weak and devious Edgar Linton.

Lynch half-heartedly includes women in the subjective quality of beauty. He concedes that “Even the beauty of woman resides not in men’s minds on the exterior face” (548). Further, he claims that their beauty, as with “the most beautiful birds” may prove “comparatively useless and without song,” but they must in fact be beautiful to uphold the tenets of his final assertion that “in his esteem for ugliness” in the male face, “unspoiled beautiful women are the rightful spoils of the cultivated and amiable ugly men” (548). This male, like a “lion, large and strong, is an object of grandeur in our sight,” whereas she, “the deer, fragile and swift, is one to it of simplicity and beauty” (548). Here, physicality maligns the woman regardless of the value of her beauty. At the same time, the effeminate male is less than “grand and simple,” and is stripped of his warranted state of “sublimity” (548). Lynch taps into the language of Kant and Burke to raise men to the level of the sublime, while diminishing women by distinguishing them as specifically not grand, not the cause of awe and terror, but simply pleasing as an everyday ornament should

be. Finally, the arguments of articles like this one assume that every man needs and wants one of these female spoils.

By mid-century, the Pre-Raphaelites, for whom “the focal point of the movement was undoubtedly the body,” began to depart from previous constructions of gender polarity, giving rise to a far more androgynous figure of Victorian beauty, until finally, “the anxiety over female absence and subsequent loss of male identity that punctuated early Pre-Raphaelite works seems to have been replaced by the androgynous world of the aesthetes” (Sawhney). J.B. Bullen notes that “In each of its phases the debate about Pre-Raphaelitism was staged around the representation of the human body, and in the period between 1850 and 1880, the Pre-Raphaelite body was a focus for public and private pleasure, puzzlement and disquiet” (Bullen 1). The social disruption brought about in large part by artistic representations of the masculine woman and the feminine man showed the cracks in conceptions about strict gender partitions – about deviance and normality, about aversion and desirability. These fissures allowed writers like the anonymous authors of *Teleny* to parody and dispute the sickly figures of the effeminate male in medical and criminal discourse and to offer instead a character like René Teleny.

Psomiades argues that androgynous men in particular were “described according to conventions applied in the first instance to beautiful women – red lips, ivory flesh, golden curls – and situated in the same dreamworlds of drapery and vague historical significance” (6). She evokes this point to conclude that both feminine and “deviating,” beautiful masculine bodies “promise the fulfillment of desire in similar ways” which serve to denigrate the sexual object through beauty’s uses, “by using similar language to describe beautiful men and women, language that lingers over the colors of flesh and hair, and by using similar conventions of representation – large eyes, languorous postures, full mouths, faces unobscured by beard or

mustache” (7). Teleny owns these features, and traditionally masculine ones as well, so that when he is wrapped in “dreamworlds of drapery” these become quite distinct from the tawdry linens conventional discourse would attempt to align with the male “invert.” By situating him as firm, strong, and fine throughout, not despite but because of his love with another man, both “the conventions applied in the first instance to beautiful women,” and their inscription on the male ideal complicates gender construction to the benefit of both females and non-conforming males. Though these descriptions could intend to slander and vilify, as with various depictions of Oscar



Figure 1.3. “Oscar Wilde Begins Lecture Tour of the United States and Canada,” worldhistoryproject.org

Wilde from his tour of North American in 1882 (Fig. 1.3) through his “indecent” trial, these details also allowed writers the opportunity to employ the dominant images, typically used disparagingly, and infuse them with beauty, harnessing the power of discourse in the ways Foucault suggests in service of progressive ideologies. For Victorian men as for women, “normal” and “moral” behavior was believed to be visible through a network of outward signs. The existence of these cues aided subversive discourse by providing a common and recognized language for writers who sought to inscribe associations of worth and decency to traditionally misrepresented bodies.

Nineteenth-century ways of imagining the beautiful body worked to exclude healthy sexuality and to scorn and shame deviant masculinities alongside the feminine, but Victorian formulations of beauty served darker purposes yet, as these representations functioned to annihilate the feminine construct itself. Birch observes that “Murdered women – women who become nothing but bodies – feature regularly in Victorian literature,” wherein “Death takes a double form– the bleeding hollow of the body, or the pale coldness of the corpse. Both are female, but both threaten to infect the male, and are obsessively dreaded by the hero” (Birch 104, 108). Describing Maud’s maddening beauty, Tennyson calls her “Luminous, gemlike, ghostlike, deathlike” (III.95). As with various Victorian Medusas, “explored with relentless misogyny,” remote and unattainable beauty, as the pinnacle of the ideal, features in Victorian literature as the object of the chase, arrest, institutionalization, public shaming, and death. In their most dangerous manifestation, the beautiful objectified body functioned destructively and even violently against women and men outside of the norm, yet again, serving to illuminate the fears of the patriarchy: “Through her constancy Maud...redeems her lover, but she can only do so at the cost of the extinction of her bodily life” (Birch 109).

In fiction as well, physical frailty, and its submission to and reliance upon a physically stronger partner situated the masculine/feminine dyad as a desirable and necessary dynamic. As Lefkowitz notes, “Adam Bede presents the positive value of delicate health: Dinah is as morally strong as she is physically frail, Hetty as weak willed as she is robust” illustrating the nineteenth-century preference for “fair, fainting, and dying beauty...women are imagined to be beautiful when they are weakest” (160, 36). Gina Marlene Dorré explores this phenomenon and its influence upon fashion for the female as well as the equine. Comparing the “bridled, harnessed,

and eventually broken horse” to the “corseted and bustled” Victorian woman, Dorré notices that “The female fashions of the period seem to epitomize...the docile body” (173).

One particularly fascinating aspect of preferred docility is the way in which it coincides with a strong preference for youth. The physical contradictions inherent in Victorian tastes render feminine compliance difficult. One imagines that youth inclines toward health, and therefore requires the application of significant social suppression to become both eternally young and chronically infirm. Ledbetter documents the production of Heath’s volumes: “Heath demanded that all beauties in his annual appear young; he once instructed artist Kenny Meadows to make Shakespeare’s character Mrs. Page and her daughter Anne look the same age: ‘I don’t care about maternity, or Shakespeare, or anything else. You must not make her more than twenty or nobody will buy!’” (120-21). Heath wanted all beauties to look “nineteen exactly” (Ledbetter 121). Certainly, the plates in Heath’s annuals illustrate the compulsory youth inscribed upon the ideal face (Fig. 1.4).



Figure 1.4. “The Lady Worsley” and “The Lady Gardner,”
Heath’s Book of Beauty for 1840

In seeking explanation for the obsession with adolescence in Victorian magazines, one senses the regard for juvenescence as a state of unblemished, unembittered innocence, as in Lord Garner’s “To Hygeia,” in praise of the goddess of health. This figuration privileges youth in ways that are perilous for women and beneficial for masculine authority. Lord Gardner, the poet,

husband to Lady Gardner queries, “Why is Youth / The chosen temple of they bless’d adode. / Where hand in hand go Faith, and Love, and Truth, / Where conscience stings not, nor the weary load / Of sin and years press on with festering goad? / ...That which doth scorch in youth in age consumes / Where all is dry and withered” (253). I would also suggest that women become less complacent and more difficult to control and to keep, as the poem “The Meeting” suggests. Upon meeting the heroine, the speaker catalogues the beloved’s features: “her azure eye was bright / and on her cheek the rose was seen; / All gazed upon her with delight; / And hailed the beauty of eighteen.” In youth, her “glow” inspires “overflowing tenderness” from the poem’s speaker. At twenty, “Two years / Such change had wrought!” The beloved’s eyes were “changed / ...less bright.” At eighteen, “the fair one’s tears / fell on my cheek as we embraced” but time has wrought disinterest: ““Oh, Mary! Do we meet once more, / and is thy heart as kind as ever?” ... / She frown’d – ‘Oh, that was childish play, / We should forget it;’ and she left me” (227-28). One also senses more than the culture of youth that pervades the spheres of romance and fashion until today. In the Victorian period, known for its prized feminine docility, a very young woman is more likely to sustain domination without complaint, more likely to succumb without restraint, more likely to maintain affection despite ill use. As U.C. Knoepfelmacher suggests in *Ventures into Childland*, the use and fetishization of girls and young women functions as a potentially violent act of domination. I would assert that it also creates a culture of inevitable insecurity and shame.

In “Lines on the Portrait of the Honourable Mrs. George Anson,” the Countess of Blessington elevates art that memorializes youth “pictured in its prime.” Age is “remorseless” and “Time steals every day / Some bright and evanescent charm away.” Time takes the “freshness of a youthful face” and “write[s] upon thy polish’d brow / Harsh lines.” It steals “the

loveliness of sparkling eye, and waving golden tress”; all “rare beauty” and finally “all of Earth must bow to ruthless Time” (272). Because women either age or die, the Victorian infatuation with youth, fed, dispersed, and propelled through literature, serves as another aggression aimed at natural versus artificial femininity. In a world obsessed with clocks and mortality, upon the ascent of science and the death of God,²¹ bodies behaved as peculiarly rich sites to express anxiety and lamentation.

Shifts in economic and class conditions, technological advances, and populations in transit must have each contributed to the desire for yes or no answers to moral grey spaces regarding the spiritual truths the physical body houses. Clearly, Victorian annals hosted no shortage of artists and writers working in support of the dominant social project, whether purposefully or as products of culture themselves. However, many of the finest artistic and literary relics conceived of, created, nurtured, and embraced in nineteenth-century England diverge from the norm, subvert the popular convention, and fabricate a new kind of beautiful body in order to express their concept of a healthier society. The authors of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, *Teleny*, and *The Ring and the Book*, appropriated constructions of physical beauty to break down and rebuild societal norms. These Victorian writers, each with a new vision for men and women in community with one another, took the beautiful feminine or feminized form as a presumed space of moral order and superimposed their agendas to create a more gracious, compassionate, and beautiful society and literary landscape.

²¹ ...as Hegel and Nietzsche insisted and as Oscar Wilde echoed in *Salome*.

CHAPTER TWO: *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

In April 1891, three months before *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* began its serial run in *The Graphic*, Thomas Hardy published "The Science of Fiction," in which the author disputed the desirability of realism, or as he called it, "copyism," reproaching "a world which no longer believes in the abnormal." What he hoped to offer with his art instead was "the finer qualities of existence, an ear for the 'still sad music of humanity,'" an essence that cannot be conveyed through the photographic retelling of a scene—"To see in half and quarter views the whole picture, to catch from a few bars the whole tune." In order to strike the note that could reveal the writer's "sympathetic appreciativeness of life," Hardy rendered his places and performers spectacularly attractive, and in doing so he developed the means through which they could be most compassionately perceived ("Science" 134-7).²²

Hardy's 1890 essay "Reflections on Art" presages many of the same sentiments: "Art is a changing of the actual proportions and order of things, so as to bring out more forcibly...that feature in them which appeals most strongly to the idiosyncrasy of the artist...to show more clearly the features that matter...which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might

²² Following up on her book *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen's essay "Empathetic Hardy: Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Strategies of Narrative Empathy" offers an excellent treatment of the way that empathy functions in the works of Hardy. She notes that "The articulation of *Einfühlung* and *empathy* as concepts separate from *sympathy* in psychology and aesthetics...occurs during Thomas Hardy's reading, research, and publishing career" (350). The OED confirms that the term empathy was first recorded in 1904, while the German *Einfühlung* came into use in 1874. Ultimately, Keen surmises that "Hardy needed neither the new term, empathy, nor the scientific speculations about how sympathy generated altruism, to arrive at parallel conclusions from his study of literature and the behavior of the creatures around him" (360). My own study of *Tess* has less to do with the specific physical identification that empathy suggests, still less to do with the disassociation that sympathy suggests, which is why I choose "compassion" as the most appropriate term to denote Hardy's emotional interest, which he often termed altruism. Also, against an "empathy" reading, I am strongly swayed by Virginia Hyman's argument that Hardy shifts the reader away from an identification with Tess and toward an identification with those whom she affects most significantly, such as Angel.

possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked” (F. Hardy 229).²³ In offering a portrait of Tess Durbeyfield, Hardy’s narrative voice describes her as in possession of a sensational beauty that cannot be “overlooked”, which is a sentiment echoed through the speech and actions of the characters in the text. She is a maiden to whom “the eye returns involuntarily” (*Tess* 101). Through their sustained attention, once readers connect to Tess, the author’s fiction works to establish a sense of common humanity by insisting that they look closely in order to note the “pulsing life” warming Tess’s gossamer tissue, and ultimately that they confront the weight of her demise (*Tess* 300). Indeed, physicality and its inner essence inform Hardy’s early title for *Tess*, “The Body and Soul of Sue.” Through a visceral engagement with the text, Hardy hoped to stimulate what Virginia Hyman terms an “ethical evolution” whereby his readers could “move into the future” with a deeper sense of altruism, toward “the eventual triumph of loving-kindness” (3, 18).

I argue that in crafting a figure who bears fantastic physical beauty, the author draws attention to Tess through the use of a familiar trope toward unfamiliar ends. As Peter Casagrande notes, Hardy “violates the expectations of his contemporary readers who expect a moral and not an aesthetic response to the deflowering of a maiden” (16). By employing the beautiful body, Hardy mines his interest in both art and science to situate Tess as recognizably ideal from the perspective of late nineteenth-century biological theory. The author links this notion of the ideal from the physical to the moral, and in doing so he redefines assumptions about what constitutes feminine virtue. Because he places emphasis on Tess’s physicality in

²³ For Hardy, verse and art shared common challenges. In 1922, discussing *The Dynasts*, Hardy recalled how in crafting the work, “events had to be pulled together...to show themselves to the mental eye of the reader as a picture viewed from one point; and hence it was sometimes necessary to see round corners, down crooked streets, & to shift buildings nearer each other than in reality (as Turner did in his landscapes)” (*Letters* 370). Hardy’s skill in manipulating these corners, in making these shifts with words, in pushing the bounds of realism, began long before *The Dynasts*. From his earliest writings, Hardy relied upon fantastical coincidences to forward his plots, and he even dabbled in fantasy, as in 1888’s “The Withered Arm.”

order to most effectively reach these aims, I assert that the novel can be misinterpreted as exploitative, but I reject that reading in favor of a broader view of Hardy's project within its contemporary context. I contend that through the use of her complicated beauty, Hardy situates Tess's purity in opposition and superior to that of the common Victorian doll. Tess's flaws which manifest physically, enriching her beauty, allow Hardy to demonstrate more compassionate ways of seeing, and ultimately more humane approaches to being. I examine Angel Clare as a literary illustration of the benefits one gleans from recognizing Tess's imperfect goodness, noting how his awareness ennobles him. When readers witness Angel's growth and evolution, they benefit from his profit. I will insist that compassionate "seeing which leads to happy doing" is key to Hardy's design, consistent with his meliorist philosophy, so that his books, with *Tess* as an exemplar, are "but one plea against 'man's inhumanity to man' – to woman – and to the lower animals" (Archer 46-47) - and that beauty initiates this process.

To support the claim that Hardy uses the beautiful as a device, one need only look at the author's awareness of its pure power within the novel itself, and the way that, as such, it is tightly woven into the plot, whereby the beautiful becomes its own noun instead of an adjective; at times it even seems to function as a verb.²⁴ At the very outset of the story, the demonstration of beauty, formed by the May-Day club walkers, stops the Clare brothers from along their south-westerly course, and renders the third and youngest "in no hurry to move on" (22). Angel reluctantly does move on before Tess's trials unfold in the novel, but the reader, drawn in part by the beautiful in the narrative, does not. Casagrande posits of the observing narrator, "He requires the reader to sit still and to contemplate the incident in a frozen silence, in which pattern, color, sound, and touch are of primary importance" (*Unorthodox Beauty* 36). Hardy utilizes the

²⁴ ...in that the action itself seems like beauty in motion as opposed to motion propelled by or moving towards the beautiful.

convention of description, but then infuses the image with so much desirability that “the reader is a paralyzed, or traumatized, witness, a person seeing a disaster but unable to do anything...and unable to remove his or her eyes from the spectacle” (*Unorthodox Beauty* 36-37). The author does this fully aware of the primal, instinctive power of the beautiful, particularly with his contemporary readership in mind.

T.R. Wright argues that “Hardy had a clear mental picture of his imagined audience,” and most Hardy scholars agree that this readership was largely comprised of the “patronizing male upper-middle-class” (2).²⁵ For this reader, Angel provides the most likely vehicle for identification, and Tess grants that needed “contrast” Hardy spoke of in his 1888 essay, “The Profitable Reading of Fiction.” Both Angel and Tess allow “a personal connection...which results in an intellectual stir” (112). Suzanne Keen situates Hardy’s authorial strategy in service of what she calls “bounded empathy...on behalf of ordinary people, highly recognizable to his compatriots as his rustics” (365). Though I agree with Keen that the “psychological aesthetics” of *einfühlung* and empathy “closely matched [Hardy’s] own convictions about human emotions” (Keen 350), I believe that he relied at least as much upon distance as association, in seeking a more compassionate response from his reader, harnessed the power of female physical beauty toward their “moral profit” (*Profitable Reading* 118).²⁶

Julie Grossman notes that “Through *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Hardy transgresses conventional representations of female power by implanting the suggestion that male readers and publishers are complicit in fostering taboos associated with female sexuality and ‘truthful’ novel-

²⁵ This is not to suggest that Hardy had only one type of reader. Tess, in particular, because of its popularity, would have been read by people across the gender and social spectrums. Still, the predominant reader of the Graphic was a wealthy British male. T.R. Wright’s *Hardy and His Readers* offers an excellent full treatment of the issue.

²⁶ In *Distance and Desire*, J. Hillis Miller discusses Hardy’s way of engaging with the world, becoming “involved in the world...without being swallowed up by it” (27). As Miller connotes, while this functions as a “protection,” it also allows Hardy to yield to the fascinations of life and to feel “the lure of music and love” among other sensations, wherein “a refusal of direct involvement lends itself to “a means of indirect response” (27, 28).

writing” (625). Grossman attempts to situate Hardy’s compassion toward woman as “victimized counterpart to his own vulnerability” as a novelist under attack (617), “to escape the repeated trauma of feeling himself objectified as an image for the public eye to look down upon” (609). In that Hardy suffered ostracization along with his success – regarding everything from his supposed lack of sophistication, to the absence of a classical education, to the strangeness of his habits, and even to the appearance of his wife - and that he left accounts in notes and letters which confirm the extent to which these opinions affected him, one can surmise that he felt himself judged and subsequently misunderstood. Still, I assert that his compassion sprang from and was fed by wells much deeper than those originating in self-pity. Hardy would assert that not just the author, but “the world itself” should be “reflected,” “revealed,” and “criticized” in “conscientious fiction” (*Candour* 127). In the works of Hardy, meaningful revelations are moments of vision, so that through biologically and psychologically-charged responses to beauty, the “appreciative, perspicacious reader” would be able to “see what his author is aiming at, and by affording full scope to his own insight, catch the vision which the writer has in his eye, and is endeavoring to project upon the paper” (*Profitable Reading* 117).

Lori Hope Lefkowitz notes that once the readers’ attention is fixed, then “Descriptions of beauty translate the essential values of a text into a visual aesthetic” from which “important social implications emerge” (1). I would argue that of all Hardy’s literary characters, Tess serves most aptly as a fictional repository for the author’s humanistic philosophies. She epitomizes the depth, durability, and elegance of the common person, the peasant who stands with the peer “on much the same level” (*Orel* 124). Twofold, as a person of the countryside and as a woman, the character of Tess Derbyfield allows Hardy to explore his interest in the plight of vulnerable people whose scratches and imperfections make them especially interesting to this writer. Hardy

calls upon his wealthy male reader, at the top of the social rung, to practice compassion, if not participate in begetting “the acme and summit of...human progress” (48), to set social history upon a more just course.

Incontrovertibly, the means by which readers understood and by which writers expressed their impressions of life shifted with the emerging paradigm brought about by new scientific theories. As Nancy Paxton suggests, “By making it possible to speak of ‘bodies’ and ‘life processes,’ rather than sin and salvation, evolutionary theorists created a language that allowed Victorians to question what Michel Foucault calls ‘the truth about sex’” (43). *Tess* emerged onto the literary scene at a moment when the reader would have perceived of “the feminine” as a social construct in flux, and the changes feminist social reform promised were broadly perceived as another threat, one of many, that late Victorians faced. Penny Boumelha pinpoints theories of evolution as contributors to “Hardy’s radicalism,” which “must be situated historically...constituted in an ideology of sexual difference that was transformed, at this period, by the impact of biological interpretations of Darwinism” (8). Hardy harnessed these emerging scientific theories to call attention to socially-driven human injustices.

In late February 1888, Hardy received a letter from the Rev. Dr. A. B. Grosart, which ventured ““to address Mr. Hardy on a problem that is of life and death”” (Letters 205). Having found in Hardy’s writing ““abundant evidence that the facts and mysteries of nature and human nature have come urgently before Mr. Hardy’s penetrative brain,”” the Reverend “enumerated some of the horrors of human and animal life, particularly parasitic,” and he asked of Hardy ““How to reconcile these with the absolute goodness and non-limitation of God,”” to which Hardy replied, ““Mr. Hardy regrets that he is unable to suggest any hypothesis that would reconcile the evidence of such evils as Dr. Grosart describes with the idea of omnipotent

goodness. Perhaps Dr. Grosart might be helped to a provisional view of the universe by the recently published *Life of Darwin*, and the works of Spencer and other agnostics” (*Letters* 205). The author’s own work was strongly affected by contemporary modes of thinking that moved beyond religious discourse and toward the humanistic. Hardy’s correspondences, along with his novels and poetry, wrestle with the same difficulties with which Grosart grappled, and Hardy finally employed science as an underlying doctrine for morality and art.

The influence of Darwin is closely aligned with Hardy’s construction of Tess’s physical self. In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin postulated that, “Men accustomed to a nearly oval face, to straight and regular features, and to bright colours, admire, as we Europeans know, these points when strongly developed. On the other hand, men accustomed to a broad face, with high cheek-bones, a depressed nose, and a black skin, admire these peculiarities when strongly marked” (Darwin XIX). Tess possesses the finest, most strongly marked English traits, evidenced by repeated references to the wide appeal of her attractiveness. Echoing Darwin’s prose, Hardy writes of Tess, “One can see the oval face of a handsome young woman with deep dark eyes and long heavy clinging tresses...The cheeks are paler, the teeth more regular, the red lips thinner than is usual in a country-bred girl” (101). Tess epitomizes Darwin’s oval-faced, extreme ideal “a little exaggerated beyond the existing common standard” (*Descent of Man*).

In a letter to Lena Milman, dated July 17, 1893 Hardy wrote of Herbert Spencer’s iconic text: “I am glad to find that you are interested in ‘First Principles’ – a book which acts, or used to act, upon me as a sort of patent expander when I had been particularly narrowed down by the events of life. Whether the theories are true or false, their effect upon the imagination is unquestionable, and I think beneficial” (*Letters* 85). The benefit of those theories is clearly expressed in *Tess*, when the narrator chastises Angel’s cynical, “sterile” gaze: “[Angel] argued

erroneously when he said to himself that [Tess's] heart was not indexed in the honest freshness of her face" (254). What if Tess's heart *is* expressed in her face, Hardy seems to posit. What if the girl is just as "pure" as she looks? Though far from ascribing truth to every word, the young Hardy read Spencer avidly, and along with other Victorian writers and intellectuals, he was both intrigued and influenced by the positive value Spencer ascribed to physical beauty.

Recalling Hardy's contention in "The Science of Fiction," that realism is not fully equipped to express the nuances of life, Spencer suggests that

It is not true that the facts of science are unpoetical; or that the cultivation of science is necessarily unfriendly to the exercise of imagination and the love of the beautiful. On the contrary, science opens up realms of poetry where to the unscientific all is a blank. Those engaged in scientific researches constantly show us that they realise not less vividly, but more vividly, than others, the poetry of their subjects. (36)

The subject of the beautiful frequently occupied Spencer's writings, from his early 1850's proclamations in support of women's rights, to his later "dramatic repudiation of his support for marriage reform, women's emancipation, and better education" once it became clear that "the physical laws of evolution did not necessarily correspond to the divinely ordained 'moral laws' that protected male privilege" (Paxton 31).²⁷

In "Physical Education," Spencer expounded further upon the benefits of beauty, and laments the intellectual training young girls receive:

²⁷ As Paxton's text discusses, Spencer shared a deep friendship and an emotional connection with George Eliot that likely would have resulted in a romantic union or even a marriage - such were their sympathies - but Spencer could not overcome his aversion to Eliot's outward self: "'The lack of physical attraction was fatal. Strongly as my judgment prompted, my instincts would not respond'" (Paxton 18). Despite Spencer's love of Eliot's mind, he proved his own assertion that "a 'good physique' was more important than a woman's 'moral and intellectual beauties' in the process of sexual selection" (Paxton 31). Even Spencer's self-defined "judgment" and his strong mental faculty could not imagine Eliot beyond her "large...ill-constructed," unbeautiful shell (Paxton 22, 23).

In the pale, angular, flat-chested young ladies, so abundant in London drawing-rooms, we see the effect of merciless application...and this physical degeneracy hinders their welfare far more than their many accomplishments aid it...Men care little for erudition in women; but very much for physical beauty, good nature, and sound sense...What man ever fell in love with a woman because she understood Italian?...But rosy cheeks and laughing eyes are great attractions. A finely rounded figure draws admiring glances...out of the many elements uniting in various proportions to produce in a man's breast the complex emotion we call love, the strongest are those produced by physical attractions...in so far as posterity are concerned, a cultivated intelligence based on a bad physique is of little worth, since its descendants will die out in a generation or two; and conversely that a good physique, however poor the accompanying mental endowments, is worth preserving, because, throughout future generations, the mental endowments may be indefinitely developed; we perceive how important is the balance of instincts above described. (150-51)

Many of Spencer's contentions would have only lightheartedly occupied Hardy, and he would have noted and recoiled from the Malthusian principles implied in Spencer's dogma. Still, Hardy instructs his reader that Angel is wrong for viewing Tess "as a species of imposter; a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent" (249). As Gillian Beer discerns, Hardy's literary world is "urged onwards always by procreation" wherein his characters' "sense-experience" feeds "that 'appetite for joy' which Hardy saw as charging life equally with rapture and disaster" (225). In this context, instinct is key to experience, and beauty compels human impulses. At their root,

these desires are more trustworthy than socially-mandated moralities. When Hardy describes “the two life-size portraits” of Tess’s hideous d’Urberville ancestors, cataloguing “the long pointed features, narrow eye, and smirk of the one, so suggestive of merciless treachery; the bill-hook nose, large teeth, and bold eye of the other” suggest, he insists “arrogance to the point of ferocity” which “haunt[s] the beholder afterwards in his dreams” (235). This recalls Spencer’s assertions in “Personal Beauty” regarding “the connexion between organic ugliness and mental inferiority, and the converse connection between organic beauty and comparative perfection of mind.” Hardy’s novel rejects the notion that Tess may have inherited an ancestral taint. Though Tess is connected to her lineage as “upon a system more extensive than the life span of the individual” (Beer 224), her place within the system is marked not with treachery but with comeliness, with the potential to elicit delight.

That Tess becomes victim and not benefactor of her beauty does nothing to dispute the assertions of natural power inherent in the beautiful which Spencer insists upon. Many men and indeed women in *Tess* are drawn to the “physical beauty, good nature, and sound sense” of the novel’s main character (“Physical Education”). As well, Spencer’s correlation between “beauty of character and beauty of aspect” that so infuriated Eliot, prompting a rebuke in the form of *Adam Bede*’s Hetty Sorrel, germinates in the character of Tess, who is as worthy and as wonderful as she is lovely (“Personal Beauty”). This is not to suggest that Hardy strictly subscribed to Spencer’s claims and meant to illustrate them in *Tess*. Indeed, with the vacillations his opinions underwent, one wonders how closely Spencer himself subscribed to the ideas he worked to advance. But the inhabitants of Wessex, from the decadent Alec to the intellectual Angel to even Mrs. Clare know that one could do worse than to secure a beautiful, sympathetic,

and sensible milkmaid. That their regard instead destroys her imbues the text with Hardy's unique sensibility.

Through Hardy's engagement with the works of Spencer and Darwin, the author underscores the way which beauty functions as a sign of health and worth, which in turn situates Tess as a new model of healthy womanhood, made visible to the reader through elaborate word-pictures. Hardy's copious, nearly scientifically-detailed descriptions of Tess serve his objective, to make meaning not only observable, but doubly visible. Peter Widdowson has written that "*Tess*, that most 'vividly visible' of novels, may be an example of Hardy 'intensifying the expression' in order to bring into view precisely that 'expression'...that the 'reality' of an image *is* the image itself, that its only reality is what is constructs through representation" (15). Exorbitant descriptions in *Tess* concentrate almost exclusively on the feminine figure at the center of the text, so that when mention is made to a peripheral image - to hills, to horses, to spectral birds - these descriptions serve less to connect Tess to the landscape than to refine the likeness of the main character.

Not all critics read Hardy's purpose and respond to his rhetorical abundance as a critique of culture or the positive production of an alternate aesthetic. The oft-cited Mowbray Morris review from 1892 acts as a starting point for the typical gender-focused critical exploration. Morris observed that "Poor Tess's sensual qualifications for the part of heroine are paraded over and over again with a persistence like that of a horse dealer egging on some wavering customer to a deal, or a slave-deal appraising his wares to some full blooded pasha" (Millgate 287). From this early complaint, within the feminist and gender studies critical camps, there are those who condemn Hardy's male eye, which it is fair to argue is at least as bold and rolling as Alec d'Urberville's, and there are others who exalt Hardy's embrace of the feminine form. My

assertions have less to do with the destructive or beneficial repercussions of the gaze, and instead explore what this beauty that Hardy parades so insistently before the reader is meant to convey, noting the ways that it supports the formulation of purity that he first defines and then insists upon, and its link to a Hardyian concept of morality.

In *The Stone and the Scorpion: The Female Subject of Desire in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy*, Judith Mitchell claims that Hardy's writing is sexist, that *Tess* "itself is pornographic," and that the author's descriptions have much the same result as a snuff film (197). Mitchell supports her allegations in part by identifying Tess's absent interiority and her spectacular physicality. Mitchell complains that "The angle of vision is from outside the female (hence we are not given her perspective) and obsessed with the female (hence we are given minutely detailed, fetishistic portraits of her)...female consciousness is elided in favor of the obsessive objectification of women by means of the male gaze" (160). Throughout her critique, Mitchell attributes Tess's visuality to authorial "obsession," implying pathology, a state of chaos, and a loss of control. In her severest condemnation, Mitchell claims that "The entire text consists of an act of objectification and violence toward its heroine... *Tess* is a text saturated with cruelty and suffering of a particularly detailed and gratuitous kind" (193).

Opposing Mitchell's assertions, I insist that there is nothing gratuitous about the suffering in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. What Mowbray Morris calls "succulence" is the managed output of an artist at his most careful and his most creative. Details, particularly those describing the protagonist in a state of trauma, forward Hardy's key objectives. As Casagrande maintains of *Tess*, "Her suffering attracts at the same time that it repels, or better, it attracts because it repels" (*Unorthodox Beauty* 14). Aesthetics function as a means of summoning the viewer to the scene, a way of making meaning known. Tess's beauty attracts and fixates the reader, counteracting the

repulsive influence of the violence in the novel. In crafting her allegations, Mitchell either neglects or rejects the idea that “the language of physical description is weighted language, such that adjectives move easily from the surface of the body to the depths of being” (Lefkowitz 10). If Hardy’s intention was only, or even mostly, to titillate, then the elaborate word-sketches describing Tess’s face and body could be viewed as problematic in the ways that Mitchell insists, but Hardy’s descriptions are used strategically and should not be allied with Tess’s denigration.²⁸ When readers are granted access only to Tess’s violet-eyed surface, this absence becomes useful; Hardy cultivates and then harnesses the distress one might experience at Tess’s unknowability and in doing so, he crafts her body as a discursive space where visibility tenders intellectual knowledge. This theme of human suffering due to “faulty interaction of the social machinery” is supported by description of Tess and what these descriptions elicit from the reader (*Tess* 49). Written in the heart of the Fin de siècle, Hardy’s formulation of Tess’s fictitious body endeavors to illustrate the malaise he exemplified a decade later in “The Darkling Thrush.”

Importantly, the seemingly cynical undertones inherent in the construction of Tess’s beautiful face and body of Tess replace a much darker vision. Tess appropriates the literary space most often allotted to the delicate, complacent, or devious nineteenth-century female, radicalizing the function of beauty, and thrusting the heroine’s loveliness at the reader. Tess is the essence of nature, as her beauty discloses, and when she commits acts that are considered morally transgressive by Victorian standards, deeds that happen largely because she is so strikingly beautiful that men seem unable to resist the attraction of her body, like nature, she has done nothing wrong. Hardy insists that of Tess’s sexual experience, only social laws are broken,

²⁸ My dispute with Mitchell’s conclusions responds only to her claim that Hardy’s descriptions are gratuitous and out of control. I do not dispute that *Tess* is filled with male fantasies about female psychological dependence. Up until (and maybe including) *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy’s women find it difficult to live without male love. I attribute this not to a lack of sympathy or imagination, but as Peter Casagrande calls it, to “Hardy’s restless imprisonment in language that serves a culture that oppresses women” (54).

“but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly” (98).

These laws then should be reexamined to establish a more just, compassionate society.

With a more admirable society in mind, made possible by Darwin’s contentions and a dismissal of conventional values, Hardy insisted that “the doll of English fiction must be demolished, if England is to have a school of fiction at all” (*Letters* 67). In part, this breaking down had to do with the creation of art, and the impediment placed upon the writer by “patrons of literature...acting under the censorship of prudery” (“Candour” 128-29). As well, not only as a writer but as a thinker concerned with the oversimplification and consequent subjugation of any complex group of individuals, Hardy crafted a character that would highlight the incongruities he notes. Tess exemplifies what Rosemarie Morgan terms “Hardy’s less-than-typical Victorian view of female sexuality: his complete lack of puritanical censure, his complete faith in the healthy, life-giving force of free, unrepressed sexual activity, his complete commitment to active, assertive, self determined women of the kind satirised in the pages of *Punch* as ‘masculine’, hag-like, or gross” (x). As Hardy’s representation of the ideal feminine, Tess is far more natural than the pale, immaculate Esther Summerson or Dorothea Brooke. Still, Dickens and Eliot wrote of complex women with intricate psychologies. Not all Victorian angels of literature were similarly endowed. Arguing that Hardy worked against popular notions of femininity, Morgan evokes as the Victorian exemplar “the representative model, as personified by Coventry Patmore’s *Angel in the House*, or Ruskin’s *Stainless Sceptre of Womanhood*,” which Morgan claims was, “in amalgam, and in Victorian eyes, the most desirable, the most perfect of all representations” in its privileging of “reticence and self-restraint” (xiv). Both Patmore and Ruskin imagined a world of absolutes, where the beautiful is of one nature and the ugly is of another. These authors, forwarding a hyper-patriarchal agenda

by way of the feminine body, proposed an uncomplicated route to moral ecstasy, wherein the feminine entity will buffer the man from the internal turmoil and the external ugliness in life. In this role, the woman is valued to the extent that she can excite or comfort or calm a man, and by exclusion from the life of decisions and actions, she bears the guilt merely by failing to placate. The beautiful in her aspect is valued as a possession, a source of status, or as a reflection, a proof of masculine advantage. Her beauty merits no description beyond its relation to the male.

In Canto V - The Violets, Preludes, "The Comparison" in *Angel in the House*, Patmore praises the "cloudless" brow of his feminine ideal (1), upon which one finds "all-mildness and young trust" ("The Dean" 4-17). The physical plainness of her forehead, free from furrow-lines, signifies her willingness to acquiesce in all things, and accentuates her naïveté. Instead of growing, the maiden deteriorates and becomes "More infantine, auroral, mild, / And still the more she lives and knows / The lovelier she's express'd a child" (18-20). Canto VI's "The Dean" admires her loveliness that rises with his superiority. She retains her "chaste and noble air" because in her "light-hearted ignorance" which fills the pursuing male "with love, and seem'd to enhance / Her beauty with pathetic force" (18, 9, 11-12), she becomes increasingly easier to control, with enhanced beauty as a gauge of masculine success. No such pallid dolls occupy Hardy's Wessex. Even Mercy Chant views and processes "heartache," and her "beatific smiles" are bought with "a curiously unnatural sacrifice of humanity to mysticism," suggesting choice and personal agency beyond the reach of Patmore's fictitious Angel (285).

In "On Love," Patmore's male fantasies of feminine submission align far closer to the conventions of the snuff film, as evoked by Judith Mitchell, than descriptions of Tess's tragical face; indeed, for Patmore's creation, love is death, death borders on infanticide, and all is framed as an instance of seeing. At the same time, Patmore offers almost no description of the beloved

throughout the poetry in *Angel in the House*. She appears as an invention within a fiction, a narcissist's hallucination, a counter-self to the narrator, created for her capacity to make him feel clever. With Patmore, the reader gains access to the interior of the unnamed "her." Within her telepathically observed exclamation, "She thinks, 'He's looking on my face!'" the female's perspective is claimed to be disclosed (21), though one almost wishes it was not. Patmore's angel is pathetic, as the narrator boasts, but gruesome as well, as an archetype and dangerous, as representative of a dead child. As Gilbert and Gubar describe in *Madwoman in the Attic*, "In the extremity of her alienation from ordinary fleshly life, this nineteenth-century angel-woman becomes not just a memento of otherness, but actually a *memento mori* or...an 'Angel of Death'" (26). Hardy's formulation of Tess's beauty works to refute the desirability of this wooden, clumsily written archetype of the mid-century, replacing it with a healthier model of femininity, aimed at building compassion, not elevating a destructive immaculacy.

Considering the ways in which Tess's rich, multilayered beauty functions as an alternative to what Morgan terms "the Ruskin camp advocating a model of perfection," one notes the ways that with Ruskin,²⁹ as with Patmore, the reader again contemplates the cloudless brow of the playful death angel: "This is wonderful - oh, wonderful! - to see her, with every innocent feeling fresh within her, go out in the morning into her garden to play with the fringes of its guarded flowers, and lift their heads when they are drooping, with her happy smile upon her face, and no cloud upon her brow, because there is a little wall around her place of peace" (188). One can compare Tess's various gardens, wherein everything she harvests deepens and enriches her, and Hardy casts her beauty in a constant new light among its shadows. Ruskin's garden space is a prison of wilted flowers with the woman as fellow inmate tasked with spinning straw

²⁹ Admittedly, John Ruskin's prose, and poetry is far more complex than Coventry Patmore's. In her article, "Raising Lilies: Ruskin and Women," Jennifer M. Lloyd offers a more comprehensive examination of Ruskin's view of women.

into gold. Ruskin's outlook, replete with woman as smiling imbecile, is far darker than Hardy's literary vision. Of unpleasantness, Ruskin insists that "Men can bear the sight of it, but you should not be able to bear it. Men may tread it down without sympathy in their own struggle; but men are feeble in sympathy, and contracted in hope; it is you only who can feel the depths of pain; and conceive the way of its healing" (186). If she cannot bear it, and yet she must feel it, what will become of her? Though *Tess* ends in tragedy, the heroine's experiences ennoble her, unlike Ruskin's female sacrifice. As Casagrande maintains of Hardy's method, "If it is true that Hardy's people always end worse than they begin, it is also true that in that end they enjoy hard-won dignity, strength beyond their station, and most importantly, a beauty of situation that (however severe) is absolutely genuine" ("Pessimism" 314). As signifiers of meaning, Hardy's women are dignified through their descriptions independent of the male gaze, and these described aspects of their being along with the author's regard improve through hardship and experience.

Germane to Hardy's vision, as explored in *Tess*, is the idea of the beauty inherent in seeming imperfection. Part of becoming a more compassionate person had to do with valuing the stains, blotches, specks, and various mechanisms of "ruin" that the uncaring world thrusts upon the individual as he or she jolts round and along. Tess's body, then lends meaning to counter Patmore and Ruskin, as importantly, her beauty increases as a consequence of her "mental harvest," brought about by her "passing corporeal blight" (*Tess* 140). Tess gains the ability to perceive splendor in "the deeper reality underlying the scenic"; she awakens to "the [beauty in the] tragical mysteries of life" (*Life* 185), and this complexity manifests physically. After Tess buries her son, Hardy points out that "symbols of reflectiveness passed into her face...her eyes grew larger and more eloquent. She became what would have been called a fine creature; her

aspect was fair and arresting” (112). Not only “reflectiveness” but “symbols of reflectiveness” heighten the expressive “eloquence” of the beautiful in her being. Casagrande discerns that by forging the opposition between the ugly and the beautiful, “Hardy reaches toward what...Edmund Burke called ‘the Sublime’...Whereas Burke had distinguished sharply between the sublime (‘whatever is qualified to cause terror’) and the beautiful (‘whatever produces...positive and original pleasure’), Hardy, by way of diverging from Burke...fuses the sublime and the beautiful” (*Unorthodox Beauty* 31). Casagrande attributes this sublimity to a deep well of violence which he envisions as an ugliness. The “beaugly” as he terms it, is a fusion of the beauty and the ugliness of Tess, the character as well as *Tess*, the novel. While I agree with the latter application, the former assumes a “masculinity” in Tess, as he labels it and a fever of brutality that I believe misses the point. Beauty in *Tess* is deeply emblematic of compassion as the reader is led to regard Tess’s large-eyed, desolate but hopeful face as the very best in nature. Tess’s physicality functions as a sublime representative palate upon which to illustrate Hardy’s philosophy, which challenged the nineteenth-century norm, yet remained palatable, in part, because of the attraction of the scene.

But to profit from his illustration, one must perceive his vision clearly and fully. Nestled in the edenic “Valley of great dairies,” Angel misreads Tess’s beauty by romanticizing her loveliness, while the reader benefits from yet another extended description:

How very lovable her face was to him. Yet there was nothing ethereal about it; all was real vitality, real warmth, real incarnation. And it was in her mouth that this culminated. Eyes almost as deep and speaking he had seen before, and cheeks perhaps as fair; brows as arched, a chin and throat almost as shapely; her mouth he had seen nothing to equal on the face of

the earth. To a young man with the least fire in him that little upward lift
in the middle of her red top lip was distracting, infatuating, maddening. He
had never before seen a woman's lips and teeth which forced upon his
mind with such persistent iteration the old Elizabethan simile of roses
filled with snow. Perfect, he, as a lover, might have called them off-hand.
But no—they were not perfect. And it was the touch of the imperfect upon
the would-be perfect that gave the sweetness, because it was that which
gave the humanity. (165-6)

Angel is wrong to call her a Goddess; Tess's incredible beauty is "nothing ethereal," just "real vitality, real warmth, real incarnation" (165). Ernest Sutherland Bates claims that for the heroic optimist, a term he applied most to Hardy, "Beauty pure and undefiled is not the beauty which is found in this world; it is not beauty which shall be significant to lives of spiritual toil and struggle" (470). Hardy's writing, and particularly his constructions of feminine beauty, works to reveal the elegance of the human misstep as it posits a new morality, a radical, heroic way of conceptualizing purity.

Insisting upon Tess's positive sexual nature, Morgan emphasizes that "[Hardy's] women toil and labour...and bear the marks of their physical activity...neither the marks of toil nor, indeed, any visible signs of the body's functioning, of physical exertion, of stress or fatigue, renders any of Hardy's women less than worthy, less than noble, less than womanly for their imperfections" (Morgan xi). This emphasis on the body as bearer of meaning is crucial throughout the text, and where emphasis is sought, Tess becomes messier, wilder, more sensually rich, closer to her animal nature, as Hardy expresses her beauty. In baby Sorrow's death scene, when conventional notions of sin and legitimacy threaten to consign Tess's

“darling” to the “nethermost corner of hell,” her “nightgown became damp with perspiration” (106) and her loveliness is made mythic:

Her figure looked singularly tall and imposing as she stood in her long white nightgown, a thick cable of twisted dark hair hanging straight down her back to her waist. The kindly dimness of the weak candle abstracted from her form and features the little blemishes which sunlight might have revealed—the stubble scratches upon her wrists, and the weariness of her eyes—her high enthusiasm having a transfiguring effect upon the face which had been her undoing, showing it as a thing of immaculate beauty, with a touch of dignity which was almost regal. (106-107)

In the sensation novel, that Victorian genre consumed with formulations of female beauty, the blemished and scratched woman is the one who is falling from grace and finally caught; her exposed imperfect body provides proof of her unraveling. Hardy co-opts the language of “immaculacy” and sets it side by side with beauty. Shaping this visual moment, the narrative voice directs the reader’s gaze, interpreting vision so that, through the use of beauty, Tess is exalted and Hardy’s viewpoint is emphasized.

Even as Angel rejects her for her “want of firmness,” and implicates her old family’s “decrepit wills, decrepit conduct” (252), Hardy states his counter-assessment of Tess through her appearance. If it is “nature, in her fantastic trickery” that sets “such a seal of maidenhood upon Tess,” the reader knows that for Hardy, this biological subversion which renders Tess’s face “absolutely pure” is more trustworthy than Angel’s punishing intellect (257).³⁰ Yet again at

³⁰ Bruce Hugman insists, “Education and social influences are not seen to be evil, but unnecessary and unhelpful in the discovery of life. Hardy’s view of the urban, educated world is not a flattering one. He is a countryman who has little sympathy for the “advanced” ideas of town-dwellers [which] seem to be out of harmony with the natural world” (55).

Flintcomb-Ash, through her greatest trials, the harshness of the elements fail to lessen her beauty; Marian declares that “in fact, it rather does it good” (308). Hardy’s novel refuses to subject Tess to the disfiguring, physically degraded fate of Stephen Crane’s Maggie, another fallen woman of 1891, as a means of expressing his belief that tragedy is valuable as well as ennobling, in that it allows individuals to grow in compassion and altruistically-driven perception. As Casagrande describes, “Tess’s strange beauty, particularly her strange beauty of countenance, flourishes in the midst of otherwise ugly surroundings and events because Hardy refuses to subject her to moral judgment, refuses to hold her to conventional codes that would call her mad, sinful, impious, pathetic, unfortunate, or ignorant” (71).

To illustrate the importance of compassionate ways of seeing, and the harm that results from traditional Victorian principles, Hardy elicits the character of Tess herself, who lacks self-compassion at key moments in the text, which proves disastrous. Her fallibility and imperfection create a sense of shame, which in many ways proves to be her undoing. One of the novel’s tragedies is that Tess comes to view her loveliness as wicked, and she accepts as true “the wretched sentiment that in inhabiting the fleshly tabernacle with which Nature had endowed her she was somehow doing wrong” (329). Here, Tess adopts a view of herself that is conventional, and it is that viewpoint that Hardy takes to task. Critics have long identified her penchant for self-castigation as primary on her short list of flaws. Tess understands “the attention she excited by her appearance,” the uses of that power to ease her family’s daily life, and also its ability to win her the love she desires, but her decency acts as an anti-defense mechanism, rendering traditional formulations of morality imprudent. She might have shaken Angel loose from the “hard, logical deposit” that inhibits his response to the goodness of her beauty (*Tess* 260-261), but instead she reminds him that, “You once said that I was apt to win men against their better

judgment: and if I am constantly before your eyes I may cause you to change your plans in opposition to your reason and wish; and afterwards your repentance and my sorrow will be terrible” (*Tess* 264). In this, she understands the power of vision, but her own way of seeing has been marred by society, in large part because of Angel. This husband, who should have known her as she truly is, judges her as harshly as anyone else—condemns her and withholds forgiveness. Both reflecting and responding to his estimation of her, she links her physical beauty to her “sin,” so that it becomes almost an agent of transgression.

Tess anticipates that her beauty will exacerbate her blight, causing more repentance and sorrow. These are the bleak configurations Hardy argues will follow from common Victorian “ethical” morality. Marianne McLeod Gilchrist notes that “Tess is excessively susceptible to guilt—something which the Christian tradition has attached particularly to women, and even more firmly to female sexuality. Her acceptance and internalisation of Angel's condemnation is part of this cultural tradition of women being taught to carry men's guilt” (www.st-andrews.ac.uk). This is the social education that produces Angel and to which Tess is vulnerable. By establishing the character of Tess through positive associations with her beauty, Hardy provokes a contrary response in the reader to Angel's and to Tess's own estimation of her body. He will not repent! - the modern reader longs to assure Tess, whom Hardy crafts as unbearably oblivious to the not just exploitable but also redemptive power that her physical beauty affords those around her. Alec and Angel both benefit from the sight of her and wither at the loss of her. In near direct opposition to George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, the positive human value of Tess's beauty holds primary importance in the novel. If Hetty Sorrel offers a warning, and if through her, “Eliot insists on the radical intellectual, moral, and emotional deficiencies that beauty may hide” (Paxton 46), then Tess Durbyfield cautions the reader no less with its counter-

assertion. Eliot instructs that the beautiful may deceive, and Hardy replies that there are worse fates than deception, such as those engendered by patent cruelty and pointless renunciation.

But to embrace beauty is not to escape the force of Hardy's universe. In the cosmos of Wessex, the problem of flawed vision giving rise to flawed action or inaction persists, as in Tess's opening scene in Shaston at the May-Day dance, wherein Hardy frames Angel's slight of Tess as an "oversight"; he sees too late the maiden "so modest, so expressive,...so soft in her thin white gown" so that "he wished that he had asked her" to dance, "he wished that he had inquired her name" (*Tess* 24). One recalls an early title Hardy toyed with for his novel, *Too Late*, *Beloved* (and then *Too Late Beloved* sans comma) when considering that Angel consistently fails Tess until seeing cannot "lead to happy doing" (*Tess* 48). Human perception again is at fault when Tess first encounters Alec. Here too, Hardy places the emphasis on that which is seen and that which remains unobserved: "Had she perceived this meeting's import she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and coveted that day by the wrong man, and not by some other man, the right and desired one in all respects—as nearly as humanity can supply the right and desired" (*Tess* 48). To Alec, Tess is hyper-visible, but his is a vision largely devoid of compassion. So that he can even see that "attribute which amounted to a disadvantage just now; and it was this that caused Alec d'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her... luxuriance of aspect, fullness of growth" (*Tess* 48). Nature fails to say "See!" to Angel, for whom "she was but a transient impression, half forgotten" (*Tess* 48). Instead, she appears "more of a woman than she really was" in the presence of Alec's pleased, gleaming eyes (*Tess* 48-49).

Problems with seeing persist throughout. In the scene directly preceding "the greatest misfortune of her life," Alec's return, Tess leaves Emminster without reaching Angel's parents, and the reader is told that, "She did, indeed, take sufficient interest in herself to throw up her

veil...as if to let the world see that she could at least exhibit a face such as Mercy Chant could not show...‘It is nothing – it is nothing!’ she said. ‘Nobody loves it; nobody sees it. Who cares about the looks of a castaway like me!’ (320) In her grief, Tess rallies pride in her looks long enough to throw off her veil, but in doing so at this critical moment and not several moments before, when it can serve her well among her husband’s family members, opting instead to remain hidden, she leaves her face now visible to Alec, her seducer, securing the truth in her “conviction that a crisis in her life was approaching” (320). Tess’s move here is the result of a conventional morality that tells her to hide her shame, when that vulnerability ought to elicit compassion.

In order to evoke a change in the reader, Hardy crafts the character of Angel as a “type” as the writer was inclined to do (Hyman 33), “a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years” and a “slave to custom and conventionality” (*Tess* 284). Angel is Tess’s quintessential “man to love...the [half] of the perfect whole...a missing counterpart” who “wander[s] independently about the earth waiting in crass obtuseness till the late time” comes (*Tess* 49). He represents that part of the un-evolved mechanism of the universal machine, which in life appears less frequently but is more dangerous than even “the wrong man” (*Tess* 49). As Rosemarie Morgan observes, it is Tess’s “lawful husband” and not her sensual deceiver, “the seducer” who renders Tess “dumb, mute, and prone” (109). Unlike Alec, whom Hyman deems emotionally and intellectually “incapable” of full and imaginative vision (124), Angel can properly see Tess and through the awareness that proper vision allows, accept that “the defective can be more than the entire” (*Tess* 284), but he cannot advance ethically in the text until this clarity of sight engendering *insight* occurs. “Nature” fails to say “See!” to Angel “when seeing can lead to happy doing” (*Tess* 48); he will have to have a near-death experience in Brazil and meet a large-

minded stranger who tells him he is wrong in his treatment of Tess to change his deficient perception so that he moves from “critic” to “advocate” (*Tess* 361). In this fictional space that seeks to imbue the reader with a more altruistic sensibility, Hardy shows that people with vision driven not just by the senses, or by only the intellect, but by compassion can help society progress toward a more humane state of being.

This evolution is illustrated through Angel’s shift in the way he views Tess’s beautiful body, which Hardy has used throughout to dispute old notions of morality. Hyman situates his original distress as a problem with seeing when she notes that it is “the *appearance* of Tess” that causes “a strange kind of intellectual relapse in Angel...he *sees* Tess as a type, indeed almost an archetype” so that his mate’s features transform into that of a divinity (my emphasis 131). Both Hardy and Tess criticize Angel’s blurred vision through which she becomes “no longer the milkmaid, but the visionary essence of woman” (146). Problematically, his distortion works to blur away those attributes, those flaws in fact that distinguish the “simply feminine” from the divine. Hardy would note that the divine can offer little human consolation, and in “overlooking” - a visual act - “the defective” in Tess, he forgets that “the defective can be more than the entire”; it is his distortions in perception which contribute most to his and her misery (*Tess* 284).

As Tess confesses, verily forcing Angel to abandon his visual delirium, his fantasies become nightmares, which Hardy situates as another form of delusion. Hyman notes the “luridness” of the scene, wherein shadows enlarge and diamonds wink like toads. In Angel’s misperception, his distorted way of seeing, Angel is devoid of compassion: “His reaction is not one of sympathy but of horror...he sees her as the embodiment of the threatening female...he sees her as threatening and destructive” (Hyman 133). Angel stops seeing Tess as a goddess and starts seeing her as sin itself: he doesn’t see her as “real” (thus flawed and complex). He denies

her a complex interiority and he projects this deficiency onto her body, imagining her as a figure of the “grotesque,” both physically like and unlike “another woman in your shape” (*Tess* 248-9).

Angel meets her despair with his “vein of metal” (*Tess* 260-61), a practicality of which Hardy is highly critical. His denial of her complex interiority has significant implications. In viewing Tess as less than human, Angel can deny her appeal for forgiveness. Hardy is targeting not just any reader: his particular interest is in that judgmental, unforgiving “good” Christian middle-class reader who, like Mercy Chant, feels that she is doing right by stealing the boots of the sinner and thus punishing her for her misdeeds. This coldness hastens Angel’s departure from Tess, and Hardy cautions that abandonment will not be without consequence; “the boreal light of a remoter view” will facilitate “unforeseen accidents” that “hinder intentions” of future good will (265). Hardy directs that one’s vision must focus quickly through a more just, compassionate lens.

Angel views his misery as an instance of seeing but misattributes it, as he muses, “Had he not been cruelly blinded?” (*Tess* 286) The irony of Angel’s metaphorical blindness may be lost upon him, but Hardy directs the reader to a clear reading of Angel’s misperception: his affliction is rendered by society and himself, but not by the milkmaid whom he wrongly dismisses. The narration as a whole reveals that Angel’s resistance against Tess’s “exceptional physical nature” amounts to self-defeat (263); it is no brave accomplishment, but a self-indulgence, and one that spreads misfortune with an intensity that surpasses Alec’s rape of Tess, ultimately leading to Tess’s death. It is little wonder that when Angel is “no longer passion’s slave,” he finds “no advantage in his enfranchisement” (*Tess* 254). Taxed with processing the change in vision that Tess’s confession demands, Angel’s sub-conscious annihilates the beloved. Hardy shows that Angel’s obsessive idealization of Tess is a fool’s paradise at best.

Eventually Angel matures, and this manifests in large part because he comes to *view* Tess and her plight clearly and to feel subsequent compassion. Hardy narrates that “He now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality... Who was the moral man? ... Who was the moral woman? The beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses... How, then, about Tess? Viewing her in these lights, a regret for his hasty judgment began to oppress him” (*Tess* 360). Casagrande claims that “because Angel Clare cannot see beauty in Tess’s defects, cannot embrace the tragic, and because he sees only ugliness in her sexual impurity, he rejects her humanity” (*Unorthodox Beauty* 47). While this is true initially, by the end of the novel it is not so. Despite his awful reserve, Angel is overcome with stress, and becomes “ill with thinking, eaten out with thinking, withered by thinking: scourged out of all his former pulsating, flexuous domesticity” (*Tess* 262). He is maddened by the trick that vision has played upon him. In reality, Angel’s lack of compassion is responsible for the distortion of Tess’s beauty. Following the confession, Tess is rendered, one time only, ugly, because of his way of seeing: “He looked upon her as a species of imposter; a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent one. Terror was upon her white face as she saw it; her cheek was flaccid, and her mouth had almost the aspect of a round little hole. The horrible sense of his *view* of her so deadened her that she staggered” (249, my emphasis). In his new way of seeing Tess, she “make[s] his flesh creep,” and with a shudder of physical repulsion, he “smother[s] his affection for her” (*Tess* 249, 250). He does not reject her humanity, as Casagrande accuses. He rejects her new physicality. Angel indicts Tess for her perceived likeness to the oil paintings of the monstrous d’Urberville women, with their smirking “merciless treachery” and their hideous features (*Tess* 235), but this is a deformation of vision, a trauma-invoked illusion, as Tess’s prettiness comes from her mother.

Finally, one cannot consider the novel's final chapters and still question Angel's embrace of what Casagrande's calls the "beaugly." Tess runs to Angel, straight from killing Alec, and "Tenderness was absolutely dominant in Clare at last. He kissed her endlessly with his white lips, and held her hand, and said— 'I will not desert you! I will protect you by every means in my power, dearest love, whatever you may have done or not have done!'" (408). This is the only humane treatment left for Tess, and for Angel's evolution, he absolutely must love her at last. Not pity, but sympathy mingled with desire finally allows Angel to love Tess fully. With this resolution, Hardy embraces Darwinian principles which inspire a humane, melioristic virtue.

The philosophical voice of the novel, that reflects upon scenes and presents them as instances of living, speculates whether the "social machinery" that directs human experience will one day shift, so that "Nature" may finally say "'See!' to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing" (48). This voice muses -- "We may wonder whether at the acme and summit of the human progress these anachronisms will be corrected by a finer intuition, a closer interaction of the social machinery than that which now jolts us round and along" (49). As expressed in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, if this pinnacle of "finer intuition" was mounted and made visible, it would form a psychic space ambiguous and sublime, "neither black nor blue nor grey nor violet; rather all those shades together, and a hundred others...shade behind shade—tint beyond tint," like Tess, fantastically beautiful, and filled with meaning (103).

CHAPTER THREE: *TELENY*

In 1897, when British physician and psychologist Havelock Ellis gathered together the case files of twenty-one homosexuals in the *Study of the Psychology of Sex, Volume II, Sexual Inversion*,³¹ he did so because, as he states in his Preface to the First Edition, “the law and public opinion combine to place a heavy penal burden and a severe social stigma on the manifestations of an instinct which to those persons who possess it frequently appears natural and normal. It was clear, therefore, that the matter was in special need of elucidation and discussion” (Ellis). Ellis was responding to various scandals, parliamentary acts, and prosecutions, including the trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, whom he names in his text and textual notes twenty-five times.

In late Victorian England, medicine, science, criminal justice, and the visual and literary arts all worked to explore gender roles and the relationships between men and women as sexual subjects. Michel Foucault investigates the “exchange of discourses” surrounding sexual irregularity, as illustrated in the pages of “psychiatric investigation” and documented in courtroom transcripts. These illustrations sought to catalogue and to regulate individuals by taking “irregular modes of behavior” and situating them as spectacle (44, 45, 9). Victorian literature employed the spectacular body as well, and used it as a powerful mechanism for swaying public opinion. In *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, Lucy Hartley argues that during the nineteenth century, “Physiognomy was presented as a science of mind designed to reveal the moral order” (7). Constructions of physicality, and

³¹ This foundational text, co-authored with John Addington Symonds, importantly follows Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* and functions as a necessary precursor to Freudian theories of sexuality.

particularly of physical beauty, could also break down order. Lori Hope Lefkowitz discerns, “when we read narrative, we expect beauty of the body to correspond to beauty of the soul. We understand that physical description is a system of codification” (6). For the Victorian reader, inundated with lengthy descriptions, this codified schema revealed an especially *visual* representation of literary characters, and these carefully crafted figures were easily discerned by the senses.³² Victorian authors used the face and body as a presumed space of moral order and superimposed their agendas so that literary heroes became persuasive mechanisms for social critique and change.

Of the many aestheticized representations of conformity and moral transgression, depictions of the feminized body held a prime position in the popular imagination. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas investigates the plethora of “books of beauties” that “align[ed] the beauties’ bodies with purchasable works of art, functioning to turn women into “so many images seducing viewers” (113). Oscar Wilde himself served as editor of the popular *The Woman’s World* magazine for more than two years in the late 1880’s (Green). Stephanie Green argues that his presence jeopardized “the safe zone of de-sexualized femininity that the genre women’s magazine tends to construct” as he “provided a link between the marginal world of femininity and the subversive climate of decadence, blurring the boundaries that kept transgression contained” (110). Still, as Talairach-Vielmas makes clear, beautiful bodies “sensually displayed,” transgressed by the nature of their attractiveness, thereby inviting the “policing gaze of Victorian authorities” (115). The desired beautiful male body could function subversively as an even more transgressive object of longing.

³² For a full treatment of the role of the visual in the Victorian novel, refer to *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, edited by Christ and Jordan.

The effect of beauty exhibited in the male body, discerned through covert glances, occupies a central position in the testimony of R.S., subject of Havelock Ellis's "History IX."³³ As R.S. explains of his glimpses of beautiful men, "I have absolutely no words to tell you how powerfully such beauty affects me. Moral and intellectual worth is, I know, of greater value, but physical beauty I *see* more clearly, and it appears to me the most *vivid* (if not the most perfect) manifestation of the divine" (Ellis). For R.S. as for others among the histories Ellis catalogues, the beautiful body, that most lucid manifestation of the divine, signifies more than sexual possibility, though the biological role of attraction and desire should not be discounted.³⁴ In the case of R.S., glimpses of beauty, and beautiful male bodies in particular, serve a variety of purposes, from the concrete, to the reflexive, to the purely subversive. Practically, R.S. explains that these stolen glances and the fantasies they produce provide him with a reason to live, a moment of "bashfulness, anguish, and delight," to break up the "weary business" of existing in a largely repressive society whose attitudes regarding homosexuality, R.S. discerns, are "utterly unjust and founded on false principles" (Ellis). The male bodies R.S. glimpses, then, function like aestheticism's beautiful masculine heroes for whom, Kathy Psomiades relates, "the aesthetic realm they define holds up the idea of the beautiful as a form of resistance to the medico-legal view of same-sex desire as ugly or perverse" (181). During this cultural moment, when bodies were assumed to expose the pathologies of their owners, the predominance of beauty in formulations of same-sex desire served in part to dispute popular nineteenth-century formulations of homosexuality.

³³ Medical testimonials, like that of R.S., function as a product of the late nineteenth-century interest in beauty, affected by these copious volumes of text, and R.S.'s words become a part of this larger tome, as a literary consumable itself.

³⁴ In *The Origin of Species, Sexual Selection*, Darwin describes the natural world as a place where the genes of most "melodious and beautiful" survive and are passed on. As educated people involved in intellectual discourse, Ellis and Wilde would have understood that the natural drive towards the beautiful is no less strong in the human animal's unconscious, though his or her conscious intention might not involve procreation or procreative sex.

Appreciation for beauty was thought to cast light upon not only the subject but also the viewer, so that in the vernacular of the beautiful, aesthetic consideration by the onlooker -- including R.S.'s recognizing the body's loveliness -- elevates the viewer alongside the desired object. As Oscar Wilde claims in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, beauty is mimetic -- "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (4). In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde states that it is "the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvelous" (*Intentions*). Victorian theories of aesthetics would have privileged R.S. as observer. Still, the "male loveliness" R.S. glimpses prompts more than just arousal (Ellis). The physical and spiritual goodness expressed in the beautiful body and the sympathetic soul of the desired male dispute misguided configurations of normality, pushing moral questions to the outer boundaries to make more room for the pure, amoral, pleasures of seeing and desiring. These bodies worked to expose the deception and false decency inherent in Victorian public opinion.

The late nineteenth century marked a particularly delicate juncture for judgments against same-sex love, as "robust masculinity" and more broadly, "the system of patriarchy was under attack not only by women but also by an avant-garde of male artists, sexual radicals, and intellectuals, who challenged its class structures and roles, its system of inheritance and primogeniture, its compulsory heterosexuality and marriage, and its cultural authority" (Showalter 10). Due in large part to the aesthetes and decadents, Walter Pater, and the revival of Hellenism, Andrew Elfenbein explains that writing which defended male homosexuality became "increasingly possible by the end of the nineteenth century, though usually in coterie circulation" (293). Parliament fought back with legislation such as the 1861 Offenses Against the Person Act, which punished sodomy with the more palatable and therefore more enforceable sentence of ten years to life, as opposed to death. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 continued to

combine “buggery” with sexual crimes such as child rape and prostitution. Still, through their counter-discourse, *Fin de Siècle* artists, radicals, and intellectuals used physical beauty as subversion, insisting that the “legitimacy or naturality” of same-sex love “be acknowledged” (Foucault 101). The lexicon of beauty offered a rich opportunity to employ a “reverse discourse” whereby “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf...using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault 101). But to speak and to be heard were separate matters. Published works were heavily policed, placing hurdles before the distribution of progressive ideas; however, these barriers were not insurmountable.

Both criticism against *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and cross-examination during the Wilde trial illustrated and reaffirmed popular middle-class resistance to “immorality” in mainstream life and in literature.³⁵ A war of words between journalist Samuel Henry Jeyes and Oscar Wilde followed the release of Jeyes’s review of *Dorian Gray* for the *St. James Gazette*. Jeyes complained that “Mr. Wilde hints that the ‘rights of literature’ include a right to say what it pleases, how it pleases, and where it pleases. That is a right not only not recognized by the law of the land, but expressly denied by penalties which have been repeatedly enforced” (Elfenbein 252). Though Wilde outwitted Jeyes within his barrage of responses, the penalties Jeyes evoked were clearly understood by the author. It was in 1890, this same year of Wilde’s and Jeyes’s exchange, that Wilde reportedly walked into Charles Hirsch’s bookstore clutching a secret manuscript, instructing the shopkeeper how to covertly circulate the pages among Wilde’s friends. If this reported scenario is true, then with this novel, *Teleny*, Wilde indeed sidestepped “the law of the land,” distributing his ideas in the ungoverned realm of forbidden writing.

³⁵ Foucault asserts, and I agree, that much of this censure is wrapped up in “the perpetual spirals of power and pleasure,” and that the erotic pleasure implied in the spectacle of policing “perversity” was at least as important to the Victorians as the business of imposing morality (45).

Much has been written on the mythos surrounding *Teleny*'s origins, and there is more conjecture than fact confirming its authorship, but based upon what is known of Oscar Wilde's involvement and what can be ascertained from studying the text, it is fairly clear that Wilde acted as a major contributor and editor to the compiled work.³⁶ The core element of the prose, the particular quality at the heart of it, suggests that at least broad sections of the text can safely be attributed to Wilde, as nearly unmistakably representative of his writing. In theme, the longing, the intensity that exists most pronouncedly in the works of Wilde, suggests Wilde's involvement more firmly even than the places and characterizations, which have been carefully chronicled as evidence of Wilde's authorship by a host of literary scholars and critics since the novel's resurgence in the mid-twentieth century. Published by Leonard Smithers, whose name is associated with "high-toned erotica" and "some of the best writing of the time in beautifully produced editions," *Teleny* is no typical work of onanistic fiction (Leyland 17). Instead, it is a highly crafted piece of literature, distributed by a producer of art, for a group of discerning gentleman willing to accept the cost and the risk of purchasing a text like *Teleny*.

Though it is clear that *Teleny* is unacceptably explicit by Victorian as well as modern middle-class standards, critics are at odds regarding the novel's classification – is it male erotica or is it pornography? The question of *Teleny*'s classification is further complicated by the various definitions of both terms, erotica and pornography, as well as ambiguities within those definitions. As Caroline West reminds in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "the word 'pornography' originates from the Greek for writing about prostitutes." The pages of *Teleny* are filled with prostitutes, including the title character himself. West also proposes a more modern definition, one that is mirrored almost identically in most general usage dictionaries:

³⁶ Winston Leyland's 1984 edition attributes the novel solely to Wilde, John McRae's in 1986 attributes it to "Oscar Wilde and others," as does Amanda Caleb's 2010 version. The Wordsworth Classic version, from 1995, labels it only "Anonymous."

“Pornography is sexually explicit material (verbal or pictorial) that is primarily designed to produce sexual arousal in viewers.” Primary designations are notoriously hard to pin down, particularly in anonymous texts such as *Teleny*. One can speak of how *Teleny* functioned and how it continues to function, but not how it was *meant* to function. West then takes up the question of “badness”: “a third definition: pornography is sexually explicit material designed to produce sexual arousal in consumers that is bad in a certain way...It might be that all and only sexually explicit material is bad in a certain way (e.g., obscene): in which case, ‘pornography’ will refer to all and only the class of sexually explicit materials.” Surely, *Teleny* is sexually explicit. Some of the sex in *Teleny* is even “bad,” wherein penetration is associated with violence and death. These particular sex scenes are enmeshed in narrative that aims to sexually excite the reader, and it would be disingenuous to argue that they are only in the text to provide social commentary. West muses, “of course, it is possible that no sexually explicit material is bad in the relevant way (e.g., harmful to women), in which case we would have an error theory about pornography: there would be no pornography, so defined, merely harmless, sexually explicit ‘erotica.’” This suggests, again, that “erotica” is the absence of “badness”; if we deem that *Teleny* is indeed bad in the “relevant way,” since women are raped and driven to suicide, and men’s and women’s violent deaths are eroticized, then by definition, *Teleny* is pornography and not erotica.

Until one consults the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The *OED* defines pornography as “the explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings; printed or visual material containing this.” Again, one is faced with the problem of intention and, most problematic, an either/or definition. As Amanda Caleb notes, “At a cost of four guineas for the two volumes” or

about £340 or \$560 today, *Teleny* was “aimed at a target audience: collectors of homoerotic literature” (xxii).³⁷ Works solely of “aesthetic feeling” could be purchased at far more reasonable prices. And yet how wrong it would be to assume that sexual arousal lies at the heart of *Teleny*’s worth. The reader interested in *Teleny* could purchase the common obscene novel for a fraction of the price.³⁸ Etymologically, the *OED* seems to contradict itself as it points out that in 1896, in the early years of *Teleny*’s release, J. W. Mackail wrote in “Lat. Lit. 18” that “the *Casina* and the *Truculentus* [of Plautus] are studies in pornography which only the unflagging animal spirits of the poet can redeem from being disgusting.” This use of the word pornography implies the “disgusting” redeemed by a sense of the poetic, there again aligning *Teleny* with pornography in contemporary usage.

Examining late nineteenth-century as well as modern terminology surrounding *Teleny*’s genre, one finds a mixed taxonomical bag. Perhaps most tepid, in his 1986 introduction to the Gay Men’s Press edition, John McRae labeled *Teleny* “a fairly erotic anonymous novel” (7). This reading of the text as only *fairly* erotic serves McRae’s contention that at the heart of *Teleny* lies a novel about coming out, a novel that “anticipates the coming freedom” (McRae16) and so he downplays the sexual content, despite the edition’s Andy Warhol-like cover art, featuring pastels of Oscar Wilde in blocks beside naked male posteriors. With a more pronounced nod toward eroticism, Leonard Smithers, the original publisher of *Teleny*, offers a slightly racier, if somewhat salesman-like, explanation of the narrative when he describes it as “the most powerful

³⁷ John McRae’s introduction denotes the cost as even higher, at “five guineas” (8).

³⁸ In *The Other Victorians*, Steven Marcus notes that the pornographer William Dugdale often sold his volumes for “two guineas a throw,” or at least half of what *Teleny* cost. Bawdy songsters sold for “6d,” or six pence, and Dugdale sold his “gaudiest volumes for as much as he could wheedle,” implying that at times, his volumes sold for far less (74). John Camden Hotten sold *Aphrodisiacs and Anti-Aphrodisiacs* for two pounds, ten shillings (72). One can imagine that the lesser known pornographer operating more covertly and among the lower classes would have charged even less for their books. Still, *Teleny* was by no means the most expensive volume one could purchase. *My Secret Life*, by “Walter,” attributed to Henry Spencer Ashbee, is said to have sold for “sums ranging from £60 to £75 ‘according to the condition’” though Marcus considers this figure as an inflated product of the hyperbole surrounding the marketing of pornography (79).

and cleverly written erotic Romance which has appeared in the English language during recent years” (Caleb xxi). More analytically sound and in keeping with her smart and thoughtful analysis of the text, Amanda Caleb, in her 2010 introduction for Valancourt Books, deems *Teleny* “a complex work...a compelling story that goes beyond erotica, although the erotic is always present” (vii). In *Governing Pleasures*, Lisa Sigel labels *Teleny* as an explicitly “pornographic novel,” though clearly her agenda is to situate the book among a broader study of Victorian pornography (115). Mark Mitchell’s and David Leavitt’s *Pages Passed from Hand to Hand* considers *Teleny* “a high watermark of Victorian pornography,” and in this case, the characterization seems intentional and devoid of an agenda. Their collection gathers “homosexual literature,” much of which falls short of being even “fairly erotic.” *Teleny* does not need to be pornographic to fit, and yet it *is* pornography: Mitchell and Leavitt compare the text with, and then judge it “enormously superior” to, Jack Saul’s *Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, or *the Recollections of a Mary-Ann* and Audrey Beardsley’s *Under the Hill* (240-41).

This work of classifying *Teleny* is germane to my argument, which at its core insists that the beautiful in the novel is used as an instrument to dispute the pathology of same-sex desire. The “aesthetic feeling” at the heart of the text, that the *OED* claims is anti-pornographic in nature, does not minimize the orgiastic sex or temper the “badness” of *Teleny*, all of which is crucial to a full consideration of the novel. *Teleny* resists and surpasses the labels of both erotica and pornography. The ecstasy, the drama, and the despair at the heart of the text demand a new and more inclusive category, because unlike with erotica and pornography, neither the sex act nor the aesthetic of the scene is privileged over the other. Both are part of the necessary whole in equal measure. *Teleny* works against this exclusive binary of either sexual stimulation or aesthetic pleasure, uniting the aesthetic with the sexual. In this text, both exist side by side,

making the novel difficult to class, rendering it not only anomalous but also subversive, in an age devoted to taxonomies and categories. Then, *Teleny* uses this subversion as a means of *inversion* to reclaim “sexual inversion” as natural, healthy, productive, life-giving, creative, and even beautiful.

In considering how to label and discuss *Teleny*, its musical construction seems essential. The novel’s hero is a concert pianist who, “in beauty, as well as in character, is the very personification of this entrancing music” (*Teleny* 9). Teleny’s lover explains that “to understand” Teleny, “you must begin by feeling the latent spell which pervades every song”:

Those strains usually begin with a soft and low andante, something like the plaintive wail of forlorn hope, then the ever changing rhythm – increasing in swiftness – becomes ‘wild as the accents of lovers’ farewell’, and without losing any of its sweetness but always acquiring new vigour and solemnity, the prestissimo – syncopated by sighs – reaches a paroxysm of mysterious passion, now melting in a mournful dirge, then bursting out into the brazen blast of a fiery and warlike anthem (9).

Teleny is rhapsodic, an “emotional, exuberant composition.” Given that the novel’s concerns are represented through music, I would argue that *Teleny* is a sexual rhapsody, a term that places it artistically higher than pornography and more primal than erotica. It is a graphically sexual, deeply subversive novel supplying unexpurgated arguments in favor of the naturalness of sex between men. Its genre, regardless of classification, when juxtaposed with the policed vernacular of acceptable discourse, offers a uniquely unregulated space. This forbidden realm of deviant erotic literature which *Teleny* inhabits epitomizes in non-veiled terms the struggles, the pleasures, and ultimately the beauty hidden among the shadows occupied by same-sex lovers.

Early editions of the text, from Smithers's in 1893 to Hirsch's French translation in 1934, omit or create content, veering away from the original manuscript in important ways; an "envoi" is featured or excluded, a title description is offered or withheld ("A Physiological Romance of Today"), a subtitle is drafted or removed (the Reverse of the Medal), and volume lengths and chapter breaks vary.³⁹ These alterations manipulate the pace and the tone of the text, an important consideration in a text that makes such heavy use of music, but the most egregious insertion is the prologue by Hirsch, which he claimed was a restoration of the original manuscript. John McRae, in his *Gay Men's Press* introduction, deems its inclusion "rather unnecessary...this Prologue adds nothing to the book, and seems indeed to contradict the opening paragraph of the novel itself" (12). Along with the other "gaps and interpolations" in the Hirsch edition, the prologue diminishes the text (McRae 12).⁴⁰ I argue that it alters the health and strength of the characters in antithetical ways, and garbles the otherwise positive celebration of homosexual love. With this in mind, my analysis is based upon Smithers's 1893 edition, which begins with two men discussing a third.

The novel's first line presents a directive from the listener, the unnamed interlocutor, to "Tell me your story from the very beginning...and how you got to be acquainted with him" (7).⁴¹

³⁹ This original manuscript is now missing, so the actual content is speculative.

⁴⁰ The prologue is presumably narrated by the unnamed interlocutor, who has found Des Grieux in Nice, suffering and dying from "a profound ailment" and "an incurable melancholy," following Teleny's death. This narrator promises to give voice to Teleny and Des Grieux's "flights of passion," described as "caprices" in contempt of "those principles and conventions generally accepted by society" (Leyland 22). The language of "stooped... pallid... emaciated... tubercular" illness is antithetical to all other images of Des Grieux in the text, or which there are admittedly few, but when not made sick by women, he seems to enjoy perfect health. Of some small value, though, is the prologue's description of Des Grieux's eyes, "beautiful blue eyes – ringed in black." The reader longs for these glimpses of Des Grieux, because in the novel proper, we are only told of his likeness to Teleny, and his general desirability, but almost nothing of his features.

⁴¹ This questioner serves as a pseudo-society to whom Des Grieux can explain the intricate, provocative, valuable love he shares with Teleny. Throughout the story, this unnamed interlocutor chimes in. Besides his service to the plot, this inquisitive voice questions Des Grieux, allowing him to defend his love without filling the novel with maudlin didactic moments. For instance, after Teleny and Des Grieux's first sexual experience together, the listener asks "Still I had thought that on the morrow –the intoxication passed–you would have shuddered at the thought of having a man for a lover?" to which Des Grieux can reply "Why? Had I committed a crime against nature

This query recalls Ellis and his clinical attentiveness to History IX. Also, it evokes a courtroom scene in its interrogative nature. The opening query also harkens back to the first chapter of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* when Lord Henry presses Basil Hallward to discuss his feelings for the golden man in the painting.⁴² Additionally, the question calls to mind bedroom talk between lovers, one who wants to know more about the other, the second who, in telling, is able to represent himself as the object of a great romance, and in the process, to narrate a sexually tantalizing tale. Finally, the directive to "tell me your story" and the sensually rich response that follows establishes an atmosphere of intimacy within which the reader can sit beside Camille Des Grieux, beside the unnamed interlocutor, and beside the ghost of Teleny, "as close to me as I am now to you, his shoulder leaning on my shoulder, exactly as yours is" (108). Narrator, listener, and reader can rest with "fingers locked...just like this" and become swept away in "that pleasure which cools the blood and calms the brain" (108).

This relationship between speaker, listener, and reader is imbued with power in the construction of beauty, through the "structure of desire" the narration creates (Lefkowitz 19). Because "that which is beautiful is loved and that which is loved appears beautiful" (19), Des Grieux, who is desired by both Teleny and the listener, is perceived by the reader as beautiful, though descriptions of his physical body are mostly withheld. Cleverly, in this construction, Lefkowitz discerns that, "because the hero or heroine also embodies desired virtues, beauty is further reinforced as the ultimate symptom of virtue. The body becomes a repository for those

when my own nature found peace and happiness thereby?" (100). These types of moments occur throughout, which is why I consider the listener a stand-in for society, to whom Des Grieux can persuade.

⁴² This type of dialogue, then, would have been recognizable to the reader in a variety of contexts, including medical, legal, and literary, all of which appealed to the Victorian imagination. This reflects back to Foucault's point about homosexuality employing a "reverse discourse" whereby "homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf...using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified" (Foucault 101). As well, I mean to connect *Teleny* as engaging in the same concerns as Ellis regarding the prosecution of homosexuals. Finally, by associating the dialogue with *Dorian Gray*, I am aiming to offer more evidence for Wilde's editorship if not authorship of the text.

values which characters and readers want to possess” (19-20). Teleny and Des Grieux are written as “beautiful” and “loveable,” traits with which the reader would like to identify, subverting the alienation from homosexuality encouraged by medical discourse denouncing “inversion” as pathological. Through its glut of sensory cues, *Teleny* offers its own means of classification, wherein specific behaviors are noted as beautiful and others as ugly. Pamela Gilbert maintains that for the Victorians, novel reading was presented not only as eating (hence, the “‘sugary romances’ and ‘highly spiced’ fictions”) but also “as sexual intercourse...the text is a substance that enters the reader and has an effect on him or her. The text is not an inert thing to be merely manipulated, it is active - even opportunistic” (18). *Teleny* entreats the reader to taste the text, to hear, feel, smell, and touch it, and to experience its truths, not as a poisoning, but as a remedy to the formulation of same-sex love as decadent or ugly.

Teleny’s narrative unfolds as a retrospective with Camille Des Grieux describing his first glimpse of René Teleny, the exciting young pianist with whom all the fashionable men and women in the story fall madly in love. Teleny responds to their appeals--for money, for pleasure, to honor his desire, or to ensure his foreshadowed “horrible, horrible fate”--but the pianist offers “the very quintessence of love” only to Des Grieux, who acts as a reluctant and then an eager recipient of Teleny’s “enamored soul” (84, 87). The story follows Des Grieux’s resistance to and then his acceptance of this love, in a sexual foray through the realm of explosive repression, fulfillment, and then loss. That the sex is uncensored offers a more primal hammer-blow affirming the force of beauty in the novel’s “whirlwind” of “rapturous joy” (84). Increasingly shameless, guiltless, and remorseless, Des Grieux is able by the end of the novel, like Ellis’s R.S., History IX, to iterate for the unnamed interrogator how wrong society and its dictates really are.

In *Queering the Gothic*, Diane Mason insists upon *Teleny*'s brutal, obsessive, pathological nature. In seeking to "medicalize" the text, her analysis dwells upon the "curative" rather than the "celebratory," deeming the narrative "a discourse whose implications limit rather than liberate the individuals and practices described" (73). Mason calls Des Grieux's tale "torrid," an analysis she offers not in the spirit of "morality" but in order to dwell upon its gothic qualities, while sacrificing analysis of much that the novel insists upon. The "occult terminology" she points to in support of her claim of morbidity is the language of Victorian love, and not exclusive to vampire fiction, as she would discern. Feeling "unwell," "haunted," or "bewitched" in a Victorian text about love is common from the Brontës, to Dickens and Eliot, straight up through to Hardy, even in the positive relationships their novels are seen to forward (74). As final proof of the unsuccessfulness of Des Grieux's and Teleny's love, Mason points to the fact that "their relationship ends in tears" with Teleny dead (83). Amanda Caleb notes, though, that "Des Grieux survives...and finds himself another man to love (in the form of the auditor), and even promises to tell us more sexually charged stories" (xix). Further, Caleb intuits that "We do not have to read the medical influence here as sexual pathology or even a condemnation of same-sex love, as there are other sexual acts that are also failures in the text" (xix). John McRae also refutes the designation of pathology: "That the novel ends in tragedy is not a peculiarity of gay writing of the time" (19). McRae notes that this penchant for tragedy "reflects a complex question of transgression and guilt tied up with the acknowledgement of sensuality, which reaches a tortured climax in English writing in the 1890s...Pleasure and pain, sensuality and suffering, are almost inevitably linked in a society where the Protestant middle-class capitalist ethic is the norm" (19). Mason's analysis misses the point. In setting out to be subversive, *Teleny* aligns itself with normative discourse (the very discourses it seeks to subvert)

as well as counterbalancing one discourse (medicine) with another (music) to destabilize and decenter it. The text uses counterpoint strategically. *Teleny* participates in the macabre and the sorrowful in order to situate homosexual desire as recognizable, to critique this common ethos, and to work towards re-inscribing a healthier “ending” for both mainstream and subversive fiction.

In order to perform this re-inscription, *Teleny* offers visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and auditory proofs in support of the positive possibilities inherent in same-sex love. As well, the sixth sense of psychic intuition cements the impression of the characters’ oneness, illustrating the magical quality of their love, not as a bewitchment or a brush with devilry, as Mason suggests, but instead as evidence of the physically transcendent, spiritual nature of their attachment. In the pages that follow, I will explore how descriptions of visual perceptions, in the form of the beautiful and the ugly, work to frame the relationship between Teleny and Des Grieux, while differentiating it from and rendering it superior to the forced heterosexual alternative for men with homosexual desires. In the novel, familiar Victorian constructions of beauty qualify, normalize, and redefine same-sex love, in order to offer new configurations of morality. The two main characters’ togetherness is characterized by cleanliness and goodness; it engenders transformation and self-knowledge; it is marked by natural beauty, and it offers an entryway toward a glimpse of the sublime.

As John Berger proposes, “It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world” (7). In *Teleny*, the moment of Des Grieux’s first introduction to the pianist occurs as a searching of eyes, and when their eyes do meet, the intense connection of their gaze, laden with a sense of inevitability, establishes their particular way of seeing for the reader. It is not lewd or pathological, but full of healthy desire. Initially, the text presents Teleny as a figure of the

sublime, wherein Des Grieux's mind is consumed entirely with the thought of him, and he can entertain no other idea than that of the pianist. Des Grieux is struck with awe and a deep sense of the terrible within their love, as he sees it, though there is delight in contemplating his beloved. Even in absence and denial, Des Grieux expresses that "I should rightfully have given up my soul to perdition...if in the meanwhile I could have fled somewhere in the confines of this earth, to some lonely island, where in perfect nakedness I could have lived for some years in deadly sin with him, feasting upon his fascinating beauty" (46).⁴³ There is a lack of clarity to this vision, a sense of deep mystery, and yet the physical loveliness of Teleny is insisted upon.⁴⁴ He is "God-like," a modern "Antinoüs," marked by all of the beauty and inspiring all of the desire of the Roman Emperor Hadrian's favorite.⁴⁵

As Des Grieux comes closer and allows himself to encounter the desired unknown, descriptions in the text shift from the sublime to the beautiful.⁴⁶ Diane Mason reads Teleny's beauty, in the novel often described as sad and tragic, as a physical manifestation of his psychological darkness. I posit instead that Teleny's beauty situates him as both a spectator gazing upon the sublimity of a tremendous love, as well as an instance of the sublime himself. The novel's engagement with the vernacular of Burke, of Rousseau, and of Ruskin refuses a designation of lowliness or inferiority, as these theorists employ the rhetoric of the ruling class.⁴⁷

⁴³ Teleny's beauty is described as "fascinating" throughout. Interestingly, Lakoff and Scherr point out the word *fascination* is derived from the Latin *fascinum*, a charm or amulet...often in the shape of a phallus" (202).

⁴⁴ These aspects of the sublime and the beautiful are catalogued in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*.

⁴⁵ Wilde's "The Young King" and *Dorian Gray* both mention Antinoüs. For a thorough study of Antinoüs, I recommend <http://aediculaantinoi.wordpress.com/academia-antinoi/>

⁴⁶ Lakoff and Scherr might suggest that Teleny moves from the sublime to the beautiful and then back to the sublime with the unveiling of his phallus: "The phallus strikes terror the way that an awesome natural phenomenon would – it is more than beautiful. It is sublime. It is incredibly close to achieving godhead on its own. It is glorious, it is almighty" (217).

⁴⁷ In my dissertation's Introduction and Chapter One, I will have foregrounded how theories of the sublime reflect the highest desires of the Victorians, so that in crafting characters as instances of the recognizable sublime, the reader is inundated with positive associations of the highest form of nature and man's place in the shadow of it. Through this association, subversion is then not debauched, not decadent, but desirable, despite the factor of the unknown. The use of the sublime will be a common thread running throughout the three chapters.

Like classical descriptions of homosexuality often do, *Teleny* elevates same-sex love above heterosexual, demarcating it as specifically stronger and more profound, as it insists that “the quintessence of bliss can only be enjoyed by beings of the same sex” (96).

Teleny is filled with glancing, staring, eyes searching, eyes following, obstacles to seeing and then divine sight. All of these means and “ways of seeing” model for the reader an approach to move from seeing aberrance to perfect health. Just before their first sexual encounter, Teleny twice “falls out of sight” (77, 81). Des Grieux pursues Teleny down the Quay, where he encounters the stereotypical “sodomite” that Des Grieux cannot and yet must identify with as the only conventional depiction of a homosexual, because as Berger notes, “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relationship between things and ourselves” (9). Des Grieux describes the “sickening faces of effete, womanish men” and he claims that it leaves him “sick at heart, disappointed...musing whether I was any better than all these worshippers of Priapus who were inured to vice,” and so he marches to the river to drown his desire permanently (81). Teleny pulls Des Grieux to safety. Des Grieux tries to resist Teleny, and he explains that “with an effort of my whole being I pushed him away from me, and staggered back,” but then he *looks*. “I looked at him and shuddered. So young, so beautiful,” and he decides “let us live...I am yours” (85). The act of seeing, the sight of beauty, and the redemptive pleasure it brings helps to redefine acceptable morality.

The image of the homosexuals on the quay works symbolically to “embody a way of seeing” (Berger 8). Through the framework of Teleny’s beauty, Des Grieux can transcend the limited ideas implanted by society and replace his old beliefs with the awareness that “all that was excellent in us, the essential part of our beings” can reach fruition and shape sensation and experience, “ethereal [and] intoxicating” if one follows one’s natural desires. Des Grieux iterates

for his listener that “Nature, hushed and silent, seemed to hold her breath to *look* upon us...I was subdued, prostrated, shattered” (84, my emphasis). Nature is inscribed with the power of vision, a sensory force that reveals worth through beauty in the story. Seeing transcends reason, as when Des Grieux narrates that in his moments of resistance, when he thinks of his love as “a criminal infatuation,” at times he “even persuaded” himself not to love Teleny, until “he had but to look at me, and I felt it gush back stronger than ever, filling my heart and bereaving me of my reason” (59). Here, it is the act of being looked at that is so transformative, because Des Grieux receives Teleny’s glances as exemplary of “the Patmorean ideal” that Ellis’s History IX desires. Teleny and Des Grieux’s visual mimesis, set down as a series of images of beauty, underscore a new way of seeing, “affected by what we know or what we believe,” in this case submitting to the natural pleasure of same-sex love (Berger 8).

Not only the act of seeing but also what is seen cues the reader in to the decency of the same-sex love at the center of the novel. This is juxtaposed with Des Grieux’s assumptions about the repercussions of his desires, explaining his initial resistance – “I had been inculcated with all kinds of wrong ideas, so when I understood what my natural feelings for Teleny were, I was staggered, horrified...I read in a modern medical book, how the penis of a sodomite becomes thin and pointed like a dog’s, and how the human mouth gets distorted when used for vile purposes, and I shuddered with horror and disgust” (44-45). In the context of this climate of physiognomical judgment, the sight of perfection where one could expect disfigurement disputes the sentiments of “this narrow-minded society of ours, that only thrives upon hypocrisy...this beautiful world of ours – this paradise that man has turned into a hell” (83). *Teleny* uses the perfect body as a space conceived of as morally goodness and applies its own concepts of right and wrong so that Teleny and Des Grieux become instrumental in redefining healthy desire.

These two men are neither the monsters of medical discourse nor the despots of the quay, and the visually discernable aspects of the characters contribute to this sense of positively consecrated love.

Teleny is constructed as “a heavenly figure,” surrounded by silvers and whites (43). This whiteness is applied, layer upon layer, for emphasis. Des Grieux tells the listener that Teleny’s hair was powdered and his skin was “of a pearly, almost iridescent whiteness” (93). At his buttonhole, “he wore a bunch of white heliotrope, although camellias and gardenias were then in fashion” (8-9).⁴⁸ The hallucinatory images Teleny shares with Des Grieux are filled with “silvery light” reflective of “the opaline moon” (16). Teleny’s room is an Eden in white. The reader along with Des Grieux initially encounters this room on the night of Teleny’s and Des Grieux’s first sexual encounter. The walls of the sacred space are sheltered with “warm, white, soft, quilted stuff, studded all over with frosted silver buttons,” all of which is illuminated by “the dazzling whiteness” that surrounds them in their first embraces (89-90). Nineteenth-century painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky discerns that “white acts upon our souls like absolute silence...this silence is not something lifeless but replete with life-potential...it is a nothingness filled with childish happiness or, in better terms, a nothingness before birth, and before the beginning of all things.” The transformative nature of Teleny and Des Grieux’s love is announced through the generous and even exaggerated usage of white imagery. In the *Dictionary of Symbols*, Henri Pfeiffer explores the link between whiteness and initiation, and he claims that white fashions “the robe of manhood” and symbolizes “acceptance of responsibility...the assumption and recognition of powers, and a fulfillment of a rebirth and of dedication” (1108). Indeed, it is at this juncture in the text, following the love scene, that Des Grieux withholds

⁴⁸ The sight, as well as the smell of white heliotrope, is present throughout the text. Besides the associations of white and purity, in Victorian flower lore, heliotrope denotes devotion and everlasting love.

aggression and judgment. He approaches life as a changed man, and this shift is typified through the use of white imagery, wherein white becomes “the colour of revelation, of grace and of the transfiguration which dazzles” (*Symbols* 1108). The dazzling whiteness of the heroes’ love scene supports the meaning and the aesthetic in the text.

From the ethereal and the symbolic, to his concrete representation in the novel, Teleny defies easy identification as a “type,” with which the nineteenth-century was obsessed. He is neither the muscled sailor on the docks, nor the womanish effete, a woman trapped in a man’s body, dressed in exaggerated feminine attire.⁴⁹ He is strong and soft, “a model of voluptuous comeliness...with his strong and muscular shoulders, his broad and swelling chest...his thighs, his legs in their exquisite grace, were perfect models” (137). Teleny’s androgynous construction taps into positive associations prefigured by the Romantic poems. As Kathy Psomiades posits, “the figure of androgyny draws on an aesthetic ideal present as far back as romanticism...the presence of masculine and feminine characteristics in one body thus gives that body all the psychological depth and emotional sensitivity associated with femininity, and yet all the force of a denial of the central difference bourgeois culture sees between men and women” (7). Teleny’s beauty renders him a recognizably heroic figure and imbues him (and by extension, his “type”) with a particular worth. Though Teleny veers from the model of robust masculinity embodied in the nineteenth-century concept of muscular Christianity, his hands are “perfect for a man, strong yet soft, and with long, tapering fingers...magnetic, thrilling hands” (13). Then, as presented in a work of unexpurgated sexual rhapsody, these hands, which soar across the piano keys and create hypnotic melodies, are allowed to perform, re-contextualize, and ultimately normalize forbidden sexual practices. Teleny’s sexual grasp is “soft as a child’s, as expert as a whore’s, as

⁴⁹ Certainly these categories of homosexuals existed, but this story neither aims to defend them nor to indict them but rather to insist that the prevalent homosexual stereotype offers an incomplete representation of the possibilities within same-sex love.

strong as a fencer's" (87). Through ambiguous constructions of beautiful male bodies, *Teleny* insists that the late-Victorian anxiety surrounding androgyny is misguided, challenging "the nineteenth-century...belief in the separate spheres of femininity and masculinity that amounted almost to religious faith," echoing while complicating Havelock Ellis's claim that "we may not know what sex is...but we do know that it is often mutable, and that there are many stages between a complete male and a complete female" (*Sexual Anarchy* 8, 9). *Teleny* calls into question the idea of gender completeness through its presentation of the androgynous, intact, beautiful body.⁵⁰

Teleny emphasizes beauty further yet by contrasting the elegantly moving body of Teleny to the hideous bodies of woman in the text, with whom "love" runs the gamut from the ridiculous to the horrible. Riding on a train, Des Grieux stumbles in the lavatory upon a female stranger who quickly becomes "a girl I believed myself to love" (29). He narrates that "I saw my English damsel, not sitting, but perched upon the seat" (29). Days later, he finds her "squatting on the ground, her legs widely opened apart," and horrified, he describes the fluid flowing out of her body (31). The sight of her urinating leaves him "speechless, dumbfounded" (31). Des Grieux is both like and unlike Jonathan Swift's disgusted Strephon discovering that "Celia, Celia, Celia shits!" Strephon stalks out, steals into, and catalogues Celia's filthy chamber, while Des Grieux has no real curiosity about this girl whom he forces himself to follow "and sometimes even tried to think of...at odd moments, when I had nothing to do" (27). Christopher Wellings notes that "Marguerite ... [is] not an individual, but [an archetype] of the female, defined solely in relation to male perceptions of [her] sexualit[y], or lack thereof" (52). For Des Grieux, she signifies not a

⁵⁰ In "Oscar Wilde's 'The Woman's World,'" Stephanie Green makes the point that through his editorship of a popular Victorian fashion magazine, "Wilde was interested in the de-naturalizing of categories of gender" (105).

woman, but women as a whole; his disdain is a product of his “struggle against the inclinations” of his nature (27), which in *Teleny* takes the form of physical ugliness.

A trip to the brothel with his college friends forces upon Des Grieux a closer visual inspection of women’s bodies; the sojourn from first to last is hideous, again underscoring the prevalence of beautiful images and sensations in the scenes with Teleny and Des Grieux. After an “endless drive through the narrow, straggling streets, alleys, and by-ways,” past “filthy windows” and “beetling-brown houses,” the drunken friends arrive at a “yellowish-red” house, which “its many excoriations gave it the appearance of having some loathsome, scabby, skin disease” with “illness festering within its walls” (36). Seven pages of ghastly details follow, describing the fetid nature of these unnatural bodies. The cantinière, a grey-haired “ghoul-like creature” who greets them at the door, has a face that is “bloated yet bloodless” with “sore and lashless eyes,” “toothless gums,” and “hanging lips...like the sucker of some polypus” (36). The men enter to find a den of monsters “crouched or lolled about” (38).

Importantly, Des Grieux veers from the scene to reflect that “This is then...one of those delightful houses of pleasure, of which I have heard so many glowing tales? These painted up Jezebels, cadaverous or bloated, are the Paphian maids, the splendid votaresses of Venus, whose magic charms make the senses thrill with delight, the houris on whose breasts you swoon away and are ravished into paradise” (37). He addresses his sarcasm to “you,” the society that would indict his sexual experiences with Teleny while sanctioning his engagement with prostitutes. As Foucault discerns, the brothel could expect tolerance by the “hypocrisy” of the bourgeois society: “Words and gestures, quietly authorized, could be exchanged there at the going rate. Only in those places would untrammelled sex have a right to (safely insularized) forms of reality... everywhere else, modern puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence”

(4-5). De Griex is sickened by what he sees and feels, and left empty by what he does not. He describes three witches, “one...in the very last stages of consumption...a mere skeleton,” the second “red-haired, gaunt, pock-marked, goggle-eyed and repulsive,” and the third “old, short, squat, and obese; quite a bladder of fat” (37). Like Swift in his scatological poems, the women are “stained” and “slimy” as if “all the snails of Burgundy had been crawling over them” (38). The fat one’s genitals terrify him: “I saw the black mass of hair part itself; two huge dark lips first appeared, then opened, and within those bulgy lips – which inside had the colour and the look of stale butcher’s meat – I saw something like the tip of a dog’s penis when in a state of erection, protruding itself towards my lips” (38). This woman, then, who offers up her body for heterosexual pleasure, bears the blight of the pointed “penis” that Des Griex had read was the fate of sodomites, while Teleny’s penis, he eventually finds, is “thick and rounded,” only “slightly tapering” (91).

Adding layers of excreta upon the soiled scene, “many of the young men who were already tipsy when they came here...began now to feel squeamish, to be quite sick, to hiccough, and finally to throw up.” Amongst the vomit and the tears of women’s pleasure, “the poor cadaverous” consumptive whore “in a fit of lubricity” breaks a blood vessel and dies, “bathing the body of the tough old prostitute” in blood, while the “ghoul-like woman...continued to writhe,” unwilling to forego her orgasm (42).

In the following chapter, the reader is thrust back to the sight of Teleny on stage, where through magnifying concert glasses, Des Griex’s eyes are “riveted upon him; my eyes gloated upon his heavenly figure, so full of youth, life and manhood” (43). The sight of Teleny’s “beautiful mouth” and “those eyes...if you had seen those eyes” embolden Des Griex, and ennoble him. Among women, prostitutes and otherwise, he is full of scorn and judgment, either

impotent or furious. With *Teleny*, he is joyful, imbued with “longing,” “sensation,” “a pleasant numbness,” “a dull pain”; he feels alive. He is granted power over himself; he becomes a more peaceful, deeper, more thoughtful citizen. *Teleny*’s radiant beauty “with his moist half-opened mouth, oriental in its voluptuous, with his blood-red lips that no illness had withered like those of the painted mush-scented courtesans who sell a few moments of carrion bliss for gold, nor discoloured like those of pale, wasp-waisted, anemic virgins whose monthly menses have left in their veins nothing but a colourless fluid instead of ruby blood,” inspires all that is best in Camille (135). The positive gaze between the men in *Teleny* is made more striking in relation to the ill and ugly female bodies, and the characters’ dark, depressed way of seeing them.

With the description of the brothel and the women who inhabit it, *Teleny* offers its rendition of what John McRae identifies as “something of a classic in late nineteenth century erotica” (19). To insert “the whorehouse scene” is common practice enough, though in this novel, the “odd mixture of titillation and disgust” seems particularly pronounced (19). One is tempted to perceive the abject in *Teleny*’s representation of women, as developed in the theories of Luce Irigaray. In this proposed context, “the womb is...phantasized as a devouring mouth, as a sewer in which anal and urethral waste is poured, as a threat to the phallus,” a literary illustration of the fact that “the only words we have for women’s sexuality are filthy, mutilating words” (16). In *Teleny*, though, the psychological tension between desire and disgust is missing. Des Grieux is less “haunted” by the “fear of castration” that women’s bodies threaten, and more psychically withdrawn from those bodies as sexual objects by *his* nature, not by theirs (Irigaray 17).

In this way, *Teleny* works not only to normalize this nature that sexually desires men and not women, but also to remove the female body from the discourse of ethics by placing it into

that of aesthetics. Within this counter-realm, women are drawn as ugly in *Teleny*, not to insist upon the danger of women or to violate or demean them; Des Grieux's gaze instead announces his own way of seeing, returning to Berger's assertion that "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relationship between things and ourselves" (9). Irigaray notes that women are fashioned in a violent, degrading way "for the construction of an exclusively male symbolic world" (17). In *Teleny*, the formulation of women's physical selves instead suggests an attempt to re-conceptualize the sexual possibilities between male lovers, rather than to assert masculine power in order to subjugate female bodies for masculine use.⁵¹ Indeed, Des Grieux would prefer to protect women from his sexual body, and laments society's dictates that contradict his attempted morality.⁵²

Still, the novel does not let the reader forget that Teleny and Des Grieux can and do perform sexually with women; the novel's first and last coital moments involve women. Wellings uses Teleny's and Des Grieux's heterosexual interludes as proof of the misogyny against women that the text can be read to forward. I suggest that the text's treatment of women is far less straightforward than that. The two heroes' ability to participate in socially sanctioned heterosexual acts adds credibility in the language of the existing masculine-dominated structure; it situates them as more difficult to dismiss as unhealthy, impotent, or without sexual options because, as Gilbert claims, in Victorian fiction, "Health is aligned with morality, disease and dirt

⁵¹ Discussing what she calls "physical empathy" in the novel, Robin Chamberlain suggests that empathy in *Teleny* is "a lateral relationship, rather than a vertical one that is about the power one has over the object of one's empathy. In *Teleny*, empathy's physicality produces subjects, rather than power relations. These subjects... can share truly intersubjective experiences, in which subjects are merged, but on equal terms, rather than in the absorption of the one by the other." This reading suggests that the love between Teleny and Des Grieux models a much healthier way of approaching sexual relations between individuals, wherein love is imagined as "horizontal, between equals," regardless of dominant or submissive roles employed during the sex act (Chamberlain).

⁵² He is forced by the society of his college friends to venture to the brothel at all, and then just before he rapes his mother's housemaid, leading to her suicide, he muses: "Which was the greater evil of the two... seducing a poor girl to ruin her... or that of yielding to the passion which was shattering my body and my mind? Our honourable society winks at the first peccadillo, and shudders with horror at the second" (61-62).

with evil” (53). More telling than these men’s shabby treatment of women is that they are least healthy and most monstrous when they aim to treat women “naturally,” as sexual beings. They are most desirable, most “manly” in the noblest Victorian sense of the word when they are unengaged with female bodies.

Further, if one accepts Wilde’s hand as a guiding force in the novel, then one knows that when women are the subject of Wildean prose, as in *Salome* or *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the author is capable of treating them humanely and attributing to them a great deal of complexity. When homosocial relationships dominate the text, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, women can become caricatures - they can be over-written (Sybil), they can be made ridiculous (Lady Wotten), and they can easily fade from the page when they fail to serve the plot. That women’s bodies in *Teleny* convulse with syphilis and consumption, that they look like they’re about to collapse from illness and then they do, that they sound like the shrill rattle of death, that they smell as if they’re rotting from the inside out, that they feel slippery and scabbed, that they taste like mussels and boiled potatoes serves to denaturalize sex with them as well as to contrast them with the healthy bodies of Teleny and Des Grieux, not as a means to denigrate the women in the text, but by concentrating the aesthetic pleasure in the text in the two beautiful male bodies, and underscoring their goodness via contrast with beauty’s opposite.

Visual imagery is used to disfavor more than heterosexual relationships; casual sexual relationships between men are also treated with disdain, first in Des Grieux’s walk down the quay, and then more fully in his experiences with upper-class homosexual pleasure-seekers in the text. Briancourt, the novel’s prime representation of male lust, boasts a home not unlike the brothel, only more opulently outfitted. As in *Dorian Gray*, the scene echoes Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *À rebours*. Also like *Dorian Gray*, the scene is “overheated” (115), overwrought

with nature, out of place and out of season, creating an unnatural, claustrophobic glut of stimuli. This type of beauty, like female beauty, is not without pleasure but of very little worth, and its evocation in the text further juxtaposes desirable aesthetics, those that uplift and bring one closer to sublimity, and those that feed only the senses.

As in the female brothel, the men lounging about are “lascivious,” “sickening,” and “expressing the most maddening paroxysm of debauchery” (115). Everything is vast in scale, and the immensity is described as a dangerous combination of desirable and deadly. Des Grieux describes “one phallus, especially...of such a size that every whore was frightened at it, and it was said that once, abroad, a woman had been ripped up by it, for he had thrust his tremendous instrument up into her womb, and slit the partition between the front and the back hole, so that the poor wretch had died” (117). Like the “bulgy lips” of the old cantinière, the brutal phallus that “every whore was frightened of” is a deadly enjoyment at best. Finally, among a crowd of chanting men, a “Spahi,” with “eyes on fire” breaks a bottle in his anus and, like the consumptive prostitute who precedes him in the novel, he dies in a confusion of blood and ejaculation (116).

This scene offers a near complete inversion of Teleny’s and Des Grieux’s first love scene, wherein the act of pleasure saves Des Grieux’s life, rendering “the world that had hitherto seemed...so bleak, so cold, so desolate...now a perfect paradise” (100). In *Teleny*, some sex endangers life while another form of sex gives life, though again it is the inverse of what one might imagine if one considers only heterosexual sex to be generative. Wellings explains that “The novel’s rejection of the Spahi’s view of sex between men becomes the reason for his death...When he dies, so does the dangerous sexuality he represents...the death of the Spahi represents a disavowal of older cultural forms of homosexuality, and of the unchecked pursuit of sexual pleasure” (153). Caleb further contends that, “Death and orgasm go hand-in-hand here,

but only when that orgasm is achieved through flesh alone, and not through love. In contrast to these death scenes, Teleny and Des Grieux's intimate moments are not criminal, are not deadly, but bring Des Grieux to great heights, revealing to him and the reader 'love – the only thing worth living for'" (xix). The listener assumes that the spectacles Briancourt offers must have provided a "rapturous sight," but Des Grieux explains that "it seemed to me as if I were in some rank jungle, where everything that is beautiful brings about instant death; where gorgeous, venomous snakes cluster together and look like bunches of variegated flowers, where sweet blossoms are ever dropping wells of fiery poison" (115). Through specific formulations of beauty that reject the gaudy caricatures of parody,⁵³ *Teleny* maligns the experience of recreational sex, thereby aligning itself with traditional Victorian sentiment.⁵⁴

Teleny employs the dominant discourse in order to overthrow convention with its own army of language and typology, and in doing so, it allows for an alternate construction, a counter-dialogue that Foucault would call "the truth of sex"...wherein "truth is drawn from pleasure itself...pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden...but in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul" (57). This allowance would not be afforded if *Teleny* did not draw this line and engage in this demarcation

⁵³ Wilde would have been familiar with this caricature, as his likeness was often exploited in just this way in the magazine *Punch* in the early 1880's straight through to his trial in 1895, when caricatures employed physical innuendo to insinuate his guilt.

⁵⁴ The monogamous sexual relationship in *Teleny* upsets modern critics who reject the favoring of traditional, two-person relationships and the punishing of freer sexuality, which *Teleny* can be read to condemn. Wellings insists that homosexuality in *Teleny* "ends up looking rather like heterosexuality. The monogamous, romantic union of Camille and Teleny is privileged as the only acceptable context for sex between men. These are not politically-sound lines along which to defend proscribed sexuality. Inevitably, responding to a dominant and oppressive framework by mimicking it, only reinforces its power" (oscholars.com). I disagree with this reading of the novel. If Teleny and Des Grieux participate in a recognizably traditional relationship, they do so instrumentally, and to align their union with something perceived to be exalted above frivolity, in dispute of those who would indict the "warped" and "morbid" stereotypical Victorian homosexual, to challenge a society that warned its citizens against "strange pleasure [that] would eventually result in nothing short of death: that of individuals, generations, the species itself" (Foucault 54). Instead, Teleny insists upon the life-affirming quality of Teleny and Des Grieux through formulations of their beauty, which align with Darwinian assertions regarding beauty and survival.

of “morality,” situating a certain kind of sex between men as comparable, as similar to heterosexual love, within the accepted, already-established guidelines. As a work of sexual rhapsody, great joy in acts that defy the “dominant and oppressive framework” of the mainstream is explicitly laid out to the last erotic detail (Wellings). *Teleny* need not endorse polyamorous sex beyond the sanctions it provides. In seeking to capitalize upon the norm, it harnesses the power of familiar tropes in order to broaden and include same-sex fulfillment as an instance of health and moral fortitude. That dominant moral conventions are questionable is asserted in every one of *Teleny*’s pages.⁵⁵ These assertions manipulate standard ideas, images, and associations--inverting and reassigning them--to celebrate something that is socially unsanctioned, so it would make sense that monogamy, the social norm, would be appropriated as well.

What, then, is the meaning of the abundance of sensation in *Teleny*? I assert that much of this sensation, engaging with the recognizable form of Victorian beauty, is crafted in order to participate in social critique. The refrain of *Teleny* is “Show me the wrong we committed” (130). Through various displays of beauty and its opposite, *Teleny* rejects and re-inscribes ideas of right and “wrong,” to insist upon the naturalness of same-sex love. As Linda Dowling discerns, the perceived “revolt of the New Woman and the decadent against what was ‘natural,’ their ‘warped’ and ‘morbid’ intellects, their extreme self-consciousness, seemed to their late-Victorian critics to isolate them in a chilly realm of sterility, asceticism, or cerebral lechery, cut off from the springs of instinctive reproductive life” (446). Also with procreation in mind, Krafft-Ebing contends that the compulsion in support of “propagation of the human race” drives the

⁵⁵ Though *Teleny* is not written for a mainstream, middle-class readership, it is directed at the broader society via its social critiques, utilizing the unnamed listener in the text as representative of the culture to whom Des Grieux seeks to persuade. As well, though *Teleny*’s readers are open and sympathetic to the novel’s sexuality, they too are part of the larger society and its problems, participating in the exclusion of homosexuals in various ways.

individual toward “higher, nobler feelings...which not withstanding their sensual origin, expand into a world of beauty, sublimity, and morality” (1). Krafft-Ebing asserts that “Sexuality is the most powerful factor in individual and social existence; the strongest incentive to the exertion of strength and acquisition of property, to the foundation of a home, and to the awakening of altruistic feelings, first for a person of the opposite sex, then for the offspring, and, in a wider sense, for all humanity” (1). This insistence that the function of sexuality, for the individual and for society, ennobles the lover and provokes and sustains instances of the sublime dramatically mirrors the central argument of *Teleny*. The absence of Krafft-Ebing’s “opposite sex” and “offspring” as participants and products of Teleny’s and Des Grieux’s sexual relationship intensify the transformative power of sex, in part because of the risks the characters’ face in performing sexuality and the socially accepted family relationships that they forego. The novel insists that the spiritual core of their love contributes immensely to their personal well-being and that their happiness is of interest to all of society, both by the output it inspires as exemplified by Teleny’s music, which he performs for the masses and can only perform well when psychically bonding with Des Grieux, and the psychological and sexual frustration that their love diffuses.

That beauty is used in this way by a man of Oscar Wilde’s sensibilities comes as no surprise. In *The Critic as Artist*, he claimed that “To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive.” Through aesthetic consideration, “we attain to that perfection of which the saints have dreamed, the perfection of those to whom sin is impossible.” Beauty, Wilde insists, is transformative, making “richer...finer...newer “that which would be “commonplace, ignoble, or vile” among the unenlightened (*Intentions*).

As *Teleny* exemplifies beauty in a similar turn as Ellis’s R.S., “History IX,” who iterates the power of the physically beautiful, which he can see more clearly as the most vivid, if not the

most perfect manifestation of the divine, Robert Browning's Pompilia in *The Ring and the Book*, explores, instead, that "*most* perfect manifestation," the physically beautiful enwrapped in bodiless-ness.

CHAPTER FOUR: *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

“The surface of the beautiful body is a playground for multiple shifting significances,” wherein “beautiful characters, heroes and heroines, are left open to the possibility of endless rereadings” (9), Lori Hope Lefkowitz maintains. Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* offers nine such rereadings of Pompilia Comparini’s undisputedly beautiful body, forming the twelve books of the text; missing, however, is the body’s representation, with its assumed revelation of female personhood. Whereas Thomas Hardy and Oscar Wilde engage directly with the body and employ the trope of beauty to challenge and dispute a variety of Victorian social norms,⁵⁶ Browning withholds descriptions of the feminine form toward a similar purpose. The poet removes the body from the reader’s direct view, so that attention shifts to the perspective, the representation, and the meaning of the absent body.

Dissimilar from the breadth of Victorian literature, details of Pompilia’s loveliness are all but absent and made inaccessible for public consumption.⁵⁷ Tying this absence into the concerns of the poem, I will argue that Browning acts against the norm by refusing to catalogue and exhibit Pompilia’s physical body through description. He removes her body from discourse in order to shield her from the fixating eye of the contemporary reader as spectator, from the crowd of onlookers in the text, and from the malevolent gaze of her husband Guido Franceschini. Browning frames this dearth of visual access to the body as a fault in “seeing.” The Rome of the poem is rich in spectacle, and at the same time flourishes in a communal blindness. This inability

⁵⁶ Notably among these norms is the mandate to adhere to prescribed behaviors that support the “phallogocentric cultural order” (Schor).

⁵⁷ From Charlotte Brontë to Alfred Lord Tennyson to the Rossettis, and forward to Wilde and Hardy, the pale, doomed lady appears so often that, in her multiple manifestations, she has become a cliché.

to see functions to instruct or malign the would-be seer, and to veil Pompilia from contemptibly deficient eyes. Conversely, Browning renders her visible to Guiseppe Capponsacchi and to Pope Innocent XII; for both of these men her “perfect beauty of the body and soul” proves a source of earthly exaltation and begets a spiritual transformation (10.1181).⁵⁸ From their eyes, as well as from her own, an alternate way of seeing is communicated to the reader, for whom a similar transformative experience takes place.

The Old Yellow Book, Browning’s source for *The Ring and the Book* began as a serendipitous moment of seeing. Scouting a Florentine flea market in June of 1860, from amidst a dazzling menagerie of odds and ends, the poet found a “manuscript: / A book in shape... / ...one glance at the lettered back of which, / And “Stall! Cried I: a *lira* made it mine” (1.85-86, 82-83). Gathered in the binding, Browning discovered “A Roman murder case” wherein an aristocrat killed his wife and her parents, and who in turn was put to death for the crime (1.121). Within the documents, the writer uncovered an assortment of voices offering their rendition of the facts. From the “alloy” of flea market ephemera, Browning “bit by bit...dug / The lingot truth” from “the untempered gold” to “let this old woe step on the stage again! / ...for men to judge” (1.458-59, 365, 824-25).

Gordon Thompson characterizes the poem as “a study of perception, of the many different ways people view the same events” (669). Books I and XII contain the voice of the speaker-poet. These monologues frame the testimonials and link the trial’s seventeenth-century content to Browning’s nineteenth-century milieu. The rest of the books are “representative of standard societal attitudes” (Johnson 123). Book II and Book III represent popular opinion, “Half-Rome” and “The Other Half-Rome.” The first Rome heroicizes Guido, while the latter

⁵⁸ This is a convention Browning returns to, as E.D.H Johnson notes : “The characters in his poems whom we are asked to admire are all exceptionally clear-sighted in their confrontation of actuality” (94).

Rome exalts Pompilia; neither voice sees nor understands the heroine, though both sensationalize her plight. At first perusal, Book IV forwards the more complicated assertions of “Tertium Quid,” but in seeking to remain dispassionate, this next male speaker’s pontifications continue to misread Pompilia. Books V and XI express the murdering husband’s perspective, first as “Count Guido Franceschini” and finally as “Guido,” stripped of pretention. Book VI, “Giuseppe Caponsacchi,” startles the reader with its unambiguous truth, accessible through the passionate vision of the one who loves Pompilia best. In Book VII, “Pompilia tells the story of her life” (I, 1086), defending herself alongside and against the male voices in the text. Books VIII and IX provide a necessary relief from the dramatic tension, as the poet employs the farcical, thoughtless voices of “Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis” and “Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius,” both of whom are again closely aligned with “conventional views of the affair” (Johnson 123). Finally in Book X, the reader attends to the Pope, who sees and believes the goodness of Pompilia. By the end of Browning’s 21,134 lines, we learn, like the Pope, to savor “the last pinpoint of light / ...to bid vapor vanish, darkness flee away” (7.587-88).

It is hardly a mystery why the papers of *The Old Yellow Book* would have attracted Browning’s vast and often dark imagination so that he engaged in a four-year labor with what Thomas Carlyle described as “an Old Bailey story, that might have been told in ten lines and only wants forgetting!” (Wilson 789). This is the quintessential Browning theme and he treats it with his typical power, “hiding away precious and glittering things in obscure and mysterious corners” (Buchanan 777). In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning hides away beauty to rally against tyranny directed at women, which is as Ann Brady notes, one of the poet’s “major repugnances” (5). In documenting Franceschini’s trial, Browning’s primary source discloses the question at stake: “Wherein it is disputed if, and when / Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet

‘scape / The customary forfeit” (1.130-31). That Count Guido Franceschini, the 51 years-old brute, mortally stabbed his seventeen-year-old wife was not in question; it was whether or not he should face punishment for the crime.

Browning’s disgust for men who bully women is well-documented by scholars of Browning’s personal correspondences, as well as readers of his dramatic monologues. Critics often evoke Browning’s January 1846 letter to Elizabeth Barrett, in which he recalls a dinner party he attended. The husband in the home humiliated his wife as a public display of mastery; then he boasted of his skill; then he had her serve his guests evening tea as she wiped tears away. Browning was sickened. He ended the friendship and vowed to his beloved that he would never act in this spirit much less in this fashion; Browning would never seek to dominate her or any woman. How *The Old Yellow Book’s* account of Guido’s murderous swagger must have struck the poet. In rejection of this kind of man, the voices in the source material, when they become the monologues of *The Ring and the Book*, allow Browning to “speak out with greater originality and boldness than would ever have been possible in his own person” (Johnson 92).

Surely there were many gentlemen in Browning’s circle and among Victorian writers more broadly similarly disposed to abhor violence against women, but as Talon insists, “In Browning’s fictional universe man is saved or damned by his attitude to women. And thus Browning reached his characters’ truth in the light of his own” (364). Driven by the reality that oppression against women was not left behind in sixteenth-century Europe, but persisted in England in the mid-nineteenth-century, in *The Ring and the Book*, Browning “reveals” in “every monologue...how completely aware he is of the sexual cynicism emanating from the core of a patriarchal society” (Brady 126). Victorian diminution of women was observable in the legal realities subverting women’s rights within marriage and supported by a culture obsessed with

female criminality and physiologically-rooted hysteria.⁵⁹ In choosing to write about the Roman murder trial of Count Guido Franceschini, Browning not only indulged his interest in “morbid cases of the soul” (Curle 143). He returned with a vengeance to the themes that occupy 1836’s “Porphyria’s Lover” and 1842’s “My Last Duchess.” Though throughout the poet’s corpus, Browning refuses to “recognize any basis for social inequality between men and women” (Johnson 100), *The Ring and the Book* marks Browning’s most mature, prolific treatment of the matter. What Browning refused to illustrate, at a time when so many others were, was the figure of the woman in pain. He insisted on evoking her, of making meaning of her, but he stopped short of describing her; he refrained from exhibiting her as a fetish object, but considered her plight instead as a serious matter for reflection.

Browning’s elevation of Pompilia defies the conventions of the genre within which the poem operates. Mary Ellis Gibson persuasively argues that *The Ring and the Book* can and must be read “in the literary context of the sensation novel” (“Criminal Body” 74). Conceived of in 1860, begun in 1864, and published in four volumes in 1868 and 1869 – the poem rests squarely within the genre of such fictional creations as 1861’s *East Lynne*, 1862’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, 1866’s *Armada*, and 1868’s *The Moonstone*. One finds in *The Ring and the Book* remarkable parallels with the popular reading of the 1860’s. Philip Allingham catalogues the conventions of sensation fiction as featuring “a beautiful woman...adept at disguise and deception,” engagement in adulterous activities, and the presence of an illegitimate child in the shadows. Allingham evokes Reginald Terry’s insistence upon a pervasive “detailism” in sensation fiction, wherein “the plots of such novels often utilized ‘the apparatus of ruined heiresses, impossible wills, damning letters, skeletons in cupboards, [and] misappropriated legacies’” (74). Finally,

⁵⁹ It was not until the Married Women's Property Acts in 1870 and 1882 that women could inherit and then control her property separately from a male, and laws of primogeniture remained in England until the second decade of the twentieth century.

Allingham considers P.D. Edwards's contribution of "yet further 'ingredients' to the Sensation formula" a work 'narrated with ostentatious care for factual accuracy and fulness of circumstantial detail'" (703). The voices forming *The Ring and the Book*'s twelve sections engage with all of these orthodoxies of the genre, in seeking to attribute recognizable behaviors to the female heroine of the poem.⁶⁰ One could argue that Browning's rebellion against the expected rests in the "rigorous detailism" and the attention to detail that Browning dutifully employs, but ever the while the poet carefully circumvents the body of Pompilia. While the reader can see *The Ring and the Book* as linked to sensation fiction, it reclaims female beauty—which operates in sensation fiction in the service of deception—for the discernment of a higher spiritual truth.

Citing the epic length of the poem, its choice of subject matter, and the ways in which "its meanings are intertwined with Victorian language and social practices related to the criminal body," Gibson deems *The Ring and the Book* "yet more excessive than even the sensation novel" (74). But despite the poem's excesses, one is left to speculate upon the feminine features typically hovered over in such texts. Missing are the nervous hands, the slim wrists, the supple arms, the cascade of hair, the curve of the neck – those elements composing a woman, revealing and eroticizing her. Set alongside some of the most carefully described heroines in literature, Pompilia's body, like her speech, is composed instead as a series of ellipses. The unexpected nonappearance of description offers its own commentary, no less than the poem's punctuation denoting absence.⁶¹ Applying Naomi Schor's theories of the ways detail functions to Browning's

⁶⁰ This is not to suggest that writers of sensation fiction, or their readers, read in an uncomplicated, woman-hating manner. As literary critics discussing the genre frequently insist, writers such as Braddon operated subversively, no less than Browning, to question and critique the institution of marriage and the precarious condition of women in Victorian England.

⁶¹ Much has been written about the poems ellipses and dashes. Ann Brady notes that Browning's style moves "from the cryptic, to the diffuse, to the opaque, to the unsaid," and that with these punctuations, especially the ellipses, Pompilia begs "her listeners to infer significance from her very reticence" (46-47).

poem, it becomes clear that if the poet wishes to establish his heroine's beauty as a matter of importance, and if he wants to avoid her degradation, then he must withhold the detail, because it "blocks the dynamic rush of the Imagination, fatigues the eye, and in the end induced anxiety rather than the elevating pleasure of the sublime" (19). Whereas Hardy employs description to elicit sympathy, and as Wilde uses details of the beautiful body to suppress the judgmental "rush of imagination," Browning's purpose is at variance. Preceding the other texts by three decades, Browning's poem rejects the convention of description within the midst of detail's use as a "deformity" to fetishize and demean the feminine body (Schor 16).

In this poem, then, wherein Pompilia's body is perpetually present, and yet she is simultaneously bodiless, the perception that the poet "allots more than 4,000 lines to the language of torture" is particularly poignant when considering why he withholds description (Gibson 87). Description functions as an act of penetration. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas notes that in 1860's sensation fiction, fairy tales, and fantasies, "the emphasis is upon moulding, shaping, or framing the female body" (8). Instead, Browning offers Pompilia this modicum of impenetrability. If the pen functions as a metaphorical penis, Browning disallows the visual enactment which would invade Pompilia.⁶² It is crucial to the poem that Pompilia's beauty affects the reader, and it is equally important that this loveliness lies beyond access.

Critically, Pompilia's beauty is Browning's own design. In writing *The Ring and the Book*, the poet adhered with extraordinary care to the details of his source material, but according to *The Old Yellow Book* Pompilia was "an ordinary girl...with sufficient good looks to attract, and insufficient character to resist temptation" (624). It is Browning who establishes her as a "Beauty whose tale is the town-talk" (2.1134), and who advocates for a more generous assessment of her personal behavior. Talon notes that Browning selected and organized the

⁶² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

details of the historical truth “in order to set off the beautiful...he worked his way from the invisible to the visible” (362). But as a figure made visible, Pompilia’s form is still predominantly in the shadows. Responding to *The Ring and the Book*, a contributor to the *Spectator* noted in December of 1868, Browning “paints with a wonderful swiftness and brilliance, but...with a singular contempt for sweetness and finish of style...for beauty of form he seems to us to have, as usual, almost a contempt” (“Unsigned” 775).⁶³ The form of the poem, like the female form of Pompilia, is contrived to fit the themes with which Browning engages. These artistic formations work together and in complementary ways. The style of the poem and the absence of the stylized body lend clues to understanding Browning’s truths. Of Browning’s various means of articulation, Daniel Karlin discerns: “Physiognomy and gesture provide the artist with an iconographic repertoire, a dictionary of ‘Truth made visible to Man’” (*Hatreds* 13). *The Ring and the Book*’s truths are expansive and complicated, resisting Terry’s “detailism” applied to Pompilia or the novel at large.

The examination of truth is the single most common trend in the critical treatment of *The Ring and the Book*. I would argue that this interest among scholars is justified. For Browning, this truth inhabits a visual space, which description can inhabit or leave vacant. The tension between truth and falsity interweaves through each monologue. Violante lies about Pompilia’s birth; both “Half-Rome” and “The Other Half-Rome” misrepresent Pompilia’s nature; Guido’s brother falsely represents the family estate; Guido falsifies his case entirely; both lawyers construct defenses that ignore the crime; the abbot and the deacon and the cardinal feign

⁶³ Criticism of Browning’s form incensed G.K. Chesterton, who wrote “The general sentiment expressed in the statement that [Browning] did not care about form is simply the most ridiculous criticism that could be conceived. It would be far nearer the truth to say that he cared more for form than any other English poet who ever lived. He was always weaving and modelling and inventing new forms. Among all his two hundred to three hundred poems it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that there are half as many different metres as there are different poems.” Certainly, the form of *The Ring and the Book* supports Chesterton’s contention.

ignorance and simulate compassion; the murderers fake innocence; the townspeople pretend knowledge – the entire poem illustrates the way individuals construct and intellectualize circumstance as it exists within and outside of truth. The poem can be read as a series of intersections between beauty and truth, with the meaning that inhabits these junctures aimed directly at the reader.

That Browning is aware of the reader and even writing *to* him and her is apparent immediately. Mary Rose Sullivan notes of Book I, told in Browning's own voice, that "the listeners are physically present in the company of the speaker. Far from being merely rhetorical, his numerous questions and directions are sharply pointed at some actual presence" (4). It is also clear throughout *The Ring and the Book*, and in the discourse surrounding it, that Browning is concerned with the readers' practical use of the poem. When Julia Wedgwood complained to the poet, "There is, what seems to me, an absolute superfluidity of detail in the hideous portraits" (Curle 139), Browning replied, "I was struck with the enormous wickedness and weakness of the main composition of the piece, and with the incidental evolution of good thereby, - good to the priest, to the poor girl, to the old Pope, who judges anon, and, I would fain to hope, to who reads and applies my reasoning to his own experience, which is not likely to fail him" (Curle 144-5). Sullivan argues that Browning's primary role in Book I is "as craftsman, 'resuscitator'" (13). I suggest instead that while he discusses craft and the resurrecting role of the poet, he does so in order to lend credence to his credentials as one who is suitably engaged to act as instructor. The writer has read the case, mulled over both its facts and its implication, and even become one with the text, he discloses. Now he is ready to deliver its messages directly to the reader. I agree with Sullivan that "The real hero of *The Ring and the Book* is the poet" (18). Browning's heroism manifests in the Carlylian sense of the word; as Bryce Covert explains, for Thomas Carlyle the

hero is “in the position of light-bearer, of a figure which can spread spirituality, truth, and wisdom to the rest of mankind.”

The poet’s morbid details direct the readers’ response to the narrative’s prevalent immorality, steering their reaction away from the pleasure that displays of beauty would afford and toward the disgust upon which Browning insists. Schor notes that “Novels are not only about speaking and writing (*encoding*), but also about reading, and by reading I mean the *decoding* of all manner of signs and signals” (Schor 121). The reader of *The Ring and the Book* is the recipient of an abundance of such signifiers.⁶⁴ The poet employs animal imagery such as wolves, lambs, owls, snakes, and all manner of flying and crawling things. He uses colors as symbols, most notably yellow, black, white, and red. Ellipses and dashes throughout signal absence, memory loss, and the recollection of the unspeakable. Even the title, the ring and the book themselves, are conjectured to symbolize any number of people, places, and objects. Browning’s use of feminine beauty too cues the Victorian reader to relate to the body in particular ways. As Talairach-Vielmas surmises, “In the fairy tales and fantasies of the period, the tropes of female beauty metamorphose into a variety of images advertising the female body. Feminine representation... transforms feminine identity into a literary exhibit” (Talairach-Vielmas 6). For Browning, this exhibition must be circumvented if he is to elicit from the reader a higher, less consumptive response to Pompilia.

⁶⁴ Browning’s use of symbols is both straightforward and complex. Unlike the conventions of sensation fiction and of the Newgate novel, wherein symbols are often contorted to create a divide between perception and reality, Browning’s symbols are often more forthright. However, the complication arises within the multitude of perspectives he asks the reader to carefully consider. For instance, swine, snakes, foxes, and sheep may be used to describe a host of characters interchangeably. This allows the reader to muse over how a single figure or an action can be read so differently by so many. As Suzanne Bailey discerns, “the poem is not... simply about Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and Guido, but about the differing ways in which people interpret reality, the reasons why their interpretations disagree, and how we – with the poet’s help – can penetrate to the fundamental truth beneath their confusion and find a meaning ‘beyond the facts’” (xi).

Simultaneously, the reader, as Paul Zietlow insists, “must bear witness” to the poem’s “spiritual truths” (195). These authorial dictums are established through the use of specific symbols that repel or attract, respectively. In Books I and XII, the speaker-poet attempts to craft a new readerly eye through careful explanation of his own process. “Do you see this Ring?” the poem begins, as the poet explains in what manner it is fashioned (1.1). Next, “Do you see this square yellow book?...Examine it yourself!” he demands (I, 33, 38), and then “Give it me back! The thing’s restorative / I’ the touch and sight” (I, 89-90). In these lines, readers encounter more than Browning’s famous dramatic tension. Browning establishes a tone of guidance to remedy the deficiencies inherent in “our blind age” (1.42). “Let eye give notice as if soul were there,” he beseeches (1.997). The poet ends in Book XII addressing his contemporary reader: “So, British Public,... / learn one lesson hence / ...That Art remains the one way possible / Of speaking truth... / So may you paint your picture, twice show truth, / Beyond mere imagery on the wall / Suffice the eye and save the soul beside / And save the soul!” (7.835-67). Browning offers the reader a play on the idea of “vision”: sight but also divine insight: in this case, moving the reader away from a desire for the former and towards an experience of the latter. *The Ring and the Book* in particular lends itself to decoding and interpretation because of its interest in seeing, wherein interpretive reading becomes a form of vision. Though this massive poem cannot be reduced to one meaning, its myriad images, the ones it displays and the ones it withholds are of “functional importance” to the reader and of functional use, as well (Iser 6).

Adherence to the truth of “wickedness and weakness” and a desired “evolution of good” are at the core of Browning’s aesthetic choices throughout the poem (Curle 144). Pompilia resides in “a world fallen, unredeemed, presided over by evil” wherein “Pompilia’s murder is a dramatic outburst of the evil that prevails in the daily life of the society portrayed” (Zeitlow 194,

196). In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning paints a picture in this humanity's likeness, and then he sets the scene into action. Illustrating for the reader the perils of faulty seeing are the clusters of spectators populating the text. They mock, blame, sentimentalize, and judge Pompilia, but thanks to Browning, they never really *see* her. Richard Altick observes their animalistic quality: "We join the sensation seekers at the church of San Lorenzo, where they climb pillars and crowd into the organ loft, fighting for a glimpse of the slaughtered Comparini couple," the dead being Pompilia's mother and father (6).

Browning engages with the crowd of onlookers as if they were one body or mass, and problematizes their voyeuristic desire to "see"; Browning coarsens them to a vulgar heap of eyes. The mass of lookers consume the spectacle of corpses in the poem. "Half-Rome" welcomes a new spectator to town, and invites him to join the gathering crowd to observe the circus of sights in Rome this day: "What, you Sir, come too? / This way, while fresh folk go and get their gaze" (2.3). Half-Rome unsympathetically counts stab wounds and mocks cuts. The voice revels in the scene "whereto this church has served as theatre / ...in short it was a show" (51, 98). One reluctant observer stands "Mute in the midst / Staring amain and crossing brow and breast" (119-20). He has seen "bodies set forth" in such a manner before, but never quite like this:

"A many have I seen,
yet all was poor to this I live and see.

Here the world's wickedness seals up the sum...

I have seen my see."

"Depart then"... "nor block the road

For youngsters still behindhand with such sights!"...

"I know it's horrid, hideous past belief,

Burdensome far beyond what eye can bear;
but they do promise, when Pompilia dies,
I' the course of the day,- and she can't outlive night,-
They'll bring her body also to expose
Beside the parents, one, two, three a-breast;
That were indeed a sight, which might I see,
I trust I shall not last to see the like!" (123-139)

This repetition of seeing and sight functions to underscore the actions' importance in the context of murdered bodies on display. That the body of Pompilia is anticipated and that this crude desire is never sated in the poem reveals the poet's aversion to placing Pompilia among this crowd.

The poem's unambiguous villain, as well, is barred from seeing Pompilia. Guido, the slain woman's husband, revels in noble masculine privilege and invokes it as a defense, which indeed it is. To deflect punishment, the prisoner reminds his wardens that he is "representative of a great line / One of the first of the old families" (5.140-141). His nobility lends his voice authority, as his status is always consistent with or above his listeners'. Refusing to spare Guido's life, even the Pope reflects upon the backlash he knows he faces from popular opinion, which favors the nobleman's release. Based upon both his class and gender, Guido dismisses his crime as incidental. Perceiving temperance as a feminine trait, he absolves himself from guilt, and claims the murders as a display of vigor for which the court should thank him. As Guido explains, "The obligation I incurred was just / To practice mastery, prove my mastership:- / Pompilia's duty was – submit herself / Afford me pleasure, perhaps cure my bile. / Am I to teach my lords what marriage means...?" (5.716-720). Guido makes an excellent case that by dominating his wife he aids society in upholding order. This order, establishing the roles of

husbands and wives, has value, he reminds, as he enlists the men of the text to recall their former meeting when his authority was lauded and his male dominance recognized and affirmed.

As a figure of social authority, Guido defines himself as acting excusably at all times, by operating in service of his own desires. He imagines Pompilia as an object whose value only registers according to his needs and her potential use. For Guido, Pompilia is “but a hawk / I bought at a hawk’s price and carried home / To do hawk’s service / ...I have paid my pound, await my penny’s worth / So, hoodwink, starve and properly train my bird, / And, should she prove a haggard,-twist her neck!” (5.703-710). With the terms agreed upon, the contract made, and the bride delivered “like ox or ass,” it is hardly a wonder that Guido demands value, of which her physical loveliness is not a part. He embarked upon an exchange of “mere rank against mere wealth – some youth beside, / Some beauty too, thrown into the bargain, just / As the buyer likes or lets alone” (5.475-477). Guido mostly lets her beauty alone, in that its value is secondary to her wealth. As Guido begins to understand Pompilia’s financial value as an illusion, her beauty is understood by him as merely another deception, and he schemes to use it in lieu of more tangible value.

In his state of marital disappointment, Guido has no conception of Pompilia as an individual. She is “the young wife” (5.55), “the mongrel of a drab” (5.88), “that mongrel brat” (V, 89), “my young bride” (5.570), “that pure smooth egg” (5.655), “child, girl, wife in one” (5.669) - a catalogue of indistinctions. She is barely living, for him, as “the thirteen-years’-old child, with milk for blood / ...all one insuppressive prayer, - / Might she but breathe” (11.965-66, 980-81). Guido sees her most fully when piece by piece, most clearly when he recalls or fantasizes violence to her: “If I...Had, with the vulgarest household implement, / Calmly and quietly cut off, clean thro’ bone, / but one joint of one finger of my wife” (5.947, 952-954). His

possession of her is complete if unaware of what it is he possesses. Andrea Dworkin would argue that the repeated sexual violence Guido has committed necessitates his hatred and blindness: “According to the killer/husband, the inferiority of women in society, including the civil inferiority of women, originates in intercourse, because in intercourse the woman is not, and cannot be, the equal of men” (20). Missing throughout Guido’s first testimonial is an act of recognition, of seeing his wife, even in recollection; she is any formulation other than an individual woman. Pompilia explains that “He never did by speech nor act imply / ‘Because of our souls’ yearning that we meet / And mix in soul through flesh, which yours and mine / Wear and impress, and make their *visible* selves / -All which means, for the love of you and me, / Let us become one flesh, being one soul!’” (7.773-78, emphasis mine). Pompilia as an individual is barely present, as Dworkin would necessitate, because “his sexuality requires [her] annihilation” (58). Browning frames Guido’s pollution of Pompilia as necessarily in conflict with the action of seeing. The source of Pompilia’s beauty, and therefore its essence is off-bounds to Guido; she is unknowable to his mean intellect and in this formation, her soul is untouchable.

Guido’s defenses as well as his fantasies would seem to communicate more about his own evil personality than about Pompilia’s goodness. This would render Browning, like Guido, guilty of appropriating Pompilia for his own uses. But instead, Guido’s tendencies, thoughts, and actions function in the same way as his physical ugliness. Through Browning’s minutely detailed descriptions, Guido’s body acts as part of Browning’s rich character sketch, offering visible proof of Guido’s demonic nature, but more crucially it allows Browning to indirectly describe Pompilia. This occurs through a series of contrasts that underscore the distinction between the Count and his wife.

Though the poet withholds details of her physical self, the reader knows that Pompilia is lithely tall and Guido is unsuitably short. She enjoys the full bloom of youth while he stoops, descending into old age. Her beauty which reveals her inane goodness is heightened in contrast to Guido's crooked, yellowing form. Juxtaposing them one beside the other, *Tertium Quid* muses, "How evolve happiness from such a match?" (4.725). Ultimately, physical difference underscores their variant spiritual worth and allows Browning to assert the poem's indisputable truths. As Johnson discerns, Guido is "all materialized body, as Pompilia is all etherealized spirit. He is the darkness to her light, the hate to her love, the craft to her guilelessness" (122). Guido is carefully described, so that the detail not only associates "the particular with brute Matter and genetic malformation," but juxtaposes "against the Sublime," of which Pompilia's body is an instance in its mystery (Schor 17).

Guido's own testimonial begins with the condemned man substantiating himself, asserting his corporeality for the unseen listener (and the reader). In the first three lines, he stands, half sits, and shifts. By line eight, he discloses his motive in speech, "to save my neck" (5.8). Wrists, shoulder blades, sockets, and flesh immediately follow. Part of Guido's sensitivity to his own body parts can be explained by their imminent peril. In Guido's second book, the first 322 lines imagine the sensation of metal across flesh in slow motion. If he dwells upon his "soft neck and throat" obsessively (11.128), in part it anticipates the instrument of his beheading, "the iron plate with the sharp sheering edge" (11.223). Does it slam, jerk, shoot or slide, he wonders – "I shall soon find which," he laments (11.224). The presence of Guido's body serves to illustrate in vivid terms the plight of the imprisoned villain, but more viscerally, it situates him as a figure whom others, within and outside of the text, can witness the capital justice the poem affords and through whom they can come to know more about Pompilia.

Of Guido's physical shape, it is fair to say that by any regular estimation, judged by nearly every standard, across regions, eras, and cultures, and allowing for individual tastes, the Count is a viciously ugly man. Book One, the voice attributed to Browning as speaker-poet, identifies Guido literally as "A beak-nosed bushy-bearded black-haired lord, / Lean, pallid, low of stature yet robust" (1.782,83), and figuratively as "part man part monster" (1.1294), a screaming "tiger-cat" whose "bristling fury foams...while his feet fumble for the filth below" (1.1296, 1301). In Book IV, Tertium Quid, who insists throughout that the listener treat Guido's case fairly, describes Guido as "care-bitten, sorrow-sunk, / Little, long-nosed, bush-bearded, lantern-jawed" (4.717-18). Caponsacchi's voice in Book VI is the most offended, the most sickened by Guido's ugliness. Guido, he relates, is "black, mean, and small" (6.427), "hideous" (6.533), with a mouth "part howl[ing], part hiss[ing]" (6.1440); he is "a spittle wiped off from the face of God" (6.1479). In Book VII, Pompilia, "barely twelve years old - / A child at marriage" approaches Guido's ugliness with generosity (7.734). When she is told by her mother that "Guido Franceschini, - old / And nothing like so tall as myself, / hook-nosed and yellow in a bush of beard" is to become her spouse, she decides that "this man would serve, / No whit the worse for being so uncouth" (7.394-96). Pompilia recalled that "I was ill once and a doctor came / ...oh so lean, so sour-faced and austere!" (7.413, 417), but he cures her, and so she surmises, "What mattered the fierce beard or the grim face? / It was the physic beautified the man / ...so ugly all the same! (7.421-424). Instead, what Pompilia finds, and what the others either believe or disregard, is that in the case of Guido, as constructed by Browning, "outward signs denote the sin" (7.811).

Browning also exhibits Guido as an act of objectification, wherein the poet reduces Guido through description by inverting conventions that would typically objectify Pompilia. In

The Ring and the Book, Franceschini, who brings Pompilia home to display as a prize hawk, finds himself gawked over instead by the people in the text and by the reader, both for whom he is visible in ghastly detail. This shift in the use of detail is pivotal to the reader's experience engaging with the text. In Book XII, the speaker-poet parades Guido's now-dead body across the page, which "Struck admiration into those who saw" (12.137). Attention to Guido's body now focuses on the reader: "We had the titillation as we sat / ...How the slow show was winding on its way / ...So that the crowd near crammed his hat with coin. / Thus was kept up excitement to the last / ...And we remained all ears and eyes, could give / Ourselves to Guido undividedly" (12.150-72). Browning leads the reader to observe and participate in the spectacle because as he proclaims, "Our glaring Guido: now decline must be. / In its explosion, you have seen his act, / By my power – maybe, judged it by your own" (12.9, 10). This treatment of criminals is consistent with the way that Browning would punish Guido's actions, and he instructs the reader to do the same.⁶⁵

The reader naturally rejects Guido's nature, and the features that disclose it, and more so because of the visceral aversion with which people tend to greet ugliness. Wayne Booth admits that "Any characteristic, mental, physical, or moral, which in real life will make me love or hate other men will work the same effect in fiction" (130). Booth links this attraction or aversion to aesthetics: "Much of what looks like purely aesthetic or intellectual quality in a character may in

⁶⁵ In the courtship letters, one of the few disagreements between Browning and Elizabeth Barrett centers on the proper treatment of criminals. Browning argued that if society is of primary value, and takes precedence over the rights of the individual, "irrelevant that the method by which society compelled men to vindicate themselves from certain kinds of attacks" (Karlin "Courtship" 150). In their discussion, Browning is speaking of dueling, which though possibly "irrational and prov[ing] nothing either way" is still an appropriate defense against dishonorable men, as "it was the effect which mattered" (Karlin "Courtship" 150). Exhibiting and shaming too are employed by Browning, in his poetry and his personal relationships, as part of his struggle against the evils of the world, toward the ascendancy of moral order. When flipping through a book of posthumous letters of Edward Fitzgerald, minor poet and friend of Tennyson, Browning found a disparaging reference to his wife, and to all women ("She and her Sex had better mind the kitchen..."), Browning responded with a poem, "To Edward Fitzgerald," in which Browning fantasized about kicking the offender and spitting in his face. As Daniel Karlin reports, the poet sent his verse to the *Athenaeum* for publication, that all might read of Fitzgerald's slander and Browning's desired vindication (*Hatreds*).

fact have a moral dimension that is highly effective, though never openly acknowledged between author and reader” (131-32). As noted with respect to Rene Teleny and Camille Des Grieux, if the beautiful body “becomes a repository for those values which characters and readers want to possess” (Lefkowitz 19-20), then Guido’s body functions conversely, as a receptacle for loathing, and bearing ethics from which readers would like to distance themselves. This distance from Guido draws them closer to Pompilia and women like her, who suffer at the hands of “ugly” men.

Instructing readers, shrouding Pompilia from their eyes, the eyes of the spectator in the text and the eyes of Guido, Browning’s most authentic and powerful lesson is to reveal the epistemological function of sight in the people who see Pompilia, the vision of which provokes in them a divine awakening associated with a spiritual transformation. As Henri Talon discerns, Browning “wished to exalt the nobility and religious character of love” (365). Caponsacchi’s and Pompilia’s love acts as the needed “irradiation of hope” that Julia Wedgwood as first reader entreated with the poet to include, to combat Pompilia’s “shame and pain and humiliation” that prompts the absence of beauty in the bulk of *The Ring and the Book* (Curle 149). Deriding the verse for its prevalent darkness, Wedgwood blamed the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: “I felt as if I were reading what you had lost in your wife. The sense of good seemed dimmed” (Curle 150). As did Browning, I disagree with Wedgwood. With the inclusion of Caponsacchi’s passionate testimonial, Browning’s epic tale, rather than too bleak to bear becomes “one of the great love stories of all time” (Brady 25).

In the November 1869 issue of *Fraser’s Magazine*, Sir John Skelton observed that “Not till we reach Caponsacchi does [Browning] put forth his whole strength, and throw himself heart and hand, into the conflict” (799). Following Count Guido’s interval, laden with disturbing

fantasies announcing its unreliability, Caponsacchi's testimonial strikes the reader as uncharacteristically straightforward. Guido exits the scene, and Caponsacchi comments on the link between truth and visibility by invoking the previous lies and their obscuring characteristics: "Have patience! In this sudden smoke from hell,- / So things disguise themselves, - I cannot see / My own hand held thus broad before my face" (6.2-4). Caponsacchi frames his complaints as problems with seeing. He observes that now the court members "stare as aghast," when before, "I left Pompilia to your watch" but without their noticing, Guido "butchered her accordingly" (6.25, 103, 42). "You were wrong, you see: that's well to see / ...I have a mind to speak, see cause / To relume the quenched flax by this dreadful light, / Burn my soul out in showing you the truth" (6.142-149). This is Caponsacchi's role in support of the poem's plot, to "interpret you / The mystery of this murder" (6.73-74), to provide "the fact! / It seems to fill the universe with sight" (6.65-66).

As the first voice in the text, absent Browning, who sees and speaks clearly, the reader leans in to hear a new rendition of the still-absent heroine Pompilia's plight through the eyes of one she has been accused of loving. Browning establishes Caponsacchi as one to whom she is visible and from whom we can learn the truth, stemming from his vision. At the theatre one evening, the Priest "saw enter, stand, and seat herself / A lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad" (6.398-99). Caponsacchi's way of seeing Pompilia suggests the difference between his vision of her and Guido's: Guido sees his wife for what she means for him and what he can do to her; Caponsacchi sees her as both a "fleshly woman" and a feminine Godhead (6.981). He "recognize[s]" her "crystalline soul" as manifested in her "beautiful sad strange smile" (6.932-33, 6.412). Caponsacchi's appreciation of Pompilia, and the self-awareness it stirs in him shatters him as an ecclesiast and awakens him as a man. Described through the pervasively powerful lens

of vision, Caponsacchi recalls “That night and next day did the gaze endure, / Burnt to my brain, as sunbeam thro’ shut eyes” (6.4 34-35). The Priest falls into a deep malaise, wherein his perceived uselessness becomes untenable. The following week, Caponsacchi is troubled and contemplative, “thinking how my life / Had shaken under me, broke short indeed / And *showed* the gap ‘twixt what is, what should be” (485-486, emphasis mine). He is “Thinking moreover...oh, thinking, if you like, how utterly disassociated was I / A priest and celibate, from the sad strange wife / Of Guido” (6.491-494, ellipses Browning’s). One instance of seeing Pompilia has changed his life, so that as Michael Yetman observes, the Priest is “preoccupied with her beauty and the pathos of her situation” (Yetman 14). This differentiates Caponsacchi from Guido not only by establishing his character as deeper, richer, and better, but also his ability to perceive.

Caponsacchi recollects Pompilia’s features and “the purity that shone there,” which he distinguishes as “plain to me not to you” (6.1986), noting his position as one who sees her, recognizes her goodness, and is transformed “By the look o’ the lady” (6.1012). Through Caponsacchi, Browning establishes how seeing, as an act of loving, can ennoble an individual.⁶⁶ Until he sees Pompilia, Caponsacchi considered himself “a fribble and coxcomb” of a Priest (6.340). Yetman notes that “Caponsacchi is to be...a showpiece, almost, one feels, an objet d’art in whom the Church may boast to the world, and perhaps attract to herself more of the world’s wealth” (12). The priest functions himself as a testament to the banal power of physical objectification, until the act of seeing Pompilia drives him to his stall to pray, “never to write a

⁶⁶ Of course *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett* are filled with seeing and loving, but prophetically, in Robert Browning’s very first letter, in which he tells Elizabeth Barrett that “I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I love you too,” he also places an interesting emphasis on seeing: “Do you know I was once not very far from seeing—really seeing you? Mr. Kenyon said to me one morning ‘Would you like to see Miss Barrett?’ then he went to announce me,—then he returned ... you were too unwell, and now it is years ago...and the sight was never to be?” Months later, the long-awaited seeing (and loving) occurred.

canzonet⁶⁷ any more” (6.467). The Pope understands Caponsacchi’s vision as so extreme that he deems the Priest “All blindness, bravery and obedience! – blind? / Ay, as a man would be inside the sun, / Delirious with the plentitude of light” (10.1561-63). If the Priest is blind, the Pope argues, then Caponsacchi’s act of opening his eyes to the intense light of Pompilia and the ensuing “blindness” functions as hyper-vision, lending his thoughts a divine clarity.

The poem closely aligns Caponsacchi’s new understanding with religious devotion, in the manner that he approaches Pompilia’s beautiful body. As Talon discerns, “For Browning, the dialectics of spiritual progress finds its inspiration and dynamism in love. Caponsacchi’s love for Pompilia is felt and lived as faith” (364). Caponsacchi recognizes her person as above all else when he says, “But she - / The glory of life, the beauty of the world, / The splendour of heaven... / ...The glory, I say, / And the beauty, I say, and splendour, still say I, / Who, priest and trained to live my whole life long / On beauty and splendour, solely at their source, / God, have thus recognized my food in her” (117-124). Like biblical Adam, Caponsacchi receives the gift of woman, but in *The Ring and the Book*’s inverted Eden, love is meant to restore the fallen world, not through fruitfulness but through sexually-pure love. For Browning, this conflation between woman and divinity is not blasphemy, wherein the beloved subsumes the sacred space belonging to a heavenly being. Instead, the intensity of this regard is poised as the ideal route to earthly transcendence. Thomas J. Collins examines Browning’s “moral-aesthetic theory” and discerns that in 1840’s *Sordello*, and then increasingly, in 1855’s *Men and Women*, “Browning explains that although man must believe in a Divine Being, he should not attempt to achieve direct access to one who is so far beyond his comprehension. Instead, he must establish a relationship with another human who is, for him, representative of God on earth” (127-28). I would argue that this

⁶⁷ According to the footnote, “a light love song.”

approach to knowing the divine for which Browning consistently advocated peaked ten years later in *The Ring and the Book*.

Also of *Men and Women*, Collins asserts that Browning “celebrates love as the power which allows man to use flesh as a medium through which...“vision” can be realized” (136). *The Ring and the Book* uses the visible body as an impetus, as well as a precursor to sexuality. In a rare reversal from the *Old Yellow Book*, the poem assumes an abstinence that the original documents leaves vague. This functions not to insist that Caponsacchi’s and Pompilia’s restraint is the ideal, but to call attention to their love’s transcendent quality. Ann Brady observes that “Browning differentiated between lust/love and spiritual love independent of lust – a distinction not frequently made in Western culture, and therefore not easily discernable to many readers” (125). I am less convinced that Caponsacchi’s love is devoid of sexual desire, or that “lust/love and spiritual love” are mutually exclusive, as crafted by Browning. Brady recalls Charles W. Hodell’s essay accompanying his translation of the *Old Yellow Book*, which claims that “the depiction of such love” as Pompilia’s and Caponsacchi’s ““can be conceived only by a very high-minded and pure worshiper of women,” and Brady observes that Browning’s “culture does not foster a great number of these,” which is “attested in its body of theology, literature, and art, much of which is tainted by devaluation and trivialization of women” (125). While these observations about culture are certainly true, I would assert that *as* a “high-minded worshiper of women,” Browning’s conception of ideal sexual relations elevates rather than devalues, deepens rather than trivializes.

I base my assertion on a confluence of factors. One is the influence of Shelley and the Romantic poets on Browning. As Betty Miller observes, students of Browning regularly discuss “the impact upon the poet of Shelley’s atheism, as of his propaganda in favor of ‘vegetables and

pure water'. What has received less attention is the effect produced...by the assertion that 'Chastity is a monkish and evangelical superstition', and the emphatic denunciation of those 'mistakes cherished by society respecting the connection of the sexes" (32-33). In recalling how much Browning relinquished of Shelley's philosophies, we sometimes forget how much he preserved. Though an exemplary Victorian, Browning's ideas took root in a previous age. G.K. Chesterton proposes that "we think of Browning as the great Victorian poet, who lived long enough to have opinions on Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill, and forget that...Browning was born in the afterglow of the great Revolution" (7). This period was affected not only by Shelley, but as Chesterton describes, "the great dominant idea of the whole of that period...is the idea that man would by his nature live in an Eden of dignity, liberty and love, and that artificial and decrepit systems are keeping him out of that Eden" (8). By youthful influence as well as by disposition, "Browning was first and foremost a poet, a man made to enjoy all things visible and invisible, and priest of the higher passions" who was "not so much a pessimist about civilized things as an optimism about savage things" I argue that this optimism would not have excluded sexual relations (Chesterton 8, 10).

Beyond Shelley and the inspiration of Romanticism and the French Revolution, Browning famously complicated literary characters as well as living persons, refusing to distinguish their actions much less their essences as either saint or sinner; instead he insisted upon the complexity of humanity. Chesterton describes the poet as curious and kind, a "cosmic detective who walked into the foulest of thieves' kitchens and accused men publicly of virtue" (27). As a "very strong Liberal," Browning's mind was "possessed, perhaps even to excess, by a belief of growth and energy and in the ultimate utility of error" (Chesterton 44). But I reject that the poet axiomatically regarded sex as an error; if the magnificent passion of Pompilia and

Caponsacchi manifested in physical expression as a release of “those great eternal and mainly forgotten wishes which are the ultimate despots of existence,” wherein physical love manifests as the “mask of a deity...looking toward some quarter of the heavens,” (Chesterton 95-96) then the consummation of feeling would fail to diminish Browning’s reverence. When he writes to Elizabeth Barrett, “Always with you in the spirit, always yearning to be with you in the body, - always, when with you, praying, as for the happiest of fortunes, that I may remain with you for ever,” though Browning’s reference to “the body” assumedly addresses physical presence, and only hints at sexual consummation, communion with the spirit and the body of the beloved together create “the happiest of fortunes.”

That the young, brutalized wife and the priest who has vowed celibacy resist physical love says more about historical circumstance than about Browning’s admittedly high mind. Also, considering the physical torture endured in her relationship with Guido who does not see her, it makes for sharper contrast if Caponsacchi sees but does not touch her. If Pompilia’s and Caponsacchi’s sexual union served as a means to convey the “truths” of the poem to the extent that their chastity does, for Browning, their unification would imbue Pompilia with not a whit less “splendour” and “glory,” and maybe a speck more, as attested to in his treatment of sexual love throughout his writings. As Hardy and Wilde necessarily malign sexual restraint in support of their respective representations of a natural earthly love, Browning proposes abstinence between Pompilia and Caponsacchi in service of a spiritual love which surpasses the uses of the body and instead engenders a heavenly union for which both await consummation in their imagined afterlife.

Browning treats their understanding of each other as an instance of “heroic virtue,” as Thomas Aquinas employs the concept, wherein beauty functions as a source, rather than a

conclusion of moral justice (Finnis). As Brady notes, Caponsacchi considers his beloved a “‘perfect soul’ (6.1162) to whom his priestly audience will someday build churches. To Pompilia, Caponsacchi is... ‘my angel’ (1587) to whom she cries from her deathbed, ‘O lover of my life, O soldier-saint!’ (7.1786)...just the utterance of his name gives her strength” (109). Dworkin would argue that their immaculacy allows for the depth within their relationship. Especially in the context of Pompilia’s recent sexual degradation by Guido, the Priest and the young wife necessarily move from seeing to imagining rather than to loving, so that each draws mental pictures of the other and visualizes the quality of life with one another, without acting upon their domestic fantasies. As Dworkin insists, “Imagination is not a synonym for sexual fantasy, which is only – pathetically – a programmed tape loop repeating in the narcoleptic mind. Imagination finds new meanings, new forms; complex and empathetic values and acts” (60). In the poem, seeing stirs imagination in a way that reveals rather than masks the sight of the seer, and then provides the seer the agency to communicate if not to consummate, as “In the determined morning, I first found / Her head erect, her face turned full to me, / Her soul intent on mine through two wide eyes. / I answered them” (6.1199-1202). Beauty feeds “absolute vision,” tendering divine affirmation (Collins).

For Caponsacchi, Pompilia’s beauty is not merely *on* the body but it occurs as a sacred transaction between the two. On the night of their escape, Caponsacchi remembers Pompilia as “A light in the eyes / ... till, at last,... / Whiter and whiter, near grew and more near, / Till it was she: There did Pompilia come: The white I saw shine through was her soul’s, / ... for the body was one black, / Black from head down to foot. She did not speak, / Glided into the carriage, - so a cloud Gathers the moon up” (VI, 1134-1146). Her soul contains the quintessence of beauty, which is in turn mimetic of her luminous “whiteness” of inner self. Brady deems that “This is not

the ordinary way of perception. It is the perception of someone in love” (110). It is also the perception of one who by necessity imagines the beautiful soul, as substitute for the sexual body. Not unlike the act of love, this way of seeing functions as an exchange between Pompilia and Caponsacchi, a communication, a consummation. Caponsacchi sees into and through her body, and this communion transforms the priest in profound spiritual ways. Whereas Guido penetrates her flesh, Caponsacchi merges his spirit with her soul.

Were these only Caponsacchi’s musings, Pompilia would function in service to someone else’s needs, once again as to her birth mother, to Violante, and to Guido. Instead, as Brady discerns, their relationship is “outstanding in its mutuality and complementariness” (19). This is illustrated by Browning from their first eye-lock. Pompilia recalls that Caponsacchi “saw me, as I saw him” (7.990), echoing Caponsacchi’s contention, “As I recognized her / So she...knew me” (6.931-33). Her first sight of his “silent, grave, / Solemn” face fills her with “hope” and a prayer for “wings” (7.989-90, 994). She believes that he is “the deliverer,” and in believing it, for her it becomes so, despite the failure of their Roman sojourn (7.1409). Nearing death, she laments to her listeners: “where’s time / To tell you how that heart burst out in shine?...Him I now see make the shine everywhere” (1528, 29, 1570). He is all illumination, all stars; he is “all my own” (1779). She repeats throughout her sense of possession of his light. As Browning gives Pompilia a voice, as he opens her testimonial with “I am” and allows her to construct herself and her life, in like fashion, he extends to her control over her relationship with the Priest. Whereas the *Old Yellow Book* asserts only her exploitation and demise, Browning permeates her narrative with agency. Pompilia actively conspires along with Caponsacchi; it is them against the rest of humankind: “Tell him that if I seem without him now, / That’s the world’s insight...The world again is holding us apart” (1791-92, 1794) They are one in “my fate,” before “God,” and with a

shared vision: “What I see, oh, he sees” (1798, 1800, 1805). Browning composes Pompilia as one who can see and act. She will wait for Caponsacchi in heaven, not because earthly forces stand in their way, which they do, but because “Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit” (1824) compared to the vastness of her love.

As necessitated by the history unfurled in the *Old Yellow Book*, their connection is not without complication, and glimpses of beauty in *The Ring in the Book* are necessarily few. Instead, the reader is most often privy to Caponsacchi’s rages, which critics tend to regard as a blemish on his otherwise valiant character. These flashes of temper follow his descents into memory, a trancelike state wherein he recalls the fulfillment of time spent with Pompilia.⁶⁸ As Buckler denotes, “Though he has not actually broken his vows, perhaps, it is clear that he has entertained private fantasies of wife, hearth, and child – has *imagined* himself married to Pompilia – and since these fantasies have been brutally foreshortened by her murder, he can convert guilt to wrath with a vengeance...he has suffered a ghastly disappointment” (135). For Browning, true love demands action and Caponsacchi’s movements are halted throughout – by oath, by law, by propriety, by villainy, and by death. His helplessness manifests as rage, and his emotion, too, is fueled by seeing and the withholding of sight.

Both Pompilia and Caponsacchi memorialize their days and nights together as perfect instances of seeing. Caponsacchi relives Pompilia as he last saw her: “Pompilia’s face, then and thus, looked on me / The last time in this life: not one sight since, / Never another sight to be! And yet / I thought I had saved her... / Come, I see through it.../ Let me see for myself if it be

⁶⁸ Love, for Browning, is the very best function of man. Johnson argues that the poet handles love “with greater candor and penetration than any other poet of the early and mid-Victorian periods. It is not hard to understand why he should have thought the experience of love so important. Through the emotions which it releases, man reaches heights of intensity, both physical and spiritual, such as are achievable in no other way” (100). Browning frames Caponsacchi’s fury, as a height of intensity, as vastly more natural and more comprehensible than the calm, suppressed emotions found elsewhere throughout the text. As Caponsacchi laments, and Browning no doubt seconds, the “shame of faultiness” in the priest not killing Guido “ere he killed his wife” is far graver than the fault of short temper (VI, 1889, 1894).

so!...Come let me see her – indeed” (6.1588-91, 1605, 1608, 1611). A shared seeing and the power of sight inhabits the text.

As a lucid witness to their love, the Pope functions as “seeing” incarnate. He proclaims, “All that I do and am / Comes from the truth, or seen or else surmised / Remembered or divined... / I...Dispose of men their bodies and their souls, / As the acknowledge or gainsay the light / I show them” (10.1287-89, 1297-98). The Pope perceives from knowledge, from recollection, from prayer, and crucially, from sight. His refrain, “I see!” appears nine times in his testimonial. Forms of the verb “to see” appear nearly seventy times within the chapter.

In *The Old Yellow Book*, the Pope’s task in the affair of the trial is to decide whether to pardon Guido and to overturn his death sentence. Indeed, in Browning’s text, he fulfills this tenet by upholding the pending date for beheading. In announcing his decision throughout the testimonial, he describes his formulation of Guido’s character and that of his accomplices, by turning to the outward stains of sin: “Such I find Guido, midmost blotch of black / Discernible in this group of clustered crimes... / I detect each shape... / All alike coloured... / By one and the same pitchy furnace stirred / At the center: see” (10.869-70, 875-78) These “denizens of the cave” inhabit a sickening world, “in the absolute drench of dark,” but in the midst of this opaque scene, “some stray beauty-beam” erases “the despair of hell” (10.994, 1001-03). The Pope is keenly attuned to the sinister and the fallible lurking in the poem’s corners, but in Browning’s poem, the stray beauty-beam is at least as important. With this in mind, the Pope advocates for Pompilia and Caponsacchi and affirms the value of their love, which is a passion he frames as a collision of heavenly aesthetics and spiritualized light.

Pompilia is “perfect in whiteness,” a figure before whom he stoops, as before a holy icon (10.1006). He revels in her “perfect beauty of body and soul,” and beseeches, “let me look at

thee in the flesh as erst” (10.1181-1009). Pompilia is “Earth’s flower / She holds up to the softened gaze of God!” (10.1018-19). He loves her with reverential awe, and he is humbled in the face of her loveliness. She is all that is best on earth and of heaven, and finally he proclaims of her, “be found / Sublime” (10.1059-60). The Pope sets this illegitimate daughter of a prostitute above himself. The outward signs of her “old clean linen garb” reveal the inner “marvel of a soul like thine” (10.1010,1018). As with Caponsacchi, the Pope’s vision is informed by his own desires. Pompilia offers proof of beauty in the world, of which the soon-to-die Pope revels. In her nineteenth-century discourses on beauty, Vernon Lee examines the way that form is interpreted by the viewer, “according to the facts of our own inner experiences” (17). For the Pope, Pompilia becomes what Lee discerns as “the expression of religion” and he bows before her beauty “as a visible manifestation of the divine” (35). He declares Pompilia “My / flower, / My rose, I gather for the breast of God” (10.1144-47). As a tiller of the spiritual soil of the land, among the “barren” earth, Pompilia as the glory in the Pope’s spiritual garden, serves as the “one blossom” to which he can offer God as a worthy sacrament (10.1034). For the Pope, along with Caponsacchi, Pompilia’s beauty is an expression of Godliness and a cause for veneration. Through their sacred vision, Browning expresses, “Why live / except for love, - how love unless they know?” (10.1327-28). In *The Ring and the Book*, beauty tenders knowledge, compassion, enlightenment, hope; it transcends darkness.

In his fantastically beautiful defense of *The Ring and the Book*, wherein he retaliates against “any one who objects to Browning writing his huge epic round a trumpery and sordid police-case” (Gutenberg), G.K. Chesterton compares Browning’s poem to the greatest epics of all-time:

Homer says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven as exhibited in a great legend of love and war, which shall contain the mightiest of all mortal warriors, and the most beautiful of all mortal women." The author of the Book of Job says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven by a tale of primeval sorrows and the voice of God out of a whirlwind." Virgil says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by the tale of the origin of the greatest people and the founding of the most wonderful city in the world." Dante says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by uncovering the very machinery of the spiritual universe, and letting you hear, as I have heard, the roaring of the mills of God." Milton says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you of the very beginning of all things, and the first shaping of the thing that is evil in the first twilight of time." Browning says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you a story out of a dirty Italian book of criminal trials from which I select one of the meanest and most completely forgotten." Until we have realised this fundamental idea in *The Ring and the Book* all criticism is misleading. (84-85)

I assert that in *The Ring and the Book*, from this mean annal, Browning withholds or reveals feminine beauty, to explore this relation of man to heaven, for which the beautiful acts as conduit as well as expression.

CONCLUSION

In seeking to bring aesthetics into conversation with the epistemological concerns of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Teleny*, and *The Ring and the Book*, I have worked to illustrate the ways that by constructing characters possessing great physical beauty, and displaying or withholding descriptions of the crafted body, Victorian writers challenged, disputed, and supplanted a variety of nineteenth-century social norms. Beautiful characters functioned within literature as persuasive agents of change, subverting social norms by arousing and then inverting conventional associations between beauty and goodness.

Though not static, this conventional connection between beauty and goodness is ubiquitous, as sociologist Anthony Synnott chronicles: "The consensus within European cultural history has been impressive. Beauty is objective, related to goodness and to God, and moral and physical beauty are related" (Synnott 625). Synnott illustrated his observation by providing a thorough history of beauty's association with virtue.⁶⁹ Plato espoused that beauty is "identical with good and it is the object of Love; it is also identical with happiness...it is connected also to wisdom." Aristotle deemed beauty "the gift of God." St. Augustine believed that "beauty reflects God, for God is Beauty, and Beauty is God." For Dante, "beauty is a reflection of the glory of God." Castiglione wrote most succinctly when he claimed that "beauty is a sacred thing...it springs from God and is like a circle, the centre of which is goodness...outward beauty is a true

⁶⁹ Perceptions of beauty as goodness, though predominant, are far from uncontested in the history of the humanities. Synnott makes clear that there is "always a tension" between beauty as the embodiment of goodness and beauty as an instrument of vice and deception (617). From the Greeks to the Romans, the Jews and the Christians, societies have long possessed a complicated relationship with beauty, filled with contradictions.

sign of inner goodness...the ugly are evil and the beautiful are good...the good and the beautiful are identical” (Synnott 612, 13, 18, 21, 22).

Castiglione’s determination of godliness and goodness associated with the outward signs written upon the body follows Aristotle, who wrote *Physiognomics* which “established physiognomy as a science” (Synnott 614) and precedes Johann Lavater’s popular text, *On Physiognomy*, which “ran 18 editions in many languages from its first publication in 1775 to 1885” (Synnott 615).⁷⁰ Though by no means uniformly accepted as a material truth, physiognomy ascended to its peak of popularity in the nineteenth century. Lucy Hartley begins her study, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, reflecting upon the pervasive influence of Lavater through social, political, intellectual, and scientific circles in Victorian England. Physical beauty was thought to reveal a great deal about the essence of an individual, and in thinking so, for the Victorians, literary constructions of beauty mattered quite a lot.

To understand how aesthetics can function so subversively in literature, it is useful to consider the ways that a reader is affected by a brush with the beautiful within a book. Wolfgang Iser suggests that text usurps the consciousness of the reader, who in processing a text becomes changed by the experience. This manipulation requires strategies, or as Iser terms it, “common ground” so that communication between the text and the reader results in an effective transaction of ideas: “Any successful transfer...through initiation by the text – depends on the extent to which this text can activate the individual reader’s faculties of perceiving and processing” (Iser 107). In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry argues persuasively that the beautiful functions

⁷⁰ As Synnott states, “Castiglione not only reflects Plato, Augustine and Aquinas but also justifies secular and sensual delight in beauty: a superb synthesis of ‘biology’ and theology, the profane and the sacred, sex and God” (Synnott 623). It is interesting that “secular and sensual delight in beauty” require justification at the historical moment when beauty shifts representation from the masculine to the feminine.

in just this way - to incite deliberation and to arouse in the perceiver “a more capacious regard for the world” (48). The association with goodness and desirability is a primary reason aesthetics functions as a persuasive force. Pamela Gilbert agrees that “the text is a substance that enters the reader and has an effect on him or her. The text is not an inert thing to be merely manipulative, it is active – even opportunistic” (18). Books are inherently powerful vehicles of persuasion, and particularly well-situated to engage feminine beauty as an impetus for cultural transformation.

Georges Poulet elegantly describes the ways that books and readers meld into one: “A book is not shut in by its contours, is not walled-up as in a fortress...the extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside” (Poulet 42). This is unlike with sculpture, paintings or various objects of beauty one circles, pauses before, and observes, touches and holds up to the light. Thoughts are actually displaced by text. Through the act of reading “Because of the strange invasion of my person by the thoughts of another, I am a self who is granted the experience of thinking thoughts foreign to him...my consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another... I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me” (Poulet 44-45). This “other,” Poulet explains, is not the author, but the author’s creations. If this other is perceived of as good, then this representation is particularly well-suited to come to life in the intellect and imagination of the reader.

Wolfgang Iser applies this usurpation of consciousness to practical purposes, discussing how the reader processes a text and becomes changed by the experience. For the reader whose consciousness has been unseated by the text, “The literary recodification of social and historical norms...enables the participants...to see what they cannot normally see in the ordinary process of day-to-day living” (Iser 74). “Any successful transfer...through initiation by the text –

depends on the extent to which this text can activate the individual reader's faculties of perceiving and processing," claims Iser (107). For a number of Victorian writers, notably Hardy, Wilde, and Browning, positive constructions of the beautiful feminine or feminized form, denoting goodness, offer this vehicle.

Scarry insists that a regard for beauty inspires and perpetuates introspection within oneself and initiates fair treatment of others. Given the intense process of experiencing a text, readers were influenced by the power inherent in beauty's goodness. The force of the aesthetic can be attributed to the visceral reaction people are inclined to experience in the presence of beauty, the way by which beauty "fills the mind and breaks all frames" (Scarry 23). One experiences this sensation in response to an actual physical nearness to a beautiful object or person, and also to an imagined beautiful face and body, of the sort that narration allows. The positive messages promoted by the authors of the three texts I examine engage with beauty's perceived goodness fully.

These writers begin with a sense that beauty is "sacred," "unprecedented," and "lifesaving" (Scarry 23). They draw in their readers in part by tapping into beauty's power: "It quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living" (23-25). The authors of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Teleny*, and *The Ring and the Book* make use of the exceptional qualities inherent in the beautiful to induce the "staring" wherein an individual tries "to keep the thing sensorily present to them" (Scarry 6). For the authors of each of the texts I examine, this potential for drawing the readers' eye is the first use of beauty. Once beauty has lured a reader into the scene, these authors overturn contemporary uses for and ways of describing feminine beauty toward different ends, but in ways that display

compelling textual similarities. Through formulations of the beautiful body, Hardy, Wilde⁷¹, and Browning mock Victorian sexual hypocritical and model more progressive notions of virtue.

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* engages with associations with the "goodness" of the beautiful body as something which elicits protection and helps repair injuries. This may seem a counter-reading, in that Tess's beauty marks her as target for Alec d'Urberville's lust. Throughout, the heroine's physical beauty can be seen to perpetuate the novel's great tragedies – Tess's sexually-enticing beauty kindles Car Darch's jealousy, resulting in Tess's vulnerability to Alec's seduction. Later in the novel, at the Inn on Christmas Eve with Angel, it is because Tess is "a comely maid" that she draws the eyes of the men who recall her as the mother from Shaston with the illegitimate child (*Tess* 226). Ultimately, however, when beauty is "seen" properly, as Hardy's plot captures, the beautiful feminine body elicits protection. As Scarry maintains, "far from damaging our capacity to attend to problems of injustice, [beauty] instead intensifies the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries" (57). Seeing "which leads to happy doing" is key to Hardy's design (48), consistent with his meliorist philosophy, so that in *Tess*, Hardy critiques the ill treatment of the natural, unrestrained sexually-desirable beautiful body, and insists that the understanding of beauty via the questioning of purity is ideal, as opposed to the hiding or the extinguishing of beauty. Through his use of beauty, Hardy insists that men and women are amorally procreative, building upon the theories of Charles Darwin, who affirmed that beauty perpetuates life. Recognition of Tess's complicated beauty allows Angel to relinquish his vein of metal and to try to save Tess from the Hangman, society's agent of "justice." There is a redemptive goodness in beauty, Hardy suggests, so that when Tess becomes more deeply

⁷¹ Though Wilde's authorship of *Teleny* is unconfirmed, one can apply this claim to many if not all of his texts.

beautiful with each perceived misstep and “indiscretion,” beauty acts subversively to call into question configurations of contemporary morality.

Hardy’s inversion of the uses of beauty is fairly straightforward and it rode upon a wave of New Woman sentiment that was radical but still sympathetic to many. In serving to dispute the pathology of same-sex desire, *Teleny* undertook a more formidable, more subversive challenge. *Teleny* engages with the most basic tenets of physiognomy, as it draws upon the assumption that beauty is good and ugliness is bad in order to reject representations of same-sex love as pathological and dangerous. Scarry discusses the “forward-momentum” inherent in beauty, wherein “beautiful things...incite the desire to bring new things into the world: infants, epics, sonnets, drawings, dances, laws, philosophical dialogues, theological tracts” (46). This is how beauty is applied in *Teleny*, in near-direct contrast to representations of sterility and chaos. These key figures in *Teleny* reject prescribed gender-mandated behaviors, and in doing so and remaining physically perfect, they defy the notion that inversion festers on the body. *Teleny*’s “fascinating beauty” deepens through same-sex sexual experience. He is not described as subjectively handsome, but instead as “the very model of carnal comeliness” (93). As a model of male perfection, he becomes one to whom anyone would want to emulate, with whom they would want to associate. His beauty manifests as goodness in mainstream fashion; his talents are not those of the Spahi, described as lascivious, or Briancourt, with his “effeminate” hobbies and his “unnatural” collections of random useless objects. Instead, *Teleny* is associated with creative rhapsodic output, in line with Scarry’s life-creating, life affirming lists of beauty’s uses. Notably, *Teleny*, “in beauty, as well as in character, was the very personification of this entrancing music” (9).

Like his melodic compositions, the reader is told that “Teleny’s beautiful eyes...like the sun or the moon...seem to reflect the infinite” (97). Associations with the heavenly, the holy, and the expansive, expressed through aesthetic descriptions, in contrast to the hideous physicality represented by the sexually-non-transgressive bodies in the text, reinforce a sense of the characters’ goodness, and the amorality of their actions. By framing Teleny’s and Des Grieux’s sexual bodies as healthily beautiful, the author or authors of *Teleny* contradict and subvert “the law and public opinion” as Havelock Ellis expressed, which in Victorian England “combine to place a heavy penal burden and a severe social stigma on the manifestations of an instinct which to those persons who possess it frequently appears natural and normal” (Ellis). Through the use of physical beauty, *Teleny* allows for an association of moral and societal goodness for those who possess the instinct toward same-sex love.

While *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Teleny* subvert social laws by employing an abundance of descriptions of beauty, Robert Browning’s near absence of the beautiful body in *The Ring and the Book* makes use of the power of beauty, even more emphatically, to destabilize social values and practices that serve to threaten female bodies. In my study, the poem functions as the exception that proves the rule; by establishing and then withholding descriptions of Pompilia’s physical beauty, Browning imparts a lesson to readers regarding beauty’s goodness toward a similar end as the other two texts, to call into question contemporary morality. “Beauty is sacred,” Scarry writes (23). It incites deliberation in individuals, and confers on the perceiver a sense of responsibility, so that “the moment of perceiving beauty also confers on the object the gift of life. The pacific quality of beauty comes in part from the reciprocal, life-granting pact” (Scarry 69). She argues that to perceive of a person’s beauty as precious perpetuates a desire to protect that individual, to defend others like them, and even to safeguard the environment from

which they arose. In *The Ring and the Book*, Pompilia's beauty functions as an "expression of religion" and offers for those the poet allows to see her a glimpse of what Vernon Lee would call "a visible manifestation of the divine" (35). For the Pope, along with Caponsacchi, Pompilia's beauty is an expression of Godliness and a cause for veneration.

As Chapter Four relates, Guido along with the poem's other exploiters of Pompilia fail to see her, which denotes both an inability on their part to properly observe beauty, and it also serves to protect Pompilia from their exploitative and injurious gaze. Pompilia's beauty is filled with redemptive power, but in the poem, this is only so for the Pope, and eventually the reader, become like the Priest Caponsacchi, "preoccupied with her beauty and the pathos of her situation" (Yetman 14), for whom one instance of *seeing* Pompilia has changed his life. In the dark world of the poem, Pompilia's goodness expressed through her beauty offers clarity, which illuminates truth, which allows for education. Suzanne Bailey discerns that in *The Ring and the Book*, the beautiful body "operates as a kind of touchstone for truth...the body figures as a kind of truth incarnate" (Bailey 576). This further underscores the use of goodness as beauty in a text that obsessively extends and withholds unreliable "truth." Visible beauty, which Scarry argues is "bound up with truth," offer surety among the poem's wave of blinding manipulations of truth and outright deceptions.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles, *Teleny*, and *The Ring and the Book* specifically, and beautiful textual bodies, more broadly, represent only one form of subversion of conventional literary deployments of beauty. One could easily widen the lens of consideration regarding the spectacular body to include not only the abnormally beautiful and the curiously attractive, but also the plain, the ugly, the freakish, and the monstrous body, which in Victorian texts are also described in great detail. As one might add to the consideration of how bodies function beautiful

characters such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lucy Hartley and George Eliot's Hetty Sorrel, one could also include Charlotte Brontë Jane Eyre as exemplary of plainness, or more dramatically, the written narrative surrounding Julia Pastrana, Krao Farini, and scores of other bear women, fat ladies, midgets, and conjoined twins. Exaggerated physicality, whether manifesting in plainness, deformity, or beauty, subverts the aesthetic and social norm, and in doing so, these bodies intuit the deviance, danger, and also desirability inherent in the abnormal during a time of soaring uniformity and the pathologization of difference. These other types of bodies, too, are catalogued with words in much the same way as the physically beautiful, utilizing a common rhetoric in construction of a figure who could be sacrificed in support of a current moral order, or crafted subversively to overthrow disputed social systems. Rosemarie Garland-Thomas claims that "visually different" figures of all kinds craft a broader reality by the very presence of their fantastical physicality by the discourse surrounding them. Because "culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment" upon the unique body, taken to the extreme in any direction, writers can subvert old modes of thinking through the physical construction of literary characters (Garland-Thompson 2). Authors are in the business of countering "problems produced by the system...the literary work implicitly draws an outline of the prevailing system by explicitly shading in the areas all around the system" (Iser 73). If we accept that "the literary historian should be able not only to gauge which system was in force at the time of the work's creation but also to reconstruct the weaknesses and the historical, human impact of that system and its claims to universal validity," then one can surmise that the work of a text often deals in subversion, "just beyond the fringes of the particular thought system prevalent at the time" (Iser 74). Whether the fantastical is understood as beauty, ugliness, or regularity taken to the extreme, the spectacularized figure serves a wonder of subversive purposes.

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