

FABRIC OF THE NATION: TEXTILES, NATIONHOOD, AND IDENTITY IN THE MID-
NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

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(Under the Direction of Richard Menke)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation contends that references to textiles show how mid-nineteenth-century literary texts took part in contemporaneous questions of nationality, commerce, and ethical labor. By studying realist novels and short fiction published between 1850 and 1880, I emphasize how the anxieties of the age are woven into the transatlantic significance of fabric—and I argue for a reconsideration of Henry James’s and George Eliot’s “web” that moves beyond its use as a metaphor or conceit. As I discuss canonical American and British texts, I draw connections between realism’s focus on the development of an individual and its attention to how consciousness reacts to and relies on a world of commodities. These goods not only go between one nation and another, but they also tie international economics to industrial life and household management.

Such intersections make cloth production and consumption into critical components of what James termed the mid-nineteenth-century “atmosphere of mind.” Indeed, the textile “web” not only informs individual mores but also shapes narrative techniques and structures on both sides of the Atlantic. Extending the work of Bill Brown, Elaine Freedgood, and Talia Schaffer, whose scholarship has renewed critical interest in nineteenth-century “things,” I explore how

ideas and material culture are inextricably linked and how the actual transatlantic circulation of textiles helped writers articulate the often-vexed notions of citizenship and belonging in the Atlantic world.

After my introduction, which traces what I term entangled consciousness in *Middlemarch* and “The Art of Fiction,” my dissertation is organized in three sections: War; Nation; and Factory and Home. The first section (chapters one and two) explores how British novels obliquely respond to the American Civil War and the transatlantic cotton trade. Section two (chapters three and four) locates a relationship between self-sufficient heroines and burgeoning national allegiance. The final section (chapters five and six) focuses on how women’s industrial and domestic needlework shapes their daily lives, fills their empty hours, and points to the limitations placed on a mid-nineteenth-century woman’s life regardless of her class.

INDEX WORDS:

Textiles, Fabric, Sewing, Consciousness, Nineteenth-Century Novel, Realism, Transatlanticism, Cotton Industry, Thing Theory, Narrative Theory, Marriage Plot, Single Women, Factory Labor, Heirlooms, Fancy-Work, Handiwork, American Civil War, Henry James, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mary Seacole, Herman Melville, Margaret Oliphant, *North and South*, *Daniel Deronda*, *Middlemarch*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Washington Square*

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B.A., Rhodes College, 2004

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm grateful for all of my teachers and professors who have taught me and encouraged me along the way. In particular, I'd like to thank my major professor Richard Menke. Not only is this dissertation a better project because of his enthusiasm, guidance, and suggestions, but I am also a better teacher and scholar because of his mentorship. I'm also grateful for the guidance of my other committee members Tricia Lootens and Doug Anderson. Their insightful comments have also shaped this project in innumerable ways. Thanks, too, to Chloe Wigston Smith, who was willing to chat about nineteenth-century dress history on more than one occasion and helpfully read early versions of at least one chapter. Finally, I couldn't have succeeded in this program without the continuing mentorship of Roxanne Eberle or Kris Boudreau. I can only hope to model their gracefulness as scholars, teachers, mentors, and women one day.

Completing this dissertation also wouldn't have been possible without my friends and family who have been my unfailing cheerleaders. For the past year, writing and revising alongside Mollie Barnes has been my saving grace, and our Saturday visits to the Athens Farmers Market and Ike & Jane with Nicole Camastra were often the highlight of the week. I'm also grateful for the companionship and humor of Archer Shaw and Ruby Barnes, whose antics were always sure to provide a moment of levity in a long day of work. And last—but not least—I am forever indebted to my parents Dewey and Virginia Shaw, who not only taught me to read but also taught me to love learning.

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INTRODUCTION

“Fresh Threads of Connections”: Eliot’s and James’s Entangled Webs and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Textiles

“Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection—gradually, as the old stocking gave way to the savings-bank, and the worship of the solar guinea became extinct; while squires and baronets, and even lords who had once lived blamelessly afar from the civic mind, gathered the faultiness of closer acquaintanceship. Settlers, too, came from distant counties, some with an alarming novelty of skill, others with an offensive advantage in cunning. In fact, much of the same sort of movement and mixture went on in old England as we find in older Herodotus, who also in telling what had been, thought it well to take a woman’s lot for his starting point; though lo, as a maiden apparently beguiled by attractive merchandise, was the reverse of Miss Brooke, and in this respect perhaps bore more resemblance to Rosamond Vincy, who had excellent taste in costume, with that nymph-like figure and pure bloneness, which give the largest range to choice in the flow and colour of drapery. But these things made only part of her charm.”

“And he counted on quiet intervals to be watchfully seized, for taking up the threads of investigation—on many hints to be won from diligent application, not only of the scalpel, but of the microscope, which research had begun to use again with new enthusiasm of reliance. Such was Lydgate’s plan for his future: to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world.”

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

In chapter thirty-six of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72), Rosamond Vincy claims that Mary Garth’s sewing “‘is the nicest thing [she] know[s] about Mary’” (329). Rosamond acknowledges that Mary’s “‘sewing is exquisite,’” and in admiring Mary’s ability to craft cambric double-hemmed ruffles, Rosamond conflates Mary’s skillful work with her character (329). The two young women are former schoolmates, and Rosamond’s brother Fred loves Mary. Rosamond, however, only thinks about Mary in terms of her fine needlework, not relationally or in terms of her connections to their mutual pasts. This condescending, so-called compliment subtly highlights Rosamond’s self-centered naïveté. Doesn’t Rosamond measure Mary’s character beyond her talent for “nice” sewing?

Rosamond's off-hand comment about Mary may seem insignificant. After all, we see Rosamond's foolishness so very clearly as the narrative unfolds. While she's more interested in thinking about Rosamond's role as "the novel's most notorious clothes-horse," Kate Flint, in her recent article "The Materiality of *Middlemarch*," briefly mentions this scene and Rosamond's "extreme condescension" toward Mary (69). Rosamond's faulty logic—that Mary is only "nice" because she does good "work"—epitomizes not only her limited world view but also her snobbery. Despite the fact that this off-hand comment doesn't make Rosamond a particularly trustworthy judge of character, Rosamond's opinion of Mary echoes stereotypes about the material expressions of character ingrained in countless other characters in mid-nineteenth-century novels.

With this cavalier, if pointed, remark, Eliot, then, suggests the vexed relationships—not only between classes but also between employee and employer—that often wordlessly haunt mid-nineteenth-century texts. These tacit connections form the underpinnings of daily Victorian life, yet their quotidian nature often renders them too muted to become the stuff of fiction. Of course, other mid-nineteenth-century novelists do examine the intersecting lives of the working and middle classes. Margaret Hale, for example, forges meaningful human connections with mill workers in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-55) and Aurora Leigh reaches out to the destitute distressed needlewoman Marian Erle in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856). On the other side of the Atlantic at the very same time, Herman Melville critiques the exploitation of New-England factory workers through the perspective of a mill tourist in his diptych "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855). Still, these texts—novel, verse novel, and short story—are the exception rather than the rule. Rosamond's back-handed compliment may not be particularly striking on first glance, in part because she fulfills our

expectation for the anti-heroine (who may or may not produce good needlework but who's always self-absorbed) in a novel that's not quite a "condition of England" novel and not quite a novel of manners. Indeed, needlewomen (poor, rich, and middle-class alike) and their critics populate almost every mid-nineteenth-century novel; however, it's easy to dismiss Rosamond-esque character appraisals as part of a grand narrative for the period: the troubled relationships among workers and the well to do.¹ As we'll see, though, the relationships among needlewomen and their critics are much more complicated. *Middlemarch* shows how seemingly off-hand references to textiles, fabrics, and sewing are central to the finer negotiations between the well to do and the working class.²

For Rosamond's flippant remark isn't just provocative on its own. Eliot comments on it—and Rosamond—a few chapters later, intimating the ramifications of such a limited or condescending world-view. While Rosamond may think of Mary Garth as the girl who can sew her beloved double-hemmed frills, in chapter forty the narrator dwells on Mary joking about Rosamond's sewing requests. Sitting at the cozy Garth family breakfast table, Mary jests with her brother Ben, "prick[ing] his hand lightly with her needle" and refusing to make "a peacock with this bread-crumbs" because she "must get this sewing done" (381). "This sewing" is Rosamond's trousseau, and Mary subtly passes judgment on Rosamond's ridiculous desires. Rosamond "is to be married next week," Mary notes, "and she can't be married without this handkerchief" (381). "With a grave air of explanation," Mary says the handkerchief "is one of a

¹ For this reason, my dissertation isn't a study of a character type we often associate with the mid-nineteenth century: the distressed needlewoman. In fact, there's a rich body of criticism about the distressed needlewoman type. In particular, Lynn Alexander's *Women, Work & Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (2003) and Beth Harris's *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (2005) both trace distressed needlewomen in Victorian art and literature. While their monographs each only focus on British industrial novels, Alexander and Harris do argue for the centrality of working-class seamstresses in Victorian literature. For a fuller discussion of these two books, see Talia Schaffer's "Women and Domestic Culture."

² Moreover, as Kate Flint argues, *Middlemarch* extends mid-nineteenth century social patterns we might see materialized most clearly through the textile trade: how people in rural England and rural New England produced the very threads that bound people to one another (69).

dozen,” so she must finish it, because “without it there would only be eleven” (381). Mary’s sarcastic tone intimates her feelings, but the narrator’s pithy commentary—“Mary ended merrily, amused with the last notion”—only further reinforces her levity: she recognizes that marriage requires important decisions beyond how many handkerchiefs to own and the style of frills on one’s petticoats (381).³ Mary’s sarcasm, then, matches Rosamond’s backhanded compliment: both get their edge in with one another through commentaries that displace character judgments onto the making of material objects.⁴

Mary may be, as F.R. Leavis famously argues, Rosamond’s “antithesis,” yet she is “equally real” (68). Mary, too, is wed by the end of the novel, and she is just as complicated as Rosamond, though her trousseau isn’t as ornate. While these characters are more than their clothes and their sewing, this brief intersection intimates the many complex, nuanced ways that cloth brought such opposing visions of femininity in direct juxtaposition with one another. D.A. Miller also suggests these tenuous connections are central to the narrative project of

³ Although they are far-reaching, these textile metaphors ultimately consider the relationship among individuals, communities, and nations. The humor in Mary’s explanation, for example, underscores Eliot’s interest in subjectivity throughout *Middlemarch*. For Mary and her jocular reinforcement just how very narrow Rosamond’s worldview really is. Rosamond may reduce Mary to the piecework she’s been hired to complete, but through “the web” of *Middlemarch* and her larger narrative project, Eliot highlights the limitations of Rosamond’s point of view with multiple perspectives that cut across traditional boundaries of class and gender. We may be “made to feel from within the circumference of Rosamond’s egoism,” F.R. Leavis argues, yet we also see her “femininity [as] incapable of intellectual interests, or of idealism of any kind” (67, 66). In his review of *Middlemarch*, which appeared in *The Galaxy* (March 1873), Henry James suggests the novel should have ended with Dorothea’s and Lydgate’s marriage, but he also notes that “if this train had been followed we should have lost Rosamond Vincy—a rare psychological study” (580). The loss of a rich, if somewhat minor, character would have been crucial to James, for at the beginning of his review he declares the novel “a treasure-house of details, but it is an indifferent whole” (578). In turn, D.A. Miller emphasizes Rosamond’s limitations. She, according to Miller, is “particularly instructive, because [she] virtually abolishes the difference between the immanence of ‘everyday-things’ and the transcendence of ‘the greatest things’” (134). More recently, Linda K. Hughes has contended that Rosamond’s unsympathetic character is integral to Eliot’s narrative project: “Eliot’s inconsistent representation of Rosamond (relative to other characters in the novel) is of a piece with the novel’s project of idealizing authorship. Within this framework Rosamond functions as a trope for those pressures exerted on authors that could subvert idealized conceptions of their role” (159-60).

⁴ Eliot expresses a similar sentiment in an 1870 letter to Mrs. Charles Lee Lewes: “The last sentence in your letter—‘I am very well,’—was especially welcome. Don’t hang too much over dress-making, lest it should cease to be true” (*Letters* 109). As with Mary’s pragmatic approach to piecework, Eliot preaches the ill-effects of dwelling on needlework too long. In recognizing—and acknowledging—these “real” interests, Eliot (along with Mary) suggests that clothes (or making clothes) often merely stands in for that which can’t be said, becoming a displacement for larger, unspoken, perhaps even existential, concerns.

Middlemarch. The novel, Miller contends, often “complicate[s] the easy analogies that bind different characters together as a single dilemma, a “manifold richness” that “passes comment on the social processes involved: for if the text’s perception is subtle and discriminating, the community’s conduct is generally blunt and insensitive” (121). The relationship between seamstress and customer, for example, is one that would have been so commonplace in the mid-Victorian world that it’s almost beyond mentioning.⁵ Yet Eliot pauses to dwell, however momentarily, on this form of Victorian domestic employment, and in doing so, she further articulates both Rosamond’s and Mary’s humanity—and the way they mutually define one another through the real things that connect their stories.

Indeed, textiles were the stuff of daily life throughout the mid-nineteenth century, and not because (or not merely because) needlework, whether fancy embroidery or plain sewing, was nearly ubiquitous for women.⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century, the very fabric that often occupied

⁵ In *At Home with the Georgians*, Amanda Vickery underscores how needlework was a livelihood for many women: “For every celebrated female amateur there was an army of women for whom craft skills furnished a livelihood, as teachers, tutors, educational authors and occasionally exhibitors. Plain sewing was demanded of female servants, the largest single occupational category for women. The archetypal labouring woman was the seamstress; millinery and mantua making the quintessentially feminine businesses” (236).

⁶ Even Eliot, the ever-cerebral writer, recorded the handmade things she made and received. While she was writing *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot uncharacteristically filled her personal letters with descriptions of sewing projects. In multiple letters to Elma Stuart during 1874 and 1875, Eliot discusses Stuart’s handicraft gifts. A present of “delicate woolen things,” for example “well represent[s] the warmth and tenderness of Elma’s love,” for, as Eliot declares, “[t]here is hardly any bodily comfort I prefer to these gossamer woolen garments which give one warmth without weight” (81). Similarly, a “very beautiful” petticoat is “perfect in colour and in texture far better than any bat’s wing I have ever been indulged with,” yet the garment “is not *par* for Elma’s presence and tenderness, but it is a pretty message from her” (243). In each instance, Eliot acknowledges and appreciates the very tactile properties of the presents alongside their poignant significance. For a woman who very rarely discusses material goods or wealth in her personal correspondence, these thank you notes—and their gifts—convey the intimacy of her relationship with Stuart. Even more telling is a letter from Eliot to Stuart in which she describes her own sewing project, a rare event. Recovering from neuralgia and other ailments, Eliot champions the comfortable garment she made for herself and imagines its usefulness for Stuart, too:

I have made a new era of comfort for myself by devising the simplest thing possible in the way of braces to hold up my flannel and calico drawers, and I am wondering whether I have the start of you in invention so that I can actually give you a hint of ease in return for all the thoughts and stitches you have given me. This mighty birth of my mind consists of two fine flannel strips about 2 ½ or 3 inches wide pinned to the aforesaid garments with safety pins and crossed over the back just where a little warmth is agreeable to the marrow. They cause no cutting or pressure, and in warm weather—if such a condition should ever again occur in our part of this planet—I have reflected that the flannel may be replaced by strips of washing silk. This is the humble

the hands of women of all classes and on both sides of the Atlantic also played a pivotal role in the economy and politics of both the British Empire and the United States. Such common tropes as the distressed needleworker, the textile mill, cotton plantations, and wealthy women doing “work” appear in passing, yet because they rarely dominate nineteenth-century narratives, they are rarely taken seriously by critics. Still, as *Middlemarch* illustrates, textiles affect almost every facet of the mid-nineteenth-century world, transcending class, gender, and professional boundaries. The economic ramifications of cloth extend beyond Rosamond’s trousseau.

The ribbon and dye factories Beer discusses in her article “What’s Not in *Middlemarch*” may sustain much of the hamlet’s economy, but their products—or ones like them—also are the raw materials that women use for plain sewing, clothing, and fancywork, all activities that appear, albeit fleetingly and almost silently, throughout the novel. While Flint argues that Eliot’s “own rhetorical habit of analogy ensures that she is continually turning the conceptual into the material” and that Eliot “reveals a good deal about how the dominant discourse of a society permeates not just the minds of its imagined inhabitants but the ways in which it is described as well,” critics continue to discount the material things alluded to in phrases including “threads of connection” and “threads of investigation” (67).⁷

contribution of my intellect in the question of braces. Perhaps you have already found exactly the right thing for yourself, in which case please think of my suggestion only as the loving desire to relieve your dear hips from pressure. (133)

In describing this simple project, Eliot repeatedly associates her needlework and thinking. The braces are both a “mighty birth of [her] mind” and a “humble contribution of [her] intellect,” suggesting the ideological weight with which Eliot imbues these things, even if in jest. Eliot, however, established an intellectual or spiritual kinship with Stuart, for she is the first Eliot tells of *Daniel Deronda*’s composition, even before her publisher John Blackwood. Eliot assumed an uncharacteristically maternal role with Stuart, often signing her letters “Maman,” and the confluence of her emotional generosity with material *things* and immaterial *ideas* recalls a similar comingling in *Daniel Deronda*.

⁷ Beer reads the advertisements that were published in the serial publications of *Middlemarch*. Because of the passing references to the ribbon and dye factories near Middlemarch, she pays particular attention to the many advertisements for fabric-related items, particularly sewing machines, dyes, and clothing. “Are industrial workers excluded from this work?” Beer contends, “that is a generally held current critical opinion. But in the nearby villages are the handloom weavers and in Middlemarch itself the dyers: Mr. Vincy, mayor of Middlemarch (‘a very good fellow’) is also, as Mrs. Cadwallader says, ‘one of those who such the life out of the wretched handloom

Alongside the hints at factory work, we see middle- and upper-class women who are often described holding a piece of half-finished fancy-work. Rosamond, for example, dabbles in embroidery, if only to fill the void of unfulfilling days. While she clearly gains no satisfaction from such work, she frequently sits “languidly wondering what she should do next, her habitual industry in small things, even in the days of her sadness, prompting her to begin some kind of occupation, which she dragged through slowly or paused from lack of interest” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 754).⁸ Dorothea, tellingly, avoids sewing altogether, instead devoting herself to her cottage project, Casaubon’s research, or Lydgate’s hospital.⁹ Mary, in contrast, has little choice in sewing Rosamond’s trousseau, because it sustains her family.

None of these women gain pleasure from plying a needle, but their relationships with “work” are strikingly different, reflecting the relationship countless nineteenth-century women and their needles, thread, and cloth. While critics and characters alike often dismiss sewing (especially sewing done by a heroine in a novel of manners) as a frivolous preoccupation,

weavers in Tipton and Freshitt. That is how his family look so fair and sleek.’ (ch. 34, 307). The cloth these weavers produce is dyed by some new methods. And the new dyes rot the silk” (23). Flint also reminds us, “The society of Middlemarch is bound up with the material in the most literal of senses. The town’s economy, like that of its outlying villages, relied heavily on the textile industry—specifically, the weaving of silk ribbons” (“What’s not in *Middlemarch*” 67).

⁸ In *Novel Craft*, Schaffer discusses the middle-class woman and “work”: “The Victorian domestic handicraft was not just one hobby among others. For middle-class Victorian subjects, the handicraft was virtually unavoidable. Handicrafts would tend to precede and thus shape experiences of literature in the lived experience of Victorian readers and reviews. Middle-class and upper-class nineteenth-century children wore embroidered or crocheted clothing, sat on Berlin wool work upholstery, gazed at scrap screens, noticed craft instructions in their favorite magazines, watched their mothers do fancywork in the evenings, participated in or watched their sisters perform craft activities, saw their fathers wearing home-decorated items, visited bazaars, and examined handicrafts in their friends’ houses. In other words, Victorian children of the educated classes spent their formative years among handicrafts, so the craft’s aesthetics would have already been internalized as the paradigmatic form of women’s work by the time the individual came to read and judge novels” (21). “Domestic handicraft was the standard against which women’s writing was constantly compared,” Schaffer continues, “when nineteenth-century writers talked about ‘women’s work,’ what they meant was the work of the hands, the needle. ‘Work’ meant sewing; ‘stuff’ meant fabric. [...] Sewing (the largest category of domestic handicraft) was among the most fundamental categories of activity” (21).

⁹ While we know Dorothea doesn’t sew, the latest edition of the Oxford World Classic *Middlemarch* features a painting of a woman—Dorothea, presumably—sewing.

women's needlework is a real part of the aesthetic and economic structures of the era.¹⁰ Whether needlework is a source of aesthetic pleasure or economic necessity, these seemingly small creations still reflect the sweeping impact of cloth that connects the parlor to the cotton mill, an idea I return to again and again in this dissertation. While *The Scarlet Letter*'s Hester Prynne, *Miss Marjoribanks*'s Lucilla Marjoribanks, and *Washington Square*'s Catherine Sloper don't have much in common at first glance, all three women are in large part defined by the only "work" they can do: sewing. Of course, the distressed needlewoman is a common (and frequently discussed) nineteenth-century trope, but it's also one that should be placed within a larger historical context, and one that includes the fruitful connections between *Aurora Leigh*'s Marian Earle, and the nameless, blank faces of the factory "girls" in Melville's "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." These women, along with Hester Prynne, Lucilla Marjoribanks, and Catherine Sloper, spend their days working with cloth, yet their working conditions range from garret to factory to parlor. For every woman who finds pleasure in wielding a needle, there's another who does so for economic solvency. Each one, however, is dependent upon the larger, global textile industry, which shipped raw cotton from the United States to British textile mills in Manchester and American mills in New England, wove it into cloth in these British and American factories, and sold it in shops on both sides of the Atlantic.

As a novel that is in many ways about middles, *Middlemarch* is historically, politically, and in terms of subject matter about intersections and transitions. While *Middlemarch* was written between 1869 and 1872, Eliot's backward-looking narrative focuses on 1829 to 1832. The gap of time between when the novel was written and its narrative moment spans the early- and mid-Victorian period when textiles became the primary commodity of the mid-century

¹⁰ Schaffer also discusses the relationship among women's handicrafts, Victorian culture, and nineteenth-century commerce in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*.

British Empire. As Gillian Beer has aptly noted, many important technological, textile-based inventions such as synthetic dyes and the sewing machine were also introduced between the novel's setting and the novel's publication. These forty years, then, were pivotal in the way Victorians reconceived of their relationship with what they bought and what they wore. From the rise of the cotton mills in Manchester and the shift in calico production from India to England, to the rise of sewing and mechanical weaving machines and the increasingly fraught transatlantic raw cotton trade, personal, national, and international politics should, in many ways, be read through the textile industry.

Textiles and “work” aren’t limited to the domestic sphere of Middlemarch or to Rosamond’s solipsistic concerns. As Flint argues, “the society of Middlemarch is bound up with the material in the most literal of senses. The town’s economy, like that of its outlying villages, relied heavily on the textile industry—specifically the weaving of silk ribbons” (67).¹¹ Indeed, the Vincy family fortunes rely upon textiles: Mr. Vincy owns a ribbon factory, so Rosamond’s trousseau (and Mary Garth’s piecework) is funded by cloth manufacturing. Mr. Plymdale also owns a factory where silk is dyed. While neither of these industrial operations is of central concern to the plot of the novel, they are mentioned and discussed frequently, often critically, further articulating the nuances of the Middlemarch web that places all people, ideas, and occupations in relation with one another.¹² Mrs. Cadwallader, for example, wryly defines Mr. Vincy as “one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers in Tipton and

¹¹ Flint’s article is about the advertisements in the serial publication of *Middlemarch*, and how novel and material culture are one in the same. Flint indirectly suggests that the advertisements published alongside the text of *Middlemarch* would have been aimed at readers more akin to Rosamond than Mary, which speaks to the assumptions publishers had about Eliot’s readership.

¹² Henry Staten suggests Eliot’s narrative silence about the textile industry—pushing it to the margins of the novel—intimates a cultural embarrassment with industrial professions. “The true gentleman,” notes Staten, “is one who never worked and whose father did not work either or even have too immediate a proximity to the material process of production (the scions of the Middlemarch manufacturers are ‘of course [...] too ashamed to mention’ the ‘dyeing and carrying trades’ to which they own their incipient gentility)” (1001).

Freshitt,” and acknowledges that it is such exploitive labor practices that keep the Vincy family “look[ing] so fair and sleek” (311). We never see the “wretched” weavers, but through such gossip we know they exist and are an integral part of the “particular web” of Middlemarch.¹³ Flint argues that this gap between producers and consumers suggests we encounter “Middlemarch and its surrounding parishes as [...] sites of display for its products” instead of “sites of labor in the textile industry” (69). Yet in conversations like the ones the Vincys have in chapter thirty-six, we are invited to see how the textile industry brings together production, consumption, and idle occupation in countless ways.¹⁴

While Mr. Vincy’s treatment of his workers is questionable—similar to Thornton’s neutrality toward his workers in *North and South* and the exploitation of the “girls” in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”—he criticizes the similar labor practices of Mr. Plymdale. Plymdale makes large profits “for the glory of God,” remarks Mr. Vincy sarcastically, but “it is not for the glory of the Middlemarch trade” (122). Rather, Mr. Vincy spells out Plymdale’s cutting-edge yet potentially-shoddy business practice of using “those blue and green dyes it gets from the Brassing manufactory,” which “rot the silk” (122). Henry Staten reads Plymdale’s synthetic, shoddy dyes as part of a continuum with other morally dubious choices in the novel. Bulstrode’s story, for example, “differs from others’ only in the degree of its moral and legal dubiety” (1002). Essentially, his immoral choices are equal to Plymdale’s rotting dyes

¹³ Beer concurs, noting that critics often believe “industrial workers [are] excluded” from the web and from the work of Middlemarch, yet they ignore the fact that “in the nearby villages are the handloom weavers and in Middlemarch itself the dyers” (23). Flint, in discussing Mrs. Cadwallader’s perception of Mr. Vincy, similarly notes that while “the weavers themselves are not given a voice by Eliot, this pointed barb remains in our minds when Brooke makes the inept electioneering speech in which he lamely announces his disconnection from the community as a whole by admonishing that ‘It won’t do, you know, breaking machines: everything must go on’” (69).

¹⁴ Eliot further intimates the invisibility of the nearby textile factory when Mr. Brooke runs for office. While they live in close proximity, “[t]he weavers and tanners of Middlemarch, unlike Mr. Mawmsey, had never thought of Mr. Brooke as a neighbor, and were not more attached to him than if he had been sent in a box from London” (479). Eliot’s narrative project may be one of expansion, multiplicity, and connection, but the narrator of *Middlemarch* also suggests the limits of the societal web. The weavers are dependent on government officials for their well-being, and, in turn, Middlemarch’s prosperity depends upon the weavers’ labor, yet these groups are ignorant of one another.

and Vincy's labor practices, and together, their "shamefulness" reveals "the essence of ignoble moneymaking" (1002).¹⁵

These new dyes, notes Beer "are from manganese, as is several times mentioned in the novel," and "sure enough, there were manganese mines in the Midlands in the 1820s and 1830s" (23). Beer places particular importance on the subtle introduction and presence of this new textile-based technology:

the introduction into the novel's economy of the new techniques for producing dyes from manganese makes it clear that, though never placed at the center of concern for any of the prominent characters in the novel, the workers in the mines and the dyeing houses and at the hand-loomers are crucial to the town of Middlemarch, its economy, and its psychic health. These industrial workers are present in the plot and in the discourse of the novel—and their presence may have been more readily recognized by the first readers. (24)

Beer's reading of the Middlemarch textile industry hinges on the simultaneous presence of "Judson's Simple Dyes" advertisements alongside the serial publication of *Middlemarch*, and her insight is illuminating for it shows how ever-present textile businesses were for Eliot's readers.¹⁶ These factories, even if they rarely appear in the novel itself, are integral to the Middlemarch web, and, as Beer posits, "the weaving and dyeing imagery moves through many levels, suggesting the fabric of society and how it rots or is close knit" (23). In her *Quarry* for *Middlemarch*, Eliot copies a definition for manganese from a textbook: "*Uses of Manganese*; In

¹⁵ Rosamond's decision to hire Mary Garth fits a similar pattern of immoral business choices. While she doesn't make any money, *per se*, she does make contracts with seamstresses on with money from her father's textile mill and, later, Lydgate's poor financial decisions.

¹⁶ Beer makes a similar claim about fancywork in *Middlemarch*: "The hand-sewing in the novel—decorative by Rosamond and utilitarian by Mary Garth, and from which Dorothea is exempted by her short sight—is juxtaposed in this first presentation of the novel with the advertisement for the Guelph Sewing Machine" (24).

dyeing & calico printing; in the colouring glass and enamel; in furnishing oxygen & chlorine. It supplies the cheapest oxygen. Also, it is used in making bleaching powder” (551). This *Quarry* entry is unusual: the majority of Eliot’s notes focus on medical terms and practices. Its inclusion, then, intimates Eliot’s interest in dyeing and weaving factories, even if they make only rare appearances in the novel itself.¹⁷

Eliot extends and anticipates her narrator’s critique of Rosamond in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856) where she makes a Mary-like argument about women’s narrow-minded attitudes and characters through her famous name for mid-century novels: the “*mind-and-millinery* species” (978). In “*mind-and-millinery*” novels, a woman is either in preparation for marriage or the product of a failed marriage plot. Although Mary is not the “very lofty and fashionable society” lady who most often populates the “silly” novels Eliot critiques, her plot in *Middlemarch* does pivot on both of these scenarios. She longs to marry Fred Vincy, but their betrothal is thwarted when Fred loses his money. In “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” Eliot exaggerates what happens when petty characters focus on petty details through the moniker “*millinery*,” which suggests that this breed of novel is merely filled with vain women whose self-absorption is most overtly materialized in their hand-decorated frippery. Eliot’s essay may be read in some ways as a sustained mediation on what Nathaniel Hawthorne called “a damned mob of scribbling women” only one year before. Eliot wouldn’t, of course, classify *Middlemarch* as a

¹⁷ Passing references to the textile industry appear elsewhere in the *Quarry*, too: Eliot notes a “cotton spinner” who opposes opening a dispensary at Nottingham and in sketching out the votes for Farebrother or Tyke, she includes “Mr. Plymdale, Dyer” as first on the list (542, 554). And while not specifically related to manganese dyes *per se*, Eliot and her correspondents spend a great deal of time discussing the color of *Middlemarch*’s cover. Barbara Bodichon, for example, bemoans the cover for “not being artistic enough” and goes on to critique the green cloth: The green is not a bad colour much better than the blue of the Spanish Gypsy which was a very hard wicked blue and made me unhappy and a plain Roman letter on that green would have been very nice, do not let them do what they like in dressing your children it does make a difference and I like to see your things in becoming clothes” (*Letters* IX: 34). As with the ethical questions surrounding Mr. Plymdale’s shoddy dyes and Mr. Vincy’s exploitation of the handloom weavers, Mme Bodichon suggests the quality and appearance of the cover is inextricably related to its content. The color, appearance, and quality of its materiality are, then, vitally important.

“*mind-and-millinery*” novel; however, it’s useful to think about how Rosamond’s and Mary’s respective comments about one another’s “*millinery*”—their outward appearance and attention to detail—extend Eliot’s theory about narrative detail and about women’s relationships. Since the publication of “Silly Novels” and *Middlemarch*, many critics have taken up this fundamental question that Eliot posed in novels and in her criticism about novels: can fabrics or critiques of fancy-work tell us something meaningful about a character? are there serious “*mind-and-millinery*” novels?

Bill Brown’s, Elaine Freedgood’s, John Plotz’s, and Talia Schaffer’s recent work on thing theory suggests that serious “*mind-and millinery*” novels are more common than not—and that the details and the things we might associate with “*millinery*,” to borrow Eliot’s term, are absolutely crucial to the characters’ worldviews. Adapting Brown’s thing theory, Freedgood argues in *The Ideas in Things* that things such as cloth may seem inconsequential, but they were, in fact, “highly consequential in the world in which the text was produced” (2).¹⁸ “The knowledge that is stockpiled in these things,” according to Freedgood, “bears on the grisly specifics of conflicts and conquests that a culture can neither regularly acknowledge nor permanently destroy if it is going to be able to count on its own history to know itself and realize a future” (2). For Freedgood and Brown, the concreteness of particular things is worth serious discussion. If we investigate an object “in terms of its own properties and history” and “refigure”

¹⁸ In *A Sense of Things*, Bill Brown posits the American Civil War as ushering in “an era when the invention, production, distribution, and consumption of things rather suddenly came to define a national culture,” changing the way people thought about the work they did and the things they produced (4). While Brown focuses on American novels of the 1890s, his claim that the texts “describe and enact an imaginative possession of things that amounts to the labor of infusing manufactured objects with a metaphysical dimension” applies to novels concerning the war as well (4). The manufactured objects of these earlier novels are, I argue, instilled with even more meaning: instead of being a mere mass-produced object, items we’ll see in chapter two such as the cotton sheet in *Little Women* or the Chinese stamped silk in *Daniel Deronda* are related to contemporaneous national and international events. These things, so inextricably tied to the world around them, often illustrate “the slippage between having (possessing a particular object) and being (the identification of one’s self with that object,” and their presence is “integral to what the text at hand is trying to get said” (Brown 13, 18).

the things “alongside and athwart the novel’s manifest or dominant narrative—the one that concerns its subjects,” then, as Freedgood argues, we can “subvert or upend the literary reading—and not reading—of the things of realism” while “explain[ing] why such readings, which occur in the margins of everyone’s reading all the time in abbreviated or fleeting form, have not been legitimated” (12, 28, 29). For Brown and Freedgood, the thing itself is imbued with significance, and requires both an extended meditation on “the historically and theoretically overdetermined material characteristic of objects” and returning “these objects [...] to their novelistic homes, so that [they] can inhabit them with a radiance or resonances of meaning they have not possessed or have not legitimately possessed in previous literary-critical reading” (5-6).

It comes as no surprise to many Victorianists who’ve long contended with crowded pages full of things that the nineteenth century is home to this turn in the theoretical conversation about realism. Freedgood and Brown both argue that we should think about thing theory and consider the things in these novels real, literal things. Others, such as Plotz, Schaffer, and Suzanne Daly have taken a renewed interest in the things that populate the Victorian novel. But what happens when the things that fill mid-nineteenth-century novels appear as metaphors or conceits—or when we understand them to be metaphors or conceits even when they are real things? Recent critical discussions suggest that thing theory may be useful for readers who don’t explicitly read things as things, for they help us to refocus our attention on nineteenth-century material life. With this in mind, I apply the historical and material historical material often attending thing theory readings to interpretations of textile metaphors and conceits, and I argue that rhetorical uses of fabric, cloth, and sewing often resonate subtly with the literal threads that connected people to one another during the second half of the nineteenth century. In other words, metaphors and conceits held real meaning for people in many cases, because they have non-

metaphorical histories.¹⁹ In this dissertation, I follow Freedgood's, Brown's, and Schaffer's lead and discuss textiles as textiles not just throwaway details, lines, metaphors, or conceits (in line with these thing theorists). At the same time, I challenge the concreteness of thing theory by arguing that in reading textiles as textiles *and* as metaphors, we can trace a tradition of serious "*mind-and-millinery*" novels circulating among English and American readers in the years surrounding both "Silly Novels" and *Middlemarch*: 1850-1880. This project, then, bridges Freedgood's challenge to read things as things with the penchant for literariness she associates with much more traditional criticism.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson also recognized the literary potential of reading things as things, too. And like Anderson, I will show how reading material things as texts and as textiles is important in understanding how people see themselves not only as individuals but also as part of communities, nations, and empires. In fact Anderson recognizes the value of goods to transmit ideas and values across nations and cultures, contrasting the immense possibilities of a book, "a distinct, self-contained object, exactly reproduced on a larger scale," with other early industrial products such as textiles, which can be measured precisely yet are not distinct and self-contained (34). Anderson's examples suggest the printed word can transmit ideas of identity and nationality in a way that other traded goods cannot, but the textile community—one linked by a single commodity and process of growing, producing, selling, and consuming—is one that served as the basis of national identity and imperial ambitions in the nineteenth century. For if Anderson argues that this period is foundational for our modern conception of the nation-state, because readers of newspapers and novels had a shared body of cultural references, then the things that constituted those cultural references, the things that filled

¹⁹ Freedgood argues that if we "investigate" these objects that "do not ascend to metaphorical stature" in novels, then the things "suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the [characters] who use them" (2).

the newspapers and novels, are also crucial to people's sense of belonging to these imagined communities. To extend Anderson's logic, then, we must consider how texts and textiles are, at least in some cases—and especially during this historical period—mutually defining.

As Freedgood contends, to take objects in novels seriously requires “a moment of taking them [objects] literally, followed by a lengthy metonymic search beyond the covers of the text” (5). This is especially true of Eliot, for *Middlemarch* (and like Eliot's *Quarry* for the novel) reveals both “an intense commingling of the literal and the figurative,” and it also shows “how vigorously Eliot tried to reduce or anticipate the random way in which things, as they are read by readers, can take on meaning” (112). If we understand Eliot's doctrine as “No things but in ideas,” then Eliot's web, the metaphor to which the narrator returns again and again, reflects the domestic materials that fill Mary's and Rosamond's hands as well as the ribbon and dye factories that surround Middlemarch (Freedgood 118).

Indeed, Eliot balances the tenuous relationships—connections and disconnections—that fill *Middlemarch* through *webs*, which become one of the most fundamental conceits in the novel.²⁰ Today, *webs* might remind most people of spiders, because the most common contemporary usage of the term; however, the variety of meanings for the word suggested that people associated it less with spiders and much more closely with the same etymology that gives us the verb *to weave* (from the Old English “web” to the Old Frisian “webb,” both of which originated in the first century AD). In fact, the collection of definitions for *web* in the *Oxford*

²⁰ The web was a central image: she also uses it in her correspondence during the years in which she was drafting and publishing *Middlemarch*. Writing to her regular correspondent Alexander Main in 1872, Eliot declares she “should like also to know what is the general web of [his] life—that is, if [he is] ever inclined to tell,” suggesting the pervasiveness of the web metaphor, even bridging fiction and reality (5: 262). In another 1872 letter, Eliot applauds her publisher John Blackwood for “unraveling that most tangled skein of trouble” in relation to the serial publication of *Middlemarch* (5: 307). Just as Eliot recognizes the ethical questions surrounding Rosamond's treatment of Mary and how their acquaintance fits into a larger web of connections and disassociations, she acknowledges the many nuanced complications that attend her own personal and professional relationships. The web, then, isn't just a narrative trope in *Middlemarch*, it also becomes a trope in her metanarrative correspondence about the novel, too.

English Dictionary demonstrates exactly the balance of literal and metaphorical meanings, many of which often connote disparate issues, registers, and even fields of study. For the purposes of my material reading of *Middlemarch*, here are some definitions that recall the manner in which the word *web* is inextricably tied to textiles:

I. 1. a. A woven fabric; *spec.* a whole piece of cloth in process of being woven or after it comes from the loom. Also *collect.*, woven stuff. Often as cognate obj. to *weave*.

b. A breadth of woven material. So medieval Latin *tela*, Old French *toile* (Du Cange).

c. *transf.* and *fig.* Something likened to a woven fabric; something of complicated structure or workmanship. Also, the texture of such a fabric.

d. Used for WARP n. *lit.* and *fig.*

2. a. An article made of woven stuff (e.g. a garment, tapestry, a winding-sheet).

Also *collect.* woven stuff of a particular material or pattern. Now chiefly literary or *arch.*

[. . .]

4. a. A cobweb. Also applied to the filmy textures spun by some caterpillars. Also *collect. sing.*

[. . .]

c. *fig.*; esp. (*a*) a subtly-woven snare or entanglement; (*b*) something flimsy and unsubstantial; fanciful reasoning or the like. Cf. cobweb n. 3.

5. *Paper-making*, etc.

[. . .]

II. 6. a. A tissue or membrane in an animal body or in a plant. Also applied to similar pathological formations.

[. . .]

III. 7. a. A thin white film or opacity growing over the eye; a kind of cataract, albugo, leucoma, or pterygium. Also *pin* and *web*: see *pin and web* n. at PIN n. 4a.

Also *fig. Obs. (web)*

As a nineteenth-century product whose goal was to catalogue all words in the English language and how those words were used, the *OED* and its expansive entry for *web* speak to the encyclopedic scope of *Middlemarch*: It's not until definition 4.a. that we see the "cobweb" definition we now expect, but the entry begins with several definitions about textiles that range from the literal ("woven cloth") to the metaphorical ("Something likened to a woven fabric").

Eliot draws on all of these meanings (from textile to human tissue to perception) throughout *Middlemarch*, and the repeated references to "*threads* of connection," "*threads* of investigations," the *webs* that connect characters to one another, as well as the narrator's passing references to the ribbon and dye factories remind us of colloquial elisions between literal and metaphorical meanings for these words. In fact, Gillian Beer contends, "[f]or Victorian people, woven fabric seems to have been the predominant reference" (*Darwin's Plots* 156).²¹ "Fabric is the key metaphor of the novel," Beer provocatively suggests, and "'this particular web' is not so much the spider's web as cloth, social fabric, and the tissues of the body, and it is a metaphor from fundamental enquiry: 'What is the primitive tissue?'" ("What's not in *Middlemarch*" 21).

²¹ When critics think about Eliot's web, they often reduce read it metaphorically, yet a few recent critics have begun to consider its rich materiality, too. Schaffer suggests the web echoes women's handicrafts: "Eliot's web is composed of threads that must variously be unraveled, disentangled, stretched into connections, knotted into families, spun into alliances, or knit into plots to weave what Gilbert and Gubar call 'Eliot's fictional fabric.' Thus Eliot guarantees her character's intellectual stature by emphasizing her rejection of female handicrafts yet simultaneously uses craft as a self-referential way of understanding her own production" (*Novel Craft* 21-22).

Indeed, the primary, literal definitions of *web* certainly recall Rosamond's trousseau, Mary's hired sewing, and the ribbon and dye factories near Middlemarch (mills we hear about but never see), but they also put the narrator's recurring metaphorical web into perspective: the "fresh threads of connection," the "fresh threads of investigation," and "this particular web" all unite the individual with the community, and private lives with public events (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 90, 140, 133). Through the narrator's passing commentary, Eliot connects most every story line, character, and register with variations of the web metaphor. Rosamond, for example, "ha[s] woven a little future" in her imagination after meeting Lydgate, and, in turn, Lydgate also "[falls] to spinning that web from his inward self with wonderful rapidity" (111, 330). The web, then, becomes a metanarrative idiom: it's not just a metaphor or a conceit but an expression that takes on richer and richer meaning given the *real* significance of textiles in characters' lives.

The narrator and Eliot's readers are much more aware of the web than the Middlemarchers themselves, and yet the narrator reminds us of its ubiquity. As the narrator applies this metaphor with increasing frequency, so we come to know the characters relationally through these "webs" and "threads" of connections instead of merely individually. In fact, the individual characters don't seem so idiosyncratic when the narrator applies the same metaphor to each of them, for the metaphor transcends the idiosyncrasies of each character. While the web describes the relational bonds of a community, it also typifies romantic love:

Young-love making—that gossamer web! Even the points it clings to—the things whence its subtle interlacings are swung—are scarcely perceptible; momentary touches of finger-tips, meetings of rays from blue and dark orbs, unfinished phrases, lightest changes of cheek and lip, faintest tremors. The web itself is made

of spontaneous beliefs and indefinable joys, yearnings of one life towards another, visions of completeness, indefinite trust. (330)

Against the everyday descriptions of Rosamond's trousseau and the much more material connotations in phrases such as the "threads of connection" and the "threads of investigation," this "gossamer web" suggests the possibility for disconnection or disintegration, almost in order to intimate the precious vulnerability of human relationships. Just as the variegated, and often irreconcilable, literal and figurative definitions of *web* in the *OED* show both the genesis and the ever-changing connotations of the word over years and centuries, Eliot's own variegated usages of *web* across *Middlemarch* suggest the inevitable fragmentations that separate individuals from the relationships and the communities they yearn for. In the "Finale" the narrator turns away from the relational bonds—those "threads of connection"—at the heart of the novel and returns to "the fragment of a life, however typical" (793). While Eliot's suggestion that the fragmented, individual life "is not the sample of an even web" seemingly repudiates the rest of the novel, this final, less-than-perfect web actually underscores the narrator's repeated claims (793).²² For while there are endless connections, however fractured they may be, among people and ideas, these associations will never be as tangible as the trousseau Mary sews for Rosamond's unhappy marriage—though they may be much more tenable.

My readings of "threads" and "webs" are, then, about *Middlemarch* specifically and about the way Eliot describes human relationships in her criticism. For if we read "webs" and "threads" as a metanarrative idiom that extends beyond this novel specifically, then we may be able to discern a pattern for serious "*mind-and-millinery*" fiction across Eliot's work and also in the work of her most famous inheritors, especially Henry James. Just as the web in *Middlemarch*

²² Beer even argues that the Finale "repudiates the evenness of spun fabric as a sufficient image of the potentialities of human life" (*Darwin's Plots* 167-68).

literalizes Eliot's narrative project, teasing out the variegated connections both among characters and within a single consciousness, so Eliot's contemporaries use similar webs to map patterns of thinking and networks of relationships. These metaphors form, to borrow Eliot's term, a "gossamer web" among nineteenth-century writers who are now known as the quintessential realists. In his classic essay "The Art of Fiction" (1886), for example, James explains how writers must convey the inevitable relationship between form and content through their very language, because "the idea permeates and penetrates it [the form], informs and animates it [the form], so that every word and every punctuation point contribute directly to the expression" (400). To reinforce his point, James invokes the humble tailor, a seemingly unlikely figure for discussions of what fiction is and how it is to be written: "The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread," for James "never heard of a guild of tailors who recommend the use of the thread without the needle, or the needle without the thread" (400).²³

James eliminates the metaphorical distance between "the story and the novel" or the "idea and the form" and "the needle and the thread" (just as Eliot's web moves between literal and metaphorical meanings), and this deliberate closeness between substance and expression suggests that the literal and the metaphorical aren't as far apart as we might expect, at least for the fictional maker. Here, the form and the content of a novel "are" (they are not just "like") a "needle and thread," without any extra framework. Instead, James extends the metaphor, implicitly transforming novelists into "tailors" whose profession necessitates the proficiency of using both needle and thread together. Just as tailors use needle and thread to achieve the seamless union of separate, intricately cut pieces of cloth, novelists, as James suggests, must also consider the "organic whole" of their writing so that the author is inseparable from the material

²³ Eliot and James both talk about painting, too, and that's the genre critics often take seriously and focus on. Indeed, a sister project to this dissertation could begin with Eliot's discussion of Dutch realism in *Adam Bede* and James's discussion of painting in "The Art of Fiction."

and the tools that constitute his work and not just individual parts (400). The example, moreover, underscores the necessity of such unity. Just as the tailor needs both the needle and the thread, and the author needs both story and novel, these tools and materials become, for James, extensions of something much more immaterial: the creative impulse that makes something out of nothing. For James and Eliot alike, the tailor and the weaver—and the narrator—cannot be separated from the plot of the novel; the narrator’s mind is as much as his/her real or metaphorical materials central to the making of seemingly real people, and these real people are extensions of the narrator’s necessarily tangible worldview.

If fiction’s “idea” and “form” *are* “needle and thread” and the novelist is a “tailor” who deftly wields his needle, then experience—the very stuff of life and the stuff of fiction—must also assume a thread-like structure: “Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms [...] Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind” (388). Here, James enfold the textile’s and the spider’s meaning of *web* and shows how these meanings often overlap in the realist novel, in terms of both form and content. Tellingly, James uses the metaphor we’ve seen Eliot develop as a metanarrative idiom across *Middlemarch* in his most famous description of his own late fiction. His silken web materializes what may be otherwise inarticulable: the same “atmosphere of the mind” Eliot suggests through the two “threads” quoted in the epigraphs to this introduction. Read against one another, Eliot’s and James’s threads suggest both a real materiality we often associate with realism or psychological realism and a fragility we associate with both of their representations of an individual’s consciousness.²⁴

²⁴ The different ways these writers use textile idioms may speak, too, to the meaningful distinctions between their narrative projects. James seems, then, to be appropriating and revising Eliot’s recurring web metaphor. While

It's not just that *Middlemarch* is the quintessential Victorian novel, but that the narrator's turns of phrase have determined much of the language we use to discuss nineteenth-century fiction. Miller, along with countless other critics, argues that *Middlemarch* as "an inevitable reference in our study of traditional form in the nineteenth-century novel" (107). James similarly claims *Middlemarch* "sets a limit to the development of the old-fashioned English novel," an argument Miller sees as central to the discussion of nineteenth-century fiction. James's reading, according to Miller, embodies his "acuteness," but it's also "equally characteristic of [James's] tact that he never went on to specify what sort of limit it set, or even on which side of the limit the novel ultimately came down: whether the limit was set by remaining—just barely—within the assumptions of traditional form, or by going beyond them to a point where their validity would seem challenged" (107). For Miller, "even the ambiguity of [James's] comment offers a useful preliminary formulation of the doubleness that shapes George Eliot's novel itself" (107).

In this introduction, I've traced the multi-layered meanings of textile metaphors and conceits in *Middlemarch* from the local to the global, from the private to the public: what do textiles mean to the individual (to Mary? to Rosamond?), and what do they mean with respect to private relationships? (Rosamond's relationship to Mary and to Lydgate?) what do they mean to the community? (*Middlemarch*?). In this dissertation, I consider the meanings of textiles on each of these levels as well, but in the chapters that follow I work in the inverse—from the global to

James's and Eliot's theories of realism diverge in many ways and, as F.R. Leavis argues, "James develops an art so unlike George Eliot's," their mutual interests in consciousness and its relationship to the larger world is indisputable (15). According to Leavis, "it was George Eliot alone [...] whose work had a direct and significant bearing on [James's] own problem" (15). As with Eliot, James invites us to take this relationship seriously—and literally—for his seemingly metaphorical language reflects a very real relationship between language and the cultural moment. These under-theorized turns of phrase in fact articulate the mid-nineteenth century "atmosphere of mind." Textiles, then, are tantamount to "ideas" in very concrete way. Eliot's and James's webs reflect the historical and material contexts of the mid-nineteenth century world, proposing that consciousness mimics the product that fueled industrialization, busied women of all social classes, and strengthened transatlantic ties between the young United States and Great Britain. While Leavis bases his argument about Eliot's influence on *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), I see a more broadly defined relation between the two and read the central web motif in *Middlemarch* as absolutely central to James's later "The Art of Fiction" (1886). Their association is both metafictional as well as fictional, and runs much deeper than eccentric cases.

the local, from the public to the private—though each chapter shows how textiles always necessarily navigate between these two poles. The chapters that follow are organized into three sections: War; Nation; and Factory and Home.

The first section explores how British novels obliquely respond to the transatlantic cotton trade and the American Civil War. Chapter one reads Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-55) as a case study in how fabric becomes the point of intersection between domestic and industrial products, national and international commerce, and traditionally masculine and feminine actions. Chapter two examines metaphors of fabric remnants and patterns in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), reading the War as a touchstone that epitomizes the novel's multi-layered connections between private individuals and public histories, particularly between young women and significant global events.

Section two locates a relationship between self-sufficient heroines and their burgeoning national allegiances. My third chapter argues that in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hester's life as a seamstress in Puritan New England connects her to nineteenth-century debates about commerce, national identity, and women's work. Similarly, chapter four explores how in *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), Mary Seacole's repeated references to calico reflect problems of globalization at mid-century, even as they also allow her to literalize and exaggerate familiar tropes of English domesticity.

The final section focuses on how women's industrial and domestic needlework shapes their daily lives, fills their empty hours, and points to the limitations placed on a mid-nineteenth-century woman's life regardless of her class. Chapter five argues that Melville's "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855) is an oblique commentary on the Lowell textile mills that underscores the relationship between the actual working conditions in the New-

England factories and the more nebulous damage from the transatlantic literary community's repeated idealization of the Lowell mills. Chapter six traces how the narrators in Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) and James's *Washington Square* (1880) return again and again to Lucilla's and Catherine's fancy-work, which materializes the emptiness of their lives as single women.

These chapters, then, are case studies of how mid-nineteenth-century authors use textiles to explore the relationship among changing individual consciousnesses, fraught national politics, and rapidly developing (inter)national commerce. As writers beyond Eliot and James grapple with how to represent the modern world, they too turned to fabric and the web, and they too position fabric as "fresh threads of connections" within and among individuals and within and among these novels. As Freedgood contends in the conclusion to *The Ideas in Things*, "our nineteenth-century forbears [*sic*] may well have maintained a more complex relationship to the goods by which they were surrounded and mingled" (142). These relationships hinge on ideas and consciousness, for "ideas swarmed in the many and various things of that world" (Freedgood 142). This dissertation considers not just the things themselves, but also how people interpreted them in their individual and collective lives. As we will see, when we read textile metaphors and conceits seriously, there are meaningful things in ideas as often as there are meaningful ideas in things.

CHAPTER 1

“Ladies’ Business” in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*

In the opening chapter of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854-1855), Henry Lennox watches Margaret Hale, her Aunt Shaw, and her cousin Edith inspect Edith’s trousseau, which is replete with exotic Indian shawls, heirlooms passed down from mother to daughter. He scoffs at the women’s attention to the textiles: “Well, I suppose you are all in the depths of business—ladies’ business, I mean. Very different to my business, which is the real true law business. Playing with shawls is very different work to drawing up settlements” (Gaskell 12). Even though trousseaus, heirlooms, and legal settlements are fundamentally part of the same enterprise of marriage agreements and dowries, Henry dismisses the monetary and sentimental value of the Indian shawls as frivolous, and instead vaunts the importance of his “real true” work in the law. Cloth, however, is the very stuff of business throughout *North and South*. The antique shawls are tactile reminders of the robust international trade and the growing imperial interests at mid-century, but they also represent how money circulates in the novel and how cloth is often the point of intersection between domestic and industrial products, national and international commerce, and traditionally masculine and feminine actions. For Gaskell, textiles typify moments of human connection and understanding far more than the “real true law business” Henry practices.

Just as these foreign garments travel from the Shaw household to Edith’s new home in Corfu upon her marriage, similar exchanges recur throughout the novel, often establishing

important relationships between characters and between characters and larger social concerns. The novel, for example, juxtaposes Margaret's coming of age and Milton-Northern's economic progress. In fact, as the plot unfolds, Margaret's changing fortunes become increasingly intertwined with the future prosperity of the Milton-Northern textile mills. This fusion of personal and industrial destinies reflects the novel's narrative project of drawing connections. The shawls (and other heirlooms) may recall the similarities between cloth and cash in business and marriage negotiations, but by the final chapter of the novel, Margaret Hale negotiates her own business and marriage settlement by sharing her "heirloom" with her fiancé: her inheritance, which saves Thornton's textile mill.²⁵ As Pamela Parker claims, "*North and South* advocates an integration of domestic and industrial economies, male and female spheres of influence, and public and private life" (1). As one of the most representative mid-nineteenth-century Condition of England novels, Gaskell's *North and South* traces Margaret Hale's coming of age not only alongside Milton-Northern's economic progress but also alongside England's imperial worldview.

This chiasmus—between textile and capital, masculine and feminine, public and private—that bookends the novel highlights the tangible value of fabric throughout *North and South*. The financial viability of the mills turns out to be contingent on the development of Margaret's self-understanding, ideas of justice, and romantic interest in John Thornton. Thus, while *North and South* traces Margaret's subjectivity, Gaskell repeatedly calls attention to the very real relationship between consciousness and social action. Textiles aren't just "ladies' business"; they're the metaphorical language of human relationships and the very concrete

²⁵ Pamela Parker similarly discusses the relationship between the opening and closing scenes of the novel, but for a different emphasis. Her reading of the conclusion highlights how "the private language of romantic courtship is displaced by the public discourse of 'Political Economy,'" while she suggests "the first scene satirically details the opportunities the wedding provides the Shaws for displaying the family wealthy" (1,2). For Parker, "ladies' business" rightly acknowledges "the important economic and public dimensions of private life" (2).

product of national identity in a novel concerned with both the local gender politics of romantic relationships and the global future of England's primary industry. The Indian shawls—and textiles in general—realize the union of the two.

While critics frequently read *North and South* as a novel about individual human connections and their ability to bridge cultural and class disparity, critical discourse surrounding the novel often focuses on either the gender politics or the cultural context of the novel.²⁶ Reading the novel through its attention to fabric, however, yields a more fruitful, comprehensive discussion of these two narrative strands. Textiles—heirlooms passed down from mother to child, presents sent from foreign nations, dresses worn by “ladies,” and cloth woven in Milton-Northern's mills—are a material and economic representation of the “web of connections” among nations, people, and labor throughout the novel.

The first chapter of the novel and its discussion of the Shaw family Indian shawls establish the prevalence and value of textiles: “all the beautiful Indian shawls and scarves the General gave to [Aunt Shaw]” fill Edith's elaborate trousseau, for which Aunt Shaw has “spared no expense” (9). These shawls, with their “spicy Eastern smell,” aren't just heirlooms passed down from mother to daughter. They're also a physical reminder of Aunt Shaw's husband—Captain Shaw—and his career in the Royal Navy. As a souvenir of Captain Shaw's far-reaching military service, the shawls illustrate the very real connections between an individual, domestic life and an imperial, global one. In their discussions of *North and South*, critics often think about these lives discreetly and separated in gendered terms; I argue, however, that the “business” of the shawl unites these seemingly disparate strands of nineteenth-century life in meaningful ways.

²⁶ Critics who discuss *North and South* often focus either on the novel's gender and social politics or on the novel's mid-nineteenth-century cultural context. For readings that address the gender and social politics of the novel, see especially Deirdre David, Dorice Williams Elliott, Pamela Parker, Catherine Barnes Stevenson, and Sue Zemka. For readings that focus on the cultural context of the novel, see especially Suzanne Daly, Catherine Gallagher, John Kanwit, Julia Sun Joo Lee, Stefanie Markovits, Elizabeth Starr, and David Thiele.

If Gaskell ever had a Dickensian moment, this is it: the caricatured similarity between the name “Shaw” and the family “shawls,” an item that marks their imperial inheritance. Once brought home to England as a token of romantic affection, the shawl now leaves the British Isles for Corfu, both an international location and an outpost of the British Empire.

Similarly, the shawl itself epitomizes the relationship between the edges and center of the Britain’s political dominance. In her discussion of *North and South*, Suzanne Daly notes the cultural significance of these shawls in the mid-nineteenth century:

[T]hey are ubiquitous in the domestic novels of the time where [...] they function at once as a marker of respectable English womanhood and as magical and mysterious “oriental” garments. They are also a coveted gift that men returning from colonial service in India bestow upon their mothers and sisters in a move that symbolizes the fitting and desired conclusion to a man’s career in India: coming home wealthy, bearing the spoils of the East even as he reenters domestic space. (“Kashmir Shawls in Mid-Victorian Novels” 238)

Mrs. Shaw’s gift materializes imperial meaning, and, in effect, she passes on this worldview to her daughter when she gives her the Indian shawl. Edith, the future wife of a Royal Naval officer, will take these imperial heirlooms with her to Corfu. Much like the shawls themselves, Edith’s new home hints at an expanding domestic existence while also emphasizing the transmission of a British national identity across the globe. Corfu’s positioning at the far edge of Europe, on the margins of European geography and culture, reflects the metonymic work of the shawl: it is something that’s at once familiar and distinctly foreign. Thus, Edith not only gains a valuable garment, which would have been a recognizable marker of lineage, but an understood lesson in her family’s history. While Henry Lennox’s “real true business”—wills and dowries—

makes explicit family inheritance through legal documents and transactions, Mrs. Shaw's present would have been imbued with subtle resonances that point to her family's worldly connections. Edith's acceptance of the Indian shawl acknowledges her place within the cosmopolitan world.²⁷

When worn benignly on mothers and daughters, the shawls serve as an ornamental reminder of how borders of nations and national identity were unsettled in the nineteenth century. Daly argues that in *North and South* "Indian shawls are largely stripped of their foreign (or at least Eastern) resonances and instead stand in for the established [...], the handmade [...], and that which can only be inherited or handed down, never purchased," yet their seemingly polite appearance in the opening chapter of this novel actually emphasizes both the condition of England and its national textile industry and the status of England within an increasingly transnational world of commerce ("Kashmir Shawls in Mid-Victorian Novels" 249). The shawls do embody the handmade, heirloom qualities valued by English "ladies" like Aunt Shaw, but at the same time, they also—equally—illustrate the international textile market alluded to (if not explicitly discussed) throughout the novel. Fabrics, especially family heirlooms that span the problem of geography and national eruptions, should be read as shorthand for characters' quiet awakenings to "cosmopolitan" issues. In a novel that's often read in terms of England itself, these gifts suggest an outward focus. By possessing and passing down these fine garments, the families—women—of England establish their domestic identity (in both the home and national sense) as one that's inextricably linked to the larger world.²⁸

²⁷ Ideas of "gifts" and inheritance are much more common in critical discussions of *Daniel Deronda* (see Irene Tucker, for example), but I see very similar concerns at play in *North and South*.

²⁸ For example, the colors in the opening description of the sofa and Edith's clothing echo issues of national identity and transnationalism. Edith's white and blue ensemble recalls her future home on Corfu as well as her upcoming role as a naval wife on an international stage. Furthermore, together, the red, white, and blue fabrics resemble the national flags of not only the United Kingdom but also France and the United States, two nations whose revolutions were in recent cultural memory. While these two nations are not settings in the novel, issues of liberty, democracy, and transatlantic trade, which would have been associated with them, are pivotal. In 1854-55, the resonances of

In fact, these Indian shawls, which appear alongside other wedding presents of Spanish mantillas and Dutch linen, merely hint at the transnational scope of *North and South*. Critics have only recently begun to address the global vision of the novel, considering the discussions of revolution and liberty that reach beyond the contexts of labor unions and national borders. It is through this transatlantic lens I read the novel. Instead of isolating domestic and international issues, *North and South* reconsiders how older domestic interests and newer cosmopolitan ones are linked fundamentally, especially through the textiles that physically travel between nations and individuals.

The convergence of marriage, worldly textiles, and even cosmopolitan identity is most fully realized in Margaret's brother Frederick's marriage announcement. Exiled to Spain, Frederick writes Margaret of his engagement to Dolores, a Spanish woman, an announcement that appears alongside "his renunciation of England as his country" and his desire to "unnative himself" (312). Frederick's choice to mingle these important choices—a wife and a nation—makes evident the far-reaching effects of transnational commerce, which cloth represents throughout the novel. Indeed, the narrator contends that, symbolically, "Frederick's worldly position was raised by this marriage on to as high a level as they could desire" (313). As with the other marriages in the novel, this one is marked by the exchange of foreign fabrics. The letter announcing the couple's marriage includes "a splendid black lace mantilla, chosen by Dolores herself for her unseen sister-in-law, whom Frederick has represented as a paragon of beauty, wisdom, and virtue" (312-13). By sending a mantilla, a garment associated with Spanish femininity, to Margaret, the "paragon" of, presumably, British beauty, Dolores establishes a personal relationship with the foreign sister-in-law whom she has not met, insists on the specific

references to France and the United States would have been striking: Revolutionary tumult in France would have been winding down while tensions in the American union were ever increasing.

(national) glamour of her own culture, and suggests that the value of textiles transcends national identity. As the most mobile character in the novel, Frederick chooses a more cosmopolitan identity by renouncing his English citizenship: his and Dolores's choice of the mantilla marks an understanding of the world based on the mobility and universal aesthetic pleasure in specific material goods. Margaret's reaction to the present—"the mantilla [is] exquisite!"—only further affirms the transnational meaning fine cloth potentially has (313). While Margaret appreciates the gift as a well-chosen *thing*, she lacks the worldly experience to put its meaning into words; it's merely, if gushingly, "exquisite." Like the second-generation Indian shawls, the Spanish mantilla is a present passed between women and dependent upon the women embracing cosmopolitan, worldly identities in establishing domestic, familial bonds.

Frederick's expatriation to Spain and Edith's move to Corfu indicate a distinct Mediterranean subtext in the novel. These two nations represent the blurring borders of national and ethnic identity. Geographically, both Spain and Corfu are gateways to more exotic regions: Spain is the closest European nation to Morocco and Africa whereas Corfu is the Western-most Greek island. Travelers seeking adventure and increasingly worldly experiences would have had to pass through these countries on their way to their ultimate destination. Moreover, Spain is an amalgam of cultures and history. With its Moorish and Catholic influences, Spain would have looked very different from the English surroundings with which the Hale family was familiar. Dolores's gift of the mantilla epitomizes the cultural discrepancies. Not only is the lace a beautiful, foreign textile that would have been a distinctive accessory in England, but it also signifies Spain's deep religious roots—wearing a mantilla was necessary for women to enter a church. Distinctly Spanish, the word *mantilla* sounds exotic against the otherwise distinctly English dialects of the Hale family, underscoring memories of Spain's complicated relationship

with England. Thus, Dolores's sending a mantilla as an introductory present for Margaret suggests more than establishing a personal friendship between sisters-in-law; the textile embodies the possibilities for nations to renegotiate political and economic allegiances with one another as well. Dolores sends a single mantilla across the channel, but it signifies the possibilities for transnational dialogue and trade as more people choose to "unnative" themselves as they claim new families. If Margaret wears the mantilla in England, she honors—and advertises—her family's (inter)national expansion.

Hand-sewn wedding gifts become a motif for a larger discussion of family lineage across story lines in *North and South*. When Mrs. Thornton believes her son has proposed to Margaret, her immediate reaction—to ready a wedding gift of household linen—expresses a similar urge to forge meaningful family connections with heirlooms. As with Dolores's mantilla, Mrs. Thornton's bridal linen is of foreign origin:

The newly-married couple-to-be would need fresh household stocks of linen; and Mrs. Thornton had clothesbasket upon clothesbasket, full of table-cloths and napkins [...] There was some confusion between what was hers, and consequently marked G.H.T. (for George and Hannah Thornton), and what was her son's—bought with his money, marked with his initials. Some of those marked G.H.T. were Dutch damask of the old kind, exquisitely fine; none were like them now. (193)

Mrs. Thornton, albeit less willingly, will pass on her fine bridal linen, including, presumably, the "Dutch damask of the old kind, exquisitely fine." As with Mrs. Shaw's heirloom shawls, the origin, quality, and obscurity of the Dutch damask is of primary importance. Both fabrics also

bear the signature of the previous owner's marriage and a family's imperial identity; their elusiveness enhances the monetary and metaphorical value of the unions, old and new.

Mrs. Thornton's rare Dutch damask is not the only valuable heirloom fabric she owns. When Margaret and Mrs. Hale first meet Mrs. Thornton, Mrs. Hale is "captivated" by Mrs. Thornton's "real old lace [...] of that old English point which has not been made for this seventy years, and which cannot be bought" (89). In fact, the antique lace, which "must have been an heir-loom, and shows that she had ancestors," is visual proof to Mrs. Hale that Mrs. Thornton is "worthy of something more than the languid exertion to be agreeable" (89). Though Mrs. Hale's remark—"she had ancestors"—may be read with an off-hand nonchalance, it in fact realizes ideas worked out much more subtly by other characters throughout the novel: people's material belongings and the family relationships they signify. Mrs. Hale isn't just saying Mrs. Thornton "had" family that came before her; she's acknowledging, as Bill Brown might argue, who Mrs. Thornton really is through her possession of the antique lace. By connecting Mrs. Thornton's lineage to her "real old lace [...] which cannot be bought," Mrs. Hale calls attention to the close relationship among heirloom, origin, and family bonds in the novel.

While Mrs. Thornton won't be involved with any literal exchange of money or dowry, her heirloom textiles are clearly precious and representative of a tasteful, worldly, and privileged identity; in passing down the linen, Mrs. Thornton symbolically ascribes these attributes to Margaret's and John's supposed marriage. Moreover, instead of saving these heirlooms for Fanny, her biological daughter, Mrs. Thornton prepares these linens for Margaret, her prospective daughter-in-law, without a second thought. This instinctive decision intimates the meaning of the heirlooms. While she cannot become a blood relation, Margaret's incorporation into the Thornton family will be marked with Mrs. Thornton's gift. As with Mrs. Thornton's

antique lace, Mrs. Thornton's gift of the bridal linen will underscore the strength of the Thornton family line, suggesting that Margaret, too, "ha[s] ancestors" and is someone in part because of her material inheritance and, that more importantly, as a new member of the Thornton family, Margaret will make ancestors as the wife of the Thornton son and heir.

Identity and marital union are imprinted—literally—on the cloth Mrs. Thornton sorts. By once stitching both her and her husband's names as a single initial and now using those initials to sort them from her son's purchases, Mrs. Thornton creates a kind of signature binding her appreciation of cloth and her sense of self. Mrs. Thornton's linens bear the marks of her own marriage—G.H.T—with the union of her and her husband's names. Accordingly, she reflects on her son's supposed engagement by preparing this linen for his new bride, "unpicking the G.H." and "search[ing] for the Turkey-red marking-thread to put in new initials" (193). In physically removing her and her husband's initials, preparing to sew John's and Margaret's joined ones, and imagining giving Margaret the "clothes-basket upon clothes-basket" of linens, Mrs. Thornton enacts the business of marriage through handling the textiles. Stitching Margaret's and John's combined initials is a textual detail akin to a legal marriage contract or religious wedding service. In each case, two individuals are joined together in a single marriage bond. In a novel about both human connections and the transnational textile market, this silent moment is a poignant reminder of the intersections of the two.

Julia Sun-Joo Lee aptly argues that "Frederick introduces an international context to a novel that has traditionally been read in national terms," and, more specifically, that Frederick's maritime career "highlights the Anglo-American connection most immediately relevant to Lancashire's operatives and manufacturers, that between the British textile industry and its American competitors and suppliers" (450, 454). As a former sailor who chooses Spain as his

new home, Frederick, according to Lee, “is the novel’s most direct link between the cotton-producing American South and the cotton-manufacturing British North” (454). By shifting the focus away from British politics alone, Lee asserts “Frederick’s plight exposes the complexities of cosmopolitan identity in the nineteenth century, as Britain and her citizens struggled to reconcile national and international allegiances in the face of shifting political and economic interests” (455).

While I am not focusing on Frederick, the transatlantic scope of the novel that Lee traces through Frederick’s character can be even more explicitly discussed through its attention to the international cotton market, something Lee only mentions in passing.²⁹ For reading *North and South* through its forward-thinking politics invites us to consider how the novel “begins to reproduce the condition of America, elevating to the geopolitical level the mutual dependence of the two nations and their inhabitants” (Lee 465). Paul Giles similarly notes “that by the mid nineteenth century the ‘condition of England’ question that so much troubled Victorian Britain came to be reconceived in transnational terms,” and the relationship between the two nations “took on added importance during this period, as the two countries found themselves increasingly intertwined economically and politically” (295). Lee merely outlines the implications of their economic interdependence in terms of the textile industry, so important for both the United States and Britain: “In the nineteenth-century global economy, the domestic

²⁹ Lee suggests the “North” and “South” of Gaskell’s title are possible allusions to the American North and South. I think this claim is implausible, but her overall argument about transnational relations—and the cotton market’s role in them—illuminates an important strand of the novel that has only recently gained critical attention. Gaskell, obviously, was not predicting the American Civil War with her choice of title, but the novel’s repeated references to the United States do reflect the already tense political climate of the United States in the 1850s. Britons would have been familiar with the financial crisis of 1837, which affected Southern plantation owners, and the newly passed Fugitive Slave Law, which also heightened tensions between the American North and South. As such, through its title and many passing references to the United States, Gaskell subtly alludes to the many long-simmering intra-national concerns. In privileging these politically-minded narrative asides, Gaskell, as Lee argues, anticipates her “agonized feelings about the American Civil War, a national conflict that places at its center the global problem of slavery” (455).

stability of England depended on the domestic stability of America. An interruption in cotton supplies caused by an American civil war and the abolition of slavery would be devastating to England, creating a ripple effect that would disrupt the manufacturing industry and trigger economic crisis” (465). Giles and other transnational critics invite us to think about the ways in which *North and South* worries about the imminent war and the impending disruptions to the cotton industry; textiles are the literal and metaphorical threads unifying the novel. In the remainder of this chapter I will discuss how communication and human relationships in the novel can be traced through either the textile-language Gaskell uses to characterize them or the way in which they revolve around (or change because of) fabric. These cloth-related metaphors emphasize why characters take seriously things like monograms (text in thread), titles, and identity.

The increasingly complex connections between Britain and the United States are subtly yet repeatedly mentioned throughout *North and South*. Specifically, the transnational relationship is discussed only in terms of textiles. One of the first conversations we overhear in the Thornton house concerns the price of American yarn:

The Americans are getting their yarns so into the general market, that our only chance is producing them at a lower rate. If we can't, we may shut up shop at once, and hand and master go alike on tramp. [...] That's what they want—they, who haven't the sense to see that, if we don't get a fair share of the profits to compensate us for our wear and tear here in England, we can move off to some other country; and that, what with home and foreign competition, we are none of us likely to make above a fair share, and may be thankful enough if we can't get that, in an average number of years. (Gaskell 132-33)

As Thornton contemplates being undercut by his American competitors, his sister Fanny “has taken up an interminable piece of worsted-work, over which she was yawning” (132). The combination of Thornton’s industrial concerns and Fanny’s fancywork epitomizes the value of textiles within *North and South*. Not only are they products made, sold, and traded around the globe for profit, they are also the “work” of ladies who do not enter the public sphere of the textile mill. While the narrator only mentions Fanny’s and Margaret’s needlework in passing, the accretion of these subtle references reminds us that ladies’ “work” was the very stuff of daily life, much like the omnipresence of the mill in Milton-Northern.³⁰ Her “work” may not be particularly valuable and it may not share the imperial flair of the Indian shawl, but Fanny’s mundane sewing—and the narrator’s off hand references to the boredom she expresses over her needlework—invite us to consider how women will pass on not only their tangible heirlooms but also skills like worsted-work and embroidery. And like the shawls, needlework itself is imbued with identity and lineage, a body of knowledge shared between mother and daughter, even if their interest in these potentially political objects is, at best, marked with ambivalence. This ambivalence makes sense of the fact that the concurring discussions of textiles and global events are always in the margins of the text. “Ladies” like Fanny would have spent much of their daily life stitching—likely on cotton grown in America. They may have implicitly understood, then, the cultural conditions that produced the fabric to the extent that they were no longer shocked into thinking about them seriously. Thus, the local and the global, domestic and industrial coexist on a number of levels: Fanny may yawn at her brother’s concerns about American yarn,

³⁰ Frances Power Cobbe denounces the drawing room and the role of women’s handiwork: “‘a drawing-room crammed with these useless fads—chairs, cushions, screens, and antimacassars—is simply a mausoleum of the wasted hours of the female part of the family’” (qtd. in Schaffer, *Novel Craft* 21). In *Behind Closed Doors: At Home with the Georgians*, Amanda Vickery also reminds us that needlework was useful in helping a woman “a long evening of patronage” and “contain her irritation at her frivolous guests” (245). “The pursuit of recreations was a widely recognized antidote to ennui,” Vickery continues, “which, left unchecked, could bring on ‘melancholia,’ a dread malady that threatened the sin of self-murder” (245).

but the transatlantic textile market affects her and her work, too, even as the narrator points to her indifference.

Toward the end of the novel, Thornton again discusses the precarious American market and its likely impact on his own business: “Hitherto there had been no failures in Milton; but, from the immense speculations that had come to light in making a bad end in America, and yet nearer home, it was known that some Milton houses of business must suffer so severely that every day men’s faces asked, if their tongues did not, ‘What news? Who is gone? How will it affect me?’” (379). This final question—“How will it affect me?”—encapsulates the potential ramifications of the transatlantic relationships in *North and South*. Thornton sees the U.S. as a single (and young) country, one that’s distinctly at odds with the novel’s ethos of separation—union—reunion. Moreover, the United States itself can be read as an antithesis of sorts to the heirlooms in the novel. As a country that established its sovereignty through a violent rupture from its motherland, the United States represents disinheritance almost, or at least in terms of economic consequences.³¹ Even if there are no failures—yet—in Milton, and even if Fanny yawns at Thornton’s ongoing concern about American cotton, the novel clearly traces the web of connections between the two nations: it will affect all of them, and soon.

Both of these passages pose pressing questions regarding transnational financial and political stability, concerns that are even more fully realized in *Daniel Deronda*. As I discuss in chapter two, many of the narrative pauses in *Daniel Deronda* use allusions to the American Civil War as a way to both situate the novel within a historical context and establish the novel’s

³¹ Reading the United States as a form of disinheritance recalls Frederick’s decision to “unnative” himself. As the only character who visits the United States in the novel, Frederick’s tumultuous life as a sailor—the mutiny, rebellion, confrontation, and expatriation—is remarkably similar to Colonial America’s pre-Revolutionary history, something Lee neglects in her article. Frederick’s *entrees* in the novel further parallel United States/Great Britain political relations: the mantilla that Frederick and Dolores send from Spain to Britain, like the cotton industry, forges a tangible, if symbolic, point of connection between the nations.

transnational worldview. While Thornton voices his quiet concerns about the American cotton market to close acquaintances only, his remarks suggest the ubiquity of his sentiments—men are so concerned they don’t even have to voice their fears. In moments like these, *North and South* seems prescient in its attention to the potentially far-reaching effects of American politics; because of its decade remove from the war, *Daniel Deronda* more fully answers the men’s final question: just how did it affect them?

Even when the United States is not mentioned explicitly, reading *North and South* in light of the impending American Civil War makes its discussions of government and autonomy, particularly concerning the textile *unions*, increasingly meaningful. Throughout the novel, language of liberty, justice, and democracy aligns the unrest in the labor unions with questions surrounding national identity and government. For example, when Mr. Thornton, Mr. Bell, and Mr. Hale discuss the British government, Mr. Thornton’s description of Northern sentiments reflects those in antebellum America: “We hate to have laws made for us at a distance. We wish people would allow us to right ourselves, instead of continually meddling, with their imperfect legislation. We stand up for self-government, and oppose centralization” (304). Thornton’s attitude mimics the language used in foundational documents of American government, namely the Preamble to the United States Constitution and its declaration of a “more perfect union.” Just as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States are written in a plural voice—and as the nineteenth-century complaints of Southern American states deliberately echoed the language of these founding documents—here Thornton speaks not only for himself but also his fellow northerners. Thus, the power struggles within Thornton’s mill (or even

within northern England) are a microcosm for larger, transatlantic discussions of political independence and autonomy in the mid-nineteenth century.³²

As with the Thornton family's earlier discussion of American yarn, the relationship between Thornton's words and the listeners' actions illustrates the intersection of domestic and industrial interests on both sides of the Atlantic. While Fanny yawns and picks up her worsted-work after Thornton mentions the low price of American yarn, Margaret "force[s] herself to say something" in the middle of their discussion of unions: "Edith says she finds the printed calicoes in Corfu better and cheaper than in London" (305). Margaret's choice of calico, especially calico sold abroad, further evokes the transnational production and consumption of textiles that pervades the novel. As I discuss in the second and fourth chapters, calico has a complicated, imperial history. A fabric that was once produced in India and considered a luxury good, the now utilitarian calico was the national product of England by the 1850s, often from cotton grown in the United States, and it's the fabric likely woven in Thornton's mills. Thus, even while shifting the conversation away from the ethical production and the transnational circulation of textiles, Margaret suggests the relationship between government, commerce, and national identity. Indeed, discussing the concerns of self-government further emphasizes the cosmopolitan scope of the novel. Even when the very governance of a nation—or a local textile union—is called into question, *North and South* illuminates the international ramifications of the most mundane fabric purchase.

Margaret's behavior during the conversation further emphasizes the web of connections between nationhood, textiles, and gendered work. After inserting her own opinion into the

³² The correlation between the international cotton market and political ties between the United States and Great Britain invites us to consider other objects of trade and their effect on transnational relationships. For example, Colonial America's fight against extraneous taxation on British/Indian tea is one of the primary precursors to the American Revolution. Also, Indian shawls, like Mrs. Shaw's, suggest the strengthening imperial ties between Britain and India.

men's political conversation, Margaret "ben[ds] over her work, and [does] not speak again" (305). The men continue their discussion, yet Margaret forces herself to concentrate on her sewing: "But she neither looked nor spoke. Her round taper fingers flew in and out of her sewing, as steadily and swiftly as if that were the business of her life" (306). While Margaret willfully ignores the men because of her complicated romantic feelings toward Thornton, her choice of occupation—needlework—recalls both Fanny's boredom earlier in the novel and Henry Lennox's decree that shawls are "ladies' business." Her conscious choice to engage in sewing in lieu of actively participating in the political debate puts her in league, generally, with the "real" experiences of many of the other women I'll discuss in the coming chapters. Here, Margaret acts as if needlework "were the business of her life," but the subjunctive mood suggests she recognizes the pretense of the situation. Her posturing is akin to Fanny's yawning, marking the ambivalence of women as they ply their needles alongside men who engage in meaningful political and economic debates, especially about the very product with which they "work." Thus, by feigning interest in her sewing while listening to the men's conversation (and betraying her ignorance when she tries to chime in), Margaret effectively unites "ladies' business," weightier concerns of the nation, and the possibilities of a romantic union.

While Gaskell, obviously, only perhaps sensed the looming future crisis of the American Civil War, *North and South* does present the transatlantic world on the brink of change and the charged quality of the word *union* less than a decade before the American crisis. As Lee notes, the British-American economic relationship would have even weightier implications within a few short years: "Although Gaskell's novel was published six years before the war, [...] it refracted American internecine tensions through geographical parallelism and its allusions to the international textile trade. This cat's cradle of connections would become increasingly snarled

with the outbreak of the war. As feared, the disruption of American cotton supplies plunged the British textile industry into economic crisis” (475-76). We should, I argue, trace this shift in the mid-nineteenth-century world through Margaret’s growing interest in the textile industry. From modeling the Indian shawls in chapter one to becoming the landlord and lender for Thornton’s mill in the final scene, Margaret’s increasing awareness and activism—her growing interest in human relationships and the world around her—also invite us to consider the transnational scope of the novel.

Indeed, in a novel that’s obsessed with the exchange of ideas and with forging meaningful connections, textiles are the sole universal mode of communication in *North and South*, transcending gender, class, and nationality. Scenes of women—Margaret, in particular—handling and discussing cloth serve as metonyms for moments of connection. These bonding moments, however, are established slowly over the course of the novel and are modes of communication Margaret must learn to recognize and understand as she shifts from shawl model to mill proprietor. When Margaret wears Edith’s Indian shawls in the first chapter of the novel, she stands “quite silent and passive” while Aunt Shaw “adjust[s] the draperies” (11). As a “tall, finely made figure” who “set[s] off the long beautiful folds of the gorgeous shawls that would have half-smothered Edith,” Margaret’s physical form complements the exotic garments, which suggests her natural affinity for a cosmopolitan, sophisticated existence (11). Margaret also appreciates the fine fabric, “touch[ing] the shawls gently as they [hang] around her, and [taking] a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours” (11). Despite Margaret’s and Aunt Shaw’s simultaneous inspection of the shawls, touching and arranging them in tandem, Margaret stands “with a quiet pleased smile on her lips,” never expressing her pleasure (11). Likewise, Aunt Shaw remains silent (or her thoughts remain unrecorded) as she examines the wedding gifts.

Margaret's and Aunt Shaw's unspoken appreciation of the shawls suggests the familial yet private meaning of the textiles. As heirlooms that will soon be given as wedding gifts, the shawls represent Aunt Shaw's cosmopolitan past, yet their personal history remains uncommunicated as Margaret models them for the guests. Each woman must contemplate the physical shawl and its many meanings privately, never voicing the metaphorical implications of this family garment, passed from mother to daughter.

When this moment is read within the larger context of the novel, it becomes the first of many in which characters touch or observe a piece of cloth and, subsequently, realize the possibility for forging a meaningful connection with another person. In contrast to the silent, mutual appreciation of the Shaw family shawls, when Margaret first ventures onto the streets in Milton-Northern, she is disconcerted by the waves of factory workers, "[t]he tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness" (66). In time, however, Margaret realizes these "girls" speak the same language—textiles:

The girls, with their rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on her dress, even touch her shawl or gown to ascertain the exact material; nay, once or twice she was asked questions relative to some article which they particularly admired. There was such a simple reliance on her womanly sympathy with their love of dress, and on her kindness, that she gladly replied to these inquiries, as soon as she understood them. (66)

As the factory workers attempt to bridge cultural and class differences by touching Margaret's Indian shawl and tailored dress, textiles—the primary commodity of the town—become the basis of Margaret's knowledge of Milton-Northern, the mills, and working class life in an industrial city. As she slowly develops an understanding of her new home, Margaret realizes that fabric

and clothes can function as gateways of a sort, facilitating communication with unfamiliar people in an unfamiliar place.

Cloth, moreover, represents the initial point of community for Margaret, illustrating her move from being isolated and lonely within the house to moving about in public freely. Instead of visually admiring or silently touching Margaret's outfit, these women are eager to discuss their mutual knowledge of clothes, even "comment[ing]" before "touch[ing]" the garment. The "girls" want to know the "exact material" of Margaret's dress, using their factory work as a point of commonality with Margaret, a "lady" who would likely never step foot in a textile mill (66). While the community of women Margaret encounters on the street is demographically different, this conversation on the Milton-Northern streets again recalls the first chapter of the novel when the "ladies" who observe Margaret's modeling ask whether the shawls are "Delhi? With the lovely little borders?" (9).³³ The women's reaction to the shawl is an odd contradiction in attentiveness and suggests a strange ambivalence about one's place in national events: is the origin of the shawl important or just its minute details? Both instances, however, suggest that regardless of class and geographic region, women are knowledgeable about specific textiles, and they want to both share and refine their understanding, both of the fabric and one another.

Still, Margaret's understanding of the factory girls is not instantaneous, a communication barrier that Sue Zemka addresses in her recent article on street encounters in Gaskell's fiction. Zemka reads these ephemeral urban scenes as imbued with "all-inclusive intimacy" and enacting "a social currency that transcends caste," but she argues that the actions of the female textile

³³ Even before Margaret brings the shawls downstairs, specific fabrics fill the opening paragraphs of *North and South*. In the first paragraph, Edith not only wears "white muslin and blue ribbons" while sleeping on a "crimson damask sofa," but she also rolls "herself up into a soft ball of muslin and ribbon, and silken curls," almost becoming more textile-like than human (7). While Gaskell's implied author discounts Edith and her impending marriage, her pointed references to specific fabrics establish the both the literal and the metaphorical significance of cloth in the novel. Even within the context of a minimized subplot of the novel (Edith and her new husband are largely absent from the narrative), textiles are central enough to the narrative to be identified by type.

workers are “intrusive, though presumably well intentioned” (799, 810). While Margaret does initially resist the women’s touch and commentary—she doesn’t understand why the girls and their “not unfriendly freedom” may want to touch her clothes—my reading of the scene above emphasizes how Margaret learns to appreciate their shared understanding of “womanly sympathy.” More importantly, textiles are the sole, tangible point of connection, where “womanly sympathy” can transcend the many barriers to communication that exist between Margaret and the factory workers.

Margaret’s developing “womanly sympathy” recalls the relationship between Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Gaskell, which Whitney Womack-Smith details in her recent article about the many resonances between Gaskell’s fiction and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). While Womack-Smith notes that Gaskell and Stowe first met when Gaskell was writing *North and South* and that the two women corresponded until at least 1860, she focuses on how their novels more fully reveal their similar approaches to women’s “work,” national identity, and social reform in the 1850s. Womack-Smith argues, “[w]ith Margaret Hale, Gaskell takes Stowe’s representation of women’s reform work even further, allowing Margaret to negotiate and transcend the permeable barrier between separate spheres, extending the limits of women’s political engagement,” highlighting how “Stowe and Gaskell engag[e] in a transatlantic, intertextual dialogue debating the roles that white, middle-class women can and should play in the work of social reform” (92). Margaret’s transformation from model and idle needlewoman to heiress and textile mill landlord exemplifies her dedication to reform work in Milton-Northern and emphasizes the gendered implications of the novel’s interconnectedness. It is through her personal investment in developing a shared “womanly sympathy,” though, that Margaret transcends class barriers and negotiates the boundaries of public and private lives. In scenes

such as the one above, Margaret's learned "womanly sympathy" and interest in reform work facilitate her understanding of the factory "girls'" actions. Because of her communication—through textiles—with the "girls," Margaret can move beyond the confining boundaries of her home and into a more active role within the Milton-Northern community.

Margaret's transplantation from South to North, gentility to working class, rural to industrial is, in part, eased through the rapport she slowly builds with the unnamed factory girls and their unrecorded questions about her clothes. Even though we never hear the questions from the girls or Margaret's answers, the narrative record of these street conversations alone suggests they are meaningful. Instead, the narrator details Margaret's and the "girls'" physical interaction, their true moment of connection: hand on cloth. Gaskell's narrative choice to withhold the conversations themselves, only gesturing toward them in passing, privileges the meaning of these sympathetic physical touches. That the women choose to express themselves through touch instead of conversations emphasizes that the narrative perspective is defined, in part, by what they do instead of what they say. Even when they appear in the novel proper, the "hands" are limited to their identity as "factory" workers, yet the novel stops short of entering the space of the factory and describing the actual work that occupies the "girls." While traditional uses of factory "hands" identifies (and restricts) workers by their labor, here hands have a public but non-economic meaning. The hand becomes a metonym for the exchanges that connect people of different class backgrounds.

Indeed, if one of the pivotal themes of *North and South* is the value of human connections and communication, then Margaret's use of textiles in establishing relationships is an important narrative trope of the novel. After meeting Bessy Higgins, Margaret finds "a human interest" in her new home, and their friendship develops through a shared knowledge of

fabric. While Margaret visits the ill Bessy, “Bessy [lies] back silent, and content to look at Margaret’s face, and touch her articles of dress, with a childish admiration of their fineness of texture” (92). Bessy’s wordless actions—touching Margaret’s clothes and simultaneously looking at her face—encapsulate possibilities of the textile-based language of *North and South*. As the only named female mill worker in the novel, Bessy instinctively tries to understand Margaret through the texture of her clothes humanizes the chaotic, momentary actions of the factory girls on the streets.³⁴ Here, we see a personal relationship develop out of the language of “womanly sympathy” Margaret learns to “understand” in Milton-Northern, a process that Dorice Williams Elliott describes. In doing so, Margaret forges meaningful connections with those around her, regardless of class.

Thus, Gaskell builds her plot around seemingly insignificant moments where a common language of “womanly sympathy” transcends the traditionally impermeable class barriers of mid-nineteenth century England. These moments, often domestic and fleeting, humanize contemporaneous philosophical, and often abstract, discussions of reform work. While wholesale reform doesn’t occur at the end of *North and South*, Margaret Hale’s own personal reformation from isolated maiden to a politically-engaged woman suggests the rich potential in taking a “human interest,” however small. In fact, when Bessy dies of her ailments from the carding room at the mill, Margaret personally selects one of her own muslin caps for Bessy’s burial clothes. The gift of clothing was a mere death-bed “fancy” of Bessy’s, but this hand-me-down present is also the culmination of the women’s friendship and analogous to the more costly textile heirlooms throughout the novel (199).

³⁴ For a more thorough discussion of Bessy’s role as the “only woman factory worker who appears in the novel,” see Catherine Barnes Stephenson’s article on women’s work in *North and South* (68).

As with the shawls, linens, and mantilla, the mundane muslin cap signifies the bond between individuals and marks an important moment in the many rituals and milestones of an ordinary life. While Mrs. Shaw, Mrs. Thornton, and Dolores bequeath their gifts as celebrations of a new phase of life, Margaret's parting present to Bessy epitomizes the emotional value imbued in these gifts. Bessy will never know that Margaret fulfills her wish, yet Margaret insists on doing so because she recognizes the muslin cap is the final tangible connection between the friends. The cap becomes a physical document of sorts. Without a will or any legal status, women are only able to bequeath and inherit among themselves with objects of little economic value. By replacing the text of a will or another legal document with a textile present, Margaret ensures that Bessy's wishes are realized, even in death. Bessy can no longer touch Margaret or her clothes, but in this final textile exchange, Margaret provides a muslin cap—"something of [hers]"—that Bessy will wear forever in death (199).

When Margaret first arrives in Milton-Northern as a skeptical outsider, such poignant moments of human connection, bridging women of different classes, seemed impossible. Bessy's death scene shows how Gaskell's "condition of England" novel is, ultimately, about how ethics bind people to one another in material and immaterial ways. For nineteenth-century readers, debates about the ethics surrounding textile mills and their labor would have been an apt case study for a generic study of sympathy and what transatlantic scholars are now coming to define as justice. Ultimately, *North and South* questions the ethics of textiles and how human connections and dignity are caught up in their production. Margaret, in particular, draws upon the "womanly sympathy" she learns and exemplifies the ethical debates surrounding textile mills and the lives of the weavers. Because the novel is as much about the way Margaret develops her "womanly sympathy" as it is about the textile mill, she becomes a heroine who exemplifies that

“web of human connection” that Eliot later explores in *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). For Eliot and Gaskell, self-understanding becomes an ethical act when it binds individuals to one another. Even though the novel describes the factory workers, through Margaret’s increasing participation in the public sphere, Gaskell suggests that it isn’t, in fact, presumptuous for the narrative to filter these “girls” identities primarily through a single, middle-class consciousness.

After visiting Bessy, Margaret resists donning a white silk dress for a dinner party at the Thorntons and laments to her mother, “how am I to dress up in my finery, and go off and away to smart parties, after the sorrow I have seen today?” (144). Dressing with a “heavy heart” and “comparing this strange dressing of hers, to go where she did not care to be” with attending parties before moving to Milton, Margaret goes to the dinner where “every corner seemed filled up with ornament” and “the mill loomed high on the left-hand side of the windows, casting a shadow down from its many stories” (145, 146-47). The jarring pairing of glamorous dinner and industrial mill continues to affect Margaret even after the party has ended. Margaret confesses to her mother that she “felt like a great hypocrite to-night, sitting there in [her] white silk gown, with [her] idle hands before [her]” (153). Unlike the print gown (calico, presumably) she wears to visit Bessy, which Bessy’s “Milton eyes appraised at sevenpence a yard,” Margaret’s pristine silk gown connotes inaction and a luxury that seemingly exempts her from making those local, human connections she grows to value.³⁵ While Margaret is talking about the household servants

³⁵ In the 1994 film adaptation of Alcott’s *Little Women*, Meg March refuses to wear a silk gown. The decision is not a mark of her character; rather, Meg chooses to wear textiles with more savory political and ethical connotations. While discussing her ball-gown with her girlfriends, Meg reminds them of the working conditions of both the mill workers in nearby Lowell and the slaves toiling in the fields of the American South. By choosing a gown made with ethically-produced fabric, Meg asserts the mid-nineteenth-century woman’s ability to define herself and her political influence through ordinary decisions. Much like Gaskell’s Margaret, director Gillian Armstrong’s interpretation of Meg uses fabrics to envision social concerns explicitly discussed among “ladies.” Of course, Meg’s moment of political consciousness is only a brief scene in the movie—not much changes because of Meg’s textile choices, but they suggest to a contemporary audience that productive relationships existed between the “girls” who worked in the

and their labor during the party, her “idle hands” and guilt must also allude to the factory workers who spend the majority of their lives working—*not* idle—in the mill that “looms” outside the Thornton drawing room windows.³⁶ All of the ethical problems associated with imperial fabrics are realized in Margaret’s concerns with her dress. This moment, in fact, is pivotal for Margaret: while wearing her silk gown and thinking about her “idle hands,” Margaret learns to “read” the fabric she wears and the fabric she sees being woven in factories around her differently. Indeed, if *North and South* traces Margaret’s finding a human interest and realizing the web of connections among classes, nations, and individuals, then this moment is a coming of age of sorts for Margaret, who must feel hypocritical in choosing a silk gown and implicitly supporting foreign labor, presumably, instead of the local mill workers and their products (like the calico gown she wears earlier in the day).

Before she can even feel guilty about wearing silk, however, Margaret embodies, literally, the worldly ramifications of textile production. From the beginning of the novel the narrator describes Margaret as being made “of different *stuff*,” a term that would have referred to fabric in the nineteenth century (41). Margaret’s moral or ethical fiber, however, strengthens after her move to Milton-Northern and its foreign customs. When wandering around the unfamiliar streets of her new home, Margaret watches shopkeepers rolling and unrolling ribbons unnecessarily. The pointless action of idly handling textiles, something Margaret has never

mills and the women who were wealthy enough purchase and wear their products. The scene is one that was added to the film adaptation; Meg does not lecture her friends in Alcott’s novel. I read this new scene as a pointed addition to a rather feminist interpretation of *Little Women*. By choosing to establish both Meg’s character and the reality of nineteenth-century labor through a woman’s clothing, Armstrong suggests the centrality of textiles in the nineteenth century.

³⁶ I also read Margaret’s “idle hands” as a reference to the street encounters she has with the female factory workers and her philanthropic visits to the Higginses’ home. Throughout the dinner party scene the chasm between “workers” and “masters,” a divide Margaret works to bridge throughout the novel, is outlined clearly. While Margaret spends her days doing much of her own housework and visiting those whose lives are largely given to mill labor, while a guest in the Thornton home, she must refrain from action and appear as if she belongs to the world of “masters.”

noticed in Helstone or London, “[strikes] upon her mind” (55). The turn of phrase suggests the physical reaction Margaret has to the pointless labor of the shopkeepers, but it also alludes to the imprinting of the calico that’s presumably manufactured throughout Milton-Northern and to the factory workers who are on “strike” (55). Gaskell’s choice of phrasing, moreover, is proto-Jamesian, emphasizing the analog between textile metaphors (such as James’s and Eliot’s mutual “web”) and patterns of individual consciousness. Margaret’s developing sympathy for others, moving beyond the walls of her home and making meaningful connections with others, begins with a shift in her own subjectivity. In a novel that’s set in a town reliant upon the transnational circulation of textiles, the parallels between narrative descriptions of Margaret’s thoughts and mill machinery only strengthen the narrative’s concern with relating self-understanding and the “web of connections.” Thus, in moving to Milton-Northern, Margaret’s consciousness molds to her surroundings.

The metaphorical strike or imprinting upon Margaret’s consciousness becomes literal during the mill strike. Inserting herself into the middle of the strike at Thornton’s mill, Margaret is “struck” in the face with a pebble, and a “thread of dark-red blood” runs down her face (163). Margaret’s bleeding forehead aptly realizes Gaskell’s larger narrative project in drawing connections between Margaret’s self-realization and her developing “human interest.” Her place at the center of the brawl further typifies Margaret’s role throughout the novel, bringing together people and ideas in her quest for true human relationships. Appropriately, this brief description of her injury—the “thread” of blood—is the most physical realization of the textile metaphor in a novel that is both literally and metaphorically obsessed with fabric and threads of connection. Once she has been physically marked by her public involvement, Margaret cannot return to her previous isolation and inaction.

The description of Margaret's injury also recalls Mrs. Thornton's impulse to stitch John's and Margaret's names together on the household linens as a signifier of their impending marriage. In both cases, fabrics convey physical realities, but, more specifically, the "thread of dark-red blood" mimics the turkey-red thread with which Mrs. Thornton embroiders the couple's initials. Whereas Mrs. Thornton only imagines John's and Margaret's union through her embroidery, the "thread" of blood on Margaret's forehead, along with her subsequent swooning into John's arms, are a more concrete representation of their developing relationship and eventual union. This thread-like wound, moreover, signifies the union of her self-understanding and her developing "human interest." She's made of a *stuff* that yearns for communication and connection, and she bears the mark of her urge to interject a personal plea into the very public conflict of the strike.

If we read the novel as retroactively looking ahead to the American Civil War and the havoc it would wreak on the British textile industry, the mill riot and the fusion of fabric and body in the description of Margaret's injury clearly exemplifies the transatlantic influence of textiles. The strike scene may be an important one in the trajectory of Margaret's and John's relationship—it's the first time they touch as he catches her when she swoons—but it also brings to mind the countless human lives and ethical questions surrounding the production and consumption of cloth. Mr. Higgins, Bessy's father, even equates the work of soldiers and weavers: "I just look forward to the chance of dying at my post sooner than yield. That's what folk call fine and honorable in a soldier, and why not in a poor weaver-chap? [...] I take up th' cause o' justice" (123). The conflation of soldier (or sailor) and weaver underscores the close relationship between textiles and national identity that both develops throughout the novel and was a financial reality in the 1850s. Just as Thornton is concerned about the American cotton

market and its effect on his mills, the British economy and the nation's livelihood was inextricably linked to the success of the textile mills and the importation of American cotton. For Higgins to liken weavers to soldiers is to state the real issues behind contemporary conflicts: justice in human relationships, whether they're local or spanning the globe. Thus, in a novel that returns again and again to cultivating meaningful communication between disparate individuals, textiles—*the* transnational commodity of the mid-nineteenth century—realize the connections forged within Milton-Northern, Britain, and the globe.

CHAPTER 2

Beyond Patterns, Remnants, and Garments: Anglo-Jewish Identities in *Daniel Deronda*

If *North and South* seems prescient in its foreshadowing of the American Civil War, then *Daniel Deronda* appears circumspect in its narrative distance. The War itself, of course, occurred in the twenty-two years that separate the novels, and each novel's place on either side of the war reflects its vision of what "nations" were in the wake of mid-nineteenth-century upheavals. These distinctions are also reflected in how the two novels explore the relationship between material culture and individual subjectivity. *North and South* uses heirlooms as a way to focus on patterns of consciousness and making connections, but *Daniel Deronda* examines qualities of mind and core identity through tangible objects.

These descriptions each resemble the March sisters sewing in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-69), a scene where the transatlantic cotton trade and imported fabrics become a way to discuss the ever-expanding world, the innumerable connections between nations, and value of people's lives within this newly cosmopolitan existence. The first chapter of *Little Women* ends with an image of the March sisters: "[O]ut came the workbaskets, and the needles flew as the girls made sheets for Aunt March. It was uninteresting sewing, but tonight no one grumbled. They adopted Jo's plan of dividing the long seams into four parts, and calling the quarters Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, and in that way got on capitably, especially when they talked about the different countries as they stitched their way through them" (20). The sisters remain secluded in their New England home, their father a chaplain for Union soldiers,

yet the family connects itself—literally and metaphorically—to the world beyond their hearth through their sewing.

This very early scene in *Little Women* foreshadows the eventual geographic distances that separate the sisters but also the eventual reconstitution of their family at the end of the novel, and it's one that's reimagined across the Atlantic in British novels, including George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Though *Daniel Deronda* is not often read within an American context, it does concern American Civil War-era relationships between individuals and communities who might otherwise live in disparate spheres, and it uses textiles to traverse geographical and ideological distances. Set in 1864-66, *Daniel Deronda* uses references to the United States and its political and economic struggles to ground the plot in a specific *milieu*. Eliot's decision to set the novel a decade before its writing, during the final years of the War and the beginning of Reconstruction, reflects the novel's interests in nation-building, transnational connections, and personal identity. Alongside the novel's double-stranded plot (Gwendolen's and Daniel's intertwining narratives), Eliot's sustained interest in Daniel's unrealized religious heritage and the cultures he inherits—and must ultimately choose between—from his real and surrogate families; her meditations on the family histories secreted alongside these socio-religious identifications; as well as her references to the American Civil War—vaunt the often terrifying singularity of individual lives in the face of contemporary nations, contemporary religions, and global catastrophes. Indeed, the Civil War is one of many historical events that helps us locate Eliot's characters in real historical time (just as the First Reform Bill or the death of King George IV does in *Middlemarch*).

Through these multiple reference points, the novel argues for the interdependence of isolated and interconnected events; the actions and ideas of a single character are reflective of, and influenced by, those of larger nations and bodies of people. While I'm not arguing that

Eliot's novel—like Alcott's— is primarily concerned with the American War, I do want to emphasize the relationship between their political concerns and their repeated references to textiles such as the Marches' bed sheet, a piece of cloth that serves to map the sisters' imagined place within the world beyond their small New England village. This particular scene emphasizes both the sewing and Meg's, Jo's, Beth's, and Amy's imaginative identities. On a typical evening in the middle of the American War, the sisters distract themselves with their "work" and the fanciful tales they can devise. Not only do they support the war effort through their needlework by performing acts of charity for their relatives, but they also use their sewing as a creative outlet. Suddenly, the drudgery of making a plain sheet for an elderly aunt becomes a gateway to the larger world beyond the March home. The sheet may be a practical gift of sorts for their aunt, but it's also a tangible object that's laden with each sister's intangible ideas. By imagining the edges of the cloth as the corners of the world, the sisters place themselves within a global community. For the Marches, the fusion of "uninteresting" work and exotic stories suggests the girls' desires for a more worldly, stimulating existence. They may remain in New England physically, at least for the moment, but as they work with this plain cotton sheet—a textile with global resonance—the sisters are citizens of the world.

Emphasizing the imaginative possibilities of foreign countries is especially meaningful in a novel about domesticity and the moral development of young women. Set during the American Civil War, *Little Women* rarely refers to the event itself, even though Mr. March is a chaplain who works with soldiers. Instead, the narrative relies on details of the wartime home-front to establish the historical and political contexts of the novel. Passing references to Mr. March missing Christmas or the sisters knitting "blue army sock[s]" push the war to the background (13). At the same time, these moments of daily life are clearly shaped by the national event,

narratively privileging the charitable and patriotic acts of the women at home. A novel written in two parts and marketed for one hundred and fifty years as the quintessential coming-of-age book for girls, *Little Women* aims to make girls—much like Jo, the heroine of her own narrative—into moral, thinking women.³⁷

For the narrator of Eliot's final novel *Daniel Deronda*, the American Civil War also becomes the touchstone that epitomizes the many, multi-layered connections throughout the novel, particularly between young women and significant global events. Set during what has come to be remembered as the height of the British Empire, *Daniel Deronda* meditates on the confluence of economics, politics, and identity. What makes these discussions so provocative, however, is their positioning alongside references to the United States, which from an English point of view, was reconstructing itself into a cohesive nation, not reveling in global dominance. Indeed, one of the most pointed references to the War's transatlantic ramifications ends the first chapter of Book Two, which is entitled "Meeting Streams." The passage pithily summarizes Eliot's vision of the ways modern life affects consciousness, and it articulates this worldview through transatlantic rhetoric:

Could there be a slenderer, more insignificant thread in human history than this consciousness of a girl, busy with her small inferences of the way in which she could make her life pleasant?—in a time, too, when ideas were fresh with vigour making armies of themselves, and the universal kinship was declaring itself fiercely: when women on the other side of the world would not mourn for the husbands and sons who died bravely in a common cause, and men stinted on bread on our side of the world heard of that willing loss and were patient: a time

³⁷ Recently, however, Geraldine Brooks has reimagined Mr. March's story and fleshed out Alcott's references to the Civil War in her novel *March* (2006); Brooks's title suggests that this family's name may recall the haunting presence of soldiers in the girls' lives throughout this historical moment.

when the soul of man was waking to pulses which had for centuries been beating in him unheard, until their full sum made a new life of terror or of joy. What in the midst of that mighty drama are girls and their blind visions? They are the Yea or Nay of that good for which men are enduring and fighting. In these delicate vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affections. (102-03)

In a novel that's in many ways about balancing individual and nation, the narrator uses the Civil War to meditate on the relevance of an individual British woman's life, especially in the midst of a global event that was taking place in the United States. While Eliot at first teases us into questioning how Gwendolen is "insignificant," especially in the face of a meditation on anonymous mothers and sisters mourning Civil War casualties overseas, the provocative contrast shows how collective histories are in fact constituted by individual lives (even when those lives belong to snobby, self-centered anti-heroines). The passage puts these mothers and sisters side-by-side with British textile mill workers, syntactically and symbolically suggesting their mutual dependency. This could be Eliot's subtle way of historicizing mid-century debates about textile production raging in Great Britain and the United States before and during the Civil War.³⁸ The most explicit reference to Gwendolen's textile-based identity may be the "yea or nay" line at the end of the passage, a provocative allusion to Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), another Victorian text that uses sewing and thread metaphors. For if the American women who are mourning their fallen sons and husbands represent to Eliot the Eternal Yea or Nay, and if Gwendolen's life should be read as a parallel to theirs despite her obvious differences, then these

³⁸ Amanda Foreman's *The World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War* (2011) traces the ways in which the British textile industry influenced the course of the American War. Stephen Yafa's *Cotton: The Biography of a Revolutionary Fiber* (2006) also discusses how the Civil War affected the transatlantic cotton industry, but from an American perspective.

seemingly insignificant lives have divine meaning, precisely in their widely different expressions of commonness.

Yet Eliot's passage also alludes much more subtly to the repercussions of textile mills in Gwendolen's lifetime. Eliot's allusion to the "men stinted on bread on our side of the world" is a direct reference to the cotton blockade, which limited cotton importation from the southern United States from early 1861 until 1864. While British mills had stockpiled raw cotton in anticipation of the blockade, the mills couldn't produce as much cotton fabric as they had, and many operatives went unemployed because of the Civil War on the other side of the Atlantic.³⁹ As with Mr. Higgins's proposition in *North and South*, the narrator of *Daniel Deronda* calls attention to the weavers' political actions and their relationship to larger world events. The distant war may seem irrelevant or abstract, yet workers in Britain's largest industry felt the effects of the upheaval and chose to participate. Their refusing cotton from the American South was an act of justice and, as the narrator points out, the boycott had overt connections to the actions of the soldiers fighting across the Atlantic.

By framing simultaneous, transatlantic "girls'" lives within the context of the textile industry and juxtaposing these public subjects with Gwendolen's "thread," the narrator sets up one of the recurring metaphors of the novel: cloth. Much like the transatlantic production and exchange of textiles, which were points of intersection for Britain and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, *Daniel Deronda* uses fabric to metaphorically connect disparate

³⁹ In 1862, for example, James Mason claimed that "The cotton famine [. . .] is looming up in fearful proportions," and he reported that "700,000 workers were currently living off charity and that typhoid appeared to be on the rise" (qtd. in Foreman 328). A Confederate Commissioner to Britain, Mason hoped the stress of the cotton blockade would force Great Britain into entering the Civil War on the side of the Confederacy. "The public mind is very much agitated and disturbed at the fearful prospect for the winter," Mason continues, "and I am not without hope that it will produce its effects on the counsels of the Government" (328). Charles Francis Adam, the Minister at the United States Legation in London from 1861 to 1863 believed, however, that "[t]he cotton famine and Lancashire distress have not proved such serious troubles as we had feared" (501).

individuals: the “delicate vessels” in England, the “husbands and sons who died bravely in a common cause” in the United States, and the “men stinted on bread” around the world suggest the significance of Gwendolen’s life even as they remind us of her privilege.

One of the formerly prevailing misconceptions about *Daniel Deronda* is that it’s bifurcated: there’s Gwendolen’s “thread” and Daniel’s “thread” (Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* 102). Eliot’s most famous early critics, in fact, have generated this mythology. F.R. Leavis is among the most well-known, and he faults *Daniel Deronda* for never reconciling its “English” (Gwendolen) and “Jewish” (Daniel) parts, and he considers it a failed or helplessly fractured novel. Yet most readers would now agree that the two halves of the novel, like the two religious or national signifiers, aren’t mutually exclusive, and, in fact, they often inform one another. For as Laura Doyle aptly argues, in *Daniel Deronda* “everything is connected to everything else, as Eliot insisted, for everything is compassed round by the ruinous yet prosperous facts of Atlantic history” (*Freedom’s Empire* 336). These connections are made most explicit in the narrative asides that punctuate the novel, passages where Eliot underscores the nuanced relationships that develop within one’s seemingly insignificant self, between seemingly disparate individuals and nations, and in the global events that connect individuals and nations to an even larger world.

The textile metaphors in the delicate vessels passage also illustrate another strand of the novel: the development of an individual’s consciousness. Using the international conflicts of Civil War as a backdrop, Eliot balances the development of Mirah’s, Daniel’s, and Gwendolen’s consciousnesses with broader discussions of sovereignty. As in the delicate vessels passage, thread and cloth metaphors underscore a narrative preoccupation with the overtly literal connections—“threads”—between the identities of “insignificant” people within the United States and Great Britain. The global implications of the textile industry—paralyzing economies

and starving individuals—are foundational, since a person’s national identity determines how she thinks about herself as one person among many. By tracing Eliot’s cloth metaphors we can better understand the many narrative possibilities alluded to elliptically in the Yea or Nay passage. For it is through the provocative juxtaposition of Gwendolen’s “insignificant” consciousness alongside the British mill workers and the American mourners that Eliot shows how tangible “threads” help us to think about the narrative trajectories (God’s or Eliot’s) suggested by Carlyle’s coinage in *Sartor Resartus*.

Throughout *Daniel Deronda* “threads” and “meeting streams” become increasingly fraught tropes. While the novel doesn’t feature the Kashmir shawls, antique linen, or mantillas that are passed down from mother to daughter in *North and South*, the novel’s textiles are tangible metaphors for family lineage and cultural identity, bequeathed between generations like heirlooms and, as Irene Tucker emphasizes, often matrilineally. John Plotz draws similar connections between material possessions and national identity, exploring how “infallible, unbreakable relics might operate as a moveable repository of both family feeling and of Englishness, a national identity understood metonymically as an extension of domestic ties” (xii-xiv). In his reading of *Daniel Deronda*, Plotz aptly explores the body itself as a vessel of portable property. By “installing cultural knowledge deep within an individual’s body,” Eliot in part suggests that more tangible forms of “portable property” are no longer adequate vessels to signify national aspirations (Plotz 73). For Plotz, *Daniel Deronda* is “utterly original in asking what happens when culture is internalized so successfully that it enters into the body of the consciously nationalized subject” (73). It is a novel “in which portable properties can become so portable because they are located entirely within characters, visible only to those who already belong within the privileged circle of national belonging” (74). This “durable and transferable

culture,” according to Plotz, is “a body of portable properties legible to the cognoscenti and the born insiders” (74). Instead of understanding the subtle nationalized rhetoric of wearing a Kashmir shawl or bequeathing family linen, then, individuals themselves internalize a sense of cultural inheritance and often bear subtle marks of these national or racial allegiances. For if the Daniel/Jewish narrative is understood as separate from the Gwendolen/English narrative, in part because so much of his history and inheritance seem to be immaterial and unrecoverable (tellingly, until he meets his mother), then Eliot’s use of *things* to represent such immaterial and unrecoverable histories is all the more counterintuitive. For the “threads,” which are both real and metaphorical, become shorthand for histories of which Daniel and Gwendolen may not even be cognizant, and they remind us of inheritances that Daniel and Gwendolen have by birth but don’t fully realize until the end of the novel.

Just as *North and South* is about how the circulation of heirloom textiles and their importance shapes cosmopolitan identities, so patterns and garments also connote inheritance in *Daniel Deronda*. Tucker argues that the novel revolves around characters who wonder “[w]hat are the rules by which not only property but cultural identity is dispersed or passed from one generation to the next?” (35). Indeed, this question governs much of the novel and underscores how inheritance determines characters’ varying senses of individual and national identity; for by the end of the novel, these two things come to define one another and aren’t as separate as Daniel and Gwendolen originally suppose. Even Daniel’s and Mordecai’s relationship, a spiritual kinship that’s based upon shared national and religious ideals, resembles the relationship of a mother with her son.⁴⁰ More broadly, Mirah’s and Daniel’s quests for their respective families

⁴⁰ Susan Meyer is one of the critics who takes up this argument most fully. She doesn’t discuss matrilineal relationships specifically, but in her reading of *Daniel Deronda*, she does present a feminist reading of the novel and how its female characters are often denied their cultural inheritance: “Eliot is trying to resolve the tension between self-fulfillment and fulfillment of a societal role that has created discontentment in her heroines’ lives. But the novel

consume the second half of the novel, and these personal journeys highlight the parallels between familial inheritance and religious/ethnic identity. Answers to these most essential and ineffable questions—who am I? where did I come from?—are almost always articulated through tangible things, family heirlooms handed down from generation to generation.

The Meyricks' parlor workshop illuminates a different side of the textile industry in the mid-nineteenth century: one that is private and domestic. Unlike the mill workers in the delicate vessels passage who are alienated from the products of their labor, the Meyricks sew with lady-like fancywork skills and they seem to take pleasure in both the work itself and the products of their labor. The scenes in the Meyrick sitting room may recall the common Victorian trope of women doing their “work,” but as Margueritte Murphy notes, “[a]ll the Meyricks—mother and daughters—are employed and thus independent of male patronage” (200). Instead of filling their otherwise empty hours with frivolous fancywork, the Meyricks sew to create fanciful pieces that are made for a marketplace that values aesthetic beauty.

While their cozy home doubles as a workshop for artistic labor, especially drawing and needlework, the Meyricks' versatile space also underscores a melding of cosmopolitanism and mercantilism. Our first glimpse of the Meyricks—just before they take in Mirah— features the sisters working diligently in the front parlor and emphasizes their small and insular yet enlightened world. While Kate is drawing, “Amy and Mab, [... are] embroidering satin cushions for ‘the great world’” (166). They all, however, sit in the same room, their collective work

creates a solution by suppressing the awareness that such a conflict is a particular problem for women. In order to resolve this tension, *Daniel Deronda* displaces the conflict between self and society, and the mark of ‘alien’ race that signifies it onto a man” (734). As a whole, the novel “does with the Jews, the non-English race with its submerged connection to female selfhood, precisely what it does with female transgressiveness: it firmly ushers both out of the English world of the novel, it returns those who have strayed and transgressed, it removes them, in the euphemistic of the novel, ‘safely to their own borders’” (735). In “purg[ing] female transgressiveness, and the ‘alien’ races who are associated with it,” the novel “reinforces gender and race hierarchies and firmly draws national boundaries” (752).

illuminated by the same lamp and candles.⁴¹ The shared lighting shines a spotlight on the sisters' labors, and as Cohen notes, "the manual mixes with the intellectual and the scene's chiaroscuro lighting casts a penumbra around the alliance" (335). Thus, the details of the domestic scene remain in darkness as the narrator focuses on the sisters' collective, ambitious industry. These pursuits "may be amateur in that the only training they received would have been at their mother's hand" and may take place in the family parlor, but Cohen argues, "it is clear that they are not only paid for their productions, but the household, including the sole and absent male, is economically dependent on such payment, compensation that is neither the laborer's wage nor the professional's fee, but typical of an artisanal economy" (335). Murphy similarly focuses on the Meyricks' domestic industry, which seemingly operates outside of traditional patriarchal bounds. The carefully wrought things in the Meyrick home "[exceed] market price, yet it is not the aristocratic estate that passes only to male heirs, but a domestic space epitomized by female independence" (Murphy 199-200). Just as so much of the novel explores the tangible and intangible stuff of matrilineal inheritance, the Meyrick sisters learn their artisanal skills—and their self-sufficiency—from their mother.

We, of course, see other moments of fancywork throughout the novel, but this kind of work appears both thoughtless and worthless to characters such as Gwendolen, who understands needlework to be an idle distraction. The narrator, for example, notes that Gwendolen, "who had always disliked needlework," feigns interest in embroidery only after her engagement to Grandcourt, absentmindedly holding "a piece of white embroidery which on examination would

⁴¹ A similar scene occurs later in the novel. Mirah sits next to the sisters, "acting as reader to the party":

All the girls were at home, and the two rooms were thrown together to make space for Kate's drawing, as well as a great length of embroidery which had taken the place of the satin cushions—a sort of *pièce de resistance* in the courses of needlework, taken up by any clever fingers that happened to be at liberty. It stretched across the front room picturesquely enough, Mrs. Meyrick bending over it at one corner, Mab in the middle, and Amy at the other end. (412)

have shown many false stitches” (275). Gwendolen’s “false stitches” may be the most tangible example early in the novel that suggest her carelessness and her inattention to detail, but they also materialize or anticipate her penchant for overlooking her own mistakes. Gwendolen’s attempt to use her “false stitches” to affect the appearance of a refined lady contrasts with the Meyrick sisters’ diligent work. Gwendolen, cannot (and does not wish to) make anything and travels around Europe to escape her problems, but the Meyricks, the Dutch-Scotch-French artisans, are successful in creating objects “for the great world” while remaining within the parlor of their cozy home. They use textiles for financial stability, feminine companionship, and, presumably, personal fulfillment, whereas Gwendolen only conceives of her “work” as posturing. Within the prospectiveness of *Daniel Deronda*, discarding the old and embracing the new, Gwendolen’s idle, incompetent fancy-work identifies her outmoded role as bourgeois “lady,” and far from marking a rejection of this status, her careless work shows how cavalierly she assumes such a position.

In his review of *Daniel Deronda*, Henry James (technically through the mouthpiece of his character Theodora) claims the Meyricks “are the best thing in the book” because we can “know them intimately well” (“*Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*” 70). This intimacy comes from the Meyricks’ fluidity: They embrace their multi-ethnic heritage, blend work and pleasure, and willingly open their home to outsiders such as Mirah. Their adaptability extends to the way their work becomes an expression of their minds: They rarely leave the comforts of home, yet the women sew objects destined for the outside world and participate in their community through their manual and their intellectual skills. Cohen aptly argues that the Meyricks are catalysts for “produc[ing] the impartiality necessary [for] the citizen of the world” because of their amalgamated home, family, and profession (334). Through their artisanal, domestic “work,” the

family “manufactures intellectualism” (334). Indeed, the Meyricks’ vibrant inner-lives are inextricably linked to their material productions, for the family prides itself on being “united by a triple bond—family love; admiration for the finest work, the best action; and habitual industry,” which recalls the March sisters’ ethos in *Little Women* (Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* 167).

Just as the March sisters imagine themselves as citizens of the world while sewing a plain cotton bed sheet, so the Meyricks’ informed conversations—while stitching—return our attention to the alternating microscopic and macroscopic perspectives of the novel. While sewing the cushions for “the great world,” for example, the Meyrick sisters (like the March sisters) talk about the American Civil War and their desire to assist with the war efforts. Kate’s comments, in particular, emphasize the shifting perspectives between the Meyrick parlor and the American battlefield. The War, for Kate, “is a bit of history brought near us with a strong telescope. We can see the soldiers’ faces: no, it is more than that—we can hear everything—we can almost hear their hearts beat” (168). At this moment, affect bridges the vast ocean that separates the Meyricks and the American soldiers and characterizes the bonds between nations and between individuals; their sympathy is palpable and recalls the delicate vessels passage. Mab is moved to act—talking about their sympathy for the American soldiers is insufficient. She longs “to take the world in [her] arms and kiss it,” but Amy returns Mab’s focus to the small world of the Meyrick sitting room and urges her do “something good,” if small: ““finish [her] cushion without soiling it”” (168). Mab, however, resisting the confines of their parlor and sewing, instead wishes she ““had three wounded conscripts to take care of”” (168). Throughout the scene, the narrator at once describes the sisters working and reports the substance of their conversation; these juxtaposed details, conversation and the work of their hands, further reinforce Eliot’s Carlylean vision of labor as a spiritually and intellectually sustaining form of activism.

Much like the March sisters and their “uninteresting” work in *Little Women*, the Meyrick sisters do practical work while envisioning themselves on a worldly stage. The scenes are similar, even if they take place on opposite sides of the Atlantic. The work itself may not be fulfilling or of much consequence—it’s not taking care of three wounded conscripts—but the sentiments both sets of sisters express while sewing acknowledge an awareness of their connections to the larger world.⁴² Mab’s satin cushions are a thing of aesthetic beauty and are practical financially, but they are insignificant in relation to transatlantic events. Mab, in fact, imagines herself capable of more meaningful work. The American War is of immediate concern, even if the Meyricks cannot help personally in this novelistic retrospect: the March sisters and the Meyrick sisters may have parallel conversations, but they are separated by a decade, at least in terms of their readership. The Meyricks, however, feel connected to the events across the Atlantic; it’s as if they can see, smell, and hear the battlefield action. All the while, they sit in London and sew satin cushions for, presumably, an elite clientele that’s a world apart from the gory realities of war.

This conversation immediately precedes Mirah’s introduction into the Meyrick household. In fact, Mrs. Meyrick suggests Mirah has displaced the hypothetical American soldier: “‘Here is someone to take care of instead of your wounded conscripts,’” she says as Mirah walks in the door (169). While the Meyricks obviously cannot take in “wounded conscripts,” Mirah’s appearance at this particular moment invites us to consider the associations between their charity for her and Mab’s desire to care for American military veterans. While we

⁴² In an 1861 letter to Charles Eliot Norton, Elizabeth Gaskell similarly grapples with how to come to terms with both the transatlantic and personal scopes of the American war: “you know I live in S. Lancashire where all personal & commercial intimacies are with the South. Everyone looks & feels sad (—oh *so* sad) about this war; it would do Americans good to see how warm the English *heart* is towards them, although we may all be blundering in our *minds* as to the wisdom or otherwise” (656). As a volunteer during the “cotton famine,” Gaskell writes frequently about the “sad crisis” and her efforts to help the millworkers (677). In a confident yet sympathetic voice that prefigures Mab’s, Gaskell, in a letter to George Smith, wishes “North & South would make friends, & let us have cotton, & then our poor people would get work” (698).

don't see the Meyrick sisters discussing the Civil War again, making this conversation all-the-more haunting, this brief conversation about displaced American soldiers frames the Meyricks' relationships with Daniel and Mirah, who represent a kind of homelessness specific to Anglo-American Jews. Other characters may engage in similar political discussions and others may gesture toward acting on their beliefs (especially toward the end of the novel as Daniel and Mirah embark on their journey to the Middle East), but the Meyricks stand alone because Eliot shows how their conversations and accidents in their plot force them to contend—at once—with the “wounded conscripts” they imagine overseas and with the class and religious/ethnic divisions that characterized mid-century London.

Eliot thematizes the intersections of plot lines and national/international crises in the title to Book II, “Meeting Streams.” While the Meyricks' conversation is a distracted allusion to the Civil War (one that's often overlooked because of our interest in Mirah's appearance), it bookends the second volume, which opens with Eliot's much more overt meditation on American politics during the period. Eliot's first reference to the Civil War jolts us into remembering that this novel takes place a decade earlier than it was written; in fact, the delicate vessels passage is the novel's most obvious chronological marker. Moreover, if these references to the Civil War remind readers, especially British readers, to empathize with the desire for re-union felt in the United States, then it's all the more strange that this passing mention of the Civil War foregrounds Gwendolen, the solipsistic and decidedly Anglo-Christian anti-heroine as a “delicate vessel.” These two passages underscore the competing microscopic and macroscopic perspectives of the novel but also the inextricable relationship between the two. While the delicate vessels passage makes broad claims about world events and the relevance of individual lives, the scene in the Meyrick sitting room reverses the paradigm, detailing the daily lives of

seemingly “insignificant” girls and how they conceive of their place within the larger world. Eliot teases us to connect the two passages, for the second inverts the first. By sewing the satin cushions at home, Amy and Mab engage in a private, domestic act, yet by sewing “for the great world,” they participate in a transatlantic economy, much like the weavers who rely upon cotton from the United States. Mirah’s appearance in the Meyricks’ living room at this particular moment when the Meyrick sisters imagine themselves as global citizens may at first seem a negligible accident; however, in narrative hindsight, it seems, in fact, prophetic. While the Meyrick sisters never seriously entertain the possibility of housing “wounded conscripts,” nor do we see them travel beyond the borders of London (let alone of England), *Daniel Deronda* ends with a vision of Mirah’s and Daniel’s Zionist departure.

Mrs. Meyrick’s conversations with her daughters contextualize the dramatic moment when Daniel finally speaks with his mother, a singer whose presence is prophesized through Mirah’s almost prayerful singing throughout the novel. Indeed, when Daniel finally meets his mother, she bemoans the cultural expectations she rejected, likening her heritage to a sewing “pattern”: “To have a pattern cut out—‘this is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman’s heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet’” (541). Daniel’s mother understands her matrilineally inherited identity in terms of a double simile, as if the pattern and the Chinese feet alone don’t suffice in suggesting her sense of being bound in predetermined ways. In a conversation Mrs. Meyrick has with Amy, Mab, and Kate, the women similarly describe Mirah’s inheritance of her mother’s Jewishness, even gradually secularizing Jewishness, in terms of “a pattern.” ““I don’t think it, my dear,”” Mrs. Meyrick tells Kate; ““I believe Mirah is cut out after the pattern of her mother. And what a joy it would be to her to have such a daughter brought back again! But a mother’s

feelings are not worth reckoning, I suppose' (she shot a mischievous glance at her own daughters), 'and a dead mother is worth more than a living one'" (306). Eliot's use of "pattern" here, at first at least, might seem like a colloquialism people might use to describe a daughter's resemblance to her mother or her physical or spiritual traits she inherits. Coupled with the line about Daniel's mother, however, the colloquial "pattern" becomes a metanarrative one that links Daniel's and Mirah's mothers together. In both cases, tellingly, the word refers to the younger generation's abandonment of Jewishness as a religious and cultural identity, as if this is something one can shed. Even though Mirah can't remember her mother, she, according to Mrs. Meyrick, is "cut out after the pattern," suggesting that the pattern is something that's not visible to the inheritor even though it is so, exaggeratedly, to non-Jews and non-inheritors (306). The "pattern" conceit is decidedly unfinished both in Daniel's mother's and Mirah's mother's cases. For Daniel's mother, in fact, the pattern is so insufficient the narrator turns to a second metaphor to fully explain the point that this identity is a burden for her. While the "pattern" metaphor merely hints at the difficulties of such an inheritance for Daniel's self-exiling mother, it is much more explicit about the disposability of Jewishness in Mrs. Meyrick's instance. For if we complete the metaphor or extended metaphor, Daniel's mother and Mirah's mother are patterns, and Daniel and Mirah are garments. By completing the implied conceit, we are better able to understand why Daniel's mother and Mrs. Meyrick see Jewishness as disposable and why the "pattern" is so hard to trace from the "garment" for Daniel and for Mirah. Tellingly, the Jewish characters are not describing their inheritance (or non-inheritance) this way since the "threads" that bind them to their mothers are not metaphorical to them but real—if yet unrealized.⁴³

⁴³ Meyer suggests these descriptions "[attempt] to idealize [the novel's] diminished women," and they transform "this archetypal 'refined' Jewish woman into a mere piece of household furnishing (739). The Princess's description particularly critiques "women's difficulties in oppressive societies" and "lays bare its suppressed plot, that of a woman entrapped in her culture and feeling herself alien within it, who escapes into another world" (742-43).

Mrs. Meyrick, too, describes her own multi-ethnic heritage in terms of a clothing pattern. Yet her identity, unlike Mirah's, is custom-tailored from her mother's and father's different heritages: "[O]ne may honour one's parents, without following their notions exactly, any more than the exact cut of their clothing. My father was a Scotch Calvinist and my mother was French Calvinist: I am neither quite Scotch, nor quite French, nor two Calvinists rolled into one, yet I honour my parents' memory" (317). Mrs. Meyrick imagines her cultural identity as a "cut" that combines two fabrics or patterns (in contradistinction to Daniel or Mirah whose Jewish "pattern" overwhelms any other material conceit about their inheritances). Mrs. Meyrick, in fact, claims agency over her character through her dress conceit in a way she doesn't allow Mirah through a parallel conceit. Mrs. Meyrick's pithy comment about her heritage resembles the similarly anomalous position the family occupies in the novel as a whole. Self-sufficient, the entirely female family (save Hans, who's at Oxford) fuses its needlework business and its privacy by working in the front parlor amid lively conversation. Whereas the narrator may suggest that Mirah or the Princess are models for a particular ethnicity without question, the Meyricks seem to exist beyond—or defy—such definitions. They're not quite English, they're not quite Scotch, and they're not quite French (but they're always Calvinist), yet Mrs. Meyrick can conceive of herself in terms of a multi-national Calvinist "pattern," not just her matrilineal inheritance.

This tension between pattern and distinctiveness mirrors larger conversations in the novel, particularly about how an individual fits into a family, a nation, and an ethnicity. The narrator's constant references to patterns, inheritances, and lineage are turns of phrases that subtly thematize Daniel's and Mirah's shared—and largely unspoken desire—to reclaim their abandoned Jewish identities through their relationship with one another. Mirah searches for her family and the Jewish past they represent, a quest to see if she is indeed "cut out" in the pattern

of her mother. Yet Daniel's desire to know his parents catalyzes his larger conclusions about national identity, typifying the novel's preoccupation with inheritance and lineage. Throughout the novel, the two—personal history and citizenship—become increasingly intertwined. For Tucker, Daniel's epiphany that he must find his mother is pivotal for both:

Nowhere is the fundamental unassimilability of English and Jewish cultures articulated more economically than in the reality that, since Jewish identity is transferred matrilineally whereas English identity passes from father to son, Daniel literally cannot know what he is looking for until he finds it. That is, he cannot know he is Jewish and therefore needs to be searching for his mother and not his father until he finds his mother and discovers he is Jewish. (105-06)

Tucker is exactly right, but I argue that we should also think about how characters who editorialize about Daniel's and Mirah's religious/ethnic identity think of it as something that can be passed down (or not passed down) intergenerationally, as if religious/ethnic identity is akin to tangible heirlooms. Throughout the novel, Jewish and non-Jewish characters and the narrator describe their understandings of identity through discussions about their belongings they wear on their bodies or conjure in their minds to express that which has not materialized. In many cases, characters (including Daniel and Mirah but also Grandcourt) turn to abstractions about textiles when they're trying to explain parts of themselves that are difficult to put in words or see in the things around them.

Eliot complicates what we might normally understand as two "nations," the British Empire and the Jewish Diaspora, through allusions to specific kinds of cloth: silk, merino, and cambric. In drawing these parallels between the Empire and the Diaspora, *Daniel Deronda* suggests a broader sense of national identity, one that's defined through the circulation of textiles

and one that's aligned with Benedict Anderson's "imagined" communities. By the mid-nineteenth-century, specific fabrics became associated with the cities and countries where they were produced. For instance, as we'll see in chapter four, *calico* reminds us (in its etymological origin and in its place within global economies) of its Anglo-Indian origins, but by the mid-nineteenth century people knew it as a cotton fabric that was produced all over Britain to look like the one originally and specifically made in Calcutta. Other cloths produced in nineteenth-century textile mills followed similar, if less notorious, trajectories, and they also became (potentially) fraught terms in an increasingly global parlance. When Eliot associates specific characters with specific fabrics, then, she also associates them with specific places that constitute their abandoned or reclaimed national identities. While cambric and merino are domestic fabrics that Grandcourt and Mirah mention when identifying themselves as non-foreign British subjects, Daniel uses silk to describe the foreign qualities of Mirah's Jewishness.⁴⁴ By the end of the novel, Daniel and Mirah leave Britain and identify themselves as activists for Jewish nationalism, but, at that moment, their Jewish state is the product of their nascent and highly individualized conceptions of nationhood and religious and cultural identification.

While the novel is set during the political and financial height of Empire, *Daniel Deronda* questions the limits of Britain and British nationalism, often through the textiles with which its characters are clad and described. As with Frederick's decision to "unnative himself" in *North and South*, Mirah's and Daniel's religious/ethnic identifications become increasingly personal choices, since they are determined by consciousness and conscience as well as by birth. These personal choices aren't relegated to the Jewish characters alone, a fact that underscores

⁴⁴ Monica Cohen's essay doesn't address textiles or things specifically; however, her point that global mercantilism may be understood from Eliot's perspective as an extension of Empire and Diaspora parallels my point about silk, merino, and cambric. Eliot's "likening of cosmopolitanism to mercantilism," Cohen argues, "connects the Diaspora Jews living in England to the Englishmen living in 'voluntary' dispersion" (344-45).

Eliot's point that Empire and Diaspora are inextricably bound to one another during this period.⁴⁵ For even the sterile, villainous Englishman Grandcourt is described as a "washed-out piece of cambric" (370). A domestic linen often used for handkerchiefs, cambric things weren't to be treasured and passed down; the fabric's threadbare, worn appearance only further emphasizes its—and Grandcourt's—disposability. No one wants to bequeath or inherit "washed-out" cloth, and Grandcourt embodies the increasingly irrelevant characteristics of British aristocracy within the ever-widening borders of the British Empire.⁴⁶

In contrast, Eliot regularly associates Daniel's and Mirah's understanding of the Jewish Diaspora with coveted goods shipped from the far reaches of the Empire. By characterizing Diaspora (and Jewishness) through references to luxurious, exotic fabrics (including Chinese silk), Daniel also looks away from England and toward the outer reaches of Empire. In eliding all of these things, Eliot suggests geographical boundaries are no longer sufficient for Daniel, who's trying to define his place in the Empire, the Diaspora, and more generally, in the world. Toward the end of the novel, in fact, Daniel feels repulsed by the "patterns" impressed upon Mirah by the Mrs. Meyricks and the Mordecais of the world who reduce her to a Jewish type:

He was beginning to feel on Mirah's behalf something of what he had felt for himself in seraphic boyish time, when Sir Hugo asked him if he would like to be a great singer—an indignant dislike to her being remarked on in a free and easy

⁴⁵ Mark Wohlfarth more fully addresses the manner in which the British Empire and the Jewish Diaspora are, for Eliot, parallel "nations" in many ways. He argues that Eliot "casts Judaism as a continuation as well as a break with English national life," so that it "serves as the middle term that conjoins both sequence and rupture, tradition and a burst of new energy" (190). Wohlfarth's point is important because it unhinges our assumption that the British Empire was a static nation-state. Instead, he urges us to think of it as something much more akin to the fractured and ever-spreading "nation" of Israel: people often associated with religious and cultural Judaism. In this way, a "nation" isn't defined solely on the basis of political boundaries, at least within the logic of *Daniel Deronda*. Wohlfarth's reading of Empire and Diaspora resonates in many ways with the spirit of Plotz's study.

⁴⁶ There's another crucial reference to cambric in the novel: At the beginning, when Daniel returns Gwendolen's necklace, he wraps it in his cambric handkerchief, which he has torn to remove his initials and, in turn, his identity. This small act recalls the scene in *North and South* where Mrs. Thornton, after imagining her son's engagement to Margaret, begins ripping out the initials on her linen.

way, as if she were an imported commodity disdainfully paid for by the fashionable public; and he winced the more because Mordecai would feel that the name “Jewess” was taken as a sort of stamp like the lettering of Chinese silk.

(Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* 477)

Still, it’s telling that the narrator describes Daniel’s offense through a simile Mordecai may or may not use, comparing the “Jewess” type to impressions on silk. Daniel is not the one using the fabric metaphor: the narrator imagines what Daniel thinks Mordecai thinks, and strangely the simile (“like the lettering of Chinese silk”) makes the hypothetical comparison more—not less—abstract. When Daniel likens the “great singer” (who we know to be both his mother and his future wife as much as it is actually him in this passage) to an “imported commodity,” he shows how he resents the way such celebrity reduces her to an anonymous voice. Yet his associative thinking here also shows how he comes to think of Mirah’s Jewish identification with his own two-fold abandonment and reclamation; the Chinese silk, which appears as the direct object in the simile, might be read in conjunction with the “imported commodity” as much as it is aligned with Mirah’s status as a “Jewess.” Daniel’s discomfort, then, seems to lie in the often indistinguishable closeness between imperial commodification at the borders between West and East and Jewish Diaspora.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ American and British textile designers also looked abroad, designing patterns that reflected the mid-nineteenth century interest in imperialism and exotic outposts. While these “Oriental designs” were often “rather awkward Western interpretations of unfamiliar design elements,” their popularity recalls Daniel’s description of Mirah in *Daniel Deronda* (Affleck 70). Eliot, of course, never describes specifically patriotic or “Oriental” printed fabrics in the novel, but the novel’s many patterns and its specific textiles parallel the ideas inherent in the popular, transatlantic commodity. While many “Oriental designs” did not contain lettering, they did feature “‘windows’ which allowed the viewer to see a variety of scenes or patterns simultaneously, depending on how the shapes were placed in the overall design” (70). This windowpane pattern, with its multiple vignettes, eschews a single motif. Instead, the variety of scenes emphasizes the variety and variation within a more general pattern. These prints reflect the metaphorical work of the Chinese silk in *Daniel Deronda*. Not only is the fabric printed and circulated across the globe, it also exemplifies the possibilities of constructing one’s own multi-faceted identity and the make-believe of a beginning. The multiple patterns within the single print parallel the endless garments that could be fashioned from the fabric bolt.

The heirlooms of *Daniel Deronda*, then, are not as tangible as the exotic garments in *North and South*, and nor are they unburdened in their nostalgic imperial representations; but they are *ideas* equally emblematic of the ways religious/ethnic inheritances problematize “national” identifications at mid-century. Indeed, Eliot draws parallels between specific fabrics (and things made of specific fabrics) and characters’ conceptions of their own individuality within “nations.” *North and South* is an important touchstone or measuring stick for *Daniel Deronda* and for *Little Women*: Gaskell’s novel was written in and is about crises in mid-century socio-political and socio-economic conscience; Eliot’s and Alcott’s novels were written in the 1870s and 1860s, respectively, but reflect on this period as a crucial turning point. All three writers come to terms with transnational upheavals, not by fictionalizing the events themselves but by dilating on the meaningful, if troubled, experiences of lives that might seem insignificant within grander non-fictional or historical scopes. All three convey these meaningful experiences—and these characters’ ideas—through the things that constitute their day-to-day lives. In *North and South*, Gaskell dramatizes opposing reactions to labor crises through Margaret Hale and John Thornton, who in many ways embody the ultimate marriage between ideologues and activists. Importantly, they learn to reconcile the split between thinking and doing at the Milton-Northern textile mill where workers produce cotton that’s produced, sold, and made into countless British things. Alcott, who was disappointed with the sales of *Work* (the most explicitly political and adult novel she published to date), wrote in her journal that *Little Women* would have “no *ideas* in it, only facts, and the people shall be as ordinary as possible.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Written just three years after the war ended, *Little Women*, as John Matteson notes in his recent Alcott biography *Eden’s Outcasts*, sympathizes with the innumerable women and fractured families affected by the Civil War. “The number of Megs, Jos, Beths, and Amys [the soldiers] left behind,” Matteson claims, “can never be precisely ascertained,” yet their experiences are often overshadowed by narratives of battlefield heroics (343). This choice of perspective belies Alcott’s perhaps tongue-in-cheek claim that her novel lacks *ideas*. As Matteson argues, *Little Women* is “an example of how one might carry on when one’s family was no longer whole,” even if the war remains in the shadows (343).

If we think of Eliot as Gaskell's and as Alcott's inheritor, then we might also think of *Daniel Deronda* as a novel that necessarily merges *ideas* with things.

In his review of *Daniel Deronda*, James also grapples with the relationship between *ideas* and fiction. "As for the Jewish element in *Deronda*," writes James (technically through the mouthpiece of his character Theodora), "I think it a very fine *idea*; it's a noble subject. [...] It shows a large conception of what one may do in a novel. I heard you say, the other day, that most novels were so trivial—that they have no general ideas. Here is a general idea, the idea interpreted by *Deronda*" (*"Daniel Deronda: A Conversation"* 74-75, emphasis mine). As James notes, Daniel and his developing religious/ethnic identity are the vehicles through which Eliot discusses both the limitations of British Empire and the possibilities of the Jewish Diaspora. Engaging with the world around him, Daniel turns inward, increasingly preoccupied with his religious/ethnic identity. Yet Daniel's search for his family history also expands outward, according to James's logic, into a more cerebral interest in founding a Jewish nation. A.S. Byatt similarly claims that Eliot was "the great English novelist of ideas" (xii). "She took human thought, as well as human passion," argues Byatt, "as her proper subject," which means that "*ideas*, such as thoughts on 'progress,' on the nature of 'culture,' on the growth and decay of society and societies, are as much actors in her work as the men and women who contemplate the ideas, partially understand them or unknowingly exhibit them" (xii). *Daniel Deronda* may be the most dynamic example of what James and Byatt are talking about when they refer to Eliot's "ideas." Whereas Alcott shies away from the theoretical possibilities of the post-Civil War world, Eliot, in James's opinion, is "addicted to moralizing and philosophizing" in a novel about expanding horizons, not the coziness of the domestic hearth (74). Alcott's and Eliot's post-Civil War novels are very different, yet both *Little Women* and *Daniel Deronda* are concerned not only

with the development of individual subjectivity but also with the relationship between these individuals' personal transformations and social reforms on larger scales.

While the project here isn't to trace the subtle presence of the American Civil War in any of these novels, reading *Little Women* or *Daniel Deronda* through their fraught textiles opens up a critical reconsideration of both Alcott's mid-century dismissal of ideas and Eliot's preoccupation with them. The Civil War may have been about the intersection of ideas and actions for many Americans, but it was experienced by many abroad as global event that affected the production of things, especially cotton in British textile mills. To be sure, Americans and Britons alike understood that this war was about slavery and the fundamental moral quandaries involved in national and transnational commerce as well as questions of local sovereignty. In these novels, the War itself is rarely mentioned; however, Eliot's references to textiles carry with them the quandaries attending the American Civil War and the rise of British Imperialism. For Eliot's readers in 1876, there were real reasons to read *things* as *ideas* and to read *ideas* in *things*.

In this light, it may be easier to understand why Mirah compares a dress to "what" or who she is "really." When choosing a dress for her singing debut, Mirah doesn't "want anything better than [her] black merino," her usual fabric selection (419). While Hans wants Mirah to dress in "a black silk dress such as ladies wear," Mirah clings to the authenticity of her black merino: "'But it is what I am really. I am not pretending anything. I shall never be anything else,' said Mirah. 'I always feel myself a Jewess'" (419). Mirah's choice of black merino over black silk suggests her self-conscious modesty. And it's strange that she associates her instinctive choice for merino over silk with her identity as a "Jewess." In fact, at first her comment almost seems to be a non sequitur. In order to make sense of Mirah's statement, Eliot seems to be relying on her readership's contemporary understanding that this product was a

quintessentially British textile. Indeed, if we read her preference for merino (Britishness) over silk (which the narrator/Daniel/Mordecai associates with Jewishness), then Mirah's assertion isn't as out-of-place as it may first seem. In her mind, the choice of fabric marks her national and her religious/ethnic identification, and though she reverses the fabric-nation associations we've seen earlier in the novel, her comment shows how she understands textiles as overt materializations of one's patriotic or spiritual self. The plain, black, unremarkable British merino will let Mirah's authentic (Jewish) self shine through.

Daniel's mother similarly discusses both the outward and the inward characterization of her identity. She "rid [herself] of the Jewish tatters," but she still feels Jewishness is "tattooed under [her] clothes" (544). This strange doubling—shedding external layers while retaining a sense of its presence within one's body—embodies definitions of identity throughout *Daniel Deronda*. More specifically, metaphors of outward garments that can be seen by the world at large yet also discarded mix with those of more permanent markings, often an integral part of the body hidden from public view. Together these internal and external metaphors express the difficult negotiations between public expectations and internal feeling within the construction of an individual identity. Indeed, while Mirah embraces her plain, if theatrical black merino dress, which may suggest she's playing the role of "Jewess" to the outside world, she makes the choice for herself and is not performing at all. The dress announces to the world what she knows within her soul: she is an Anglo-Jewish woman and isn't pretending to be anything else.

For Cohen, embracing one's cultural identity, what she terms "racial homecoming," is most fully expressed as "the materiality of interiority, the making of capacity into an acquisition, inner quality into outer property" (326). Daniel Novak similarly claims "it is precisely the accidentals—speech and clothing—that suggest the permanence of a hidden and legible writing

of Jewish identity” (83).⁴⁹ The duality of this definition—outer aesthetics reflecting inward self-definition—perfectly encapsulates the novel’s repeated textile metaphors used to characterize Jewish identity. Indeed, Daniel’s mother’s “tatters” are metaphorical threads while the real “clothes” she tears from her tattooed body are merely hypothetical. If a character’s religious/ethnic heritage is akin to an innate pattern and largely predetermined, at least from the perspective of non-Jewish characters, then Mirah’s clothing is provocative not for its outward modesty but for what she inwardly sees herself to be.

Throughout *Daniel Deronda* both fabrics and patterns are emblematic of the relationship between interior life and public persona, and these questions of identity are doubled and connected, becoming pattern-like themselves. As in the delicate vessels passage, the novel as a whole suggests that documenting individual lives is as important as recording the impact of a war or strike. The doubling metaphors of individual identity continue in discussions of nationalism and statehood. Such mirroring—language of selfhood reflecting the discourse of politics—highlights the dual microscopic and macroscopic perspectives of *Daniel Deronda*. These images culminate in Mordecai’s exhortation to Daniel on national identity: “You are one of the multitudes over this globe who must walk among the nations and be known as Jews [...] Can a fresh-made garment of citizenship weave itself straightway into the flesh and change the slow deposit of eighteen centuries?” (450). For Mordecai, individual identity is inextricably tied to citizenship, even if that sense of belonging isn’t related to specific geographical boundaries.

⁴⁹ Novak also explores how “types” bridge individual identity and national allegiance throughout the novel. For Novak, the composite photograph epitomizes how “Eliot emphasizes the Jewish national consciousness, arguing that in the Diaspora they have been able to retain a national ‘pride which identifies . . . with a great historic body’” (62). This national pride, however, is bound up in the body itself, for “they had to abstract and efface bodily differences within Judaism in order to produce a coherent body of Jewish *national* difference—a ‘historic body’ envisioned as a composite—what Eliot calls a ‘corporate existence’” (62). While Novak’s argument relies on the language and visual possibilities of photography, a relatively new technology in the 1870s, the recurring patterns—printed on a textile, papers to be traced and cut out an unlimited number of times, and images on the body itself—that populate the novel similarly negotiate a sense of continuity and cultural identity while maintaining a distinctive sense of self.

Rather, his abstracted definition of national allegiance—a sense or feeling that’s consciously chosen yet also innately ingrained—echoes other metaphors of self-identification in the novel, particularly Mirah’s black merino dress and the Princess’s tattered clothes and tattoo. Whereas these moments suggest both Mirah’s and the Princess’s clothing embodies who they are as individuals and as members of a particular ethnicity, Mordecai’s declaration of citizenship dwells in pre-national or the pre-imperial or, even, in the Biblical, since his Zionist vision sees citizenship in terms of religious (not secular or political or economic) identification. He uses the phrase “a fresh-made garment of citizenship” (and its attending associations with secular, political, or economic transnationality) to convey to Daniel the manner in which a religious nation becomes inseparable from one’s flesh.

Mordecai’s metaphor—fusing a “fresh-made garment” that’s worn and visible with something that’s woven “straightway into the flesh” and invisible—also recalls James’s web of consciousness. If James draws upon the image of the web to characterize a vibrant “atmosphere of the mind” that captures every possible impression, then Mordecai imagines the web as forming the skin of each citizen and imbuing him or her with a sense of patriotism (James, “The Art of Fiction” 388). As the thin, permeable, visible barrier that protects the body and is still part of it, Mordecai’s “fresh-made garment” bridges the space between inner-life and outer identity. For Mordecai the web not only illustrates the vast space separating Jews who would assume the “garment” but also epitomizes the subtle connections between the very ideas of religious/ethnic citizenship that so consume his daily thoughts.

As Daniel and Mirah set out to reclaim the “fresh-made garment of citizenship” that Mordecai envisions, the narrator also makes explicit connections between Daniel’s Zionist agenda and the sovereignty of the United States. Recently, critics such as Doyle and Meyer have

begun to discuss the novel's many references to the United States, Christopher Columbus, and the American Civil War.⁵⁰ These allusions, which often occur in the narrative asides such as the delicate vessels passage and the wounded conscripts passage, inform the narrative voice and are central to Eliot's interest in the painful realities of home and homelessness in mid-Victorian period. Describing Daniel's hopes to realize Mordecai's idealized "nation," the narrator alludes to the American Civil War one final time near the close of the novel:

There comes a terrible moment to many souls when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which have lain aloof in the newspapers and other neglected reading, enters like an earthquake into their own lives—when the slow urgency of growing generations turns into the tread of an invading army or the dire clash of civil war, and grey fathers know nothing to seek for but the corpses of their blooming sons, and girls forget all vanity to make lint and bandages which may serve for the shattered limbs of their betrothed husbands.
(Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* 689)

Similar to the delicate vessels passage and the wounded conscripts passage, this narrative aside connects individual lives and the needlework of "girls" to transnational events. The passage suggests how international events affect various characters' consciences, for each person must worry over how the "dire clash of civil war" affects his or her own life. Nancy Henry goes as far as claiming that Daniel's "new-found connection to 'the larger destinies of mankind' makes him as remote [...] as the civil war in America or life 'in the colonies'" (136-37). Henry, too, draws parallels between Gwendolen's own "awakening" and "the violence of invasion, civil war, and social crisis," further associating geopolitical conflicts with the "insignificant" lives they frame.

⁵⁰ Doyle devotes an entire chapter to *Daniel Deronda* and transatlanticism whereas Meyer discusses allusions to Christopher Columbus. Steve Bramlett also traces the role of the United States in *Daniel Deronda*.

Ultimately, then, *Daniel Deronda* questions the very physical space of the United States and ultimately eschews the England of 1876 (or 1866, when the novel concludes).

This final reference to the American Civil War underscores the transatlantic scope of the novel. Daniel shifts from discovering his own religious/ethnic heritage and prepares to rejoin and to build the Jewish nation, which is, as Mordecai teaches him, in a state of Diaspora. At the same time, the United States was resurrecting both its own “national centre” and individual families. Likewise, the anonymous girls who bind their betrothed husbands’ wounds with lint and bandages recall not only the Meyrick sisters’ desire to nurse wounded conscripts but also the heady political negotiations that worked to bring together scattered citizens during Reconstruction, the years when Eliot drafted and published *Daniel Deronda*. As Daniel learns, being moved to act as an individual—responding to the “earthquake” in one’s own life—is especially valuable in the face of “the great movements of the world,” where one feels inconsequential. We can read Daniel’s religio-political transformation as mirroring the charged political landscape of the mid-nineteenth century. Such descriptions again fictionalize James’s web of consciousness, uniting the very *ideas* at the heart of the novel with the *things* that recall its transnational backdrop, an “interior absorption” that’s also played out in mid-century geopolitical economies (James, “The Art of Fiction” 334). In characterizing Daniel’s religious/ethnic coming of age, Doyle subtly draws upon the transatlantic things and ideas that unite the novel. Daniel’s racial and political awakening is, she argues, “an interior revolution in [his] mind about questions of legitimacy—prompted by his reading of republican history, figuratively rendered as a storm at sea, and thereby linked with Britain’s tempestuous Atlantic

imagery” (334). In a novel that’s preoccupied with religious/ethnic consciousness, it’s fitting that Daniel’s mind undergoes a transformation that resembles the world around him.⁵¹

Reflecting on the American Civil War from a decade’s remove and during a year of national celebration (1876 was the American Centennial), Eliot’s transatlantic perspective emphasizes the continued relevance of looking back on this period of vast internal—and transnational—struggle. While she draws upon the political ideals inherent in the rebuilding nation, Eliot refused to visit the United States. In 1874, as she was beginning to think about the novel, Eliot wrote to Annie Fields: “[i]t is not for want of hope and belief in America as the scene of a great future, nor for want of real delight in the graceful kindness which I have felt in all the distinguished natures from the United States with whom I have had any intercourse, that I give up the sight of the great New World” (54). What “it is” remains unspoken, but it’s interesting that the author who wrote so poignantly about connections among British Empire, Jewish Diaspora, and the American Civil War would not traverse the Atlantic. The United States, then, was just as much an idea—*ideal*—for Eliot as it was a political reality, an “imaginary elsewhere” (Bramlett qtd. in Doyle 338). The narrative’s backward glances, however, are a significant counterpoint to the novel’s prospectiveness as Eliot positions the democratic possibilities—*ideals*—of the United States and the ideals on which it was founded as the inspiration behind Mordecai’s and Daniel’s Zionist aspirations. In particular, Daniel’s and Mirah’s departure for the Middle East at the conclusion of the novel looks ahead to new definitions of national identity, much like American independence a century earlier and Reconstruction between 1865 and 1876.

⁵¹ Cohen similarly concludes that *Daniel Deronda* “redefin[es] independence as a quality of mind, as an intellectual property” (342).

The past and future imaginative possibilities of America punctuate the novel, particularly when they parallel those of Daniel's own imagined "nation." Daniel, for example, compares Mordecai's "visionary excitability" to that of Christopher Columbus (Eliot 438).⁵² Columbus, like Mordecai, "had the passionate patience of genius to make [his ideas] tell on mankind," and Daniel hopes that one day the world will come to similar conclusions about his teacher: "The world has make up its mind rather contemptuously about those who were deaf to Columbus" (438). By comparing his mentor and spiritual teacher to the discoverer of the American continent, Daniel equates the possibilities of Mordecai's nationalism with the success of the United States. While these conversations are set in the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War, the democratic possibilities of the United States remain inspirational for Mordecai's—and, soon, Daniel's—visions of a Jewish state. Indeed, Mordecai uses the United States's founding myth to idealize nation-building:

How long is it?—only two centuries since a *vessel* carried over the ocean the beginning of the great North American nation. The people grew like *meeting waters*—they were various in habit and sect—there came a time, a century ago, when they needed a polity, and there were heroes of peace among them. What had they to form a polity but with memories of Europe, corrected by the vision of a better? (458, emphases mine)

⁵² Passing references to Columbus recur throughout the novel. While I'm focusing on their relationship to the novel's preoccupation with the United States and ideas of nationhood, they also allude to the pivotal scenes of the novel, which take place in Genoa, Columbus's birthplace. For a more thorough discussion of Mordecai as "a heroic American colonizer," see Meyer (qtd. in Doyle 343). Meyer suggests likening Mordecai to Columbus is "disconcerting" because "[n]ot only did Columbus pave the way for European exploitation and extermination of darker races in the new world, but he used money confiscated from Jews who had been forcibly converted or expelled from Spain, provided to him by Ferdinand and Isabella, in order to fund his voyage" (751).

Mordecai's description of colonial America recalls the title of "Meeting Streams" and suggests the optimism and inspiration inherent in the nation's founding.⁵³ The "meeting streams" is a literal body of water here, though: the Atlantic Ocean. As with the United States, the Jewish nation Mordecai and Daniel envision requires travel, joining disparate individuals, and forging ahead with a "vision of a better." As American colonists had a century before, the new Jewish nation can unify and move away from the mere "memories" of Europe and form their own polity, fashioning a "fresh-made garment" of citizenship so integral that it's woven into each citizen's flesh. Moreover, Daniel says, "as long as there is a remnant of national consciousness, I suppose nobody will deny that there may be a new stirring of memories and hopes which may inspire arduous action" (457). Daniel's turn of phrase—"the remnant of national consciousness"—is a call for Zionist action that extends Mordecai's textile conceit. While the word *remnant* commonly refers to fabric scraps, by the fifteenth century it became a euphemism for people in exile from their homeland and survivors of persecuted peoples living in Diaspora. This connotation, coupled with Anglo-Christian translations of Isaiah and Jeremiah (which came to contain the word *remnant*), was a euphemistic way to suggest that a Jewish nation was a relic; it had survived but just barely, and certainly not undisturbed.⁵⁴ Unlike Mirah, whom Mrs. Meyrick compares to a pattern without her knowledge, Daniel takes up and pushes back against conventional metaphors that associate religious/ethnic individuality or nationality with tattered cloth. For just as Mirah is not a pattern of her mother, Daniel is not a remnant of his. Daniel calls

⁵³ In her chapter on *Daniel Deronda*, Doyle claims that "'America' remains an important element of Britain's nineteenth-century colonial-economic imagination," but she also suggests "its presence was discomfiting as well as enabling" (339). Because of this "potential for defeat and loss," Britain—and *Daniel Deronda*—relied more heavily on "its eastern commerce and colonial aspirations" (339). While Doyle acknowledges that "the Mediterranean basin was the 'uniting element' in a most specific material sense: it provided a key part of the overland route to its holdings in India and its trade in Asia," she never discusses the novel's narrative asides that meditate on both the political and the trade relationship between Britain and the United States (340).

⁵⁴ The *OED* offers this definition of *remnant* as one of several figurative meanings: "A small number of Jews surviving exile or persecution, in whom future hope rests" ("remnant").

for a “new stirring of memories and hopes,” and, perhaps, even a new language to give voice to his newly realized and reclaimed inheritance.

Daniel Deronda ends with the newlyweds Mirah and Daniel, who have each recently affirmed their individual and shared inheritances, travelling Eastward “to become better acquainted with the condition of [their] race” (688). In time, Eliot concludes, the couple will use their own firm senses of self as catalysts for the creation of a Jewish State, “restoring a political existence to [their] people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre, such as the English have, though they too are scattered over the face of the globe” (688).⁵⁵ Far from being mere patterns or remnants, they are characters who embody a transnationalism that combines the good parts of the British Empire and the Jewish Diaspora. And tellingly, their shared project remains just elliptically narrated: the details of their future life are promisingly absent, just as the details of their pasts once were.

⁵⁵ While he focuses on photography, Novak similarly uses material culture to grapple with the relationship between individual identity and national allegiance. For him, “not only does *Deronda* serve to combine the mixed inheritances of a Christian and Jewish sensibility, he also extends the promise of unifying the heterogeneous Jewish nation” (77). Daniel, then, “embodies the essence of the Jew, because he is *the* Jewish type. Like the composite photograph and like the Jewish national hope, he promises to gather together in a single, ghostly, ‘bodiless body’ the dismembered and heterogeneous Jewish nation” (82).

CHAPTER 3

The “Two Profiles” of Revolutionary Materiality in *The Scarlet Letter*

In 1842, while living at the Old Manse, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote in his notebooks about a trunk he’d found on the property. Belonging to the late Doctor Ripley, who “of course, succeeded to the erudite tomes, as well as to the mansion and widow of the Reverend Mr. Emerson of ante-revolutionary memory,” the “large old leather-covered wooden trunk” contained “many [...] memorials of the venerable Doctor” (*American Notebooks* 339-40). Hawthorne’s interests in the sundry artifacts of the Old Manse’s previous inhabitants suggest his historical mindset, but what’s even more provocative is his description of the “memorials.” Within the trunk, clothing “such as his best beaver hat, with a brim of solemn breadth, and a silk hat in the same style, for summer wear” and “his study-slippers, warm and comfortable” mingle with trinkets such as “his iron tobacco-box” and “a Japanned tin-box for the powder-puff, wherewith his hair or wig used to be whitened, half a century ago” (339-40). After examining what he’s discovered, Hawthorne reads these belongings as revealing “two profiles” of Doctor Ripley, “one apparently in middle life, another in his venerable age” (340). For Hawthorne, the tangible *things* of Doctor Ripley’s life are tantamount to biography. Without these articles, Hawthorne suggests, he could not conjure the “two profiles” of the former Old Manse owner: one in the prime of his life and one in old age (340).

Hawthorne’s sense of awe here suggests an element of surprise that objects such as clothing and letters—things that are material and consequently vulnerable to irrelevance—can

actually speak to people across generations, transmitting a sense of individual and cultural history. Hawthorne, of course, never met Doctor Ripley. This notebook entry, however, suggests that he almost imagines the Doctor's personal history through the selection of things in the trunk, items that were long ago discarded, not cherished heirlooms passed down from generation to generation. Through Doctor Ripley's mundane personal belongings, Hawthorne and his readers gain insight into a historically valuable narrative that's seemingly otherwise inaccessible.

In meditating on these things and reconstructing the "two profiles" of the Doctor, Hawthorne begins to explore whether a piece of clothing can actually serve as a legible marker of one's personality, a question to which he returns through Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Hawthorne meditates on Hester's seventeenth-century life in *The Scarlet Letter*, but readers first encounter Hester—or what Hester has left behind—in "The Custom-House," a decidedly nineteenth-century narrative and one that's obsessed with the material remains of Puritan Boston. In fact, the things that surround Hester, especially those she makes, are also important markers of her identity and character throughout *The Scarlet Letter* and "The Custom-House." Together, these texts reveal "two profiles" of Hester. *The Scarlet Letter* exaggerates these "two profiles" because the clothing spans two centuries, one of the most obvious ways we can tell the passage of time. Just as the style of Dr. Ripley's hats and their wear patterns suggest when he wore them, and the different materials show the different seasons, Hester's A badge, too, shows how one finite moment in her life reverberates across two centuries, even if the punishment for her sin was an anachronistic one by 1850.

Written and set in an era increasingly concerned with industrial progress, "The Custom-House" is preoccupied with the commodities of the past, most of which are long divorced from

their original context.⁵⁶ The title and setting of this short story, which precedes *The Scarlet Letter*, is a government office that oversees the movement of commerce through American ports. Tellingly, however, the short story advertises itself as an everyday account, much like Hawthorne's 1842 notebook entry. The boundaries between fictional and non-fictional imaginings in "The Custom-House" exaggerate the "two profiles" Hawthorne imagines for Doctor Ripley in his Notebook, since he knows only through the things that remain long after his death. The narrator and his associates monitor ships that export novelties to the far reaches of the globe and import exotic, luxurious goods to the United States, but the custom house itself is also an archive of a now-buried national history and populated with material objects, "which [are] now only an encumbrance on earth, and [are] hidden away in this forgotten corner" (Hawthorne, "The Custom-House" 24). Through its deep interest in the burgeoning worldly commerce of the United States and in the tangible remnants of the nation's colonial history, "The Custom-House" introduces Hester Prynne's similarly contradictory sensibility.

For as much as Hester has come to represent the repressed Puritanism of colonial America, she equally embodies the revolutionary, industrious spirit of the age in which "The Custom-House" is set. Hester's *milieu* is seventeenth-century Boston: she lives—and is punished—by Puritan moral codes. Yet the glimpses we see of her quiet, rich inner life more often reflect the age in which the novel was written. As Laura Doyle argues, "Not just one but two histories are sub-merged here, one contemporary with Hester and one with Hawthorne" ("‘A’ is for Atlantic" 251). Indeed, as the narrator subtly hints, it is that rebellious spirit that encourages Hester's most important choices: where to live, what to do, and how to act. Hester,

⁵⁶ Scholars have long been interested in "The Custom-House," particularly its historical (and bio-critical) context and the how these contexts inform *The Scarlet Letter*. See especially Stephen Nissenbaum, Douglas Anderson, Ken Egan, Donald Pease.

then, is both old and new, and her transatlantic movements echo those of the precious cargo that the narrator supervises.⁵⁷

Through “The Custom-House” narrator’s preoccupation with the detritus of colonial America, Hawthorne suggests these discarded objects are laden with meaning. Indeed, Hawthorne’s narrator believes these objects may be forgotten, but they are “yet not altogether worthless” (*The Scarlet Letter* 24). In particular, Hawthorne’s narrator fixates on the material remains of Hester Prynne’s existence—the tattered cloth of her *A* badge. The narrator’s discovery of the *A* is a pivotal moment in “The Custom-House”: it’s the catalyst for *The Scarlet Letter* itself, in which he imagines the past through this piece of cloth. Hester’s story, too, thus becomes a commodity that passes through the custom house, examined, inspected, and sent out into the world by the narrator. For just as the “The Custom-House” narrator spends his days evaluating goods and their movement in and out of the country, *The Scarlet Letter* chronicles Hester’s displaced sense of belonging. That she refuses to return to England (her home country) is a tacit reminder of the circulation of goods in and out of colonial New England. She and the things she makes may have foreign origins, but they come to materialize quintessentially American characteristics such as self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship, even on a very small scale. The meticulous descriptions of her heirloom *A* badge in “The Custom-House” complement the many passages in the novel itself that focus on Hester’s work.⁵⁸ When read alongside one

⁵⁷ In “‘A’ for Atlantic: The Colonizing Force of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*” and *Freedom’s Empire*, Doyle traces how transatlantic movement shapes the novel, particularly Hester’s story. Doyle argues that “if we attend to the colonizing processes submerged in *The Scarlet Letter*, we discover the novel’s place in transatlantic history—a history catalyzed by the English Civil War and imbued with that conflict’s rhetoric of native liberty” (“‘A’ is for Atlantic” 243). “We see that Hawthorne’s text partakes of an implicitly racialized, Atlantic ur-narrative,” she continues, “in which a people’s quest for freedom entails an ocean crossing and a crisis of bodily ruin” (243).

⁵⁸ Recent material histories such as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s *Age of the Homespun* and Marla Miller’s *The Needle’s Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* and *Betsy Ross and the Making of America* are useful histories for understanding the trade conditions that governed mid-seventeenth textile production. Their interests in the centrality of fabric and needlework in colonial America and the early republic (which they argue serve as a homespun alternative to textile importation) invert the fictional history detailed by the narrator of “The Custom-House.”

another, these passages create parallel, two-fold “profiles” that illuminate Hester’s life as an artisan and businesswoman instead of sinner and outcast.

Just as Hester’s *A* badge at one time simultaneously covers and reveals the immaterial content of Hester’s heart, the hats Hawthorne finds in the Old Manse serve as relics that remind us of what we don’t know about Dr. Ripley’s mind now that he’s dead. If the hats become metonyms for Doctor Ripley’s aging mind, then the “two profiles” and the two hats stand for his evolving character. Hawthorne’s notebook entry about Doctor Ripley’s discarded treasures anticipates “The Custom-House” scene in which the narrator discovers the tattered remains of the scarlet *A*. Not only do both passages meditate on the rich potential of the tangible remnants of the past, but both moments also explore the relationship among material objects, written texts, and human life.

After describing the items in Doctor Ripley’s trunk, Hawthorne reveals that these material possessions in which he is so interested are “mixed up with manuscript sermons, old bundles of musty accounts, and numerous letters, some directions of which are in female hands” (*The American Notebooks* 340). Yet while Hawthorne includes these documents, he separates them from the descriptions of the clothing and boxes, only mentioning them after suggesting the trunk contains “two profiles” of Doctor Ripley. Hawthorne’s narrative imagining replaces the recovery of Doctor Ripley’s actual texts, and he in fact draws attention to this self-conscious fictionalization through his clipped description of the documents themselves. While he describes each article of clothing and the two boxes, Hawthorne glosses over the details of the papers. “Old [...] musty” ledgers mingle with “numerous” letters in various hands, but Hawthorne stops there, omitting the business with which the ledgers deal and the correspondents of the letters. These

written records, then, are secondary to the hats and the boxes: the texts supplement the “two profiles” Hawthorne imagines after having touched the real things that Ripley wore.

Concluding the notebook entry, Hawthorne suggests that “we might find something of interest in these” papers, half-heartedly acknowledging their potential historical richness. But in the end, Hawthorne joins together the material artifacts and the written records (340). He acknowledges that he—and we—are “the rightful inheritors of all [Doctor Ripley’s] history,” suggesting the combined historical value—and narrative power?—of the clothes, boxes, and papers (340). Hawthorne privileges the biographical value of the clothes and boxes, but he suggests that along with the papers, these forgotten items, “deposited in one of [the] outhouses” many years ago, have the potential to reveal Doctor Ripley’s full life history (339). Living in the Doctor’s former home, seemingly surrounded by biographically revealing material, Hawthorne claims to flesh out his understanding of the late Doctor only after the outhouse discovery. The inclusiveness of Hawthorne’s concluding sentence also suggests his impulse to be a democratic historian.⁵⁹ For Hawthorne, Doctor Ripley’s “ante-revolutionary memory” conveys something meaningful about the rich national history infused in the Old Manse. The trunk of Doctor Ripley’s things not only illuminates the late man’s undocumented, largely forgotten life, but it also provides a new, concentrated focus on how one lived in colonial America: but perhaps this applied to Hawthorne as much as it did to Doctor Ripley. Since the clothing and the texts are mutually informing, they bridge the past and the present, so that Hawthorne feels as if has access to Doctor Ripley himself when he discovers these forgotten belongings. Hawthorne’s concluding

⁵⁹ The Old Manse is a storied home in both American history and in American literary history: Hawthorne wrote *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) in the same room where Emerson wrote *Nature* (1836). The room overlooks the backyard where the first shots of the American Revolutionary War were fired. Both Emerson’s and Hawthorne’s biographers like to remind us that Hawthorne’s desk faced the wall while Emerson’s desk faced the window. There’s a rich precedent for understanding Emerson’s and Hawthorne’s early work through their revolutionary inheritance materialized quite clearly through the home the one passed to the other. (When Nathaniel Hawthorne married Sophia Hawthorne in 1842, the Emerson family encouraged him to move into the home where he could write productively and begin his family).

thought also suggests a collective—and “rightful”—inheritance of this man’s singular colonial history. From the assorted, private histories of this one man, one real and one imagined, contemporary American citizens can learn important historical lessons.

“The Custom-House” narrator’s accidental encounter with the tattered scarlet *A* badge similarly imbues material objects with narrative potential, for even before we know the plot of the novel, which develops out of his discovery, the narrator dwells on the “wonderful skill” of the needlework (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 26). Indeed, his appreciation for the fine materiality of this physical trace of the past is the defining moment of the novel, and it sets the stage for a narrative that privileges Hester’s work and not her crime or sin. In repeatedly returning to the material, especially in a novel so concerned with immaterial states, actions, and feelings, Hawthorne draws our attention to the person behind the embroidery, the one who once possessed such “wonderful skill.” With the narrator’s discovery in “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne elaborates on the narrative potential of material objects that he only mentions in passing at the end of the Ripley notebook entry. By appreciating the “wonderful skill” of the embroidery—indeed, by appreciating the shred of fabric at all—“The Custom-House” narrator and his readers also become “rightful inheritors” of Hester Prynne’s history in an aesthetic as well as moral sense, for Hester’s diligence in creating beautiful work comes to represent a way of living rightly in the modern world. Rather than distancing us from the scarlet letter, the “The Custom-House” brings us even closer to the material meanings of the text, bridging narratives with things and bridging the seventeenth century with the nineteenth century.

The plot of *The Scarlet Letter* proper begins once “The Custom-House” narrator encounters the embroidered *A* badge. Thus, before we meet Hester—or even know the subject of the novel—we encounter a colonial artifact she once wrought, and this tattered textile becomes

the inspiration for the rest of the narrative. This meticulous attention begins in the middle of “The Custom House.” Hawthorne’s “Endicott and the Red Cross” (1837), an earlier short story similarly features “a young woman, with no mean share of beauty, whose doom it was to wear the letter A on the breast of her gown” (219). While the narrator of “Endicott” dwells on the meaning of the young woman’s “letter A,” “The Custom-House” narrator is preoccupied with the materiality of the found embroidery.⁶⁰ There is an important shift, then, between the description of the scarlet letter in “Endicott” (rooted in the meaning and significance of the letter) and “The Custom-House” narrator’s initial pleasure in observing the artistic skills of the embroidery without considering its meaning. Hawthorne’s revised treatment of scarlet letters between the tale and the novel is striking: the later version makes the object the title of his narrative, a fact that further draws our attention to the material connections between text and textile. Between 1837 and 1848–1849 when “The Custom-House” was written, Hawthorne’s attention shifts focus from metaphorical meaning to artistic skill and materiality.

As in Hawthorne’s notebook entry about Doctor Ripley, “The Custom-House” narrator dwells on the physical traces of the past before noticing or reading the papers that may go with them. This shift suggests a growing interest in the real things that constitute human lives and not in allegory.⁶¹ If Hawthorne’s short stories are known for their allegories, then we should also

⁶⁰ While scholars often group “Endicott” and many entries in Hawthorne’s *American Notebooks* as other examples of Hawthorne’s interest in women who wear scarlet letters, only “Endicott” dwells on the materiality and fine artistry of the letter. The notebook entries are mere passing references to tableaux.

⁶¹ The critical discourse surrounding *The Scarlet Letter* often privileges allegorical, metaphorical, and symbolic readings of the novel that often draws upon the novel’s seventeenth-century Puritan setting; see especially, Sacvan Bercovitch, Jonathan Arac, Michael Colacurcio, and Lauren Berlant. Other critics are, however, more interested in how the actual things of *The Scarlet Letter* can be read as legible markers of Hawthorne’s interest in the nineteenth-century world. In these readings, critics often focus on “The Custom-House,” often drawing bio-critical parallels between the work of “The Custom-House” narrator and Hawthorne’s own tenure in the Salem custom-house. In her article on authorship and *The Scarlet Letter*, Teresa Goddu explores how “Hawthorne’s formulation of romance converts a material economy into a symbolic one” (49). While Goddu also dwells on how “The Custom-House” narrator calls the scarlet letter a “rag,” she interprets this material description as a metaphor for “the raw materials of the writer’s trade in the 1850s—paper made of reconstituted cotton fibers” (49-50). In turn, she explains how Hawthorne’s “embeddedness within commercial networks intertwined with slavery” shows how “Hawthorne’s

consider how Hawthorne's novels are equally grounded in real things. The titles of three of his four romances, in fact, are things: *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), *The Marble Faun* (1860). This is a subtle difference, but it's one between allegory and metonym: Doctor Ripley's hat represents his mind, and Hester's badge represents her heart, respectively.⁶² While the narrator describes the fabric as "much worn and faded," he also—in the same sentence—notes that it is "fine red cloth," thus emphasizing the quality of the artifact (26). He similarly balances his description of the embroidery. The gold design may be "greatly frayed and defaced," but the narrator goes to great lengths to assure the reader of the quality of the work: "It had been wrought, as was easy to perceive, with wonderful skill of needlework; and the stitch (as I am assured by ladies conversant with such mysteries) gives evidence of a now forgotten art, not to be recovered even by the process of picking out the threads" (26). The work is so fine that its quality is "easy to perceive" despite the "rag"-like appearance of the cloth (26). By not only noting the "wonderful skill" of the stitches but also emphasizing the embroidery as an example of a lost art, the narrator shifts our attention from the possible significance of the "rag" that "on careful examination, assumed the shape of a letter" to the needlewoman who would have made such a marvelous creation years before (26). The "rag" of cloth, then, is a historical record: it's

authorship and his romance are indebted to and articulated through the economy of slavery" (50-51). Bryce Traister considers "the emergence of bureaucratic individualism" in the novel, especially because it's so concerned with how "the private affairs of the heart" and "those of trade and excise" often "share a similar packaging" (77). Similarly, Jee Yoon Lee focuses on how Hawthorne's own work in the Salem custom-house "suggests that Hawthorne's literary imagination is powerfully grounded in the material objects" that would have passed across his (and other clerks') desks (952). Lee only explores resonances of Oriental material culture in *The Scarlet Letter*, but her argument invites us to consider a more comprehensive reading of the novel that suggests "Hawthorne both figuratively and literally transfigures the material of nineteenth-century Salem and its museum into the world of fiction" (953).

⁶² As early as "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), which was collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), Hawthorne associates Faith's lost pink ribbon with her lost innocence, conveying the allegory of the story through a metonymical accessory, much like the A in "Endicott and the Red Cross. As these objects become less explicitly religious in their allegorical meaning (in their novelistic revisions), then their un-metaphorical qualities (the actual physical properties of the A badge in *The Scarlet Letter*) take on manifold importance since they are complemented by parallel secular histories.

the physical evidence of a now-forgotten art form. That the stitches are unraveled reminds the narrator of the time that has elapsed since Hester's story was fully known.

The narrator spends six sentences precisely describing the materiality of the embroidery before venturing to guess its purpose or meaning. Even then, the narrator seems only vaguely interested in discovering "some deep meaning" within its embroidery. While he eventually muses the textile "had been intended, there could be no doubt, as an ornamental article of dress," he admits the details remain "a riddle which (so evanescent are the fashions of the world in these particulars) [he] saw little hope in solving" (26). However he ultimately chooses to read the embroidered letter, the narrator understands that its materiality is the key to its interpretation, especially since the *A* badge recalls "mysteries" of a "forgotten art." Together, the lost stitches and the forgotten narrative serve as a striking contrast between the colonial past and the nineteenth-century present when the narrator finds the package in the custom house. While much has been lost to history, Hester's skillful work—materialized in the ragged cloth and gold thread—still speaks for itself and is very much present in the nineteenth-century custom house. The narrator's visceral reaction—the "not altogether physical, yet almost so" sensation he experiences when he places the embroidery on his chest—coupled with his "absorbing contemplation" of the textile itself intimates the needlework's significance.⁶³ Even the without context, the beautiful embroidery is valuable on its own terms; even the narrator of "The Custom-House" can see that the elaborate *A* badge doesn't need a narrative imposed on it.

Of course, the "mysteries" of the scarlet letter are revealed, at least partially, in the "small roll of dingy paper, around which [the cloth] had been twisted" (Hawthorne "Custom-House"

⁶³ The narrator's visceral reaction to the still-anonymous woman's work parallels the narrator's similarly palpable encounter with feminine labor in Melville's diptych "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," which I discuss in chapter five. Both narrators are queasy at the prospect of the work, because they can't quite understand its consequences on the women's lives. While Melville's narrator finds the paper-mill operatives' work to be illegible because they produce blank, white paper, Hawthorne's narrator struggles to read between the lines of a faded past.

26). And while this written history is “a reasonably complete explanation of the whole affair,” the narrator returns to the “wonderful skill” of Hester’s embroidery throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, suggesting the importance of Hester’s work—the action of creating and the badge itself—in fashioning a narrative that is almost “entirely of [the narrator’s] own invention” (27). The resonance between the materiality of Hester’s work and the narrator’s fanciful story is striking. The “two profiles,” then, aren’t just the scarlet *A* badge the narrator finds in the custom house and Hester’s story in *The Scarlet Letter*, but they are also the confluence of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

While the narrator bemoans “the materiality of his daily life pressing so intrusively upon” him, he ironically relies upon the *A* badge to relieve him from his outdated work at the custom house (30). His reinvention of Hester’s story forces him to reckon the materiality of the nineteenth century alongside that of the seventeenth century; in this way, his narrative *The Scarlet Letter* appears as an heirloom he leaves to future historians, one that merges text with textile. Hawthorne returns to one of his favorite themes and modes—paratext—through the narrator of “The Custom-House,” a figure who will forever be suspended between seventeenth-century, nineteenth-century, and future histories. Indeed, the narrator envisions himself as a chronicler of past and future *A* badge inheritors: He will write “a few scattered fragments and broken paragraphs” and “find the letters turn into gold upon the page,” which recalls the narrator’s initial description of the scarlet *A*: a tattered, gold letter imbued with meaning and a means to economic solvency (30).

Inspired by Hester’s embroidery, the material product of her industry, “The Custom-House” narrator writes the narrative that articulates the relationship between doing meaningful work and leading a fulfilling life. Before finding the tattered *A* badge, the narrator laments how

“sorrowful” he was over the “many days, and weeks, and months, and years of toil, [that] had been wasted on [the] musty papers” that surround him at the custom house (24). Yet with this material discovery, the narrator embarks on his own internal transformation, oiling his “rusty [...] intellectual machinery,” writing Hester’s story, and, ultimately, learning how to live in the world. Compiling Hester’s “fragments” (as well as his own) and making them “turn into gold,” the narrator realizes he, too, has crafted a new “more real” life for himself (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 35, 165). He may now be “a citizen of somewhere else,” but he’s also financed a way out of the custom house (35).

Much like the title of the novel itself, the scarlet letter is both a very real, tangible thing and a representation of countless intangible ideas. While scholars often focus on the semiotics of Hester’s *A* badge or her morality—and how it might reflect Hawthorne’s own views on his Puritan inheritance—few note the detail with which Hawthorne describes the work that fills Hester’s days and his novel’s pages. Where our normal starting place usually is the plot nested within the novel (after “The Custom-House”), we can see now the surrounding paratexts are crucial to the meaning of *The Scarlet Letter*, since the scarlet letter is one of those texts. Throughout “The Custom-House” and *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester’s embroidered *A* is so much of a thing that we often forget about it, just as generations of people left it abandoned in the custom house. Instead, critical memory often renders the *A* in abstractions, dwelling on allegory instead of the very real ideas, things, and people behind them.⁶⁴ But if Hester actively creates a meaningful life for herself through the work she does, then the things she makes show how her work connects her to ideas that were provocative in the seventeenth century and nineteenth century alike.

⁶⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch’s *The Office of The Scarlet Letter* (1991) presents the most extensive discussion of the “cultural symbology” of Hester’s scarlet letter (xvii).

In the opening chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's narrator continues to elaborate on his interest in the "wonderful skill" of Hester's *A*. Instead of reducing the scarlet letter to a mere symbol of Hester's sin, the narrator calls attention to the materiality of the letter itself: its gold thread, its red fabric, and the elaborate embroidery that covers the object. The *A* badge isn't an abstract idea or representation, then, but an actual thing that is aesthetically beautiful. At first, Hester may try to hide her needlework (the textile "token" of her moral sin) with her baby (the human materialization of her moral sin), but she eventually displays her handiwork as she exits the prison door and appears upon the scaffold before the men and women of Boston and before Governor Bellingham and Reverend Dimmesdale, the authorities who judge her:

When the young woman—the mother of this child—stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter *A*. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore, and which was of a splendour in

accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony. (*The Scarlet Letter* 40)

Just as “The Custom-House” narrator romanticizes the “wonderful skill” of the raggy cloth and “forgotten” stitches he finds in the custom house (an unlikely place for such a forgotten object), *The Scarlet Letter* narrator devotes as much attention to the “elaborate embroidery” as he does to the baby (Pearl) or to “the young woman” (Hester) herself. Indeed, he takes note of the *A* badge’s “fine red cloth,” “gold thread,” and “gorgeous luxuriance” with as much attention as he devotes to following Hester’s subtle movements on the scaffold, almost holding Pearl in front of her before blushing, smiling, and, finally, displaying the handiwork of her *A* badge. There’s a dramatic buildup to revealing the *A*, not because the secret that the *A* stands for (adultery) is to be kept quiet, but as the women comment, Hester seems coyly self-satisfied with the badge she bears over her heart. While the narrator initially imagines that Hester “wisely judg[es] that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another” when she moves Pearl to her hip, after he begins describing the textile “token,” he focuses on its aesthetic qualities; its only flaw is that the elaborate embroidery and expensive fabric are “greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony,” another violation of the law and order in Hester’s Puritan community.

Hawthorne’s narrator isn’t the only one interested in Hester’s needlework. In fact, the narrator calls our attention to a group of five women waiting in the crowd to see Hester stand on the scaffold who are also obsessed with the way Hester has sewn her *A* badge. They read the sumptuous fabric and thread and Hester’s intricate embroidery as an expression of vanity that suggests Hester doesn’t really care about her earthly sin or her guilt in an afterlife. Before she even sees Hester’s “elaborate embroidery,” the “autumnal” woman of the group implies that it’s

in Hester's character to accessorize: "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead. Madam Hester would have winced at that, I warrant me. But she,—the naughty baggage,—little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown! Why, look you, she may cover it with a brooch, or such like heathenish adornment, and so walk the streets as brave as ever!" (39). The fourth and the fifth women oddly prefigure the scarlet letter about to be unveiled when they imagine Hester bearing a public mark of sin as a brand on her forehead or a mark on the bodice of her gown. "Ah, but," says "a young wife, 'let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart'" (39). Another young woman (who is "the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges") criticizes Hester more harshly. "What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown, or the flesh of her forehead?" she says, "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is both in the Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray!" (39). The narrator reminds us that these five gossipers are the only women among the crowd and suggests that their judgment may be even more damning than the governor's or the magistrates'. That they anticipate Hester will emerge from the prison with a flourish—a sartorial flourish that reaffirms her public disregard for secular and for religious conventions—intimates that the gilded badge the narrator is to describe in the following paragraphs is representative of her old character more than it is a soon-to-be reformed one.

In fact, the narrator returns us to their private conversation directly after he first describes Hester, Pearl, and the *A*. And as appalled as they may have been by the fact that their expectations are fulfilled (they may even be surprised that her punishment is in part to wear a badge on her chest that she's made herself), they are even more appalled by the overwrought

details of the fabric and the embroidery visible from their place beneath the scaffold. ““She hath good skill at her needle, that's certain,”” says one of the women, ““but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it? Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?”” (41).

The woman's comment about Hester's self-made badge marking her as a “brazen hussy” is more in line with nineteenth-century conventions of the distressed needlewoman, whose work was often associated with moral impropriety, than with a seventeenth-century Puritan who has become a fallen woman. For if this woman, like the others, serves as a Greek chorus on behalf of the Boston populace, her rhetoric bridges judgments of Hester made by two generations of gawking spectators: those of the 1640s and those of the 1850s. In fact, the women's collective critique of Hester's needlework may be so biting, since it stands in for judgments of sins that must remain secreted except for the presence of Pearl and the *A* badge. They may not be able to articulate their disdain for what she did in order to become pregnant or for the child screaming upon the scaffold, but their petty nit-picking of Hester's stitches suggests their venom for her. ““It were well,” says another “iron-visaged” woman, ““if we stripped Madame Hester's rich gown off her dainty shoulders; and as for the red letter which she hath stitched so curiously, I'll bestow a rag of mine own rheumatic flannel to make a fitter one!”” (41). ““Oh, peace, neighbours—peace!’ whispered their youngest companion,” the only one who even tries to empathize with Hester: ““do not let her hear you! Not a stitch in that embroidered letter but she has felt it in her heart”” (41). This woman is the only one of the five who seems to realize that the badge Hester bears over her heart is supposed to be symbolic of Hester's potential spiritual

reformation. For this youngest companion, the badge represents a promise for change and not vain glory.

For most spectators, however, Hester's appearance makes her seem unrepentant at best, and audacious and brash at worst. Even the narrator acknowledges that she seems self-conscious about the manner in which her dress and her badge draw attention to her spectacle:

Her attire, which indeed, she had wrought for the occasion in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity. But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer—so that both men and women who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time—was that scarlet letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself. (40-41)

Hester's specially-made garments separate her from the crowd. They buck the expectation of modesty. Instead, they are "modeled much after her own fancy," a word that suggests her handiwork style but also her penchant for choosing instinct over convention or expectation. Indeed, if the scarlet letter is to represent her sin, the excess it displays is not of transfiguration or potential transfiguration but of transgression. By describing the *A* badge as both "fantastically embroidered" and "illuminated," Hawthorne's narrator also reminds us of its afterlife, for when "The Custom-House" narrator finds the tattered piece of cloth, it is still coupled with a story and an archive that couldn't be fully read on its own. The word "illuminated," then, doesn't just

suggest the spell associated with Hester's presumed mystic fall: it also shows how text and textile are inextricably bound.

Though Hawthorne coins the term “two profiles” in his notebook entry about Doctor Ripley, he extends this mode of fictionalized biography most fully in *The Scarlet Letter*: Hester appears both as the composite figure imagined by “The Custom-House” narrator and the subjective presence in the body of the novel, where the narrative often teases these connections between seventeenth-century and nineteenth-century perspectives. The scaffold scene is one of the most famous in the novel, because it surveys a crowd of women who seem to belong to both centuries before moving within Hester's mind. By the time we realize that we're moving in and out of her consciousness, then, we're thinking of her through a series of twin perspectives: outside and inside, seventeenth-century and nineteenth-century, sympathetic and judgmental. Chapter five, “Hester at Her Needle” adds another two-fold perspective of our heroine: well-respected seamstress (for the governor and other public officials) and social pariah. Hester's flashy *A* badge, which encapsulates the provocative reception of her other needlework, becomes increasingly central to the narrator's understanding of her history, since he begins connecting Hester's industriousness to larger concerns, rendering Hester a prescient figure for her nineteenth-century readers—not just an outdated sinner.

The narrator returns to another sustained meditation of Hester's “wonderful skill” in the fifth chapter, “Hester at Her Needle” (chapters one-three take place before the prison door and chapter four recounts Hester's reunion with Chillingworth, so chapter five assumes the ensuing weeks and months from her official judgment to the end of her confinement). It's telling that Hester's confinement remains unnarrated, and when we rejoin her, we primarily see the work she's doing for her community. Between chapter one and chapter five, then, Hester's embroidery

moves from being a mark of her sin to being a mark of her industriousness and potentially reformed character. As a consequence of this, we see Hester as a figure in the community who is creating for herself what the narrator ultimately terms “a more real life” than the one imagined by her critics beneath the scaffold and in front of the prison door (165).

Indeed, much of the rest of *The Scarlet Letter* traces Hester’s nascent self-sufficiency and the choices she makes in creating a meaningful life for herself and for her daughter Pearl.⁶⁵ For while Hester is portrayed as a brazen sinner, she’s also portrayed as a diligent worker who serves the community in which she’s chosen to live. Lee notes the nineteenth-century belief that “a woman’s skill at embroidery serves as a visual indication of her ability to be a moral member to a community,” but Hester’s sewing is more than a mere “visual indication” of her morality (960). “Hester at Her Needle,” in fact, focuses on the relationship between her work and the distinctively nineteenth-century character she’s cultivated upon her judgment and confinement. Instead of “flee[ing]” the community that has punished her, Hester makes a home on the outskirts of Boston, where she sews clothes for her fellow townspeople (56). In the opening sentences of “Hester at Her Needle,” Hawthorne’s narrator establishes that Hester lives in a “little lonesome dwelling” on the edge of town where she “established herself, with her infant child” under the observation of the local magistrates, “who still kept an inquisitorial watch over her” (57). Yet while she lives near a community that knows her and her past, Hester, the narrator imagines, still feels “[l]onely” and as if she’s “without a friend on earth who dared to show himself” (57). Despite her isolation (or perhaps because of it), Hester dedicates herself to her needlework, a profession, the narrator reminds us, that was “almost the only one within a

⁶⁵ Like the heroines (or anti-heroines) I discuss in the introduction (Rosamond Vincy and Dorothea Brooke), chapter two (Gwendolen Harleth), chapter four (Mary Seacole), and chapter six (Lucilla Marjoribanks and Catherine Sloper), Hester’s romantic fate and life’s work are determined in the opening chapters of the novel. The dénouement is not whether or when the heroine will marry but what she’ll do in the wake of decisions that were made before the novel even opens.

woman's grasp" in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries alike (57). Her sewing, in fact, "sufficed, even in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise, to supply food for her thriving infant and herself" (57). And, of course, Hester's *A* badge is the iconic, omnipresent advertisement for her skills. It may serve as a mark of her moral sin and supposed shame, but it also showcases her beautiful embroidery: "She bore on her breast, in the curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill, of which the dames of a sort might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and more spiritual adornment of human ingenuity to their fabrics of silk and gold" (57).

Hester's embroidery is, however, more than a way to mark her sin and a means of subsistence. Hawthorne's narrator, in fact, devotes much of "Hester at Her Needle" to descriptions of Hester's needlework. Instead of dwelling on what the *A* badge Hester makes and wears means, the narrator focuses on what Hester sews after she leaves the prison, what these garments look like, and who in Boston purchases them, all of which underscore how her post-*A* badge sewing comes to suggest a moral reformation that was much more nineteenth-century in its moral code than it was Puritanical. The assumption that labor contributes to her moral fiber and that this transformation affected her understanding of herself and other people's impressions of her echoes ideas espoused by Carlyle and Emerson, even if they would have resonated vaguely in seventeenth-century America, too.

In fact, her embroidery is a meaningful materialization of her character because it shows how she pairs these values with her taste for fancy, and together, it becomes "the fashion" (57). As the narrator reminds us, her fellow Bostonians flock to her for their sewing commissions:

Whether from commiseration for a woman of so miserable a destiny; or from the morbid curiosity that gives a fictitious value even to common or worthless things;

or by whatever other intangible circumstance was then, as now, sufficient to bestow, on some persons, what others might seek in vain; or because Hester really filled a gap which must otherwise have remained vacant; it is certain that she had ready and fairly requited employment for as many hours as she saw fit to occupy with her needle. (57-58)

The narrator may question why Bostonians choose to hire Hester, but it's also clear that her embroidery work is popular. As he describes Hester's sewing business, he emphasizes the eventual ubiquity of her fancy-work. "Her needle-work," he claims, "was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarfs, and the minister on his band; it decked the baby's little cap; it was shut up, to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead" (58). If Hester's single letter *A* is intended to tell her story through a single act, then her needlework appears as inscriptions on cloth at moments that bookend her compatriot cradle-to-the-grave Bostonians' lives. Though she may not be welcome in Dimmesdale's church for these touchstone events, her handiwork is present at baptisms, funerals, and other important church and state events—but not weddings.

While the community forgives Hester enough to commission her embroidery for babies and for lost members of their congregation, the scarlet letter is so damning that they do not ask her to sew wedding veils. Hester's success as a seamstress may be surprising in itself, so it's curious that the narrator calls attention to the work she's still not allowed to do out of respect for the bridal innocence expected of Boston's maidens: "it is not recorded that, in a single instance, her skill was called in aid to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride" (58). The narrator's reference to what's "not recorded" is a self-referential reminder of his research and identity as Hester's historian and biographer, but it also intimates the manner in

which Hester positions herself as the unofficial historian and biographer of seventeenth-century Boston through her embroidery. One might imagine the narrator of “The Custom-House” happening upon trunks full of mourning clothes or baptismal gowns and imagining the lives of these Bostonians, just as Hawthorne had when he discovered Doctor Ripley’s hats in 1842.

Indeed, the narrator’s reference to a bridal veil is an anachronism that suggests Victorian Puritanism more than it does seventeenth-century mores and fashions. An embroidered white veil would have been hypothetical in Hester’s world for many reasons. Beyond the narrator’s observation that one was “not recorded,” bridal veils, let alone white bridal veils, would have been anachronistic in seventeenth-century Boston. Until Queen Victoria wore a white wedding dress and lace veil on the occasion of her marriage to Prince Albert in 1840, women rarely chose white dresses—or white veils—for their wedding costumes. Instead, brides often wore more practical dresses that could be reused for years to come. The narrator’s aside about the nonexistent veil, then, further highlights how Hawthorne rewrites Puritan history throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, particularly with Hester and her work. It also reminds us that Hester’s narrative trajectory is delineated long before the beginning of the novel (when she gives birth to Pearl) but also even after her community embraces her as a useful member of society. Despite her ongoing friendship with Dimmesdale and the return of her husband, we know she will never marry again, not only because the church and the state won’t allow it but also because her singledom is inscribed in the work she is and isn’t allowed to do for her customers.

And yet Hester is responsible not only for these momentous occasions that bridge people’s private and public spiritual lives but also for dressing Boston’s men for important state events. The narrator catalogues Hester’s embroidery on state garments of magistrates and governors (officials who once sentenced her to prison and wearing the *A* badge that now

advertises her profession), intimating her surprising recovery from the judgment described in the first chapter. Hester may or may not have experienced the spiritual reformation Dimmesdale called for in his sermon, but she has regained her identity as a productive citizen of this place. Tellingly, however, the governor and magistrates require Hester's work because it displays the flashiness so often outlawed by their seventeenth-century society. Her embroidery, which eschews the "sable simplicity that generally characterised the Puritanic modes of dress," is deemed perfect for special occasions observed by the church and the state (57). "Public ceremonies, such as ordinations, the installation of magistrates, and all that could give majesty to the forms in which a new government manifested itself to the people, were," the narrator reminds us, "as a matter of policy, marked by a stately and well-conducted ceremonial, and a sombre, but yet a studied magnificence" (57). These state occasions, too, required special clothing, so Hester's "[d]eep ruffs, painfully wrought bands, and gorgeously embroidered gloves, were all deemed necessary to the official state of men assuming the reins of power, and were readily allowed to individuals dignified by rank or wealth, even while sumptuary laws forbade these and similar extravagances to the plebeian order" (57).

While Hester continues to sew extravagantly for the governor and magistrates, the clothing she wears is "ascetic," so that the scarlet letter still stands out (58). Hester's modest dress parallels her work with charity in the aftermath of her confinement. Rather than spending her money on herself or on her daughter, she donates it or she uses it to purchase material to clothe the poor: "Except for that small expenditure in the decoration of her infant, Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself, and who not unfrequently insulted the hand that fed them. Much of the time, which she might readily have applied to the better efforts of her art, she employed in making coarse garments for the poor"

(58). For if Hester is doing work for free or donating garments to the poor, the narrator imagines that this charity is both a kind of penance for her past sin as well as a prayer-like act of goodness. “It is probable that there was an idea of penance in this mode of occupation,” the narrator speculates, “and that she offered up a real sacrifice of enjoyment in devoting so many hours to such rude handiwork” (58).

Even Hester realizes there’s a kind of luxury in the elaborate needlework she does for the magistrates. The narrator moves from a description of Hester looking outside the house and at her person objectively to an inward moving narrative much more akin to free indirect discourse. When he does, he suggests that this work may be liberating for her spiritually and economically, but it also leaves her in a kind of isolation that often verges on solipsism. For as much as she may seem to have reformed herself from an outsider’s perspective, the narrator suggests she is still the same person with a deep-seeded regard for iconoclastic materials and behaviors:

She had in her nature a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic—a taste for the gorgeously beautiful, which, save in the exquisite productions of her needle, found nothing else, in all the possibilities of her life, to exercise itself upon. Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needle. To Hester Prynne it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life. Like all other joys, she rejected it as sin. This morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter betokened, it is to be feared, no genuine and steadfast penitence, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong, beneath. (58)

Midway through this intensely private representation of Hester’s mind, the narrator pauses to generalize about women’s character, concluding that all women “derive a pleasure” from

“delicate toil” that could represent a much more intangible kind of labor. While poor mothers would teach their daughters how to sew in order to get practical work done around the house, plain work and fancy-work were important accomplishments for women with more money, because they represented good education and a good appreciation of Anglo-American values: discipline, steadfastness, precision, neatness, diligence, economy, and well-developed taste. When Hester or other women took too much delight in their work, their interest in embroidery seemed a perversion of these well-established values and appeared instead to materialize a kind of excessive narcissism that might otherwise remain unspoken. These beliefs were, of course, the foundation of Puritan sumptuary laws, which we’ve come to understand in terms of sexlessness or somberness, not as marks of modesty. It’s telling, then, that Hester observes the expected forms of modesty outwardly through her dress and her work with her community, yet she leaves her historian/biographer wondering if she subscribed to them in her everyday subconscious as she plied her needle with gold thread.

Reading *The Scarlet Letter* through Hester’s work emphasizes how the novel reflects mid-nineteenth century philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic, who were heralding a spirit of self-sufficient industriousness.⁶⁶ Emerson and Carlyle’s correspondence and respective work are the most famous example of transatlantic labor discussions in the generation preceding Hawthorne’s great romances. In the spirit of revolutions around the world as well as fervor surrounding the growing abolition and suffrage movements at home, American thinkers began embracing similar sentiments in their own writing, even if it was otherwise apolitical, while in

⁶⁶ While he doesn’t spend much time exploring how Hester’s work reflects mid-nineteenth-century culture, Michael Pringle, in his article on Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” and *The Scarlet Letter* does suggest “Hester plies her needle in an act of resistance against her punishment, although her powers of resistance are limited by the role assigned her in the community’s drama of discipline” (40). Pringle argues that Hester’s needlework “is equally overdetermined and excessive” for deliberate, political ends, but he doesn’t extend his argument to an examination of how Hester’s choice of work reflects her own sensibility (41).

the wake of the First and Second Reform Bills, the subject of labor became a major preoccupation in British letters. The sheer volume of fiction, non-fiction prose, and poetry about the values and the hardships experienced by the workforce during the rising industrial period is a testament to Emerson's and Carlyle's centrality during this period. In *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), Carlyle addresses work with similar zeal. Industry in *Sartor Resartus* also prefigures Hester's work in *The Scarlet Letter*, for both texts use clothing and sewing (or tailoring) as a way to discuss the larger philosophical concerns of the era while blending history (or, perhaps, the mere appearance of historical fact) and fiction. Carlyle coined the term "condition of England" in *Chartism* (1839), and he further explored how increasingly mechanized labor affected workers in *Past and Present* (1843). Similarly, Emerson's "Experience" (1844), written just six years before *The Scarlet Letter* and just one year *Past and Present*, urges readers to "fill the hour, and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval" because "liv[ing] the greatest number of good hours" leads to happiness and wisdom (478, 479). For Americans who were learning to "live amid surfaces" and, as Emerson suggests, learning to "skate well on them," balancing the material and spiritual poles of modern life required deliberate action, not mere idleness and contemplation (478). During the 1840s and 1850s, *doing* and *acting* were reclaimed as decidedly American principles as Emerson's inheritors took on his subjects as fictional projects.

Even if Hester is a historical product of the late 1840s, her experience as a needleworker *isn't* the same as the mid-nineteenth-century factory woman or distressed seamstress. At the same time, however, Hester's work and Hawthorne's choice to focus on her life as one of the unwritten multitudes, demystifies mundane labor. Lee, too, acknowledges, in passing, that Hester represents a "nineteenth-century social convention" by choosing "a profession normally reserved for poor and morally suspect women" (960). Hester, however, is not like the destitute Marian

Earle in *Aurora Leigh*; the consumption-ridden Bessy in *North and South*; the eponymous fallen woman in *Ruth*; the silent, blank-faced factory workers in “The Paradise of Bachelors and Tartarus of Maids”; the many worker-authors of the *Lowell Offering*; or the countless of other needlewomen and factory workers in mid-nineteenth-century texts. At the same time, Hester’s doubled identification with the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries remind us that this was an obsolete (or soon-to-be obsolete) profession.

Within a generation, the embroidery work Hester does for hire would have been the “fancy-work” that occupied ladies’ empty hours: Catherine Sloper, Lucilla Marjoribanks, and Gwendolen Harleth are her inheritors, not surrogate mother figures such as Jenny Wren in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) or Pinnie in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). She predates the factory women whom Melville, for instance, fictionalizes by the end of the decade. She also falls outside the narrative trajectory popularized by Gaskell and Barrett Browning in which a needlewoman becomes pregnant as a result of the dicey conditions in which she works and lives: Hester’s needlework isn’t the cause of her relationship with Dimmesdale; it is most flagrantly displayed in the aftermath. Still, in literary historical terms, she occupies a position between these two conventions, and her seventeenth-century identity isn’t the only way in which she challenges novelistic expectations Hawthorne’s readership had in 1850. Indeed, the industrious spirit in “Hester at Her Needle” and the rest of the novel are very much in line with Carlylian and Emersonian debates of the period.

Though Hawthorne’s romances were written almost a full generation after Carlyle and Emerson published their most famous pieces on labor, he was in many ways one of their contemporaries. Hawthorne is often characterized as aloof and cerebral, but his smaller, lesser-known works often underscore his interest in contemporary, transatlantic debates surrounding

ethical labor and consumerism. Just one year after Carlyle published *Past and Present*, Hawthorne published a piece entitled “The Procession of Life” (1843). In this tale, he discusses the ethical implications of textile workers’ living and working conditions we might normally associate in the United States with Melville or Fuller and in Great Britain with Dickens or Gaskell. Written in Concord shortly after he and Sophia were married and later included in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), “The Procession of Life” classifies individuals in numerous ways, but the first category—disease—uses the perils of tailors and seamstresses to emphasize the inequalities in the material conditions of workers.

In Hawthorne’s imagined procession of weary individuals, the “[t]ailors and shoemakers, being sedentary men, will chiefly congregate into one part of the procession and march under similar banners of disease” (237). Even though he doesn’t imagine the tailors and shoemakers at work, Hawthorne’s classification gestures at their profession: the men must sit to sew their wares. The narrator also dwells on the details the “cloud of pale-cheeked, slender girls, who disturb the ear with the multiplicity of their short, dry coughs,” a description that anticipates the maids in Melville’s diptych, which I discuss in chapter five (237-38). These needlewomen “have plied the daily and mighty needle in the service of master tailors and close-fisted contractors,” and they are surely just as “grim” as the workers in Lowell (not far from Boston and Concord) (237). Hawthorne’s description of their unhealthy working conditions suggests that the factories kill them rather than sustaining their living: “it is almost time for each to hem the borders of her own shroud” (237-38).

Later in “The Procession of Life,” the narrator makes a more explicit passing reference to the burgeoning American textile mills. Aligning individuals by intellect, the narrator claims the “factory girls from Lowell shall mate themselves with the pride of drawing-rooms and literary

circles, the bluebells in fashion's nosegay, the Sapphos, and Montagues, and Nortons of the age" (239). In associating the women who worked in the first American industrial factory with American intelligentsia, Hawthorne coyly equates ladies with working girls.⁶⁷ The "factory girls" in the procession are Hawthorne's caricature of the Lowell operatives who produced *The Lowell Offering* (1840-45), a periodical which I also discuss in chapter five. To be sure, the narrator's satirical tone points to the withering social criticism at work in "The Procession of Life," but his repeated references to the plight of the needleworker—physically and spiritually malnourished because of her poor working conditions and low wages—equally reflects the social realities of American life for working-class women in New England during the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁸

One of the often untold storylines in novels of fallen women is what happens to the children, especially the female children who embody the consequences of their mothers' sins. Yet in *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl's presence is central to Hester's story since it shows how she is defined by her future as much as her past.⁶⁹ In fact, the two chapters directly following "Hester at Her Needle" ("Pearl" and "The Governor's Hall") begin to articulate how the narrator imagines

⁶⁷ Earlier in the story, Hawthorne places "a sickly student, who has left his health between the leaves of classic volumes" alongside the sedentary tailor and shoemaker (237). The grouping, while never discussed, similarly juxtaposes education and manual labor.

⁶⁸ Brenda Wineapple, in her recent biography of Hawthorne, argues that Hawthorne's obsessive sorting in "The Procession of Life" mocks American democracy. Wineapple points to Hawthorne's caustic tone in this piece, and she suggests that this tone represents his disillusionment with working-class people's socioeconomic plight. Wineapple is one of the only critics who discuss "The Procession of Life."

⁶⁹ In a notebook entry that was written just a couple of months before his meditation on Doctor Ripley, Hawthorne notes, "Pearl—the English of Margaret—a pretty name for a girl in a story" (242). This pithy entry encapsulates the aesthetic pleasures of "Pearl." The note abstracts the name from a particular individual, further aestheticizing the name itself. Yet at some point between Hawthorne's note in 1842 and the composition in 1848 or 1849, the name "Pearl" shifts from being merely pretty to one with an accretion of meanings that are moral as well as aesthetic. Though it's easy to call both of the incidents trivial, the coincidence of the pearl buttons and the name *Pearl* in the notebooks illustrates how Hawthorne aestheticized details that are fundamental to his texts. "Pearl" is no mere pretty finishing touch. Rather, it is both a crucial detail and a philosophical ideal. For as much as baby Pearl and her gorgeous dresses reflect Hester's artistic eye and embroidery talent, they both equally embody Hester's world view and desire to live morally. Pearl may be the child of an adulterous relationship, but she more fully expresses how Hester chooses to live and act in the world. The fact that the name "Pearl" is the English of Margaret has led critics to read Hester in terms of Margaret Fuller's revolutionary history. Hester, too, has been read as a revolutionary. Another source for Pearl's materiality may be found in an 1843 letter Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne wrote to his sister Louisa. After Sophia describes a "splendid" purple robe she had sewn for Nathaniel, he adds a postscript: "I want you to send those pearl buttons—they being all that is wanting to the perfection of the imperial robe" (8).

Pearl's relationship to Hester's *A* badge. If the scarlet letter is usually read as allegory, then Pearl is usually read as equally immaterial and inhuman: it's hard for many to imagine her as a real person. Indeed, even the narrator describes Pearl as "the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 69). It's shocking to render Pearl a material thing instead of a human being, but we're often so quick to draw connections between the allegorical meanings of Pearl and Hester's *A* badge that allegory subsumes their shared, intense materiality. Yet Hawthorne draws attention to the fact that Hester's daughter and her *A* badge are alike not just because they represent her sin but also because they materialize it, and they materialize it through exactly the same textiles: scarlet cloth and gold thread.

The narrator draws attention to Pearl's dresses, which bear a marked resemblance to the scarlet *A* badge we've encountered again and again throughout the novel. Indeed, from the perspectives of Bostonians, it's impossible to forget that Hester is mother and seamstress to Pearl, whose beautiful clothes seem like human extensions of the horrible scarlet *A* badge: "But it was a remarkable attribute of this garb, and indeed, of the child's whole appearance, that it irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear upon her bosom" (69). The resemblance isn't an accident, and it isn't something Hester tries to hide. In fact, Hester herself "carefully wrought out the similitude" between her scarlet letter and Pearl, "lavishing many hours of morbid ingenuity, to create an analogy between the object of her affection and the emblem of her guilt and torture" (69). When the narrator reminds us "Pearl was the one, as well as the other," he asks us to think about this twinned profile not just allegorically but also, and much more importantly, through the literal threads that bind the two (69).

The visible connections between Hester's *A* badge and her daughter Pearl show us how one isn't bound to the other simply because of a sinful past mired in allegory. Instead, these material things mark Hester's and Pearl's transformative potential: because they mutually define one another, the subtle differences that emerge between Hester's badge and Pearl's clothes become shorthand not for some intractable history but for Hester's subtle efforts to inscribe an *A*-less version of her quintessential self upon the material that clothes Pearl's very body, as if it's an embroidered prayer for a different ending to her story. In this way, Pearl isn't wearing her mother's past, but she's never separated from it.

The scarlet cloth and gold thread that once covered Hester's heart in the form of a badge or a nursing child reappears as this innocent human being dressed in the same iconic fabric who's also flawed but also represents a new generation when Hester's materials cover her daughter's small body. For Pearl, Hester creates "a crimson velvet tunic, of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered with fantasies and flourishes of gold thread" (69).⁷⁰ While this tunic recalls, of course, Hester's own *A* badge and her other embroidery work for Boston officials, Pearl's doesn't just seem expensive or beautiful: it's over the top. It's red (a bold color in a drab community), it's made of velvet (an expensive fabric), it has gold thread (also costly), and it's an unusual design. Any one of these aesthetic choices would have been singular, but their

⁷⁰ While Hester denies herself ornate clothing, save the embroidered *A*, she sews Pearl's elaborate gowns with "the richest tissues that could be procured" and "allow[s] her imaginative faculty its full play in the arrangement and decoration" (62). Rich silks, velvets, and gold thread such as make up Pearl's wardrobe could only have been imported, probably from England, further restricting their availability and every time Hester refers to her *A* as a token, she reminds us just how expensive it was to purchase imported materials even in Boston. In a novel that returns again and again, albeit subtly, to the transatlantic movement of people and things ("The Custom-House" narrator controls the movement of commerce in and out of the United States; Hester comes to Boston from England; and she and Dimmesdale discuss returning to England). Besides flagrantly disregarding the colony's sumptuary laws, Pearl's dresses materialize Hester's isolation in Boston because her taste in fabric and thread marks her as a rarity but also because they materialize her ever-present transatlantic imaginings eastward: to England where she was born but also to the Orient where the silks were produced.

combination suggests the value with which Hester imbues these clothes, which in turn, intimates the preciousness and singularity Hester sees in her daughter.

Moreover, the narrator imagines Hester's understanding of Pearl's character through specific colors, and he places "crimson and gold" next to the expected light and dark imagery of enlightenment and guilt, suggesting the manner in which Hester's signature colors have come to define Pearl, too. Hester recognizes that her "impassioned state had been the medium through which were transmitted to the unborn infant the rays of its moral life; and, however, white and clear originally, they had taken the deep stains of crimson and gold, the fiery luster, the black shadow, and the untempered light, of the intervening substance" (62). At the same time, however, Hester often "snatch[es]" Pearl "to her bosom, with a close pressure and earnest kisses,—not so much from overflowing love, as to assure herself that Pearl was flesh and blood, and not utterly delusive" (63). While Hawthorne teases that Pearl's tunic is just like Hester's *A* badge—the "stains" of "crimson" may be more damning than "scarlet" alone, at least at first—the subtle difference between "scarlet" and "crimson" is a telling one. The word *crimson* does connote the important theme of consanguinity always lurking behind the parallel badge and tunic (one of the figurative meanings for *crimson* is, in fact, "of or relating to blood"); however, by marking the red fabric with the word *crimson* instead of the word *scarlet*, the narrator intimates that these two things both wrought by Hester's hands aren't irreducibly the same ("crimson"). Pearl's crimson tunic is, then, a sacred inheritance, one that marks her sense of belonging to Hester but also her material and her corporeal differences from her mother.

The more striking difference between the tunic and the badge is the different golden embroidery adorning the crimson and the scarlet fabrics. Hester's badge is, of course, emblazoned with the letter *A*, but that letter is conspicuously absent on Pearl's clothes. When we

reduce the visible similarities between Hester's scarlet letter and Pearl's clothes to allegory, the importance of the letter *A* as a text and as a textile is lost, a fact that reminds us of the Bostonians who misread Hester and Pearl through a singular damned identity. One of the reasons we don't pay attention to the material qualities of Hester's *A* badge and Pearl's clothing is that traditional readings of the novel conflate Pearl with her tunic and with Hester's badge, so it's not, perhaps, terribly radical to focus attention on the badge and the tunic as literal things, even if the critical trajectory is usually allegorical or metaphorical, because these things are often read as emblems of Hester's and of Pearl's legibility and as markers of their otherwise inscrutable characters. As we can see when we read Hawthorne's language closely, however, the badge isn't an object to divine the meanings of their respective souls, at least from Hester's and from Pearl's perspectives.

In fact, in one of the most moving and one of the most discussed scenes in the novel, Pearl touches Hester's *A* badge with a sensitivity that seems almost preternatural. Yet it's only preternatural if we assume that the *A* badge is a mystical emblem for Hester and for Pearl alike in this moment. Stripped of these assumption, however, the badge inspires a poignant moment between mother and daughter that's moving for its very mundaneness. It comes as no surprise that Pearl is drawn to the fine materiality of Hester's embroidered *A*. When Pearl asks Hester why she wears the elaborate embroidered letter, Hester responds with an answer that emphasizes the tangibility of the cloth: "I wear it for the sake of its gold thread" (117). While this answer is a lie of sorts, it also points to the real and complicated relationship among Hester's artistry, her ostracism, and Pearl. The "glimmering" of the gold thread is also the first thing that catches baby Pearl's eye (66). When Hester leans over the cradle, Pearl sees the "gold embroidery about the letter," and "putting up her little hand, she grasp[s] at it, smiling, not doubtfully, but with a

decided gleam” (66). Moving with a “decided gleam” instead of “doubt,” Pearl acts and with purpose, much like her mother. Hester flinches, not just at Pearl’s decisive touch, but at “the torture inflicted by the intelligent touch of Pearl’s baby hand,” fingering the mark of her sin (66). Pearl’s innocent yet purposeful touch further emphasizes the materiality of Hester’s elaborately embroidered *A*. Pearl is brazen and brilliant; even if she is the physical, live counterpart to the embroidery, her “intelligent touch” emphasizes her ultimate innocence and goodness. She’s ignorant of what the *A* means, yet she still—repeatedly—expresses her interest in Hester’s embroidery for its aesthetic beauty, and it’s clear that this tactile “intelligence” is instinctive. Pearl’s seemingly innate attraction to the gold thread, then, further suggests a relationship between her embodiment of goodness and Hester’s skillful needlework. Pearl unwittingly acknowledges the real, redemptive significance of Hester’s self-sufficient activity.

Ultimately, for mid-nineteenth-century readers who placed Hester within a tradition of fallen women, Pearl appears as an unraveled and revised inheritor of her mother’s sin, and her *A*-less tunic represents a new kind of fallen woman fiction as much as it represents an allegorical turn from sin to reformation. That we see Pearl at all makes Hester stand out against her compatriot fallen women heroines who so often populated the novels of the 1840s and 1850s. Moreover, that we see Hester stitch Pearl’s clothing with thread that at once does and doesn’t recall her own past shows how Hawthorne imagines these clothes as the much more promising reincarnations of a badge that would have left its singular heroine damned and alone with no future for herself or her child. Hawthorne, however, turns this preconception on its head and imbues both Pearl and her audacious wardrobe with the inscrutable parts of Hester’s past that aren’t, as we all know, unequivocally shameful.

In the final chapter of the novel, we return again to the subject of Hester's needlework. Though it's clear she leaves Boston for an unnamed period of time, she ultimately returns as an old woman to her former home without Pearl. Here, she is surrounded by "trifles [...] that must have been wrought by delicate fingers" and is seen "embroidering a baby-garment, with such a lavish richness of golden fancy as would have raised a public tumult, had any infant, thus appalled, been shown to [the] sober-hued community" (165). By beginning this final tableau with a description of Hester's "delicate" items and their "lavish richness," the narrator emphasizes the value of these textiles, recalling—one final time—the work Hester does throughout the novel. The work continues to connect Hester to her community, for almost everything she sews is for someone else. In Boston, the narrator recalls, at the end of his imagined history, Hester lives "a more real life" rooted in a particular place and in the particular work she continues to do (165). It is through this work—and the network of associations she forges through it—that Hester gains a sense of purpose that makes her life seem "more real" than it had before.

This is Hester's "more real" life—one lived in New England, filled with sewing fine objects, and working, however subtly, toward a better future. More important than the economic solvency she's gained by this point, or even the significant solitude she finds when she returns to her home without her daughter, this scene shows how these material "trifles" bridge Hester's identities as a young and an old woman, and she appears, as Doctor Ripley does in Hawthorne's notebooks, in twinned profile. Ultimately, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester's life appears as a "more real" history, because it's more like a stereoscopic doubling of past and present (or multiple pasts and multiple presents) than it is like a photographic still. Realness as a character and generic

identifier isn't something Hester cultivates alone; it's something the narrator of "The Custom-House" and *The Scarlet Letter* make in tandem with her.

It's not surprising, then, that twin profiles have proliferated in the reception history of *The Scarlet Letter*, beginning most famously with Henry James. In his biographical essay *Hawthorne* (1879), James foregrounds his discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* with his memories of a painting he saw as a child at the National Academy. While James wasn't allowed to read the novel as a child, he confesses he felt a strange affinity for Hester and especially Pearl after of his encounter with their portrait:

Of course it was difficult to explain to a child the significance of poor Hester Prynne's blood-coloured *A*. But the mystery was partly dispelled by his being taken to see a collection of pictures (the annual exhibition of the National Academy), where he encountered a representation of a pale, handsome woman, in a quaint black dress and a white coif, holding between her knees an elfish-looking little girl, fantastically dressed, and crowned with flowers. Embroidered on the woman's breast was a great crimson *A*, over which the child's fingers, as the glanced strangely out of the picture, were maliciously playing. I was told this was Hester Prynne and little Pearl, and that when I grew older I might read their interesting history. But the picture remained vividly imprinted on my mind. [...] and when, years afterwards, I first read the novel, I seemed to myself to have read it before, and to be familiar with its two strange heroines. (88)

James's memory of the painting further emphasizes the centrality of the letter and its materiality. Remembering his confusion between the "scarlet letter" of the title and "one of the documents that come by the post," James meditates on the "significance" of the *A* (87). This passage doesn't

just describe the painting, which alone would signify an attention to detail; James's emphasis on childhood memory suggests the particular selection of detail. From his hazy memories, James recalls this particular encounter and these specific parts of the portrait. This painting—and James's memory of it—revolves around Pearl touching the “great crimson *A*” as a child, an attention to the materiality of the *A* badge that recalls “The Custom-House” narrator's interest in the tattered cloth he finds. Instead of dwelling on the unwritten words signified by the *A* badge, James uses this remembered painting to point to the material realities detailed throughout the novel, especially the ornate embroidery and the “fantastically dressed” Pearl. James, here, would have been much like Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*: innocent in his knowledge of Hester's shame and instinctively drawn to what he saw in front of him.

Above all else, these details, especially Pearl's great tactile interest in them, are what ultimately “imprint” the painting on James's mind. It is this “imprinted” detail that makes him feel as if he is “familiar with” the novel's “two strange heroines” even before reading the novel itself. His encounter with the portrait is clearly formative: Hester and Pearl, for him, are part of a “history” rather than a fictional tale. While the passage begins in the removed third person—James seems to be discussing some other child's experience—he switches to first person after describing Pearl touching Hester's *A* badge. Indeed, James remembers the painting so vividly that his first encounter with the novel is an almost out-of-body experience: “I seemed to myself to have read it before.” And while James may be uncertain about the novel itself, his very real, tangible experience of the painting—after all, it is “imprinted” on his mind—reminds us of the importance of these things, even—especially—when divorced from imposed meaning.

CHAPTER 4

The Imperial Domesticities of *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) were published only seven years apart. At first glance, Hester Prynne and Mary Seacole don't appear to have much in common. Hester lives a quiet, penitential life in colonial Boston and is one of American literature's most infamous fallen women. Seacole, in contrast, positions herself as a worldly, independent, and locally-renowned businesswoman but has been a footnote to nineteenth-century canons, not quite fitting into definitions of "Victorian" despite her self-proclaimed "Britishness." These broad incongruities may be superficial, however, for both *The Scarlet Letter* and *Wonderful Adventures* are ultimately concerned with how their independent heroines create meaningful lives for themselves in seemingly inhospitable locations. Both women express a desire to be useful as they make their livings by serving others. Each woman prides herself on her industriousness, a value that resonated with Carlyle and with Emerson, the transatlantic philosophers of labor in the early decades of the nineteenth century. These women put such ideas into effect outside the inscribed rules of Boston and London: Hester's scarlet *A* belongs to an archive in the Boston custom house, and Seacole runs "British Hotels" in New Granada and Crimea.

Both Hester and Seacole support themselves by doing domestic work within communities that would otherwise ostracize them: Hester embroiders clothing for church and state functions and for the children who live in seventeenth-century Boston, while Seacole runs hotels in Cruces

and Gorgona and nurses soldiers on the battlefields in Crimea. These seemingly domestic professions enable the women to “have a part to perform in the world” (Hawthorne, *Scarlet Letter* 58). “The Custom-House” narrator feels as if he’s a “citizen of somewhere else,” a sentiment Hester surely feels throughout much of *The Scarlet Letter*. Likewise, Seacole’s service to the Empire was in many ways governed by others who tried to dictate where and whom she could nurse. In order to come to terms with themselves and their work, Hester and Seacole form new allegiances to places they choose to call home. Their most striking parallel may be found, however, at the conclusions of their narratives. Just as Hester chooses to return to “a more real life” in Boston (she doesn’t return to England, where she was born), so Seacole identifies herself as a British subject by traveling to the far reaches of the Empire, but she only settles in London at the conclusion of her narrative (165). Though temporary, Seacole’s “British Hotels” in New Granada and Crimea reveal the manner in which she proclaims a fixed identity as a British woman. The material objects she uses to make these hotels “British” are tangible reminders of larger transnational exchanges within the British Empire that have determined who she is and where she can live and work. While Hester’s project is to find acceptance by doing handiwork for Bostonians, Seacole’s parallel project is to care for British subjects as she moves further and further away from England. Paradoxically, she legitimizes her place in the nation by tending to soldiers and travelers from all over the world.

On the surface, Hester and Seacole may appear as geographical inversions of one another: Hester overcomes her pariah status by moving further and further into the community, while Seacole affirms her Britishness by circulating around the perimeter of the Empire and working in places that aren’t even under British rule. Indeed, as Lorraine Mercer argues, “This ‘celebration’ of her British identity is assumed by Seacole not only for political reasons, but also

because her ambitions place her in direct opposition to British values. Everything Seacole does goes against the prescribed British norm for the proper lady” (11). While Mercer notes that Seacole’s “main preoccupation—making a living—is extremely unladylike,” she also acknowledges that Seacole appears as the consummate British woman: “Whatever her ultimate motives, Seacole must dress everything in traditional feminine attire to be acceptable to her public. Everything she says must be steeped in altruism and sacrifice” (11). Rather than merely dwelling on what distinguishes Seacole from her fictional contemporaries (she’s *not* white, *not* English by birth, *not* a professional writer, among other things), we should, like Mercer, recognize the ways in which she marks her national identity through familiar nineteenth-century rhetoric: her understanding of material things shows how she is, in fact, a recognizable British subject.

Many critics have suggested important reasons why Seacole has been read as marginally Britishness (she *is* black, she *is* from Jamaica, her autobiography *is* in many ways a departure from others written at the same time, among other reasons). While we are redefining what nation means, we also need to consider who the nineteenth-century heroine can be and what she looks like. What if we read Seacole as a mid-Victorian heroine? How do tropes of materiality change for a “heroine” in a piece of non-fiction versus a piece of fiction? How does this generic difference affect the details she associates with her picture of domesticity?

If we read Seacole as presenting herself as a real-life domestic heroine in her *Wonderful Adventures*, then she emerges as a woman who navigates the tenuous boundaries between private and public spheres like Margaret Hale; a woman who privileges her professional life like Aurora Leigh; a woman who seeks a nation and home like Hester Prynne; a woman who self-consciously conceals her narrative gaps as will Lucilla Marjoribanks and Catherine Sloper.

Seacole's most obvious parallel, then, may be Florence Nightingale (not Hester Prynne), who famously fashioned herself as a domestic archetype, not only through her writing and celebrity, but also through her very specific prescriptions for nursing techniques. As we'll see, Seacole requested to work with Nightingale's nurses in Crimea, but her application was rejected. Indeed, Seacole's narrative trajectory parallels the dramatic changes in the marriage plot we see during the 1850s and the 1860s: unlike Gaskell's touchstone biography of Charlotte Brontë, and the countless Victorian novels that end in marriage, Seacole's autobiography opens with a quiet assumption of marriage—she is *Mrs.* Seacole—but she summarily dismisses this part of her domestic life after the first chapter. Her husband dies and she effectively works as a widow. Seacole's autobiography does not work up to a romantic climax, and she suggests that her story—how she becomes a Victorian heroine—really begins after the traditional “happily ever after.”

Seacole's imperial domesticities are, rather, spatially defined.⁷¹ The language Seacole uses to describe her hotels re-envision domesticity; in contrast to her contemporaries' domestic fixtures (weddings, husbands, children, a family home), these hotels are decidedly temporary spaces in unfamiliar places. The sense of intimacy we would normally associate with a family home is unsettled—and perhaps even exaggerated—because Seacole sets up her British Hotels to serve men she doesn't really know: travelers panning for gold in New Granada and soldiers fighting in Crimea. In this way, she presents herself as both wife and mother to these global strangers, a fact that critics including Mercer have seen as the mark of her otherness, but one that, I argue, also marks her as a consummate heroine. Indeed, the conceits that critics have

⁷¹ My reading of Mary Seacole's “imperial domesticities” is, in many ways, an extension of what Amy Kaplan titles “Manifest Domesticity.” “If domesticity plays a key role in imagining the nation as home,” Kaplan argues, “then women, positioned at the center of the home, play a major role in defining the contours of the nation and its shifting borders with the foreign” (582).

turned to in order to understand and describe this text generically intimate exactly how important Seacole's domestic tropes really are. For example, Deirdre McMahon's analysis points to the centrality of calico in Seacole's autobiography. For her, fabric is a metaphor, not a thing, despite the fact that she asks us to think "literally" about Seacole's global connections: "Seacole literally writes her way into the fabric of Englishness; moreover, her specific strategies of self-representation undermine one of the primary foundations of British imperialism and British identity: the sanctity and stability of British motherhood" (181-82). While this is true, I challenge us to consider, again, the "literal" "fabric" that connects Seacole to British subjects across the globe: Seacole not only "writes her way *into* the fabric of Englishness," but she also relies upon actual English fabric—calico—to claim her citizenship within the British nation-state, not just within England.⁷²

Just as the rest of this project reads metaphors of cloth as cloth, I argue that we ought to read Seacole's claims to Britishness seriously and at face value in order to understand how mid-nineteenth-century rhetoric relies on very real materials to forge transcontinental connections within a burgeoning British consciousness. Seacole's claims that she is a "Crimean *heroine!*" are certainly controversial, and the repetition of these claims throughout her autobiography has made most readers question whether Seacole's identification as a British woman really is sincere (76). To be sure, she may or may not have been genuine about her allegiances to Great Britain, though it's hard to imagine this woman was not aware of the forces working against her. Still, I'm less interested in whether Seacole was or was not aware of the way in which she'd already been disenfranchised by the very nation she claimed as her own. Instead, the rest of this chapter focuses attention on the material objects that mark her as a British woman and citizen. This close

⁷² Suzanne Daly also uses metaphorical language to express the way cotton shapes novels published during the same period as *Wonderful Adventures*: "The history of this long and contentious relationship is woven into both domestic and industrial novels through repeated references to cotton" (*The Empire Inside* 36).

reading shows how repeated references to calico take these vexed global factors into account, and it shows how Seacole literalizes and exaggerates familiar tropes of English domesticity through them.

As she builds an international reputation for her British Hotels and her medical care, Seacole consistently blurs the boundaries between private, domestic spaces of English homes and those of international businesses.⁷³ Since *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* was first reprinted in 1984, critics have been interested in how Seacole represents herself as a Creole or British woman.⁷⁴ Sandra Paquet claims that Seacole's narrative brings "into sharp focus the conflicts and contradictions of identity, authority, and freedom built into the relationship between Europe and the Americas, seat of Empire and dependent colonies, master and slave, men and women" (paragraph one). Sandra Gunning similarly emphasizes Seacole's self-consciously hybrid identity: "Indeed, what is radical about *Wonderful Adventures* is not Seacole's repeated migrations from place to place but, rather, her unique ability to negotiate so successfully the costs, limits, and possibilities of the multiple communities she encounters" (978). Seacole's narrative self-awareness only further underscores the exaggerated quality of her femininity and national allegiances.⁷⁵ As Paquet notes, Seacole's autobiography rarely—if ever—allows us access to her consciousness or real self; rather, "Her story takes shape as an entirely public account of self. She reveals nothing of herself that might not be the substance of

⁷³ For further discussions of the historical context surrounding Seacole's travel and mobility, see Helen Cooper, Cheryl Fish, and Maria McGarrity, Helen Rappaport, and Sean Goudie.

⁷⁴ *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* was first published in London in July 1857, but Seacole and her text were relatively obscure until being reprinted in 1984 by Falling Wall Press, a small press in England. In 1988, the work was reprinted again as a part of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, an Oxford University Press series that primarily reprints work by American women writers. Throughout *Wonderful Adventures*, however, Seacole consistently distances herself from Americans, especially American women. Seacole's identity as a Jamaican-born woman who aligns herself with the British Empire, though, remains a primary interest for critics. See Amy Robinson, Simon Gikandi, Cheryl Fish, Bernard McKenna, and Angelina Poon. More specifically, many critics read Seacole in terms of her roles as a "doctress" and a "mother" to British soldiers; see Nicole Fluhr, and Deirdre McMahon.

⁷⁵ For further discussions of Seacole's narrative choices, see Evelyn Hawthorne, Mercer, and Sara Salih.

conversations with others. Her life-story, skewed to public approval and public patronage, erases the interior core of Mary Seacole along with Jamaica” (paragraph twenty-six). Seacole’s British identity is inflected with Creole, New Granadan, and Crimean experiences, but the idea of home she markets in her businesses and in her autobiography is distinctly British—though by British we don’t mean English, specifically.

Each of Seacole’s British Hotels is decorated with the same imported calico, a surface that recalls her adopted nation but also its imperial history, and this calico literalizes the way personal and national histories intersect in the text. In fact, Seacole’s autobiography, which is punctuated by imperial references that become familiar domestic markers, is less explicitly revealing than we might expect from a much more confessional travelogue writer. *Wonderful Adventures* is episodic in the way it traces her movement from place to place, devoting documentary-level attention to the details of her day-to-day experiences without dwelling on her innermost feelings. The material objects to which she returns again and again, though, have loaded histories that give us insight about what Britishness means to her far away from London. While she does not share personal details about herself, the material things that reappear in each of her hotels (calico drapes, household linens, and clothes) become global signifiers that document how Seacole understands and replicates the British Empire at its edges. For Seacole, then, these material things become a way of marking domesticity, especially British domesticity, in places where she might be identified as a racial or national other. The calico encompasses both feminine domesticity (discussed by McMahon and Nicole Fluhr, among others) and British domesticity (discussed by Elaine Freedgood and Chloe Wigston Smith, among others), and for our purposes as contemporary readers of the text, the calico bridges what may be two seemingly

distant New Historicist readings. Indeed, this chapter shows how the feminine domestic and the British domestic are never, actually, separable.

Even before Seacole sets foot in New Granada, she shows how attuned she is to the material comforts lacking in her transport from Kingston, Jamaica, the British colony of her birth, to the cities of Gorgona and Cruces in this Spanish colonial outpost. Her travel along the river Chagres would have been a difficult one for practical reasons every nineteenth-century traveler would have expected. But the structure of the first and second chapters of *Wonderful Adventures* suggests this passage is meaningful because of reasons specific to Seacole's childhood and early adulthood. That Seacole was born in Jamaica highlights her British imperial citizenship but also her Jamaican birthright, and this complicated global identity surfaces in her detailed attention to the material realities of these port cities—and even in her sense of disorientation there. In the table of contents, Seacole summarizes and editorializes chapter one with the following header: “MY BIRTH AND PARENTAGE—EARLY TASTES AND TRAVELS—MARRIAGE, AND WIDOWHOOD” (ix). Unlike other mid-nineteenth-century autobiographers, biographers, and novelists, whose entire texts would often trace this trajectory (usually stopping short of widowhood), Seacole renders these pivotal moments a sort of preface to the “Wonderful Adventures” that actually begin in the second chapter, well after we've left the marriage plot behind. Still, when the first of these takes place, Seacole departs from Kingston, Jamaica, though the first chapter makes clear that she's spent time in England during the ensuing years. That she returns to and departs from her birthplace in the second chapter, where she marks the beginning of her true “adventures,” tacitly shows how she maps her life, not according to traditional chronological milestones, but through temporary British outposts.

The understated emotion attending her difficult passage from Jamaica to New Granada, then, enfolds layers of meanings. Before the Panama Canal was built, travel in the region was a multi-step process, and chapter two outlines her arduous journey from port to port within this Central/South American hub on the frontier. But, perhaps more importantly, Seacole's attention to the way the other people look and feel reveals how she identifies with the people who seem never to have known another home. In the second chapter, Seacole turns from her own life story to a more global interest in human issues: the crewmen's comfort, discomfort, and sense of displacement during their tedious (and often unpredictable) journey. She details the crewmembers' clothing in order to convey to her English readers the impoverished economic circumstances that define these international outposts—and mark them as transient for her but also for the crew and the other travelers. Despite her apparent shock at the dirt and the poverty, though, these crewmembers are, for Seacole, still “common enough specimens of humanity, with a marked disregard of the prejudices of society with respect to clothing. A dirty handkerchief rolled over the head, and a wisp of something, which might have been linen bound around the loins, formed their attire. Perhaps, however, the thick coating of dirt which covered them kept them warmer than more civilized clothing, besides being indisputably economical” (15). Through this first meaningful reference to clothing, Seacole shows how cloth represents to her and to her readers economic circumstances that are determined by national politics and would otherwise be impolite for a lady to mention. Her mention of the cloth both draws attention to and distracts attention from the men's near-naked bodies; but, above all, it emphasizes their poverty.

Two paragraphs later she notes linen again, but this time it appears in her imagination, not as “economical” loincloths but as “fair linen sheets” which associate the crewmen with a

foreign kind of luxury. Seacole describes the crewmen while recalling her drowsy state, and she confesses that she had been so afraid of insomnia that she could watch the crewmen long after they had gone to sleep themselves:

All I could get to eat were some guavas, which grew wild upon the banks, and then I watched the padrone curl his long body up among my luggage, and listened to the crew, who had rolled together at the bottom of the boat, snore as peacefully as if they slept between fair linen sheets, in the purest of calico night-gear, and the most unexceptionable of nightcaps, until somehow I fell into a troubled, dreamy sleep. (16)

Seacole's "troubled, dreamy" state may be an analogue to her geographical transience, for just as the ship marks her passage from Central to South America, her drowsy consciousness in this moment emphasizes the almost metaphorical significance of travel along not yet fully realized borderlines, especially in this region.

As early as the second chapter, then, the material things within Seacole's narrative are fraught with geopolitical as well as personal meanings, not only because the things themselves—here, the linen—are significant, but also because these things inspire Seacole's imaginary, if displaced, imperial domesticity. Here, the "fair linen sheets" and "purest of calico night-gear" are real fabrics, but they are real fabrics that only exist in Seacole's imagination. It's strange that Seacole reveals this flight of her mind, since she's not yet been forthcoming about the actual things she's experienced personally and immediately during this adventure. Her self-consciously imagined retrospect, however, reinforces the fact that this passage follows her movement from a British colony to a Spanish colony, and it implies, strangely, that this distance represents the meaningful economic disparities between the two. By clothing the crewmen in linen sheets and

calico nightclothes, she shows how imperial material products hold literal meaning for her—even if these are fictional fabrics—long before she even arrives in New Granada, the site of her brother’s “International Hotel,” and later, her own “British Hotel.”

In *Out of Place*, Ian Baucom argues that “we are the product of the spaces we inhabit” (38). Baucom’s observation is certainly true for Seacole, whose unsettledness aboard the ship transporting her from Jamaica to New Granada shows how self-aware she is about place, geographically and psychologically. Indeed, if we read the ship as what Baucom would call a temporary imperial space, then we can also read her British Hotels as much more permanent (but still temporary) sites for her patriotic imaginary. The borders of the British Empire, in fact, were forever expanding and changing, and as a consequence, the desire to articulate who and what was British became increasingly complicated for Victorians at mid-century, especially for people on the outskirts of the British Empire who were born away from (or moving away from) London and everything it represented. Victorians, Baucom suggests, “understood that the nation’s uneasy commitment to its empire had massively complicated the task of defining what it meant to be English in large part by making it so difficult simply to determine what kind of place England was” (*Out* 37). What Baucom’s argument reveals is that even if people had an idea of the hierarchy of England and the rest of the Empire, their way to define citizenship was always changing. Indeed, while the distinctions between being British and being English may have been subtle, British subjects understood that citizenship at the outposts of the Empire did not equate in many ways with English citizenship proper. Though these two national identifications are often blurred, Seacole’s text is one among many that shows the real divisions between the two. Seacole may be Jamaican by birth, but her autobiography traces the way the things in her hotels reinscribe the distance between British and English domesticities. For if her British Hotels

replace her brother's "International" Hotels within the autobiography, then they become "temporary" places in Baucom's sense of the word, since they mark the ever-shifting boundaries that are part of her national identity.

Seacole was decidedly British and not English (because she was born in Jamaica), and she may have recognized that she was not the ideal representative for either. Her autobiographical accounts of nursing and serving men abroad suggest, however, that her domestic ideals were decidedly "English" and "British" but they ultimately transcended the assumed mores we now traditionally associate with those particular labels. Indeed, Seacole's domesticity reflects how Baucom characterizes Victorians' shifting ideas of citizenship, for as he notes, by the middle of the nineteenth century, "England became more closely entwined with the cultures, peoples, languages, and products of the British Empire" (*Out* 29). Though Baucom does not discuss Seacole's text, what he's saying about mid-nineteenth-century citizenship contextualizes her contemporary observations about working in the field: for her, things and places are mutually defining, and she comes to understand the British Empire through the material objects that circulate in and out of her Hotels.

Seacole's dreamy description of the linen and calico on the ship might seem like a throwaway line, but its strangeness should be read as the first in a series of moments when the memoir archives the things that fill her imperial domestic spaces. Indeed, moments such as this one reveal how these objects locate her in particular places at particular times. Seacole, in fact, seems to be drawing our attention to scope in the first few chapters: while the first chapter outlines life-altering events from her birth to her widowhood, the second chapter dilates on minutiae, not only on what she sees but what she imagines she sees, suggesting that this is an autobiography of her imperial mind. Read in this light, the strange dream in the second chapter is

a template for the rest of *Wonderful Adventures*. The narrative itself, then, traces only a small portion of Seacole's life in middle age and in short-term hindsight.⁷⁶

Seacole's narrative may be retrospective, but her language (from the headlines in the table of contents to the objects such as the linen and the calico on the ship) conveys a sense of immediacy that that would have been familiar for nineteenth-century readers of newspapers and travelogues. As she navigates these English and Spanish outposts, Seacole expresses her British allegiance without hesitation. Her autobiography shows how "the task of 'locating' English identity became ever more complex as England struggled to define the relationship between the national 'here' and the imperial 'there'" (Baucom, *Out* 37). If we read chapter two as the preface to the narrative logic in the rest of *Wonderful Adventures*, since it shows how she combines "here" and "there" in one temporary space, then the British Hotels may be the most important sites for her national self-figurations within this autobiography. They become domestic spaces that are British in the truest sense of the word in 1857, since they are entirely mobile and replicable.

The British Hotels in New Granada and Crimea are difficult to distinguish, even if they are on opposite sides of the world. Our sense of disorientation may be a result of the fact that twenty-first-century readers don't know a place on the globe called "New Granada" (today, Panama) or "Crimea" (today, parts of Ukraine and Russia). But it may also be a savvy narrative strategy on Seacole's part, for it shows how she is creating a totalizing British experience replicable in the Western and the Eastern colonies. For Seacole, who has a Baucom-esque way of understanding citizenship, it almost doesn't matter where the hotels are: the facts that these

⁷⁶ This brief time span is why Seacole's narrative is decidedly not *Aurora Leigh* or *In Memoriam* or Gaskell's biography of Brontë. Instead, *Wonderful Adventures* is a different project at work and why it in many ways resembles a novel: it's about a life among crowds instead of focusing on the exceptional subject separated from others.

British Hotels are mobile, replicable, and necessarily “British” are what’s important. In fact, the British Hotels help her understand and replicate the British Empire on a global scale through small objects, including calico, linen, and clothing.

“Calico” appears as one of these cosmopolitan significations in chapters three (in her brother’s International Hotel in Cruces), five (in her British Hotel in Cruces), six (in her British Hotel in Gorgona), and fifteen (in her British Hotel in Crimea). Both the word *calico* and the object itself remind us of the ever-present influence of Calcutta in the British Empire, and that the fabric is a domestic mainstay in each of these “British” and “International” sites. *Calico*, both the word and the item, recalls, in fact, her own difficult personal history with India. Seacole famously wanted to establish another British Hotel in India during the Indian Mutiny of 1857 (while she was writing *Wonderful Adventures*), but the Defense Minister dissuaded her from traveling into a warzone yet again.⁷⁷ Seacole’s narrative is a product of her necessarily distant engagement with India, because the domestic objects that make her hotel and her text “British” are defined in part by Britain’s colonial domination of India. Her “wonderful adventures” are suffused with references to what was, for British citizens, a quintessential nineteenth-century product, calico, named for its Calcuttan origins. The calico she uses to decorate each of her hotels serves, then, as a placeholder for her Indian nonexperience and for her truly “British” representations of domesticity. Thus her own claims to imperial citizenship are in many ways predicated on the material products once made in this colonial city. That the people Seacole serves in New Granada and Crimea live in a British Hotel decorated with imperial things shows how Seacole subtly replicates the Empire even in colonial cities outside the British Empire and

⁷⁷ For years before critics rediscovered Seacole’s autobiography, she may have been most famous for her other thwarted attempt at serving British troops in Crimea, for during the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale and her nursing team refused to hire Seacole. This dismissal, then, led to Seacole’s subsequent business operations in Spring Hill. See Jane Robinson’s biography of Seacole for a more complete discussion of Seacole’s nursing projects outside of the ones she describes in *Wonderful Adventures*.

far from India, among them Cruces and Gorgona. The fact that this fabric appears each time she documents a new hotel's opening suggests how important it was for Seacole to provide details for her readers that would make her British Hotels seem as familiar to them as they would to her customers.

Chapters six and seven are abbreviated incidents in *Wonderful Adventures* that prepare us for the much more dramatic narrative of Seacole's work in Crimea. In these chapters she talks about how restless she is in Cruces and in Gorgona, and by chapter eight, she is advertising the British Hotel she will soon open in Crimea. The events that take place there fill the remaining eleven chapters. The Cruces and Gorgona hotels are strange even within Seacole's autobiography: in Seacole's retrospect, she's already looking ahead to Crimea. Moreover, while she describes each one separately, she deliberately confuses them and merges them together, suggesting that because these sites were transient "homes" within her adventures, the hotels became interchangeable. For if Empire is defined by its transient identity, according to Baucom, then Seacole's movement from hotel to hotel along these imperial outposts shows how she reconstructs the domesticizing mindset of Spanish and British powers within her very "ramshackle" buildings. Indeed, Seacole exaggerates the interchangeability of her establishments, and she claims after describing both the British Hotel at Cruces and the British Hotel at Gorgona that "[l]ife at Gorgona resembled life at Cruces so nearly that it does not need a separate description" (Seacole 53). This statement seems to retreat from the rather proud descriptions of the individual hotels at Cruces and Gorgona and may even be a nod to feminine modesty. Seacole's comment reflects the sense of exhaustion she describes experiencing, and it's a tacit acknowledgement of the excess of her pursuit in the meager society she serves in both cities. Her seemingly modest comment, too, invites us to reflect on how cagey she is and how

she posits herself as a British subject but also as a decidedly feminine subject in these new domestic sites.

Seacole's strange impulse to be proud—but not too proud—and to foreshadow future events while still narrating her “adventures” in Cruces and Gorgona shows how she toys with the anticipation often associated with the English domestic novel. But if she's claiming an identity as a heroine through dismissing fictional conventions, then what kind of heroine is she setting herself up to be in these early chapters? If we take Seacole at face value, and read her British Hotels in Cruces and Gorgona as mirror images, what are their shared defining features? In chapter five, she describes her first British Hotel (in Cruces) in the following way:

It was a mere tumble-down hut, with wattled sides, and a rotten thatched roof, containing two rooms, one small enough to serve as a bedroom. For this charming residence—very openly situated, and well ventilated—twenty pounds a month was considered a fair and by no means exorbitant rent. And yet I was glad to take possession of it; and in a few days had hung its rude walls with calico of gayest colour in stripes, with an exuberance of fringes, frills, and bows (the Americans love show dearly), and prepared it to accommodate fifty dinner guests. (36)

We see a similar description in chapter six, when less than a year later, Seacole moves to Gorgona and opens her second British Hotel:

With the aid of an old Jamaican friend, who had settled at Gorgona, I at last had found a miserable little hut for sale, and bought it for a hundred dollars. It consisted of one room only, and was, in its then condition, utterly unfit for my purpose; but I determined to set to work and build on to it—by no means the hazardous speculation in Gorgona, where bricks and mortar are unknown, that it

is in England [...] The building process was simple enough, and I soon found myself in possession of a capital dining-room some thirty feet in length, which was gaily hung with coloured calico, concealing all the defects of construction, and lighted with large oil lamps; a store-room, bar, and a small private apartment for ladies. Altogether, although I have to pay my labourers four shillings a day, the whole building did not cost me more than my brother paid for three months' rent of his hotel. (49)

Chapters five and six are strange foils to chapters one and two, for while the first pair of chapters dramatizes a striking chronological shift from major life events to the immediacy of crossing the River Chagres, this later pairing draws our attention to repetition: both the mundane day-to-day life in Cruces and in Gorgona and the way this is replicated when she moves from one city to the other. Because she is so careful to point out they are identical, it's important to note their differences.

The descriptions begin by suggesting the poverty in Cruces and Gorgona, respectively. The Hotel in Cruces has "wattled sides" and a "rotten thatched roof," while the building she purchases in Gorgona is "utterly unfit" for her purposes without renovation. It's almost as if she describes the misery of her surroundings to show how these projects are a testament to her character. The physical buildings are manifestations of the characteristics she wants to portray: she's economical, weighing the cost and value of each building and its renovations; she's patient, for though each is a short paragraph, it describes the work that's taken place over weeks and months; she's practical, making the poor conditions of the buildings attractive to potential customers; and she's attentive to the details of her hotels, describing how she's acquired her materials and how they were used in the space. She figures herself a savvy businesswoman

through these qualities, but they also prepare readers to understand her as a heroine long before she serves or cares for anyone in Crimea. The hotels give her an occasion to provide a character sketch of herself that outlines her identity as a “*heroine!*” both historically and autobiographically (76). While she seems to be modest about the miserable conditions she experienced and the transformations she’s directed, the suggestion that the British Hotels may be interchangeable in her readers’ minds hints at the wide spread success of her work within each of these Spanish colonies: when she calls her British Hotel in Cruces a “charming residence,” she invites us to imagine each subsequent hotel as an equally familiar domestic space. The similarities among her hotels convey the domestic style she and her brother developed as they moved from British Hotel to British Hotel within the region.

The details she does specifically name in the Hotel in Cruces and the Hotel in Gorgona are marked, then, with a rare significance, for they invite us to picture exactly what her domestic enterprise looked like in each of these spaces. Importantly, calico is a centerpiece of the British Hotels in Cruces and in Gorgona, and this fabric shows how Seacole’s domesticity is characterized by a movement inward from the framework of the “mere tumble-down hut” in Cruces and the “miserable little hut” in Gorgona to what seem to be impossibly lavish (and huge) dining rooms inside: the dining room in Cruces will “accommodate fifty dinner guests” and the one in Gorgona is “thirty feet in length.”⁷⁸ How Seacole outfits these improbable spaces, though, makes them all the more lavish. Inside her “hut” in Cruces, Seacole hangs “its rude walls with calico of gayest colour in stripes, with an exuberance of fringes, frills, and bows”; similarly, the Gorgona “hut” is “gaily hung with coloured calico, concealing all the defects of construction,

⁷⁸ The décor seems to be pretty standard, for Seacole mentions her brother’s hotel has a similar aesthetic. Even though her brother’s Independent Hotel is less than respectable and she openly recalls her disappointment—“rest! warmth! Comfort!—miserable delusions!”—its interior is “gaily hung with dirty calico, in stripes of red and white” (Seacole 19). The gay red and white stripes, however dirty, decorate the interior and distract the customers from noticing the shabby surroundings.

and lighted with large oil lamps.” Not only do these details seem exceptional in light of the poor physical conditions Seacole enumerates throughout chapters five and six, but they also seem strange because Seacole has used a familiar, utilitarian fabric in a way that seems excessive.

In many ways, it makes sense that Seacole selects calico to decorate her British Hotels. Beyond its imperial significance, the fabric also would have been understood as a utilitarian and English-produced textile among Seacole’s mid-nineteenth-century British readership, even if it was once woven in India. Indeed, the shifting definitions of *calico* reflect the fabric’s storied history and ties to both India and England. Named after “a city on the coast of Malabar,” that was “in the 16th c. the chief port, next to Goa, of intercourse between India and Europe,” calico became defined as “a general name for cotton cloth of all kinds imported from the East” (“calico”). When the word *calico* first appeared in English during the mid-sixteenth century, it referred to an Indian fabric “made of cotton, sometimes stained with gay and beautiful colours”—a textile that resembles Seacole’s own “calico of gayest colour” in *Wonderful Adventures* (“calico”; Seacole 36). It was immediately popular: by 1680 “more than a million pieces were being imported into England,” a figure that only increased into the eighteenth century (Yafa 31). Although England banned “imported cotton of all kind” in 1700, women of all classes continued to purchase, use, and wear calico (31).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the word *calico* referred to the same kind of cotton cloth with the same kind of colors and patterns, but it would have been made in England instead of in India, despite the fact that it maintained its Calcuttan history in its name. Even as calico became a fabric with global connections, Britain and British textile mills strove to claim it as emblematic of English prosperity and commerce. “The journey of cotton from utilitarian cloth to celebrity fabric in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe,” Stephen Yafa claims, “would change the

world, stitch by stitch” (24). In her recent study of Indian commodities in nineteenth-century fiction, Daly also notes the shifting connotation of *calico* and its changing cultural capital throughout the nineteenth century. While “the nineteenth-century movement of British cotton goods into India was an invasion in the sense that an already-existing industry was targeted, attacked, and weakened,” Daly also notes that “the ‘vocabulary of chintzes and calicoes’ made its way into Victorian novels as a means of signaling stability, continuity, and order” (*The Empire Inside* 37). For when weaving factories in Lancashire and Manchester supplanted those in Calcutta, calico became a mass-produced commodity.

Indeed, as calico shifted from being an imported Indian textile to a domestic one, clearly defining what fabrics could be labeled *calico* became increasingly difficult. Between the seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, the bright colors and patterns on the cotton British people called *calico* became synonymous with middle-class material culture.⁷⁹ For as Daly suggests, “not until the bulk of cotton textiles were understood to be of English origin could any cotton fabric be read as virtuous. Victorian commentators, eager to promote England’s largest and ‘most important industry,’ began to argue that the introduction of cotton textiles had had, historically, a positive effect on English culture” (*The Empire Inside* 47). As these fabrics were increasingly accessible to women of all classes, British merchants were forced to keep up with the demand: “Chintz had created a phenomenon among the upper classes; then, as now, the general populace was eager to follow, and it did so in great numbers. Calico, a cheaper and more

⁷⁹ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *calico*, textile manufacturers were supposed to distinguish between “Callico, which stands for foreign Callico” and “British Manufacture,” which was to be stamped on all domestically produced wares (“Calico”). In their histories of the fabric (and its attending colonial politics), however, Yafa and Foreman refer to printed cotton fabric as *calico*, whether it’s made in India or Britain. The elision between the two seems to be a meaningful one in studies of imperial culture, and for this reason I follow Yafa’s and Foreman’s lead.

accessible printed version of glazed fabric, became the new, affordable fabric of choice for every shopgirl in France and in the British Isles” (Yafa 37).

Eventually, however, *calico* came to mean “anything cotton and colorful” and also came to signify English printed fabric more generally (Yafa 59). When the distinction between *calico* and *chintz* no longer denoted a difference in quality (*chintz* wasn’t necessarily more ornate or even glazed), the fabrics could no longer be read as markers of distinctly middle-class or distinctly upper-class taste. If *calico* came to mean something imperial and something utilitarian, and if *chintz* maintained an immaterial distinction from calico, it was that *chintz* marked an antiquated notion of expensive taste since the fabric itself was now the same as calico. Both would have been distinct from other fabrics because they were made of cotton, and both cottons were printed with bright colors and patterns. The etymological changes in these words mark larger economic changes within the Empire, for both consumers and producers around the world. When Seacole calls attention to the calico in her Cruces and her Gorgona British Hotels, the fabric would have seemed strange in the huts to begin with, but the disparity between the ramshackle exteriors and the more polished interiors would have been all the more fraught because of the changed significations of *calico* at this particular moment in material history.

Seacole’s readership would have taken the presence of calico for granted within their English homes. Each of the paragraphs about Cruces and Gorgona describes overwhelming poverty, for even poor sections of London would not have looked like the series of foreign huts Seacole chronicles in chapters five and six. But her description of the dining rooms in each of the two British Hotels, by mentioning calico, would have recalled a kind of utilitarian domesticity with which her middle-class readers could identify (and, perhaps, even admire). The descriptions of the dining rooms are probably exaggerated, given her lengthy descriptions of the buildings’

modest exteriors. But this could be a rhetorical strategy on Seacole's part, since it's clear elsewhere that she's working to cultivate mid-Victorian domesticity overseas. Her descriptions of her dining rooms, in fact, recall details we associate with mainstream mid-Victorian interior decoration. Both the printed calico (or another kind of printed fabric patterned after calico) and the excessive trim were mainstays in mid-century homes in England. Middle-class women would have spent a considerable amount of money purchasing fabric like calico for drapes, chair covers, tablecloths, napkins, and bed linens; later, these textiles (save the napkins) would have been cut up and refashioned into clothing so these women wouldn't have to spend their money on additional fabric. Seacole's attention to economy, coupled with her references to calico, spoke to the women whose similar attention to domestic detail consumed their day-to-day finances. What seems to be in *Cruces* and in *Gorgona* an off-hand reference was an emotional appeal to contemporary readers, who were largely middle-class English women.

If the references to calico work as an appeal to her readers, they do so in part because they are more overt appeals to her customers in *Cruces* and *Gorgona*, whom Seacole defines specifically and ironically as ladies. Seacole's work in these outposts is self-consciously domestic: she wants to make these ladies feel as if they are "at home." Her expectation, however, is that she will be serving English (or British) ladies, and she openly admits her disappointment when her clients are women who, she assumes, won't appreciate her good taste. For Seacole, American women seem oblivious to the details that make her hotel worthy of fine, imperial ladies:

My present life was not agreeable for a woman with the least delicacy or refinement; and of female society I had none. Indeed, the females who crossed my path were about as unpleasant specimens of the fair sex as one could well wish to

avoid. With very few exceptions, those who were not bad were very disagreeable, and as the majority came from the Southern States of America, and showed an instinctive repugnance against any one whose countenance claimed for her kindred with their slaves, my position was far from a pleasant one. Not that it ever gave me any annoyance; they were glad of my stores and comforts, I made money out of their wants; nor do I think our bond of connection was ever closer; only this, if any of them came to me sick and suffering (I say this out of simple justice to myself), I forgot everything, except that she was my sister, and that it was my duty to help her. (50)

Seacole uses her confession of repugnance with the American women to build confidence with her British readership.⁸⁰ This is a moment when she's positioning herself as a Victorian "heroine," and it's important that she narrates serving women—even if they are American women—before she moves to Crimea and serves men almost exclusively. Seacole teases us into thinking the trust she establishes with these women puts on good faith with her readers who she assumes will laud her for her values: hospitality, graciousness (even graciousness to people who are beneath her), patience, empathy with women whom she calls her "sister[s]," and a muted rebuke of the United States. The rebuke is necessarily muted because it's clear that Seacole is critical of American slavery. Seacole's suggestion that she takes care of the women, despite the fact that they compare her "countenance" to the faces of slaves in the South, is telling, for it

⁸⁰ Fish interprets Seacole's choice to name her businesses the "British Hotel" as defiant. For Fish, Seacole wants to define herself in opposition to the Americans who seem omnipresent in New Granada (and whom Seacole abhors). "By making an example of the lawlessness, arrogance, and brutality of slaveholding Americans abroad and the success and leadership roles of blacks as citizens with equal rights in New Granada," Fish argues, Seacole "challenges white supremacy and points out the contingent nature of slavery [...]. The names of the hotels in New Granada towns indicate the way they performed as markers of nationhood. Mary Seacole's brother Edward ran the Independent Hotel in Cruces, while American hotels dominated the landscape, with names such as United States Hotel, Crescent City Hotel, and Hotel Americano [...]. Mary Seacole's general put-down of American travelers is not placed in the context of the competition she may have faced in running her British Hotel" (*Black and White Women's Travel Narratives* 76).

suggests Seacole's modest fortitude. While it's clear that she wants to leave Cruces and Gorgona, her experiences with these women are crucial for the rest of the narrative, because they show how she defines herself in terms of her sense of "duty" and how she exemplifies domestic expectations for a woman of character at mid-century.

Just as Seacole "set hard to work to settle [herself] somewhere" when she leaves Cruces for Gorgona, she does the same when she sets out for Crimea (49). Indeed, where Seacole lives and works seems to be irrelevant, even if she denies that her benevolent wanderlust (or her "old roving inclination") leads her "to desire a change" from New Granadan scenery (50). The Cruces and Gorgona British Hotels function, then, as narrative shorthand, much like the ship scene in chapter two. These places are important because Seacole's temporary, imperial domesticities prepare us for her more distant travel to the Crimean warzone. This warzone, too, is a different sort of domesticity, where she is a lone feminine figure among British soldiers fighting on foreign battlefields. Her British Hotels here appear as exaggerated microcosms of British imperialism, since they protect and recreate domestic ideals on foreign territory. Strikingly, her clients here are homesick soldiers who find Seacole to be an embodiment of the British maternal.

After describing her two nearly identical British Hotels in New Granada, Seacole has already established the standard features in each hotel and devotes little of her narrative to physical descriptions of her business in Spring Hill. Instead, she focuses on the ways in which her hotel and her dry-goods store commodify British experience for the soldiers. These businesses catalogue the things that fill her imperial domestic spaces she creates in Cruces and Gorgona, but they also exaggerate the noticeable absences she experiences abroad because she's now living on the outskirts of a battlefield. Seacole boasts that her shop stocks "everything [...]" from an anchor down to a needle" and specifically highlights the availability of "linen and

hosiery” after claiming she has “omit[ted] ordinary things” from this stock list (114, 139). But even as this chapter catalogues the things she stores in her hotel and dry-goods store to serve the British soldiers, the header is a foreboding catalogue of the losses she experiences in this remote place. Before the store and the hotel are even finished, Seacole intimates that this will be a site for crisis. The header for chapter twelve reads: “THE BRITISH HOTEL—DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES—OUR ENEMIES—THE RUSSIAN RATS—ADVENTURES IN SEARCH OF A CAT—LIGHT-FINGERED ZOUAVES—CRIMEAN THIEVES—POWDERING A HORSE” (113). Next to this daunting outline of what is to come, her description of plenty seems almost to be damned, and her pride makes her seem heroic precisely because we know her efforts may be for naught.

For if chapter twelve begins with Seacole’s semi-modest, self-congratulatory mention that her rooms offer the only “few gleams” of “sun” to the “weary soldiers,” then it is all the more devastating when this chapter turns to a narrative of theft (113). By this point in her narrative, Seacole has worked to show us what a savvy businesswoman she is, so her confession that a transient washerman was able to steal her clothes and table linens is all the more surprising—and in fact, she suggests so through her equivocal (even involved) account:

More than once the Crimean thievery reduced us to woeful straits. To a Greek, returning to Constantinople, we entrusted (after the murder of our washerwoman) two trunks, containing “things for the wash,” which he was to bring back as soon as possible. But neither upon Greek, trunks, nor their contents did we ever set eyes upon again. It was a serious loss. The best part of our table-cloths and other domestic linen, all my clothes, except two suits, and all of Mr. Day’s linen vanished, and had to be replaced as best we could by fresh purchases from Kamiesch and Kadikoi. (123)

Seacole feels violated when her linen is stolen. The loss of things become a metonymic representation of the psychological vulnerability she feels in response to her and her soldiers' losses. The fact that the washerman steals all of her clothes "except two suits" may even be symbolic of the domestic nakedness she feels in this landscape, where she can't rely on the washerwoman, who has been murdered, to support her domestic work. Still, Seacole's cavalier treatment of the washerwoman shows how she fancies herself the only reliable "*Crimean heroine!*" in this place: the washerwoman's murder is, in fact, relegated to parentheses while the linen theft is outlined in detail. Seacole may confess how foolish it was for her to give the trunks of linen to the Greek man, and she may lament never seeing him, the trunks, or her linen again, but the washerwoman silently slips out of the narrative. Seacole doesn't lament her passing. The Hotel's linens are certainly more than "ordinary," then, for when Seacole's Crimean British Hotel is robbed, it shows how vulnerable she is to greater breaches than she could have imagined. The fact that she's fixated on the tablecloths underscores how she's concerned about the lack of civility in this place, where she can't rely on the washerwoman staying alive or the stand-in washer to return with her belongings. Seacole, too, is careful to associate the thefts with specific nationalities: Why is it "Crimean thievery" when she knows it's a "Greek" man who runs off with the trunks? Seacole never explains these identifications, but it's clear that she considers specific things (such as the stolen linen) as part of her British enterprise, and that this domestic space—and its real but also symbolic contents—have been dissolved into the war's international economy.

The theft suggests how difficult it is for Seacole to obtain material for clothing and for her hotel. When she has to replace her household linen and her clothes, she specifically calls attention to the fact that she has to travel to Kamiesch and Kadikoi, which reminds us that this is

a warzone and these basic things are not readily available. Indeed, Seacole complains about the absence of necessary clothing and other common items throughout her time in Crimea. As she discusses her day-to-day life at the British Hotel, she appeals to readers with descriptions of soldiers who lack simple clothing items. “[S]hirts and socks were often comforts to dream about rather than possess,” Seacole tells her readers before asking them if they could “fancy what the want of so simple a thing as a pocket-handkerchief is?” (137). When these items do appear, they appear as phantom objects, just as they do in chapter two. In fact, the word “dream” recalls Seacole’s hypnagogic vision of the New Granadan sailors sleeping in linen and calico while traveling to Cruces. Just as she “dream[s]” of sailors who can escape sleeping in squalor, Seacole’s “dream” of plentiful shirts and socks takes place in the middle of a less-than-desirable hotel where basic necessities are absent, washerwomen are murdered, and household linen is stolen (16, 137). While the ship and the Crimean British Hotel are merely temporary domestic spaces, material objects—even imagined material objects—transform what would be, for Seacole, miserable experiences into meaningful ones.

In fact, by calling attention to these imagined shirts, socks, and handkerchiefs rather than her “greater” heroic acts (which she doesn’t narrate until the following chapter), Seacole alludes to modest acts of kindness that would be familiar for her middle-class readers. Shirts, socks, and handkerchiefs are things that wives and mothers had to purchase or make for their own families, and though it wouldn’t have been as difficult for them as it was for Seacole to replace shirts, socks, and handkerchiefs, these women would be equally horrified to imagine exactly what she’s experiencing.⁸¹ After she discovers many of the soldiers do not have handkerchiefs, Seacole

⁸¹ Seacole calls attention to the parallels between the work of women in England and the work she does in Crimea, emphasizing that she’s able to support soldiers in ways the women in England cannot: “Don’t you think, reader, if you were lying, with parched lips and fading appetite, thousands of miles from mother, wife, or sister, loathing the rough food by your side, and thinking regretfully of that English home where nothing that would minister to your

orders “a hundred dozen of these useful articles” and “[sells] them all to officers and men very speedily” (138). Unlike the imagined shirts and socks, these handkerchiefs are real, but the size of her order also counts the large number of men she serves. Instead of saying she helped 1200 soldiers, which may be too great a number for her readers to fathom, Seacole has her readers picture 1200 squares of cloth corresponding to the men who put them in their pockets. This is another moment when Seacole’s references to fabric help her to veil a rather proud account of her work. It’s a strategy she uses both to identify with her women readers without putting them off and to figure herself as a heroine. After all, handkerchiefs, shirts, and socks would have been “ordinary,” even inconsequential, items. Their loss or noticeable absence, then, makes the often abstract or incomprehensible horrors of a warfront or a colonial outpost all the more tangible. The mention of these things seems to stand in for other kinds of losses she has yet to narrate, in part because they are painful but also because it’s not ladylike to discuss them in the sort of gory detail she’s witnessed.⁸²

The calico suggests an “imagined community” in Seacole’s *British Hotels*, uniting England with these imperial outposts. But this object is also a metonym for *Wonderful Adventures* as a whole, because Seacole used the profits from selling her story to help pay off her debts from her imperial enterprise, her hotels and her dry-goods store, once she returned to London from Spring Hill. In that sense, the book, like the calico she details, became a global commodity. Indeed, Helen Cooper reads *Wonderful Adventures* as appealing to the British Empire’s “imagined community” of readers, which is crucial to our understanding of Seacole as

great need would be left untried—don’t you think that you would welcome the familiar figure of the stout lady whose bony horse has just pulled up at the door of your hut, and whose panniers contain some cooling drink, a little broth, some homely cake, or a dish of jelly or blanc-mange—don’t you think, under such circumstances, that you would heartily agree [...] when a woman’s voice and a woman’s care have brought to their minds recollections of those happy English homes which some of them never saw again; but many did, who will remember their woman comrade upon the bleak and barren heights before Sebastopol” (126-27).

⁸² In fact, Seacole begins with an apology for the grisly details she’s about to share, reminding readers that she’s only including these facts to help the British soldiers.

a self-professed, almost novelistic, domestic heroine. “As English exploration and colonization expanded,” Cooper notes, “writing published in England contributed towards a national narrative just as the notion of ‘England’ and the ‘English’ became increasingly unstable as a result of England’s colonial enterprise” (125). The newspapers and novels Anderson cites in *Imagined Communities* unite individuals across disparate places, but Seacole’s selective details—how she arranges each and every British Hotel—similarly transmit and replicate the mid-century British Empire wherever she sets up shop.

Seacole’s Crimean narrative shows how she is sensitive to the role of journalists in her British Hotel, which becomes an Andersonian imagined community, especially on the occasion of the dinner party she hosts in a reporter’s honor. Soon after she bemoans the lack of handkerchiefs, Seacole sews calico napkins for a dinner party attended by W.H. Russell, Esq., a *Times* correspondent who is one of the committee members who “aids” her when she arrives in London at the end of the narrative (199, 200). Seacole’s preparations for the dinner intimate that she is well aware of the fact that Russell’s interest in her work will afford credibility before her disbelievers and, ultimately, to the readers of her autobiography. In the paragraph that details her preparations for the dinner, she catalogues the ingredients for her favorite recipe, which she prepares for the officers and for the correspondent. She also describes the efforts she undertakes to make the table setting hospitable for her special guest. She contrasts this highly controlled scene with the constant loss of human life in the next paragraph:

But the reader must not forget that all this time, although there might be only a few short and sullen roars of the great guns by day, few nights passed without some fighting in the trenches; and very often the news of the morning would be that one or other of those I knew had fallen. These tidings often saddened me, and

when I awoke in the night and heard the thunder of the guns fiercer than usual, I have quite dreaded the dawn which might usher in bad news. (151-52)

Alongside this elegiac remembering, Seacole's brief discussion of the dinner party seems almost like a guilty pleasure; however, her language also shows how important it is for her to provide comfort to the soldiers and to the correspondent through domestic things that will remind them of home.

Seacole's description of the calico napkins is equally detailed. She describes riding "down to Kadioki" where she earlier had replaced her table linens and personal wardrobe, and "bought some calico, and cut it up into table napkins" (151).⁸³ At the party, she calls our attention to the guests' appreciation of the new napkins. "They all laughed very heartily," notes Seacole, "and thought perhaps of a few weeks previously, when every available piece of linen in the camp would have been snapped up for pocket-handkerchiefs" (151). Just as in Cruces and Gorgona, the calico napkins are her way of making the table feel a little less bare and a little more like their English homes. The napkins are functional and imply the civility Seacole requires of her customers and the domesticity she wishes to cultivate in her British Hotels. She may suggest the calico and the napkins she sews out of it are luxurious in Crimea, but their rarity only highlights their ubiquity elsewhere, where cotton cloth and household linen would be expected.

Seacole's curtains and table linens and napkins aren't isolated mentions of this global phenomenon. Elaine Freedgood uses calico as a case study to theorize the way things literalize cultural histories that often remain assumed within nineteenth-century texts. In *The Ideas in*

⁸³ Seacole's business was one of many in Crimea that sold British goods (especially luxury goods) to soldiers. As Robinson notes in her recent biography of Seacole, Kadikoi and Kamiesh (towns Seacole visits in *Wonderful Adventures*, particularly to buy calico and other household linen) were filled with British outposts: "Outside camp, Kadikoi looked more like an English country fair by the beginning of 1856, so stuffed was every alleyway and open space with stalls. There was even a branch of Crockford's wine merchants from St. James Street in London to raise the tone. The French equivalent was in nearby Kamiesh, boasting some particularly fine restaurants and cafes" (126).

Things, she argues, for example, that the calico curtains in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) "indicate domesticity, and hence orderly relations between men and women, children and adults, home and world" (57). As we have seen, Seacole's repeated calico purchases are equally fraught with imperial meanings. For just as Gaskell's calico "contains within its very name the history of the deindustrialization of the Indian textile manufacture, and the rise to dominance of British cotton production," so Seacole's calico also "contains in its very warp and weft, we might say, significant historical threads of uneven development that characterized [...] a global economy" (57). *Wonderful Adventures* similarly "mark[s] a definite boundary between the domestic and the foreign, the inside and the outside," but "with its inescapable [...] international affiliations," the cloth also "suggests how difficult it is to draw such boundaries by the mid-nineteenth century" (57). The side-by-side paragraphs about the calico napkins and about the fallen soldiers, about the "correspondent" and about the "news" Seacole doesn't want to hear, suggest the way these details often clash within her mind but also the way she has to reconcile the domestic ideals she holds with the realities of her Crimean surroundings. Both of them are human details that mark the sociopolitical exchanges she witnesses during her travels, and both show how she's working within and without the Empire, always navigating the cusp between the two.

But as poignant as the dinner party may be, the officers' and the correspondent's laughter is almost bittersweet: why are they laughing? And why does Seacole mention it? Just as in other places she's both modest and self-congratulatory, here she's both defensive about her identity as "heroine" and honest about how the men value the earnestness of her efforts. In some ways, they seem to be laughing because the dinner offers them respite from the real dangers they face, which she notes in the next paragraph, but they also may be laughing because this domestic

nicety seems to be out of place, especially when there are less material worries on everyone's minds. Even if Seacole narrates this moment as one that shows how good humored her relationship is with the soldiers, it also points uncomfortably to the real differences between women's work and men's work on the battlefield—and how both of these labors were received by her critics, who may be embodied by the *Times* journalist.

In fact, earlier in the autobiography, she reminds her readers of the cartoons *Punch* made of her while she was in Crimea, and she pokes fun at herself, appealing to her readers for sympathy since they can now see how meaningful her work really is. Seacole's self-consciousness of newspaper representations is important because it reveals that she worried people would see her as a caricature of herself and that they would laugh at her efforts:

Of course, I have nothing to do with what occurred in the camp, although I could not help hearing a great deal about it. Mismanagement and privation there might have been, but my business was to make things right in my sphere, and whatever confusion and disorder existed elsewhere, comfort and order were always to be found at Spring Hill. When there was no sun elsewhere, some few gleams—so its grateful visitor said—always seemed to have stayed behind, to cheer the weary soldiers that gathered in the British Hotel. And, perhaps, as my kind friend *Punch* said, after all these things had become pleasant memories of the past. (113)

Seacole is self-conscious of her presentation of domestic efforts before the London *Times* correspondent in the wake of the *Punch* caricatures, and the narrative of her dinner party is an important moment because it offers her a chance to defend the importance of the material things and the material efforts she makes alongside the British soldiers. This episode becomes, then, a turning point in her narrative, since she defends her own authorial credibility.

Seacole, in fact, capitalized on her place in British current events, for she published *Wonderful Adventures* as soon as she returned to London, an arrival that coincided with India's First War of Independence. Indeed, the stories of *Wonderful Adventures*, themselves commodities that Seacole sold to recoup the losses from her Crimean store, also contain references to the commodities that further incensed the uproar over India. *Wonderful Adventures* was published in July 1857, just after the beginning of the War of Independence, which began 10 May 1857. While before the rebellion India had been largely controlled by the British East India Company, the relationship became even further entwined after 1858. India came under direct control of the British Empire, and the British East India Company was also dissolved at the end of the rebellion.⁸⁴ As the chief trading merchant of the British Empire, the East India Company even influenced the shift from producing calico in India to weaving the fabric in England, because the company first introduced the fabric to England in the seventeenth century. The dissolution of the East India Company, then, signified the complete revision of calico not as *an* English product but as *the* English product.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ The rising demand for calico made "India itself [...] a desirable acquisition for its immensely profitable cotton textile industry as well as for its plentiful source for raw material" (Yafa 33-34). Indeed, in 1757, Robert Clive and the East India Company invaded Bengal, and as Yafa notes, "[f]rom there it was a short, crisp British strut to occupying India's cotton fields and outlawing Indian manufacture of any cotton fabric from its own raw material" (Yafa 34). England's factories flourished in the wake of Britain's increasing control over India's cotton and textile industry. The first mechanized textile mill in England opened in 1771, and by 1774, calico was largely appropriated by British manufactures (Yafa 55). As Britain's factories became increasingly productive—they were producing three million yards of fabric in 1783—they began using American cotton instead of Indian.⁸⁴ By the early nineteenth century Britain was importing over 1.5 million pounds of cotton from America (Foreman 21). British manufacturers' decision to use American cotton instead of Indian left Indian markets even more impoverished than before the East India Company's mid-eighteenth century invasion, but the choice to purchase slave-grown American cotton also implicated British mills in a transnational economy with wide-ranging ethical and financial decisions, ones which culminated in the American Civil War.

⁸⁵ In fact, when *Wonderful Adventures* was published, factories in Manchester and Lancashire were weaving millions of miles of cotton fabric annually. As historian Amanda Foreman notes, "[b]y 1857, the textile industry was one of the most important in Britain, and the cotton trade translated into a business worth \$600 million a year, providing employment and financial security in England for more than 5 million men and women" (9). Only one year later, South Carolina senator James Hammond coined the phrase "Cotton is King," not only because of its financial success in the American South, but also because without American cotton, "England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South" (qtd. in Foreman 37).

Just as her calico references in Cruces, Gorgona, and Spring Hill require the reader to think of calico as a familiar detail that becomes a template in each subsequent hotel, so Seacole's descriptions of her clothing are predicated on author-reader familiarity since they become more and more exaggerated (even ostentatious) as she moves toward the end of the narrative. Seacole describes her clothing three times in *Wonderful Adventures*: in chapter two (on the boat to Cruces), chapter nine (on the boat to Constantinople), and chapter ten (on the battlefield in Crimea). By dwelling on the descriptions of her dresses, shawls, and bonnets that reflect the current tastes and styles of middle-class Victorians, Seacole emphasizes details that require the reader to see her as an English "heroine."

Throughout *Wonderful Adventures* Seacole considers it "a duty as well as a pleasure to study" her clothing and emphasizes the impeccable polish of her feminine appearance (Seacole 13). This statement may be read as a microcosm for how Seacole handles textual detail within her autobiography, but it also suggests how she reads her own autobiography as a microcosm for cultural history at this particular historical moment. These small details signify the big national exchanges of Seacole's contemporary world. As she makes the symbolic journey from Jamaica to Cruces in chapter two, Seacole turns again to what seems to be a hyper-detailed description against the broad strokes of chapter one. She outlines her "personal appearance" immediately following a discussion of the horrendous conditions on the boat in order for "the reader [to] sympathise with [her] distress" (13). She writes:

And as with that due regard to personal appearance, which I have always deemed a duty as well as a pleasure to study, I had, before leaving Navy Bay, attired myself in a delicate light blue dress, a white bonnet prettily trimmed, and an equally chaste shawl, the reader can sympathise with my distress. However, I

gained the summit, and after an arduous descent, of a few minutes duration,
 reached the river-side; in a most piteous plight, however, for my pretty dress,
 from its contact with the Gatun clay, looked as red as if, in the pursuit of science,
 I had passed it through a strong solution of muriatic acid. (13)

Seacole's emphasis on the excessive femininity of her bonnet is her way of describing her own "delicate" and "pretty" person, a fact that may be lost during her "arduous" and muddy "descent" to the riverbank. Seacole is coy throughout the passage, alternately eliciting sympathy from her readers and pushing them away.

While she wants her female readership to identify with her—calling attention to her overly feminine clothes, bemoaning how they get dirty in the red clay of the riverbank, and describing the unfortunate theft of her luggage—Seacole also characterizes her muddy dress with scientific language. The word "red" might at first suggest that the dress is bloodied (or recall the dresses she describes later in Crimea), but she explains that the color is a stain from the "Gatun clay," stains that connect her to this transitory geography in Panama. But she shies away from a plain description of her soiled skirts, and she renders the geographical mark as a simile, one that emphasizes her medical knowledge. It's a strange, hyper-literary moment for her: since she's been so interested in describing the scenery, it's striking that she disorients the reader through her specialized terminology. It's also strange because this moment seems to be one of her more self-conscious descriptions of her body and her character: the simile confuses who she wants to be with her reader's unfulfilled expectations of her femininity. Seacole's description of the "delicate" material of her dress calls attention to her delicate rhetorical coyness, through which she fulfills, exaggerates, and, consequently, undermines, the image of proper Victorian femininity.

This tension among fulfilling, exaggerating, and undermining readerly expectations is quite subtle: Seacole uses “however” twice in the short passage, a word that reflects her ever-shifting self-portrayal throughout her dramatic entrance into New Granada. This rich description of her dress appears among a number of passages that emphasize just how crowded this place would have been for a single woman. Indeed, this passage not only immediately precedes one that enumerates how disgusted she is with American women, but it also appears just before she discusses her long, sleepless, and “dreamy” night on the boat to Cruces when she imagines the crewmen sleeping in “fair linen sheets” while wearing “the purest of calico night-gear” (16). Seacole’s choice to stress the incongruity of her appearance and her surroundings underscores the sense of exceptionality she cultivates throughout her narrative.

After detailing her frustration with the stains on her clothing, she describes an even more disastrous “accident” that underscores exactly how vulnerable she is in this place. “By the water-side,” Seacole writes, “I found my travelling companions arguing angrily with the shrewd boatmen, and baiting down their fares. Upon collecting my luggage, I found, as I had expected, that the porters had not neglected the glorious opportunity of robbing a woman, and that several articles were missing” (13).⁸⁶ If the reader had questioned whether Seacole’s descriptions of material objects, especially stolen material objects, are rhetorical pleas for sympathy, this passage shows just how savvily she uses parallel incidents within her *Wonderful Adventures*. For just as the stolen linens and clothes in Crimea reveal Seacole’s vulnerability and resourcefulness, these clothes introduce Seacole as a resilient traveler long before she reaches her first British Hotel. Even in this moment of potential (if symbolic) nakedness, Seacole presses on and notes the incident almost in passing.

⁸⁶ A similar incident occurs in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853). When Lucy Snowe arrives in Villette, she panics when she cannot locate her suitcase, on which she’s tied a green ribbon: “And my portmanteau, with my few clothes and little pocket-book enclasping the remnant of my fifteen pounds, where were they?” (61).

When she returns again to descriptions of her clothing while in transit to Spring Hill, then, the descriptions are all the more surprising, for we know just how easily the clothes could be lost among the untrustworthy crowds or ruined in the unpredictable landscape. Still, Seacole's descriptions of her sartorial choices in Crimea focus on the clothing's unexpected femininity. In fact, Seacole uses these brief passages to draw even more explicit connections between her Britishness and her femininity. For if in New Granada Seacole emphasizes the "calico of gayest colour" she uses her British Hotels to appeal to her female readers and to establish an imagined community, then in Crimea Seacole's clothing also signifies the temporary imperial spaces she establishes in colonial outposts. The bright colors of her Crimean wardrobe are distinct from the light blue dress she describes wearing in New Granada. Indeed, the language she uses to describe her clothes in chapter nine (on her way to Crimea) and in chapter ten (on the Crimean battlefield) recalls the "calico of gayest colour" that she calls attention to in her Cruces and Gorgona British Hotels.

On a boat from England to Constantinople, Seacole focuses on how her appearance draws the attention of her fellow boatmates. If she subtly asks her readers to imagine how other women perceived her in Cruces and Gorgona, here her narrative describes her person almost as an out-of-body experience, through the imagined perspective of "the grave English" and the "vivacious French" people she encounters in this storied port city. In her imagination, she sees "the grave English [who] raised their eyebrows wonderingly, and the more vivacious French [who] shrugged their pliant shoulders into the strangest contortions" (86). She continues:

I accepted it all as a compliment to a stout female tourist dressed in a red or a yellow dress, a plain shawl of some other colour, and a simple straw wide-awake, with bright red streamers. I flatter myself that I woke up sundry sleepy-eyed

Turks, who seemed to think that the great object of life was to avoid showing surprise at anything; while the Turkish women gathered around me, and jabbered about me, in the most flattering manner. (86)

One of the most striking things about this passage is that she imagines the other people through their national identifiers: it's not a "French" person she has in mind but a "vivacity" she associates with "French" people more generally. Likewise, Seacole doesn't single out an English citizen or a Turkish citizen but instead stereotypes "Englishness" in terms of "graveness" and "Turkishness" in terms of "sleepy-eyed" gawking. Against Seacole's self-conscious description of this cosmopolitan spectacle, she points out how very singular her "form" is, and squeezes in one more cultural stereotype about Americans in Constantinople: "Time and trouble combined have left me with a well-filled-out, portly form—the envy of many an angular Yankee female—and, more than once, it was in no slight danger of becoming too intimately acquainted with the temperature of the Bosphorus" (86). Seacole's caricatures of the Americans, the English, the French, and the Turks only highlight exactly how "British" she is in this decidedly global nexus between West and East and between Old World and New World. It is the Panama of the Mediterranean for Seacole, whose passing in this moment is as symbolic as it was when she traveled from Jamaica to New Granada.

In fact, the other descriptions of Seacole's clothing reflect this cosmopolitanism. When other critics have discussed these passages, they often point to the significance of the fabrics' colors, which often seem to correspond with images of nationalism or patriotism across the British Empire. Robinson suggests that Seacole's clothes reflect how she was a "warm-hearted and exhibitionist Creole woman who had grown up loving the vivid colors of the West Indies and favoured dresses in bold primary colours—red, blue, yellow" (190). She also draws parallels

between Seacole's seemingly calculated wardrobe and her patriotism: "Both [red and blue] signified for her a fierce loyalty to Jamaica, Britain, Empire and Queen and would have signaled as much to her clientele" (190).⁸⁷ The festive blues, yellows, and reds certainly recall the imperial history of the cloth as well as Seacole's own experiences throughout the Empire, but as Robinson points out, Seacole's clients and eventual readers would have also understood how the colorful dresses visually labeled Seacole herself as a product of the Empire. But perhaps more striking is that she describes the folds of the material itself as "streamers," a word that suggests the transmutation of clothing to a flag she wears on her person. Among the crowdedness of Constantinople, Seacole intimates that she sees herself—and, indeed, that others also see her—as a personification of imperial Britishness. In this way, through her choice of dress, Seacole further associates not only her body and presence in the Empire with Britishness but also the cloth that transforms each surface into a representation of Britain.

Seacole's clothes also function as reminders of the Empire that were far more portable than a decorated British Hotel. Rather than being marks of vanity, these details suggest the manner in which clothing comes to signify a much more deeply felt kind of pride, one that combines her self-conscious femininity with her self-conscious nationalism or patriotism abroad. Indeed, Seacole may be busy nursing soldiers in Balaclava, but while she describes her nursing work, she pauses to remind her readers that she "[has] not neglected [her] personal appearance" and wears her "favourite yellow dress, and blue bonnet, with the red ribbons" (97-98). Seacole's description of her clothing here may be rather sparse, but she was apparently famous for her penchant for wearing a plaid riding habit, which she made in between nursing soldiers on and off

⁸⁷ Many critics have pointed to Seacole's clothing to discuss her complicated self-representations of "othered" Victorian femininity. See especially Paquet, who argues Seacole's "feminine attire is explicitly a sign of her womanly mission in a man's world" (paragraph eleven). I don't disagree with this claim, but it oversimplifies the other questions of identity against which her femininity is defined.

the battlefield. Readers who had followed Seacole in the *Illustrated London News* might, then, envision the yellow, blue, and red scene she describes in *Wonderful Adventures* through newspaper reports of her taste for tartan, a fabric that reflects her half-Scottish heritage: “Mrs Seacole, dressed in a plaid riding habit, and the smartest of hats, calling everybody her son” (qtd. in Robinson 153). In her biography of Seacole, Robinson imagines how Seacole sewed her tartan ensemble. “Her dress,” Robinson speculates, “must have been stitched on comparatively idle Sunday evenings in the rancid candlelight of the British Hotel, perhaps from the tartan effects of a dead Highlander acquired at auction at the British Camp. She wore it with a frothy white lace fichu and a sort of prototype bowler hat stuck with an impressive plume” (153). Just as Seacole’s use of calico carries with it a long imperial history, her interest in tartan plaid shows how her British identity isn’t simply English. Her taste for worldly materials reflects her transcontinental identity and maps her travels, real or imaginary, across the Empire. For regardless of whether the yellow, blue, and red ensemble and the plaid riding suit are one and the same, both show how Seacole displayed an audacious penchant for bright color amidst an ominous landscape—and, just for a moment, blur the lines between Scotland and Crimea. Her fashion seems to have been a way she coped with her homesickness and pain, but it also likely came as a respite for the British soldiers she nurtured. It’s clear that she was proud of her ability to maintain such a well-manicured appearance, even in moments when she had to overcome what others might have called feminine weakness. Far from affecting masculinity or gender neutrality or even cross-dressing, Seacole reveals how her sense of femininity was in fact heightened on the dirty and bloody battlefields.

By the end of the autobiography, then, Seacole’s uses of calico become part of her very person and take on increasingly melodramatic significance for her self-fashioned heroism. She

uses the things themselves as rhetorical shorthand in place of much more emotional appeals we might expect from an autobiography or alongside the apologies she issues just before she describes the battlefield. These material objects veil bodily, especially male bodily, contact: these outfits are like shells outside of her that remove her personally but also embody all of those attributes that calico signifies. Fish similarly interprets Seacole's wardrobe choices as a way to reflect her "'maternal' or feminine presence" (*Black and White Women's Travel Narratives* 80). These overly feminine ensembles allow Seacole to "minimize the threat of her politics of trespass and medical intervention" (80).

Indeed, by calling attention to her overly feminine clothes, all of which are unsuitable for the New Granadan wilderness or the Crimean battlefield, Seacole conveys her national allegiances without overstepping the bounds of feminine propriety.⁸⁸ As Mercer notes, "Seacole knows that the issue of dress is one important signpost that divides the proper lady from the bold and coarse women who ride into town sitting astride their mules and wearing flannels" (16). "Throughout her narrative," Mercer continues, Seacole "often discusses her dress and how no matter the time or place, whether in cholera-stricken Cruces or on a bloody battlefield in the Crimea, she would not be seen in public in other than a deliberately feminine outfit. Seacole wants her readers to know that, above all, she knows and respects the proprieties of dress" (16-17). Mercer is exactly right, but to this we should add that Seacole uses her stylish ensembles as material things that become indistinguishable from her person and from her character, while also exaggerating the tacit significance they've held in her global domestic spaces. The threads that constitute the fabric materialize Britain's troubled history with India and Seacole's own troubled efforts to nurse soldiers in Crimea and then in India. But these dresses also render her a territorial

⁸⁸ In fact, rather than cross-dressing (as many of her fellow women travelers do), Seacole embraces her gender as beneficial for her role in New Granada as hotelier and unofficial cultural ambassador.

marker in a foreign land. She, in fact, almost renders the fabric a personified material object, because the material itself is wrapped around her person, and it begins to take on the “heroic” qualities she displays. For if Seacole herself becomes a representative for transnational exchanges when she travels from Jamaica to New Granada and then to Crimea, then the fabrics she wears on her body may be the most important material objects she carries, because they hold both personal and political significance.

Ultimately, Seacole presents her own narrative trajectory as one of imperial subject turned domestic heroine. The first half of *Wonderful Adventures* gestures toward making Seacole’s own story fit into the narrative of a typical Victorian “heroine” (the chapter devoted to her childhood and marriage, for example). Maria McGarrity, in fact, understands Seacole’s elisions and omissions as part of how *Wonderful Adventures* “moves purposefully toward the center of the British Empire, London” (127).⁸⁹ Ultimately, Seacole’s narrative presents her as a woman who has fully embraced—and dutifully served—her adopted homeland: she’s part of that center she’s moved toward all along. “The heroic values she celebrates in the English at home and abroad are represented as coinciding with her own,” notes Paquet: “they are not represented as adopted. This is not a conversion narrative. No longer must she rely on outside forces to corroborate her Englishness” (paragraph fourteen). Indeed, by declaring herself a “Crimean *heroine*!” Seacole underscores not only her narrative control but also her ability to create a meaningful life for herself that goes beyond prescribed Victorian mores (76).⁹⁰

⁸⁹ McGarrity also notes, “Seacole’s personal history is largely elided in her text and little is known of her life outside of the paucity of specific biographical information she offers therein” (127).

⁹⁰ Several critics have discussed the textual identity of *Wonderful Adventures* in terms of generic and geographical politics. I prefer McGarrity and Paquet because they emphasize readings of homeland that are “British” and not “English.” Simon Gikandi’s compelling argument about Seacole’s crossings between metropolitan and colonial sites locates the text within the closed boundaries of England and Scotland. As Simon Gikandi contends, “writing *Wonderful Adventures* is [Seacole’s] ultimate attempt to claim her Englishness: she invites us to read her narrative—and self-portrait—as a form of self-willed entry into the social codes that define the proper Englishwoman. In addition, because writing is Seacole’s strategy for establishing affiliation with her English

Ultimately, Seacole reminds her readers that she is “only the historian of Spring Hill,” but she is even more concerned about controlling the way in which her own history is detailed and what those details look like from her specific perspective at this specific historical moment.

For most of *Wonderful Adventures*, the “Crimean” in “Crimean *heroine!*” emphasizes historical context she intimates through details such as the linen, the calico, the clothing, and the bodies these pieces of fabric come in contact with. But the “*heroine!*” in “Crimean *heroine!*” is much more complicated, in part because the book itself becomes one of the material objects Seacole fixates upon. For if we read her as a self-fashioned domestic figure in a book that crosses fictional and non-fictional conventions as often as it crosses imperial borderlines, then the two-fold meanings of “*heroine!*” are perpetually intersecting: she is both a self-made literary “*heroine!*” and a real-life “*heroine!*” for British imperialism at the outposts of various empires.

audience, her narrative tends to emphasize—even overemphasize—her British cultural and genealogical connections” (127). McMahon reads Seacole’s Englishness similarly. “Seacole presents herself as English by choice, and by her own authority,” argues McMahon, “as if her work in the Crimea were the proof rather than the cause of her essential Britishness (and as if Britishness by definition would accommodate multiple claims of identity, offering a kind of continuum on which to inscribe oneself)” (McMahon 184). No longer is she merely an exotic other or curiosity, for with *Wonderful Adventures* Seacole casts herself an indispensable part of England and mid-century. Even so, this kind of comparison overlooks Seacole’s global identity too casually in favor of contextualizing her generic identity.

CHAPTER 5

Transatlantic Crossings between Paper and Cotton in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”

In the closing pages of his chapter on Lowell, Massachusetts and its textile mills in *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842), Charles Dickens gestures toward comparing the quality of life of the New England mill “girls” he has observed and that of the Manchester mill workers, with whom he is “well acquainted” (154). In describing the comparative luxury of Lowell’s factory system, Dickens implicitly asks his readers to recognize the inhumane working conditions of the mills in Manchester. A little over a decade later, Herman Melville uses the same rhetorical strategy in his diptych “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” which was published in the April 1855 *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*.

Melville’s story fictionalizes two visits, one to a dinner party of London bachelors in Temple Bar and the other to a desolate New England mill. As did Dickens, Melville urges his readers to translate their misgivings about mill working conditions for women across the Atlantic. Melville’s Dickens-like fictionalization of transatlantic travelogues emphasizes the chiasmus of text or textile crossings. While Dickens looks to the United States as a way to critique Britain, Melville inverts the international comparison, suggesting the idle British bachelors are an oblique commentary on the American mill girls and the culture that exploits them. These two texts, of course, are not completely reciprocal, for Melville’s story is fictional. Dickens’s notoriety and the subsequent vogue for factory tours, however, point to the interest in

cotton production at this cultural moment. Just as we might question whether it's fair to compare Lowell and Manchester, Melville's short story itself, as a piece of fiction, inherently poses the problem of eyewitness believability and supposedly factual accounts.⁹¹ Throughout "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" Melville highlights the discrepancies between public praise of the mills and reality of life behind the factory walls. In subtly noting these national and generic differences, Melville at once talks about—and does not talk about—the Lowell mills. By describing cotton-rag paper production instead of textile weaving and by filtering these observations through his largely ambivalent narrator, Melville emphasizes the real material—and transatlantic—connections between consumer and factory. In doing so, he underscores the relationship between the actual poor working conditions in the New England factories and the more nebulous damage from the transatlantic literary community's idealization of the Lowell mills, and he urges his readers to come to terms with their own complicity in the global economy.

Claiming he has "carefully abstained from drawing a comparison between these factories and those of our own land," Dickens provokes his nominally British (but, ultimately, transatlantic) audience with ethical questions about the differences between the two industrial towns:

Are we quite sure that we in England have not formed our ideas of the "station" of working people, from accustoming ourselves to the contemplation of that class as they are, and not as they might be? I think that if we examine our own feelings, we shall find that the pianos, and the circulating libraries, and even the *Lowell*

⁹¹ While critics compared Manchester's mill system to Lowell's, it's worth noting their size difference. In 1841, the Manchester mills employed around 374,000 workers, or about 22.44% of the city's population. Lowell's factories, in contrast, employed only 72,119. By 1851, the discrepancy was only slightly less: 379,000 employees in Manchester and 92,000 in Lowell (Greenlees 19).

Offering, startle us by their novelty, and not by their bearing upon any abstract question of right and wrong. (161)

This distinction between “novelty” and ethical correctness is noteworthy in its implicit condemnation of his British readers, and it’s one that lurks just beneath the surface of Dickens’s entire account of his visit to Lowell. For Dickens, the amenities that the Lowell workers enjoy are not just frivolous pastimes but concrete examples of the contrasts between the mills and nations. The piano is not just a piano; rather, it’s a material good that suggests the workers are treated as real human beings and not mere cogs in the factory system.

Most of the anecdotes in Dickens’s Lowell chapter describe novelties (such as the shiny newness of the town or the “fine” names with which the girls sign their *Lowell Offering* articles), but Dickens ultimately demands that his readers take seriously the “abstract question of right or wrong” by looking back across the Atlantic toward Manchester. Writing in the conditional mood, Dickens suggests that if he were to compare the two towns, “The contrast [between Lowell and Manchester] would be a strong one, for it would be between the Good and Evil, the living light and deepest shadow” (164). The “Good” and “living light” of Lowell that Dickens catalogues in *American Notes* only further underscores the “great haunts of desperate misery” that exist throughout Britain’s textile mills, with which his British reading public would have been more than familiar (164). In putting the onerous duty of acknowledging the discrepancies between the mills on his readers—these criticisms, after all, are completely couched in conditional language—Dickens critiques the Manchester mill system indirectly, an important distinction for a writer writing for and selling to the popular marketplace. Even in this factual travelogue, the conditional mood intimates a distinction between Dickens the traveler and Dickens the author.

It's both an authorial pose and a protective measure for someone as famous as he was, with an audience that had varying connections to these institutions.

The narrator of Melville's diptych similarly embarks on his two separate transatlantic journeys for the "novelty" of the experiences. The diptych echoes a Dickensian travelogue, too, for the narrator mixes seemingly factual reporting and thoughtful reflection. The first half of the story takes place at a leisurely dinner party of bachelors in London, which "was the perfection of quiet absorption of good living, good drinking, good feeling, and good talk" (81). The bachelors embrace the "fraternal, household comfort" of the gathering, for they've created a place where one can "give the whole care-worn world the slip, and, disentangled, stand beneath the quiet cloisters of the Paradise of Bachelors" (74). The second-half of the story is set in New England as the narrator "[f]or economy's sake, and partly for the adventure of the trip, [...] resolve[s] to cross the mountains, some sixty miles, and order[s] future paper at the Devil's Dungeon paper-mill" (84). There, he observes "girls [who] did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels" (88). The two parts of the diptych are unrelated save by the narrator's presence, but his occasional commentary illustrates how he comes to understand the "inverted similitude" of the two places, for the paper-mill is "the very counterpart of the Paradise of Bachelors, but snowed upon, and frost-painted to a sepulchre" (86). While he initially considers his tour of the paper-mill a "novelty" or amusing ancillary to his visit, the narrator becomes increasingly affected by what he sees. He concludes his factory tour (and the story) with a not-quite-articulated critique of the transatlantic system that implicitly facilitates the exploitation of labor in the mills and connects the two halves of the diptych.⁹²

⁹² While it's sometimes anthologized, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" has rarely been the subject of critical discussion. The few articles or book chapters published on the story are mainly interested in allegorical or generic discussions of the diptych (see John Gretchko and Karen Weyler for representative examples). Even fewer critics have considered the relationship between the diptych and its cultural moment, particularly the

These critiques are not overt, in part because Melville published “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, the most popular American periodical and one that had just recently begun publishing American authors (Milder viii). The magazine, according to Shelia Post-Lauria, cultivated its vast readership by covering a wide array of topics without taking a partisan stance (167). “Paradise,” for example, was published alongside an installment of William Makepeace Thackeray’s *The Newcomes*, an article on the catacombs in Rome, and fashion plates for men and women. It was also one of three transatlantic diptych short stories that Melville published in *Harper’s* and *Putnam’s* between 1853 and 1855, all of which, Aaron Winter explains, “are narrative experiments angling toward a ‘cakes and ale’ populism that [are] nonetheless flexible enough to accommodate Melville’s ever-sharpening critique of American social and political values” (17). Melville’s “ever-sharpening critique” was a liability in such a widely-distributed magazine that shied away from controversy, but, as Milder aptly notes, “Melville found he could broadly have his say if he said things obliquely enough, assigned them to a genial or crotchedy narrator, or clothed them in symbolism” (ix). In carefully characterizing his narrators, Melville, like Dickens, could both

parallels among Lowell, Manchester, and the paper-mill in the story. Aaron Winter suggests that the story “certainly engages the picturesque as a mode of upper class delusion about the lives of workers” (29). Sidney Bremer similarly discusses the cultural relevance of the story: “Melville’s story demonstrates that the traditional image of the European city cannot even account for the modern European city itself—any more than the popular mythology of neighborly rural hamlets can accurately represent the economic slavery and the life-denying mechanization of an industrialized American countryside” (56). More specifically, Robert Milder acknowledges that, “[o]n the most explicit level, the Devil’s Dungeon paper-mill visited by the seedsman-narrator is a representation *in extremis* of countless New England factories scattered throughout the stream-fed landscape” (xvii). Similarly, Elizabeth Schultz reads the female workers in the second-half of the diptych as “Melville’s recognition of the oppression to which industrialization and the market economy in the antebellum period subjected women” (82). In her recent book exploring Emily Dickinson’s vexed relationship with clothing and domestic labor, Daneen Wardrop makes a more explicit connection between Melville’s story and the Lowell mills. She notes “Dickinson would have been likely to read about the drudging and inhumane working conditions in the paper mill of Herman Melville’s story, ‘The Tartarus of Maids,’ as it appeared in *Harper’s* April 1855 issue” (73). William Spanos also reads the story as a commentary on the mills. He argues, “Melville is clearly alluding to the Lowell project” in “Paradise,” but he makes this claim in passing (150).

distance himself from his potentially controversial social commentary and appease the “the great mass of the American people” who regularly read *Harper’s* (qtd. in Post-Lauria 167).

Accordingly, Melville couches the majority of his critique in the second half of the diptych and in his narrator’s seemingly detached observations of the mill workers. In a series of fleeting reflections, he compares the work the girls perform in the mills with that of the loafing London bachelors he has just visited. Post-Lauria suggests the editorial culture of *Harper’s* muted whatever social critique Melville would have included in the diptych, and the narrator remains “ambivalent toward the horrors of the social realities portrayed” (174). But to this we should add that the narrator’s muted or ambivalent reactions throughout the story are themselves a critique of the New England mills and the media ecology surrounding the transatlantic cotton industry in the mid-nineteenth century. British luminaries such as Dickens toured the United States’s first factory operations and celebrated what they observed in factual newspaper articles and travelogues. Yet Melville uses his fictional story to present a bleaker picture of life in the mill and how willful ignorance—even removed across the Atlantic—equally affects the exploitive system. Through his somewhat inarticulate narrator, Melville suggests that life in a New England mill isn’t uplifting at all (and, perhaps, is even rather similar to the “desperate misery” of the British factories).

While “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” can be read as a call to action for transatlantic labor reform, Melville eschews any overly sentimental descriptions of the exploited workers. Instead, he addresses Dickens-esque “abstract question of right or wrong” by calling attention both to the bodily suffering of the “maids” as they operate the machinery and to the narrator’s visceral reaction during his factory tour (Dickens 161).⁹³ Rather than being able to

⁹³ In contrast, Gillian Brown suggests the second half of Melville’s diptych is characterized by “the ghostly disappearance of female physicality in the production of paper” (239).

enjoy the comfortable mill town amenities Dickens describes in *American Notes*, the maids in Melville's story are stuck within the factory itself. The first "girl" he encounters (before he even enters the building) typifies the workers. "A face pale with work, and blue with cold," the girl does not speak but looks at the narrator with "an eye supernatural with unrelated misery" (Melville 87). All of the operatives he observes are similarly silent and downtrodden—almost lifeless—as they are absorbed in their labor. While the narrator usually describes the workers without editorializing commentary, his sustained attention to their weak bodies and minds and their pale complexions demonstrates that he understands "through consumptive pallors of this blank, raggy life, go these white girls to death" (91). They are "their own executioners" as the very work that (however minimally) sustains them also contributes to their puny health, a far cry from journalistic reports of cheerful, thinking mill girls proud of their manual labor and relishing their independent lives (91).⁹⁴

The narrator's observations become even more scathing when Melville's story is read alongside contemporary accounts of Lowell and its homegrown literary magazine the *Lowell Offering*, with which Melville's contemporary audience would have been familiar. A magazine written and edited entirely by Lowell's female operatives, the *Lowell Offering* was published monthly between 1840 and 1845 and, as Stephen Yafa notes, it "became an international sensation, a symbol of brave new gender equality and an ode to self-improvement" (114). Widely circulated, the *Lowell Offering* was read by middle-class people who also subscribed to periodicals such as *Harper's* and *Putnam's*. Dickens even claimed the magazine "compare[d] advantageously with a great many English Annuals" (161). Lowell mill owners capitalized on

⁹⁴ These observations, however, do recall reform-minded poetry of the 1840s such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" and Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt." Both of these poems were published in mainstream periodicals. "The Cry of the Children" appeared in the August 1843 *Blackwoods*. Likewise, "The Song of the Shirt" first appeared in *Punch* on 16 December 1843.

the *Lowell Offering*'s far-flung praise, marketing the periodical as an advertisement of sorts for the female-centered community they'd cultivated. Since it was "uncensored and independent," the *Lowell Offering*, as Benita Eisler points out, "provided a fortuitous medium for those two expressions of distinctly American genius: public relations and packaging" (36).⁹⁵ Indeed, while the magazine began as a "traveling mirror to reflect an ideal system," and it was read around the world as showcasing the very amenities that other transatlantic mill towns including Manchester clearly lacked, the periodical's idealism, in many ways, ultimately belied the desires of the mill operatives. As a literary periodical that published a mixture of fiction and non-fiction essays, the *Lowell Offering* was marketed as avoiding social critique. Instead, its editorial policy privileged pieces that were cheerfully naïve in their treatment of demanding labor, often highlighting the Puritan values at the core of the Lowell mill project. As Lowell grew, however, labor conditions became increasingly controversial. The literary label that "was supposed to seal [the *Lowell Offering*] off from the turmoil of 'issues,'" according to Eisler, slowly "became a balancing act that was doomed to fail" (36). With the rise of the Ten-Hour Movement, the increasingly political voices in the magazine began to tarnish the publication's idealized image. By 1845, the magazine ceased publication.⁹⁶

While the *Lowell Offering* was short-lived, in many ways it determined transatlantic discussions of the cotton industry (and industrialization more generally). It also provided an insider's view of the Lowell utopia for reformers around the globe. After her one-day visit to Lowell in the early 1840s, Harriet Martineau was so enamored with Lowell and its literary magazine that she convinced English publisher Charles Knight to reprint a selection of the mill

⁹⁵ For a thorough discussion of Harriot F. Curits, one of the *Lowell Offering* editors, and her literary career, see Ranta.

⁹⁶ Even after it ended, the *Lowell Offering* influenced other periodicals. Most notably, editor Harriet Farley ran *The New England Offering* from 1848 until 1850, which published selections written by women throughout New England.

workers' literary efforts in *Mind Amongst the Spindles* (1844), which, as with Dickens's *American Notes*, brought Lowell and its literary mill workers to the attention of the British reading public.⁹⁷ Highlighting only the best aspects of the American mills and contrast them with those in Manchester, Knight and Martineau took "care to choose those *Offering* artists heaviest on moral uplift," omitting any pieces that hinted at dehumanizing labor or unethical working conditions (Eisler 34-35). Martineau similarly projects her own conclusions upon the "girls" she observes at Lowell, claiming "[t]wice the wages and half the toil would not have made the girls I saw happy and healthy without that cultivation of mind which afforded them perpetual support, entertainment, and motive for activity" (Martineau xvi).⁹⁸ By celebrating what she perceives as earnestness, Martineau calls attention to how very different she believes these "girls" are from the Manchester workforce.

When she describes the audience at a lecture by Ralph Waldo Emerson, with whom she toured the mills, Martineau focuses on their engagement, noting she "saw no sign of weariness among any of [the women]," even if "[t]he girls were then working seventy hours a week" (xv). The crucial difference, for Martineau, between the transatlantic workforces is "[Lowell's] superior culture," for "their minds are kept fresh, and strong, and free by knowledge and power of thought," which is how "they are not worn and depressed under their labors" (xv).⁹⁹ Such

⁹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of Martineau's interest in the *Lowell Offering* and her relationship with Charles Knight, see Frawley.

⁹⁸ In his introduction to *Mind Amongst the Spindles*, Charles Knight similarly idealizes the workers' abilities to meditate upon weighty subjects while working twelve-hour days in the noisy, dirty mills: "During their twelve hours of daily labor, when there were easy but automatic services to perform, waiting upon a machine—with that slight degree of skill which no machine can ever attain—they may, without a neglect of their duty, have been elevating their minds in the scale of being by cheerful lookings-out upon nature, by pleasant recollections of books, by imaginary converse with just and wise who have lived before them [...] These habits have given them cheerfulness and freedom amidst their uninterrupted toils. We see no repinings against their twelve hours' labor, for it has had its solace" (xii-xiii).

⁹⁹ Knight, too, believes the Lowell workers "ought to be encouraging" because "it should teach [English mill workers] that their strength, as well as their happiness, lies in the cultivation of their minds" (xiii).

observations are politically charged; Martineau, much like Dickens in *American Notes*, concludes her letter by urging British reformers to look to Lowell as a model to replicate:

There is nothing in America which necessitates the prosperity of manufactures as of agriculture, and there is nothing of good in their factory system that may not be emulated elsewhere—equalled elsewhere, when the people employed are so educated as to have the command of themselves and of their lot in life, which is always and everywhere controlled by mind, far more than by outward circumstances. (xix)

Martineau's visit to Lowell "was merely one day," and she doesn't appear to have actually spoken with any of the "girls." But as her conclusion indicates, the "outward circumstances"—and imagined inner lives—of the girls are enough evidence for her to draw huge conclusions about their quality of life. Martineau's and Knight's effusive praise wasn't unusual. As Eisler outlines, proximity to Lowell often indicated just how enthusiastically a visitor would praise the factory town and its periodical: "Admiration was the more intense, the farther the admirer lived from Lowell" (35).¹⁰⁰ In general, Lowell seemed to be of the most interest to those who were not around to see the day-to-day operations of the mill.

While living and writing in New England, Melville, unlike Dickens or Martineau, was close to mills such as Lowell and would have been aware of their increasing turmoil and social upheaval, much of which was caused by the ever-increasing transatlantic textile trade. By the mid-1850s when Melville wrote "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," Lowell and other New England mills were producing more and more fabric. By 1860, the U.S. mills

¹⁰⁰ Eisler repeatedly emphasizes the particular fervor of Lowell's British patrons, but she also notes the vast American support for the mills: "Not that the *Offering* lacked American patronage: its admirers included William Ellery Channing, Horace Greeley, Emma Willard, Elizabeth Peabody, and John Greenleaf Whittier, a sometime resident of Lowell during this period, who occasionally attended editorial meetings and became a lifelong friend of its best-known contributor, poet Lucy Larcom" (35).

made about \$115,000,000 of cloth, three times the amount of fabric imported from Europe (Yafa 120). While the United States still imported about \$32.5 million in finished British cotton, the United States was, at the same time, supplying Britain with about 80 percent of their raw cotton, or about 800,000 tons a year (Yafa 130-32). The labor market, once almost entirely made up of single young women from New England, was also becoming increasingly transatlantic. During the 1850s, immigrants from Europe (Ireland, primarily), whose labor was far less expensive than the much-lauded New England “maids’,” began working in the mills with increasing frequency. As Eisler notes, “by the beginning of the Civil War the presence of Yankee farm girls was mere memory. Of 7,000 women operatives in 1836, less than 4 percent had been foreign-born. By 1860, 61.8 percent of Lowell’s work force were immigrants, almost half of whom were Irish. The first generation of Lowell mill girls was also the last WASP labor force in America” (29).¹⁰¹ The New England mills, then, were in the process of becoming very different environments when Dickens and Martineau toured the facilities in the 1840s.

Indeed, many writers who initially praised the industrial advancements of Lowell and its kind were by the 1850s too far away to recognize or witness these changes. The factory Melville’s narrator tours, for example, is “in a very out-of-the-way corner,” and, as Cupid the tour guide notes, they “don’t have many” visitors (Melville 95). Those who do visit believe the factory and its machinery are “a miracle of inscrutable intricacy” (95). Martineau, too, continued to romanticize Lowell’s all-female (and WASPy) workforce into the late 1850s, over a decade after her visit. In 1859, Martineau returned to the *Lowell Offering* in “Female Industry,” which was published in the mainstream and widely-circulated *Edinburgh Review*. Discussing the

¹⁰¹ Janet Greenlees’s similarly acknowledges that “[b]y 1860, the composition of the mill workforce was changing throughout America” because “increased immigration to certain areas provided manufacturers with greater labour choices” (61). Greenlees cites statistics that are similar to Eisler’s, yet she contends the workforce was still predominantly New England-born women: “In Lowell too, the 1860 Census indicates that native-born workers constituted between 42 and 58 percent of the Lowell workforce” (62).

limited range of work available to women in Britain, Martineau cites the *Lowell Offering* as a potential model. Although she would “have been well aware of the fate both of the Lowell women, under the Ten Hours’ Movement, and of the *Lowell Offering*, whose run had ended fifteen years before,” Martineau, argues Maria Frawley, “opted to perpetuate a highly sentimentalized version of Lowell, believing it to be a necessary weapon in her attempt to get her readers to acknowledge the need for a changed understanding of women’s work in Britain” (150). While in the 1840s Martineau’s choice to publicize the opportunities for women in the *Lowell Offering* may have appeared optimistic or even forward-thinking, clinging to the same idealized (and now-outdated) image of the magazine and the Lowell at the brink of the American Civil War only detracts from the seriousness of her reform efforts.

Melville’s story should, then, be understood as a corrective since it illustrates the actual working conditions in the mills, something visitors might not experience on a routine tour. His diptych emphasizes the importance of proximity and perspective by subtly critiquing the idle London bachelors who use distance and isolation as excuses for inaction or ignorance. The narrator complains, “he cannot distinctly see,” but after traveling from London to New England, he slowly understands the true crisis of the mills, confessing “the strange emotion filled [him]” as he concludes his tour (Melville 91, 96).¹⁰² The disparate reactions to Lowell—indeed, the entire discourse surrounding the mid-nineteenth-century textile industry—were often directly related to geography; likewise, Melville’s narrator highlights not only the stark differences between the London bachelors and the New England maids but also their more implicit

¹⁰² Martineau and Dickens similarly emphasize their first-hand knowledge of the mills. Martineau opens her letter at the beginning of *Mind Amongst the Spindles* by reminding her readers of her visit to Massachusetts (and their presumed lack thereof): “Your interest in this Lowell book can scarcely equal mine; for I have seen the factory girls in their Lyceum, and have gone over the cotton-mills at Waltham, and made myself familiar on the spot with factory life in New England” (xiv). Dickens defends his decision to devote an entire chapter to Lowell; he “remember[s] it as a thing by itself, and am desirous that [his] readers should do the same” (145).

connections. As the narrator comes to realize during his factory tour, the bachelors' collective choice to recuse themselves from worldly concerns only further emphasizes their implication in the problems of global culture. For Melville, the extreme of choosing isolation is just as damning as promoting idealized accounts of the world.

While Melville's narrator visits a paper mill instead of one that produces textiles, the factory system and workers he describes, in many ways, directly echo the plentiful published accounts of Lowell and Manchester at the height of their production. When the narrator asks Cupid why they refer to the female workers as "girls," for example, Cupid responds with an explanation that mimics the oft-repeated anecdotes of Lowell's workforce. The worker Cupid describes is the Lowell mill girl "type," and their schedules are alike, too:

[W]hy, I suppose, the fact of their being generally unmarried—that's the reason, I should think. But it never struck me before. For our factory here, we will not have married women; they are apt to be off-and-on too much. We want more steady workers: twelve hours to the day, day after day, though the three hundred and sixty-five days, excepting Sundays, Thanksgiving, and Fast-days. That's our rule. And so, having no married women, what females we have are rightly called girls.

(96)

While this explanation seems unremarkable to Cupid, he emphasizes the singleness of the "girls" and their long hours in the mill, which were defining characteristics of Lowell. While essays in the *Lowell Offering* often focused on the more positive aspects of the workers' lives, many articles do address their grueling schedule, albeit briefly. "A Week in the Mill" (1845), for example, highlights the regimented nature of the female operative's daily existence. Each paragraph begins with the ringing of yet another bell, and the writer concludes her essay pithily:

“Yet there is very little variety in an operative’s life [...] Few would wish to spend a whole life in a factory” (77). Countless other articles and stories mention the long, tedious days standing at the looms and marking the hours of the day with the bells announcing meals. In his description of the New England mill system, Yafa similarly characterizes the factories where “young female workers fought to maintain their mental and physical health for the better part of fourteen hours a day” and where their days were punctuated by a series of bells (93). By creating a city complete with both factories and boarding houses, the mills could regulate most every part of their workers’ daily lives.

While many pieces in the *Lowell Offering* mention the less-than fulfilling work and the inflexible schedule, the majority of articles focus on the more agreeable aspects of their workplace. “Letters from Susan” (1844), for example, recounts a new mill worker’s first impression of the factory as “very pleasant at first,” for “the rooms were so light, spacious, and clean, the girls so pretty and neatly dressed, and the machinery so brightly polished or nicely painted. The plants in the windows, or on the overseer’s bench or desk, gave a pleasant aspect to things” (51). They are not “such dreadful places as you imagine them to be” (56). Instead, as the writer emphasizes, the mills are bright and technologically advanced: “The rooms are high, very light, kept nicely whitewashed, and extremely neat; with many plants in the window seats, and white cotton curtains to the windows. The machinery is very handsomely made and painted, and is placed in regular rows” (57). The mill, then, presents “a beautiful and uniform appearance,” one that’s counter to stereotypical descriptions of polluted factories (57). Written as a fictional letter to be sent home to rural New England, Susan’s descriptions characterize the factory as cozy and domestic. While Susan may be far away from home and doing work that’s much different from her duties on the family farm, her description of the factory attempts to bridge the

cultural and generational gap between the living at home and working in a distant factory. Because the space is neat and features some homey details, Susan implicitly suggests her new position as a “Lowell girl” is not all that different. The picturesque space, however, is noticeably unpopulated. Rather than describe the women with whom she works, Susan focuses on the physical space of the factory, carefully avoiding the work they do and the other girls who operate the looms. “When the girls [are] gone,” she notes, she often watches “the lathes moving back and forth, the harnesses up and down, the white cloth winding over the rollers” and thinks the independently moving machinery “beautiful” (57). The girls’ absence is telling, for the beauty in Susan’s “long perspective” of the space only can be achieved without seeing the people who perform the demanding manual labor that’s ultimately required to produce the finished fabric.

While the initial description of the paper-mill in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” similarly highlights the brightness and size of the factory, the space is not uplifting. As the narrator enters, he observes “a spacious place, intolerably lighted by long rows of windows, focusing inward the snowy scene without” (88). Just as the Lowell factories featured spacious rooms with large windows, the workspace in the Devil’s Dungeon paper-mill supposedly provides ample natural light for the women at work. The narrator, however, immediately judges the harsh quality of the light. The windows don’t welcome the outside scenery into the mill; they cast an “intolerabl[e]” light across the space.

Surveying the vast room, the narrator thinks the windows have reflected the snow-covered landscape inside the factory. He quickly realizes, though, that the “snowy scene” is not a mirror image of the outside world but the rows upon rows of silent, working girls. Filling the long, airy room, “[a]t rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper” (88). The narrator focuses on

the “blank looking girls,” noting their presence throughout the factory and their similarity to everything else in the room. The girls, moreover, do not possess the active minds that so enchanted Lowell advocates, for the narrator repeatedly observes the eerie similarity between the operatives and the blank paper they produce.¹⁰³ In details such as these, Melville begins to distance the Devil’s Dungeon paper-mill from characteristic descriptions of Lowell. Here, even though Cupid showcases the company’s newest machines, the “blank looking girls” are the true workhorses of the factory. Susan may take pleasure in the rows of “beautiful” machines of Lowell, but Melville’s narrator cannot take his eyes off the large number of pale young women who produce the paper he’s about to order.

Indeed, as the narrator moves through the factory, he notes not only the girls’ working conditions but also the way they bleed into their environment. While Martineau’s and Dickens’s travelogues rely on their eyewitness details of the mills themselves, Melville’s narrator notices how the mills affect the girls: he emphasizes that “[b]efore [his] eyes—there, passing in slow procession along the wheeling cylinders, [he] seemed to see, glued to the pallid incipience of the pulp, the yet more pallid faces of all the pallid girls I had eyed that heavy day” (95). The “blank looking girls” assume the appearance of the paper they produce, but as he witnesses the actual labor involved in making the paper, the narrator begins to understand that the women, too, become part of the product they produce. While he rarely pauses to reflect on what he “eye[s]” in the mill, the narrator’s qualifying adjectives here—everything and everyone is “pallid” and the day is “heavy”—intimate his growing shock or sympathy throughout the tour. In contrast to the suggestion of one *Lowell Offering* writer, these “pallid” girls are not “led to the reflection, that the mind is boundless, and is destined to rise higher and still higher” through their

¹⁰³ The narrator’s descriptions of the blank-faced “girls” recall Marx’s critique of mid-nineteenth-century labor conditions.

work (“Pleasures of Factory Life” 64). Instead, they’re led toward death as the narrator even confuses the factory’s ultimate product. Asking Cupid, his tour guide, ““You make only blank paper; no printing of any sort, I suppose? All blank paper, don’t you?”” the narrator goes on to justify his seemingly silly question: ““it only [strikes] me as so strange that red waters should turn out pale chee—paper, I mean”” (89-90). His verbal slip—beginning to say “cheek”—intimates the bodily effect of the working conditions on the operatives. The workers are as plentiful and expendable as the blank paper they produce, and managers such as Cupid appear oblivious to the effects of their inhumane environment. Just as the slip between “paper” and “cheek” suggests the narrator’s superimposition of textile worker and text, their faces mark the absence of typefaces within the paper-mill. Unlike the *Lowell Offering* contributors, the Dungeon’s Dragon mill operatives are not producing any printed periodicals that include their own words (at least within the factory itself). For if Dickens, Martineau, and countless other nineteenth-century writers associated the Lowell Mill workers with their periodical as much as they did with the production of fabric, then the narrator’s slip may not be as awkward as it first seems. Indeed, the narrator’s interest in the “faces” as faces (cheeks as well as typefaces) shows how sensitive he is to the materiality of the factory. It may, in fact, be one of Melville’s famous puns.

Perhaps because they were plentiful and expendable, the Lowell workers experienced a high turn-over rate. Eisler suggests the New England girls were often thought of as both “a special class of temporary help” and an “ever-renewed supply of fresh female labor from the farms” (15, 18). Their brief tenure in the mill was often attributed to re-entering typical rural New England life, presumably as a wife and mother. Indeed, champions of Lowell remarked that many girls saved their earnings “for a dowry or for their own further education!” (Eisler 16). The

reality, however, is probably closer to Melville's bleak depiction of factory work. According to Eisler, the turnover rate was very high "as high as 40 percent in some mills," but it's difficult to determine how many girls left to get married and what percentage "was attributable to girls 'going home to die,' as reformers regularly asserted" (28). But, as Janet Greenlees explains, the physical well-being of the girls was routinely and generally dismissed. Since most female factory workers were considered temporary labor, "reformers focused on workers' morality, rather than the physical and environmental causes of ill-health" despite the well documented connections between mill conditions and the girls' well-being (Greenlees 184). Greenlees notes that by 1849, Lowell doctors Josiah Curtis and Gilman Kimball had determined that "the two main causes of operatives' ill-health were working long hours in poorly ventilated, overheated and lint-filled rooms. Working in such conditions caused or enhanced lung diseases, while formerly healthy constitutions were weakened" (180). Still more shocking, Yafa notes how "[d]octors frequently saw female workers vomiting up little balls of cotton" (96). Yet, even with such concrete medical evidence, working and living conditions in many New England mills began to "deteriorate" throughout the mid-1840s as mill owners established a pattern "of recognizing health risks, followed by little concrete action" (Greenlees 181, 179). By repeatedly describing the maids' "blankness" and "sheety" or "pallid" complexions, Melville's narrator tacitly comments on these well-documented (but often ignored) working conditions.¹⁰⁴ For him, highlighting the showy parts of the New England mills won't transform or erase their grittier realities.

It's especially notable, then, that the narrator's description of the rag room highlights these similarities between paper and textile production: both rely on and begin with cotton. This

¹⁰⁴ Yafa notes, "70 percent of early textile workers died of respiratory illnesses, as opposed to 4 percent of farmers in Massachusetts" (96).

room, too, features some of the dirtiest and most dangerous work in a mill, for cotton fluff was palpable in the air and covered the contents of the room. As a pivotal stop on the narrator's factory tour, the rag room presents him with the horrors of the mill far more graphically than the blank rows of girls downstairs:

He took me up a wet and rickety stair to a great light room, furnished with no visible thing but rude, manger-like receptacles running all round its sides; and up to these mangers, like so many mares haltered to the rack, stood rows of girls. Before each was vertically thrust up a long glittering scythe, immovably fixed at bottom to the manger-edge. The curve of the scythe, and its having no snath to it, made it look exactly like a sword. To and fro, across the sharp edge, the girls forever dragged long strips of rags washed white, picked from baskets at one side; thus ripping asunder every seam, and converting the tatters almost into lint. The air swarm with the fine, poisonous particles, which from all sides darted, subtly, as motes in sun-beams, into the lungs. (Melville 90)

Melville's detailed description of the room intimates his implicit commentary on New England's more prominent industry. Just as the rag and carding rooms were often placed on the upper-floors of textile mills, the Devil's Dungeon paper-mill features a warm, polluted rag room that's removed from the more public spaces on the lower floors of the factory. Its confined location signifies both the controlled lives of the women who make the paper and their often-idealized working conditions. Indeed, the narrator's description emphasizes the cloistered space. He compares the girls to "haltered" "mares" as they stand at their "mangers" of rags, and their work is monotonous, "forever drag[ing]" the cloth across their individual scythes. Their menial, endless work is akin to the physical labor from the fields they likely came from: the girls are

“ripping [...] every” seam and transforming the rags into pulpy lint so that the cloth is no longer recognizable. In contrast to the “blank” faces and mechanical labor downstairs at the machines, the rag room, the narrator suggests, exerts an even greater bodily and mental damage as the girls are valued only for their strength and endurance.

The “air swarm” associates Devil’s Dungeon with contemporary textile mills even more concretely.¹⁰⁵ Bessy, for example, in Elizabeth Gaskell’s contemporaneous *North and South* (1854-55) dies from inhaling too much cotton fluff, and many *Lowell Offering* essays refer to carding and rag room dangers. In the second installment of “Letters from Susan,” Susan begins describing the various jobs in the mill with the carding room, or “where the cotton flies most, and the girls get the dirtiest” (51). Susan doesn’t dwell on the carding room, but her brief account highlights the looming danger of working there: it’s full of polluted air. Accordingly, Melville’s narrator emphasizes just how prolific the “poisonous” fluff is in the mill (90). It “dart[s]” in the air from every direction and seems to head straight “into the lungs,” highlighting the direct correlation between the physical conditions of the mill and the poor health of the workers who cannot escape the “swarm.” The cotton fluff in the air even gains a consciousness of sorts; it appears to move with precision and seems menacing. The humans, however, are reduced to helpless animals as they are “immovably fixed” to their physical labor.

The seemingly metaphorical relationship between the girls’ bodies and the rag paper they produce is made real in the rag room as the girls at once use their bodies to rip apart the cotton and inhale much of the lint byproduct. Daneen Wardrop similarly understands cotton fluff as an

¹⁰⁵ Yafa’s description of the omnipresent cotton fluff in the textile mills reinforces the parallels between Melville’s imagined paper-mill and the nineteenth-century textile factories: “fine hairs of cotton lint circulated through the hot air and mingled with particles of machine oil that gave off an acrid, burnt scent and seemed to coat walls, posts, and beams on every floor with a thin sheen. To maintain a high level of humidity to reduce thread breakage, managers often nailed windows closed. [...] cotton’s welfare mattered more than the workers’. Airborne lint hairs, one mill girl noted, fell as thickly ‘as snow falls in winter.’ The sometimes piled up on workers’ clothing and hair; inhaled for more than twelve hours a day in the absence of fresh air, the lint caused frequent lung diseases that were difficult to diagnose and impossible to treat effectively” (95).

important point of connection between the imaginary paper-mill and the very real textile mills. Wardrop notes, “Melville’s story detailed the same lint-inhaling ‘kiss of death’” that was widely discussed in contemporary social reform tracts (73). “Melville’s masterpiece of social criticism,” she continues, “excoriates the working conditions for women at mills where they lived unnaturally cloistered lives, breathed lint, and lost control of the ownership of their bodies” (73). Melville’s meticulous account of the “swarm,” Wardrop notes, suggests that he “was appalled by working conditions in New England factories and, similarly to Emerson, thought of factory life as wage slavery” (73). As the “central stage” of the narrator’s factory visit, the rag room and its omnipresent cotton fluff are crucial to Melville’s social critique. If the narrator is overwhelmed by the silence and seeming “blankness” of the operatives before visiting the rag room, then after experiencing its hot, polluted environment, he begins to “see it now” and perceives the bodily realities of factory labor (91).

These details and the narrator’s developing perceptiveness further imply that Melville was appalled by the lack of reaction to these inhumane surroundings. When the narrator asks about the cotton fluff, Cupid dismisses his concern, claiming the girls don’t cough because they “are used to it” (90). Cupid also doesn’t recognize how the workers’ waif-like appearance may be related to their working environment; rather, he “suppose[s] the handling of such white bits of sheets all the time makes them so sheety,” which may linguistically associate their bodies and the product of their labor but ignores the grave significance merging human bodies with textiles (91). By rejecting—or refusing to acknowledge—the dangerous link between the cotton fluff and the ailing girls, Cupid resembles contemporary mill owners on both sides of the Atlantic who “refused to accept responsibility for poor mill conditions or workers’ poor health” (Greenlees 184). Indeed, when the narrator leaves the rag room, he pauses to reflect on what he’s witnessed

there, concluding that Cupid's apathy or "strange innocence of cruel-heartedness" is far "more tragical and more inscrutably mysterious" than the awful working conditions themselves (91). This realization is another turning point in the story, and it marks the beginning of the narrator's nascent social criticism. It's almost an afterthought, but by verbalizing his own understanding of and discomfort with the factory managers' apathy, Melville's narrator invites similar reactions from his readers. As Sidney Bremer suggests, "Once inside the factory, Melville's narrator can no longer avoid the pressing realities of an economic system that is 'served' by the laborer as by a 'slave'" (55). He's traveled a great distance to the paper-mill for the adventure of the journey and the novelty of the tour, yet the realities of the rag room make real his understanding of industrialism as a serious—and seriously flawed—business.¹⁰⁶

The actual cotton in the rag room only further connects the Devil's Dragon paper-mill with textile factories on both sides of the Atlantic and reinforces the transnational interdependence of industrial textile operations. As the cotton fluff fills the air and the girls' lungs in the process of becoming reams of blank paper, it becomes part of the girls' bodily existence and inextricably links them with the product and with the mill itself. It also connects them and the paper they make to the bachelors in London, who may benefit materially (and, perhaps, even financially) from the girls' labor. The narrator is overwhelmed at the sight of so much cotton in the rag room, and he asks from where the mill gets "such hosts of rags" (90). Cupid's response—"Some from the country round about; some from far over sea—Leghorn and London"—seems surprising to him for its geographical scope (90). After all, it's difficult to imagine the paper in this single factory comes from the nearby countryside as well as two cities across the ocean. The geographical scope of the cotton, however, reiterates the very real

¹⁰⁶ It may be useful to note that Cupid could be read as a contemporaneous caricature of more famous mill operators such as Thornton in *North and South*. Likewise, the complexities of "business" when it comes to women's work shape both novel and Melville's diptych.

relationship Melville outlines throughout the diptych, for the fabric not only unites the two halves of the story but also associates the Devil's Dungeon paper-mill with the transatlantic textile trade. In these terms, then, Cupid's response mimics the industry it represents, and thus it is a crucial narrative intersection of the diptych.

Cupid, perhaps, doesn't recognize that the rags, which are "from the country round about" and "from far over sea," become a material link for the narrator, who likewise is beginning to realize connections between London and New England. In fact, the narrator specifically associates the rags that make the girls so "sheety" with the men he's met in London: "'Tis not unlikely, then,' murmured I, 'that among these heaps of rags there may be some shirts, gathered from the dormitories of these Paradise of Bachelors'" (90). Instead of merely gesturing toward some metaphorical relationship between the bachelors and the maids, the narrator fancies that the cotton shirts and the cotton rag paper sheets of paper they will become are the concrete products of the complex affiliation. It's all the more shocking that both parties are unaware of the others' existence without the narrator's hope for such a coincidence (Cupid doesn't seem to realize that his answer has any specific significance to the narrator). As Winter aptly argues, these subtle yet material connections illustrate Melville's argument that "there is no life without strings attached; one chooses willful negligence and complicity with exploitation or one does not" (31). By acknowledging this global network and realizing it through the cotton shirts that have traveled across the Atlantic, Melville's narrator, as Winter claims, is no longer "merely a means of uncovering ironic analogies between the two halves of the diptych" (31). Indeed, the narrative whole depends on this unifying strand.

In turn, Melville—and his reading public—are "all supporting the cycle of production and consumption that consumes its own primary producers" (55). Just as the United States

shipped raw cotton to Britain throughout the mid-nineteenth century, and Britain, in turn, exported tons of finished cotton for the United States' consumption, the bachelors' used shirts and the maids' labor reinforce the thoroughly-integrated complicity within a system of exploitation. The bachelors choose to be unaware of the maids and the mills across the Atlantic, but they still contribute to the inhumane conditions inside the rag room through their continual consumption and through their discarded clothing.

Through this circulation, the shirts become tangible connections between the two halves of the diptych—and materialize the narrator's unwitting but crucial penchant for stringing disparate scenes together through a single, double-processed global product. Indeed, the shirts are the only material objects to cross the Atlantic to witness not only London leisure but also New England toil. If the cotton shirts exemplify such a crucial point of intersection between Britain and the United States and between the bachelors and the maids, and if the factory the narrator tours so closely resembles the mid-nineteenth-century textile mill, why, then, does Melville specifically describe the production of cotton-rag paper?

Melville certainly emphasizes the material product of the Devil's Dungeon paper-mill. The narrator, after all, makes his visit to purchase paper for the "several hundreds of thousands" of seed packets that his own company sells, a detail that recalls the hyper-lush descriptions in the *Lowell Offering* (84). The packets at once suggest a neat narrative possibility (if the seeds are cotton seeds, then the diptych has come full circle) and emphasize the narrator's naïve assumption that this place is a generative one. He may travel to the remote factory for adventure, but the decision is also one of economy. The price of paper, the narrator admits, "amount[s] to a most important item in the general account" of his company (84). Before he sees the mill, then,

the narrator admits his preference for inexpensive goods, even, perhaps, if the purchase comes at the expense of quality or morality, or human perspective.

Watching the girls produce an enormous amount of paper only further emphasizes the product of the mill. As he tours it, the narrator seems overwhelmed by the sight of the sheer volume of paper, and he imagines its myriad future uses just as he imagines its textile-based past:

Looking at that blank paper continually dropping, dropping, dropping, my mind ran on in wonderings of those strange uses to which those thousand sheets eventually would be put. All sorts of writings would be writ on those now vacant things—sermons, lawyers' briefs, physicans' prescriptions, love-letters, marriage certificates, bills of divorce, registers of births, death-warrants, and so on, without end. (94)

The narrator imagines the cotton rag paper as a prospective transatlantic connection because he understands the shirts in the rag room are, perhaps, from the bachelors with whom he dined in London. These two material goods epitomize the very real economic relationship between the bachelors and the maids and between London and New England.

Moreover, by this point in the story, the narrator has twice acknowledged that the consumption and willful ignorance of the cloistered bachelors contributes to the impoverished and unfulfilled lives of the women who make the real stuff of the bachelors' daily lives—cotton and paper, among other things. The amount (and the actual material presence) of these two items emphasizes both their importance and their prevalence. While the thousands of sheets of blank paper keep “dropping, dropping, dropping,” from the machines, the narrator understands their connections to the “hosts of rags” he saw just minutes before. Just as cotton fluff swirls around in the air of the rag room and forms the paper pulp, the reams of blank paper fall endlessly around

the feet of the factory operatives. Because both the cotton and the paper are omnipresent in their blankness, they almost go unnoticed.

If the narrator witnesses the exhaustive labor of making the paper for the seed packets, his knowledge that this material will enfold the literal seeds of production and growth—agricultural and economic. While many critics read these seed packets as a sexual metaphor, especially in contrast to the celibate bachelors and maids (and Cupid), it's also important to understand them as seeds themselves that place the narrator within another transatlantic economy.¹⁰⁷ We don't know what kind of seed he sells, but this generative business is clearly worth whatever human waste he witnesses in the mill. As lawyers in Temple Bar, the London bachelors would have a great need for "those thousand sheets" of blank paper that continually drop from the female-operated machines. The volume of paper, too, must recall the ever-increasing textile production in Lowell (and across New England). According to Yafa, by 1834, "[w]orkers [...] turned out an astonishing quantity of cheap cotton cloth—27,000,000 yards, or 15,698 miles, of it annually," and that amount only increased as the century progressed (112). It may be, too, that Melville is teasing out another industry that's on the brink of change, for it was during this decade that cotton-rag paper was beginning to be displaced by cheaper, and easier to produce, wood-pulp paper.¹⁰⁸ Much like the WASP-run New England textile mills, cotton-rag

¹⁰⁷ Winter discusses the narrator's seed business and seed packets in more detail, and he also connects them, albeit briefly, to the publishing industry: "Like the seedsman's envelopes, Melville's text is a manufactured paper object and therefore part of the vicious economy that it describes. As Thomas reminds us, 'the very pages we are holding might have been produced by an exploitive system' (182). Nothing in the fictional world inside the text or in the fiction-reading world outside of it escapes the range of its satire, which makes the diptych's reader as much a satiric target as its narrator. By purchasing the fictional contents of Melville's paper envelopes, the reader becomes an unwitting participant in the economic exploitation of the factory maids. [...] We may scoff at the narrator's puerile endorsement of the bachelor lifestyle in the first half of the diptych. In the second half, the joke is on us" (Winter 33).

¹⁰⁸ Talia Schaffer's *Novel Craft* includes a more comprehensive discussion of the transition from cotton-rag to wood-pulp paper. As Schaffer notes, cotton-rag paper was often associated with women's handiwork: "Because paper came from cloth, it was sturdy—but there was a limited supply. Paper had been made from rags, recycled from old clothes, which meant constant crises as the supply of rags failed to suffice for paper-making needs. [...] Because paper came from cloth, too, it was intimately related to the material that women spent many of their waking

paper was becoming obsolete, an object of nostalgia. The narrator's ambivalence is, then, redoubled since the thing he sees is unclear. While we (and the narrator) see the product being made, its destination and ultimate use can only be speculation.

The shift from fabric production to papermaking also underscores how Melville uses his graphic descriptions of the mill and its workers to distance his diptych from other texts that merely document the "novelty" of the mill-town experience, to return to Dickens's term. The narrator's "adventure" of visiting the mill becomes a subtle commentary on the vast, transatlantic literary interest in Lowell as a sort of "New Jerusalem," modeling utopian industrial production and virtuous living (Eisler 15). While the Devil's Dungeon paper-mill produces countless sheets of blank paper—pages that will, most likely, eventually hold a written message of some sort—the New England textile mills were already the subjects of numerous literary and journalistic accounts by the mid-1850s. These published pieces were widely read and were even circulated transatlantically. The *Lowell Offering*, of course, was popular on both sides of the Atlantic, especially after Martineau's and Dickens's vocal support in the mid-1840s. Martineau's and Knight's *Mind Amongst the Spindles* collection was first published in Britain and then in the United States one year later, so the British anthology of the Lowell girls' writing also reached readers in both nations. Moreover, Martineau's introductory letter was reprinted in the June 1843 *Lowell Offering*, again publicizing Martineau's beliefs transatlantically.

Dickens's *American Notes*, too, was originally published in Britain, but it was immediately notorious in the United States as copies were both shipped across the Atlantic and, soon thereafter, pirated by an American publisher. *Lowell Offering* editor Harriet Farley's review of the book in the January 1843 issue calls attention to Dickens' transatlantic view of the textile

hours manipulating. Early paper crafts often treat paper as if it were cloth, folding and pleating it, even sewing and embroidering it" (17).

industry. While she applauds him for seeing “so much to please him in [the] ‘City of Spindles,’” she also coyly comments on his transatlantic distinctions: “[I] regret for their sakes that so broad a line of distinction must be drawn us and our sister operatives, across the Atlantic. Heaven speed the day when sentiments, more worthy of enlightened Britain, shall prevail among her rulers, and justice and generosity shall guide their counsels” (96). As a story published in *Harper’s*, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” addressed a similarly global audience, not only in content but also in its physical publication in a periodical that was widely read and circulated on both sides of the ocean.¹⁰⁹ As this body of texts moved transatlantically, even commenting on one another, the writers engaged in a quiet generic crossing in which fiction and nonfiction critiques became almost indistinguishable.

These are just four of the most famous examples of the paper and ink devoted to the New England mills, for scores of articles and stories attempted to capture the utopian vision of Lowell. And yet in many ways, these accounts were as inscrutable as the blank pages produced at Devil’s Dungeon and the “blank looking girls” who made them. If these articles only focus on the very best aspects of the mills, then the Devil’s Dungeon paper-mill, for Melville, underscores how their endless production (like the paper-mill itself) is harmful for the workers. Gillian Brown similarly points to this literary ecology in her brief discussion of the story. She suggests that “the mechanical workings of the publishing industry are exposed as violations of nature,” because “the health and beauty of the female paper-mill workers are subsumed into the paper

¹⁰⁹ Post-Lauria similarly addresses the way political affiliations of journals may illuminate Melville’s fictional stance on the transatlantic cotton industry: “His tales can be seen as attempting to reach out and instruct the reader on the limitations of the sentimental approach to treating social attitudes regarding the most appropriate style for thematizing social issues. Thus, subversive strategies of the author can be seen as instructional, not hostile, acts. This interest *in* the reader, rather than *beyond* the reader, as commonly implied in criticism that labels Melville’s achievements in *Harper’s* as subversive, locates and explains both the author’s deference to and his creative use of essentially conservative magazine conventions” (Post-Lauria 175).

they produce” (240). “Industry,” she concludes, “does not merely alienate the worker’s labor but incorporates the worker” (240).

In turn, we should also read the shift from textile to paper as a critique of the Lowell advocates’ belief in the intellectual fulfillment of the mill workers. While the ideal Lowell girl would have strived to cultivate an active mind, Melville repeatedly connects the blankness of the paper with the operatives’ interest (or lack thereof). The narrator even considers the maids’ interiority as he observes the endless pages of blank paper: “Then recurring back to them as they here lay all blank, I could not but bethink me of that celebrated comparison of John Locke, who, in demonstration of his theory that man had no innate ideas, compared the human minds at birth to a sheet of blank paper; something destined to be scribbled on, but what sort of characters no soul might tell” (94).¹¹⁰ In his final moments in the mill, the narrator again obfuscates his own thoughts, this time not by claiming blankness but by quoting John Locke, a figure who embodies the very ideas of social contract and responsibility at issue throughout the story. Locke, too, would have been the type of figure the ideal Lowell workers would have studied in the popular “mutual improvement societies” that both Dickens and Martineau note in their essays. It’s clear, though, that Devil’s Dungeon doesn’t support this ideal intellectual atmosphere. As the narrator has imagined (even if he hasn’t fully articulated it), the factory operatives’ minds remain as empty as blank sheet of paper, simply because they cannot think about anything other than the mind-numbing repetition of their work. Therefore, the narrator’s citation reads more like lip service than sincere application of his education to the experience itself.

¹¹⁰ The recurring blankness in the Devil’s Dungeon paper mill also, of course, recalls Melville’s more famous exploration of whiteness and absences: *Moby Dick* (1850). While Ishmael is haunted by Ahab’s monomaniacal (and elusive) hunt for the white whale, the narrator of “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” cannot fully articulate the shock he feels in the wake of his factory tour.

Just as the narrator's reference to Locke's text signifies the unspoken debates over the way industrialism treats the "girls" in the mills, Melville's diptych as a whole stands in for the much more explicit rallying cry we might expect to be published in other contemporary journals. For if *Harper's* resisted such potentially radical interventions, then they needed to be veiled and couched within a fictional pretense. This exaggerated narrative obliqueness accounts for the narrator's silent yet visceral reaction to what he sees inside the mill. By the end of the diptych, in fact, Melville's narrator applies the language of blankness to himself, which is telling because he's come to realize that the blankness he's critiqued in the girls is a painful physical reality for himself as much as it is an apt metaphor.

As he ends his tour, the narrator feels flushed, yet Cupid says his cheeks "look whitish" (96). The narrator begins to assume, then, if only momentarily, the appearance of both the operatives and the paper he's come to purchase. Cupid's comment, too, makes the narrator doubt the objective facts of his own body and his control over it, recalling the mill workers' own helplessness. Nevertheless, he feels sure that upon leaving Devil's Dungeon, he "shall feel them mending," another historical resonance, for female operatives were almost always sent away from the mills to convalesce (or, more likely, to die) (96). It's unclear whether he actually wants to believe that his own body is so affected by the condition of the mill and what he's witnessed. Still, the narrator's insistence that he will be better when he leaves shows how he does in fact realize that the mill affects his body, and even shapes the language he uses to describe it. By "mending" his cheeks, the narrator turns again, if coyly, to language that has potential double meanings within this space: for the girls who handle the cotton rags, "mending" would mean repairing tattered cloth, quite the opposite of what happens to the fabric in the rag room at the

paper-mill. The narrator sees his cheeks as part of a textile-like body, which has also crossed the Atlantic over the course of the story.

For despite the narrator's visceral reaction to what he sees in the factory and his need to "mend" his body, he still places an order for paper and leaves the mill without overtly damning the unethical practices he's seen there. As he drives away "wrapped in furs and mediations," his mind is as impenetrable to us as the girls' minds are to him (96). The narrator's mute complicity is tantamount to the ignorance of the bachelors; he's witnessed the horrors of the mill and still participates in the economy that makes such corruption necessary. In his discussion of the end of the diptych, Winter argues, "Melville offers a narrator who posits himself in the role of a voyeur, discovers social guilt in his complicity with the exploited condition of the working class, yet in the end does absolutely nothing" (30). Winter is exactly right, and, in fact, it's not just that the narrator refuses to act: he also refuses to say anything. This reticence to put words to thoughts makes him uncomfortable, and that's exactly what Melville's diptych is doing within transatlantic textual circulations about the textile industry.

The final ambivalence, then, belongs to the reader, who like the narrator must decide whether to act beyond the page and whether blankness is either morally or economically satisfying. This, of course, is where the real margins between fiction and nonfiction exist, since Melville's imagined readers are thinking, acting subjects who cannot avoid participating in the global economy. Holding the *Harper's* diptych in their hands, Melville's readers might have wondered whether the paper was made in a paper factory like the one in the story, just as the narrator wonders whether the cotton shirts were once worn by the bachelors he meets in London. This final, and most wide-ranging form of complicity, would have dulled, of course, once the diptych wasn't just circulating in periodicals and once the paper on which it was printed was

made from wood-pulp and not cotton-rag. For these reasons, the narrator's subtle critique the bachelors, the factory owners who controlled the maids, and the nineteenth-century periodical readers has become more and more obscured. Indeed, the narrator's final most inscrutable line—"Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! and oh! Tartarus of Maids!"—is also Melville's final and most damning critique of the publishing frenzy surrounding the textile mills (96). It's not just that our being aware of the problem can't easily absolve us of guilt; rather, it often makes us, like the narrator, uncomfortably complicit.

CHAPTER 6

Fancy-work, Expectation, and the Un-Marriage Plot in *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Washington Square*

Melville's narrator in "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" witnesses pallid "maids" in a New England paper-mill making reams of blank paper from discarded cotton shirts and concludes that men and women on both sides of the Atlantic are unwittingly complicit in the global textile trade. Henry James and Margaret Oliphant use metaphors to explore the limitations placed on an affluent woman's participation in the cosmopolitan world, often focusing on conversations about relationships that quietly allude to Melvillian transatlantic connections. Melville's narrator does not speak with the women of the Devil's Dungeon paper-mill, but he witnesses how their lives are consumed by their work: they assume the appearance of the paper they make and are physically weak. While not economically enjoined to work, the upper-middle-class women of Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) and James's *Washington Square* (1880) take up similarly mindless needlework, yet they "work" within their homes as a source of so-called leisure. Unlike the mill operatives (and unlike the many distressed needlewomen who populate mid-nineteenth-century fiction), James's and Oliphant's heroines don't earn money for the work they do, and their work will never circulate in the transatlantic economy that Melville describes and toward which James and Oliphant gesture. In fact, their fancy-work tacitly marks them as "ladies" who are removed from the public sphere and commercial ventures where their labor or the products of their labor would be sold. The

needlework they produce, however, similarly informs these women's existences, filling their many empty hours, and pointing to the limitations placed on a mid-nineteenth-century genteel woman's life. The work done by James's and Oliphant's heroines becomes narrative short-hand that increases in frequency as the narratives unfold; calling our attention to and then belittling embroidery, James's and Oliphant's narrators intensify the women's sense of isolation.

Moreover, by implying the women's narrow focus on this work, the narrators cruelly suggest their diminished prospects and limited possibilities for leading a fulfilling life in the world outside the home.

Expected to marry and spend her days managing a household filled with servants, children, and a husband, the upper-middle-class Victorian woman lived a daily existence that was at once leisurely—working outside of the home was anathema—and highly prescriptive. Indeed, handbooks such as *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861) describe in minute detail the proper way to maintain a household and manage one's servants. Yet if a woman remained unmarried, finding opportunities for meaningful work were limited at best. Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* and James's *Washington Square* both meditate on this problem. The novels trace the coming of age and subsequent lives of Lucilla Marjoribanks and Catherine Sloper, respectively. Unlike most mid-nineteenth century novelists, Oliphant and James extend their narratives of courtship and romance beyond their logical conclusions, dwelling on what happens to the two women well after when they are expected to marry—and don't. By continuing the story past its typical conclusion, Oliphant and James both highlight the constraints placed on upper-middle-class women who have few real options beyond wedlock. These limitations are heightened even further by the attention both narrators pay to how the women choose to spend their time: fancy-work. Appearing only in the last sections of each novel, and

only after Lucilla and Catherine approach (and pass) thirty, the narrative attention to women's needlework parallels other moments when Oliphant and James either represent each woman's inner turmoil through free indirect discourse or call attention to the inaccessibility of their thoughts. Together, they suggest that as Lucilla and Catherine grapple with shaping meaningful lives, their sudden interest in fancy-work signifies the emptiness they feel and the few choices they really have. Neither woman appears interested in the embroidery she does—indeed, the narrators only mention it in passing, never describing the projects—but as she comes to terms with a quiet, single life, each woman picks up her work with increasing frequency.

Q.D. Leavis asserts that Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* "is an earlier *Washington Square* written by a woman, whose heroine vindicates herself," but discussing Oliphant and James concurrently may seem unusual or even heretical, since it's clear they thought they were writing very different kinds of fiction (Leavis 140).¹¹¹ Between writing countless articles for *Blackwood's Magazine* and publishing ninety-two novels, Oliphant has been cast as a prolific novelist who valued quantity over quality. Indeed, until Leavis published her introduction to *Miss Marjoribanks* in 1969, Oliphant was most famous for her posthumous *Autobiography* (1897) because virtually all of her novels were out of print (and largely forgotten).¹¹² In his brief obituary of Oliphant, Henry James comments on the "inordinate scale" of Oliphant's publishing:

¹¹¹ Each novel is more often paired with other texts discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. Leavis persuasively argues that *Miss Marjoribanks* is the "missing link" between Austen's *Emma* and Eliot's *Middlemarch*: "Her Lucilla has long seemed to me a triumphant intermediary between their Emma and Dorothea, and, incidentally, more entertaining, more impressive and more likeable than either" (135). In turn, scholars such as Robert Emmett Long, Lauren Berlant, and Ian Bell all read James's *Washington Square* as a rewriting of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, especially as James wrote the novel immediately after finishing his *Hawthorne* biography.

¹¹² The reception history of *Miss Marjoribanks* mirrors the academy's tepid relationship with Oliphant and scholars' tendency to conflate biography and critical assessments of her fiction. In particular, critics have been interested in Oliphant's politics. Merryn Williams, Elizabeth Langland, and Joseph O'Mealy, for example, all read the novel as "rescuing" Oliphant from being cast as antifeminist. Robert and Vineta Colby, however, argue that the irony with which the narrator treats Lucilla makes the novel antifeminist. Others are interested in the parallels between the novel and the mid-nineteenth-century interest in "queenliness," especially since both Oliphant and Queen Victoria were young widows at the time, and Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* was published the same year as *Miss Marjoribanks* (see Margaret Homan and Melissa Schaub for the most representative examples).

“I should almost suppose in fact that no woman had ever, for half a century, had her personal ‘say’ so publicly and irresponsibly” (James, “London Notes” 1411). James, in contrast, has come to symbolize the measured cerebralness of nineteenth-century fiction, a far cry from Oliphant’s supposed place as the “queen” of popular fiction.¹¹³ It’s significant, then, that aside from their professional differences, both authors ultimately relied on many similar plots, tropes, and metaphors, suggesting that the thirty-year-old single needlewoman was a cultural touchstone who was relevant in both popular and highbrow fiction.

Leavis’s linking of *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Washington Square* is apt, for despite their authors’ differences in reputation, these two novels have much in common. On the surface, each novel traces the development of a doctor’s daughter who grows up without a mother, becomes educated, and then struggles to find a husband. But alongside this seemingly rote plot, both novels also underscore how Lucilla and Catherine don’t quite fit the mold of a Victorian heroine. Leavis, in fact, calls Lucilla Marjoribanks “a Victorian anti-heroine” (316). As the narrator notes early in the novel, Lucilla is physically larger than her peers: “Miss Marjoribanks was not vain; but the word had taken possession of her imagination, as was natural, and solaced her much when she made the painful discovery that her gloves here a half number larger, and her shoes a hairbreadth broader, than those of any of her companions” (Oliphant 26). Accordingly, Lucilla begins to understand the world around her—and how she’s set apart from it—through her body and the clothes she wears, which don’t mirror those of her peers. Catherine Sloper, too, doesn’t conform to the physical description of an eligible young woman. James’s narrator politely describes her dominant physical presence: “She was a healthy, well-grown child, without a trace of her mother’s beauty. She was not ugly; she had simply a plain, dull, gentle countenance. The

¹¹³ Oliphant was well aware of these evaluative distinctions. According to her biographers Vineta and Robert Colby, Oliphant “was alternately impressed, overwhelmed, perplexed, and annoyed by ‘the champion and exponent of the New World,’ Henry James” (190)

most that had ever been said for her was that she had a ‘nice’ face; and, though she was an heiress, no one had ever thought of regarding her as a belle” (James, *Washington Square* 12). Catherine’s character was one of the few parts of the novel that ultimately pleased James, who was disappointed in the overall effect of *Washington Square*. In a letter to his brother William, James claims, “The only good thing in the story is the girl” (James, *Letters* 316). As with Lucilla, Catherine’s appearance—her surface—sets her apart. Even before we receive a glimpse of either woman’s interior life, we understand their distinctiveness through their physical presence.

Lucilla is almost uniformly read as a strong character whose limited choices define the novel. Linda Peterson argues that Oliphant “takes up the question of the female *bildungsroman*—and the implications of its conventions”—throughout *Miss Marjoribanks* (68). Beginning in the first chapter, Oliphant makes it clear that her heroine will “fulfill the socially acceptable patterns of feminine development, which she has learned from ladies’ guidebooks and novels” (Peterson 68). Andrea Kaston Tange similarly traces Oliphant’s attention to Victorian propriety, but she reads the novel as more nuanced, illustrating the difficulties in maintaining such a carefully constructed persona: “Without fully discounting the Victorian notion that there is a proper place a woman ought to occupy, *Miss Marjoribanks* raises complex questions about how that place is defined and limited” (163).¹¹⁴ By behaving as she should, “Lucilla highlights what a struggle it is for a woman to satisfy her intelligence and energy while living within the properties of middle-class femininity” (Tange 164). Critics such as Melissa Schaub, D.J. Trela, and Leavis concur with Tange, exploring how Oliphant highlights the limitations of Victorian

¹¹⁴ Tange suggests the many ways in which Lucilla assumes the role of the ideal middle-class young woman. She claims, “Lucilla’s modesty, good taste, high moral code, skillful household management, and clear understanding of the finer points of social interaction demonstrate that she knows what is expected of the daughter of one of the most prominent men in town” (164).

propriety.¹¹⁵ They suggest, as Margarete Rubik claims, “the heroines’ choice signifies their dilemma,” for “in a restrictive social structure few creditable possibilities for making a living are available to them other than marrying men they do not care for. The time-honored belief that marriage is the true fulfillment of a woman’s life is questioned here, although, on the surface, the requirements for a traditional happy ending are conscientiously fulfilled” (58).

The reception history for *Washington Square*, in contrast, often focuses on Catherine’s quiet rebellion and how it reflects the novel’s measured rhetoric and frequent silence.¹¹⁶ Millicent Bell argues, “*Washington Square* is all about language, and one could say that the principal players in its verbal drama are such *words* as ‘clever,’ ‘natural,’ or ‘sincere,’ which change their roles in the contest of rhetoric conducted by the characters” (70). Melissa Valiska Gregory, too, emphasizes rhetorical restraint, particularly Catherine’s: “Catherine learns that restraining language—the ultimate refinement—is far more powerful than using it as an offensive weapon [...] Catherine becomes more powerful than her father, if only within the extremely limited confines of Washington Square” (152). Lauren Berlant also understands the novel through its attention to what Catherine does, and does not, say. Focusing on Catherine’s extended—and pointed—silence throughout the novel, Berlant reads these mute responses as acts of power and style. Berlant claims, “the exemplary struggle of subjectivities that take place in the domestic theater of the Sloper household marks *Washington Square* as a case study of female colonization by patriarchal culture: it painstakingly represents both the public and private conditions of cultural negation within which even the most privileged female subject knew

¹¹⁵ Schaub argues that the narrator’s irony illustrates how Oliphant is “anti-idealist” and “critical of domestic ideology” (196). Trella claims Oliphant “often very sensitively suggests the physical and psychological toll they endured and equally often shows women operating in an empowered and emboldened domestic space, and, less often, as empowered in a man’s world” (15). Leavis, more subtly, suggests that *Miss Marjoribanks* illustrates “the waste Victorian society caused by assuming that a lady was incapable of outside domestic duties” (152).

¹¹⁶ *Washington Square* has been critically neglected. In recent years, critics have been more interested in the 1997 film adaptation directed by Agnieszka Holland than in the novel itself.

herself and the world in pre-Civil War America” (440). Cynthia Ozick similarly suggests *Washington Square* should be read as “a novel of absences,” for even the novel’s interest in marriage points to its nonexistence (xiii-xiv). *Washington Square*, she concludes, “is a novel about the abuse of imagination, the abuse of trust, the abuse of propriety and form; about, above all else, the absence of pity” (xv).

The critical discourse surrounding both novels underscores the relationship between the each woman’s character and how she subtly negotiates power within her limited world. As Leavis argues, “[t]hough for some time it seems that it is Lucilla who is to be the subject for ironic examination, it is in fact the nature of the society she operates in that becomes the main object of irony” (141).¹¹⁷ Leavis is exactly right, but I argue that we can apply what she says about *Miss Marjoribanks* to *Washington Square* as well.¹¹⁸ James’s narrator’s similarly outlines each character’s contradictory perceptions, which allows us to understand Catherine’s silence as a conscious choice. Both novels, then, make a point of distinguishing between the consciousness of the woman at the center of each novel and the surrounding world that has produced her, a world embodied by their respective narrators. To be sure, their temperaments differ; Lucilla, after all, orchestrates her “reign” over Carlingford, whereas Catherine does not speak for the first

¹¹⁷ Discussions of irony and tone punctuate *Miss Marjoribanks*’s reception history; most criticism hinges on whether one reads the narrator as sympathetic to Lucilla. The Colbys suggest that the narrative irony makes the novel antifeminist, and “[f]or the most part the satire is bitter and the feeling cold” (64). Merryn Williams, however, reads the tone as more positive: Many of the situations it describes are disturbing and painful, and although there is a believable happy ending the author is obviously well aware of the darker aspects of life” (*Oliphant* 81). Melissa Schaub claims the novel’s tone makes it “anti-idealist”: She attacks idealism using irony of two types: an irony of tone manifested partly in mock-heroic imagery in her descriptions of the novel’s heroine, Lucilla Marjoribanks, and a structural irony created by the gap between Lucilla’s use of narrative emplotment and the narrator’s own, more complicated deployment of it” (196).

¹¹⁸ Critics such as Bell have similarly addressed how the irony in *Washington Square* shapes our understanding of Catherine’s place in the world. She argues, “The irony of the plot, which is outside [Dr. Sloper’s] own ironic perspective (and refutes it), is that his daughter *will* surprise him by writing her own history—and he will not enjoy it” (68). She also claims the narrator is the “fifth character” in the novel “who is of importance in this testing of style”; he resembles “some of James’s more developed narrating consciousnesses” because he seems to have a degree of experience in Catherine’s story (71). In particular, “when he speaks of Catherine, [his voice] becomes more and more sober, plain, unmocking” (73).

twenty-five pages of *Washington Square*. And yet the narrators of both novels meditate on the quiet ways in which Lucilla and Catherine reconcile their desires with what is expected of them; as both novels unfold, the two women themselves become increasingly reflective.

One of the most telling resonances between the narratives is how each woman imagines her single life. For Oliphant's narrator, Lucilla's life is an empty container with few options for her to fill it: "Lucilla did not see how the blank was to be filled up as she looked into the future; for, as has been said, parish work was not much in her way, and for a woman who feels that she is a Power, there are so few other outlets. She was a little disheartened as she thought it all over" (Oliphant 395). Without her prescribed narrative trajectory—marriage and children by the end of her story—twenty-nine year-old Lucilla comes to terms with future beyond something akin to a blank page. More immediately, Lucilla realizes she has few real ways to "fill up" that absence or empty surface: she acknowledges the "few other outlets" beyond church philanthropy, which the narrator repeatedly notes she detests (395). While Catherine chooses to engage in charitable visits and "regulated her days upon a system of her own [...] and went generally, with an even and noiseless step, about the rigid business of her life," the narrator is careful to note her dissatisfaction with these activities: "There was something dead in her life, and her duty was to try and fill the void" (James, *Washington Square* 226-27). The similarities in language underscore the women's plights, for the bleakness of the "blank" and "void" the two narrators describe suggests the very real, existential crisis each woman faces as she strives to lead a meaningful life: it's not just a desire but a "duty." The language, too, recalls the "blank" faces of the workers Melville's narrator observes in the Devil's Dungeon paper-mill, and his projection that the women's minds are also, in the spirit of Locke, blank sheets of paper. Lucilla and

Catherine long to fill their hours with something they like to do, but as both narrators note, this seemingly simple desire is at the heart of both women's poignant dissatisfaction with their lives.

Oliphant's and James's language, too, invites us to consider the very real differences between superficial occupation and meaningful work; this is a distinction that Catherine and Lucilla are denied. In the remainder of this chapter I will argue that Oliphant's and James's narrators return again and again to Lucilla's and Catherine's fancy-work as a way to express the emptiness of their lives and how they are informed by their prolonged singlehood. To be sure, needlework plays but a small role in each novel, and it's mainly mentioned in passing, as a supporting role in pivotal scenes or narrative asides. Still, it is important that fancy-work is mentioned in passing, because the narrators' delayed and temporary interest in it emphasizes the trivial nature of the work, which is often associated with the "blank" or "void" Lucilla and Catherine recognize in their respective lives. When Lucilla's and Catherine's narrators take an interest in this most lady-like of pastimes at the very point of their heroine's seeming obsolescence and confirmed spinsterhood (in the final chapters of each novel), they reinforce the women's lack of fulfillment through their idle attachment to worsted-work and embroidery. Unlike the mid-nineteenth-century interest in sewing or making other crafts for philanthropic bazaars or other charity work, Lucilla's and Catherine's fancy-work never leaves the drawing room.¹¹⁹ In fact, we never see them complete a project; their "work" is, then, forever in progress without an end in sight. Just as the two women search for something meaningful to consume their days and minds, the narrators' references to the women's needlework can be read as not only filling in the narrative gaps between what should happen in the women's lives and what really does but also calling attention to the superficiality of the choices each woman can (and

¹¹⁹ See Judith Flanders's *Inside the Victorian Home* and Schaffer's *Novel Craft* for discussions of women's sewing (as well as other handicrafts) and the philanthropy work of Victorian bazaars.

does) make. As Amanda Vickery reminds us, “[t]he innocuous appeal of craftwork as a remedy for boredom should not be underestimated. [. . .] The soul-destroying tedium of life at home was taken for granted” (243-44). Indeed, when Catherine and Lucilla sit by the fireside and embellish yet another canvas, they embody the wasted lives of countless genteel women.

While embroidery or needlework was a ubiquitous pastime in mid-Victorian drawing rooms, the narrators of *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Washington Square* mention their heroines’ work—pointedly. Throughout both novels, though, the narrators contrast the women’s atypical characters with their most stereotypical way of passing time. Indeed, fancywork appears in each novel only after Lucilla’s and Catherine’s potential romances are thwarted. Their first appearances are subtle, and the narrators do not call attention to either woman’s new activity. Rather, needlework seems to be a matter of course, a way to “fill up” one’s days (Oliphant 395). While Catherine is waiting (in vain) for Morris to fix a date for their marriage, she holds “up her head and busie[s] her hands, and [goes] about her daily occupations,” even if her days are “dismal” and “the weight of some of her hours [are] almost more than she [can] bear” (James, *Washington Square* 151). With this first indirect allusion to needlework in *Washington Square*, James’s narrator silently associates Catherine mindlessly “busying her hands” with her romantic stalemate. Catherine may appear to be maintaining her “daily occupations,” but the narrator’s sudden interest in her work suggests fancy-work is a narrative placeholder. During these distracted moments, the narrator diverts our attention from Catherine’s yet unrealized courtship with Morris (a heroine’s perennial problem in a novel of manners) to her busy hands (the perennial occupation of a “lady”). She can neither propose a wedding date nor make Morris move forward, so Catherine’s left with little else besides her needlework. By repeatedly noting Catherine’s busy hands, James’s narrator calls our attention to her inaction and silence. For

whatever Catherine may be thinking about Morris and his unwillingness to set a wedding date is concealed by her apparent diligence. We know she's "working," but her consciousness remains as blank to us as an unworked embroidery canvas.

Lucilla, too, first takes up needle and thread amid romantic turmoil. The turmoil, however, is not her own. While playing matchmaker for Mrs. Mortimer and further delaying a marriage of her own, Lucilla takes up "her work and [sits] down to reflect" (Oliphant 239). Unlike Catherine, who shyly pursues Morris within the bounds of lady-like propriety, Lucilla spurns thoughts of love and marriage for the majority of the novel, claiming she wants to "be a comfort" to her widowed father (33). *Miss Marjoribanks's* narrator, too, invites us to consider Lucilla's innermost thoughts, even if we aren't always privy to them. While Catherine's mind remains mysterious, Oliphant's narrator does affectionately (and sometimes teasingly) reveal Lucilla's "reflect[ions]" from time to time (239). And yet, Oliphant's narrator similarly aligns the introduction of Lucilla's needlework and her matchmaking. Even if she's not actively pursuing marriage—even claiming she's not interested in it—Lucilla still has few options for meaningful occupation. In the middle of an emotionally charged scene, Lucilla retreats to needlework, an activity that will let her mind wander elsewhere without being open to others' scrutiny.

In both *Washington Square* and *Miss Marjoribanks*, needlework slowly becomes the primary non-event in these women's lives, for both of these scenes are just the first of many in which the narrators describe how Lucilla and Catherine increasingly devote time to sewing. Just as each woman desires to "fill up the blank" or "fill the void" in her life, her fancywork is an empty surface waiting to be filled or embellished. Instead of more interesting plot—and life—events, both women are increasingly restricted to their drawing rooms and their sewing baskets. Through these scenes or passing references, then, the women's work becomes a way for both

narrators to represent all Catherine and Lucilla aren't doing and can't do. Moreover, needlework becomes a material representation of both narrators' inability to access fully the women's consciousnesses, especially in pivotal scenes. Instead of describing what either Lucilla or Catherine thinks, the narrators often describe each woman with her needle and thread.

By taking up needlework when they cannot or do not marry, both Lucilla and Catherine suggest that their empty days are much like the worsted-work and fancy-work projects they take on; they are blank canvases waiting for embellishment. Victoria Coulson argues that embroidery becomes an important trope for surfaces throughout James's canon, but it's a cultural understanding we see as early as Oliphant: "But a piece of needlework is not a closed container, and embroidery is not a practice of opening but rather of working on and within the surface of a material whose structure is itself mostly composed of surface. A piece of fabric or an embroidery canvas does not have an interior; it has two sides and no core" (Coulson 23). Coulson is more interested in how language can be read as an embellished surface akin to fancy-work, but her attention to its superficiality similarly expresses how we can understand the relationship between the surface qualities of needlework and the interiority of consciousness or subjectivity. Berlant similarly defines fancy-work as "the trace of [Catherine's] luxuriant love of elaborate surfaces or styles," emphasizing the discrepancy between Catherine's developing devotion to creating ornate surfaces and her increasingly small life ("Silence" 457). While she only describes Catherine's work in *Washington Square*, Berlant's definition of fancy-work applies to *Miss Marjoribanks*, too; Lucilla's worsted work also represents the life Lucilla expects—and is expected to—lead without question. Even if inwardly she's pining for something greater, Lucilla, on the surface, appears to lead a charmed and satisfying life. Both novels, in fact, articulate an inverted relationship between a woman's interiority and her fancywork. While it may be a material

representation of the lives that others expect Catherine and Lucilla to lead, their sewing simultaneously masks the feelings and desires they really have, at times rendering their subjectivity almost completely opaque.

For if we think about needlework as completely covering a surface, rendering its original canvas unrecognizable, then, as Coulson argues, we should also think about how needlework may be covering the chasms of the women's feelings or subjectivity.¹²⁰ We certainly see this in both *Washington Square* and *Miss Marjoribanks*, for Catherine and Lucilla acknowledge the voids in their own lives but are largely unable to fill them. The narrators, too, are complicit; by shifting from heated encounters to mundane work, both James's and Oliphant's narrators conceal the women's emotions with busywork. Accordingly, Catherine's and Lucilla's needlework—a surface to cover, a way to fill time—appears largely meaningless. Neither woman seems to have any real attachment to the needle she wields, nor do the narrators really describe the fancy-work in any detail. As such, its narrative presence mimics the women's lack of interest: the work fills out a description of a scene or a narrative aside, but without flourish and without any lingering thought. The significance of the fancy-work lies in its superficiality, appearing with increasing frequency yet without increasing reward and without increasing insight into the women's inner selves.

Understanding how Catherine's and Lucilla's fancy-work and lives are surfaces to be filled-in or covered-over becomes even more apparent alongside their respective fathers'

¹²⁰ Both novels also feature older, unmarried Aunts who act as companions, and who also do a fair amount of needlework. In *Washington Square*, Mrs. Penniman, a woman who's uniformly dismissed as silly, does plenty of needlework in her free time: "The elder lady hardly knew what to use to make of this larger margin of her life; she sat and looked at it very much as she had often sat, with her poised needle in her hand, before her tapestry frame. She had a confident hope, however, that her rich impulses, her talent for embroidery, would still find their application, and this confidence was justified before many months had elapsed" (235). In *Miss Marjoribanks*, Aunt Jemima not only helps Lucilla make campaign ribbons for Ashburton but also does work of her own during the many quiet hours in Carlingford. As with Catherine and Lucilla, Mrs. Penniman and Aunt Jemima are women who have limited life choices, especially since both are at least partially dependent on their brothers for financial support.

dismissal of their work. While he perhaps doesn't perceive a difference, Dr. Sloper tries to apply his own pragmatic philosophy of always learning "something interesting" and doing "something useful" to Catherine's perpetual work, especially after her broken engagement (James, *Washington Square* 5). According to Dr. Sloper, her outward busyness isn't just "a moral poultice":

In fact, she seems to me much better than while the fellow was hanging about. She is perfectly comfortable and blooming; she eats and sleeps, takes her usual exercise, and overloads herself, as usual with finery. She is always knitting some purse or embroidering some handkerchief, and it seems to me she turns these articles out about as fast as ever. She hasn't much to say; but when had she anything to say? She had her little dance, and now she is sitting down to rest. I suspect that, on the whole, she enjoys it. (224)

When Dr. Sloper observes Catherine knitting, he assumes she's not only "better" but also that she "enjoys it" (224). As it does for the narrator, the knitting becomes a placeholder for the psychology he cannot access and details of her romantic desires that must remain unspoken. The work may not be "interesting" or "useful" in the way that Dr. Sloper advocates, but he applauds the speed and volume of her work since it marks, for him, a sense of closure that would make them both feel better. Indeed, the rapidity of her sewing is the only description of Catherine's knitting (or embroidery) we get, suggesting the material itself is not as important as the fact that she's doing it. What Dr. Sloper fails to intuit is how Catherine's outward actions—her omnipresent knitting—could belie her inward emotional state, for just as she's not necessarily "enjoying" the work, a much more sensitive observer would see that this industriousness is a thin

cover for her sadness. But Dr. Sloper can't (or won't) fathom anything beyond the superficial action he sees: why wouldn't Catherine's zeal for knitting suggest she's feeling "better" (224)?

Dr. Marjoribanks, in contrast, doesn't dismiss Lucilla's needlework as evidence of her well-being. Rather, he bemoans fancy-work as a largely meaningless activity, especially in comparison to what a man her age could do with his life:

She could have continued, and perhaps extended, the practice, whereas just now it was quite possible that she might drop down into worsted-work and tea-parties like any other single woman—while Tom, who had carried off the family honours, was "the boy" in this limited and unfruitful generation, was never likely to do anything to speak of, and would be a poor man if he were to live for a hundred years. (Oliphant 400)

Much as Dr. Sloper silently dismisses Catherine, Dr. Marjoribanks tells Lucilla "occupation is always the best remedy" for grief (30). Dr. Marjoribanks, however, is more outspoken than Dr. Sloper, and he distinguishes between the value of a career and the "worsted-work" he fears she'll "drop down into" (400). He, moreover, makes a connection between the likelihood of Lucilla resorting to worsted-work and her status as a single woman, for he understands Lucilla's choices are limited simply because she's not "'the boy'" and because she's unmarried (400). This passage and Dr. Marjoribanks's resignation suggests, as Merryn Williams has argued, that "Lucilla *is* wasted": the life she is suited for isn't available to her ("Feminist" 170). Tange concurs: "To identify decorative embroidery and light entertainment like tea-parties as a 'dropping down' is to suggest that Lucilla would fall short of her potential if she merely occupied the drawing-room as most middle-class women do. Clearly, a woman who is expected to spend her life in the drawing-room might easily end up creating 'lasting examples of killed

time' by perpetually doing worsted-work with no apparent purpose" (172). Indeed, Lucilla's worsted-work, which she does eventually "drop down into," only further highlights her "waste." As Tange suggests, her choice of occupations are only "semi-satisfying" at best and continually underscore the few outlets she really has (172). These, then, are not activities Lucilla has chosen for herself; they've been chosen for her because of her sex, class, and marital status. Catherine's needlework articulates an inevitable tragedy that she and her father do not openly discuss. Both Lucilla and her father, on the other hand, realize that this preoccupation becomes a polite or appropriate distraction from courtship and marriage, which should be her central concerns. Though Dr. Marjoribanks's judgments may be more transparent, they are equally painful precisely because a polite silence has been breached.

If we begin with these moments of needlework (and talking about needlework) that are usually un-narrated—the small, insignificant moments that occur after the usual ending—then we can reinterpret the work Lucilla and Catherine do more fully. Moreover, through narrative asides such as these two examples we come to understand the distinctions both James and Oliphant make between men's professions and women's work. While both fathers perhaps belittle their daughters' activities, they also acknowledge, at least partially, that the women's choices are limited. These divisions—between work and "work," and between fulfillment and filling a void—are at the heart of each novel and invite us to ask what, in fact, is "the business" of either Lucilla's or Catherine's life (James, *Washington Square* 226).

Indeed, both women participate in other repetitive activities throughout the novel long before they take up needlework. While they seem to take more pleasure in them, these pastimes resemble fancy-work in their repetition and sheer volume. Catherine, for example, admires her beautiful handwriting and is "extremely fond of copying, and possessed volumes of extracts

which testified to this accomplishment” (105). As with the fancy-work and knitting she eventually does, these copies are beautiful but, ultimately, useless.¹²¹ Lucilla, in contrast, plans weekly Thursday “evenings” to create a semblance of society for women in Carlingford. While her “evenings” are not mindless busywork in the same way as copying or sewing, both she and the narrator refer to these gatherings as her “work.” The narrator ironically describes the “evenings” as “the real beginning of her great work in Carlingford,” and Lucilla combats her periodic listlessness by thinking “she had wrought a great work” with these weekly occasions (Oliphant 102, 180). Oliphant’s narrator’s and Lucilla’s descriptions of these social gatherings are metaphorically rich. Long before Lucilla begins her worsted-work, she completes another piece of “work” that marks her days and fills her hours. As Joseph O’Mealy notes, “the double-edge of that phrase is unmistakable: ordinarily a genteel Victorian woman’s ‘work’ meant her needlework or embroidery, symbols of the limits placed on female productivity” (47). By linguistically associating Lucilla’s “evenings” with her future worsted-work, then, Oliphant’s narrator calls attention to the emptiness of Lucilla’s activities, even when she’s the social “queen” of Carlingford. Lucilla’s activities, in fact, will forever be mere “work” because she cannot participate in a true profession more suited to her ambitious character.

¹²¹ Catherine also develops “a lively taste for dress,” which the narrator openly critiques: “A lively taste is quite the expression to use. I feel as if I ought to write it very small, her judgment in this matter was by no means infallible; it was liable to confusions and embarrassments. Her great indulgence of it was really the desire of a rather inarticulate nature to manifest itself; she sought to be eloquent in her garments, and to make up for her diffidence of speech by a fine frankness of costume. But if she expressed herself in her clothes, it is certain that people were not to blame for not thinking her a witty person” (16-17). Moreover, although the narrator suggests Catherine takes pleasure in her ostentatious dress, he also suggests she’s uncomfortable in them: “but oddly enough, in spite of her taste for fine clothes, she had not a grain of coquetry; and her anxiety when she put them on was as to whether they, and not she, would look well” (18). Just as Catherine copies others’ phrases and eventually does endless fancy-work, she seems unskilled in the aesthetics of dress. Berlant reads Catherine’s ostentatious dress as a material representation of her reticence: “Catherine’s focus on verbal style generalizes to clothing as well. Her love of dress reveals the ‘desire of a rather inarticulate nature to manifest itself; she sought to be eloquent in her garments and made up for her diffidence of speech by a fine frankness of costume.’ Here, as well as in the arena of discourse, style acts as a rhetoric that reigns regardless of referent: like a reputation. Catherine’s red dress seems to precede her own presence at her cousin Marion’s engagement party” (“Silence” 447).

If Lucilla and Catherine undertake other “work” throughout their respective novels, then why should we consider their idle fancy-work to be any different? Embroidery or fancy-work skills, as O’Mealy notes in his reading of Lucilla’s “evenings,” became one of the primary indications of gentility in the mid-nineteenth century (47). Unlike copying or even hosting “evenings,” needlework was recognized as an accomplishment akin to playing the piano or sketching. Equating a woman’s fancy-work with her middle- or upper-middle-class status became so common it was almost an unspoken cultural marker.¹²² In the encyclopedic *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management*, Isabella Beeton only mentions it in passing: “Light or fancy needlework often forms a portion of the evening’s recreation for the ladies of the household, and this may be varied by an occasional game at chess or backgammon” (28). We should understand decorative sewing, then, as a woman’s standard leisure activity, and one that’s markedly different from plain sewing, which was often left to the lady’s maid or other servants.¹²³ Like the narrators in both novels, Beeton only mentions a lady’s fancy-work in passing, presumably because it’s so commonplace it doesn’t merit explanation or instruction. Yet

¹²² In *Novel Craft*, Talia Schaffer outlines how class consciousness informed the needlework choices of middle-class and genteel women; in turn, a lady’s fancy-work tacitly signified her “homebound status” and her ability to hire others to do her household labor: “[M]iddle-class women were increasingly sequestered in and expected to focus on that home. Deprived of the occupations that had made them important managers of their farms, forbidden to engage in virtually any kind of remunerative employment, middle-class women were searching for activities to help pass the time in their new domiciles. Domestic handicraft was an ideal solution. It made women’s separate-sphere virtues visible; the domestic handicraft testified to the woman’s skills in management, thrift, industry, and ornamental talent. It occupied women’s time and energies. And it was a creative outlet that allowed middle-class women to articulate their relation to the industrial economy in a satisfyingly complex way. [...] Domestic handicraft consequently became closely associated with middle-class women’s homebound status, a connection that accounts for both the passionate advocacy and the bitter renunciation with which women described it during the nineteenth century” (5-6). Vickery also reads women’s handiwork through the prescriptive rules of middle-class Victorian womanhood: “The domestic context of female decorative work has guaranteed its low prestige. A founding legend of women’s history narrates the withdrawal of middling and privileged women from productive work and their relegation to a separate sphere of home as a consequence of industrial capitalism. [. . .] Notwithstanding the newer interpretations of the affluent home as a site of administrative expertise rather than a cage, handicrafts are still seen as the perfection of pointlessness” (232).

¹²³ Moments when women switch between doing plain sewing and fancy-work are often read as tacit examples of their social class (or their aspirational social class). In the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, the five Bennet women hurry to hide their plain sewing when Bingley and Darcy come to visit. In front of their genteel suitors, the women want to appear as lady-like as possible.

she devotes multiple pages to outlining the plain sewing duties of a lady's maid, for "[p]lain work will probably be one of the lady's-maid's chief employments" (424). Beeton's handbook, then, tacitly suggests that a lady's work is intuitive or a skill middle- and upper-class woman can and should already know, for it would be improper for a lady to worry over something that should be second-nature, or even something that's taught quietly between mother and daughter or among sisters. Instead, Mrs. Beeton spells out much more specific instructions for a maid's plain sewing—work that is productive and useful. These distinctions make clear the aesthetic and class distinctions between the frivolity of fancy-work and the practicality of plain-sewing.

Indeed, in the latter-halves of both *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Washington Square* the narrator's attention to each heroine's fancy-work is pivotal, not only to illustrate the void each woman feels but also to distinguish between what they are "producing" and what's *not* happening in their lives. The fancy-work, too, comes both to mask the women's emotions and to embody their emptiness. Lucilla and Catherine are at the mercy of their narrators, whose clipped descriptions of their emotional distress (or at least dissatisfaction) rely on the trope of women's handiwork. As each woman makes crucial narrative choices about her romantic life—accepting or rejecting potential suitors—the narrator details what she does with her needlework at crucial moments in the scene. These descriptions effectively minimize the choices in the women's lives that would ordinarily constitute the novel-of-manners plot. By drawing attention to the movement of the woman's needlework while unfolding the plot of the scene, Oliphant and James imbue the work with uncomfortable significance. Ultimately, these determining moments are the moments when the narrator most methodically describes Lucilla or Catherine sewing. Their work, then, becomes the material representation of the chasm not only between what the women are expected to do with their lives and what they are doing at that moment but also between what

they are feeling and how they are acting. The pivotal moments in Catherine's and Lucilla's lives, then, occur at opposite ends of the text: while Catherine and Lucilla gradually sink into the cushions of their drawing-rooms with their work, Aurora tries to abandon her needle and thread almost as soon as she learns to sew. Her quiet outburst in Book I—and choice to put sewing against writing—is the crisis that drives her desire to become a poet.

Likewise, the narrators of both novels show how their heroine's lives turn on scenes where the heroine does her needlework—or deliberately stops sewing. Oliphant and James convey the unspeakable emotional turmoil of Lucilla's and Catherine's stultified romances through their half-hearted preoccupations with their needlework. In *Miss Marjoribanks*, Oliphant's narrator pays particular attention to Lucilla and her sewing when she rejects Cavendish. After Cavendish rushes home "furious," the narrator notes that Lucilla "went to a little worsted-work with a mind at peace with itself and all men" (Oliphant 332). Her "peace" is, however, poignant, for the narrator goes on to describe how "[w]hen Miss Marjoribanks found herself alone in the solitude of her drawing-room, and in the still greater solitude, as we have said, of her genius, she felt a little sad, as was natural" (332). While clearly teasing and ironic, the narrator's aside still may be even more bitter in tone than that: Lucilla's going "to a little worsted-work" not only suggests the contrast between a marriage to Cavendish and living at home with her father, but it also signifies her sadness at the isolation that attends her singleness (332). Her "clear mind," too, underscores the novel's association between needlework and reflection, for while we know she's "a little sad," we aren't privy to what she's thinking in her newly clarified consciousness (332). For as understated as Lucilla has to be in the face of her romantic choices, the narrator's teasing may be refreshing, but it's also cruel.

As the romantic drama in *Miss Marjoribanks* intensifies, Lucilla's worsted-work becomes a tacit sign of her gradual resignation to a quiet (and, perhaps, unmarried) life at home in Carlingford. When Lucilla manages Mr. Ashburton's parliamentary campaign, for example, she sits with her needlework while waiting for the election results. The narrator's account of the election day is strange and markedly different from the rest of the novel, because she narrates the pivotal evening once but then doubles back three pages later and dilates over a seemingly inconsequential detail: a description of Lucilla at her worsted-work. The scene is a painful one. Lucilla is even lonelier than she was the last time we saw her with her needlework, for not only is she worried about Mr. Ashburton, but she's also lost her father and her inheritance. The drawing-room seems especially cloistered at this moment. She is waiting for other people's crises to resolve themselves (from Ashburton's election to Aunt Jemima's decisions about her financial future) so that she can envision what the rest of her life will be. The scene—indeed, this section of the novel—hinges on a lack of news, and Lucilla can only sit and wait for notes and letters to be delivered to the close quarters of her drawing-room.

It's within this claustrophobic setting that the narrator describes Lucilla's sadness, not once but twice. On the one hand, the narrator's sustained interest in this scene echoes the cruelty expressed in the earlier passage when she describes Lucilla's disappearing marital prospects, since she again dwells on a moment when Lucilla fails to be, as James writes in *Washington Square*, "our heroine." And the narrative reiteration is all the more awkward against the sense of anticipation crowding Lucilla's drawing-room on the election night. But when the narrator returns to the description of Lucilla with her needlework, her tone softens, even if the repetition still seems gossipy. Indeed, just as Lucilla is waiting, the narrator is waiting for something to narrate, and both are impatient for news. It's in this doubled-back standstill that the narrator

reveals a glimpse of Lucilla's feelings. When the narrator returns to the needlework, she, too, reflects on Lucilla's unspoken motivations in her life, speculating on why she's doing what she's doing. This scene, then, is pivotal, not only because of what does or doesn't happen but also because of the narrator's corrective revision. For if we read it as a microcosm of Lucilla's existence in the novel, then the narrator is as affected as Lucilla is by her increasing isolation. Both are trapped and waiting for something to happen. The narrator's doubling-back shows how Oliphant is exaggerating the ways in which Lucilla precisely fails to be the novel-of-manners heroine.

In the first account of the worsted-work, the narrator suggests Lucilla is pretending to focus on it, which screens us and the other people in the drawing-room from the feelings she cannot express publically. From this perspective, it seems as if Lucilla is focusing on the surface of her work, not even skimming her deeper emotional turmoil. After receiving a note with vote tallies that place Mr. Ashburton behind in the polls, Lucilla calmly "put[s] the note in her pocket without saying a word to Aunt Jemima, and [leaves] her window, and [goes] back to her worsted-work" (Oliphant 457). When we see this exact moment again a few pages later, however, our view is much more familiar. We're privy to Lucilla's emotional world, and the narrator studies her body language and tries to infer what she may be feeling from her otherwise reserved behavior. The narrator again reiterates Lucilla's characteristic silence:

As for Lucilla, she had gone back to her worsted-work when she got Mr. Ashburton's first note. [...] She looked quite composed, and Aunt Jemima went on teasing with her senseless questions [...] Lucilla bore it, doing as much as she could of her worsted-work, and saying nothing to nobody, except, indeed, an occasional word to Aunt Jemima, who would have an answer. [...] When the

next report came, Lucilla's fingers trembled as she opened it, so great was her emotion; but after that she recovered herself as if by magic. She grew pale then gave a kind of sob, and then a kind of laugh, and finally put her worsted-work back into her basket, and threw Mr. Ashburton's note into the fire. (460)

This shift from Lucilla reading the polling tallies to focusing on her worsted-work is an important one. The narrator's attention to how Lucilla occupies herself and what she does with her hands implicitly links her worsted-work to her reaction to the election results. Lucilla focuses on her work to block out any distractions, and she tries to sew "as much as she could." Her concentration and productivity, however, aren't because she's dedicated to her work: her focus is a distraction from her anxiety to find out whether Mr. Ashburton has won, especially since Lucilla helped with his campaign.

By setting the two versions of the scene (one almost absent of emotion and one grasping to imagine what she must be feeling), Oliphant shows the alternative resolution to her heroine's romantic plot. Without the doubled-back glance, the anticipation of Lucilla's resolution might be inferred, but the second rendering emphasizes that this resolution is far from imminent. The doubling-back illuminates a gap in Lucilla's story and is not, then, just a trivial repetition. This contrast—between using needlework as an opaque screen and using needlework as a necessary distraction—underscores the ways in which Oliphant's narrator obliquely characterizes Lucilla's sadness as the work of the novel and as something that may only be palpable when she's with her needlework. While the first description suggests Lucilla does her worsted-work without a worry in the world, the second scene undercuts such a notion: Lucilla thinks of (and uses) her work as a way to mask her nervousness, and the narrator has finally seen through her. Arguably, this realization is the turning point of the scene, not the electoral and the financial drama that

everyone else is buzzing about. For though Lucilla may feign interest in the worsted-work, it's valuable because it keeps her busy and draws our attention to her inner world. With her work in her hands, she can ignore Aunt Jemima's "senseless questions" and the busy street noise she hears outside.¹²⁴ She doesn't appear to have any attachment to the work, though, for the narrator pays more attention to her fingers opening second note she receives—they "trembled" with nervousness—and what happens with the work after she's satisfied with the vote tallies. The worsted-work is "finally" returned to her workbasket, but only because Lucilla no longer needs a prop to occupy herself: its purpose as a distraction has been fulfilled.

Lucilla's behavior on the election night epitomizes her circumscribed world, for under different circumstances, she would run for parliament herself rather than campaign for Mr. Ashburton from her drawing-room, an incongruity even Dr. Marjoribanks acknowledges. The narrator carefully (if teasingly) notes Lucilla's exclusion from the election: "thus in order to come to a right decision and with a sense of the duty she owed to her country which would have shamed half the electors in England, not to say Carlingford, Lucilla, who naturally had no vote, read the two addresses of the two candidates, and addressed herself candidly and impartially to the rights of the subject" (Oliphant 364). And yet Lucilla is decidedly more enthusiastic about making Mr. Ashburton's campaign ribbons than she is with her own worsted-work.

Making campaign ribbons, of course, is trivial in the scheme of an election, but Lucilla's dedication points to her desire for meaningful work. She and Mr. Ashburton form a "silken link" between them by choosing the colors for his campaign, and she begins making ribbons almost

¹²⁴ A similar scene is repeated a few days later when Lucilla imagines that Mr. Ashburton will propose to her. Just as she sits with her work and thinks of something else on election night, Lucilla's "mind was in such a commotion as she sat over her embroidery, that she thought it strange indeed that it did not show, and could not understand how Aunt Jemima could sit there so quietly opposite her, as if nothing was the matter" (Oliphant 465). By sitting placidly with her embroidery—a pose she *ought* to assume—Lucilla conceals her more turbulent inner monologue—ideas she, perhaps, *shouldn't* be thinking. It's interesting to note that the narrator confesses this self-censored moment.

immediately because “there was no time to be lost in a matter of such importance” (349, 350).¹²⁵

Indeed, thinking of the election inspires Lucilla to make as many ribbons as possible:

But while all these thoughts were going through her mind, her fingers were still busy with the violet-and-green cockades which Aunt Jemima, after making sure that Mr. Ashburton was not a Radical, had begun to help her with. [...] This at least was how Lucilla reasoned to herself in her dilemma; and while she reasoned she used up yard upon yard of her green ribbon (for naturally the violet bore but a small proportion to the green). Whatever she might have to do or to suffer—however her thoughts might be disturbed or her heart distracted—it is unnecessary to add that it was impossible to Lucilla to betray or to yield. (362)

While the narrator clearly mocks Lucilla’s zeal and not-so subtly notes the triviality of her project, making the campaign ribbons becomes a way Lucilla can insert herself into a public arena that would be otherwise outside her purview. Indeed, the narrator emphasizes Lucilla’s “still busy” fingers at work on the ribbons, prefiguring her shaking hands in the election-night scene (362). And it is this difference—the “work” she does here may very well serve a larger purpose in getting Ashburton elected—that makes Lucilla take an interest in the ribbon in a way she never does with her worsted-work. “Lucilla, in fact, understands politics perfectly,” argues Tange, yet “[d]espite Lucilla’s influence within the town, she is ultimately ‘only’ a woman, whose voice on issues of political matters not at all to the state” (177). This contrast between knowledge and reality is at the crux of Lucilla’s reaction to her various “work.” Unlike the worsted-work she does on the election night (because she cannot do anything else), here Lucilla thinks about the election as she directly contributes to the cause. Even if she can neither vote nor

¹²⁵ There is an interesting historic continuity here with the work of Whig women (in particular the Duchess of Devonshire) inscribing party colors on their bodies.

run, and even if her limited participation is laughable to others, Lucilla seeks fulfilling projects she can influence.

Oliphant's narrator also draws connections between Lucilla's interest in worsted-work and her interest in her cousin Tom, whom she not-so-subtly sends to India in the opening chapters of *Miss Marjoribanks*. While Tom is absent for all but the very beginning and end of the novel, he remains as a ghostly presence through Lucilla's thoughts. Both the narrator and Lucilla use her interest in worsted-work to betray her real desire to learn something of Tom. In a conversation with her Aunt Jemima, Lucilla pretends to take a casual interest in Tom through her exaggerated concentration on her busy hands. The narrator specifically notes how Lucilla begins the conversation only after "she had got her work and settled herself comfortably for a quiet afternoon" and only after knowing that no one would "disturb the two ladies in their work and their talk" (375). Lucilla tries to tease information out of her aunt off-handedly: "'Now tell me all about Tom'" (375). In the silence before Aunt Jemima begins, the narrator (like Lucilla) coyly draws attention to the worsted-work: "Lucilla had some very interesting worsted-work in hand" (375). Only then does the narrator relay that Aunt Jemima tells Lucilla "*all* about Tom, including many things which she was quite acquainted with and knew by heart" (375). Because we don't know these oft-repeated stories and the narrator doesn't give us Aunt Jemima's side of the dialogue, our attention remains focused on Lucilla. The narrator describes Lucilla's worsted-work as indirectly as she reports Aunt Jemima's news. But in tracing the relationship between Lucilla's "very interesting" work (but clearly not "interesting" enough to hold the narrator's sustained attention and merit description) and her cousin Tom, Oliphant's narrator tacitly suggests Lucilla's work is a material replacement for a romantic entanglement or marriage. Lucilla's behavior is telling, especially given her history of deflecting real conversation through

over-wrought interest in handiwork. While Lucilla's desire to talk about Tom with her aunt brings her closer, on first glance, to the resolution of a marriage plot, her would-be heroics fall short and are mere flirtations. There is no conversation about Tom in the novel itself. Instead, the narrator focuses on Lucilla's "symbolical" work, reminding us that even if her work is genteel, she remains either a little girl or old maid by clinging to this pretty accomplishment.

As with her needlework on the election night, Lucilla sews with Aunt Jemima because she needs to appear busy so she's free to think about something else. Here, she wants to know about Tom, and Oliphant's narrator suggests Lucilla arranges a scene that makes her Aunt Jemima comfortable enough to talk about her son. The arrangement of the scene—the solitude, the drawing-room, and their needlework—is just as important as the news Aunt Jemima imparts.¹²⁶ Just as Lucilla arranges her "evenings" and manages Ashburton's campaign, so Lucilla's worsted-work and chat with her Aunt Jemima suggest that "work" is a prop for something loaded. It's the material representation of the "blank" future Lucilla envisions, but it's also the way Lucilla tries to thwart that "blank" as much as possible: she can make Ashburton's ribbons and help him win the election even if she can't vote, and she can ask about Tom who, perhaps, may marry her if he were to come home from India.

Indeed, the relationship the narrator traces between Lucilla's worsted-work and her looming "blank" future culminates in Tom's homecoming from the far reaches of the British Empire. When Aunt Jemima hints that Tom may return—and that he may have feelings for her—Lucilla "immediately [throws] her embroidery away, and looked at Tom's mother keenly in the face," clearly interested in what her Aunt is implying (467). While she "recover[s] herself in a moment and fold[s] up her worsted-work," Lucilla does not pick up her needlework again in the text of the novel (467). Tellingly, Tom returns to Carlingford and proposes to Lucilla in the next

¹²⁶ For a thorough discussion of how Lucilla wields power from her drawing-room, see Tange.

chapter; Lucilla's worsted-work, then, is replaced with a future husband. Still, though, Lucilla's fancy-work remains folded, for she no longer has a need for idle "work" to fill-in an unknown future.¹²⁷ Her "blank" future has become more than a surface to be filled in with fancy-work, and she can—and does—move out of her faded Carlingford drawing-room. The joy in this narrative resolution is, however, tempered. Oliphant's narrator gently mocks Lucilla's choices and future life, which already promises a new project: to restore their ancestral home of Marchbank and its nearby village. For the narrator, Lucilla may marry and avoid an unmarried and financially-strained life, but the life she's chosen will still be limited, in part because of her less-than clever (but very doting) husband.

Likewise, the narrator of *Washington Square* distracts us with Catherine's attachment to her fancy-work during uncomfortable conversations. As with *Miss Marjoribanks*, the narrator only notes Catherine's attention to her work during these pivotal scenes; fancy-work appears in few other places in the novel. For if Catherine is circumspect throughout, then her silence paired with occupation—needlework—further defines Catherine's opacity. Not only is she quiet in response to her own future, but she also appears occupied and indifferent. Catherine's "work," then, is like Lucilla's, masking or standing in for her response. Instead of talking, Catherine simply sits and sews, letting her silence and busyness speak for her.

When Dr. Sloper asks Catherine about her broken engagement to Morris, the narrator outlines Catherine's reactions through her attention to her needlework. Catherine sits "with some work" at the beginning of the conversation (James, *Washington Square* 218). Dr. Sloper asks

¹²⁷ Peterson also addresses the narrator's muted tone at the end of *Miss Marjoribanks*: "The effect of this complex irony is to undercut both the central assumption of the traditional female *bildungsroman* (that moral growth results from romantic or emotional trials) and the philosophy of the heroine whom Oliphant offers in contrast (that young women do best avoiding such trials). One senses that Oliphant, like her contemporary Harriet Martineau, found the female *bildungsroman* too obsessively focused on love, as if that were the only important aspect of a woman's existence" (70).

Catherine questions, but she continues to focus on her sewing; indeed, the narrator seems more interested in when Catherine sews and when she works and talks simultaneously than in the conversation itself. Just as Lucilla occupies herself on the election night to avoid talking about Ashburton, James's narrator implies Catherine's mind is elsewhere as she studies her work instead of looking at her father. Even when she eventually speaks, her answer is vague and noncommittal: "'I don't know what I have done,' Catherine answered, with her eyes on her work" (219). She avoids confronting her father by devoting herself to needlework, and her verbal response reveals and admits nothing. Moreover, we can only imagine Catherine's internal turmoil that's lurking behind her cryptic answer and feigned absorption in her fancy-work, for the narrator never fully imparts her thoughts. Catherine tells her father her engagement has been broken-off and then "[gets] up" because "she was suffocating" (219). While James's narrator limits his physical description of Catherine, he does explain how she handles her needlework: "But she folded her work deliberately and correctly, bending her burning face upon it" (219). Catherine's action of folding her work "deliberately and correctly" contradicts her unstated feelings, which we can only assume from her "burning face" and her "suffocating" (219). Her concentration on folding away her work tacitly replaces any outward expression of anger and embarrassment during the conversation.

The pivotal final chapter of *Washington Square* only extends the inverse relationship between Catherine's unspoken feelings and her fancy-work: as Catherine seems to feel angrier and more hurt, the narrator focuses increasing attention to her needlework. Just as Catherine appears to hold her embroidery in the scene with her father, so this concluding conversation between Catherine and Morris Townsend hinges on the correlation between Catherine's work and her measured response. Her conversation with Morris is one she doesn't want to have and

one in which she only half participates. By the end of the first paragraph, James's narrator describes how Catherine, now middle-aged, "ha[s] placed herself near [the lamp] with a morsel of fancywork" (241). James's narrator reiterates the seeming smallness of Catherine's needlework to her life, suggesting it's merely a "morsel," a speck of occupation. Its significance is in the symbolic association the narrator has developed between its presence and her failed romance. It is, in fact, an absorbing—or deceptively absorbing—"morsel," for Catherine steadies her attention on it throughout the chapter. Even after Morris, whom she's not seen in many years, enters the room, she continues to stitch: "Catherine listened to this wonderful speech without pausing in her work; she had now had several days to accustom herself to think of Morris Townsend again as an actuality" (James 242). As the narrator—and Catherine indirectly—suggests, her steady attention to fancy-work masks her emotional reaction to Morris's return. By continuing to sew, Catherine can prolong her imagined reality of Morris rather than acknowledge his actual presence in her home. Just as she rebels against her father through her sustained silence, Catherine feigns uninterest in Morris's presence while attending to her "morsel"; both are acts of tacit control and rebellion.

Indeed, James's narrator concludes the novel by implying that the remainder of Catherine's life will unfold similarly. The chapter is a study in contrasts; after telling Morris to leave her home (her most pointed speech of the novel), Catherine resumes her characteristic silence. As James's narrator ends the scene, he adds—almost as an afterthought—one final glimpse of Catherine, now definitively destined to live out her life as a single woman:

"Catherine, meanwhile, in the parlour, picking up her morsel of fancywork, had seated herself with it again—for life, as it were" (248). If Catherine has increasingly sewed "morsels" of fancywork as she moves from a young, single woman to a middle-aged spinster, then our final

glimpse of her, settling down “for life, as it were,” is a picture of an empty life to come (248).¹²⁸ Even the halting phrases of the sentence suggest the reluctance with which she has assumed this life and its seemingly endless expanse or blank surface: it’s only broken up by multiple clauses that qualify her solitude. The reality of these activities, which we can imagine constitute her days, is incongruous with the narrator’s off-hand “meanwhile” (248). While picking up a “morsel” of needlework may appear to be a leisure activity (the sort of pleasurable work that one does in between more important duties), this detail is the most damning part of James’s final image. For we understand the final tableau of Catherine alone and silent with her “morsel” as her now-commonplace existence, not a momentary respite.

By including—and concluding with—this monotonous and resigned image, James’s narrator resists a typical Victorian resolution of engagement and marriage. As with *Miss Marjoribanks* (despite its outwardly happy resolution), *Washington Square* asks us to consider why a genteel Victorian woman’s life should be quietly resigned and seemingly unresolved without marriage and family. We aren’t often privy to this image of a woman settling down “for life, as it were,” especially in the final sentence of a mid-nineteenth-century novel (248). For this reason, the parting glimpse of Catherine is bleakly anticlimactic: if Catherine had other possibilities for her life throughout the novel, then this final image confirms that she will remain

¹²⁸ As many critics have noted, Catherine Sloper can be read as James’s interpretation of (and response to) Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. As Catherine matures, she mentors young women, much as Hester does at the end of Hawthorne’s novel: “[A]s time went on she grew to be a sort of kindly maiden Aunt to the younger portion of society. Young girls were apt to confide to her their love affairs [...] and young men to be fond of her without knowing why. She developed a few harmless eccentricities; her habits, on all moral and social matters, were extremely conservative; and before she was forty she was regarded as an old-fashioned person, and an authority on customs that had passed away” (James, *Washington Square* 227). In her discussion of Catherine as a nineteenth-century Hester, Berlant focuses on Catherine’s red dress and its “direct ancestor, Hester Prynne’s ‘A’” (Berlant, “Silence” 447). “[T]he association of Hester and Catherine through their use of style or fashion,” Berlant continues, “suggests that Catherine be understood as a legitimate and even potentially heroic point of resistance to the patriarchal values of which her father and every other major character in the novel is an agent. In addition, Catherine’s dress is a broad parody of the ‘A,’ in the sense that her sumptuary extravagance strikes merely a minor blow in the realm of transgressions” (447). Catherine and Hester, of course, are also both needlewomen, but whereas Hester seems to find fulfillment in her needlework, Catherine’s only illuminates the emptiness of her life.

single whether she has any offers or not. It is, then, a definitive non-ending because Catherine's outward inconclusiveness speaks to her decided inward resolution: we can imagine Catherine, alone, forever seated next to her lamp, fancywork in hand.

The final clause—"as it were"—further punctuates Catherine's tacit smallness and resignation as she returns to her "morsel," one of the few occupations she has and one that embodies all that she does not and will not do.¹²⁹ This final sentence and phrase express, as Bell argues, "the restrictedness of the mere morsel of life on which she is permitted to work her own design; in James's favorite image of art as needle-work—that tapestry woven upon a canvas with infinite perforations for the needle—the creativity is the most insignificant of embroideries" (Bell 78). Berlant, too, reads Catherine's final act of returning to her "morsel of fancywork" as acceptance: "She achieves this kind of death by immersing her 'burning face' in her 'morsel' of fancy-work: fancy-work, the least fancy and most ordinary of bourgeois female activities, is the only production the twice-burned Catherine allows herself" ("Silence" 457). "More (and less) than this," Berlant continues, Catherine's "fancy-work is a 'topographical parenthesis,' where her 'life, as it were' takes place: it is a refuge from the world of rhetorical fancy foot-work, of her father and her lover, where all female speech can only end in gen(d)eric negation" (457).

The fancy-work may be a "refuge" of sorts. Catherine certainly seems to use it that way in the scenes with her father and with Morris. But to this we should add that this "refuge" appears superficial and meager to Catherine. Berlant contends that "fancy-work is a luxurious production meant to please the worker," but we never see Catherine expressing any pleasure in her work (457). Instead, she simply continues to sew, just as Dr. Sloper's recalls earlier in the novel. She may be increasingly assertive in crafting a life for herself, but as James's narrator reminds us in this final sentence, this work still amounts to idly filling a "void" rather than to a

¹²⁹ Ozick reads this final clause as symbolizing "the snuffing of the light" (Ozick xxii).

rewarding creative activity. Catherine's "morsel," in fact, calls attention to the emotional life we're not privy to. James's narrator does not (or cannot) impart Catherine's feelings as she settles down to her future existence. Just as the narrator describes how Catherine focuses on her sewing when her father confronts her about Morris, this final scene substitutes a passing observation of Catherine's action (picking up her work, again) for a meditation on her subjectivity.¹³⁰ This final image, then, should solidify our understanding of how Catherine's "morsel" is a surface that symbolizes not only her small life but also our inability to know Catherine's emotional depths.¹³¹ James's narrator suggests that in resigning herself to "work," Catherine has made herself a similarly opaque surface.

Similarly, Oliphant's narrator makes a point of the fact that Lucilla is not a successful heroine in the marriage plot, even though she ultimately marries Tom. But Lucilla herself realizes that she can't identify with what we might understand to be her narrative alternative in the mid-nineteenth century: the heroine of an industrial novel.¹³² When she and Tom are deciding how to begin their married lives, Lucilla compares her previous ten years of "evenings" and worsted-work to that of a textile operative: "'That will be the end of it all, after one has slaved like a—like a woman in a mill,' said the disappointed reformer, 'and given up ten years!'" (Oliphant 485). Oliphant's narrator at least dimly acknowledges the distance between lady and factory worker, and Lucilla's stilted remark to Tom shows how she fits neither category neatly.

¹³⁰ In contrast, Barrett Browning suggests a relationship between depths of Aurora's despondence and her inactivity. When "Romney did not come," Aurora describes how she

lived on and on
As if my heart were kept beneath a glass
And everybody stood, all eyes and ears,
To see and hear it tick. I could not sit
Nor walk nor take a book, nor lay it down,
Nor sew on steadily, nor drop a stitch. (Barrett Browning II.856-62)

¹³¹ Bell also reads this conclusion as damning for more than Catherine's continued singleness: "In so meager a triumph it is possible to see even less than James intended [...] James's ending would seem to conform to the sentimental platitude that not to marry is the tragic aborting of female destiny" (Bell 78).

¹³² For if Aurora has a foil in Marian, a distressed needlewoman and her potential rival for Romney's love, then these women become Lucilla's silent, generic counterparts.

But as telling as this comment is generically, it's all the more shocking for the way it reveals Lucilla's simpering attitude within this very protected world: her stilted life is in no way akin to the impoverished life of a textile mill operative. Oliphant's narrator underscores the discrepancy between Lucilla's shallow sympathy and the seriousness of her own political identity by ironically referring to Lucilla as "the disappointed reformer." After all, her most concerted reform effort is to create a social life for the middle- and upper-class ladies of Carlingford and to make political ribbons.

As overstated as her identification with these anonymous women may be, Lucilla's comparison also forces us to think seriously about both women's isolated lives. The novels, for the most part, unfold within the Marjoribanks and Sloper homes, settings that only heighten each woman's insularity. While Lucilla and Catherine each take a Grand Tour, their worlds and each woman's subjectivity are primarily defined by their drawing-rooms, widowed fathers, and attending unmarried aunts.¹³³ As they sit in their drawing-rooms, waiting for life to come to them, the women only periodically encounter others who travel to and from more cosmopolitan locales. This stasis only heightens both novels' sense of myopia, for Lucilla and Catherine both exist in small worlds with few changes: each woman remains in the same limited group, visits the same local places, and does the same things throughout both novels. Lucilla Marjoribanks even marries an early prospect: a cousin.

Since both *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Washington Square* are focused on the middle-class domestic space (so much so that *Miss Marjoribanks* only leaves Carlingford at the end of the novel with Lucilla's marriage), characters' arrivals and departures underscore the narrow perspective of each woman. While Lucilla or Catherine sits in her drawing room with her work,

¹³³ The narrative *Washington Square* follows Catherine and her father on their yearlong Grand Tour whereas Oliphant's narrator only mentions Lucilla's, which occurs outside of *Miss Marjoribanks*'s Carlingford-centered narrative trajectory.

men of her age move freely about in the world and make lives for themselves. In particular, both women's courtships are thwarted when their suitors travel to exotic destinations: Tom moves to India and Morris goes to New Orleans. Not only do these displacements signify a worldly existence that Lucilla and Catherine cannot experience, but India and New Orleans were also economic centers of the transnational textile industry in the mid-nineteenth-century. As Lucilla and Catherine are confined to their homes and destined to sew another insignificant bibelot, their lovers travel the globe as participants in the very economy the two women are exempt from beyond a leisurely consumption of fine thread and fabric.

In *Miss Marjoribanks*, Tom is absent during the majority of the novel while he works as an attorney in India. As a way to sidestep Tom's proposal, young Lucilla pointedly suggests he move to the subcontinent and make a career for himself. "Going to India was very right and proper, and the best thing to do," notes Oliphant's narrator, "for a man might get on *there*, even at the bar, who would have no chance *here*" (Oliphant 259). As the narrator not so subtly implies throughout the novel, Tom isn't clever; however, he's diligent, and as his move across the world suggests, faithful to those he loves. He can be successful in this imperial outpost, even if he might not have succeeded at home in England.

We hear little of Tom throughout the novel, but his mother—Lucilla's Aunt Jemima—periodically shares news of Tom's success in the far reaches of the British Empire. Oliphant's narrator, too, subtly (and ironically) contrasts Tom's adventures abroad with Lucilla's own "reign" in Carlingford. Neither career path is ideal, but since she cannot go abroad, Lucilla tries to establish her own domestic empire through her "great work" of evenings and, later, campaigning. Oliphant's narrator never fully articulates how "reigning" over the home compares to imperial service. The ironic juxtaposition, however, suggests that Lucilla is not only attuned to

the discrepancies but also reconciles herself to the limitations of being “a lady.” In fact, the teasing relationship between the two is where the respective power in these metaphors lies. As O’Mealy argues, “underneath Lucilla’s grand schemes and ambition lies compromise. Since she cannot partake in the imperial public life open to young men like her cousin Tom, who goes to India, she will create her own private empire in Carlingford” (49).

Neither empire nor reign is permanent, however. Tom’s arrival at the Marjoribanks home in the penultimate chapter is the novel’s *deus ex machina*. His return to England serendipitously secures Lucilla’s future, but it also suggests the empire’s inevitable collapse even as it suggests the melding of the empire’s margins with the epitome of British domesticity. Since Tom remains at the empire’s margins for the majority of the plot, his returned presence epitomizes the manner in which British domesticity exists at the hearth and outposts of Empire in India. Indeed, Lucilla rejoices in his return and her newly-clarified life, but Aunt Jemima, Lucilla, and Oliphant’s narrator are equally interested in the material reminders of the empire that Tom has brought home. Tom arrives with luxurious examples of India’s vastly popular shawls. As the narrator describes Tom’s homecoming, she balances reactions to the surprise engagement with expectations of what souvenirs Tom has in his trunk: “And when Tom finally was dismissed to his room, to open his trunks, and show the things he had brought home, Aunt Jemima drew nearer her future daughter with wistful guiltiness. There was no comfort to her in the thought of the India shawl, which her son had gone to find. Any day, any hour, Lucilla might tell; and if the unlucky mother were put on her defence, what could she say?” (480). While Aunt Jemima supposedly finds “no comfort” in her new Indian shawl, the narrator’s attention to it suggests otherwise.¹³⁴ Tom brings home a trunk replete with presents, but this shawl is the only item

¹³⁴ In *Washington Square*, Catherine also brings home “the spoils of foreign travel”—an Indian shawl—for her Aunt Penniman. Unlike Aunt Jemima, however, Aunt Penniman relishes the present: “To Mrs. Penniman she had been

that's specifically named. Calling attention to Aunt Jemima's Indian shawl—and only an Indian shawl—is suggestive. As discussed with *North and South* in chapter one, Indian shawls were notable luxury goods in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, a material representation of one's (or a loved one's) financial ability to travel as well as one's cosmopolitan worldview. Eventually, these shawls even came to symbolize Englishness: a respectable lady would wear her Indian shawl in social settings as a marker of her class and taste. More importantly, however, Indian shawls came to represent the nexus of domestic and industrial products, and national and international commerce: they illustrated the real material connections between the small, private life Lucilla and Aunt Jemima have lived in Carlingford and the imperial, global one Tom has lived in India. As Aunt Shaw's shawls suggest, these cosmopolitan textiles quietly bring together seemingly disparate parts of mid-nineteenth-century life.

Lucilla, too, receives presents from Tom. As she once did with her worsted-work, she holds her gifts and reflects: “[Lucilla's] mind was full of it while her hands were busy putting away all the Indian presents which Tom had brought—presents which were chronological in their character, and which he had begun to accumulate from the very beginning of his exile. It could not but be touching to Lucilla to see how he had thought of her for all these years” (482). Lucilla, like her Aunt Jemima, seems uninterested in her specific Indian presents, but these tokens of Tom's affection provide an occasion for her nostalgic contemplation. Unlike her worsted-work, which busied her hands, was a distraction, and never materialized what was on her mind, the shawl Lucilla holds in her hands directly points to the focus of her thoughts: Tom. The narrator gives us a glimpse of Tom's thoughts, too, which are characteristically jumbled but sweet. Tom, here, imagines their newly complete life in material terms. “He did not quite believe

lavishly generous, and Aunt Lavinia spent half an hour unfolding and folding again, the little ejaculations of gratitude and taste. She marched about for some time in a splendid cashmere shawl, which Catherine had begged her to accept, settling it on her shoulders, and twisting down her head to see how low the point descended behind” (172).

in it as yet,” Tom thinks, “and could not help feeling as if, should he venture to leave her, the whole fabric of his incredible good fortune must dissolve and melt away” (477). And while Tom isn’t holding any of the shawls or other souvenirs he’s purchased for Lucilla over the past ten years, the way he thinks of his own subjectivity and their life together has been altered by these textile presents: his life is now a “whole fabric” once he returns from the empire to a small English village (477).

While Tom’s return from India symbolizes the amalgamation of individuals, empire and nation, and material representations of consciousness, Morris Townsend’s departure for New Orleans can be read as a point of rupture and a way James makes distinctions between lives and worlds. Simultaneously ending his life of loafing and cryptically ending his engagement to Catherine, Morris decides he’s going “To New Orleans—about buying some cotton” (James, *Washington Square* 199). New Orleans’s fraught history inflects Morris’s duplicitous announcement. In the 1840s and 1850s, when the action of *Washington Square* takes place, New Orleans was an important port for exporting slave-grown raw cotton, and the city seemed as much a part of Europe as it did the United States. This exotic locale, then, is the antithesis of Catherine’s stuffy, old-fashioned Washington Square world. Since the novel was written and published in 1880, this subtle allusion to slavery and antebellum economics also maligns Morris and his choices: traveling to New Orleans to buy slave-owned cotton is an ethically-fraught act, but especially so when it’s in lieu of breaking off his engagement to Catherine.

Catherine, however, understands Morris’s buying cotton as his way to distance himself from their relationship. “You shouldn’t think about cotton,” she tells Morris; “you should think about me. You can go to New Orleans some other time—there will always be plenty of cotton. It isn’t the moment to choose: We have waited too long already” (200). Morris, of course, goes to

New Orleans, choosing slave-produced cotton and the larger world of the transatlantic cotton trade, while Catherine is left to her fancy-work, which she begins in earnest after Morris leaves. While the contrast between international commerce and frivolous needlework is striking, it's also damning. As James's tacit comparison suggests, we shouldn't consider buying slave-produced cotton an attractive alternative to staying at home with embroidery. The pairing, however, further underscores the blankness and void Catherine feels; it's not just that Morris leaves, but that he leaves in favor of a morally suspect material currency and a world Catherine can only imagine but one in which she can never participate.

Since Catherine and Lucilla are both aware of worlds beyond their circumscribed lives, their blank canvases are all the more poignant. Moreover, the lives they construct for themselves are necessarily compromised. Even if Tom does return from India to marry Lucilla, their marriage isn't ideal for a woman whose ambitions transcend her community's expectations. As such, Lucilla's worsted-work-filled world is an indictment of a society that produces "ladies" and and constrains them. "In Oliphant's world," O'Mealy contends, "everyone has to settle for the best she can get" (49). Lucilla may have the outwardly-perfect Victorian ending, complete with ancestral house, doting husband, and rosy future, but the narrator leaves us with the sense of resignation. While Lucilla's marriage fills in her blank future and seems to bring her some happiness, she still yearns for something greater than Marchbank and, perhaps, the return of her worsted-work.

Similarly, the conclusion of Catherine's story in *Washington Square* shouldn't come as a surprise because it's inscribed in her story as early as the opening chapter. While the controversy in genre lies in the ending, it's not just the ending that defines the plot: it's the texture of the relationships. It's not just what happens to Lucilla and Catherine at the end of their stories, but

it's about the trajectory of the women's lives all along. Catherine, like Lucilla, comes to terms with her narrow world, even if her reconciliation to such a life isn't as optimistic on the surface. When we leave Catherine, she's sitting with a "morsel" of fancy-work, clearly settling down to a lifetime of embroidery and quiet evenings. This conclusion, however, is foregone. Throughout the novel, James's narrator implies that Catherine is destined to a constrained, seemingly fractured existence. Indeed, when she first wears her extravagant red satin gown, the narrator tempers the way Catherine responds to her father and tries to reconcile her unstated feelings with his harsh rhetoric:

[I]t is a literal fact that [Dr. Sloper] almost never addressed his daughter save in the ironical form. Whenever he addressed her he gave her pleasure; but she had to cut her pleasure out of the pieces, as it were. There were portions left over, light remnants and snippets of irony, which she never knew what to do with, which seemed too delicate for her own use. (James, *Washington Square* 27-28)

In this, the first scene where the narrator conceives of Catherine's life in terms of textiles, the material becomes narrative shorthand for her sadness. Even in this early chapter, the narrator prefigures Catherine's middle-age disappointment through her slowly developing interest in fancy-work. But it's telling that this "work" already exists in a state of "remnants and snippets" (27-28). Indeed, the narrator's metaphor is so exaggerated that it seems to comment not just on this one moment but also anticipate Catherine's life as a whole. The narrator's language in this passage also echoes that final haunting sentence. By ending the sentence describing Catherine's metaphorical pattern-cutting with "as it were," the narrator not only sets up his final image of Catherine but also suggests the futility of her actions. Catherine similarly picks up that "morsel" of fancy-work with a mixture of resolve and sadness in the novel's final sentence. Catherine's

fancy-work comes to represent how she quietly reconciles the life others expect (her father's desire that she be "clever" and well-married) and the one she ultimately leads: living alone.

Indeed, the narrator's description of Catherine's thoughts underscores how her needlework represents her life. Whenever her father speaks to her, Catherine doesn't understand what to do with the "light remnants and snippets of irony," but she's left with similar remnants of doubt and disappointment throughout the irony-filled novel. James's narrator notes Dr. Sloper's frequent "ironical form" for addressing Catherine, but he, too, relies on irony throughout *Washington Square*, frequently illuminating how Catherine is the product of the staid world around her and how she doesn't always meet its rigid expectations. Catherine may have difficulty parsing the sincerity of her father's words, but her fancy-work (especially coupled with her characteristic silence) is equally cryptic to those around her. Her father, after all, assumes her productivity is tantamount to happiness. The similarities between speech and needlework are telling, for as we've seen, Catherine uses her work as a prop, avoiding direct confrontation with her father and with Morris. We see a similar relationship in *Miss Marjoribanks*. While Oliphant's narrator subtly mocks Lucilla, she also sympathizes with her, and this delicate balance is often coyly realized in her descriptions of Lucilla at work as she details how her heroine comes to rely on her needlework for distraction and meager engagement.

CODA

The Un-“Symbolical” “Work” of the Mid-Nineteenth Century Novel

As Talia Schaffer reminds us, the mid-nineteenth century was the first time “the economic life of the nation occurred in places middle-class women were not supposed to visit or understand” (*Novel Craft* 35). While women doing fancy-work and women working in textile factories handled similar products, these were often worlds that never touched. As such, the fancy-work and factory work in this dissertation in many ways typify women’s “work” in the mid-nineteenth century, because the era was a time where the two coexisted, often uncomfortably. For just as *Daniel Deronda*’s narrator alludes to Manchester textile factories as well as more intangible fabric metaphors to explain interdependence of local and global events, the seemingly opposing perspectives (literal and metaphorical, global and local, public and private) of many nineteenth-century novels return to the ways in which James and Eliot use “threads” and “webs.” These turns of phrase express not only how material things take on *real* significance in an individual’s life, but also how difficult it is to represent (or even fully understand) the fragility of human relationships.

Washington Square and *Miss Marjoribanks*, of course, aren’t the only mid-nineteenth-century novels where fancy-work is associated with women’s boredom or limited choices. As we saw in chapter one, *North and South*’s Fanny Thornton yawns over “an interminable piece of worsted-work” while listening to her brother discuss the price of American yarn, uninterested in

either her work or her brother's (Gaskell 132).¹³⁵ Both *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* also feature middle-class women who dislike sewing but do so anyway because they want to be thought of as respectable (and married) women. Rosamond Vincy also takes no pleasure in fancy-work, and Gwendolen Harleth begins to embroider—reluctantly—only after her engagement to Henleigh Grandcourt. Neither of Eliot's women takes pleasure in her needlework, but it's almost always present, becoming a material representation of their dissatisfaction with their lives more generally. Tellingly, Dorothea Brooke, *Middlemarch*'s ambitious heroine, is short-sighted, which exempts her from the obligation to do any sort of needlework; accordingly, she strives to find fulfillment and meaningful occupation on a much larger scale throughout the novel: she recognizes that sewing isn't sufficient for her.

These passing references illustrate the crucial relationship between class and different kinds of sewing (fancy-work, worsted-work, knitting, and much less ornate work). If we trace parallels between class and these various occupations, it becomes clear that embroidery came to signal gentility that was otherwise implicitly understood. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856) most clearly explores how representations of women's fancy-work stand in for discussions about their limited choices in the world that had to remain unspoken.¹³⁶ As Anne Wallace contends, Elizabeth Barrett Browning "saturates" *Aurora Leigh* with sewing allusions that are both literal and metaphorical and "sets up a deliberate opposition between the female/domestic labor of sewing and the masculine/artistic 'labors' of walking and writing"

¹³⁵ In her review of *North and South*, which was published in the May 1855 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Oliphant criticizes the novel's romance plot: "though her superb and stately Margaret is by no means a perfect character, she does not seem to us a likely person to fall in love with the churlish and ill-natured Thornton" (422).

¹³⁶ In her discussion of women's mid-nineteenth-century handicrafts, Schaffer similarly claims that "we cannot do better than look to *Aurora Leigh*" for examples of "the most popular early-nineteenth-century crafts" (31). As Schaffer notes, Aurora sees needlework as "something for people to trip over and curse," and something that interferes "the real work they have to do" (59). Yet Schaffer continues, arguing that Barrett Browning "simultaneously dismiss[es] women's arts and us[es] them seriously as poetic training" (59). Indeed, "the way handicraft functions in the poem, to express Aurora's poetic training and yet compete with that training at the same time, is symptomatic of the uses of domestic handicraft in [...] nineteenth-century texts" (59).

(226, 228).¹³⁷ While Barrett Browning is, perhaps, better known for her distressed needlewomen, especially *Aurora Leigh*'s Marian Erle, this verse novel also belongs to the same tradition as *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda*, and *Washington Square* because of its much more genteel heroine (who's not often defined in terms of her sewing).¹³⁸

In Book I, as a part of Aurora's "womanly" education, her aunt makes her learn "cross-stitch" because she "did not like / To see [Aurora] wear the night with empty hands / A-doing nothing" (Barrett Browning I.443-49). Aurora's aunt isn't concerned with the particular skills this handiwork requires. Rather, even in the privacy of their own home, she's worried about the impropriety of Aurora appearing idle. Aurora, an aspiring poet, laments the uselessness of this "work," especially in contrast to the writing she wants to do: creative, meaningful, fulfilling work. The contrast is one that Barrett Browning traces throughout *Aurora Leigh*: For Aurora, sewing is tantamount to occupying one's hands and doing nothing else.¹³⁹ Aurora bemoans the uselessness of this endless, wasteful production:

By the way,
The works of women are symbolical.

We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,

Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,

To put on when you're weary

[...]

This hurts most, this—that, after all, we are paid

¹³⁷ Wallace claims that "there are more than fifty such references in the first two books alone" (228).

¹³⁸ Wallace is primarily interested in how Elizabeth Barrett Browning casts sewing as a "productive labor," but Wallace does contend that the early chapters of the verse novel blend "sewing imagery with the vegetative imagery," which "never fully displaces negative interpretations of sewing," by "problematically entangl[ing]" needlework, poetry, and walking (227).

¹³⁹ For Marian Erle, however, needlework leads to physical, mental, and moral distress. An impoverished needlewoman and fallen woman, Marian is Aurora's counterpart or double throughout much of *Aurora Leigh*: Barrett Browning provocatively pairs poetess and seamstress.

The worth of our work, perhaps. (Barrett Browning I.455-64)

By beginning with “[b]y the way,” Aurora presents women’s “works” as off-handedly as the narrators of *Washington Square* and *Miss Marjoribanks*. Fancy-work is something that’s done in between other more pressing duties, much like the narrative asides (such as Aurora’s) that fill-in gaps between more crucial plot points. While Aurora dabbles in fancy-work to please her aunt, she hides the rebellious thoughts she’s working over in her mind through the almost-mechanical work of her hands. Perhaps strangely, the poet articulates what we can only imagine Catherine might be thinking. These thoughts seem to transcend the vast differences between a heroine of the 1850s (Aurora) and a heroine of the 1880s (Catherine). Aurora and Catherine may be lonely, and their handiwork shows how they are living similarly prescribed existences. Aurora, however, ultimately takes over her narrative, and she speaks. So it’s not surprising that she makes her disdain for needlework clear early in the verse novel, since she realizes that it is a predictable “symbol” for a traditionally feminine life, and she’d rather not have that life or even “produce” that “pair of slippers.”¹⁴⁰ If Catherine seethes silently, taking little notice of the sewing or the marital relationship it represents, then Aurora takes on the metaphor and funnels her frustrations into her handiwork. Barrett Browning’s language in these moments becomes more pointed, precisely because she understands what the needle and thread stand for.

As she sits “and tease[s] / The patient needle till it split the thread, / Which oozed off from it in meandering lace,” Aurora’s “soul was singing at a work apart / Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm” (I.1049-1051). Before Aurora claims her identity as an autobiographical poet, she struggles to figure herself as a heroine of a traditional plot, and she busies herself unhappily with “symbolical” accomplishments. For the young Aurora, then,

¹⁴⁰ Wallace also close reads this passage. ““Symbolical,”” she contends, “although ironic [. . .] gestures toward a possible conflation of sewing and poetry” (229).

embroidery fills the textual blanks in her life: it busies her hands, it augments her accomplishments, it makes her look like the heroines in the novels she doesn't really want to write. The poet within her realizes that she needs to protect the "work" of her "soul," since handiwork can too easily conflate text with textile. While she doesn't yet have the language to explain why, she realizes it's potentially "harm[ful]" to her "soul."¹⁴¹ This may seem like an exaggerated response, but Aurora is the narrator of her own story. Unlike Lucilla and Catherine, her self-silencing inheritors, her work is not just to sew in place of having an emotional life but to create a plot that promises her own fulfilling existence.

Aurora asks a question that these later novels must also address, if more timidly: what constitutes serious work? Fanny's, Aurora's, Lucilla's, Rosamond's, Gwendolen's, and Catherine's fancy-work embodies their narrow lives in each these novels. Indeed, as *Mrs. Beeton's Handbook* illustrates, the women's sewing certainly distinguishes all of them as "ladies," but this leisurely hobby is something women were to take for granted. On the surface, then, their endless "work" signifies a privileged existence; their ample time and money allow them to create objects with no specific purpose. Unlike *North and South*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, however, both *Washington Square* and *Miss Marjoribanks* make this superfluity part of the drama of the plot and reveal how the heroines aren't really textbook heroines. It's, perhaps, this tacit cultural understanding of genteel women's casual interest in leisurely "work" that makes close readings of it so difficult, regardless of its importance to the plot. For in addition to considering fancy-work's metaphorical potential or its narrative function,

¹⁴¹ Schaffer also close reads this scene from *Aurora Leigh*, suggesting this passage "acts as a kind of *mise en abîme* for how to read *Aurora Leigh*" (58). As Schaffer notes, "Aurora Leigh is 'teas[ing]' the reader. We expect straightforward narrative threads; we expect her to knot those threads into a strong central plot. Instead, we will get 'meandering lace,' the meaning of the poem unraveling as we try to follow it, the individual episodes splitting into multiple curlicues of separate meanings to be admired, clouds of complex structures that offer intricate loveliness" (58).

we must also read it as actual needlework, a tangible item that constituted many mid-Victorian women's lives but remained undiscussed in detail.

And while the women's needlework is a visible marker of their class, it also associates them with the larger global marketplace that produces and sells the textiles both women use. This relationship between a private, domestic leisure activity and the international trade of raw materials and produced goods is more complicated. For in many ways, the sewing that fills these women's idle hours signifies their exemption from transnational commerce. They, of course, must purchase their fabric and thread, but what they make with these products will never enter the commercial market, which is what distinguishes Fanny, Aurora, Lucilla, Rosamond, Gwendolen, and Catherine from distressed needlewomen and female mill-workers who handle (or even weave) cloth for their livelihoods. The maids in Melville's "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," for example, or Bessy in Gaskell's *North and South* are impoverished women who support themselves by working in mills that damage their own health, things Fanny, Aurora, Lucilla, Rosamond, Gwendolen, and Catherine never experience. And yet despite these economic and class discrepancies, all of these women—operative and lady alike—experience a similar longing for human relationships and fulfilling work. This unspoken—and largely unrealized—connection highlights the omnipresent "voids" and "blanks" that constitute all of these women's lives regardless of occupation. Lucilla and Catherine (or the other genteel women I've mentioned), of course, don't face poor working conditions or weak health, but as Oliphant and James subtly suggest, the women's practical options—how to live and what to do—are similarly inadequate, but in a decidedly more privileged way and with the painful luxury of confinement.

Indeed, in the thirty years between 1850 and 1880, textile metaphors became less and less a literary device; instead, they became *things* that embodied the shift in narrative directions toward new possibilities for who heroines could be and what they could do. Lucilla Marjoribanks and Catherine Sloper aim to be what Hester Prynne couldn't have been in 1850. For if Hester wanted "a more real life" at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, then Lucilla and Catherine, too, have to contend with the narrative trappings implied by their fancy-work and their solitude (Hawthorne 165). In the two hundred years separating Hawthorne's, Oliphant's, and James's nineteenth-century heroines—Hester's story is set during the mid-seventeenth century while Lucilla's and Catherine's are set in the mid-nineteenth century—a number of other novelists used the novel of manners to historicize fiction—and, perhaps more importantly, how women's lives should not look like fiction—through the very things that occupied these women's day-to-day lives. In reading *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Washington Square* alongside other novels such as *North and South*, *Aurora Leigh*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*, we must ask how marriage was being reconceived and why fancy-work remained central to that re-conception.

Both Lucilla's and Catherine's conceptions of marriage are largely informed by their relationships with their fathers, not just because they are the most important men in these women's lives (I don't read this as an Electra complex), but because these men's expectations are representative of conventional plots in which the heroine meets and marries the hero, and the father's consent is often the turning point. Indeed, for Catherine and for Lucilla, their relationships with their fathers dictate their educations—or the limitations of their educations—and even become the impetus for these women's reactionary isolation. Of course, there were real-life precedents for the Lucillas and the Catherine's who came to populate late-nineteenth-century fiction: Alcott, Barrett Browning, Brontë, Fuller, Gaskell, and Stowe all famously

attributed their love of fiction and, ultimately, their penchant for writing new stories to fathers who opened their libraries to them. For some of these writers, these libraries were liberating, but for others, the pressure to respond to the volumes they inherited in a way that reconciled the past and the present was a daunting task. In rewriting the marriage plot, then, these women are not only imagining a present or a future beyond what the previous generation could imagine; they're also implicitly rejecting the tradition they inherit from their mothers and fathers.

Margaret Fuller famously discusses the way her father influenced her ideas of equality between the sexes. "The Great Lawsuit" (1843) isn't a theory of fiction, but it grapples with the same questions marriage-plot (or anti-marriage-plot) novels address in the mid-nineteenth-century. Marriage seems, to Fuller, an old-fashioned institution, but one that people cannot relinquish: "Centuries have passed since, but civilized Europe is still in a transition state about marriage, not only in practice, but in thought. A great majority of societies and individuals are still doubtful whether earthly marriage is to be a union of souls, or merely a contract of convenience and utility" (1639). Not only is each generation of men and women responsible for perpetuating this fantasy of fulfillment, but each generation of fathers is, to Fuller's mind, participating in an economics of domesticity that makes his daughter a currency. "Were woman established in the rights of an immortal being," Fuller continues in the hypothetical tense, "this could not be. She would not in some countries be given away by her father, with scarcely more respect for her own feelings than is shown by the Indian chief, who sells his daughter for a horse, and beats her if she runs away from her new home" (1639). In the provocative final sentence of this paragraph, Fuller imagines a Lucilla or a Catherine who is yet to be because she finds happiness in remaining single: "Nor, in societies where her choice is left free, would she be perverted by the current of opinion that seizes her, into the belief that she must marry, if it be

only to find a protector, and a home of her own" (1639). The problem of "a home of her own" remains unresolved for both Oliphant and James, despite their vexed feelings about marriage and singledom. Lucilla may move away from Carlingford and her father's house, but she moves to Marchbank, her paternal ancestors' family seat. Catherine, in turn, never moves from Washington Square within the plot of the novel and, we can assume, well after its conclusion. Her father may have died, but the home is not "her own," despite the fact she inherits it (1639). For Fuller, Oliphant, and James, a woman's "choice" about marriage may be her own on the surface, but it is bound up with the values her father instilled in her, to say nothing of her father's "choice" of suitor.

Fuller, in fact, uses fictional techniques to describe how the education she had under her father's tutelage shaped the beliefs about marriage she held in 1843. Infuriated with the Lucillas and the Catherines of her age, Fuller includes an imagined dialogue with "Miranda," a fictionalized version of herself.¹⁴² Had Fuller lived to read *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Washington Square*, she would have seen these drawing room scenes as regressions from the conversations she held with her own father. The generation gap between Fuller and these novels' heroines makes their tragedies all the more intense. For if marriage seemed to be an outdated institution for Fuller in 1843, her likeminded inheritors would have seen Lucilla and Catherine as vestiges of a bygone era, not as potential New Women. These women seem lonely in 1866 and 1880, but Fuller imagines herself to be just one of many women who espoused similar beliefs when she wrote "The Great Lawsuit" in 1843. There's an intimacy between Fuller and Miranda (one that extends beyond the surface biographical similarities), and their friendship is forward-thinking, in part because of their mutual respect for their fathers:

¹⁴² Fuller's "Miranda" is also an allusion to *The Tempest*.

I was talking on this subject with Miranda, a woman, who, if any in the world, might speak without heat or bitterness of the position of her sex. Her father was a man who cherished no sentimental reverence for a woman, but a firm belief in the equality of the sexes. She was his eldest child, and came to him at an age when he needed a companion. From the time she could speak and go alone, he addressed her not as a plaything, but as a living mind. Among the few verses he ever wrote were a copy addressed to this child, when the first locks were cut from her head, and the reverence expressed on this occasion for that cherished head he never belied. It was to him the temple of immortal intellect. He respected his child, however, too much to be an indulgent parent. He called on her for clear judgment, for courage, for honor and fidelity, in short for such virtues as he knew. In so far as he possessed the keys to the wonders of this universe, he allowed free use of them to her, and by the incentive of the high expectation he forbade, as far as possible, that she should let the privilege lie idle. (1629-30)

Miranda's conversation with her father is one that Lucilla and Catherine could never imagine having with their fathers. In fact, if they could, they wouldn't be the women they are in *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Washington Square*, for their narrative trajectories would have taken an early turn.

Fuller idealizes her father (or "Miranda's" father), but no more so than Lucilla and Catherine necessarily have to villainize theirs in order to resolve their own narratives. Fuller claims her education with her father taught her not just rote knowledge or even old-fashioned feminine "accomplishments" but also to think and act "Miranda's" egalitarian education shows us why Lucilla's and Catherine's marriage plots fail. For if the difference is that Fuller's father

wanted her to think and act with the belief that men and women were equal, then Dr. Sloper and Dr. Marjoribanks educate Catherine and Lucilla, respectively, to be girls who don't see themselves as "living minds." In fact, Oliphant and James introduce the theme of education early in both novels: *Miss Marjoribanks* opens with Lucilla in isolation from her peers since she has just left her finishing school, and we never see Catherine with young women her age (only Aunt Penniman and, occasionally, her Almond cousins). Lucilla's and Catherine's isolation is, then, part of their respective characters, long before they become women eligible to marry. While the obvious narrative upending is that they never marry, their shared cultural critique is also that they must endure their experiences alone. Combined, these factors leave Lucilla and Catherine to see themselves as anomalies within their "societies." For them, independence comes to mean something entirely separate from what it means in "The Great Lawsuit": it's loneliness, not empowerment.

Indeed, there's a fine line between loneliness and empowerment, and it's one that Eliot claims many readers overlook. In "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," Eliot expresses her worries that neat narrative resolutions, especially neat narrative resolutions for people who belong to moneyed classes, limit the fictional genre to a readership that expects unrealistic fantasy. The opening line categorizes the "evolution" of this genre with biting Linnaean rhetoric, as if to say that people's lives are as predictable as biological labels: "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them—the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic" (978). Though we know Eliot did not care for Oliphant's fiction and had a troubled relationship with James, their iconoclastic heroines could easily be all of these things—"the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic"—at different points in their respective novels. But if Lucilla knows she's silly, Catherine's story may

be even more tragic precisely because she takes of herself so seriously. Similarly, Margaret Hale and Hester Prynne may be precursors to Eliot's critique, but the glimpses we get of their consciousnesses suggest that they, too, fit into this trajectory. Margaret Hale's narrative in many ways typifies the Victorian marriage plot, and Hester's story is the product of a failed marriage and adultery, yet both women take their marriage (and un-marriage) choices seriously: both women's narrative resolutions ultimately hinge on their respective financial and intellectual independence. For if the un-marriage plot was on the horizon when *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850 and *North and South* in 1854-55, it was a cultural project by 1856 when Eliot wrote "Silly Novels" and Barrett Browning published *Aurora Leigh* and, still, in 1866 when Oliphant published *Miss Marjoribanks*. By 1880, James's *Washington Square* was, then, at once outmoded and novel in its subtle critique of the previous generation. *Washington Square* (the latest novel discussed in this dissertation) is even more tragic than *Miss Marjoribanks* precisely because it's a generation removed from Eliot's and Oliphant's critiques, but its heroine finds the yet-outdated questions of marriage horrifyingly relevant and, ultimately, much more intractable.

In 1856 and 1866, Aurora and Lucilla desire to do something other than marry, and this is a novelty. Indeed, unlike Mary Seacole in *Wonderful Adventures* (who, after all, controls her own narrative by eschewing the marriage plot), they are disappointed or frustrated at moments when these new radicalized trajectories appear on the verge of failure. In the end, though, neither woman is surprised that she ends up becoming one of the women she never thought she would be: both Aurora and Lucilla live on their own as a necessary period of development before they reconcile their personal desires with their lives as married women. Yet if Catherine Sloper had read these books, she might have determined not to compromise—in other words, to become the anti-heroine Aurora and Lucilla first imagined without marriage in her future, ever—and known

that she was not alone. Catherine's tragedy, then, isn't that she compromises "independence" for marriage, but that her independence becomes tantamount to loneliness. In the end, Catherine is still unable to transcend the marriage plot, because she's self-aware of her limited world and unhappy with what it has to offer. Ultimately, *Washington Square* redoubles the cultural critique Oliphant imagines since it also poses a fictional dilemma that James returns to across the 1880s: why is the unmarried woman still relevant, and why is she still figured as a needlewoman?

James published his monumental essay "The Art of Fiction" six years after he completed *Washington Square*, but his descriptions of human consciousness in the essay recall how both women's needlework are material representations of their minds. Catherine, like the novel as a whole, is an elegy of sorts for the failure to create a heroine outside of the romance and marriage plot. This plot fails because the narrator wants to reveal the inner workings of her mind, but it is illegible. The prose of *Washington Square* may feel old-fashioned, but the resolution to Catherine's narrative trajectory is, in many ways, new.¹⁴³ James wrote much of *Washington Square* in tandem with *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), which was published just one year later.¹⁴⁴ James was dissatisfied with *Washington Square* and famously omitted it from the New York Edition. *The Portrait of a Lady*, on the other hand, has come to be read as James's finest novel. While it's unproductive to value one novel over the other, it's hard not to read the heroines against one another since one follows the marriage plot (her tragedy) and one does not (also her tragedy). In *The Portrait of a Lady*, however, we do get Isabel Archer's consciousness, and though it's painful, it's legible to us because we know what's going to happen to her. We can

¹⁴³ *Washington Square* is, after all, set in the 1840s or 1850s. And while it belongs to James's "early period," which Jamesians characterize as more plot-heavy than his late works (novels that are much more interested in portrayals of characters' consciousnesses), *Washington Square* occupies some sort of middle ground: it has a minimal plot and we gain some access to character's consciousnesses.

¹⁴⁴ *The Portrait of a Lady* was first published serially in *The Atlantic Monthly* from November 1880 (the same month *Washington Square* ended its serial publication in *Cornhill Magazine*) through December 1881. The one-volume edition of *Portrait of a Lady* was published by Houghton, Mifflin and Company (in the United States) in October 1881 and by Macmillan and Company (in Great Britain) in November 1881.

read James's omission of *Washington Square* from the New York Edition as a generic evaluation: it is, like Catherine, considered too plain and too straightforward compared to the more intricate novels that came immediately after, but the irony may be that the unexpected ending of *Washington Square* was too *avant-garde*, since the same ending was impossible for Isabel in 1881. James claimed the only thing he liked about *Washington Square* was "the girl." Because Catherine was such an enduring character, we might reevaluate the importance of the novel to his narrative project despite the fact that James wrote it out of his canon. For just as James eventually left the novel out of the New York Edition, Catherine is left to herself at the conclusion to *Washington Square*. Perhaps James understood in 1880 and again in 1913 that people were not ready to be left with a "girl" who was to live on her own forever. For if Isabel's story is iconoclastic (she does, after all, do just what Catherine is asked to do in *Washington Square*), then Catherine's could be even more so. Catherine's failure within the novel (and within James's canon) suggests something about the limits of this genre. In fact, the narrator's inability to access Catherine's thoughts isn't just a narrative quirk: it's James's meditation on the limits of representing feminine solitude.

As Catherine and Lucilla come to terms with their lives—cutting their "pleasure out of the pieces," so to speak—they both turn to needlework, the very occupation that both James and Oliphant suggest metaphorically characterizes their consciousnesses (James, *Washington Square* 28). James's interest in discussing metaphor in "The Art of Fiction" shows how the project of conveying their minds is grounded in decisions about the plot that are irreparably bound to his narrative techniques, including metaphor and conceit. Catherine's and Lucilla's needlework contradicts James's conception of the human psyche. For if in "The Art of Fiction" James imagines consciousness as "an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken

threads suspended,” then Catherine’s and Lucilla’s embroidery encloses or conceals that chamber, distancing us from their minds and inner lives (James, “Art” 388). While they’re left to piece together fulfilling lives for themselves, we’re left with mere glimpses of their opaque surfaces, much like the canvases the women embellish.

Ultimately, the new technique we see emerging between *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady* had to abandon what would have been a new move in fiction—a revived needlewoman who lives a fulfilling life on her own—for an impressionistic but old-fashioned marriage plot. James may have abandoned the literal web for a narrative project predicated on a metaphor of an internal web, but the Lucillas and the Catherines belong in a *Middlemarch*, because the threads of their work represent what we now understand as Eliot’s “web.” For Eliot, it wasn’t just the security of a web (a metaphorical woven fabric that locates individuals and secures them in relationship to others) but also its fragility that’s important, because this fragility means that we are all, inevitably, on our own, even as we’re bound to other people.

If we read the final sentence of *Washington Square* in this light, then Catherine picking up her “morsel of fancy-work” for “life, as it were” is an Eliotesque conclusion about meaningful isolation. The final paragraph of *Middlemarch* may be the one James could not write for Catherine and the one Oliphant could not write for Lucilla, for it shows the beauty in a quiet life. For Catherine, for Lucilla, for the countless of other heroines and women across the mid-nineteenth century, just as for Dorothea, “the growing good of the world is partly dependent upon unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 799).

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