VICTORIAN VOICES: GENDER IDEOLOGY AND SHAKESPEARE’S FEMALE CHARACTERS

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by

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Abstract

The Victorians loved Shakespeare and, during this period, the study of Shakespeare became a popular form of education for middle class women, some of whom began writing about the female characters who populated these plays. Ongoing debates about the inherent nature of womanhood and the role of women in society—collectively known as the Woman Question—were also taking place in England at this time. These two areas converge in the writing produced by nineteenth-century female critics who used their criticism of Shakespeare’s female characters to express their views about Victorian gender ideology. Through their commentary on Shakespeare’s plays, Anna Jameson, Constance O’Brien, Grace Latham, Helena Faucit, and Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott reveal their own conceptions of gender by affirming, challenging, or rejecting many of the accepted Victorian gender norms that they identify in Shakespeare’s female characters. Several of the characters that these critics discuss fall into distinct categories: there are the tragic innocents—Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia; the defiant daughters and dutiful wives—Juliet, Katherine, and Lady Macbeth; and the wise and witty women—Portia, Beatrice, and Rosalind. In each instance, the critics who consider these characters use their analyses to explore the inherent nature of femininity, the validity of socially constructed gender norms, and the impact of cultural practices, such as marriage, on women. Collectively, their work reflects an adherence to many basic Victorian precepts of femininity—gentleness, selflessness, and purity; however, these critics also question the notion of many socially imposed gender expectations that governed and limited the agency of nineteenth-century women. Through their combined criticism of Shakespeare’s female characters, these critics engage in the public discourse surrounding gender and demonstrate a growing tolerance for female autonomy, as well as a pronounced desire to recognize female intelligence and strength.
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**Introduction**

Victorian gender ideology and Shakespearean drama fascinate me. In fact, my interest in nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood and marriage began with an early twentieth-century film version of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. In this 1929 film, Mary Pickford portrays Katherine as a forceful, determined New Woman still operating within a social framework that afforded women little, if any, redress against tyrannical husbands. The social conception of marriage as a patriarchal structure that favored male power and female submission had been in place for much of the nineteenth century, even as women began to expand their public and political presence and to seek more equitable treatment under the law. Viewing Pickford’s Katherine, I was struck by the manner in which her performance challenged social norms—this Katherine was a woman who first railed against her lack of power within marriage and then, after realizing her lack of legal and social status, embraced her position as Petruchio’s wife in order to subvert her husband’s influence, at least within the domestic sphere. By the end of the film, Pickford’s Katherine assumes the dominant role in the marriage and humors her hapless husband while winking at the audience, which, unlike Petruchio, realizes that she has taken control of the situation and thereby empowered herself as best as she can while still operating within the confines of social and private spheres. Pickford’s Katherine alerts the audience to the subversive nature of her apparent acceptance of social norms even as she is attempting to recast those norms, thus eliciting the audience’s collusion in her subversion of Petruchio’s power.

The connections between Shakespeare’s female characters and the societal conceptions of womanhood expressed in this film led me to consider the discursive convergence between performance, audience reaction, and issues of gender that took place during the nineteenth
century. I discovered that Victorian responses to Shakespeare—particularly those offered by women—could function as a framework for affirming or challenging then contemporary cultural conceptions of womanhood and marriage. While the popularity of Shakespeare’s plays undoubtedly contributed to the abundance of nineteenth-century criticism, it also became clear to me that much of the Victorian scholarship by women surrounding Shakespeare’s drama had little to do with performance and was more focused on the inherent elements of the plays, namely the depiction of women and how such depictions related to nineteenth-century gender mores.

The Victorians, by all accounts, loved Shakespeare and demonstrated their affinity for his works by producing and performing Shakespeare’s plays throughout the mid to late nineteenth century. Judging by frequency of performance, among the most popular of Shakespeare’s plays during the Victorian period were Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, As You Like It, The Merchant of Venice, and Much Ado about Nothing, all of which include significant female characters. In addition to more or less standard presentations of Shakespeare’s plays, the period also saw several stage adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays by eighteenth and nineteenth century playwrights, such as David Garrick’s Katherine and Petruchio, an immensely popular adaptation of Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew, and Naham Tate’s adaptation of King Lear, both of which were frequently performed on the Victorian stage. The range of female representation Victorian critics found in Shakespeare’s plays is wide and varied and includes selfless, tragic and victimized women, such as Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia; assertive characters, like Juliet, Katherine, and Lady Macbeth, who defy social norms and mores and who also share a forceful presence equal to their male

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1 I’m basing my estimate of the popularity of these plays on the data provided by Donald Mullin in Victorian Plays: A Record of Significant Productions on the London Stage, 1837-1901. Mullin provides a comprehensive list of nineteenth-century London productions of Shakespeare’s plays, as well as the length of each production’s run, and the theater at which each production was staged.
counterparts; and wise and witty female characters like Portia, Beatrice, and Rosalind, who took the leading role in educating or correcting men while still upholding and reinforcing the existing social order. The range of female characters depicted in these plays, coupled with the popularity of these productions on the Victorian stage, provided numerous opportunities for female critics to engage in social discourse about both the nature of gender and the socially imposed conceptions of gender during the nineteenth century. The traits of Shakespeare’s female characters and the social situations in which they are engaged often parallel the issues highlighted in Victorian debates about the nature of femininity and marriage, providing occasions for meaningful discourse about gender and social norms.

During the nineteenth century, questions about the essential nature of women and their appropriate roles in society were being widely discussed by such figures as John Stuart Mill, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Havelock Ellis, and Herbert Spencer, making Shakespeare’s characterizations of women and his focus on marriage as a central plot device particularly well suited to serve as an entry point for continuing cultural dialogues about the roles and nature of women in society. At the start of the Victorian period, in 1837, women’s official status in society—both practically and legally—had changed very little during the roughly 300 years or so since Shakespeare had first written his plays. As had been the case since the sixteenth century, women in the nineteenth century were still categorized within the legal system as *femme sole* or *femme covert*, based on their marital status. This legal terminology denoted that once a woman married and became a *femme covert* in the eyes of the law, she was essentially subsumed by her husband and ceased to exist as an autonomous legal entity. This arrangement was typically beneficial for a man but detrimental for a woman. As John Stuart Mill observes, “[t]he two are called ‘one person in law,’ for the purpose of inferring that whatever is hers is his, but the
parallel inference is never drawn that whatever is his is hers; the maxim is not applied against the
man, except to make him responsible to third parties for her acts, as a master is for the acts of his
slaves or of his cattle” (37). The legal practice of coverture regulated and limited the legal
autonomy of married women and, in Victorian society, it was expected that women would marry.
Helsinger, Sheets and Veeder also remark on the relationship of marriage and coverture in the
nineteenth century, when they note that Victorian “[p]arents and clergymen taught that marriage
was the purpose of life, but the law regarded it as the end of a woman’s autonomous existence”
(2: 3). The pressure on women to marry is also rife within nineteenth-century literary references
to women. Novels by most Victorian authors, including Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell,
Charles Dickens, George Eliot and George Gissing, focus on marriage as a central plot device,
attesting to the prominent place that marriage held for most Victorian women. If most women
married, the result, of course, was that most women would be subject to coverture.

In theory, a Victorian woman was generally expected to remain dependent on her
husband or nearest male relative for sustenance, support, and legal protection, but this was not
always practical or possible. Although all women were expected to depend upon and defer to
male authority, middle class women seem to have occupied the most prominent role as subjects
of Victorian discourse concerning appropriate gender expectations. As a result, by the mid
nineteenth century, public debate regarding whether women—particularly middle class
women—were psychologically, emotionally, intellectually and physically suited for roles other
than wife, mother, and homemaker became increasingly common. The range of issues being
discussed in nineteenth-century society focused on the very nature of gender difference and the
existence of inherently gendered traits or predispositions: whether women were capable of
advanced learning; whether women could and should be educated; whether women deserved
greater autonomy under the law, especially in cases of divorce and child custody, where legal rights had traditionally belonged exclusively to husbands; whether women were fit to own property; and whether women were capable of working outside of the home as contributing members of society. These issues—collectively referred to as the Woman Question—shaped the public discourse that took place in the form of formal treatises, political tracts, essays, lectures, editorials, and political cartoons.

The burgeoning field of Shakespearean criticism that began to appear during this time offered an ideal opportunity for female scholars to enter into the discourse surrounding the nature of women, via their discussions about Shakespeare’s female characters. Several different factors converged to create this ideal opportunity: first, the study of Shakespeare’s drama was seen as an appropriate educational tool for girls and women during the nineteenth century, creating a degree of familiarity with these plays for most women;\(^2\) secondly, literary venues and societies were publishing female critiques and allowing female membership, providing a medium through which female Shakespearean critics could publicly express their views, particularly about Shakespeare’s female characters; and, finally, nineteenth-century male critics and Shakespearean scholars typically shied away from any in-depth analysis or discussion of Shakespeare’s female characters, leaving the field to female commentators. Even a cursory glance at the Shakespearean criticism by male critics prior to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century reveals an overwhelming focus on Shakespeare’s male characters, such as Hamlet; moreover, when

\(^2\) Gail Marshall observes that “[d]uring the years 1850-1900, when the debates over women’s education were most vociferous . . . educationalists strive both to articulate appropriate motives for improving the education of women of all classes and to design appropriate models and curricula whereby those ends might be attained” (22-3). According to Marshall, this motive inspires “an effort throughout the century to embed Shakespeare within the rhetoric and canon of girls’ reading,” which is concurrent with the “increasingly central cultural position of Shakespeare in the Victorian period” and the increasingly “pervasive sense that Shakespeare could educate for female citizenship in the nineteenth century” (22). Such concerted exposure to Shakespeare provided a context through which women could engage in public discussions surrounding both the plays and issues of gender.
Shakespeare’s plays were discussed by male critics, his female characters, if mentioned at all, were typically examined as plot devices or dismissed outright as insignificant adornment in the plays.\(^3\) This circumstance had created a void in popular literary criticism that emerging Victorian female critics were eager and willing to fill. Female critics tended to see the complexity of female characterization in Shakespeare’s plays as a reflection of the complexity surrounding the Woman Question in society.

Several of the Victorian women who wrote about Shakespeare’s plays tend to focus solely on his female characters and their relationships with male characters, thus providing a uniquely feminine perspective on gender and inter-gender relations in the plays and in the Victorian contexts already mentioned. In addition, these critics uniformly tend to look at Shakespeare’s female characters not as mutable stage representations of women but as fixed representations, akin to characters in a novel, designed to illustrate and engage with the culturally normative gender ideals that they observed in Victorian England.\(^4\) As the nineteenth-century essayist and critic Charles Lamb points out, when portrayed on stage, we see a character, such as King Lear, but “while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear” (88). This distinction is particularly significant for female critics discussing female characters, for, on some level, these critics don’t just read about Shakespeare’s women, they seem to relate to Shakespeare’s women on a deeply personal level; this, in turn, enables them to apply their own perceptions of Victorian

\[^3\] In *Shakespeare’s Festive Tragedy* and in her Introduction to *The Female Tragic Hero in Renaissance Drama*, Naomi Conn Liebler identifies and discusses the historical neglect of Shakespeare’s female characters in much of the scholarly work produced by male critics, up to and including the nineteenth century. Liebler’s analysis focuses on the significance of female lead characters in Shakespeare’s tragedies as well as the general lack of scholarly attention to Shakespeare’s female characters.

\[^4\] Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott, one of the Victorian critics who wrote about Shakespeare’s female characters, explicitly addresses this issue at the start of her discussion of Juliet in *Shakespeare’s Garden of Girls*, when she states that her purpose is “to take the leading girl characters and make as close acquaintance with them as they will allow me” rather than to “speak of any of Shakespeare’s plays as a whole” (4). This approach, while not always explicitly stated, tends to be common among the various women writers I discuss.
gender mores and socially normative behaviors to their understanding of the female characters in Shakespeare’s plays.

**Cultural and Political Contexts**

At the start of the Victorian era, gender spheres had been relatively clear cut. Women were normally relegated to the domestic sphere, where their duties concerned caring for the household, raising the children, tending to the sick and providing a comfortable home environment for husband and family, particularly in middle class households. Likewise, men typically occupied the public sphere of business and politics, providing the financial support for the household and making important decisions that would affect the household. The different spheres and responsibilities of each gender, and particularly of women, are discussed by Victorian authors such Sarah Stickney Ellis, who wrote a popular conduct manual, *The Women of England* (1839), in which she advises women to maintain their domesticity and selflessness, and Coventry Patmore, whose popular poem *The Angel in the House* (1854; 1862) established a poetic model of angelic femininity as the ideal standard for women. And although John Ruskin argued for the enlightenment of both genders, he still adhered to the notion of separate spheres and inherent gender traits in his work, as in his *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), while John Stuart Mill argues against the imposition of the widely practiced gender norms he described in his treatise, *On the Subjection of Women* (1869). Collectively, these works suggest a degree of continuity in the general perception of gender normative traits and behaviors during the nineteenth century. During this same period, theorists such as Patrick Geddes and John Arthur Thomson, G. Stanley

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5 In her conduct manual, Sarah Stickney Ellis notes “that to women belongs the minute and particular observance of all those trifles which fill up the sum of human happiness or misery... she endeavors to prove that it is the minor morals of domestic life which give the tone to English character, and that over this sphere of duty it is her peculiar province to preside” (39).
Hall, Havelock Ellis, and Herbert Spencer had helped to perpetuate many of the gender norms and cultural practices that cast femininity as inherently weak, passive, frail, nurturing, gentle, and emotional, thus suiting women for roles like domesticity and the care of the sick. These theorists also endorsed masculinity as being intrinsically strong, assertive, aggressive, intellectual, and rational, thus suiting men for roles in business, politics, the academy, and for physical labor outside the home. Generally speaking, this division of spheres was seen as an effective model for society and was widely accepted as such by many during the nineteenth century. As the Victorian era progressed, however, several factors combined to call this widely held set of assumptions into question.

Changing factors in Victorian society included the fact that England was becoming ever more urban and industrialized, resulting in the necessity for an increasing number of women to seek employment outside of the domestic sphere; in addition, by the middle of the nineteenth century, in Britain, the number of women began to outpace the number of men, as evidenced by the Census of 1851, which revealed that, due to a far greater number of women than men in England, the possibility of marriage for every woman was unrealistic. While unmarried women of the middle class who had no viable means of support often found work in domestic roles, for instance, as governesses or paid companions, the need for women of the lower, working classes to contribute to household income drove many such women during the Victorian period to work in factories, as shop clerks, or as seamstresses and the like. One need look no farther than Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* or Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* to see depictions of women who had to work for a living in factories, as dressmakers, and sometimes even as prostitutes. While marriage was still seen as the optimal goal for women of all classes, the entry of middle class women into the work force was becoming both more common and more
potentially threatening, from a practical as well as an ideological point of view. Many men and women alike theorized that a significant presence of women in the work force would destabilize the social norms of home and family that had been a cornerstone of society up until that point.

Meanwhile, Victorian assumptions about the nature and importance of marriage promoted the popularly held ideal of complementarity in marriage. Social theorists, such as Geddes and Thomson, observed the complementary nature of gender among different species in the natural world and then extrapolated from their observations to claim the more specific notion of a complementary gender system in humans as well. This concept of complementarity is explained by Geddes and Thomson in their work, *The Evolution of Sex* (1889). Geddes and Thomson argue that, because the nature of gender is complementary, with each gender lacking certain traits found in the opposite gender, the natural drive is to want to unite with a member of the opposite gender and thus to comprise the unified totality of traits necessary for humanity to flourish. Whereas women were generally thought to be passionate, nurturing, and feeling natures, men were believed to be strong, aggressive, and rational—thus, the genders were meant to complement one another, not to compete with one another. Moreover, theorists such as Charles Darwin and Hebert Spencer emphasized the inherent differences in physiology between the sexes and argued that women’s societal roles were necessarily determined by their biological functions—since women were biologically determined to carry and nurse offspring, their pre-determined societal role was located in the home and domestic sphere, as opposed to the public sphere of business and politics. Others, such as G. Stanley Hall and Havelock Ellis, argued that, psychologically, women were not capable of competing in the male dominated worlds of business, politics and public affairs and that a traditional education would tax a woman’s intellectual capabilities at the expense of her inherent qualities and, thus, cause her to risk losing
all that was admirably and ideally feminine in her nature. Still others argued that allowing women to own property and to maintain autonomy in decision making regarding their own and their children’s welfare would lead to imminent social disaster because women were not qualified to or capable of dealing with matters of politics or law. As debates about these matters—collectively the Woman Question—became more and more common throughout the period, gender ideology began to shift, and laws began to change to reflect the developing social mores accompanying that shift.

The Victorian era witnessed widespread changes to the legal and political rights of women. Legislation affecting women introduced during this period included changes in codes governing child custody, such as the Infants and Child Custody Bill of 1839, which was followed by the Custody Act of 1873 and the Custody of Infants Act in 1886; changes to the legal rights of women in cases of divorce, such as the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Acts of 1857 and 1884; and changes to the statutes governing women’s property, such as the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882. While such legislation ultimately helped to improve

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6 In response to the debate over the Infants and Child Custody Bill of 1839, a critic of the bill, John Kemble, wrote that this bill was in violation of “the great fundamental law of society, the law of paternity” and that it should be “the father’s right to have sole command in his own house, and over his own legitimate children” (qtd in Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 2: 10). This debate shows that the absolute nature of paternal authority was emphasized as an essential, inherent right during the Victorian period. The nature of Kemble’s comments also illustrates the often divisive nature of public debates over gender.

7 The rights of mothers during the nineteenth century were very limited. The Child Custody Act of 1873 “extended the mother’s rights somewhat” but it was not until 1886 that “the Custody of Infants Act gave the mother guardianship in the event of the father’s death but as long as the father lived, he retained the authority to decide upon the religion, education, and upbringing of the children. Equal rights and responsibilities for both parents were not established until the Guardianship of Infants Act in 1925” (Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 2: 13). Thus, even at the close of the nineteenth century, the rights of women in custodial disputes continued to be debated and legislated.

8 During the late nineteenth century, some progress was made in the fight for a woman’s right to own property. According to Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder, “The struggle to extend property rights lasted about a quarter century . . . from 1856 to 1882 in England” (2: 13). The last Married Women’s Property Act was passed in England in 1882 but, even then, when a woman was finally allowed to “keep all real and personal property that was hers at the time of marriage or acquired later,” a married woman was still not considered to have the same “status . . . [as] a man or a feme sole” (21). Despite the limited nature of these concessions to women, this was still a significant and very public development in the rights of women.
the status of women in Victorian England, these changes transpired over many years and only after much public debate. Meanwhile, debates intensified, and competing views of maternal rights, filial duty, the ability of women to own property and to act autonomously on their own behalf (factors that eventually led to changes in the laws of England) also informed the way in which Victorian critics saw Shakespeare’s female characters.

As the nineteenth century progressed, women began to gain more rights under the law and more autonomy in society. With these changing circumstances, the image of the assertive, independent New Woman emerged and the intellectual, educated group of women known as the ‘bluestockings’ gained prominence. These new conceptions of womanhood were not embraced by all, as demonstrated in George Gissing’s fictional account of the challenges facing intellectual and independent women in *The Odd Women* (1893). Neither was public disapproval of changes in gender ideology dictated by the gender of the opponent. Throughout these tumultuous times, women disagreed over elements of gender ideology as often as men did. The issues being debated in society were complex, and the views that people held regarding gender were equally complicated. While one woman might see the home as a sacrosanct environment, one that belonged to women, others might see domesticity as confining and stifling; one woman might see female education as a corrupting influence likely to erode society, while another might see education as a necessary step in the evolution of the gender as a whole. When one considers the range of possibilities between these polarized extremes—for instance, that an educated woman might be better suited to run a household and raise children or that a feminine influence in politics might make for a more sympathetic and nurturing government and, thus, be a boon to society—it becomes evident that a diverse range of positions and views coexisted during this period. It is just such a range of ideology that is reflected in the Shakespearean criticism.
produced by women writing about Shakespeare’s female characters during the mid to late nineteenth century.

As women looked for more opportunity in nineteenth-century society, a distinctly feminine public discourse concerning gender ideology emerged. At one extreme of this discourse were those who desperately clung to the established spheres as the only legitimate approach to a stable nation and family; at the other were those who saw the need for radical change in order to deconstruct and reconstruct a failing cultural norm. Between these extremes were many voices that appreciated and acknowledged elements of both concepts and attempted constructively to join in the debate over the Woman Question in all its forms. And these chart precisely the types and range of views offered by Victorian women who were writing about Shakespeare’s female characters. The subjectivity exhibited by many of these critics is indicative that they are reflecting their own attitudes toward gender ideology, whether consciously or not, even as they are being directly impacted by broader social customs and debates. These critics sometimes affirm, sometimes denounce, and sometimes challenge popular gender norms via the very means by which established authorities attempted to indoctrinate women into socially normalized gender behavior—through the use of Shakespeare. These women then use the means previously employed to encourage accepted behaviors as a means by which they might enter into a social discussion about gender and its impact on women’s issues.

**Critical Contexts**

Victorian ideations of womanhood are particularly complex and diverse, a notion that has gained more critical support in the years since the early feminism of the 1970s, when scholarship tended toward a more polarized reading of Victorian women in literature as either the neglected
and often passive victim or as a threateningly subversive and either monstrous or heroic presence. Soon after the first wave of modern feminist theory was applied to the Victorian era, Elizabeth Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder delineated many of the legal, literary and social arguments concerning gender ideology and the related changes in Victorian laws, practices and customs in *The Woman Question*. Likewise, in *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood*, Cynthia Eagle Russett presented a thorough review of the pseudo-scientific, theoretical debates regarding the nature of female sexuality and gender that took place during the nineteenth century. Russett examines the public discourse surrounding gender and sexuality that provided a context for many nineteenth-century political and legal changes, particularly those that affected women. The nineteenth-century cultural ideals and debates that Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder and Russett discuss tend to focus largely on public, explicit challenges or changes to gender ideology and the issues surrounding them in Victorian England. When considered in total, these sources provide a comprehensive overview of the practical and theoretical context for Victorian conceptions of gender.

The more subtle, implicit expression of gender ideology during this period is discussed in *Uneven Developments*, by Mary Poovey. In addition to considering public expressions of gender, such as parliamentary debates and established social practices, Poovey also explores the ways in which fictional and non-fictional literature conveyed embedded gender ideologies in ways furthering their internalization by Victorian readers, many of whom were women. More recently, authors such as Laura Morgan Green and Lisa Surridge have further explored the relationship between gender ideology and the novel—namely, how social ideals and gender normative behaviors are either perpetuated, undermined or reflected through depictions of social mores and cultural practices in nineteenth-century novels. Green’s *Educating Women: Cultural*
Conflict and Victorian Literature focuses on Victorian novels as a medium through which the sometimes contentious relationship between women, education, domesticity and gender ideology is reflected, while Surridge’s work, Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian England, considers public debates regarding marital violence, as well as the depiction of domestic violence in literary works, to explore the relationship between cultural reality and fictionalized representations of violence in the nineteenth century novel. As the range of critical and historical works published on the topic of Victorian gender ideology might suggest, conceptions of nineteenth-century womanhood were pervasive, complicated, and fluid.

While authors like Poovey, Green, and Surridge have explored the relationship between gender ideology and literature, particularly as an influence on Victorian girls and women, Gail Marshall has explored the influence of Shakespeare’s drama on this same population. According to Marshall, Shakespeare’s plays were used to inculcate Victorian girls and women into an established nineteenth-century framework of gender ideology, with varying results. In her book, Shakespeare and Victorian Women, Marshall concludes that, although Shakespeare’s works may have originally been used to promote gender normative behaviors among Victorians, particularly among females, these same girls soon found that they could also use Shakespeare’s plays as a means of expressing their own views about gender. These girls often did so by entering essay contests or completing written assignments about Shakespeare, by performing the plays in private as well as in public venues, and, as adults, by expressing their views about womanhood through memoirs or fictionalized literature about Shakespeare’s drama. Thus, Marshall argues, the very tool that was used to teach girls and to implement gender normative behavior frequently became the means of more subversive discussions that had the potential to undermine socially perpetuated gender ideals. Whereas Marshall considers a number of venues, from the private
domestic setting to the novel, my aim is to focus more closely on a smaller group of women than
Marshall does—specifically, professional and public female critics of Shakespeare’s plays whose
work centered on Shakespeare’s female characters in relation to issues of Victorian gender
ideology.

In addition to Victorianists, other scholars whose work is particularly important to my
project are Amy Louise Erickson, who considers the historical background of the laws regulating
property and ownership during the early modern period in England, as well as the practical way
that such laws affected women and the cultural practices involving women; Ann Thompson and
Sasha Roberts, whose compilation of Shakespearean criticism written by women between the
years 1660 and 1900 provided me with essential information about Victorian female scholarship;
and Naomi Conn Liebler, who focuses on the status of Shakespeare’s female characters as
protagonists and even tragic heroes in their own right, an approach shared by several of the
Victorian women who write about Shakespeare’s female characters.

**Victorian Women and Shakespeare**

Many women in Victorian England attempted to take a prominent role in shaping gender
ideology even as they were being shaped by said ideology. Girls and women in Victorian
England were enjoying unprecedented exposure to Shakespeare’s plays, which led to a great
degree of comfort and familiarity in discussing Shakespeare’s work; as Marshall has pointed out,
Shakespeare “inhabits a space in Victorian women’s culture which . . . is characterized by a
discursive, interrogative energy” (4). This energy is often demonstrated in nineteenth-century
criticism by women who explore the connection between Shakespeare’s female characters and
gender ideology. My examination of the women writing about Shakespeare during this period
reveals that these women are just as likely to promote normalized Victorian gendered behavior as they are to applaud what might otherwise be seen as excessive or radical behavior in a female character. While many Victorian women wrote about Shakespeare during this period, I am limiting my discussion to those critics who specifically focus on Shakespeare’s female characters and their relation to Victorian gender ideology and behavioral norms. Anna Jameson, Constance O’Brien, Grace Latham, Helena Faucit, and Madeleine Leigh Noel-Elliott are Victorian critics who express their individual perception of gender mores through their Shakespearean criticism and, in the process, reveal a complex and frequently divergent range of views about nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood and gender ideology. My aim is to extract and identify those moments when these Victorian women reveal, through their criticism of and commentary on Shakespeare’s female characters, their individual perceptions of late nineteenth-century gender ideology, and to explore the relationship between their views and the Victorian cultural discourse about gender.

One of the earliest Victorian female critics writing about Shakespeare is Anna Jameson. In her book, *Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1832; 1858), Jameson examines Shakespeare’s female characters as a means of discussing essential gender traits and behaviors. Jameson was a prolific writer and traveled in literary and theatrical circles. She knew John Ruskin, Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, as well as Fanny Kemble, a popular actress of the time. Jameson also mentored many young women writers and activists during her lifetime. While Jameson historicizes the characters she writes about in *Shakespeare’s Heroines*, she also applies her own

9 Mary Cowden Clarke’s fictionalized consideration of Shakespeare’s characters, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1850-1852), presents a more implicit analysis of Shakespeare’s female characters via a fictionalized backstory that she creates for each of the female characters that she discusses. While these fictionalized accounts also reflect the relationship between Shakespeare’s female characters and Victorian gender ideology, the nature of Clarke’s work is quite different from standard scholarship by women and, as such, would be more effectively considered elsewhere, in a separate study.
nineteenth-century understanding of gender mores to her criticism. As Cheri Larson Hoeckley observes in her introduction to Jameson’s book, her analysis of Shakespeare’s female characters “allowed Jameson to explore, and ultimately to demonstrate, how Victorian women might creatively and properly move from the household and enter the public sphere—a sphere that many Victorians viewed as a masculine domain, but one that Jameson viewed as deeply in need of female influence” (9). Jameson’s analysis blends scholarship on Shakespeare’s plays, in the form of close reading, with her personal insights regarding gender. *Shakespeare’s Heroines* was extremely popular and seems to have served as a foundational text for subsequent female critics who also consider Shakespeare’s female characters in relation to nineteenth-century gender normative behaviors. Those female critics don’t typically acknowledge the work done by Jameson; nonetheless, their views often express similar points in ways that appear to demonstrate Jameson’s influence.

The Victorian critic and scholar Constance O’Brien presented a paper to the New Shakspere Society and regularly contributed to *The Monthly Packet* and its series on Shakespeare’s female characters, “Shakspere Talks with Uncritical People.” ¹⁰ This series specifically targeted young women who would not necessarily have had rigorous or scholarly exposure to Shakespeare’s plays; it was intended to introduce them to Shakespeare’s works and the concepts expressed therein. Other than the record constituted by her publications, little is known about her work and nothing seems to be known about her personal life.

¹⁰ According to Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts, in *Women Reading Shakespeare 1660-1900*, the paper that O’Brien presented to the New Shakspere Society in 1891 was entitled “On Shakspere’s Old Men” (142). My focus is on O’Brien’s series on Shakespeare that appeared in *The Monthly Packet* in February, 1879 and November, 1891.
Like O’Brien, Grace Latham also presented her work to the New Shakspere Society, for instance, she delivered her paper “‘O Poor Ophelia!’” to the Society in 1884.\footnote{Latham’s paper appears in the collection that is labeled as the 1880-2 record of transactions; however, the publication also includes the information that Latham’s paper was presented on Friday, February 8, 1884 at the 94th meeting of the Society and is followed by the footnote, “N. S. SOC. TRANS., 1880-4.” This discrepancy suggests that a reprinted edition of the \textit{The New Shakspere Society’s Transactions} mistakenly published Latham’s paper in its 1880-2 record.} As a member of this literary organization dedicated to the study and publication of Shakespeare’s plays (and whose members included Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, and Lord Alfred Tennyson), Latham presented her own writing and engaged in debates about Shakespeare’s dramas. While little is known about Latham’s personal life, she regularly entered into the society’s debates during her years as an active member. Although Latham does not seem to have gained much renown outside of this literary circle, the \textit{Transactions} of the society suggest that her scholarship was held in high regard by her fellow members.\footnote{\textit{The New Shakspere Society’s Transactions} between the years 1884 and 1889 recounts some of the discussion that Latham entered into with other Society members.}

One of the best known women writing about Shakespeare’s female characters in the late nineteenth century was Helena Faucit. Faucit was a highly acclaimed actress during the nineteenth century and had portrayed many of Shakespeare’s female characters on stage. She played Juliet while still a schoolgirl (Faucit 88), for instance. During her long and illustrious career, Faucit portrayed many of Shakespeare’s female characters on the London stage, often having a say in the staging and costuming of the roles. As a leading figure on the Victorian stage and someone who had worked closely with William Charles Macready, a leading actor-manager during the Victorian period, she was familiar with critical reactions to Shakespeare and was held in relatively high regard by the general public and by those in theatrical circles. In her popular book, \textit{On Some of Shakespeare’s Female Characters} (1885), Faucit explains her own
perceptions and understandings of the female roles represented on stage, often conveying an explicit awareness of the gender ideology being produced and conveyed through her portrayals. Although Faucit’s experience with these characters is largely performative, she explains that she is consciously attempting to “divest” herself “of the emotions” that she felt when portraying a character and “to write . . . with critical calmness” when working as a scholar (90). Throughout her book, Faucit attempts a detached style when discussing Shakespeare’s female characters, with varying degrees of success. Faucit’s commentary, while not strictly critical or scholarly, attempts to be more than a memoir and to provide commentary on Shakespeare and Victorian gender ideals.

Madeline Leigh-Noel Elliott, like Grace Latham, was also a member of the New Shakspere Society and presented some of her essays concerning Shakespeare’s female characters in the form of lectures to the organization in 1884. Unlike Latham, however, Elliott subsequently published these essays in book form—Lady Macbeth: A Study (1884)\textsuperscript{13} and Shakespeare’s Garden of Girls (1885)—both of which were quite popular during the late nineteenth century. Little else is known about this author and, unlike Latham, Elliott doesn’t seem to appear in the admittedly incomplete record of discussions within the New Shakspere Society’s annals.

In any event, all of these critics inform their analyses of Shakespeare’s female characters with their own experiences as female members of a society that was very consciously examining the nature of gender. In the process, these women impose their own gender ideals onto Shakespeare’s female characters and reveal the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of the late nineteenth-century debate over changing conceptions of womanhood. While their writing does

\textsuperscript{13} Elliott’s first book, Lady Macbeth: A Study, is catalogued in various databases under a variety of names, including M. Leigh-Noel, M. Leigh-Noel Elliott, Madeleine Leigh-Noel, and Madeline Leigh-Noel Elliott. For the sake of uniformity, I have listed both of her books under the last name Elliott and refer to the author by this name throughout my discussion of her criticism.
not appear to express a concerted agenda regarding the Woman Question, they do seem to be internalizing and subsequently imposing their personal beliefs and attitudes toward gender ideology on the female characters that they saw in Shakespeare’s plays. These critics use their respective commentaries on Shakespeare’s female characters to implicitly emphasize the drawbacks and dangers of rigid adherence to a strict code of gender norms or, conversely, to caution against a blind adherence to rebellious, destabilizing conceptions of womanhood. As a result, their respective analyses of the plays provide tacit confirmations and critiques of Victorian gender ideology, cultural practices, and societal mores.

In the chapters that follow, I will examine the respective views of these Victorian female critics regarding both Shakespeare’s female characters and nineteenth century gender ideals. The titles of the chapters that follow reflect the prominent themes that emerged in the writings of these women and their perceptions of Shakespeare’s female figures. In chapter one, Tragic Innocents, I explore how these critics expressed their views on female selflessness and obedience to male authority by considering Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia; in chapter two, Defiant Daughters and Faithful Wives, I discuss how relevant nineteenth-century female critics conveyed their opinions about female defiance of masculine authority through their commentary on Juliet, Katherine, and Lady Macbeth; and, in chapter three, Wise and Witty Women, I examine how these Victorian critics communicated their perception of female autonomy and intelligence in relation to societal and familial orders in their analyses of Rosalind, Beatrice and Portia.

Shakespeare’s female characters seemed to enact, reinforce, or defy the very social norms that were being discussed and observed in Victorian England, and the women who were writing about Shakespeare’s female characters turned to them as touchstones of conventional or alternative codes of femininity. Their criticism both promotes standard ideological beliefs about
femininity and expresses disdain toward inequitable cultural practices that demean women. This, in turn, reflects the often contradictory and sometimes conflicted feelings that many women in Victorian society experienced. Even as these women are commenting on the nature of Victorian gender ideology, at times consciously and explicitly and, at other times, more implicitly, they often seem to be struggling with these concepts themselves. The analysis conducted by female Victorian critics of Shakespeare offers a distinct record of the evolution of Victorian gender ideology by women who were directly impacted by these attitudes and cultural practices. These women sometimes affirm, sometimes denounce, and sometimes challenge such ideologies via the very means by which authorities sought to normalize gendered behavior, that is, by using Shakespeare’s plays and female characters as examples, in order to affirm or to reshape popular Victorian conceptions of womanhood.
Chapter One: The Tragic Innocents

Of all Shakespeare’s creations, those female characters who seem to embody the Victorian ideals of womanhood—namely, loyalty, fidelity, selflessness, honor, and passivity—only to meet with tragic ends are among the most sympathetic to nineteenth-century female critics. Three of Shakespeare’s tragic female characters—Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia—seem to have held special interest for Victorian critics Anna Jameson, Constance O’Brien, Grace Latham, Helena Faucit, and Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott. These critics offer their personal assessments of Victorian social and gender norms that pertain to women through their respective analyses of Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia. Jameson, O’Brien, Latham, Faucit, and Elliott consider the gender normative traits that they identify in these characters, particularly in regard to relations between men and women, as a means of affirming or challenging socially condoned precepts. In the process, these critics reveal individual variations in gender ideals as well as subtle patterns that emerge throughout the Victorian period in the way that women are perceived.

While Victorian authors such as Coventry Patmore memorialized the ideal Victorian woman as selfless and submissive in his poem, *The Angel in the House* (1854; 1862), actual women who followed such socially constructed gender ideals often met dismal and even tragic ends—a situation that was not lost on many of the nineteenth-century women who wrote about these characters. Each of the characters whose innocence meets with a tragic fate—Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia—fits Patmore’s angelic ideal, to some extent, with each character exhibiting varying degrees of passivity, selflessness, and submissiveness. The range of responses to these characters is markedly varied in that these critics see Ophelia, Desdemona and Cordelia as either pathetically victimized, unfortunately misused, or even as tragically heroic because of the gender normative traits that each character displays and the feminine ideals to which they
adhere.\textsuperscript{14} Jameson, O’Brien, Latham, Faucit, and Elliott explore conceptions of womanhood by applying their individual but recognizably Victorian ideals of femininity to Shakespeare’s female characters in order to construct a view of womanhood that both affirms much of Coventry Patmore’s demure, angelic prototype of the ideal woman while also anticipating and celebrating the heroic female model that would be promoted more than a century later by modern feminist critics such as Naomi Conn Liebler.

The Victorian women writing about Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia identify in these characters a range of traits that were typically associated with women during the nineteenth century. Jameson, Latham, Faucit, and Elliott evaluate what they see as Ophelia’s feminine traits—her passivity, her gentleness, and her timidity—as well as her relationships and interactions with the men in her life, as they attempt to determine culpability in Ophelia’s tragic end, generally concluding that her extreme passivity contributed to her downfall. Likewise, Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott consider Desdemona’s essentially passive, gentle nature and her relationship with her father and, subsequently, with Othello, coming to the conclusion that her passivity and momentary dishonesty are contributing factors to her tragic demise. And, finally, Jameson and Elliott examine Cordelia’s loyalty, purity and sincerity in an attempt to understand how these attributes, which were highly regarded in the Victorian era, conspire to doom Cordelia, concluding that she was more victim than tragically flawed heroine. The

\textsuperscript{14} In more recent criticism, Naomi Conn Liebler also makes the case that characters like Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia are heroic and that modern feminism falls short in its treatment of female characters: “What has been missing from feminist criticism of tragedy, especially, is a reading of women as such actors and agents, as tragic heroes, protagonists positioned in their plays in precisely (or nearly so) the same ways as Hamlet, Othello, King Lear . . . and Macbeth” (The Female Tragic Hero 2). The Victorian women writing about these characters do just that and focus their respective analyses of these tragedies—Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear—on the tragic female protagonists in each of these plays. Jameson, Faucit, and Elliott also discuss Lady Macbeth as a female protagonist, rather than seeing her simply as an antagonistic presence in Shakespeare’s Macbeth. These critics generally find Lady Macbeth to be a character worthy of note in her own right. See Chapter Two: Defiant Daughters and Devoted Wives for an overview and discussion of their critical analyses of Lady Macbeth.
Victorian critics writing about these characters also point to the failures and shortcomings of the male characters that have power over Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia. In each case, the Victorian female critics attribute varying degrees of responsibility to the male characters for the tragic fate that befalls Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia. In the eyes of these critics, it is the combination of extreme femininity and a failure of male duty that catalyzes the tragic events of these plays. Essentially, the characters that these critics examine serve as touchstones by which to measure each critic’s attitude toward socially constructed gender normative behaviors and nineteenth-century expectations for women, as well as illustrating what these critics recognize as the repercussions of such behaviors for real women who adhere to similar principles. Jameson, O’Brien, Latham, Faucit, and Elliott consistently draw parallels between the Victorian discourse surrounding gender, the daily lives of typical Victorian women, and Shakespeare’s representation of the Elizabethan world to express their various conceptions of what constitutes a feminine ideal.

**Ophelia**

Among Shakespeare’s tragic innocents, Ophelia stands out as the paragon of idealized traits that the Victorians typically associated with women. She is loyal, obedient, deferential, and passive, yet she is seemingly punished for these traits during the course of the play. Ophelia is portrayed by the female critics who wrote about her as a woman who seems to have little chance to succeed or flourish in her environment, whether that is depicted as a result of her own personality or as a result of the male influences exerted upon her. Anna Jameson, Grace Latham,  

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15 In this case, and throughout the analysis of these critics, the ‘typical’ Victorian woman belongs to the middle class. Circumstances might differ for those of the lower classes but all of the attendant discourse over the question of femininity and appropriate conceptions of womanhood, much like Patmore’s poem, seems to hinge on the premise of middle class respectability and expectations.
Helena Faucit, and Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott observe that Ophelia is depicted as a woman who obeys her father, consistently defers to male judgment, and remains submissive throughout the play, all traits that were frequently touted as ideals for women in Victorian England but also traits that were the site of vigorous debate during the period. Jameson primarily focuses her commentary on Ophelia’s character, but she also touches on Ophelia’s relationships with the men in her life. While Jameson does not explicitly blame the men in Ophelia’s life for her situation, she does imply that Ophelia requires and lacks a degree of protection and care from the men in her life. Latham, Faucit, and Elliott, meanwhile, tend to focus their respective interpretations of the play primarily on Ophelia’s relationships with Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet. Both Latham and Faucit point to Shakespeare’s Ophelia as an example of a woman who did all that was asked of her by the presiding male authority figures in her life, only to be treated with indifference, distrust, and suspicion, ultimately leading to her death. Latham and Faucit also present an implicitly cautionary interpretation of this character as an exemplar of the negative effects of paternal ineptitude and betrayal. Elliott, on the other hand, is not quite as sympathetic to Ophelia but, nonetheless, uses her critique to condemn Ophelia’s treatment by the men in her life. By focusing on Ophelia’s relationships with men and the dynamics elemental to such relationships, Latham, Faucit, and Elliott implicitly emphasize the drawbacks of rigid adherence to a strict code of gender normative behavior that dictates how women should behave within such male-female relations. Because Ophelia’s situation presents parallels to Victorian customs and social mores governing female behavior, these critics are able to use their commentary on Ophelia to provide tacit critiques of Victorian conceptions of womanhood and the social practices that attempt to regulate female autonomy.
Jameson, Latham, Faucit, and Elliott also consider such issues as Ophelia’s selflessness and selfishness, where her filial duty ends and her marital duty begins, the extent to which paternal authority should be upheld, and the role of Ophelia’s passivity in her demise. These critics express a range of sympathy for Ophelia—ranging from Jameson’s analysis in 1832 to Latham, Faucit, and Elliott, who were publishing their work in 1884 and 1885—that seems to reflect a progression of attitudes toward an increasing approbation of feminine autonomy. Latham, Faucit, and Elliott seem more inclined to expect women to take control of their own fate by assuming more responsibility for their situation rather than remaining passively victimized. While these critics don’t agree on all points, thereby reflecting the divergent nature of the Victorian public debate over the nature of womanhood, they all make clear that Ophelia’s situation is untenable, largely due to socio-cultural mores that governed women.

Jameson begins her analysis by considering what she perceives as the innately feminine characteristics of Ophelia, “in whom the feminine character appears resolved into its very elementary principles—as modesty, grace, tenderness. Without these a woman is no woman . . . These are the inherent qualities with which God sent us into the world” (176). While Jameson clearly admires the qualities of “modesty, grace, [and] tenderness” in Ophelia, and sees these as inherently feminine traits, she also notes that, in excess, these traits are harmful and indirectly lead to Ophelia’s tragic end: “Ophelia—poor Ophelia! O, far too soft, too good, too fair, to be cast among the briers of the working-day world, and fall and bleed upon the thorns of life!” (176). By posing Ophelia’s feminine qualities in opposition to the “working-day world”—an implicit allusion to the sphere of men16—Jameson seems to suggest that Ophelia’s extreme

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16 In her introduction to John Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*, Deborah Epstein Nord contends that “Ruskin reified the idea of ‘separate spheres’ for men and women” (xvi). The sphere that is generally assigned to men, by Ruskin and others, is the public, political sphere of business. When observing gender differences, Ruskin claims that “the best strength of man is shown in his intellectual work, as that of a woman in her daily deed and character” (23).
femininity is an ideal that cannot exist in reality. Jameson expands on this suggestion and on the implications of gender in nineteenth-century society by her observation that “[w]henever we bring [Ophelia] to mind, it is with the same exclusive sense of her real existence, without reference to the wondrous power which called her into life” (177). Thus, by her own admission, Jameson treats Ophelia as an actual woman rather than as a creation of Shakespeare’s wit and recognizes in Ophelia traits that are promoted during the Victorian era as ideally feminine qualities. Moreover, by alluding to the tragic fate that befalls Ophelia, Jameson also implicitly critiques a Victorian ideology that promotes an extreme passivity in women, which is subsequently crushed by masculine demands.

When considering the male influences in Ophelia’s life, Jameson sees Polonius and Laertes as acting appropriately when they warn Ophelia to be cautious of loving Hamlet, given Ophelia’s youth and innocence. In Jameson’s view, it is Ophelia’s genuine love for Hamlet in conjunction with her innocence that leads her to a tragic end: “Ophelia, the young, fair, inexperienced girl, facile to every impression, fond in her simplicity, and credulous in her innocence, loves Hamlet” (182). Jameson further defends Ophelia and takes issue with an unidentified male critic who suggests “there is nothing in Ophelia which could make her the object of an engrossing passion to so majestic a spirit as Hamlet” (qtd on 184). Jameson argues that “the love of Hamlet for Ophelia is deep, is real, and is precisely the kind of love which such a man as Hamlet would feel for such a woman as Ophelia” (185). In Jameson’s view, it is

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17 The way in which Jameson responds to this comment suggests the precarious nature of the female Shakespearean critic, as indicated by the preface to her remarks: “Now, though it be with reluctance, and even considerable mistrust of myself, that I differ from a critic who can thus feel and write, I do not think so: --I do think, with submission, that the love of Hamlet for Ophelia is deep, is real, and is precisely the kind of love which such a man as Hamlet would feel for such a woman as Ophelia” (184-5). Jameson’s tone and reluctance to take issue with prevailing male criticism of Hamlet demonstrates the tenuous position of women who were adding their voices to the public body of Shakespearean scholarship and also demonstrates the same gendered behaviors that inform her critiques of Shakespeare’s female characters.
because Hamlet loves Ophelia that he “has no thought to link his terrible destiny with her: he cannot reveal to her, young, gentle, innocent as she is, the terrific influences which have changed the whole current of his life and purposes” (186). The significance of Jameson’s assessment in this instance is that she sees Hamlet as blameless and attributes the tragic ending for these lovers to a combination of circumstance and to Ophelia’s innate innocence and extreme youth.

Although innocence and passivity were frequently praised during the nineteenth century as admirably feminine traits, in this instance they seem to work against Ophelia—at least, in Jameson’s view—by preventing Hamlet from divulging the truth of his situation. As Jameson notes, “[i]t is the helplessness of Ophelia, arising merely from her innocence, and pictured without any indication of weakness, which melts us with such profound pity” (178). In her helpless state, Ophelia must rely on the assistance of others and, although Jameson resists overtly blaming the men in Ophelia’s life, she seems to implicitly point to Ophelia’s associations with all three men—Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet—as somehow failing her, despite what she sees as the genuine desire of these men to protect Ophelia. The message that is imbedded in her analysis implies that women should avoid extremes of femininity that are likely to leave them vulnerable and that men need to take greater care when placed in guardianship of women who share such traits with Ophelia.

Ophelia’s tragic end, in Jameson’s opinion, comes because she is unable to deal with Hamlet’s apparent rejection of her as a lover. Jameson notes that Ophelia “says very little” for much of the play and that “what she does say seems rather intended to hide than to reveal the emotions of her heart” (179). The one exception to this rule that Jameson notes is when Ophelia says that she is “. . . of ladies most deject and wretched, / That suck’d the honey of his music vows” (*Hamlet* III.i.158-9). Jameson contends that Ophelia's words “contain the revelation of a
life of love” (187). To live “a life of love” was a commonly promoted goal for Victorian girls and women—to aspire to a life focused on loving a man, to become married, and to find satisfaction through that loving relationship; in Ophelia’s case, however, the result is rejection, despondence, and madness, which leads to her demise. Jameson, having already claimed to see Ophelia as a real woman rather than as a fictionalized creation, is thus implicitly suggesting that, like an excess of passivity and innocence, an excess of love can be detrimental to a woman’s wellbeing, especially if circumstances conspire against an equitable match. As Jameson observes, “poor Ophelia, ‘divided from herself and her fair judgment,’ appears here like a spotless victim offered up to the mysterious and inexorable Fates” (188). Despite explicitly attributing Ophelia’s tragic end to fate, Jameson’s assessment of the play consistently suggests that an excess of traditionally feminine traits in combination with a failure of the men in her life to adequately protect and shield her lead to Ophelia’s demise.

The implications of Jameson’s analysis for the nineteenth-century discourse surrounding gender are that extreme femininity, however admirable, when coupled with male inadequacy, has the potential to result in a tragic end for women. Jameson doesn’t really reject the ideals of femininity being promoted during the Victorian era; rather, she seems to imply that women need to be slightly more savvy, to temper innocence with some pragmatism, and that men who admire and promote such traits in women need to take a more prominent role in protecting such women from negative influences that they are not equipped to handle. As Jameson observes in her discussion of Ophelia, “Shakespeare then has shown us . . . these elemental feminine qualities, modesty, grace, tenderness . . . [but] when thrown alone amid harsh and adverse destinies . . .

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18 One need look no further than the early nineteenth-century novels of Jane Austen or the subsequent novels of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, or George Eliot to see the focus placed on feminine virtue and the pursuit of love throughout the Victorian period. In non-fiction writings, John Ruskin and Sarah Stickney Ellis, among others, also discuss the pursuit of domestic happiness through love and duty as the ideal primary goal of women.
without energy to resist, or will to act, or strength to endure, the end must be desolation,” and such is the case for Ophelia (176). Ultimately, Jameson acknowledges that adhering to culturally imposed gender norms is no guarantee of happiness or fulfillment and that such adherence can actually be harmful under certain conditions.

In her analysis of Ophelia, Grace Latham acknowledges that Ophelia is inherently passive and gentle; however, unlike Jameson, Latham focuses much of her analysis of Ophelia on the negative effect of the male authority figures in Ophelia’s life.19 Latham observes that Ophelia’s passive nature contributes to her problems but that most of her difficulties are largely the result of Polonius’ stifling influence; Latham also notes, however, that a stronger, more passionate woman might have reacted more defiantly to Polonius’ oversight in an attempt to assert herself.

Latham contends that Polonius’ influence is pervasive and argues that, since Polonius employs spies to observe Laertes and instructs Reynaldo to inquire about Laertes’s behavior (Hamlet II.i.4-5), it is likely that he would have done the same to Ophelia. Latham speculates that Polonius would likely have “kept his gentle, timid daughter, under stern control at home . . . [and] Ophelia would thus grow up with the knowledge that she was not trusted, and the sense that she was being watched” (404-5). Latham further surmises that Polonius’s influence would have created a sense of self-consciousness and paranoia in Ophelia that would likely have

19 Latham presented her paper on Ophelia, “O Poor Ophelia!” to The New Shakspere Society in 1884. Among the members listed in the rolls of the Society are Robert Browning and John Ruskin. Although Latham does not explicitly acknowledge the influence of Anna Jameson in her analysis, the title of her paper, “O Poor Ophelia!,” appears to be part of a quotation taken from Jameson’s book: “Ophelia—poor Ophelia! O, far too soft, too good, too fair, to be cast among the briers of the working-day world, and fall and bleed upon the thorns of life!” (Jameson 176). Given the popularity of Jameson’s book, which was first published in 1832 and reissued in 1858, it is highly likely that Latham would have been familiar with this work as a Shakespearean scholar and member of The New Shakspere Society. As is the case with so many of the female critics that I discuss, Latham’s interpretation of Ophelia seems to use Jameson’s critique as a stepping-off point for her own analysis. Hence, the title of Latham’s paper would appear to be an acknowledgment of the influence that Jameson’s work provided for Latham and for subsequent female critics of Shakespeare’s female characters and indicates a trajectory of female discursive tendencies during the nineteenth century.
hindered her healthy development as a woman. Thus, Latham supposes that Polonius’s influence is as instrumental in influencing Ophelia’s character as any inherent traits may be, emphasizing her perception that Polonius carries a great deal of the responsibility for Ophelia’s shortcomings. Latham further notes that Ophelia also “lacked the passion which might have lifted her . . . beyond her fears” (415). In Latham’s view, a stronger nature would have helped Ophelia resist her father’s attempts to control her. Without such an inclination, however, Ophelia gives way to her father’s overbearing influence. Thus, it is understandable, according to Latham, that Ophelia would follow her father’s instructions completely, even to her own detriment, since Ophelia would have been familiar with Polonius’ proclivity for spying. In this sense, then, Ophelia is performing the role of the good, obedient daughter as a result of what Latham perceives as Ophelia’s conditioning by Polonius.  

Unlike Jameson, Latham explicitly criticizes Polonius for his inadequate parenting of Ophelia and notes what she sees as Polonius’ harsh, insensitive treatment of Ophelia as a fundamental cause of her downfall. Latham believes that Polonius sees his daughter as little more than a slave and observes that, as Shakespeare’s play progresses, Polonius becomes more and more focused on Hamlet’s madness, remembering his duty to Claudius but apparently forgetting his duty to Ophelia. After encountering Hamlet, Ophelia tells Polonius of Hamlet’s uncharacteristic behavior and describes him as having “. . . a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosèd out of hell” (Hamlet II.i.84-5). Polonius’s subsequent reaction is to go to

20 A contrasting view, expressed by Ellis in her conduct book, The Women of England (1839), suggests that fathers are not to be held responsible for the way in which their daughters reflect their upbringing: “the father who has brought up his family in habits of extravagancy, when he feels the tide of prosperity turning against him, forgets that those habits are necessarily stronger than his reasoning, and is wounded to the soul to think that his daughters are not more considerate” (258). Ellis then backtracks, however, and demonstrates the double standard that was so pervasive in Victorian gender discourse by asserting that, ultimately, the woman or daughter is to blame for her shortcomings: “Still, though the fault may, in some cases, have been originally with the parents, there is little excuse for daughters who are of age to think and act for themselves” (259). This is precisely the type of reasoning that Latham is implicitly arguing against by assigning blame to Polonius rather than to Ophelia.
Claudius to report this situation, going as far as to offer his daughter’s services as a spy to pry deeper into the cause of Hamlet’s madness:

At such a time I’ll loose my daughter to him.
Be you and I behind an arras then.
Mark the encounter. If he loves her not
And be not from his reason fall’n thereon,
Let me be no assistant for state,
But keep a farm and carters.  (Hamlet II.ii.162-7)

Latham sees Polonius’ reaction as evidence that he is a selfish and negligent father, who is only too willing to use his daughter for his own benefit with little or no regard for her feelings or for her emotional health. According to Latham, Ophelia’s “life has been that of a slave” (430), with the result that she has become a “nervous, timid” girl, who is “most reserved” and who lived “as much as possible alone” (405). Latham contends that Ophelia was destined for tragedy because she could not escape the negative influences of Polonius. Thus, in Latham’s view, Ophelia’s temperament is the combined result of innate characteristics and environmental influences.²¹

Latham also observes that Ophelia is in “the habit of unquestioning obedience in which she had been trained” and that “the power of independent judgment . . . has been frightened out of Ophelia” (417-18). Typically, in Victorian England, as was the case in Elizabethan England, men occupied places of authority in the family and were expected to rule wisely. By pointing out the negligence of Polonius in this situation and the impact that his actions have had on Ophelia’s

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²¹ A prominent subject of debate during the nineteenth century discourse surrounding gender focused on the notion that gender traits were transmitted biologically and represented innately feminine or masculine characteristics rather than gendered behaviors emanating from environmental influences. In this instance, Latham seems to be aligning herself with theorists such as John Stuart Mill, who insisted on recognizing the influence of environmental factors on gendered behavior versus biological determinism. As Cynthia Eagle Russett notes, many Victorian theories of gender difference emanated from “the confusion between biology and culture pervading late-nineteenth-century thought. Explicitly in Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte and a host of lesser social theorists, implicitly in most of the rest, the study of society was seen as a kind of extension of biology to be pursued according to the methods and concepts of the natural sciences” (86).
wellbeing, Latham provides an implicit warning against the potential dangers that similar societal norms and practices could pose in Victorian England, since most fathers would have faced no real or practical deterrents against the abuse of paternal authority. While most Victorian women would not be faced with the same situation in which Ophelia finds herself within the context of the play, many would be likely to find themselves beholden to the wishes of their fathers and may have found themselves ill equipped to handle the challenges of life as a result of paternal negligence or ineptitude. Latham, however, does not conclude that Ophelia is a blameless victim of circumstance and fate; rather, she sees both Ophelia’s feminine tendencies and Polonius’ influence as contributing to her tragic outcome.

The problematic nature of Ophelia lying to Hamlet when questioned about her father’s whereabouts is, in Latham’s view, a direct result of her gendered behaviors. When Hamlet asks Ophelia where Polonius is, she replies, “At home, my lord” (Hamlet III.i.132). Latham sees Ophelia’s motivation for lying to Hamlet as resulting from both her sense of duty to her father and her excessively passive nature, noting that Ophelia “possessed an unusually large number of those passive virtues . . . which form a necessary part of every beautiful female character” (Latham 430). While Latham seems to consider passivity to be a feminine virtue, she sees excessive passivity as negative, implicitly arguing for the presence of feminine traits in moderation and not in excess. According to Latham, Ophelia’s passivity should be balanced with passion and courage, and she notes that, in Ophelia, “active courage was lacking” (430). By chastising Ophelia for a lack of “active courage,” Latham essentially challenges the attitude that

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22 Patriarchal authority was well established in Victorian England; while women typically raised the children, the male head of household held the ultimate authority. As Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder note, the courts “did have the power to intervene to protect the children,” when children were mistreated or neglected by a father, “but in practice the court did not interfere unless the children had property” (2: 8). Given that Ophelia is not associated with a maternal influence, it’s even more likely that Polonius would have exercised his legal and social power as a means of controlling his daughter.
women should be passive, which was a commonly held gender norm of the nineteenth century. Latham seems to suggest that Ophelia should have challenged the authority of her father in this instance. According to Latham, when “passive virtues” are present in excess and are manipulated by male authority—as is the case in Ophelia’s situation—traditionally feminine passivity can become detrimental.

Despite her criticism of Ophelia’s extreme passiveness, Latham adheres to the popular Victorian view that selflessness is and should be the purview of women, demonstrating the complexity of individual gender mores. Latham sees Ophelia’s actions, or her inability to act on Hamlet’s behalf, as a failure of selflessness on Ophelia’s part, asserting that “her feeling for Hamlet was tender and pitiful; a very real affection, but not deep enough to give her the power of self-sacrifice” (416). In this sense, according to Latham, Ophelia is more concerned with fulfilling her duty to her father than acting in Hamlet’s best interests. Had Ophelia possessed enough selflessness, she would have sacrificed her own honor and her filial obligation to her father by telling Hamlet the truth, asserting her love for Hamlet, and putting his best interests before her duty to Polonius. Yet, when discussing Ophelia’s shortcomings, Latham also argues that the “fault must be laid not on herself, but on her character and her bringing up” (416). By distinguishing between Ophelia’s innate personality traits and the effect of “her bringing up” upon her character, Latham not only emphasizes the effect of the environment on gendered traits,

23 During the nineteenth century, women were generally expected to strive for selflessness. This was not the case, however, for men. Ellis asserts that, to gain personal happiness, women should make “their own personal exertions conducive to the great end of promoting the happiness of those around them” (22) and notes that “[i]t is not uncommon to find negatively amiable individuals, who sink under the weight of indolence, and suffer from innate selfishness a gradual contraction of mind” (17). J. S. Mill also notes the establishment of Victorian gender norms that encourage selflessness and submissiveness in women: “All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others” (21). In her analysis of Ophelia, Latham seems to be making a subtle distinction between passiveness and selflessness, with an excess of the former being a detrimental trait and the appropriate degree of the latter being a desirable quality in women. In this sense, Latham both challenges and affirms the gender norms to which Ellis and Mill are referring.
she is essentially laying the blame for Ophelia’s deficiencies at Polonius’s feet. Through her
criticism of Polonius, Latham also implicitly critiques as deficient a societal system that
regulates the amount of autonomy a woman can respectfully maintain. In this instance, then,
Latham seems to suggest that female disobedience to authority is sometimes warranted and that
simply adhering to gender expectations is not a sufficient means of ensuring happiness.

In her critique of Ophelia’s ultimate demise, Latham doesn’t address Hamlet’s treatment
of Ophelia directly but sees Ophelia’s mental disintegration as an inevitable outcome for an
already unbalanced character when deserted by those men who had controlled her. Latham
contends that Ophelia “has no judgment to discern where her duty to her father ends, and that to
her lover begins; and we must feel that hers was a one-sided, unbalanced character” (430).
Latham also notes that it is only after Polonius’ death “that we learn how strong a hold the words
of Laertes and Polonius, with regard to Hamlet, have taken on her mind” (427). In Latham’s
view, it is not surprising that Ophelia is not able to function once her father is gone, given the
level of influence he has exerted in her life. Latham sees Ophelia’s dependence on men as
absolute and when her father is dead and the other men in her life—Hamlet and Laertes—are
completely and utterly consumed with their own burdens, offering no assistance to her, Ophelia
can no longer cope with her reality. Thus, Latham draws attention to the fact that all the men in
Ophelia’s life have failed her by treating her as little more than a pawn, thereby implicitly
suggesting the dangers for Victorian women who might be inclined to place too much faith in the
men in their lives and not take enough responsibility for their own wellbeing. By seeing Ophelia
as the representation of a woman without any real practical or legal autonomy, Latham
establishes a parallel to contemporary Victorian women who were struggling to establish some
degree of autonomy during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Latham emphasizes the need
for women to take responsibility for themselves and to find some degree of sustainable balance between traditionally feminine traits and the need for a sense of propriety in order to achieve personal happiness and stability.

Like Latham, Faucit believes that Polonius has a negative influence on Ophelia and suggests that Ophelia’s extreme obedience to Polonius, while understandable, inadvertently brings on Hamlet’s distrust of her. Faucit points to Ophelia’s lack of autonomy and what she perceives as Polonius’ parental negligence as crucial factors in Ophelia’s tragic end. Despite Ophelia’s loyalty to Polonius, however, Faucit doesn’t see Ophelia as a weak character, as many other critics did: “Ophelia, as I have pictured her to myself, is so unlike what I hear and read about her, and have seen represented on the stage, that I can scarcely hope to make anyone think of her as I do. It hurts me to hear her spoken of, as she often is, as a weak creature” (3). Rather than seeing her as weak, Faucit sees Ophelia as a character who is submissive and obedient to a fault, which, according to Faucit, is evident when Ophelia acquiesces to Polonius’ instructions to stay away from Hamlet by replying, “I shall obey, my lord” (*Hamlet* I.iii.137). In Faucit’s view, Ophelia is simply obeying her father, as would be expected of her. Moreover, Faucit observes that it was Polonius’ instruction to Ophelia in this scene, to “deny Hamlet access to her [that was] destined to cut Hamlet’s life in twain . . . and shake to its foundations all faith in womanhood” (Faucit 10). According to Faucit, Polonius’ influence is the catalyst for Hamlet’s betrayal of Ophelia and is subsequently responsible for Ophelia’s later isolation and distress. Ultimately, Faucit blames Polonius’ judgment and poor parenting for initiating the eventual tragedy that is to befall his daughter and sees Ophelia’s actions as appropriate, given that she is merely acting on the loyalty she feels toward her father.
Faucit continues to focus on the men in Ophelia’s life by contending that both Polonius and Laertes treat Ophelia with indifference and have failed in their obligations to care for and guide her. Faucit notes Laertes’ apparent lack of sympathy when he lectures Ophelia about Hamlet’s potential feelings for her:

> For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,
> Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,
> A violet in the youth of primy nature,
> Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
> The perfume and the suppliance of a minute—
> No more *(Hamlet I.iii.5-10)*

Faucit sees Laertes’ comments to Ophelia as heartless and unnecessarily cruel. According to Faucit, “all that her brother says to her shows complete indifference to her feelings” (10). Faucit also criticizes Laertes for questioning Ophelia’s decency, contending that he has “dragged rudely to the light; discussed in the most commonplace tone” and called into question “her very maidenly modesty” (10). In this instance, Faucit applies her personal sense of moral outrage, which is firmly grounded in Victorian mores, to her analysis of Ophelia. By focusing on Laertes’ lack of regard for his sister’s feelings in this way, Faucit is essentially recasting Ophelia as a Victorian woman and is clearly aligning herself with Ophelia and against Laertes, demonstrating her own gender mores.

Faucit continues in her criticism of the men in this play by stressing Polonius’ obsession with Hamlet and the disregard he shows for his own daughter when he learns of Ophelia’s encounter with the prince. Faucit notes that, rather than express concern for his daughter’s wellbeing, Polonius wonders what has made Hamlet mad: “I am sorry that with better heed and judgment / I had not quoted him. I feared he did but trifle / And meant to wreck thee . . . “ *(Hamlet II.i.112-115)*. Despite Polonius’ claim that he has acted to protect his daughter, Faucit sees his reaction as completely indifferent toward Ophelia’s feelings and contends that he
doesn’t regret his decision until he believes that he has driven Hamlet mad. Ultimately, Faucit suggests that, as a result of her father’s and brother’s indifference, Ophelia “drifts away from them into a shoreless ‘sea of troubles,’ unheeded” (15). Faucit blames the utter failure of the men in Ophelia’s life to provide the care and oversight for her that would have been expected of any responsible father or brother, rather than laying the blame for Ophelia’s downfall at her own feet.

Faucit sees Ophelia as a character that demonstrates traditional expectations for Victorian women; Ophelia has been obedient and demure, has been loyal to her father, and has done nothing to merit criticism, in Faucit’s view. Conversely, Faucit sees the failure of Polonius and Laertes to effectively guide and protect Ophelia and their lack of concern for her as a failure of social norms, norms that were still observed in Victorian England.24 In Faucit’s view, the implicit message conveyed by Ophelia’s situation is that men have a duty to the women in their lives and that women often bear the responsibility when men fail to act appropriately.

Like Latham, Faucit also comments on Ophelia’s selflessness; unlike Latham, however, Faucit sees Ophelia as a model of selflessness and comments on the significance of Ophelia’s decision to lie to Hamlet, when, in answer to Hamlet’s question as to where Polonius is, Ophelia replies, “At home, my lord” (Hamlet III.i.132). While Ophelia clearly lies to Hamlet in this scene, Faucit argues that Ophelia is driven to this subterfuge by an abundance of selflessness,

24 During the nineteenth century, there were certain expectations that men, because of the power with which they were invested, would provide appropriate care and oversight of women and children. J. S. Mill observes in 1869 that this is not always the case, however: “If the family in its best forms is, as it is often said to be, a school of sympathy, tenderness, and loving forgetfulness of self, it is still oftener, as respects its chief, a school of willfulness, overbearingness, unbounded selfish indulgence, and a double-dyed and idealized selfishness, of which sacrifice itself is only a particular form: the care for the wife and children being only care for them as parts of the man’s own interests and belongings, and their individual happiness being immolated in every shape to his smallest preferences” (42). What’s more, Mill also notes that this power is “not placed in the hands of a man here and there, but offered to every adult male, down to the basest and most ferocious” (42). Faucit’s criticism of Polonius and his treatment of Ophelia also emphasizes that these problems continued to exist beyond the boundaries of Shakespeare’s play and into her own era.
that most Victorian of female traits,\textsuperscript{25} contending that Ophelia’s actions demonstrate her
ing willingness to sacrifice her own honor to protect her father and submit to his wishes while
forgetting herself and her own needs (Faucit 15). In Faucit’s view, Ophelia is selflessly
protecting her father. Although misplaced and possibly ill advised, Ophelia’s actions are,
according to Faucit, essentially admirable. Faucit’s criticism essentially provides a defense of
Ophelia and a harsh critique of Polonius, which also suggests Faucit’s view of Victorian cultural
practices that impose subservience on women without necessarily holding men responsible for
the positions of authority they’ve been granted. Faucit seems to feel that a defense of Ophelia is
necessary because so many other critics have dismissed her as weak,\textsuperscript{26} while Faucit sees
Polonius’ behavior as the problem.

Faucit continues to lay blame on the male characters in the play by turning her attention
toward Hamlet. One of the first scenes in which we see the downfall of Ophelia, according to
Faucit, is the players’ scene. During this scene, Ophelia’s responses to Hamlet consist of a series
of single line replies that, to Faucit, appear devoid of any great depth of feeling or even of basic
understanding. At one point, in response to Hamlet’s banter about “country matters,” Ophelia
says, “I think nothing, my lord” (Hamlet III.ii.114-115). Faucit very explicitly states that she sees

\textsuperscript{25}In his poem, \textit{Angel in the House}, Patmore describes the selfless nature of woman: “The lack of lovely pride, in her
/ Who strives to please, my pleasure numbs, / And still the maid I most prefer / Whose care to please with pleasing
comes” (II. iv. 1-4). Patmore’s description of the idealized Victorian woman is one with which Ruskin was also in
agreement. Ruskin cites Patmore’s poem and claims that “[y]ou cannot read him too often or too carefully; as far as
I know he is the only living poet who always strengthens and purifies; the others sometimes darken, and nearly
always depress and discourage, the imagination they deeply seize” (Sesame and Lilies 76). Ruskin’s comments
underscore the popularity of Patmore and the ideals of femininity that he espoused.

\textsuperscript{26}Although Faucit doesn’t specify which critics have seen Ophelia as weak, this view seems to have been generally
accepted during the period. Ruskin comments on the weakness of Ophelia in relation to Shakespeare’s other female
characters: “among all the principal figures in Shakespeare’s plays, there is only one weak woman—Ophelia; and it
is because she fails Hamlet at the critical moment, and is not, and cannot in her nature be, a guide to him when he
needs her most, that all the bitter catastrophe follows” (72). While Ruskin’s view is rooted in a male centric
perspective, Faucit takes an opposing view and sees Polonius as the catalyst for the tragedy that follows; Faucit
subsequently does all she can to establish Ophelia as a woman of misplaced loyalties rather than weakness.
Hamlet’s reaction to Ophelia in this scene, in particular, and the way in which he toys with Ophelia, in general, as extreme and unwarranted. Faucit notes that during the players’ scene, Ophelia is just “a sort of automaton” who, by the end of the scene, is fully engulfed in her “own misery and desolation” (Faucit 16). Meanwhile, Faucit says of Hamlet, “he has indeed blotted [Ophelia] from his mind as a ‘trivial fond record.’ He is so self-centered, so enwrapped in his own suffering, that he has no thought to waste on this delicate girl whom he had wooed with such a ‘fire of love’ and had taught to listen to his most honeyed vows” (18). Faucit’s assessment of Hamlet’s selfish motives stands in contrast to her understanding of Ophelia’s motivation for lying to Hamlet as excessive selflessness. While selfishness is not a trait to be admired in anyone, regardless of gender, this clear contrast does suggest that there exists a double standard during the Victorian era in which women are expected and encouraged to act selflessly while men are often excused for their selfishness, due to the gravity of their situations. Popular

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27 Judith Butler’s notion of performativity seems particularly relevant to Faucit’s analysis given that Faucit is discussing the performance of these characters within the context of the play—not the characters in relation to the audience, but the characters in relation to one another; Faucit is thereby implying the idea of gender as performance because we see Ophelia performing as expected during the players’ scene but without any inherent feeling. It’s as if she’s performing out of habit based on others’ expectations. Ophelia is simply playing the part of Hamlet’s betrothed, at least in Faucit’s view. As an actress herself, Faucit was acutely aware of the performative nature of gender in her daily existence on the stage. In this case, however, Faucit is not explaining how she portrays Ophelia on stage but how she sees Ophelia’s use of performance before Hamlet and the members of the court, as well as the connection this performance has to gender expectations. (See Judith Butler’s Bodies that Matter for a more thorough discussion of gender and performativity.)

An element of similarity between Latham and Faucit is that both critics ‘perform’ their criticism of Ophelia in a very literal way. In Latham’s case, she read, or presented, her critique of Ophelia to the audience of the New Shakspere Society, essentially a method of performance as well; Faucit’s understanding of Ophelia was based on Faucit’s many performances portraying this character on the stage. The disparity of gender within the field of literary criticism during the nineteenth century, which typically treated male criticism as scholarly and female criticism as amateurish or unofficial, suggests that these women are appropriating Shakespearean criticism as a means of entering the cultural discourse surrounding gender. The act of presenting—or performing—their criticism, as well as the opinions they convey within the context of their critiques, essentially serves to destabilize existing cultural norms. In Bodies that Matter, Judith Butler makes an observation that could also apply to these critics, in that what Faucit and Latham are doing could be seen as establishing “a kind of agency, a power in and as discourse, in and as performance, which appears in order to remake” (Butler 137). Given the performative nature of their work—Latham as a presenter in a literary society and Faucit on stage—as well as their focus on gender issues, Butler’s theories as to the destabilizing nature of performativity of gender seem particularly appropriate to the work being done by these critics.
Victorian mores held that a man’s public, political concerns, such as Hamlet’s need to avenge his father’s murder, for his sake and for the sake of Denmark, would generally have been seen as taking precedence over the heartbreak and private, domestic concerns of a woman. In Faucit’s view, however, Ophelia’s concerns and challenges are every bit as significant as Hamlet’s. As modern critic Naomi Conn Liebler observes, “[t]hat the space where [the female tragic hero’s] agon is staged is sometimes (but not always) domestic rather than public does not in any way diminish either its rigor or its social significance” (The Female Tragic Hero 2). Liebler’s view seems to echo Faucit’s stance that Ophelia’s tragedy is just as significant as Hamlet’s, despite the domestic nature of her suffering. By applauding Ophelia’s selflessness and condemning Hamlet’s selfishness, Faucit is essentially critiquing the existence of such double standards in Victorian society and recognizing Ophelia as a character worthy of note.

Even though Faucit sees Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia as a betrayal of her love, she is loathe to fully blame him for Ophelia’s downfall, eventually concluding her analysis by describing Hamlet as a victim: “he unconsciously drags down Ophelia with him. They are the victims of the same inexorable fate” (18). Faucit also notes, however, that Hamlet is not totally blameless either, observing that “he has offered [Ophelia] his love” and that “whatever his own troubles, perplexities, heart-breaks . . . it is hard to find an apology for such usage of one whose heart he could not but know that he had won” (18). Faucit’s vacillation between blaming and

28 John Ruskin contends “that a man’s duties are public” (87), although he also has a role in the care and oversight of the household, and that “[t]he man’s duty as a member of a commonwealth, is to assist in the maintenstance, in the advance, in the defence of the state” (88). The woman is responsible for the “household office” (87). Although Ruskin attempts to treat both equally, the added responsibility of the public sphere, while women have only the domestic, suggests the greater importance and priority of men’s duties. As Cynthia Eagle Russett’s review of the prominent theoretical tracts of the Victorian era also demonstrates, the man’s essential role as a provider and as an occupant of the public, political sphere was a widely held norm; the woman’s private, domestic sphere was, in theory, equally important but, in practice, was not often treated as such by most contemporary individuals and institutions. (See chapter 5 of Sexual Science for a more comprehensive overview of the accepted spheres for men and women in the mid to late nineteenth century.)
pardoning Hamlet is perhaps understandable when considering the environment in which Faucit was writing. Since many male critics had previously dismissed Ophelia as an inferior character, not particularly worthy of study, and had celebrated Hamlet as Shakespeare’s masterpiece of characterization, it seems understandable that Faucit would be less likely to risk alienating her audience by conclusively condemning Hamlet because of his treatment of Ophelia. Faucit was also the product of the system surrounding the theater, which deferred to male judgment in most instances. Faucit herself had been largely beholden to male actors, most notably William Charles Macready, for much of the early advancement of her stage career. Faucit, more so than most female critics, would likely have been aware of the need to please her audience, whether through written or performed media, since she was dependent upon her audience for survival. For Faucit to focus her analysis on female characters and attempt to analyze the play from Ophelia’s perspective was, in its own right, unconventional—a fact that is easy to lose sight of in the present day, when feminist criticism is so firmly established and widely recognized.

29 J. S. Mill observes that “very few [women] dare tell anything which men, on whom their literary success depends, are unwilling to hear” (31). Although Faucit is writing nearly twenty years after Mill’s treatise was published, the reception of a male audience would still likely have been a concern to a female Shakespearean critic, given the relatively new advent of female Shakespearean criticism in the nineteenth century and the established scholarship of their male counterparts.

30 Macready, a powerful actor and actor-manager of the early and mid Victorian period, was very influential in helping to establish Faucit’s stage career, although they had a falling out later in their professional relationship. See the Journal of William Charles Macready, 1832-1851, Ed. J. C. Trewin; Bulwer and Macready: A Chronicle of the Early Victorian Theatre, Ed. Charles H. Shattuck; and Helen Faucit: Fire and Ice on the Victorian Stage, by Carol Jones Carlyle, for further discussion of the private and professional relationship between Helena Faucit and William Charles Macready.

31 Tracy Davis explores the conditions of life, both personally and professionally, for Victorian actresses and makes the claim that the most common reason for an actress falling out of favor was based upon her age (52). This situation was exacerbated by the reality that “the vast majority of women could not aspire to management for even the briefest term,” which essentially meant that “the development of a woman’s career was largely decided by factors beyond her control and unresponsive to her talents or determination” (52). Given this context and the extremely subjective nature of garnering favor and, thus, employment, it seems likely that Faucit would be more sensitive than most female authors and scholars to considerations of audience reception, whether in print or on stage.
In her study of Ophelia, Elliott finds fault with the standard practices of men and the established power structures that are depicted in *Hamlet*, paying particular attention to the impact these cultural norms have on Ophelia. While Elliott is clearly aware of the historical context for Shakespeare’s play, she, like Jameson, Latham, and Faucit, applies the conditions and concepts of Victorian cultural practices and gender ideology to her understanding of Ophelia in order to implicitly critique nineteenth century societal norms and socially constructed gender ideals.

Elliott assesses Ophelia’s relations with her father, much as Latham and Faucit had, and concludes that Polonius’ influence over Ophelia was extensive. Elliott observes that “Ophelia evidently held it her duty as a daughter to overrule her private and personal inclination. She religiously obeyed her father’s commands” (50). Thus, when Polonius instructs Ophelia not to see Hamlet, she obeys, regardless of how much she might have been inclined to go against her father’s wishes. Elliott further asserts that “Polonius had evidently held her well in check from her childhood, and taught her to hold the parental authority in great awe and reverence” (52). In Elliott’s view, Ophelia is an obedient daughter who would not dream of disobeying her father, much to her own detriment. In fact, Elliott sees Polonius’ paternal authority as the most significantly damaging influence on Ophelia. While Polonius’ control of Ophelia doesn’t fall into the realm of physical abuse, Elliott sees his authority as a misuse of power. Her criticism, therefore, has implications for Victorian audiences because the potential for inappropriate use of patriarchal authority was a reality for many during the nineteenth century.\(^{32}\) Elliott uses her critique of Ophelia to suggest her criticism of a system that would allow a man like Polonius to

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\(^{32}\) In her study of domestic violence in Victorian England, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*, Lisa Surridge asserts that “Victorians linked wife and child abuse as two related forms of violence. The 1853 Act for the Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults upon Women and Children raised penalties for both these crimes, seen jointly as a violation of protective manliness” (10). Although Polonius’ treatment of Ophelia does not constitute physical abuse, Elliott’s assessment of Ophelia does suggest that she has been intimidated or bullied by Polonius and that Polonius’ behavior constitutes just such a misuse of power, representing a “violation of protective manliness” in his duty to Ophelia.
have such complete authority over his daughter. Since Ophelia acts out of a sense of duty and obligation to Polonius, Elliott is, by implication, also bringing to light the need for women to look out for their own best interests and cautioning against trusting wholly to the men in their lives for guidance.

Elliott also critiques the social limitations placed on women through her analysis of Ophelia. Elliott observes that gender raises challenging, even insurmountable obstacles for Ophelia and calls attention to the many opportunities provided to men and the lack of such opportunities for women: “Laertes had all the world before him . . . He had everything to engage his thoughts, please his fancy and fire his imagination. [Ophelia] had nothing but her books and her spinning” (49). Elliott also contends that the arbitrary nature of gender inequality is exacerbated by Polonius’ neglect of his daughter: “With a father busied in matters of state, compared to which his daughter was of small account, and a brother living away from her, Ophelia’s lot was a hard and lonely one” (49). Ophelia’s situation and lack of possibilities would have had implications for women during the nineteenth century as well. Realistically, most Victorian women had little hope of seeing the world, attending university, or gaining experience beyond the domestic sphere, so Elliott’s criticism would have had a great deal of resonance for female readers of her work.33 While women in the late nineteenth century may have had more opportunities than Ophelia did, the domestic sphere was still seen as the main realm for women and, thus, as a justification for limiting educational and professional opportunities that would have provided women with a great deal more autonomy. Thus, Elliott uses her discussion of

33 Elliott consistently criticizes the limitations placed upon women by society throughout both of her critical works—*Lady Macbeth: A Study* (1884) and *Shakspeare’s Garden of Girls* (1885). Her writing reveals her abhorrence for social norms that limit the educational and practical opportunities of intelligent women.
Ophelia to provide a commentary on nineteenth-century social norms and, in the process, essentially challenges such socially imposed limitations for women.34

Despite acknowledging the social and practical limitations placed upon Ophelia, Elliott has little apparent sympathy for Ophelia when she lies to Hamlet, claiming that Polonius is at home when he is, in fact, spying on them (Hamlet III.i). Elliott appears to see Hamlet’s subsequent madness as genuine and finds Ophelia’s treatment of him to be at least partially responsible, contending that “Ophelia had much to do with Hamlet’s madness” (51). Although Elliott seems sympathetic to Ophelia’s situation, she notes that “It is difficult to sympathize with her in this treatment of her lover” (51). While Elliott is siding with Hamlet’s perspective rather than Ophelia’s in this instance, she also blames Ophelia’s actions on her oppression by Polonius. Elliott makes it very clear that Ophelia is under Polonius’ control, claiming that, “we must take it for granted that old Polonius made his household feel that his will was law” (52). Presumably, Elliott is basing this conclusion on the manner in which Polonius controls Ophelia; however, Elliott is also implicitly suggesting that, as the male head of the household, Polonius would have held absolute authority as a matter of course. Elliott also suggests that, if Ophelia had “enjoyed a mother’s sympathy and care . . . there is little doubt but that her mind would have been strong enough to bear the strain put upon it by Hamlet’s real or assumed madness, and his wretched behavior to the girl he had taught to love him” (48). In Elliott’s view, then, a female, maternal presence is essential in this situation to help mitigate the negative influence of Polonius. In addition to her criticism of Hamlet for treating Ophelia badly, this comment also makes Elliott’s

34 Mary Poovey discusses the construction and establishment of a gender ideology that governed women, via literary ventures during the nineteenth century. Poovey focuses on what she defines as “the textual construction of an individualist psychology” in the literature of the period and notes that the depiction of women in literature had the effect of “stabilizing and mobilizing a particular image of woman, the domestic sphere, and woman’s work” (89). Elliott’s criticism of Ophelia seems to be actively working to destabilize the traditional conceptions of women as being necessarily docile and submissive, while also suggesting that the domestic sphere is a realm fraught with dangers for women who were not willing to act in an assertive manner to provide for their own well being.
attitude toward gender norms quite clear—without a woman’s guidance, any girl would be ill-equipped to deal with the trials and troubles of a life governed by gender normative practices. This sentiment is also relatively common in the literature of the Victorian period and is demonstrated through characters such as Dorothea and Celia Brooke of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* or the title character in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, all of whom face challenges when selecting a husband and navigating typical social obstacles without the benefit of a guiding maternal presence. In Elliott’s view, the lack of a female influence and mentor in Ophelia’s life is a situation that is further exacerbated by Polonius’s overbearing nature and ineptitude as a parent.

Although Elliott blames Polonius for much of Ophelia’s situation and temperament, she sees Ophelia as partly to blame for her predicament, because she doesn’t assert herself. Elliott notes that, because Ophelia refuses to stand up to her father and to remain true to Hamlet, “[t]here is nothing heroic, nothing particularly attractive in her character” (56). Moreover, in speaking about Ophelia’s madness and her pathetic state after she learns of her father’s death, Elliott comments that, “Had [Ophelia] not been visited by this terrible affliction there would be little to recommend her to our special notice or sympathy” (56). In Elliott’s view, Ophelia is a victim of her upbringing and her own weak nature, which would put her view more in accord with the view expressed by many male critics that Ophelia was simply a weak character. The distinction that Elliott makes is that Ophelia is both weak by nature and as a result of Polonius’s influence on her. For Elliott, the social implications of a patriarchal society are elemental in forming Ophelia’s persona. While her situation is sad, Elliott does not find it especially endearing or admirable. As Elliott further notes, “it is her fate rather than her character that commends her to our sympathies, and as we follow the terrible story of Hamlet’s mental
struggles and tragic end, we often wonder how different everything might have been had he met with a woman of stronger nature than that of ‘poor Ophelia’” (56-7). Elliott is essentially blaming Ophelia for Hamlet’s tragic end. Although Elliott points to Ophelia’s lack of strength as the basis for her disdain, this view also underscores the traditional role for women in society as nurturers. Elliott is suggesting that, by failing Hamlet, Ophelia fails to fulfill her duty as a woman, presumably, because she lacks the strength and fortitude necessary to defy Polonius and transfer her allegiance to Hamlet. Thus, Elliott’s assessment of Ophelia reveals her complex view of gender mores; she approves of nurturing as a feminine trait but disdains an overly passive or submissive strain in women.

Ultimately, Jameson, Latham, Faucit, and Elliott believe that Hamlet’s betrayal of Ophelia is steeped in the gender norms and cultural practices that permeated Elizabethan as well as Victorian society. The betrayal that Ophelia experiences begins with Polonius’ consistent failure to put consideration for his daughter uppermost in his mind and his willingness to use her as a pawn; this betrayal is mimicked and perpetuated by Laertes’ platitudes and utter indifference to his living sister; finally, the betrayal of Ophelia culminates with Hamlet’s suspicion and rejection of the woman who had previously been the object of his love and affection. By focusing on the men in Ophelia’s life and their consistent failure to ensure Ophelia’s wellbeing, Jameson, Latham, Faucit, and Elliott draw clear parallels to contemporary gender issues and demonstrate, through their Shakespearean criticism, the inadequacy and dangers of cultural practices that bestow excessive power on men and applaud subservience and excessive passivity.

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35 This reference to ‘poor Ophelia’ seems to be an allusion to Jameson’s more sympathetic response to this character, although this could also be a reference to Latham’s paper. In any case, the sentiment expressed by Elliott suggests that she sees the pathos of Ophelia as disdainful rather than pitiable. This, perhaps, reflects a general change in conceptions of womanhood, given that Elliott’s analysis is published in 1885 and Jameson’s critique of Ophelia appeared in 1832 and as a second edition in 1858; certainly, Elliott’s comments suggest a different conception of women as more capable of autonomy than seems to have been observed by Jameson.
in women. In this way, their commentary becomes a critique of nineteenth-century gender norms and societal mores. Through their discussion of Ophelia, Jameson, Latham, Faucit, and Elliott are able to illustrate the dangers of blind compliance to an artificially constructed gender ideal, as well as the need to construct new conceptions of Victorian womanhood and societal practices.

**Desdemona**

Victorian women writing about Shakespeare saw Desdemona, like Ophelia, as embodying many nineteenth-century feminine ideals. According to Anna Jameson, Constance O’Brien, Helena Faucit, and Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott, Desdemona is pure, good, loving, and selfless, yet she meets a tragic end, largely due to the failings of the men in her life. Desdemona’s trusting nature and her devotion to and faith in her husband is, in many ways, the epitome of the Victorian ideal for married women; however, according to some of the female Victorian critics who wrote about Desdemona, her character is not without faults, since she showed little concern for her father’s wishes and disobeyed him by refusing to abandon Othello. She also lied to Othello when he inquired as to the whereabouts of the handkerchief. Thus, her character was seen as feminine but flawed by the Victorian women who wrote about Desdemona.

Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott seem to agree on the essential “womanliness” of Desdemona and see her as a loving woman who finds herself in the unpleasant situation of being at odds with her father, but they disagree on the amount of responsibility that should be allotted to Brabantio and on whether Desdemona should be seen as heroic, victimized, or simply vulnerable. Jameson sees Desdemona as too gentle and soft, but not weak, and believes that Desdemona is motivated by love but lacks intellect; O’Brien is sympathetic to Desdemona, blames Othello for the tragedy, and sees Desdemona as a victim; Faucit expresses the most
admiration for Desdemona and sees her as heroic for having pursued her love and for remaining selfless throughout; Elliott is sympathetic to Desdemona’s feminine nature but also implies that Desdemona’s extreme timidity and submissiveness facilitates Othello’s mistreatment of her. According to these nineteenth-century critics, it is Desdemona’s womanly nature, her love for and devotion to her husband, and her general adherence to gender norms that lead to her downfall, whether they see her as victimized, heroic, or complicit in her tragic end.

Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott consistently apply their understanding of Victorian societal values and gender mores to their study of Desdemona, thereby imposing a Victorian context on Shakespeare’s tragedy. Contemporary critic, Naomi Conn Liebler discusses the socially contextualized nature of tragedy and contends that, much like Shakespeare’s comedies, the “tragedies perform social and communal concerns” (Shakespeare’s Festive Tragedy I).36

The social and communal concerns to which Liebler is referring include marriage, authority, social customs, and political concerns that necessarily encompass gender normative behaviors. Liebler argues that “[t]ragedy presents the contestation of a range of social and political values in conflict in a fictive but recognizable community” (21). This premise is particularly relevant, given that Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott treat Othello precisely in this manner—as a site of social and political conflict, one that, in many ways, mimics the social and political conflicts surrounding conceptions of womanhood and the nature of political autonomy for women that was the focus of much late nineteenth-century discourse. Thus, the play, Othello, and the character of Desdemona present an opportunity for these women to critique and comment on

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36 Liebler is extrapolating from the premise offered by C. L. Barber in Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy that comedies provide relevant commentary on social concerns because of the way in which ritual and custom are contextualized. Although Liebler and Barber focus on the implications that Shakespeare’s plays had on the relevant issues of early modern England, the nineteenth-century critics that I discuss in this chapter are performing the same sort of contextualization through their Victorianization of the plays and characters that they examine.
Victorian social norms, particularly those concerning filial relations, gender, and marriage, as they analyze Shakespeare’s play.

Jameson begins her assessment of Desdemona by observing that she is a quintessentially feminine character who is primarily affiliated with feelings and embodies “modesty, tenderness, and grace” as well as being an example of “injured and defenceless innocence” (216). Jameson also specifies that Desdemona is a character “associated with the palpable realities of every-day existence” and claims that “we see the forms and habits of society tinting her language and deportment” (216). Jameson sees Desdemona as an ideally feminine character who is unable to defend herself against the trials of life. Jameson also considers Desdemona’s love for Othello and her tendency to be enthralled by Othello’s worldliness and tales of adventure, observing that, through Desdemona’s affection for Othello, her true nature emerges: “gentleness gives the prevailing tone to the character—gentleness in its excess—gentleness verging on passiveness—gentleness, which not only cannot resent—but cannot resist” (218). Jameson seems to see Desdemona’s gentleness as verging on excessive, but she resists explicitly criticizing Desdemona for possessing this trait by noting that “this extreme gentleness of nature is yet delineated with such exceeding refinement, that the effect never approaches to feebleness” (218). Gentleness, refinement, and passivity are all traits that were promoted during the mid Victorian era as desirable feminine qualities and Jameson sees Desdemona as an admirable depiction of womanhood.

37 In her conduct manual, Sarah Stickney Ellis specifically notes the loss of true refinement among women, via a false sense of this quality, and cites this as a basic premise for her book—to guide women back to true values: “I would justify the obtrusiveness of a work like this, by first premising that the women of England are deteriorating in their moral character, and that false notions of refinement are rendering them less influential, less useful, and less happy than they were” (10). What Ellis objects to are the “false notions of refinement,” demonstrating the discourse surrounding appropriate gender mores that was taking place during the nineteenth century, as well as the promotion of ‘refinement’ as an attribute in women.
Jameson does, however, imply that any woman as exceedingly gentle and passive as she perceives Desdemona to be must rely on others, particularly men, to treat her fairly and admirably in order to survive. Despite Jameson’s hesitation to blame Desdemona’s fate on her feminine passiveness, Jameson does imply that Desdemona’s timid, gentle nature contributes to the outcome of the play by noting that “the exceeding softness of Desdemona’s temper is turned against her by Iago” (218). Jameson points to the handkerchief scene, in which Othello asks Desdemona to produce the handkerchief and tells her, via his explanation of the spell cast upon the handkerchief, that if she should lose this token he would “. . . hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt / After new fancies . . .” (*Othello* III.iv.64-5). After hearing this veiled threat, Desdemona tells Othello “It is not lost; but what an if it were?” (III.iv.85). Jameson asserts that, in this situation, Desdemona’s “extreme timidity leads her in a moment of confusion and terror to prevaricate about the fatal handkerchief” (218). Jameson specifically attributes Desdemona’s lie to her extreme fear when Othello tells her the handkerchief is a magic talisman: “Desdemona, whose soft credulity, whose turn for the marvelous, whose susceptible imagination had first directed her thoughts and affections to Othello, is precisely the woman to be frightened out of her senses by such a tale as this and betrayed by her fears into a momentary tergiversation” (219). In Jameson’s view, it is less a fault in Desdemona that leads to her lying than the inability of the men in her life to recognize and respect her innocence. The protection and oversight of women was typically seen as the duty of men, in terms of idealized nineteenth-century gender mores and, in this case, Othello fails in this duty. Moreover, if ideally suited, a husband and wife should complement one another’s qualities and so mitigate the spouse’s deficiencies. In the

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38 J. S. Mill notes that “[t]he relation between husband and wife is very like that between lord and vassal, except that the wife is held to more unlimited obedience than the vassal was” (87). As the ‘lord,’ the husband was expected to provide support and protection for his wife but, as Mill frequently points out, such was often not the case in Victorian households. Jameson appears to be applying these same expectations to the marriage of Othello and Desdemona.
case of Desdemona and Othello, however, Jameson implies that the deficiencies and qualities of both are manipulated and taken advantage of by Iago and, as a result, Othello fails to fulfill his role as husband, leaving Desdemona vulnerable and unprotected, and Desdemona’s gentle and timid nature leaves her vulnerable to Iago’s machinations. Ultimately, Jameson sees Desdemona and Othello as being a fatally mismatched couple, with dire results.

Jameson concludes her discussion of Desdemona by clarifying her position that Desdemona is not at fault for exhibiting what are, in Jameson’s mind, admirably feminine qualities: “Desdemona, with all her timid flexibility and soft acquiescence, is not weak; for the negative alone is weak; and the mere presence of goodness and affection implies in itself a species of power; power without consciousness, power without effort, power with repose—that soul of grace!” (224). In Desdemona, Jameson sees a woman whose qualities are essentially incompatible with the realities of her life and, while she praises Desdemona’s feminine traits, the implication is that the men in Desdemona’s life have failed her. Jameson also draws clear parallels between her analysis and nineteenth-century gender norms by observing that she “know[s] a Desdemona in real life, one in whom the absence of intellectual power is never felt as a deficiency . . . one in whom thoughts appear mere instincts” (224). Presumably, Jameson’s acquaintance managed to survive by the protection of others or perhaps by sheer luck, but Jameson’s message is clear—Desdemona is an unfortunate victim and is not to be blamed for her tragic end. Thus, Jameson’s analysis affirms traditional nineteenth-century conceptions of femininity even as she suggests the inadequacies of men and of social practices that invest men with authority when they are not necessarily worthy of such power. Although Jameson doesn’t explicitly discuss Othello’s murder of Desdemona or the fact that her timidity and gentleness have contributed to bringing Desdemona to her fatal end, the totality of Jameson’s analysis
suggests the need for women such as Desdemona to be protected by the same society that promotes such feminine ideals in women and endows men with so much power within the social construct of marriage.

Much like Jameson, O’Brien sees Desdemona as possessing many admirable feminine traits, but O’Brien focuses more attention on Desdemona’s relationships with Brabantio and Othello than Jameson had. Although O’Brien begins her analysis of Shakespeare’s play by noting “Desdemona’s charm” and observes that, in Cinthio’s novel, Shakespeare’s source for the play, “[i]t is singular that [Desdemona] is the only person in the novel who has a name” (536-7), she quickly turns her attention to Brabantio, his relationship with Desdemona, and the set of circumstances that would lead to the final, tragic events of the play. O’Brien first cites Brabantio’s reaction when he hears about Desdemona’s liaison with Othello and exclaims to Roderigo, “. . . O, would you had had her!” (Othello I.i.179). O’Brien immediately expresses her dismay over Brabantio’s reaction: “Brabantio actually comes to wishing that Desdemona had taken [Roderigo] instead of her hero!” (538). Despite her apparent shock at his exclamation, O’Brien goes on to qualify her criticism of Brabantio and to defend his right to be upset at the news that Desdemona has eloped with Othello: “Not that he has no grounds for excitement when he discovers Desdemona’s flight, for the unexpected blow hits him hard” (538). O’Brien seems to believe that, as Desdemona’s father, Brabantio should legitimately have some authority over his daughter. Even though his reaction was somewhat excessive, it is understandable, in O’Brien’s view, that the “unexpected blow” would strongly affect him, although whether because of his wounded pride or because of a deep emotional connection with his daughter is uncertain.
As O’Brien considers Desdemona’s marriage to Othello and the way in which the marriage comes about, she seems to struggle with the issue of assigning blame. O’Brien first criticizes Brabantio for not having given his daughter more guidance: “Evidently it has never occurred to him that his sweet daughter could have a will of her own or that anything could come of her constantly seeing and hearing Othello in the privacy of her home” (538). O’Brien’s thoughts on the events depicted in the play seem to be intended as a jab at established Victorian gender norms, to some extent, when she observes that a “sweet daughter” might also “have a will of her own,” whether or not that possibility is recognized by her father, thereby suggesting the absurdity of stereotypes that painted all women with pleasant natures as malleable and mindless. O’Brien also criticizes Brabantio’s judgment and efficacy as a parent by calling attention to the fact that the meetings between Desdemona and Othello could have been considered inappropriate, particularly since these meetings took place “in the privacy of her home,” where Brabantio presumably should have been in charge. Almost immediately after making this observation, however, O’Brien wavers and rethinks her criticism of Brabantio: “Still it is hard on the old man, and we cannot help feeling that he is not well used by the lovers” (538). At this point, hesitant to blame Brabantio for raising a daughter who would disobey him and equally loathe to blame Desdemona for her behavior, thereby condemning the heroine, O’Brien instead lays the blame for this situation at Othello’s door, contending that it is especially “treacherous on Othello’s part to repay his friend’s hospitality by taking away his daughter without leave of license, or any effort to get Brabantio’s consent” (538). By placing agency for

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39 Russett cites the work of nineteenth-century philosophers and psychologists, Herbert Spencer, G. Stanley Hall, Harry Campbell, and Francis Galton in defining the pre-eminent conception of femininity during the Victorian era: “These men constructed a feminine psyche very much in accord with prevailing cultural views of womanhood—gentle, emotional, nurturant, weak-willed, and dependent” (Sexual Science 42). This popular Victorian conception of womanhood is one with which O’Brien is clearly familiar and is a model that she appears to be challenging or redefining, to some degree.
these actions with Othello, O’Brien seems to be upholding and validating societal conventions—that a father should have the final say as to whom his daughter marries and that it is the responsibility of the male suitor to procure the father’s permission,\(^{40}\) thus, absolving Desdemona of responsibility but also negating the propriety of Desdemona’s autonomy in this situation. O’Brien certainly seems to suggest that the two men deserve much more blame for this situation than Desdemona does.

O’Brien also blames Othello for his role in the clandestine relationship he has shared with Desdemona, culminating in their secret marriage, but she treats Desdemona much more favorably. O’Brien recognizes and justifies the bias that Brabantio shows toward Othello when she notes that “[t]here is something to be said for Brabantio’s objections to his son-in-law” and that Brabantio is upset by Othello’s “bewitching of his daughter” (539). In this manner, O’Brien implicitly justifies her criticism of Othello by noting his “difference,” that is his exotic and mysterious origins, as well as what O’Brien sees as his inappropriate relationship with Desdemona. In contrast, O’Brien’s characterization of Desdemona, when discussing that character’s response to Othello’s stories, reveals how favorably and traditionally she views Desdemona: “There comes out the true woman’s heart, not caring for Othello because she saw him successful and triumphant and prosperous, but because he had suffered so much and needed her so badly” (540). O’Brien holds Desdemona’s desire to nurture and care for Othello in high

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\(^{40}\) Mill comments on the practice of deferring the choice of a woman’s husband to her father: “Until a late period in European history, the father had the power to dispose of his daughter in marriage at his own will and pleasure, without any regard to hers” (35). Mill notes that, although the church had influenced marital practices enough “to require a formal ‘yes’ from the woman at the marriage ceremony...there was nothing to show that the consent was other than compulsory” (35). While O’Brien likely recognizes that, historically, Brabantio would have had greater say in his daughter’s marital decisions, she makes no such distinction, thereby suggesting that, in her own Victorian perception, a father should have the right to at least influence his daughter’s choice of a husband.
regard. By affirming Victorian associations of nurturing and care-giving as a woman’s domain, O’Brien’s analysis reveals a view of gender normative behavior that is in accordance with the angel in the house model offered by Coventry Patmore, in which women are typically seen as being ruled by love or passion rather than reason; since Othello is a man, he should have been ruled by reason, in O’Brien’s opinion, and should have handled matters accordingly, but his mysterious, foreign origins make his behavior suspect and in conflict with standard Victorian gender norms.

It is Desdemona’s feminine nature that actually leaves her vulnerable to Othello’s affection, according to O’Brien, who describes Desdemona as “innocent, inexperienced, and guileless” (54). O’Brien also notes that when Desdemona appears before the senators to attest to her love for Othello, she appears “in all the bloom of her beauty, and that soft winning grace which is her crowning charm” (540). The picture that O’Brien paints, then, is one of a young girl who is innocent and naïve, living a sheltered existence—one who, in O’Brien’s view, would not likely be well equipped to make her own way in the world but would be expected to rely on a father or a husband or some other worldly male figure for guidance. O’Brien points out the character’s innocence and lack of experience, also noting that it is “curious” that Brabantio “does not attack Othello for carrying off his daughter, but for bewitching her” (539). Thus, O’Brien implies that it is questionable whether Desdemona herself can be held accountable for her situation and suggests that Desdemona is actually more victim than active agent—a girl who has not chosen her husband but who has been bewitched by him. Desdemona is the epitome of femininity in O’Brien’s eyes—sweet, innocent, and loving, but also in need of guidance, which

41 O’Brien seems to subscribe to the view expressed by Ellis that “a high-minded and intellectual woman is never more truly great than when willingly and judiciously performing kind offices for the sick” (The Women of England 42). While not suggesting that Othello is physically sick, O’Brien clearly sees him in need of care for his mental anguish and praises Desdemona for fulfilling the role of nurturer.
renders her vulnerable to the influence of Othello. Lest there be any doubt as to the essentially feminine nature of Desdemona—a nature that echoes the Victorian era’s version of normative feminine traits—O’Brien describes her impressions of Desdemona in much more detail: “She is no creature fitted to fight her way through a cruel world, rather she suggests some lovely pet bird . . . who has never known anything but tenderness and admiration . . . too confiding to be exactly timid . . . she is intensely sensitive . . . losing all strength and courage in the face of unkindness and suspicion” (540).42 By comparing Desdemona to a “lovely pet bird,” O’Brien is reaffirming Victorian gender conventions that saw women as needing to be cared for because they are too innocent and vulnerable to navigate the harsh realities of life on their own.

O’Brien’s assessment of Desdemona as a passive women and an appropriately submissive wife continues with her characterization of Desdemona’s appearance before the senate: “True wife, Desdemona has accepted her lord for better or worse” and “plead[s] to be allowed to go with him to the wars” (541). Thus, O’Brien sees Desdemona as a recipient of the senate’s summons, who must act based on the will of the senate and who pleads for permission. It is also interesting to note that O’Brien presents an implicit criticism of Othello here by observing that Desdemona has “accepted her lord for better or worse,” suggesting that Desdemona is observing cultural norms that dictate women’s behavior in marriage. Within marriages, in Elizabethan as well as in Victorian culture, the male has ultimate authority and, according to O’Brien, Desdemona is to be admired for choosing to act as a “true wife,” a decision that will eventually lead to Desdemona’s demise.

42 Mill ponders whether a “woman born to the present lot of women, and content with it, how should she appreciate the value of self-dependence? She is not self-dependent; she is not taught self-dependence; her destiny is to receive everything from others” (94). The perpetuation of this model leads to the common nineteenth-century analogy of women as pets, to which O’Brien here refers. Other literary examples of female characters who need to be kept might include Dora Spenlow from Charles Dickens’ David Copperfield.
O’Brien continues her examination of Desdemona as an ideal wife by observing that, on Cyprus, Desdemona is “more charming than ever in her tender anxiety for her husband” (542). Yet, O’Brien also observes that these same qualities lead, in part, to Desdemona’s downfall, by pointing out that Iago “watches her, measuring her gracious ways, calculating how her courtesy may be turned against her” (542). According to O’Brien, Desdemona also unknowingly contributes to her downfall by her defense of Cassio, which is carried out with “generous ardour” and “fatal inexperience,” when Desdemona mistakenly and innocently “reckons on either coaxing or teasing her husband into doing what she wants” (545). O’Brien’s descriptions seem to favorably describe Desdemona’s traditionally feminine traits, but her analysis also suggests that these are the very traits that are manipulated by evil men, such as Iago, and misconstrued by dull or suspicious men, such as Othello. O’Brien casts Desdemona in the role of victim as a result of her feminine traits: “Desdemona’s frank, warm pleading for Cassio affects us so painfully” because Desdemona “is so absolutely unconscious of any possible danger, she is so light-hearted, so happy, so eager to make others happy also, that it seems unbearably cruel that this should be the point at which her own ruin begins” (545). Thus, in O’Brien’s interpretation, Desdemona’s own admirable behavior and her adherence to gender ideals lead to her ruin. This is what O’Brien seems to find the most painful and tragic aspect of the play. O’Brien notes that “Her bright laugh, as she goes away jesting over her own wifely obedience, sounds like a funeral knell” (545). Despite her praise of Desdemona for adhering to traditional gender norms, O’Brien also emphasizes, albeit implicitly, the inherent dangers and risks of a system that does not always protect those women who conform to social expectations. O’Brien’s comments suggest her belief that, if women are to be subservient, kind, nurturing and gentle, it is vital that the men in society
acknowledge, appreciate and honor women’s conformity to gender normative behaviors, which is not the case in Shakespeare’s play.

In her analysis of the final scenes of the play, O’Brien also touches on Desdemona’s traditional femininity and tends to see Desdemona as a victim. O’Brien does not immediately blame Desdemona for lying to Othello about the missing handkerchief: “It is part of the general conspiracy of things against Desdemona that Othello should choose to make it harder than needful for her to own that she has lost the handkerchief” (547). While suggesting that circumstances and Othello are working against Desdemona, O’Brien does also acknowledge Desdemona’s own shortcomings by observing that it is in this instance that “the weakness of her nature peeps out. It is very natural that she should shrink from making him angry, but it is a fatal bit of cowardice that makes her try to deceive her husband” (547). O’Brien sympathizes with Desdemona by agreeing that she should “shrink from making [Othello] angry,” which suggests the social implications of marriage and gender in Victorian England. In Shakespeare’s day as well as during most of the nineteenth century, a husband had the legal right to physically harm and mistreat his wife, as she was considered to be his property. O’Brien acknowledges Desdemona’s legitimate fear of angering her husband, given that physical violence was a very real threat for wives in both Elizabethan and Victorian society. In O’Brien’s view, Desdemona’s lie is a means of self preservation and is not born of a true desire to act deceitfully. Despite the

43 Lisa Surridge explores the presence of marital violence in society as well as in the Victorian novel and contends that debates as to the limits and potential penalties for marital violence in Victorian England were present in the court system,” the Houses of Parliament,” and in the print media available at the time (6). According to Surridge, “the narrative of marital violence permeated Victorian middle-class culture, even as these very narratives threatened to undermine its central tenets of domesticity, marriage and protective masculinity” (13). J. S. Mill also remarks on the proclivity for husbands to mistreat their wives: “how many thousands are there among the lowest classes in every country, who, without being in a legal sense malefactors in any other respect . . . indulge the utmost habitual excesses of bodily violence towards the unhappy wife, who alone, at least of grown persons, can neither repel nor escape from their brutality” (40). In combination with the views expressed by Surridge and Mill, O’Brien’s mundane treatment of this subject suggests the level of normalization toward domestic violence that existed in Victorian England.
implicit threat of violence that Othello poses, O’Brien can’t bring herself to totally condone Desdemona’s lie to Othello, her husband. In this case, it seems clear that O’Brien is torn between her sympathy for Desdemona and the principle that a woman should be truthful and obedient to her husband in marriage.

In a continued attempt to elicit sympathy for Desdemona, O’Brien notes that, even after Othello falsely accuses Desdemona of being in love with Cassio and with the knowledge that her husband intends to kill her, Desdemona’s main concern is “that Othello does not love her now, and that is all, comparatively speaking, that she cares about” (548). O’Brien then refers to Desdemona’s death scene, when, in response to Emilia’s question as to who has attacked Desdemona, Desdemona replies, “Nobody; I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!” (Othello V.ii.128-9). O’Brien points out that Desdemona’s last words are characteristic of her selfless, submissive nature: “Clinging to the assertion of her innocence, she makes one wild loving effort to shield Othello even at her own expense, surely the most pathetically guileless of falsehoods ever uttered” (551). O’Brien’s analysis reveals her view that the men in Desdemona’s life have an obligation to her that is not honored and that Desdemona’s own nature—namely, her passive, innocent, trusting nature—has left her vulnerable and unable to protect herself; thus, O’Brien sees Desdemona as a vulnerable, “pathetically guileless” victim. O’Brien’s tendency to sympathize with Desdemona, to praise her femininity and to point to her extreme passivity suggest that the critic, while identifying with this conception of womanhood, also recognizes the pitfalls of placing one’s well-being solely in the control of one man, particularly should that person be flawed. 44 Despite her often conventional views about

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44 A much earlier but very public case of mistreatment in marriage had been the case of Caroline Norton in the 1830s. Norton was married to a man who beat her, kept her possessions, turned her out of the house, barred her from seeing her children, and then attached the salary she made from writing. Because Norton had worked as a writer and had come from a family with some social standing, she was able to bring her case to the public eye, where she
femininity, it is evident that O’Brien also recognizes the inherent dangers in such a system and uses her societal beliefs and experience to inform and shape her analysis of Desdemona.

Unlike O’Brien, who sees Desdemona as a meek, passive woman, who must be kept and cared for, Faucit attempts to cast Desdemona in a new light as a heroic feminine character who draws strength from her femininity while also using her analysis to contest stereotyped gender norms. Faucit begins her analysis of Desdemona by considering the significance of the absent mother in *Othello* and Desdemona’s subsequent lack of savvy in choosing a mate. Faucit sees the lack of a maternal presence in Desdemona’s life as a significant factor in her ultimate demise. Faucit imagines that, like Ophelia and Portia, Desdemona’s “mother had obviously been long dead before Shakespeare takes up the story” (53). Faucit notes that, given Desdemona’s “loving, generous, imaginative” nature (54), and the lack of a maternal presence to guide her, it’s not surprising that Brabantio’s lack of attention leaves her in a vulnerable state: “Making so small a part of her father’s life, and missing the love, or the display of it, which would have been so precious to her, she finds her happiness in dreams . . . more exalted than any she has known, but which she has heard and read of in the poets and romances of her own and other times” (54).

Thus, Faucit implies that Brabantio’s lack of attention, coupled with the absence of a mother, has left Desdemona unguarded, unguided and vulnerable to her own romantic inclinations. What’s more, Faucit notes that Desdemona’s nature and behavior are “not that of a shrinking, timid girl, but of a thoughtful woman; one whose mind and heart went with her love, whose courage is as great and as high as she thinks the object of her love is worthy” (54-5). Faucit’s praise for Desdemona combines with her criticism of Brabantio to suggest that she faults Brabantio for garnered a great deal of sympathy. Norton’s case sparked the beginnings of legal reform in marriage with the subsequent passage of the Infants and Child Custody Bill of 1839, but such reform was minimal and slow in being enacted (Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder). For Victorian audiences, the Norton case, among others, would have been common knowledge, therefore, references to a one-sided, ill suited marriage would likely have had public as well as untold personal resonance for those reading the criticism generated by women.
having left his daughter’s future to chance, not only neglecting her but also putting her in the company of a man who gives her the attention she craves and with whom she falls deeply and thoroughly in love. Thus, Faucit assigns a portion of the blame for Desdemona’s elopement to Brabantio.

Faucit does acknowledge that Desdemona had a responsibility to Brabantio, but cites the distance in their relationship as an additional factor in Desdemona’s behavior. In Faucit’s view, Brabantio has been less than an ideal parent, a parent more in form than in feeling. Faucit turns to Desdemona’s own words, when the character is asked where her allegiance lies, as evidence that Desdemona is not oblivious to the duty that she owes to her father, but neither does she display any deep affection for him:

My noble Father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you. You are the lord of duty;
I am hitherto your daughter . . . (Othello I.iii.183-7)

Faucit notes that in Desdemona’s response, “not a word does she say about love and affection towards” Brabantio (55). By establishing their somewhat distant, obligatory, and perfunctory relationship, Faucit suggests that Brabantio has been negligent. In Faucit’s view, given the distance between Brabantio and Desdemona, her decision to marry without her father’s knowledge or approval is more understandable than it would be had they shared a close, loving relationship. Given that Faucit identifies Brabantio’s lack of feeling as the problem in this situation, she seems to imply that the lack of a maternal presence emotionally deprived the household in which Desdemona grew up and facilitated the apparent lack of a deep, emotional connection between father and daughter, while also leaving Desdemona’s own emotions unregulated because she has no maternal presence to teach her what the appropriate expression
of love should be. Faucit further justifies Desdemona’s actions by contending that, “From all we see of Desdemona’s readiness to give more than is expected from her of love and service . . . I cannot think she would have been wanting in these to her father” (55). Faucit doesn’t find Desdemona at fault for the lack of love and closeness in this father-daughter relationship; instead, she blames Brabantio’s inability as a parent and, to some extent, the lack of a maternal presence.

Faucit believes that Desdemona’s home situation—the lack of maternal guidance and the perfunctory paternal presence that Brabantio represents—have left Desdemona vulnerable to her own nature and tendency to romanticize the first love interest she encounters, Othello. Faucit also blames Brabantio’s lack of oversight for creating an opportunity for Desdemona and Othello to form a relationship:

> How dull must Brabantio have been when he so oft invited the great hero of the day to his house! If he found pleasure in ‘questioning’ the story of Othello’s life, how was it he did not cast a thought upon the still greater charm that story might have for his daughter’s ear? Dull and blind indeed must the old man have been . . . not to see how quickly, when called away by house affairs, she steals back, sinking quietly into her seat so as not to interrupt the tale. (57)

Faucit clearly disdains Brabantio’s fathering skills by describing him repeatedly as “dull and blind.” Faucit also seems to imply that a mother would be more aware of the potential for an illicit relationship to occur between Desdemona and Othello under such circumstances. Faucit notes that Brabantio accepts no responsibility for the role he played in facilitating the relationship between Desdemona and Othello. What’s worse, in Faucit’s eyes, is that he disowns

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45 In *The Evolution of Sex* (1889), by Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson, the authors proffered what came to be a popularly held theory during the Victorian era—that the sexes were founded on a series of complementary gendered traits and that the respective roles of each gender were essential in selecting a mate and could be observed within the condition of marriage. According to this theory, women provide the domestic, nurturing, emotional presence in a household while men provide the more professional, aggressive, reasoning presence, with each gender being drawn to what is lacking in their own make-up when choosing a mate, thus creating a unified and complete whole via marriage. The lack of such balance in Brabantio’s household would, therefore, create an imperfect model for Desdemona to follow.
his daughter when she proclaims her love for Othello even though she also avows her sense of duty to Brabantio. In response to Desdemona’s proclamation, Brabantio exclaims, “God be with you! I have done. / . . . / I had rather to adopt a child than get it” (Othello I.iii.192-4). To make clear her lack of sympathy for Desdemona’s father, Faucit also notes that at the end of his speech, “Brabantio let[s] out the cold malignity of his natural disposition—the unforgiving cruelty which he keeps to the last, so that it may sting and wound more surely: ‘Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee’” (Othello I.iii.295-6 qtd in Faucit 59). Faucit describes Brabantio’s “natural disposition” as possessing a “cold malignity” and an “unforgiving cruelty,” which has the effect of negating all sympathy for Brabantio, in Faucit’s view. By noting Brabantio’s final words to the couple, Faucit also implicates Brabantio’s influence in the tragedy that will follow, contending that “Desdemona never forgot them. But how was it with Othello? Although at the time cast aside, defied, yet they struck home as they were intended; and such a listener as Iago, intent as we know beforehand, on revenge, and caring not by what means it was brought about, would eagerly seize the weapon Brabantio puts into his hands” (59). Faucit holds Brabantio partially responsible for the tragedy by providing Iago with a means through which he could ruin both Desdemona and Othello. Ultimately, Faucit’s criticism casts a harsh light on Brabantio while portraying Desdemona sympathetically, despite Desdemona’s defiance of traditional paternal authority.

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46 One document that illustrates the power of fathers was written by John Kemble and published in the British and Foreign Quarterly Review in 1838. In this article, Kemble argues against the Infants and Child Custody Bill, by defending a man’s inherent right to have ultimate power over his children: “The sole and absolute power over the children, to the exclusion of everyone else, is a fundamental right vested in the man, as man and father, from the beginning. The paternal power is the oldest and most sacred right belonging to a man—the right that ought to be most religiously guarded” (qtd in Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 2: 10). While this view was expressed some years before Faucit was writing, it does provide a sense of the seriousness with which parental authority was treated. This issue continued to be debated though the remainder of the nineteenth century, as evidenced by subsequent changes to the laws—the Custody Act of 1873 and the Custody of Infants Act of 1886. Even with the passage of the Custody of Infants Act in 1886, mothers could be granted “guardianship in the event of the father’s death, but as long as the father lived, he retained the authority to decide upon the religion, education, and upbringing of the children” (13).
Like O’Brien, Faucit sees Desdemona as possessing an extremely feminine nature, in agreement with well established Victorian gender norms. Early on in her analysis, Faucit identifies the gendered traits that she recognizes in Desdemona and describes her as a “being so bright, so pure, so unselfish, generous, courageous—so devoted in her love, so unconquerable in her allegiance to her ‘kind lord,’ even while dying by his hand” (47). Faucit here enumerates a series of gendered traits that were typically associated with women in Victorian England—purity, generosity, unselfishness, devotion in love—and adds a trait that, at the time, typically had a more masculine association—courage—in order to depict Desdemona as a strong but feminine woman. While women could certainly be courageous, this was not a trait typically associated with femininity during the nineteenth century, suggesting that Faucit is attempting to construct and offer her own assessment of what constitutes admirable femininity. Faucit sees Desdemona as an exemplary character who “excelled in every accomplishment” and who possessed “grace,” “purity,” and “dignity,” as well as “beauty and manners” (56). The picture created by Faucit constitutes her view of an admirable, dignified and eminently feminine character.

Faucit also notes that, when she was first conceptualizing and portraying Desdemona on stage, her views and impressions of the character were quite different from those of established critics: “I did not know in those days that Desdemona is usually considered a merely amiable, simple, yielding creature . . . This is the last idea that would have entered my mind. To me she

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47 In her discussion of Darwin’s theories and the implications of those theories on the Victorian understanding of essential gender difference, Cynthia Eagle Russett explains that “Darwin recited a familiar Victorian litany. Men excelled in courage, pugnacity, energy and preeminently in the higher intellectual facilities of abstraction, reason, and imagination” (40). Thus, Faucit’s inclusion of ‘courage’ as a trait of Desdemona’s is significant for its nonconformist approach to gender norms.

Clearly, there were many in Victorian society who would likely still find Desdemona’s treatment of Brabantio to be improper.
was in all things worthy to be a hero’s bride, and deserving the highest love, reverence, and
gratitude from the noble Moor” (48). In this instance, Faucit recognizes that her interpretation of
Desdemona is unusual, which suggests that she is basing her perceptions on her own experience
with and understanding of gendered social norms as they existed in Victorian England. Perhaps
aware of the potentially inflammatory nature of her interpretation, Faucit quickly points to an
esteemed male literary figure, William Wordsworth, to validate her own unconventional
assessment of Desdemona: “I cannot think [Wordsworth] would have singled her out in his
famous sonnet,¹⁴ had he not thought her as brave as she was generous, as high of heart as she
was sweet of nature, or had he regarded her as a soft, insipid, plastic creature, ready to do
anyone’s bidding, and submit placidly to any ill-usage from mere weakness and general
characterless docility” (48). Faucit points out here, albeit indirectly, that the traditional school of
thought gave little regard to Desdemona; the list of traits typically associated with Desdemona
also suggests the stereotyping inherent in many feminine gender norms—a woman who is “soft,”
pliable, submissive, “weak,” and “docile,” but all depicted here, by Faucit, in a negative light.
Faucit’s view of Desdemona, in contrast, aligns that character with more favorable traits, such as
purity and gentleness, but also strength of character. Moreover, by aligning her analysis with the
views of a prominent nineteenth-century literary figure, Wordsworth, Faucit very consciously
attempts to invest her own views with established authority as she asserts her construction of an
ideal feminine nature.

Faucit comments further on what she sees as the heroic nature of Desdemona’s character,
when considering Desdemona’s empathy for Othello’s war time exploits. Faucit cites Othello’s

¹⁴ The sonnet to which Faucit refers here is Sonnet III in Wordsworth’s “Personal Talk.” This sonnet concerns the
wonders of literature and concludes with the following stanza: “There find I personal themes, a plenteous store, /
Matter wherein right voluble I am, / To which I listen with a ready ear; Two shall be named, pre-eminently dear,— / The gentle Lady married to the Moor; / And heavenly Una with her milk-white Lamb” (Wordsworth 10-14).
description of Desdemona’s reaction to the stories he had entertained her with on so many occasions: “‘Twas pitiful, ‘twas wondrous pitiful. / She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished / That heaven had made her such a man . . . “ (Othello I.iii.163-5). Faucit cites Desdemona’s reaction to Othello’s stories as evidence of Desdemona’s “spotless and heroic” nature: “Here comes out the warrior spirit which I have ascribed to her—the power of kindling, of understanding and rising up to, heroic deeds” (Faucit 58). Faucit’s perception of Desdemona as a heroic character is quite extraordinary within the context of nineteenth-century criticism that, as previously noted, most often viewed Desdemona as a weak, pliable woman.49 The further implication of Faucit’s commentary is that, like Desdemona, women in ordinary situations, such as marriage, who are typically overlooked or under-estimated are, in fact, often demonstrating courage and heroism that goes un-remarked and unrecognized.

Faucit also examines Desdemona’s marriage to Othello and what this reveals about her character, particularly Desdemona’s courage and her genuine love for Othello. Faucit observes that “the ‘maiden never bold’ [took] courage to leave her father’s home, and give herself in marriage to the Moor. She had also the true, quiet courage, when sent for to the senate-house, to appeal directly to the Duke” (59). Unlike O’Brien, who characterizes Desdemona’s appearance before the senate as passive supplication, Faucit points to Desdemona’s actions as evidence of her courage, despite what she sees as Desdemona’s common, but mistaken, characterization as a “maiden never bold.” Faucit points to Desdemona’s willingness to leave the safety and security of her father’s house to throw her lot in with Othello as evidence of this fact. As implied by

49 The concept of viewing Desdemona as a heroine, while revolutionary in the nineteenth century, is in accord with a concept argued by Naomi Conn Liebler in 2002; Liebler discusses the idea that the nature of tragedy “calls for a representation of the futile struggle of a protagonist within and against a specific political or social arena; that is, it is in the nature of the genre to present the agon of a protagonist who will, for a variety of reasons, be destroyed in its process. The female tragic hero engages in a struggle exactly as rigorous, exactly as dangerous, and exactly as futile as that of any of her masculine counterparts” (The Female Tragic Hero 2). Faucit here suggests the same classification for Desdemona.
Faucit’s analysis, marrying a man who was also an outsider, due to his race and national origin, against her father’s wishes, would put Desdemona in a fairly precarious social position. As a female in society, whether within the cultural context of Shakespeare’s Elizabethan period or of Faucit’s Victorian era, Desdemona would have been expected to look to her father and, in lieu of her father, to her husband, to care for her and see to her affairs. Certainly, Faucit seems to suggest that for Desdemona to choose Othello against her father’s wishes is no small gesture and emphasizes this view by asking “Who cannot see that this woman was of the true, heroic mould, fearless as she was gentle?” (60). What inspires Desdemona, according to Faucit, is her depth of feeling for Othello and her belief “almost to the last, that her noble Moor’s love and trust were as absolute as her own” (60). Faucit praises Desdemona’s love for her husband, her courage and fearlessness in devoting herself to him, and her gentle nature through it all. Faucit also offers an implicit criticism of Othello by suggesting that Desdemona’s faith and trust in her husband were not deserved, since Othello does not return her devotion in the end. Faucit’s implication is clearly that, had Othello been as devoted in love as Desdemona and remained as trusting as she did, the tragedy could have been averted. Faucit consistently defends Desdemona, from a female perspective, on the basis of Desdemona’s femininity and, in the process, challenges established Victorian societal custom, which would typically have invested authority in men as fathers and husbands, whether or not they were deserving of such power. As J. S. Mill has noted, “[m]en are not required, as a preliminary to the marriage ceremony, to prove by testimonials that they are fit to be trusted with the exercise of absolute power” (40). In Faucit’s view, neither of the men who have power over Desdemona—Brabantio or Othello—is deserving of such power.

An even more explicit condemnation of typically gendered attitudes is made by Faucit when she comments on Othello’s lack of empathy for Desdemona: “Men, as we know, may
possess all manly gifts and be fairly decorous and moral in their conduct, yet, through some defect of nature or of training, or of both, may be quite incapable of conceiving the noblest qualities of womanhood. To understand these there must be some sympathy, some affinity” (62). Although Faucit is speaking specifically about Othello’s inability to truly understand Desdemona, as well as suggesting his shortcomings, her use of the more generalized terms “men” and “womanhood” are telling. Faucit seems to be drawing very clear parallels between her understanding of the play and her perception of Victorian societal and gender norms. Faucit’s criticism of men and their lack of receptivity to a female perspective also implicitly legitimizes Faucit’s authority as a critic in this instance; essentially, Faucit is emphasizing the propriety of a female critic analyzing female characters from a uniquely feminine perspective. This position also, by extension, underscores the propriety of women entering a public discourse about gender that has direct implications for women.

Faucit continues her critique of Shakespeare’s play by examining Othello’s character in relation to Desdemona’s and concluding that Desdemona’s is the superior nature: “Had Othello been really the ‘noble Moor,’ as ‘true of mind’ as Desdemona thought him, he would, at the lightest aspersion of his wife, have recoiled as from a serpent” (Othello III.iv.26-7 qtd in Faucit 62). Faucit further contends that, “We feel with him when he exclaims, ‘Oh, the pity of it, the pity of it!’ but we feel, too, that had he but possessed some of Desdemona’s loyalty, some grains of common-sense, all Iago’s snares might have been set for him in vain” (Othello IV.i.195-6 qtd in Faucit 64). Thus, in Faucit’s analysis, Desdemona is the stronger of the two and, in contrast, it is Othello’s shortcomings that facilitate the tragedy. Given her previous references to gendered traits, it seems particularly significant that, in this instance, Faucit is treating traits such as “loyalty” and “common sense” as non-gendered or androgynous and, as a result, is rather
powerfully contesting accepted Victorian gender norms. Here, Desdemona is characterized as not just an equal partner to her husband but as superior to him. Given Faucit’s Victorian contextualization of the play, her comments about Desdemona have implications toward the ongoing discourse regarding nineteenth-century attitudes toward gender and marriage. Faucit essentially contests the commonly adopted attitude that males are inherently superior to females, based on gender alone.

One particularly problematic aspect of the play for Faucit is the scene in which Desdemona lies to Othello about her missing handkerchief. Faucit attempts to mitigate the blame she assigns to Desdemona for lying about the handkerchief by reminding us that Desdemona “knows nothing of its whereabouts, but believ[es] it to be only mislaid, and hop[es] to have it to show [Othello] when it has been properly searched for” (69). Faucit then refers back to the scene in which Othello strikes Desdemona, noting the animosity he expresses toward his wife in the following lines:

. . . O devil, devil!
If that the earth could teem with woman’s tears,
Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile.
Out of my sight! (Othello IV.i.247-50)

Faucit notes that Desdemona is ever faithful, and simply replies, “I will not stay to offend you” (Othello IV.i.50), removing herself from Othello’s sight after he strikes her. Faucit also observes that Desdemona’s reaction to Othello’s accusation is that of an innocent woman: “Think how

50 Mill elucidates the pervasive Victorian attitude toward male superiority: “Think what it is to be a boy, to grow up to manhood in the belief that, without any merit or any exertion of his own, though he may be the most frivolous and empty or the most ignorant and stolid of mankind, by the mere fact of being born a male he is by right the superior of all and every one of an entire half of the human race: including probably some whose real superiority to himself he has daily or hourly occasion to feel . . . he sees that she is superior to him, and believes that, notwithstanding her superiority, he is entitled to command and she is bound to obey. What must be the effect on his character of this lesson? And men of the cultivated classes are often not aware how deeply it sinks into the immense majority of male minds” (86). As Mill observes, female superiority is not treated as non-existent, rather it is not typically acknowledged. Through her analysis of Desdemona, Faucit is attempting to publicly recognize the existence of such female superiority, particularly in contrast to Othello’s shortcomings.
stunned and bewildered she must be! She is accused of a crime beyond all others most foreign to her nature” (Faucit 72). Clearly, then, it is no vice of Desdemona’s, in Faucit’s view, that is responsible for her ill treatment at Othello’s hands. The implication is that Desdemona’s small lie pales in comparison to Othello’s mistreatment of her. Even after such devastating and unfounded accusations, Faucit contends, “Desdemona still loved and trusted . . . To the last she shows herself to be of a hopeful, generous disposition” (75). In every other way, according to Faucit, Desdemona has been a true, devoted, acquiescent wife, the suggestion being that the one indiscretion of lying to her husband over such a small matter as the whereabouts of a handkerchief is insignificant.

In her discussion of the climactic scenes of the play, Faucit emphasizes Desdemona’s feminine qualities and traits, her devotion, acquiescence, innocence, compassion, purity and selflessness—all traits which were promoted as ideals in Victorian conceptions of femininity. Faucit concludes by casting Desdemona as a heroine, contending that history has no “higher heroism than this,” no “nobler love” born of “self-abnegation” (78). What seems to prevent Desdemona from becoming a full-fledged victim, in Faucit’s opinion, is Desdemona’s final act of selflessness by refusing to name Othello as her murderer, noting that “with her dying breath, she exonerates the Moor” (78). Faucit gives accolades to Desdemona for embracing her femininity and, even as she suggests that these traits are the indirect cause of her demise, she reinvests Desdemona with the nobility of dying a heroic death, because she remained true to her feminine ideals to the end. To understand Faucit’s classification of Desdemona as heroic due to her selflessness, it’s important to remember that the Victorian “conception of woman’s moral nature on which her role as preserver of essential human values was based” meant that “Woman . . . is above all selfless; her actions are motivated by self-denying love” (Helsinger, Sheets, and
Veeder 2: 113). Presumably, this is a view to which Faucit subscribed. Her purpose in thus representing Desdemona, then, seems to be an attempt to elevate Desdemona’s status from the weak, victimized pawn that she had traditionally been seen as by Shakespearean scholars to a more dignified, self-willed individual who was fulfilling her purpose in spite of the unfairness of the situation. Imposing her own feminine perspective on Desdemona and refuting the established and largely male critical view of this character becomes an act of defiance on Faucit’s part, especially given what she has acknowledged as the unconventional nature of her interpretation of this character. The explanatory and somewhat apologetic opening of her analysis suggests that she is aware of this aspect of her criticism.

Like Faucit, Elliott sees Desdemona’s love for Othello as natural and understandable, while blaming Brabantio for a lack of oversight and guidance. Elliott seems to suggest, much as Faucit had, that Brabantio is somewhat negligent or obtuse in allowing the meetings between Desdemona and Othello to continue, observing that Brabantio was “altogether unmindful of the young girl whom he still regarded as a child” (Elliott 62). As a result of these meetings with Othello, Desdemona became ever more enamored with him as “the ideal of her romantic fancy, the man whom in her girlish day dreams she was some day to meet and to love” (63). Thus, Elliott suggests that Brabantio has essentially enabled the romance by inviting Othello to his home and is negligent for allowing the situation to continue. When discussing Desdemona’s defiance of her father, Elliott seems quite matter-of-fact: “Dutiful as [Desdemona] had always been as a daughter, the inevitable epoch had arrived, when a stronger claim asserted itself before which even filial obligations must give way” (63). In Elliott’s view, this is simply the natural order of events—that a young girl should, at the appropriate time, transfer her loyalty from her father to her husband, a view that is in keeping with popular Victorian mores. Elliott seems to be
adhering to principles that were widely accepted during the nineteenth century that promoted marriage as the common objective for women and the natural progression of development in a woman’s life. J. S. Mill observes that marriage is “the destination appointed by society for women, the prospect they are brought up to, and the object which it is intended should be sought by all of them” (35). This nineteenth-century view of gender and marriage clearly informs Elliott’s perception of Desdemona’s motivation for pursuing Othello as a potential husband and love interest.

In regard to Brabantio’s reaction to and anger over his daughter’s love for Othello and her subsequent disobedience, Elliott is quite neutral, simply observing that it is unfortunate that “Brabantio was very far from accepting this new state of things with the grace that might have secured him a loyal son-in-law and preserved a loving daughter” (63). Elliott’s description can be seen as a commentary on Victorian societal norms and customs. She implies that a woman should be given the freedom to choose her husband and that fathers should be supportive of their daughters, whether or not the father approves of his daughter’s choice. Within the context of the play, Elliott’s comments suggest that Brabantio might have helped to avert the subsequent tragedy had he been a more loving and supportive father to Desdemona.

Elliott also makes it clear that she sees Desdemona as a woman who fits the traditional gender norms of the Victorian period, noting that “Desdemona is passive and yielding . . . our love for Desdemona is of that sheltering, protecting kind that one feels towards a little child . . . she is made to be caressed and petted” (62).51 Elliott appears to see Desdemona as a weak

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51 During the Victorian period, much was written about the childlike nature of women. In Man and Woman: A Study of Secondary Sexual Characters, Havelock Ellis notes the tendency of women to remain physiologically closer to children and identifies “tendencies that are latent in each [gender]—the man’s to independence, the woman’s to dependence” (211). A popular Victorian view was that women were the inherently weaker sex and, thus, needed to be cared for and protected by the inherently stronger sex, men. In the instance above, Elliott seems to be applying these gender mores to her understanding of Desdemona.
natured, vulnerable woman whose traits accord with common Victorian conceptions of womanhood. Although Desdemona’s nature is extremely passive, in Elliott’s view, Desdemona is also “noble in disposition” and as “pure as the driven snow in thought and deed” (61). Like O’Brien’s traditional view of Desdemona as a lovely bird, Elliott’s view of this character as a “little child” stands in sharp contrast to Faucit’s view of Desdemona as a courageous heroine, indicating the range of feminine gender mores that existed among nineteenth-century women. By taking part in Shakespearean criticism, these Victorian critics entered into the public debate over conceptions of femininity and were able to promote their own conception of what constituted appropriate femininity.

As Elliott proceeds, she praises Desdemona’s qualities as a wife, reveals her bias against Othello as an outsider, and conveys her own perceptions of marriage. Elliott enumerates the qualities she sees in Desdemona: “we have seen in this young Venetian girl a quick and ready wit, much decision of character, romantic devotion to the man of her choice, spite of his physical drawbacks of colour and nationality, and a mind trained to the habits of housewifely industry” (63). Elliott further contends that “We cannot but esteem Othello fortunate indeed in the possession of such a wife” (63-4). Elliott’s reference to Othello’s “possession” of Desdemona serves as a clear reminder that Desdemona, through marriage, has essentially become Othello’s property under the practice of coverture. Elliott’s commentary also emphasizes her view that Desdemona is not appreciated by Othello and that, under coverture, a woman who finds herself married to a man who will not treat her in an appropriate manner—whether in Victorian or Elizabethan times—would have had little recourse against poor treatment. This would have been
a very real and immediate problem for many Victorian women, a point implicit throughout Elliott’s commentary.52

Elliott makes further parallels to nineteenth-century ideals when she notes that Desdemona, “Like many other young wives” had “imagined her lord to be ‘True of mind and made of no such baseness, / As jealous creatures are’” (Othello III.iv.27-8 qtd in Elliott 67). Elliott is drawing the inference that many women naïvely misjudge their husbands and presume them to be better than they are. She continues in this vein by observing that “If ever there was a wife wholly her husband’s in body, soul, and spirit, it was Desdemona, and if ever there were a husband possessed of the devil of jealousy it was Othello” (67-8). Elliott’s view is clear—Desdemona fulfilled her social and marital obligations to Othello by giving herself over “wholly” to her husband in “body, soul, and spirit,” yet Othello fails to meet his obligations to Desdemona and instead gives himself over to jealousy. When Elliott notes that Desdemona has acted “like many other young wives” and misjudged her husband, she is essentially cautioning women to choose their husbands wisely. The further implication of Elliot’s commentary is that, if society has expectations for women in marriage, husbands must be equally obligated. Moreover, a wife could do all that is expected of her and still find herself in an unhappy and potentially dangerous marital situation if she does not choose her husband wisely. The reality of bad marital choices was a very real threat for many Victorian women, particularly in a society that invested men with so much authority and divested women of so much of their autonomy.

52 Mill comments on the practice of coverture in the past and in relation to Victorian England: “By the old laws of England, the husband was called the lord of the wife; he was literally regarded as her sovereign, inasmuch that the murder of a man by his wife was called treason (petty as distinguished from high treason), and was more cruelly avenged than was usually the case with high treason, for the penalty was burning to death . . . we are continually told that civilization and Christianity have restored to the woman her just rights. Meanwhile the wife is the actual bond-servant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called” (35-6). Elliott’s analysis of Desdemona indicates that she is also making parallels between the historical extent of coverture and the continued legal practice of coverture in Victorian England to comment on the implications this practice had on nineteenth-century women.
Domestic abuse is an issue that was quite frequently raised during the nineteenth century. Lisa Surridge observes that “Victorians debated how to prevent and punish wife assault. As those debates reveal, wife beating stood at the vortex of some of the most urgent issues of the period: marital coverture, divorce, domesticity, manliness, and women’s rights” (6). Desdemona’s story, then, serves as a cautionary tale for Elliott and any young woman in her audience who might be inclined to choose a husband based on emotions rather than on practical reason.

Elliott continues her analysis by observing Desdemona’s nature and the role it plays in her demise. Elliott notes that Desdemona, when accused of wrongdoing, is “Too bewildered to defend herself” and, as a result, “quietly obeys her husband’s orders, and goes like a lamb to the slaughter” (70). In this instance, Elliott devotes little time to specifics or a close analysis of the play, choosing instead to comment on what she sees as parallels between Shakespeare’s dramatization of events and day to day life in Victorian England, noting that Desdemona is “true to nature” and that “There are thousands of Desdemonas in the world, purifying it by their tender, innocent natures, and raising the tone of its moral and social atmosphere” (70). In this instance, Elliott affirms a conventional, idealized view of women as submissive, gentle, and morally superior, not unlike the image offered in Coventry Patmore’s poem, The Angel in the House, but with the clear implication that such faultless angels may also find themselves mistreated or brutalized by the men in their lives. Ultimately, however, Elliott declares her pity for both Desdemona and Othello as “victims of the most diabolical malignity” (70). Elliott may claim to pity both characters but her praise of Desdemona’s nature is far more prominent than her pity for Othello. Moreover, her lack of attention to the specific details and situations in the play suggests that Elliott is far more pre-occupied with drawing parallels between Shakespeare’s fictional female character and the “thousands of Desdemonas in the world” who are sweet, pure,
and devoted wives only to find themselves in bad marriages. For Elliott, Desdemona’s fate becomes a cautionary example for Victorian women contemplating the choice of a husband as well as an implicit criticism of the cultural and legal conventions that enabled such an imbalance of power within the marital relationship.

The overall view that Elliott expresses is that Desdemona is a gentle, passive, and demure woman who needs to be taken care of by the men in her life but who is, instead, neglected by Brabantio and murdered by Othello; her analysis suggests that nineteenth-century women are placed at a social disadvantage and that adhering to submissive gender norms of femininity could pose real and serious dangers for women. Whether nineteenth-century female critics see Desdemona as a noble heroine, a victimized woman, or as an illustration of the typical Victorian wife, they all use the opportunity of their analysis to critique this play as a means of expressing their own views about the woman question in Victorian England. Their very gender and experience gives them the authority to comment on these characters but they further use this opportunity to express their views about gender and social norms, thereby helping to contest, affirm, or illuminate established attitudes and demonstrating the degree of divisiveness in nineteenth-century society regarding conceptions of womanhood. The sometimes conflicting analyses of Faucit, O’Brien, and Elliott demonstrate how each critic subtly uses the platform of Shakespearean criticism to offer her view of the treatment and perception of women in society at large.

Cordelia

Much like Ophelia and Desdemona, Cordelia embodies many idealized traits of womanhood and is faithful, loyal, nurturing and loving; unlike Ophelia and Desdemona,
however, who both lie to the men they love, Cordelia does nothing untoward throughout the play and merely answers her father honestly, making her demise seem exceptionally harsh and unwarranted to Victorian critics Anna Jameson and Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott. Cordelia acts according to the socially promoted gender ideals of the Victorian period—she is prepared to love her father in his due measure but is aware of the propriety of transferring her loyalty and deference to the man who will become her husband—and she replies to her father honestly and appropriately, yet she still faces exile, abandonment by her father, and, ultimately, execution as a result of her adherence to these ideals. Jameson and Elliott take on the task of assessing Cordelia and, while Jameson sees Cordelia as an idealized bastion of femininity who exists only in abstraction and not in actuality, Elliott considers the story and fate of Cordelia to be an unfortunate but relevant example for women, an argument that she emphasizes throughout her analysis. As Elliott points out, Shakespeare draws his characters from life and, for Elliott, it is apparently not difficult to imagine many such women during the nineteenth century who act in good faith, adhering to the gender norms conscribed to them, only to meet with a harsh fate

53 It should be noted here that the most popular version of King Lear on the Victorian stage was Naham Tate’s adaptation of this play. In Tate’s version, Cordelia survives the murder attempt, Lear recovers, they successfully defeat the opposing forces and Cordelia and Edgar marry. This version of the play deprives the character of Cordelia of much of her heroic grandeur and may be partially responsible for the apparent lack of interest in her character among Victorian female critics. Both Jameson and Elliott focus on the tragic depiction of Cordelia in Shakespeare’s original play.

54 Helena Faucit acknowledges her failure to comment on the character of Cordelia in the preface to her book, On Some of Shakespeare’s Female Characters. Faucit notes that there are significant characters that she has omitted from her book: “I have resisted the temptation to go still further, and to write of Lady Macbeth . . . and Cordelia” (viii). Faucit continues to explain that she has examined these characters as closely as the others that are included in her book: “Like them, they became living realities for me, and in impersonating them I learned much, which would not otherwise have been learned, as to the master poet’s conception and purpose . . . But I fear I have already taxed too greatly the patience of those who have read my studies” (ix). This excerpt is also significant for demonstrating Faucit’s own gendered behavior. In this instance, Faucit demonstrates her justification for delving into the realm of Shakespearean criticism by virtue of her profession as a stage actress; she also claims her propensity for treating these characters as actual women, presumably drawing on her own nineteenth-century experiences and gender mores to better understand them; and she concludes with an apology of sorts to demonstrate that she is appropriately modest and selfless in the presentation of her analyses by not wanting to take advantage of the ‘patience’ of her audience.
because they are not prepared for the unpredictability and mistreatment of others. In her analysis of Cordelia, Elliott celebrates this character’s feminine devotion and steadfastness in the face of enormous opposition, even as she points to Cordelia as a cautionary example. Although Cordelia is ultimately unable to restore her father or herself and avoid disaster, Elliott does note that Cordelia was able to maintain her ideals despite the trials and tribulations of life and, for this achievement, Elliott agrees with Jameson’s view that Cordelia represents a model of feminine ideals and behavior.

In Jameson’s study of Cordelia, the critic first comments on the ideally feminine qualities and essence of Cordelia’s character: “There is in the beauty of Cordelia’s character an effect too sacred for words, and almost too deep for tears; within her heart is a fathomless well of purest affection, but its waters sleep in silence and obscurity” (245-6). Although Cordelia only appears in a few scenes, Jameson notes that her presence is felt acutely in those scenes. Jameson further contends that Cordelia is as significant as is Lear: “If Lear be the grandest of Shakespeare’s tragedies, Cordelia in herself, as a human being, governed by the purest and holiest impulses and motives, the most refined from all dross of selfishness and passion, approaches near to perfection” (246). By associating Cordelia with purity and holiness, Jameson emphasizes Cordelia’s traditionally feminine traits and elevates her to heroic status by virtue of her womanhood. Jameson’s view stands out in stark contrast to traditional views of female protagonists as merely victimized. The modern feminist critic, Naomi Conn Liebler comments on the infrequency of such a view even in current critical thought: “it is not surprising that critics, feminist and otherwise, have refused to recognize the female tragic protagonist as heroic and have assumed that the very term ‘hero’ is a masculine form belonging properly only to masculine representations, and, further that a feminine ‘version’ of that representation must be
only and exactly that: a version, a poor imitation, an ‘inauthentic copy’” (*The Female Tragic Hero* 8). Jameson places Cordelia on an equally tragic, heroic scale to Lear and contends that Cordelia’s gender justifies rather than diminishes this classification.

Jameson also claims her affinity for Cordelia and engages with male criticism of this character. While she doesn’t directly fault Schlegel’s assessment of Cordelia, she feels that it lacks profundity. Jameson cites Schlegel’s comments on Cordelia and his hesitancy to examine her character: “Of the heavenly beauty of the soul of Cordelia, I will not venture to speak” (qtd on 246). Males critics commonly deferred from providing detailed analysis of Shakespeare’s female characters, but Jameson is eager to pick up where Schlegel leaves off. Jameson does feel the need to justify her efforts, however: “Now if I attempt what Schlegel and others have left undone, it is because I feel that this general acknowledgment of [Cordelia’s] excellence can neither satisfy those who have studied the character, nor convey a just conception of it to the mere reader” (246-7). Jameson’s explicit reference to her audience suggests that she is aware of the potential influence her comments could have on the “mere” reader’s perception of Shakespeare’s women, thereby implicitly suggesting what she perceives as the need to comment on Cordelia’s femininity. Jameson’s attention to Cordelia emphasizes the value she places on understanding feminine ideals and motivation as well as demonstrating her own desire to enter into the nineteenth-century discourse surrounding femininity and gender.

The two characteristics that Jameson sees as predominate in Cordelia are her sense of truth and duty. These are the traits, in Jameson’s view, that set Cordelia apart as an emblem of feminine perfection: “It appears to me that the whole character rests upon the two sublimest principles of human action, the love of truth and the sense of duty; but these, when they stand alone . . . are apt to strike us as severe and cold. Shakespeare has, therefore, wreathed them round
with the dearest attributes of our feminine nature, the power of feeling and inspiring affection” (247). While “truth” and “duty” are not necessarily traits assigned to a particular gender, according to nineteenth-century conceptions of appropriate gender norms, Jameson’s use of the pronoun “our” suggests her affinity for and empathy with Cordelia as a representation of feminine ideals and qualifies that the ability to “inspir[e] affection” in combination with the “power of feeling” are gendered traits. As evidence that Cordelia possesses these feminine qualities, Jameson points to the affection that Lear, Kent and the Fool all felt for Cordelia:

“Cordelia is loved . . . To her father she is the object of a secret preference . . . Kent is ready to brave death and exile in her defence [sic]” and the fool is miserable in his anguish for her circumstances (247). Thus, the proof of Cordelia’s value, according to Jameson, is linked to the love and affection that men feel for her—to a large extent, this becomes the measure of her worth, in Jameson’s view.55

The prevailing traits that Jameson identifies in Cordelia are dutifulness and selflessness, beginning with Cordelia’s reaction when Lear disowns her: “In her speech after her defeat, we have a calm fortitude and elevation of soul, arising from the consciousness of duty, and lifting her above all consideration of self” (249). Jameson also sees Cordelia’s sense of duty conveyed in her reunion with Lear on the battlefield (King Lear IV.vii). Jameson notes that Cordelia remains dutiful to Lear and selflessly ministers to his needs, even though she has suffered

55 Several nineteenth-century sources comment on the need or desire for women to gain the affection of men, whether to affirm self-worth or to achieve practical advancement. In her nineteenth-century conduct manual, Ellis contends that “[t]his is the true nature of woman; and the home she seeks is in the hearts of those who are bound to her by affection” (306). Mill claims that, given the practical need for women to please men and gain their affection in order to achieve social advancement, “it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar start of feminine education and formation of character” (21). More implicitly, Ruskin suggests that there is an unequal distribution of power and a need for women to gain the admiration of men by claiming that there is “only one pure kind of kingship; an inevitable and internal kind, crowned or not; the kingship, namely which consists in a stronger moral state, and a truer thoughtful state than those of others; enabling you, therefore, to guide, or to raise them” (69). Moreover, men should exhibit a true “kingly, power—first, over ourselves, and through ourselves, over all around us” (69). The relation between men and women of comparable classes is clear—as the subject of the man’s kingly power, it is in their best interest to court the man’s affection.
because of his shortcomings, noting that “all filial tenderness” is shown when she cares for him in his infirmity (248). Despite Lear’s previous mistreatment of her, Cordelia “thinks and fears only for her father” (250). In Jameson’s opinion, this selflessness elevates Cordelia to saintly status: “Cordelia is a saint ready prepared for heaven—our earth is not good enough for her” (255). Jameson continues with her praise of Cordelia as an exemplar of popular conceptions of femininity, in keeping with the model offered by Coventry Patmore in his poem, The Angel in the House. Patmore’s picture of the perfectly selfless Victorian woman is a concept that Jameson here seems to employ. The primary traits that Jameson identifies in Cordelia are that she is dutiful and selfless, but to such an extreme that she is almost ethereal. This suggests that, while Jameson sees Cordelia as an ideal example of womanhood, she is hardly a realistic model. Cordelia’s association with the angel in the house persona, in Jameson’s view, is evidenced in that “the tender influence of Cordelia, like that of a celestial visitant, is felt and acknowledged without being quite understood” (247). This description captures the essence of this model of angelic womanhood—essentially, that the goodness, purity, and tenderness of a woman should permeate her domestic environment, creating a sanctified home for those around her. But Jameson also observes that Cordelia does not simply ooze celestial influence, she also acts, forgiving Lear’s mistreatment of her.

Jameson makes it clear that she is not, however, suggesting that actual women attempt to model their behaviors on Cordelia’s. Jameson sees Cordelia as an abstraction, an ideally

56 Another version of the angelic, selfless model is offered by Ellis: “The considerateness I shall attempt to define is one of the highest recommendations the female character can possess; because it combines an habitual examination of our own situation and responsibilities, with a quick discernment of the character and feelings of those around us, and a benevolent desire to afford them as much pleasure, and spare them as much pain, as we can. A considerate woman, therefore, whether surrounded by all appliances and means of personal enjoyment, or depending upon the use of her own hands for the daily comforts of life, will look around her, and consider what is due to those whom Providence has placed within the sphere of her influence” (175). The models of angelic womanhood provided by Patmore and Ellis seem to be in keeping with Jameson’s analysis of Cordelia.
manifested embodiment of womanhood, much like Sophocles’ Antigone: “they are both pure abstractions of truth, piety, and natural affection; and in both, love, as a passion, is kept entirely out of sight” (257). In Jameson’s view, Cordelia represents an ideal and not an actualization of womanhood. Jameson further notes that “[t]he heroism of Cordelia is more passive and tender—it melts into our heart; and in the veiled loveliness and unostentatious delicacy of her character, there is an effect more profound and artless . . . than in the Grecian heroine” (260). In this sense, Jameson insinuates that Cordelia embodies more of what Jameson sees as nineteenth-century gender mores. Passivity, tenderness, and “delicacy of . . . character” are all traits that were typically affiliated with Victorian conceptions of womanhood. By associating these traits with Cordelia, Jameson implicitly connects her to the ideology of gender that permeated Victorian England; conversely, by stressing the abstract and intangible nature of this character, Jameson also suggests that Cordelia is neither a realistic nor a practical model for nineteenth-century women.

Unlike Jameson, Elliott appears to see Cordelia as a character with practical, albeit cautionary, implications for Victorian women. At the outset of her analysis of Cordelia, Elliott establishes the implications that this play has for Victorian audiences, noting that “tragedy is a powerful help in the development of our moral powers . . . In it we can see the efforts of a human soul working out great ends under similar conditions to those that affect ourselves” (220-1). Given that Elliott concentrates her analysis on the character of Cordelia, Cordelia’s relationship to her father, the notion of filial duty as opposed to a woman’s duty to her husband, and the very nature of womanhood, Elliott is clearly suggesting that this play has definitive lessons for Victorian women. She further comments on the serious and heady nature of tragedy: “It is the part of tragedy then to familiarize us with the sterner side of life by the example of men and
women who either conquer or fall in their struggle against ‘fearful odds.’ It is for those who take life seriously” (221). The stress that Elliott gives to the role of women in the play, implicitly placing them on the same level as the male characters, indicates the significance she saw in Shakespeare’s female characters and the implications they held for nineteenth-century audiences.

Elliott sees Cordelia’s moral struggle through that character’s attempt to adhere to cultural norms and expectations, and to maintain her idealized but inherently feminine nature when she is treated unreasonably by her father.

Elliott first examines Lear’s unreasonable expectations of Cordelia when he asks her for her unmitigated devotion: “Which of you shall we say doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge? . . .” (King Lear I.i.51-3). Lear subsequently asks Cordelia, “. . . what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters’? Speak.” (I.i.85-6). According to Elliott, Cordelia responds in a very appropriate and authentic manner:

> You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I<br>Return those duties back as are right fit,<br>Obey you, love you, and most honor you.<br>Why have my sisters husbands if they say<br>They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,<br>That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry<br>Half my love with him, half my care and duty.<br>Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,<br>To love my father all. (1.1.95-104)

Elliott contends that Cordelia’s response is honest, genuine and completely in keeping with societal expectations. As Elliott notes, Lear’s reproach and exile of Cordelia is a “shock to all her preconceived notions of the sanctity of marriage, to find it placed second to the filial tie . . . Her father’s reproaches wring her heart” (225). In Victorian as well as in Elizabethan times, it would be expected that a woman would transfer her love from her father to her husband as a matter of
course when a woman’s age and circumstances warranted such a transference of affection and duty. Elliott emphasizes the stance that Cordelia has done nothing wrong in her response to Lear and, in fact, is wounded by her father’s reaction, because she has simply acted according to established societal norms and gender expectations.

The conflict between paternal expectations and marital obligations is one that has implications for nineteenth-century women as well. Based on Elliott’s previously stated view that tragedy teaches life lessons, Cordelia’s situation seems to serve as a parallel for women who might put their faith in men—whether fathers or husbands or brothers—whose expectations do not accord with societal norms and whose subsequent actions, however unreasonable, are well within their legal rights. By pointing to Cordelia’s unfair and undeserved mistreatment at the hands of her protector, Elliott implicitly emphasizes the struggles of Victorian women who face undeserved and unchecked cruelty in their own lives.

Elliott emphasizes the essentially feminine nature of Cordelia and praises her reaction to Lear’s betrayal of her honesty and trust, thus presenting Cordelia as an exemplary model for nineteenth century women to follow. First, Elliott specifies that she is concerned only with Cordelia and is not attempting to analyze Regan or Goneril and notes with some derision that these are monstrous women who, while true to nature, serve to emphasize the purity of Cordelia by contrast:

Shakespeare drew from nature, and lamentable as it is to be obliged to acknowledge, yet such is the fact, that there have been, and are beings, who, in the form of women, lack all a woman’s graces, and hide behind a fair exterior a wolfish soul, whose lives justify the portraits here drawn, but who, let us believe, exist only in sufficient numbers to throw into higher relief the general beauty and tenderness of their sex. (Elliott 227)

Elliott criticizes those monstrous females as opportunistic women who lie, who do not adhere to societal expectations (and instead act ruthlessly and selfishly), and who act without loyalty or
gratitude to the male protectors in their lives. However, by noting that they exist in society in limited numbers and that their existence serves merely to emphasize the virtues of most Victorian women, Elliott promotes the established gender norms for women and perpetuates the dichotomous depiction of women as angelic or monstrous, at least, in this case.\textsuperscript{57}

In contrast to Regan and Goneril there is Cordelia, whose behavior, according to Elliott, reflects the Victorian ideals of femininity, as Patmore has described them—the only difference being that Cordelia is no longer an angel in the house, she is now an angel on the battlefield who arrives to rescue Lear from the fate to which her monstrous sisters have driven him. To stress the idealized nature of Cordelia and her strict adherence to gender norms, Elliott points to Cordelia’s reaction when she receives news about Lear:

\begin{quote}
All blest secrets,
All you unpublished virtues of the earth,
Spring with my tears! Be aidant and remediate
In the good man’s distress! Seek, seek for him,
Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life
That wants the means to lead it (\textit{King Lear} IV.iv.15-20).
\end{quote}

Elliott contends that Cordelia, in her reaction to Lear’s infirmity, demonstrates her capacity to forgive, to nurture, and to remain faithful in her love and devotion to her undeserving father. Moreover, when Cordelia anticipates her encounter with her father, her desire is to nurture and protect him, as she instructs the doctor to tend to him and is assured that Lear will be well if he can rest. Elliott stresses the forgiving nature of Cordelia and her complete lack of vindictiveness in the face of the man who had exiled and disowned her: “There is no remembrance of the hard

\textsuperscript{57} Liebler comments on this dichotomous reading of female characters in modern feminism: “It has long seemed to me that the debates of feminism too often produced radically polarized readings of female representations in early modern tragedy’s either oppressed and marginalized victims or demonic (and again marginalized) bitches, a binary option that left little room for alternatives” (\textit{The Female Tragic Hero} 2). Although Elliott is casting the female characters in \textit{King Lear} into just such a binary polarization, elsewhere in her critical studies of Shakespeare’s female characters, she also attempts to complicate the accepted conception of womanhood to allow for a greater range of traits and to thus challenge the stereotyped perceptions of ideal womanhood that existed in Victorian society.
lot he would have consigned her to, no thought of the bitter words he had hurled against her, the most unnatural reproaches he has heaped upon all. All that was left was an overwhelming desire to shelter his beloved head upon her tender bosom, and to efface the memory of his deep wrongs and woe” (Elliott 228). Elliott identifies Cordelia’s feminine traits of forgiveness, love and loyalty as well as her inclination to nurture and care for her father, in order to selflessly ease Lear’s suffering despite the suffering he has caused her. Presumably then, Elliott is encouraging Victorian women to look to Cordelia as a model for the day to day tribulations that they face and is implicitly urging them to be kind, patient, forgiving and selfless, particularly in the relationship between father and daughter. In Elliott’s view, Cordelia’s situation demonstrates “the highest possible ideal of a daughter’s dutiful affection surviving every blow that one can imagine directed against it” (229). While this appears to be encouragement for those daughters who are suffering at the hands of inept, unappreciative, or abusive fathers, another message in her analysis might also be that fathers should be more appreciative of their daughters because most daughters have the potential to act according to Cordelia’s example and to be faithful, loyal, and selfless. Thus, her praise of Cordelia’s traditional Victorian qualities is also a recognition of Cordelia’s strength in that she is able to navigate the challenges placed before her and vindicate herself to Lear in the end.

The last scene that Elliott discusses is the reunion between Lear and Cordelia, one which emphasizes the bond between father and child as well as Cordelia’s essentially pure, feminine, maternal nature, thus stressing the role reversal that has taken place. In this scene, Cordelia is the one who has power over Lear, as demonstrated when Cordelia attempts to kneel at Lear’s feet and Cordelia tells him not to do so. Lear’s response, “Pray, do not mock me. / I am a very foolish fond old man” (King Lear IV.vii.60-1), indicates his submissive role in relation to Cordelia’s
position as his savior. Elliott describes Cordelia’s reaction to the reunion: “With tears streaming down her cheeks, she clasps him to her heart, as a mother might clasp a prodigal but repentant child, and as they fall upon his troubled brow, he asks” if she has poison for him to drink (231-2). Here, then, Cordelia is finally exonerated by the man who exiled her. Everything about Elliott’s description of this scene places Cordelia in a morally and pragmatically superior position to Lear. The subversive nature of this scene and Elliott’s analysis of their reunion implicitly suggests that selfless, nurturing love and devotion is the primary means of empowerment open to women, a means which was perfectly legitimate within the established societal gender ideals of the nineteenth century. By remaining faithful, Cordelia has regained the upper hand and is literally holding Lear as if she were his mother.

Elliott’s praise of Cordelia and Elliott’s recommendation to audience members to look to Cordelia as a model suggest that she saw Cordelia’s idealized femininity and her ability to take on a maternal role as a potentially powerful means of vindication. It is undeniable that this does Cordelia little good in the end, however. Given Cordelia’s tragic fate, a more subversive message in Elliott’s analysis might be that women modeling themselves on Cordelia’s behavior had no guarantees of a happy existence in return. Elliott doesn’t directly address this aspect of her analysis but the lack of comment on Cordelia’s death suggests that Elliott was aware of this implication. Thus, both Jameson and Elliott point to Cordelia as an exemplary woman, even though Jameson makes no attempt to treat this character as a tangible figure. In both instances, these critics tend to ignore the tragic outcome of the play for Cordelia, instead opting to stress the positive influence she exerted while alive and, thereby, essentially reaffirming traditional Victorian conceptions of angelic womanhood.
Conclusion

The Victorian critics who wrote about Shakespeare’s tragic and innocent female characters used their respective analyses to express their individual views on what constitutes acceptable femininity and, in doing so, they also present a sketch of the varied perceptions of femininity that coexisted during the nineteenth century. Although each critic has a tendency to applaud and reaffirm traditionally feminine traits, such as passivity, gentleness, and selflessness, they differ in the way that they perceive these traits to be manifesting in Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia. Jameson stresses the gentle, submissive and docile traits of each of these female characters while also praising their strength and nobility; O’Brien sees Desdemona as a tragic but admirable victim who pays the ultimate price for her digression from social norms; Latham’s discussion of Ophelia stresses both her admiration for traditionally feminine traits in Ophelia as well as her disdain for extreme forms of these characteristics and the paralyzing effect they have on Ophelia; Faucit tends to see both Ophelia and Desdemona as courageous, noble and strong but suffering from misplaced loyalty to men who don’t deserve their devotion; and Elliott seems to have little patience for the extreme passivity of Ophelia and Desdemona, marking each character as contributing to her own downfall by an excess of passivity and a failure to stand up to those who would mistreat them, while in the case of Cordelia, she has nothing but praise for Cordelia’s sense of moral duty and selflessness in the face of extreme hardship. These critics also consider the interdependent role of the sexes and examine the nature of male responsibility to the women entrusted in them, often finding the men to fall short of the established social ideal. Whether discussing a character’s father, her betrothed, her brother, or her husband, each critic finds fault with some level of male leadership as depicted in *Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear*, particularly concerning the responsibility that these male characters had to women.
What emerges when considering the totality of these feminine critical views is the diversity expressed by Victorian women concerning acceptable and admirable notions of gender. Collectively, they present an implicit critique of the standard approaches to gender and demonstrate the need to reconfigure cultural expectations for both men and women. For the most part, these critics have a tendency to dispute the popular critical view that Ophelia and Desdemona are merely weak willed and insignificant. Instead, they explore what motivates these characters from a feminine perspective to present a defense of sorts for these representations of women. Ultimately, the critics discussed in this chapter see Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia as characters who meet tragic ends as a result of questionable actions by the men in their lives. By focusing on these elements of the plays in question, these critics are also able to offer an implicit criticism of nineteenth-century societal mores and cultural practices that paralleled Shakespeare’s plays and that continued to impact Victorian women.
Chapter Two: Defiant Daughters and Devoted Wives

Among the defiant daughters and devoted wives that populate Shakespeare’s plays are three that drew the attention of female Victorian critics—Juliet, Katherine, and Lady Macbeth. These characters often deviate from accepted cultural norms even as they engage in the cultural practice of marriage and the gender normative behaviors that the institution of marriage embodies. While only Juliet and Desdemona are seen as defying paternal authority, all three of these female characters are primarily connected by their extreme devotion to their husbands. These fictional daughters and wives attracted the attention of nineteenth-century critics, Anna Jameson, Constance O’Brien, Helena Faucit, and Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott, precisely because these characters provide a means through which to discuss socially accepted elements of femininity, the limits of female autonomy and independence, and the appropriate role for women within marriage. Female sexuality is also an integral, if not always explicit, element in Romeo and Juliet, The Taming of the Shrew, and Macbeth, which leads these critics to consider cultural notions of acceptable female sexuality, in the form of passion, within their respective analyses.

Juliet, Katherine, and Lady Macbeth all defy established cultural norms to some extent, and each character is treated somewhat sympathetically by the various women who wrote about them. The female Victorian critics whose work is discussed in this chapter tend to uniformly treat Juliet as an ideal woman whose behavior is acceptable because her motives are pure; O’Brien and Elliott have somewhat contradictory views of Katherine—either seeing her as a woman who needs to be coached in gender appropriate behavior or as a powerfully admirable force; and the critics who wrote about Lady Macbeth, Jameson, Faucit and Elliott, tend to see Lady Macbeth as a sexualized and inherently feminine woman, who is alternately horrifying, threatening, sympathetic or misunderstood. By discussing what degree of independence is
acceptable within the context of gender, these critics use their analyses of Shakespeare’s female characters as a means of alternately affirming, challenging, and shaping nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood, including those paradigms that govern the expression of female sexuality.

Given the somewhat thorny issue of female sexuality and its inherent stigma during the nineteenth century as potentially destabilizing if allowed free reign, all four critics tackle this subject via the more socially acceptable perspective of emotion, or passion, as it is demonstrated through Juliet, Katherine, and Lady Macbeth. The range of sexuality conveyed by these three characters is remarkably varied. Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott tend to see Juliet’s sexuality as restrained and appropriate to her situation and circumstances, given that her ultimate goal is marriage. Only O’Brien and Elliott discuss Katherine, and both see Katherine’s misdirected sexuality as the root cause of her defiance of cultural norms, particularly her violent outbursts and her attempt to avoid marriage. Once she is indoctrinated as a domestic and docile wife, however, her shrewish behavior stops, suggesting that she has been taught how to appropriately express and implement her sexuality within marriage and, thus, within society. Lady Macbeth’s assertive sexuality, while appropriate in that she is wife to Macbeth, is often judged as excessive and is portrayed, in varying degrees, by Jameson, Faucit and Elliott, as alternately dangerous or sympathetic. Jameson discusses Lady Macbeth in less favorable terms than Elliott does in her study of this character, but both critics share the belief that Lady Macbeth is intelligent, passionate, and inherently feminine. Faucit, while explicitly expressing disdain for Lady Macbeth, implicitly suggests that she also feels some sympathy for this character. Elliott expresses the most sympathy for Lady Macbeth, seeing her as more maternal than sexual in
nature. Ultimately, all three critics find Lady Macbeth to be somewhat sympathetic rather than simply monstrous.

Of course, Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott also convey their own notions of gender appropriate behavior by applying nineteenth-century gender ideals and social norms to their considerations of Juliet, Katherine and Lady Macbeth, three apparently divergent characters who all participate in some form of culturally situated gender defiance. These critics explore notions about marriage, autonomy, agency, and decorum—condoning some defiance while condemning other behaviors—and, in the process, reveal their own complex sense of gender identification with these characters while also participating in the ongoing nineteenth-century discourse surrounding gender.

**Juliet**

It is undeniable that Shakespeare’s Juliet disobeys her father and defies his authority by marrying into the Montague family and aligning herself with a husband of her own choosing, yet the critics who comment on her take great pains to justify Juliet’s apparent defiance of patriarchal authority in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and ultimately cast her as an ideal example of womanhood. These critics describe Juliet as an essentially obedient daughter who is motivated by her genuine love for Romeo, which ultimately explains and excuses Juliet’s behavior in their eyes. Juliet’s passion for Romeo is a passion rooted in the goal of marriage, and her ultimate defiance of her parents is, according to these critics, a courageous act necessitated by her transformation from girlhood to womanhood. More recently, Gail Marshall has noted that, despite the frequent focus on Juliet’s youth, there was a darker, more cautionary message for Victorian audiences inherent in Juliet’s story: “alongside this cultural awareness of youth sits a
more dissonant awareness of sexuality, which can only be countered and controlled by its subject’s death” (31). As Marshall observes, the sexual nature of Juliet’s motives is self-evident; however, Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott choose to present her sexuality within the context of emotion and describe her as an appropriately passionate woman, thus demonstrating their shared views regarding gender—and age—appropriate behavior. In the process, these critics, for the most part, keep their focus on Juliet’s attempt to navigate cultural expectations and on the propriety of her doing so, rather than on the ultimate result of her defiance, which is, of course, her death.

While Juliet’s defiance of her parents’ wishes could be seen as a departure from cultural norms when Juliet is in her girl state and is expected to submit to her parents’ authority, the fact that she transfers her loyalty, love, and devotion to her husband, Romeo, when in her adult state is seen by these critics as culturally condoned behavior for women. These critics also see Juliet’s actions as appropriate and heroic, because she puts her marriage and adult responsibilities as Romeo’s devoted, loyal wife before her obedience to her parents. The consistency with which these critics perceive Juliet indicates their collective view that Juliet is a tragic but admirable example of fully realized womanhood by virtue of her love and passion for Romeo, which culminates in marriage. All four critics essentially affirm conventional Victorian gender ideologies governing women through their respective assessments of Juliet. Juliet thereby serves as a literary example of social expectations that were quite relevant to nineteenth-century women and, in the view of these critics, she is a shining example of ideal femininity.

As Anna Jameson considers Juliet’s transition from girlhood to womanhood, she notes that, despite her youth, Juliet is a complex and very feminine character: “Such . . . is the simplicity, the truth, and the loveliness of Juliet’s character, that we are not at first aware of its
complexity, its depth and its variety” (125). Jameson treats Juliet as an admirable example of femininity and expands on the nature of her complexity by contending that Juliet experiences the “extremes of subjection and independence,” as evident “in the mixture of self-will and timidity, of strength and weakness, of confidence and reserve, which are developed as the action of the play proceeds” (138). Within Juliet’s subjection, Jameson sees her timidity, weakness and reserve, all of which seem to be most evident in her role as daughter; conversely, Juliet’s independence, as demonstrated by her self-will, strength and confidence, emerges as she makes the transition from daughter to wife. Although these latter traits demonstrate independence, which is not typically identified as an admirable female characteristic during the Victorian period, Jameson’s assessment suggests the appropriateness of these traits within the context of the play. In this instance, then, Jameson seems to be subtly challenging accepted gender norms that promote submissiveness in women, should the environment and circumstances warrant such assertive behavior. Jameson contends that, in Juliet’s case, such a reaction is indeed warranted: “she and her lover are in contrast with all around them. They are all love surrounded with all hate; all harmony surrounded with all discord; all pure nature, in the midst of polished and artificial life” (127). In Jameson’s view, these challenges to the young lovers have pushed Juliet to act in an extreme fashion, which in turn necessitates her independence. As Naomi Conn Liebler notes in her discussion of socially observed ritual, “the ambivalence (more precisely, the complexity) of ritual inheres precisely in its very nature: rituals set boundaries. Operating in time and space, it marks alterations in time and space, as well as in status, condition, and identity. As an integral in the calculus of past and present, or of one status and another, a boundary is itself a site of ambivalence or rather, of multivalence” (Festive Tragedy 10). As Juliet moves from her position as a dependent daughter to an autonomous woman and devoted wife, her willingness to
defy her father and to seek a husband based on her personal desire illustrates quite effectively the complexity of such boundaries and their affiliation with ritual, particularly in that Jameson perceives the pair as being centered amidst conflict.

Such an open expression of sexuality by a young woman might be seen as defiant or destabilizing by many Victorians but Jameson associates Juliet’s sexuality with the more acceptable feminine traits of love and passion, noting that in Juliet’s complexity, there is “an intensity of passion, a singleness of purpose, an entireness, a completeness of effect” (125). Jameson accepts Juliet’s non-traditional traits because they emanate from her situation and the depth of her passion and, in Jameson’s eyes, passion is a quintessentially feminine characteristic, particularly if the ultimate goal of such passion is marriage. As Jameson sees it, the “sweetness and dignity of Juliet’s character are preserved inviolate... even in the midst of all the romance and willfulness of passion” (138). Jameson’s description hints at Juliet’s sexuality with the phrase “willfulness of passion,” however, Jameson also negates such sexual implications by emphasizing the more traditionally feminine qualities of “sweetness,” “dignity,” and purity, since her character is preserved “inviolate.” Clearly, Jameson associates Juliet with what she perceives as a nobler, more dignified sort of passion than a physical, more lustful version of sexuality. Jameson’s attempt to qualify Juliet’s sexuality suggests her own perceptions of acceptable feminine behaviors. Jameson approves of a form of passion that emerges from a socially condoned source—love for a man and the intent to marry—and embodies a certain level of restraint or a sense of decorum. Juliet, unlike Victorian fictional characters, such as Charles Dickens’ Little Em’ly in *David Copperfield* or Elizabeth Gaskell’s Aunt Esther in *Mary Barton*, manages to control her sexual urges and to remain within the bounds of acceptable gender normative behavior by insisting on marriage to Romeo. Characters such as Little Em’ly and Aunt
Esther, however, demonstrate the danger and destabilizing potential of unregulated sexuality in women. Even though both Little Em’ly and Aunt Esther presumably had marriage as an object, their passion wasn’t held at bay or expressed in an appropriate manner, and they paid the social price for their indiscretion.

Passion is, in fact, what Jameson sees as Juliet’s overwhelming trait; she observes that the character of Juliet “is founded in the strength of passion” (129). It is this same passion (emanating from Juliet’s sexuality and demonstrated through her love for Romeo) that transforms Juliet from a girl to a woman; with this transformation, she changes her allegiance from her parents to her husband. Jameson stresses that such a change is natural, understandable and even desirable. Jameson notes that Juliet appears at first “as the serene, graceful girl, her feelings as yet unawakened . . . Her silence and her filial deference are charming” (133). The transformation from girl to woman transpires in Juliet as her love for Romeo takes hold of her. Jameson contends that, when she is in crisis, “we see Juliet assume a new aspect. The fond, impatient, timid girl, puts on the wife and the woman: she has learned heroism from suffering and subtlety from oppression . . . In the mind of Juliet there is no struggle between her filial and her conjugal duties, and there ought to be none” (141). Jameson’s view is that Juliet’s allegiance should be transferred from a father to a husband once her passion has been awakened. For Jameson, then, as for Juliet, the emergence of passionate love should lead her to marriage and

58 A popular nineteenth century conduct book, The Women of England, their social duties and domestic habits (1839), written by Sarah Stickney Ellis, discusses the importance of paternal relations at some length and promotes the need for daughters to act deferentially toward their fathers. Ellis also notes that “[t]he affection existing between fathers and daughters, is a favorite theme with writers of romance and reality” (250-1). Ellis then implores the women of England to adhere to social norms: “those will be happy days for England, when her noble-minded women, despite the prejudices of early education, shall stand forth before the world, and show that they dare to be dutiful daughters” (257). Ellis is not referring to formal education here, but to the habit of middle class girls being taught to expect finery and excess as a result of their father’s daily labor. Ellis’s comments suggest the pressure on women to act in accordance with the Victorian ideal of filial duty in exchange for a father’s practical or monetary support.
away from her parents. Juliet’s willingness to comply with this cultural precept essentially supports the Victorian gender normative behaviors which dictated that women should defer to a male, whether by birth or through approved social rituals, such as marriage, and this is what excuses Juliet’s potentially threatening and socially destabilizing defiance of her parents. As Jameson observes, “All Shakespeare’s women, being essentially women, either love or have loved, or are capable of loving; but Juliet is love itself. The passion is her state of being, and out of it she has no existence” (126). For Jameson, a deep, abiding love is the purview of women and Juliet is the epitome of appropriate passion in womanhood.

Like Jameson, Constance O’Brien also sees Juliet as an extremely sympathetic character who exemplifies the ideals of Victorian womanhood. O’Brien makes clear that “Juliet [is] . . . the character of the play” (188). O’Brien’s remarks as to Juliet’s significance suggest the critic’s belief that Juliet has not been given a due amount of critical notice and attention among her readers and among scholars in general. One doesn’t, after all, have to state that Hamlet is “the character of the play,” yet O’Brien feels the need to justify Juliet’s significance. O’Brien’s emphasis foreshadows twentieth-century critic Naomi Conn Liebler’s view that female characters deserve attention and importance equal to their male counterparts regardless of the domestic nature of their tragic focus: “If the female tragic heroes of English Renaissance drama suffered in ways tailored to their domestic situations or relationships . . . their suffering, nobility, and exemplarity resonated neither more nor less than those of male tragic heroes” (The Female Tragic Hero 3). As is evident from both O’Brien’s and Liebler’s comments, however, the female tragic hero was often neglected by critics. To O’Brien, in particular, this is a play about a young woman who is admirable in many ways and whose significance has not yet been given adequate critical attention or consideration, particularly when offered to young girls as part and parcel of
their education, the same young girls that would presumably be reading O’Brien’s series of articles on Shakespeare’s female characters.  

While O’Brien doesn’t necessarily approve of the choices that Juliet makes during the course of the play, she suggests that Juliet’s essential character, as well as her home environment, play a role in the subsequent events that take place. O’Brien, who deems Juliet a “sweet” girl who is far different from her “fierce” mother (187), notes the lack of sympathy and support that Juliet finds in the Capulet household: “she stands beside her stern mother, full of the love and tenderness which find no outlet in her home life” (188). In O’Brien’s view, Juliet’s sterile environment and the lack of affection at home leave her somewhat vulnerable because of Juliet’s inherent desire to express her innate “love and tenderness,” which she will gladly and freely bestow on Romeo when the two meet and fall in love (188). By placing blame on Juliet’s environment, O’Brien essentially relieves Juliet of some responsibility for defying her parents’ wishes. O’Brien also suggests that Juliet’s home environment has forced her to become more intelligent and more assertive than other girls her age, observing that Juliet “has [a] strong will and [a] passionate nature,” which becomes evident when she and Romeo fall in love (188).

Although forwardness in women is often frowned upon in Victorian England, for example, in the literary depictions of characters such as Little Em’ly in Dickens’ *David Copperfield* and Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*, two fictional Victorian characters who are depicted as paying a high social price for their forwardness, O’Brien justifies and defends Juliet’s forwardness with Romeo: “she reverses the order of things, and asks Romeo if he means to marry her . . . she has her wits so very much about her, considering her youth and perfect

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59 O’Brien’s series of articles, which ran in the conservative journal, *The Monthly Packet*, under the title “Shakespeare Talks with Uncritical People,” were intended for young women who were not trained in Shakespeare scholarship. Although O’Brien’s series would likely have been read by other, more critically accomplished readers of the *Monthly Packet* as well, it’s important to keep her intended audience in mind when considering the gender values and mores that she conveys through her analysis.
inexperience” (191). By observing that Juliet is “reversing the order of things,” O’Brien essentially acknowledges that there is a socio-cultural expectation that women, particularly young girls, should accept or reject marriage proposals rather than initiating them, but O’Brien further points out that this is a positive attribute in Juliet because Juliet is essentially preserving her purity and assuring that her relationship with Romeo remains appropriate. Rather than seeing Juliet’s behavior as questionable, O’Brien sees Juliet’s pursuit of marriage as admirable. This position is strengthened when O’Brien opines that Romeo “is a graceful pleasant sort of lover, full of ardour and devotion,” then questions, “but is he quite man enough for Juliet?” (191). This assessment of Romeo and Juliet reveals O’Brien’s belief that Juliet is, on some level, superior to Romeo, which also serves as an indirect justification of Juliet’s assertiveness.

Regardless of their suitability for one another, O’Brien stresses the propriety of Juliet transferring her allegiance from her parents to Romeo. O’Brien refers to the scene in which Juliet learns that her new husband has killed her cousin, Tybalt, and been banished as a result (Romeo and Juliet III.ii). O’Brien sees this scene as a crucial turning point in the play because of Juliet’s reaction to this news: “My husband lives, that Tybalt would have slain, / And Tybalt’s dead, that would have slain my husband. / All this is comfort. Wherefore weep I then?” (Romeo and Juliet III.ii.105-7). Juliet’s reaction to the news solidifies her noble and admirable nature in O’Brien’s eyes: “Her whole soul is absorbed in the thought of him, which only increases the shock when the bad news reaches her; and then we see the strange combination of grief and love, natural distress at her cousin’s death, struggling with joy at her husband’s escape, that again

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60 Although Juliet is “reversing the order of things,” according to O’Brien (191), her aim of marrying Romeo and correcting the situation is in keeping with popular conceptions of womanhood. John Ruskin, for instance, discusses the nature and function of women in society when he professes that “the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places” (Sesame and Lilies 77). Ruskin argues that women should exercise their power domestically and in the abstract realm of thought and guidance, which is not contrary to what O’Brien sees as Juliet’s appropriate expression of autonomy, in that Juliet’s goal is marriage.
overpowered by horror at Romeo’s banishment” (O’Brien 193). By tracing the cause and expression of each emotion, O’Brien establishes Juliet as an eminently empathetic character, caught in a conflict between familial and marital obligations. Ultimately, Juliet’s devotion to her new husband wins out, which is a justifiable outcome in O’Brien’s eyes. This reinforces the prominence of Victorian attitudes toward propriety, in that a woman’s loyalty should be transferred from her family to her husband upon marriage. Clearly, O’Brien ascribes Juliet’s behavior to this Victorian attitude.

Juliet’s transition from girl to woman is complete, in O’Brien’s eyes, when, immediately upon learning of Tybalt’s death and Romeo’s banishment, Juliet discovers that her mother, Lady Capulet, is pushing forward with the proposed marriage of Juliet to Paris (Romeo and Juliet III.v). O’Brien points out that Juliet could easily go along with her mother’s plan and be married to Paris, just keeping her clandestine marriage to Romeo a secret, as the Nurse wants her to do, but, instead, Juliet reacts as a loving wife whose heart and body are already claimed by another rather than as a deferential and obedient daughter. According to O’Brien, “the sudden proposal of marriage to Paris, quite takes Juliet off her guard, and in her surprise she is imprudently defiant and rouses up the wrath of her amiable parents” (194). Of course, Juliet’s behavior, being “imprudently defiant,” leads to further complications. O’Brien seems to suggest here that if Juliet had kept her wits about her and acted from a foundation of reason, versus passion only, she might have been able to find another way out of her dilemma. So O’Brien, while a bit critical of Juliet’s defiance, is also sympathetic to this character’s circumstances, reflecting O’Brien’s apparent conflict of interest between her feminine sympathy for Juliet and her strict sense of Victorian propriety, a dilemma that was undoubtedly experienced by many Victorian women when faced with conflicting societal obligations. Moreover, O’Brien’s tone suggests that Juliet’s
response, while somewhat inappropriate, is eminently understandable, given Juliet’s passionate love for and loyalty to her new husband. Despite Juliet’s acknowledged defiance of her parents, O’Brien otherwise finds her to be a thoroughly admirable character and refers to Juliet’s transformation from girl to woman as evidence of her growth: “A few days changes her from a timid girl, almost a child, into a resolute woman, self-supporting, determined to brave the worst extremity rather than be false to her love” (195). Because Juliet resolves to remain a true and loyal wife to Romeo, in O’Brien’s opinion, Juliet’s defiance is excusable.

At this point, O’Brien notes that Juliet transforms herself, even further, into a courageous and honorable wife, willing to risk her own life for the chance of a happy and loving marriage. The Friar’s plan for Juliet to feign her own death will require courage and determination as well as loyalty and Juliet’s response to his plan indicates her fortitude: “. . . I will do it without fear or doubt, / To live an unstained wife to my sweet love” (Romeo and Juliet IV.i.87-8). In O’Brien’s view, it is Juliet’s courage and her loyalty to Romeo that solidify her transformation from girlhood to womanhood:

She takes up her part in [the plan] most bravely, and, as long as she is in the presence of others her nerves never seem to falter . . . Only when she is alone, the horror of the prospect comes upon her, and her vivid fancy pictures all the terrors of the charnel house and the possible consequences of taking the draught. It adds to our respect for her resolution that it does cost her so much, that we see how the woman’s nature recoils while her will holds firm. (O’Brien 195)

O’Brien acknowledges and applauds Juliet’s loyalty and devotion to her husband, Romeo. Moreover, Juliet’s bravery in the face of her fear and her willingness to risk her own wellbeing in order to preserve her virtue and her marriage, combine to depict a woman of principle and character. O’Brien’s approval of the virtuous, self-sacrificing wife, which is the epitome of idealized Victorian womanhood, reflects the critic’s adherence to these nineteenth-century ideals. It is in Juliet’s resolve that O’Brien identifies an admirable, devoted, courageous and selfless
woman and wife—all traits that accord with traditional Victorian conceptions of womanhood, particularly in marriage. O’Brien’s analysis suggests that these exemplary traits, in turn, diminish the gravity of Juliet’s initial defiance.

When the plan doesn’t go as expected and Juliet discovers that Romeo is dead, her decision to join Romeo in death also impresses O’Brien as the act of a devoted wife, within the context of the play. Once Juliet drinks the sleeping potion and wakes to find that Romeo has taken his own life and that their plan is for naught, she is faced with a choice—she can grieve for Romeo and embark on a life without him, “Among a sisterhood of holy nuns,” as the Friar wishes her to do (Romeo and Juliet V.iii.157), or she can join Romeo in death. O’Brien notes that, as a devoted, impassioned wife, Juliet chooses the latter option and takes her own life by means of a sword: “the girl who had trembled before taking the sleeping draft, stabs her breast unshrinkingly when she thinks the time has come to die; so husband and wife are reunited at last” (O’Brien 197). By drawing attention to Juliet’s means of self-sacrifice—a sword—O’Brien emphasizes the masculine, more assertive way in which Juliet acts and dies. Dying by the sword was the standard for Roman soldiers on the battlefield and O’Brien seems to see Juliet’s suicide and selfless devotion to her husband as no less valiant or honorable; conversely, Juliet’s gender and her role in society as a *femme covert* might suggest the idealized and glorified propriety of selflessly joining her true love in death, suggesting the complexity of Victorian notions of appropriate womanhood. Ultimately, O’Brien establishes her perception of Juliet as a noble character who adheres to cultural gender norms even as O’Brien herself, at times, defies those same gender norms by describing Juliet’s rebellion against her parents’ authority in heroic terms.  

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61 Ellis uses the term ‘heroic’ to denote women who honor their “domestic duties,” describing such duties as “all which is most lovely, poetical, and interesting, nay, even *heroic* in women” (39). O’Brien seems to adopt the term
O’Brien admires Juliet’s dedication, loyalty, and passion but also recognizes and appreciates her self-possession, courage, and willfulness, suggesting that O’Brien either recognizes a range of acceptable gendered traits for women or that she sees these tendencies as acceptable within very particular situations. One has to question whether Juliet’s behavior would have been acceptable to O’Brien if Juliet’s ultimate purpose were not to express the love and devotion she felt toward Romeo. As O’Brien’s commentary demonstrates, within the proper context, even traditionally masculine behaviors might be admirable in women if a legitimately feminine goal were the object, a condition made more striking by the audience for O’Brien’s article, the conservative journal *The Monthly Packet*, and the readers of her series “Shakspere Talks with Uncritical People,” presumably girls and women who had not had the benefit of scholarly or critical training. O’Brien’s views of Juliet and her empathy for Juliet’s apparent deviation from cultural norms, in conjunction with her apparent affirmation of Victorian social mores, reflect the subtle complexities of individual gender mores.

Helena Faucit also engages in such critical discourse, devoting much of her book, *On Some of Shakespeare’s Female Characters*, to her discussion of Juliet, one of her favorite characters to portray on stage. Faucit notes that it will be difficult for her to write about this character “with critical calmness,” but that she will attempt to do so nonetheless (90). Faucit recognizes that her personal experience portraying this character on the stage will affect the objectivity of her analysis, but she seems unaware that her own conceptions of femininity and gender normative behavior, shaped as they must be by Victorian ideology, might also render her perceptions of Shakespeare’s characters subjective.

‘heroic’ in both senses, to denote domestic feminine heroism as well as a more traditionally masculine sense of the term ‘heroic’ in its association here with courage and death by a sword.
Faucit, who focuses more strongly on Juliet’s parents and family relations than either Jameson or O’Brien had, begins her study of Juliet by establishing a context in which Juliet’s need to defy her parents is justified and expressing her view that Juliet’s parents have little regard for their daughter’s happiness. Faucit judges Lord Capulet’s response when Paris requests Juliet’s hand in marriage to be misleading: “But woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart; / My will to her consent is but a part” (*Romeo and Juliet* I.ii.16-17). Capulet seems to be deferring to his daughter’s wishes in this instance, but Faucit contends that Capulet’s subsequent protestations of love for his daughter, as well as his offer to at least consider her wishes in marriage, are false because “this profession does not stand the proof; for when, later, his child entreats with all earnestness of despair but to be heard, he is deaf as an adder to her appeal, his own will admitting of no question” (111). Even more than Lord Capulet’s ever present will, Faucit points to Capulet’s failure to adequately guide and lead Juliet, noting that he is “a father who loves her in a willful, passionate way, with the understanding that when he has set his mind upon a thing her will shall always bend to his” (113). Juliet, like her father, is also “willful” and “passionate,” which is at odds with societal expectations that daughters should willingly submit to a father’s wishes.⁶² As Juliet’s father, Lord Capulet’s behavior is, of course, socially condoned, but Faucit takes issue with the way in which Lord Capulet imposes his will on Juliet, seeing his lack of concern for Juliet’s wishes as justification for Juliet’s eventual defiance. Within her critique of Capulet, Faucit is also implicitly criticizing the practice of and cultural adherence to a father’s

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⁶² Although Faucit takes issue with Lord Capulet’s proprietary rights in choosing Paris for Juliet, control of property and wealth would have been particularly relevant among the upper classes when choosing a husband for one’s daughter, thus, open defiance of a parent’s wishes in such a case would inherently act to destabilize and decentralize control of wealth. Erickson contends that “[w]hen a man had daughters but no sons he generally gave his land to his daughters, rather than to his brothers, nephews or even grandsons” (63). In Juliet’s case, this would have made the choice of a husband a matter of business and a decision likely seen by society as more befitting a man such as Lord Capulet, since Juliet’s *feme covert* status after marriage could have potentially shifted control of wealth to her husband.
absolute authority. In Victorian England, fathers still held considerable power, both practically and ideologically, over their daughters, although perhaps not to the extent portrayed in Shakespeare’s play.\(^6^3\) Faucit, like O’Brien, feels the need to justify Juliet’s defiance, which suggests the extent to which patriarchal authority was still recognized during the nineteenth century.

Faucit attempts to further mitigate Juliet’s subsequent actions by pointing to Lady Capulet’s deficiencies as a mother, noting that Lady Capulet “appears . . . to be a piece of cold, formal propriety” (112). Despite their cool relations, however, Faucit believes that Juliet is fundamentally obedient to her parents: “One can see that there is no sympathy between Lady Capulet and her daughter, although Juliet . . . would not question that she owed her mother all obedience” (112). Faucit’s use of the subjunctive “would” indicates a tendency to ascribe to Juliet behaviors that fit with the critic’s perception of how a girl should act, presumably based upon her own Victorian cultural mores, since no evidence from the play is cited as the basis for Faucit’s supposition. Faucit is intent on presenting Juliet as an obedient daughter even though she is about to defy her parents’ wishes. One might think it would be difficult to reconcile Juliet’s subsequent, clandestine marriage to Romeo with this description of her as an obedient daughter, but Faucit, like Jameson and O’Brien, points to Juliet’s genuine and overwhelming feelings of love for Romeo to further justify her defiance of parental authority.

\(^6^3\) In 1861, J. S. Mill contends that “the possession of power . . . comes home to the person and hearth of every male head of a family, and of every one who looks forward to being so” (16). This description is also demonstrated in Victorian laws, which typically gave control of the children, in the rare instances of divorce, to the male head of household. Women had obtained some limited parenting rights with the passage of the Infants and Child Custody Bill of 1839, but it would be more than thirty years until further legislation was passed. The Child Custody Act of 1873 and the Custody of Infants Act in 1886 “gave the mother guardianship in the event of the father’s death, but as long as the father lived, he retained authority to decide upon the religion, education, and upbringing of the children” (Helsinger, Sheets and Veeder 2: 13). These nineteenth-century examples of the legal rights of fathers illustrate the extent of male authority within the household that continued to exist in Victorian England.
Faucit next turns to the overwhelming force of passion in Juliet’s character as justification for her willful defiance of her parents’ wishes. Many Victorians considered passion to be an appropriate feminine trait, a counterpart to the masculine trait or predominance of reason, even though passion also had the potential to become a dangerous or threatening trait, if taken to an extreme. Like other critics in this chapter, Faucit addresses Juliet’s sexuality and desire under the guise of ‘passion,’ and seems to see this as a much more culturally acceptable trait for women. Juliet, who, according to Faucit, has no interest in marriage but is shown to be an obedient daughter prior to encountering Romeo (112), experiences a love for Romeo that is overwhelming in its intensity: “It has not been left to her will to determine how ‘deep she will endart her eye.’ The invincible and unknown Erôs has come upon her unlooked for, unannounced, in all his terror and in all his beauty” (117). The terminology Faucit employs here, particularly that love “has come upon her,” has the effect of removing agency and, thus, responsibility from Juliet for loving Romeo to the extent that she does. To emphasize Juliet’s lack of agency, Faucit also reminds us of the invincibility of love. Because Erôs is “invincible” and “unknown,” we can gather that Juliet is uncertain how to handle her own sexuality but is attempting to do so in a way that is in accord with cultural norms—namely, via marriage. Faucit believes that Juliet is a victim of her extreme love and passion for Romeo, a trait that was traditionally revered in grown women just as much as obedience to one’s parents was admired and expected in a child.64

64 Ellis also comments on the typically feminine transference of loyalty from fathers to husbands, observing that “the remarks I have made upon the behavior of daughters to their fathers, are equally applicable to that of wives towards their husbands” (263). Essentially, Ellis contends that daughters and wives should focus on making the lives of their fathers and husbands enjoyable and tranquil, when the men are at home, by being selfless, agreeable, and attentive at all times. This view was prevalent during the Victorian era and, to some extent, seems to inform Jameson’s analysis of Juliet.
Faucit, like Jameson and O’Brien, remarks on Juliet’s transition from girlhood to womanhood, which is demonstrated by the depth and nature of Juliet’s feelings for Romeo. Faucit cites Juliet’s dialogue with Romeo in the famous balcony scene, particularly Juliet’s concern over his wellbeing, as evidence of Juliet’s genuine feelings for Romeo. In this scene, Juliet not only expresses her own feelings of love for the young Montague but conveys her desire that he remain undetected, for fear that he will be killed if discovered: “If they do see thee, they will murder thee” (*Romeo and Juliet* II.i.70). Faucit points to Juliet’s repeated expressions of concern for Romeo’s safety as evidence that Juliet is consciously aware of the danger they face but loves him regardless, thereby encompassing the ideal of womanhood:

> Women are deeply in debt to Shakespeare for all the lovely noble things he has put into his women’s hearts and mouths, but surely for nothing more than for the words in which Juliet’s reply is couched . . . Only one who knew of what a true woman is capable, in frankness, in courage, and self-surrender, when her heart is possessed by a noble love, could have touched with such delicacy, such infinite charm of mingled reserves and artless frankness, the avowal of so fervent yet so modest a love. (Faucit 118)

Faucit’s explicit view is that Juliet’s love is ‘noble’ because it emanates from a true passion. Faucit also points to “frankness . . . courage, and self-surrender” as feminine ideals, exhibiting a view of womanhood that celebrates the courage that, in this instance, results in Juliet’s defiance of parental authority. Juliet’s defiance is presumably more acceptable when accompanied by self-surrender, a slightly different concept than the traditionally feminine trait of selflessness, but still in keeping with acceptable Victorian norms of female behavior, since she is surrendering to her love, or passion, for Romeo, even while knowing the danger and difficulties that this love will involve. Faucit’s analysis here simultaneously portrays Juliet as both passive and courageous and, by doing so, attempts to negate Juliet’s agency and any potentially negative connotation that Juliet’s defiance might convey. In this way, Faucit justifies Juliet’s defiance of
one socio-cultural norm—filial obedience—in order to realize what she deems a more worthy socio-cultural norm: the marriage of true love and passion at any cost. This ideal is a common goal in Victorian literature as well and is evident in marriages involving characters such as Dorothea Casaubon of George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch* or Jane Eye in Charlotte Brontë’s novel of the same name. These novels depict the marriages of their female protagonists to Will Ladislaw and Rochester, respectively, to demonstrate the female protagonists’ desire to marry for true love at some personal cost or sacrifice. The same ideology can be applied to Juliet in this case as well, which is clearly the attitude with which Faucit is approaching Juliet’s marriage to Romeo.

Juliet’s passion is depicted by Faucit as admirable because it is both selfless and disciplined, with marriage as its ultimate goal. Juliet’s determination to follow her passion for Romeo, as Faucit so carefully points out, rises to an admirable level and emanates from selflessness combined with full knowledge and consideration of the difficulties inherent in their enterprise. Faucit’s assessment also alludes to the significance of Shakespeare’s female characters as models of behavior for Victorian girls and women and, in the case of Juliet, Faucit is approving of such a model. In this way, Faucit also contributes to the ongoing nineteenth-century discourse regarding gender ideology by promoting Juliet as an appropriate example to follow, in theory, if not in practice. As Mary Poovey observes, “the work of making ideology” can often be identified in Victorian writing in “representations of gender [that] constituted one of the sites on which ideological systems were simultaneously constructed and contested” (2). While Poovey primarily focuses on fictional representations of gender, her theories regarding the formation of gender normative behaviors and expectations apply to non-fictional writing, such as Faucit’s work, as well. The way that gender is represented by an author such as Faucit had a
hand in shaping ideologies, just as laws, institutions, and cultural practices also influenced
gender driven behaviors and expectations.

Once Juliet has cast her lot with Romeo and determines to take part in their clandestine
marriage, she acts as a loyal, devoted wife, but she also acts based on reason, a trait that is
applauded by Faucit. Juliet’s allegiance to Romeo is tested when she learns that her newly-wed
husband has slain her cousin, Tybalt. In response to the nurse’s diatribe against Romeo, Juliet
replies as a devoted wife: “Shall I speak ill of him that is my husband” (*Romeo and Juliet*
III.ii.97). Faucit notes that, “[i]n Juliet’s answer we see that her intellect was as clear, her sense
of duty in the position she had chosen as vivid, as her feelings were quick and strong” (131).
Faucit notes that, by refusing to speak ill of Romeo, who has just killed her cousin, Juliet is
acting appropriately as a loyal, devoted wife. Juliet’s devotion is not blind or simply compulsory,
however. Faucit attributes Juliet’s loyalty to the power of reason: “Juliet’s clear intellect quickly
absolves Romeo from blame for having slain Tybalt” (133). Faucit here establishes her view that
Juliet is not driven merely by passionate emotions but is exhibiting an appropriate and admirable
blend of passion and reason.

For Faucit, Juliet’s true test comes when she must face the dilemma created by her
parents’ insistence that she marry Paris (*Romeo and Juliet* III.ii), and it is in this test that Juliet
proves her worth. When resolving to meet with the Friar and receive his counsel on how best to
proceed, Juliet reminds herself of the dagger that she has: “If all else fail, myself have power to
die” (III.v.244). In Faucit’s view, it is at this point that we see Juliet “transfigured into the heroic
woman just as Romeo, when possessed by a genuine passion, rises from the dreaming youth to
the full stature of a noble manhood” (Faucit 140). It is this heroic nature, inspired by love, which
Faucit sees as the most elemental quality of Juliet’s nature. As Juliet proceeds to grapple with her situation, she consults with Friar Laurence. It is in this meeting that she displays her “determined resolute composure” and her “readiness to face such terrors as [the Friar] might think would affright her most, if only she may live ‘an unstained wife to her sweet love’” (Faucit 141). Juliet’s devotion to Romeo and her resolve to honor her role as his wife puts her above reproach in Faucit’s eyes and, by emphasizing this view, Faucit is simultaneously reflecting her own view of the sanctity of marriage and what she deems to be appropriate cultural expectations for wives. When Juliet exclaims, “Love give me strength!” (Romeo and Juliet IV.i.125), Faucit observes that Juliet’s motives are pure and sincere: “What strength love gives her we are soon to see—love true and unwavering” (Faucit 141). For Faucit, the depth of Juliet’s love is of the utmost importance—by expressing her love and gaining strength from this love, Juliet exemplifies ideal womanhood and reaches heroic status, meeting and exceeding the cultural expectations for women that existed in Victorian England and to which Faucit seems to adhere. For Faucit, Juliet is heroic but Faucit also seems burdened with Victorian notions of gender appropriate behavior, which lead her to continually justify Juliet’s actions.

Despite her adherence to gender norms, Juliet meets a tragic end, but Faucit clearly attributes Juliet’s demise to fate and not to Juliet’s choices or behavior by noting that “the fates are spinning, spinning out the doom of the lovers, and will not be thwarted” (147). In casting Juliet as the female hero of this tragedy, Faucit contends that Romeo and Juliet rivals any of the classical Greek tragedies, “for the ancients knew nothing of the passion of love in its purity, its

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65 Liebler also comments on the notion that “The word heroine has in itself taken on a pejorative coloration that bans these figures from serious and equitable consideration as tragic heroes” (The Female Tragic Hero . . . 14). Faucit avoids the use of the term ‘heroine’ and instead describes Juliet as a “heroic woman” (140), perhaps instinctively feeling that the term heroine would reduce Juliet’s stature in the eyes of her readers and wanting to equate Juliet more with the significant male tragic heroes of Shakespeare’s plays; Faucit’s terminology also emphasizes gender and the existence of heroism in women.
earnestness, its devotedness, its self-sacrifice. It needed Christianity to teach us this, and a Shakespeare in the drama to illustrate it” (147). Faucit’s comments are indicative of her tendency to apply nineteenth-century sensibilities and cultural mores to her understanding of Shakespeare’s female characters. The characteristics that Faucit attributes to Juliet—“purity . . . earnestness . . . devotedness . . . self-sacrifice”—might have been taken directly from Coventry Patmore’s poem, “Angel in the House,” which paints a picture of the idealized Victorian woman: “The gentle wife, who decks his board / And makes his day to have no night, / Whose wishes wait upon her lord, / Who finds her own in his delight” (“Frost in Harvest,” Book II, Canto X, 17-20). For Juliet, however, there is no delight because her husband is dead. In the culmination of Shakespeare’s play, Juliet “has braved all the horrors which her imagination so vividly pictured for the sake of him who now lies dead before her . . . She has no questions, no words. Her heart is bankrupt utterly” (Faucit 152). In Faucit’s view, Juliet’s behavior, choices, and actions have been irreproachable, and Faucit further admonishes her readers that “to judge Juliet rightly, we must have clear ideas of Romeo, of her parents, and of all the circumstances that determined her conduct” (154). Faucit’s attempt to “judge Juliet rightly” suggests that others may have the proclivity to misjudge Juliet and to perceive her conduct as less than admirable by failing to give Juliet’s circumstances due consideration. Because Romeo was worthy of Juliet’s love, because her parents offered no sympathy toward her desires, Juliet was forced to take extreme measures to protect the sanctity of her marriage, a marriage based on genuine love, passion, and devotion. In this way, Faucit attempts to establish Juliet as a character who embodies Faucit’s own conception that the ideal Victorian woman is one who rises above the harshness and oppression of life by remaining true to her values and principles, even when those principles might conflict with established norms of behavior.
Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott also tends to focus on Juliet’s transformation over the course of the play from girlhood to womanhood, a transformation that implicitly suggests female sexuality, particularly within the context of marriage; however, Elliott, more explicitly than Jameson, O’Brien, or Faucit, parallels her discussion of Juliet to actual situations and ideologies to which she and her nineteenth-century readers can relate. Early in her chapter on Juliet, Elliott asserts that “[n]o man with the least touch of healthy romance in his nature has not at some time been a Romeo; and no girl with true fresh springs of womanhood welling up in her nature has not been a Juliet” (4). Elliott thereby establishes the gender norms in which her analysis is grounded, and establishes as well her intention to read these characters as representatives of typical, contemporary men and women.

Like the other nineteenth-century female critics discussed here, Elliott sees Juliet as an ideal example of femininity. Elliott describes Juliet as “the flower of refinement and gentle breeding” and notes that, “[i]n her character perfect integrity of heart is joined to extreme warmth of imagination . . . She unites the spotless purity of the lily and the voluptuous beauty of the rose” (7). Elliott is blending the typically dichotomous depiction of women as saintly and pure, like the lily, or sensual and passionate, like the rose, in her assessment of Juliet because she sees this character as a multi-dimensional female and expresses her admiration for this complex depiction of a young woman, thus contesting the popular notion that women be categorized as representing one extreme or the other. In Elliott’s view, Juliet is an appropriately chaste woman, who still expresses a degree of acceptable sensual passion for Romeo.

Elliott also approves of Juliet’s chaste character and her deference toward marriage. According to Elliott, Juliet is “natural and girlish” and, while she hadn’t actively sought marriage prior to meeting Romeo, Elliott speculates that Juliet would have viewed marriage as “an
honourable estate, the end and crown of a woman’s existence” (9). Even a cursory glance at the popular literature of the Victorian era reveals that such an attitude toward marriage was extremely common. Nineteenth-century authors, such as Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot, routinely depict marriage as a respectable and admirable goal for young women and typically refer to marriage as a matter of course for both genders within Victorian society. This cultural ideal is also held by Elliott, who repeatedly expresses her view that motherhood and marriage are the natural, normalized roles for women in society and, ideally, should result in personal satisfaction and gratification, although she also acknowledges that such is often not the case, as demonstrated in this play by the lack of love and familiarity between Juliet and Lady Capulet.

Elliott, like O’Brien and Faucit, sees Juliet’s family situation as one that fails Juliet and contributes to her subsequent, defiant behavior; however, Elliott seems to be more aware of historically based cultural differences at work within the play than Jameson, O’Brien, or Faucit. Elliott notes that Juliet “seems to have seen little of her father and mother, and that only in a formal, perfunctory way” (5); Elliott further speculates that Juliet’s parents likely had a marriage of convenience and that Lady Capulet “seems in spirit and speech to have more of the nature of the step-mother” and that “[s]he evidently became a mother long before the deeper and truer qualities of womanhood had matured” (5). Elliott’s assessment of Lady Capulet implicitly acknowledges the common practice of marrying for practical reasons rather than for love among

66 O’Brien, Faucit and Elliott are generally critical in their assessment of Lady Capulet and see her maternal inadequacies as a contributing factor in Juliet’s demise. Only Jameson tends to be somewhat sympathetic toward Juliet’s parents and expresses her belief that Lady Capulet “loves her daughter” and conveys “a touch of remorseful tenderness in her lamentation over her” (137). Jameson’s comments suggest that she sees Lady Capulet as flawed, but still sympathetic; however, the majority of the critics discussed in this chapter see Lady Capulet as a cold and ineffective mother, essentially forcing Juliet into making difficult decisions independently, as best as she can.
those of Lady Capulet’s station in Shakespeare’s day. Elliott is also imposing very distinct
gender attributes on Lady Capulet by suggesting that Lady Capulet’s actions and words are
closer to those of a step-mother, which implies that there is an expected code of conduct that
inherently belongs to biological mothers and that Lady Capulet is lacking in this area and,
therefore, that she is unnatural in this respect. Elliott’s further speculation that Lady Capulet had
become a mother too soon—“before the deeper and truer qualities of womanhood had
matured”—suggests that Elliott saw maternal instincts as inherently feminine, a view that she
consistently expresses. This view appears to be grounded in biological determinism and the
social theories of men like Herbert Spenser and Auguste Comte, who routinely conflated social
and biological factors to arrive at a gender specific notion of purpose for individuals within
society. This prevalent Victorian theory seems to inform Elliott’s analysis of Lady Capulet. In
Elliott’s opinion, since Lady Capulet is not emotionally or practically available to Juliet as a
maternal guide, as a mother should be, Juliet is vulnerable to the problems that will plague her
and Romeo.

Much like Faucit, Elliott sees Juliet as essentially obedient and wanting to please her
parents but contends that Juliet’s love for Romeo becomes the more powerful force in her
existence: “all her good intentions to seek only her parents’ pleasure and to restrain her glances
and desires according to their consent are powerless in the presence of overmastering love” (10).
In this instance, Elliott justifies Juliet’s disobedience and defiance of her parents’ wishes by

67 Erickson cites a description of seventeenth-century marriage settlements in the aristocracy that was offered by
R.B. Outhwaite in 1986: “A daughter’s marriage portion has been described as ‘the price a father paid to persuade
some other male to relieve him of the obligation to support his daughter for the remaining term of her natural life’”
(qtd on 93). Elliott seems to be applying this standard to the presumably similarly arranged union between Lord and
Lady Capulet.

68 Most notably, Elliott argues, in Lady Macbeth: A Study (1884), that Lady Macbeth is not unnatural, as many have
claimed, but is acting in a very maternal manner toward her husband. Thus, Elliott would seem to perceive Lady
Capulet’s lack of mothering skills as more distinctly unnatural than Lady Macbeth’s devotion to her husband.
attributing the cause of her subsequent actions not to willfulness or selfishness but to a genuine love for Romeo, which, in Elliott’s view, is enough to excuse Juliet’s behavior. Elliott also contends that Shakespeare very deliberately portrayed Juliet as being powerless to love:

“Shakespeare revels in this love at first sight . . . It is no crime in his eyes for a maiden, pure and unsullied in nature, to fall in love at the first glance, and delight in confessing it; and to Juliet’s warm, passionate spirit, her love for Romeo becomes a life-giving fire that . . . calls into being and blossom the hidden gems of a true woman’s devotion” (Elliott 10-11). Once again, Elliott emphasizes that, in Juliet’s case, a “pure and unsullied” nature can and does co-exist with a “warm, passionate spirit” and it is this acceptable blend of traits that creates in Juliet an ideal depiction of womanhood. Juliet doesn’t exhibit blatant sexuality; rather, she displays such a depth of love and passion, coexisting with spiritual purity, that she epitomizes traditionally Victorian conceptions of femininity. In this case, like the critics before her, Elliott is affirming established Victorian gender ideals and normative behaviors while also minimizing Juliet’s more contentious and potentially challenging behaviors.

This blend of purity and passion also signifies the mixture of girlhood and womanhood that Elliott sees in Juliet. Juliet “is not bold,” she is “innocent,” although “not ignorant of lovers’ follies,” and it is “[w]ith girlish perplexity, and sweet entreaty for pardon, that she casts herself upon the tender consideration of her lover, and yet maintains her maiden modesty inviolate” (11-12). These girlish traits are vying with more womanly inclinations in Juliet as she is faced with the prospect of marrying Paris, and Elliott observes that, for Juliet, “there could be only one escape—to marry Romeo; and if his bent of love were honourable, there could be no reason for delay. Already the practical woman was taking the place of the simple child” (12). Juliet may be young and pure of spirit, but her concern for ensuring an appropriate marriage between herself
and Romeo does, indeed, demonstrate that she is “not ignorant of lovers’ follies” (12). She wants no part in an illicit affair and acts accordingly, which casts her as a respectable and appropriately sexualized woman. While explicit and blatant sexuality among unmarried middle class women was considered scandalous in Victorian England, the expression of love within marriage was appropriate and admirable, vindicating Juliet’s implicit expression of sexuality.

Once Elliott has identified this blend of traits in Juliet, she almost immediately justifies Juliet’s forwardness with Romeo by asserting the inherent femininity and womanliness of Juliet’s character. Elliott notes that Juliet “has suddenly sprung into a woman’s experience” (14) and argues that her tearful reaction to the news of Tybalt’s death at Romeo’s hand “is natural and womanly, for tears and cries are the prerogative of the sex,” even though the expression of tears is an admittedly childish response (14-15). Elliott seems to be struggling with her assessment of Juliet and vacillates between seeing her as a woman and as a child. Elliott turns to a popular Victorian conception of women as the weaker sex, who are allowed the prerogative of tears, even as she justifies Juliet’s tears based on the character’s age. While present day readers might cringe at such stereotypical descriptions of a woman’s prerogative to melt into tears, to the majority of Victorian readers, such a description would likely have seemed perfectly acceptable and a matter of course.⁶⁹ Dora in Dickens’ novel, *David Copperfield*, for instance, is just such a Victorian era characterization of a woman as childlike. She depends on David and seems incapable of handling anything more than the simplest of tasks. Many nineteenth century theorists characterized

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⁶⁹ Ruskin assesses the common Victorian association of women with childishness in the following description: “The perfect loveliness of a woman’s countenance can only consist in that majestic place, which is founded in the memory of happy and useful years, --full of sweet records; and from the joining of this with that yet more majestic childishness, which is full of change and promise; --opening always—modest at once, and bright with hope of better things to be won, and to be bestowed” (80). Ruskin’s description is fairly typical of Victorian attitudes toward women with which Elliott is also affiliating Juliet. Given Juliet’s age and situation, this affiliation is understandable but still seems to make Elliott hesitate, lest she demean Juliet by compromising her strong and more independent womanly tendencies.
women as childlike because women typically remained physically smaller than men. The most notable theorist in this respect is Havelock Ellis, whose theories regarding sexuality appear in *Man and Woman* (1894). This work notes that women are generally smaller and weaker than men, thus representing a closer link to childhood.\(^7\) In this instance, Elliott is once again pointing to Juliet’s adherence to socially condoned gender norms by acknowledging her childlike behavior and is, perhaps unintentionally, affirming common Victorian gender ideals, given that tears are childish but still compatible with Victorian notions of womanhood.

Much like O’Brien and Faucit, Elliott also sees Juliet’s subsequent actions—namely her attempt to thwart her parents’ efforts to arrange a marriage between her and Paris—as noble, admirable, and eminently feminine, in that Juliet’s motivation is to remain a true, faithful and loyal wife to Romeo: “She could live to endure grief, but she cannot live to be disloyal to her lord” (Elliott 16). Elliott condones Juliet’s defiance of her parents’ wishes by affiliating Juliet’s actions with the acceptable cultural expectations associated with womanhood and marriage in Victorian England. Juliet “is a wife, with wifely responsibilities and duties. Suffering has given her heroism; oppression has taught her subtlety. As a child she may not defy her parents, but as a woman she can outwit them” (17). Here, Elliott, to some extent, cleverly addresses and subverts the Victorian double standard that dictates female behavior as necessarily passive, since Juliet actively chooses death, and she celebrates Juliet’s agency, while still remaining true to other socially condoned gender normative behavioral codes, namely, that women remain dedicated and loyal in marriage. Elliott further suggests the empowerment of women beyond Juliet when

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\(^7\) In *Sexual Science*, Cynthia Eagle Russett also notes the work of several other Victorian era theorists who promoted the concept that women were anatomically and psychologically closer to children or adolescents. A range of theoretical work that stressed the similarities between women and children was performed by men such as Paul Topinard, Rudolf Wagner, Emile Huschke, Harry Campbell, G. Stanley Hall and James McGrigor Allan, a member of the London Anthropological Society, who deemed that “woman is a kind of adult child” and was, therefore, inferior “physically, mentally, and morally” to men (qtd in Russett 55). The pervasiveness of such theories clearly influences Elliott’s analysis of Juliet, even though she also conveys a degree of reticence in adhering to such views.
discussing the combined traits of “wariness” and “strength of resolution” that were evident in Juliet’s character, by noting that “when a woman unites these two qualities—resolution and cunning—what is there she cannot effect?” (17). Elliott seems to savor the potential for women to exert power by working within the confines of socially imposed contexts, such as marriage, for a potentially subversive purpose.\footnote{Elliott takes a similar approach to her study of Lady Macbeth, admiring that character’s ability to do whatever is necessary in the best interests of her husband, whom Elliott definitely sees as the weaker partner in the marriage. Elliott’s view of Juliet, a generally innocent and widely admired female character, in this instance, is completely consistent with her view of Lady Macbeth, a generally detested and roundly condemned female character; gender ideals within marriage are the points of convergence for these two characters, in Elliott’s view.}

In concluding her analysis of Juliet, Elliott considers the difficulty of representing this character on stage, observing that, because of Juliet’s transformation from child to woman, “[i]t is not the role of a tragedy queen any more than it is a part for an ingénue” (20); over the course of the play, Juliet progresses from an inexperienced girl to a resolute woman and demonstrates the many socio-cultural dangers inherent in and barriers to this transformation. As Juliet’s “youthful passion” falls away, Elliott sees this character as “a settled and determined spirit . . . capable of enduring all things,” who now possesses “the spirit of a mature nature in the physically immature form of a mere girl” (20). It’s because of these challenges in portraying such a character that Elliott feels Juliet is best considered as a literary creation that also embodies several of the dilemmas present within Victorian society for girls who must pass into womanhood and who may lack satisfactory literary models. In her study of Victorian reactions to Juliet, Gail Marshall identifies the “Victorian fashion [to] both capitalise upon and [be] condemnatory of Juliet’s sexuality,” even among female artists and critics (34); however, Elliott appears to be akin to a group of women, like those identified by Marshall, who commented on Juliet’s character in a “more radical way,” to elucidate a discourse on “professional, intellectual and emotional autonomy” (Marshall 34). This is not to say that Elliott is concerned only with
Juliet’s potential as being demonstrative of feminine autonomy, but that she sees this capacity in addition to the inherent sexuality of Juliet’s character. Elliott attests to Juliet’s potential significance as a model for subsequent women when she states that, through Juliet’s “untimely death the beauty of Juliet’s character and the nobility and purity of her devotion are consecrated for all succeeding ages” (Elliott 22). Although this comment affirms the more traditional view that women should devote themselves to a husband, Elliott is also implicitly referencing the noble way in which Juliet achieves this goal—by defying her parents and acting autonomously but with great courage and fortitude. While this view might also be seen as the ultimate act of submission for a wife, to join her husband in death, Elliott seems to be aligning Juliet more closely with noble male tragic heroes who choose death rather than live an ignoble life.

Beyond a doubt, Juliet is the favorite Shakespearean character among Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott because of Juliet’s purity, nobility, and passion, as well as for the courage and self-possession that she manifests, while still functioning within a socially imposed, gender normative paradigm that so closely resembles the Victorian ideals and ideologies to which these critics generally adhere. In regard to this character, any defiance of patriarchal cultural norms, as demonstrated via Juliet’s defiance of her parents, is clearly mitigated by her observance of other nineteenth-century gender normative behaviors, namely passion, spiritual purity, and a selfless devotion to her husband, all elements of character that these critics see as praiseworthy and redemptive.

**Katherine**

Katherine, more than Juliet, presents significant problems as a model of womanhood for the Victorian female critics who wrote about her. Both Constance O’Brien and Madeleine Leigh-
Noel Elliott wrote about Katherine and both saw her as a generally sympathetic character, but their critiques of *The Taming of the Shrew* and the characters that Shakespeare presents in the play differ widely in their particulars. Both O’Brien and Elliott see Katherine as a strong, passionate woman who’s been given no guidance by her father, Baptista, and both see Katherine’s behavior at the start of the play as regrettably shrewish; however, these critics interpret Katherine’s taming by Petruchio very differently, and those interpretations reflect their distinct attitudes toward nineteenth-century gender normative behaviors. O’Brien tends to see Petruchio in a favorable light, often defending his treatment of Katherine as necessary and stemming from his genuine affection for her. In O’Brien’s view, Katherine becomes submissive in the end because she has learned self-control and genuinely wants to please Petruchio. O’Brien’s analysis of Katherine, overall, seems less concerned with Katherine’s essential character and more concerned with her family and marital relations, in that O’Brien views the play holistically rather than simply from Katherine’s perspective. Elliott, on the other hand, sees Katherine as intelligent and emphasizes the lack of a female presence in Katherine’s life to help her direct her wit away from shrewishness. More significant is Elliott’s view that Katherine’s submission to Petruchio at the end of the play is just a pretense, necessary for her to subvert Petruchio’s power within the marriage and to empower herself while still functioning within the socially condoned paradigm of marriage. Elliott seems to admire Katherine’s strength and intelligence and sees these qualities as being initially misdirected; in Elliott’s view, Katherine eventually discerns how to redirect her energy so that she can effectively exercise her will within acceptable social parameters for women. It is clear, however, that this ‘shrew’ interested both

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72 O’Brien titles her article “Katherine” but much of her analysis is devoted to discussing other issues and characters—namely Petruchio, Baptista, and Bianca—and how Katherine relates to each of these characters. O’Brien does provide analysis of Katherine, but she does so by examining the relationships that Katherine engages in rather than by consistent, direct analysis of Katherine’s words and actions.
O’Brien and Elliott enough for these critics to present a defense of sorts for Katherine’s behavior.

The main problem with Katherine, as O’Brien sees it, is Katherine’s lack of discipline and self-control. O’Brien identifies Katherine as an unconventional heroine who was shaped by an abundance of spirit and a lack of parental guidance: “She is a spoilt child on a large scale, not able to manage herself, and too strong for those about her” (178). O’Brien’s view that Katherine is unable “to manage herself” in her current, undisciplined state is the underlying theme of her subsequent discussion of this character—the need for Katherine to learn self-control. Unlike Juliet, a defiant daughter whose passion is admirable, O’Brien sees Katherine’s passion as dangerous and wild: “Baptista has no authority, and Bianca no influence over her, so there is no check on her wild passion” (178). Clearly, O’Brien sees Kate’s “wild passion” and lack of discipline in an unflattering light, very much in keeping with traditionally negative Victorian attitudes toward unchecked female sexuality. Katherine, perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare’s female characters, illustrates for Victorian audiences the implicit but ever present social pressure to control female sexuality and, in O’Brien’s view, the need to control one’s own sexual impulses. The fact that Katherine cannot be controlled by those who are closest to her suggests her potential to destabilize societal norms. She doesn’t act as expected and is too strong

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73 Victorian society was filled with official efforts to control female sexuality during the mid to late nineteenth century. Some of the most extreme examples of this are The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1868 and 1869, “which provided for a medical and police inspection of prostitutes in garrison towns and ports” (Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight, 22-23). While women were routinely stopped, questioned, held and treated for syphilis under the Contagious Diseases Act, men were normally allowed to go on their way, with no attempt to control their activities (Walkowitz). A more subtle indication of Victorian attempts to control female sexuality and to indoctrinate girls into adhering to proscribed behaviors occurred in educational settings, particularly in relation to Shakespeare’s Katherine. For instance, Gail Marshall notes that two nineteenth-century collections of Shakespeare’s plays—“Adelaide C. Gordon Sim’s Phoebe’s Shakespeare, arranged for children (1894) and Edith Nesbit’s The Children’s Shakespeare (1897)”—“contain versions of The Taming of the Shrew which specifically posit responses to the dangerous anti-marriage tendencies of the contemporary new woman” (21). This same underlying principle seems to inform O’Brien’s analysis of this character as well—the need to control female sexuality through marriage.
willed to follow established guidelines of behavior. This makes Katherine a dangerous and destabilizing presence.

Nonetheless, O’Brien is inclined to treat Katherine sympathetically, even as she chastises her for exhibiting less than admirable traits: “Perhaps Shakspere [sic] did not mean us to take her very seriously, but with all the childish absurdity of her rages, one is half sorry for her as one is for a child or animal in a passion . . . She has put herself entirely out of her natural position as a woman” (O’Brien 178). By suggesting that Shakespeare “did not mean us to take her very seriously,” O’Brien is essentially attempting to nullify any threat that Katherine might pose to readers as a destabilizing presence and to divest her of any power to threaten cultural norms.

O’Brien’s description of Katherine’s “childish absurdity” and her attempt to claim pity for her as for “a child or animal in a passion” seems, at first, to be perpetuating an association between women and children or animals, as in “pets,” that need to be cared for and looked after, a commonly proffered analogy in Victorian society; however, O’Brien’s reference to this stereotyped imagery of women is clearly derogatory in nature. She sees such behavior as pitiable and regrettable. What’s more, O’Brien makes clear that Kate’s behavior is, in her estimation, unnatural and unbecoming in a woman. Such an assessment attests to her opposition to seeing women as helpless charges, but O’Brien is also far from being a defender of the New Woman persona that is suggested by Katherine’s desire for independence from a husband’s influence.

O’Brien’s view of womanhood is complex and reflects the diversity of views regarding conceptions of femininity. Ultimately, O’Brien sees this situation, which necessitates Katherine being tamed, as pitiable. Kate has the makings of an admirable woman, because she’s strong and passionate, but she has not developed appropriately because she lacks discipline and, in
O’Brien’s view, “something extraordinary is required to right her” (178). According to O’Brien, the strong influence that’s missing from Kate’s existence emerges in the character of Petruchio.

While O’Brien’s view of Katherine is somewhat ambivalent, her view of Petruchio is definitive. O’Brien believes that Petruchio’s influence is exactly what Katherine needs to help her grow into her natural and rightful role as a woman, via marriage, which O’Brien believes is possible because of what she perceives as the genuine affection that Katherine and Petruchio have for one another. O’Brien devotes much of her article to discussing Petruchio and what she sees as his genuine love for Katherine, contending that Petruchio is quite a catch as a husband: “his sharp wits, his overflowing spirits [sic] and vivacity, make him worth a dozen of the sentimental type” (178). When discussing Katherine and Petruchio’s first meeting, O’Brien notes that “the girl coming sweeping in, proud in her beauty, expecting to frighten the stranger like everybody else” is, instead, “startled into a sort of self-control” by Petruchio’s calm, friendly greeting of “Good morrow, Kate” (179). O’Brien imagines that Katherine’s lack of anger and violence in this instance indicates that, for Katherine, “it might not be quite disagreeable to find a man who openly admires her and laughs at her temper instead of calling her a fiend, and who will not let her go, instead of shrinking away from her. He is not a bit afraid of her, so the spoilt child begins to be a little afraid of him” (180). In this way, O’Brien attributes to both Katherine and Petruchio a genuine and mutual attraction, while also employing the assumption that women who behave unconventionally should be equated with and treated as children. O’Brien employs the negative associations of this stereotype to underscore her negative view of Katherine’s behavior and to suggest that Petruchio’s behavior toward her can rehabilitate Katherine by forcing her to act as a responsible adult.
One clear sign of Petruchio’s commendable nature, in O’Brien’s estimation, is what she perceives as his general appreciation of Katherine. When discussing Petruchio’s apparent attraction to Katherine and his willingness to take on the challenge of marrying her, O’Brien speculates on his true motives: “one may imagine that it is quite as much the pleasure of outdoing every one else which attracts him to Katharina as the charms of her money . . . [she is] a girl with beauty, birth and wealth” (179). While other suitors fail to appreciate Katherine’s appeal, Petruchio not only recognizes her quality but is up to the challenge of matching his wits and strength of will with hers, which, according to O’Brien, is exactly what Katherine needs to mature as a woman. O’Brien claims that, through Petruchio’s implicit tutelage, Katherine will see the error of her ways and will begin to act more in accordance with acceptable gender behaviors that determined women should be submissive, domestic and docile within marriage.\footnote{O’Brien would seem to echo the view expressed by Ellis in her advice to Victorian women that “when indolence or selfishness is allowed to prevail over her better feelings, this power is often exercised to the annoyance of society, and to her own disgrace” (286). It is this fault in Katherine’s character that O’Brien believes Petruchio can correct.}

Katherine may, at first, seem to present a problem within the Victorian ideal of marriage, since she is aggressive, domineering and willful, all qualities that would seem inappropriate in a wife, however, Petruchio’s ability to stand up to Katherine in kind and his ability to outmatch her unconventionally aggressive behavior with his own makes him a fitting partner and complement to Katherine, at least in O’Brien’s eyes.

The mutual affection that O’Brien sees between Katherine and Petruchio also enables her to accept Petruchio’s mistreatment of Katherine as the necessary means of achieving a desired end—that end being Katherine’s compliance with social norms of behavior governing womanhood and marriage. O’Brien first suggests that Petruchio is justified for acting rudely at their wedding, because he is attempting to establish his authority over Katherine: “Probably
nobody else dares to keep Kate waiting a minute, and the new experience forces home the conviction that her future husband is not the least afraid of her” (O’Brien 180-1). Not only does O’Brien see it as necessary that Petruchio establish his role as the authoritarian in the relationship, she also sees Katherine as welcoming the marriage and notes that “[t]he interval has so far reconciled her to the marriage that she is heartily vexed when she thinks he is not coming” (181). Here, then, are the two ingredients that O’Brien argues are necessary for Katherine’s reformation—a strong willed husband, who is not intimidated by his willful wife, and a genuine desire on Katherine’s part to wed Petruchio, so that she has some underlying motivation to change her behavior. For O’Brien, Katherine’s apparent desire to wed Petruchio prevents her from remaining an incorrigible shrew.

O’Brien devotes much of her article to Petruchio’s ‘taming’ of Katherine, often defending Petruchio’s actions. O’Brien cites the scene immediately after the wedding ceremony in which Petruchio pretends that he must protect Katherine from thieves: “. . . Grumio, / Draw forth thy weapon. We are beset with thieves. / Rescue thy mistress, if thou be a man—“ (Taming of the Shrew III.ii.235-7). Petruchio’s aim in this scene is to remove Katherine from the impending wedding celebration even though she desires to remain. When discussing Petruchio’s behavior in this scene, O’Brien begins by claiming that “this is the only time that Petruchio distinctly claims authority to force Kate to do what she disliked. When once he has so far mastered her, all his future operations are veiled under the appearance of considering her wishes, and what is good for her” (181). O’Brien seems to struggle here with the problem of somehow justifying Petruchio’s behavior and reconciling his manipulation of Katherine with the belief that his affection is genuine and that his methods are just. O’Brien’s professed sympathy for
Katherine seems to reflect her belief that it is in Katherine’s best interest to learn how to behave according to acknowledged gender norms for women.

She continues her assessment of Petruchio’s training methods by explaining that Petruchio “knows that to lose his temper with Kate would be to give her an advantage over him, and besides, being a good fellow in his way, he would never really dream of hurting her” (O’Brien 181). Because Petruchio is acting in a rational way and not acting out of “temper,” O’Brien views his behavior at the wedding ceremony as excusable and even advisable. O’Brien is clearly attempting to legitimize his outlandish behavior toward Katherine and to justify Petruchio’s expression of authority over his new wife, a relatively common occurrence in Victorian England, where even domestic violence was often seen as the purview of a husband. According to Lisa Surridge, “extensive wife-assault debates [appeared] in the Victorian print media” and “wife beating formed part of a web of Victorian issues surrounding marital power—coverture, married women’s property law, divorce law, [and] conjugal rights” (4). Perhaps the prevalence of domestic violence in Victorian England influences O’Brien to take an accepting, even tolerant stance toward Petruchio’s psychological manipulation of his new wife, since he refrains from physical violence.75 Regardless of O’Brien’s underlying mores, she is certainly portraying the relationship between men and women, via Petruchio and Katherine, as a strategic battle of wills and is justifying Petruchio’s behavior by describing him as a “good fellow” who “would never dream of really hurting” his wife (181). Given the assumptions that O’Brien is

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75 Many such references to domestic violence are to be found in the literature of the period, from Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* to Wilkie Collins’ *Woman in White*, both of which are discussed by Surridge in *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*. Surridge points to many examples of what appears to be socially acceptable domestic violence during the period, which then is reflected in the fiction of the period. It is perhaps not surprising then that a critic such as O’Brien may have become so accustomed to the specter of violence in the home, in both actual and fictional instances, that Petruchio’s behavior seems eminently more acceptable, by comparison, than actual physical abuse, since Petruchio’s behavior might be seen to center more on emotional and psychological manipulation than brute, physical violence.
making as to Petruchio’s motives and disposition, her commentary seems to be based largely on her own cultural contexts rather than solely on those of the play. In essence, O’Brien expresses the opinion, via the situation of Katherine and Petruchio, that such training or taming of wayward women is sometimes justifiable and even necessary.

One event, however, does appear to trouble O’Brien more than other examples of Petruchio’s mistreatment of his new wife. O’Brien is particularly vexed by the scene in which Petruchio is said to leave Katherine under her horse (The Taming of the Shrew IV.i). In this scene, Grumio tells Curtis about a mishap involving Katherine’s horse on the way back from the wedding ceremony: “thou shouldst have heard how her horse fell and she under her horse; thou shouldst have heard in how miry a place, how she was bemoiled, how he left her with the horse upon her, how he beat me because her horse stumbled, how she waded through the dirt to pluck him off me” (Taming of the Shrew IV.i.65-70). When considering this scene, O’Brien attributes the description of Petruchio’s actions to Shakespeare’s exaggeration: “we hope he exaggerates when he says Petruchio left Katharina under her horse; we could not quite forgive him for that, and it would be out of keeping with the rest of his policy” (182). Shakespeare’s description is, of course, fictional, but O’Brien treats it more as an eyewitness account of Petruchio’s behavior than as a fictionalized event, which further suggests that she is applying normative behaviors from Victorian culture to her study of Petruchio and Katherine. O’Brien attempts to justify and excuse Petruchio’s behavior on the grounds that such behavior is an aberration and “would be out of keeping with the rest of his policy” of manipulating Katherine without causing her any real harm—at least in O’Brien’s view. Thus, O’Brien essentially expresses the belief that patriarchal authority within marriage is acceptable, but only to a point. Once any real harm or potential physical damage might be done to a woman, that husband has crossed a threshold and
his behavior is no longer acceptable. Such a view is perpetuated in the philosophy of the Victorian era, particularly among the middle class, but is often at odds with the actual practice of domestic violence. Surridge notes that such a double standard, or what might be considered contradictory attitudes toward domestic violence, can be seen in the writing of one of the most popular novelists of the period, Charles Dickens, among others. Surridge contends that Dickens “creates sympathy for the battered woman, but simultaneously implies that women who defend themselves or others are unworthy of sympathy” (29). Thus, theoretical abhorrence to domestic violence was often mitigated by circumstance for Victorian audiences. O’Brien’s analysis of, and obvious discomfort with, Petruchio’s negligent and harsh treatment of Katherine in this scene seems to demonstrate quite effectively the inherent conflicts in Victorian ideals of marriage—namely, the norm of patriarchal power within marriage and the potential for misuse of such authority—with which many, including O’Brien, seem to have struggled.

O’Brien demonstrates her somewhat conflicted attitudes toward Petruchio’s efforts to wear Katherine down when she tries to justify Petruchio’s “barbarous” treatment of Katherine:

> All this elaborate scheme for wearing out Kate’s physical power of resistance seems barbarous; but hitherto she has been able to tyrannise over her surroundings in the pride of her strong will, so she has now to realize her true weakness. In the bullying, overbearing line which she took at home, Petruchio can easily beat her, and never give her a chance to quarrel with him, and slowly she is forced to the conviction that it is best to yield with a good grace and not struggle hopelessly.

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Here, O’Brien not only justifies Petruchio’s treatment of Katherine as being deserved and necessary to show Katherine how her own behavior has harmed others, but O’Brien also

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76 Surridge discusses a pattern of spousal violence that appears in several of Dickens’ works, beginning with “Sketches by Boz (1836) through The Pickwick Papers (1836-37), to Oliver Twist (1837-39) and The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-41)” (17-18). Surridge explores the Victorian context of “public intrusion into domestic privacy,” via the courts, journalists, and private citizens, and the “deep ambivalence” that emerges (18). This same sort of ambivalence seems evident in O’Brien’s reading of Shakespeare’s play and the relationship between Katherine and Petruchio.
emphasizes the correctness of Katherine realizing her “true weakness” and her appropriate place within their marriage, as well as within society, as the weaker, subservient sex. O’Brien does seem to have mixed feelings as to the propriety of such treatment, however, because she feels the need to justify Petruchio’s behavior, thereby suggesting that his approach to Katherine is questionable at best and potentially loathsome at worst, further demonstrating O’Brien’s own conflicting attitudes toward established ideologies of the nineteenth century.

O’Brien does eventually return to her examination of Katherine, but she continues to defend Petruchio’s behavior by noting Katherine’s former desire to dominate all around her and what she sees as the need for Katherine to exhibit self control. O’Brien contends that Kate “has recovered control of the temper which has so long run riot, and has begun to love the man who forced her to conquer that fiend. After having managed herself so badly, Kate seems to find a relief in letting herself drop completely into Petruchio’s rough but not unkindly hands” (184). O’Brien emphasizes the theme of self control as a justification for Katherine’s submission to Petruchio and sees this as a positive outcome; O’Brien contends that Katherine rewards her husband’s behavior with her love. From a twenty-first century perspective, this viewpoint may seem outrageous and in keeping with the syndrome of domestic abuse in which the abused identifies with the abuser and rationalizes the abuse but, once again, O’Brien’s attitude toward domestic relations suggests that she accepts Petruchio’s forceful imposition of authority. In O’Brien’s view, Katherine’s ultimate submission to Petruchio serves as an acknowledgement that her earlier behavior had been unbecoming. O’Brien believes that Katherine is happy to cede control of herself to Petruchio, even as she argues that Katherine has gained self-control as a

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77 In her 1839 conduct manual for women, Ellis asserts the same essential view of female inferiority: “In her intercourse with man, it is impossible but that woman should feel her own inferiority; and it is right that it should be so” (223). Ellis’s handbook was quite popular, so this view suggests that female inferiority was a socially accepted attitude in Victorian England among many. Certainly, this seems to be a view to which O’Brien subscribes.
result of Petruchio’s actions. While O’Brien seems unaware of the inherent contradiction within her analysis of Katherine, she clearly approves of the change in Katherine’s behavior and notes that “a gentle grace comes over the young beauty” and that “her whole nature had become refined” (184). This Katherine is far more palatable and eminently more admirable to O’Brien’s Victorian sensibilities than the shrewish Katherine of the early scenes in this play.

O’Brien’s conflicted views are also evident in her discussion of the final scene of the play, in which Katherine announces her submission and obedience to Petruchio. O’Brien first considers the wager that Petruchio places with the other men, pitting Katherine’s newly docile nature against that of the other wives present to see “. . . whose wife is most obedient” (Taming of the Shrew V.ii.67). O’Brien attributes Petruchio’s wager to his pride in his new wife and his desire to defend her. She believes that, in this instance, Petruchio is trying to prevent unwarranted criticism of Katherine’s behavior rather than attempting to boost his own reputation as a husband who has imposed his authority on his wife. O’Brien describes the scene by noting that “[t]he old impetuous nature is still in Kate” but is “controlled” when she addresses the taunts of Bianca and the widow (185). Yet, O’Brien notes that, when facing off with these two, Katherine “goes right to the utmost extreme of submission and pushes her doctrine of the inequality of the sexes as far as it will possibly go” (185). In O’Brien’s opinion, Katherine’s public show of her new attitude is necessary for her to demonstrate to the other women how much she has changed and, thus, to win the bet for Petruchio, meaning that Katherine is now primarily identifying with Petruchio and her role as his wife. O’Brien still feels the need to justify Katherine’s submission, however, and notes that “Kate has no idea of making all the sacrifice come from either side, or of erecting her husband into an eastern sultan; but she must have fallen far in love with Petruchio before she imagined him to correspond with the ideal
husband of her speech” (185). O’Brien seems to suggest that Katherine is choosing to be submissive as a result of the genuine love she feels for her husband. In other words, Katherine’s behavior is appropriate and admirable in O’Brien’s view, because it emanates from Katherine’s genuine love for her husband and her willingness to embrace the traditional role of a submissive wife.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her apparent adherence to conventional Victorian ideology and gender normative behaviors, O’Brien reveals her belief that Katherine’s submission might serve an ulterior purpose as well. In the concluding paragraphs of her article, O’Brien suggests that “it might well happen that Kate found herself in the end able to twist her sturdy Petruchio round her little finger by realizing her own true strength” (186). O’Brien is here implying that Katherine’s true power within the marriage will be to subvert Petruchio’s power, presumably by submitting or seeming to submit, but even this suggestion seems half-hearted, since O’Brien immediately clarifies this view by observing that “he does deserve well of her, by making her a much better and happier woman than he found her” (186). Although she once again reveals conflicted feelings toward gender mores, O’Brien ultimately contends that Katherine is better off for learning to submit to Petruchio, within the context of marriage, essentially affirming the traditionally Victorian view that marriage should be a woman’s primary goal and that the way to achieve a happy, complementary marriage and a stable life is by submitting to one’s husband and assuming the role of the angel in the house.

Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott, on the other hand, sees Katherine as an essentially strong, intelligent, and impressive character who lacks maternal guidance and appropriate channels for expressing her wit, resulting in her shrewish behavior. As she begins her discussion of Katherine, Elliott equates Katherine with a wild flower “whose graces . . . come not by culture but by
intuition” (301). She further asserts that, “in this Garden of Girls such a flower is Katherine of Padua, the wildest of them all, a girl of spirit like Beatrice and Rosalind, and Portia, but lacking the sweetness that distinguishes those three sprightly but gentle blossoms” (301). Given Elliott’s high estimation of Beatrice, Rosalind, and Portia, this is praise indeed. Katherine, in Elliott’s eyes, is at a disadvantage mainly because she is young and has had little motherly influence in her life, leaving her “full of promise,” once time will have “worn away the sharpness” of her character, leaving the strength and wit, without the severity (302). Elliott contends that, although Bianca and Katherine have been blessed with wealth, “beauty, grace, and wit,” fate has also been hard in that fate has “taken from them the tender care and gentle overshadowing influence of the richest of all home blessings, a mother’s love” (302). Presumably, with a mother’s love and guidance, the harsher elements of Katherine’s nature might have been lessened and the positive, gentler elements might have been encouraged; however, “[d]eprived of this mellowing influence . . . Katherine, with her restless energy and buoyant spirit, became a termagant” (302). Elliott further surmises that “Baptista had no doubt been early left a widower, and his daughters had grown up in parental neglect and remissness, until the elder became too boisterous for him” (302). Elliott’s emphasis on the absence of a mother and the impact that this had on Katherine stresses the importance she attached to a mother’s role while also implying that appropriate gendered behavior is learned and not merely biologically determined, as many in Victorian

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78 Elliott’s observation underscores similar, if less frequently applied, Victorian ideals about women who were perceived as uncontrollable, because of a lack of maternal guidance. While Victorian novelists tend to paint shrews in a consistently negative light—see Dickens’ Miss Murdstone and Rosa Dartle, for instance, in David Copperfield, for examples of shrewish women—the regrettable condition of female characters lacking maternal guidance abounds. Dickens’ Little Em’ly and George Eliot’s Dorothea, from Middlemarch, are two such characters whose lack of strong maternal guidance leads them to make questionable choices and, quite often, to act impulsively to their own detriment. The same problem—a lack of strong maternal guidance—is what Elliott sees as the core problem for Katherine.
England argued. Elliott points to the ineffectiveness of Baptista as a parent and implicitly blames him for his daughter’s shrewish behavior. Therefore, while Katherine’s behavior is not admirable, neither is it without some degree of justification.

Elliott notes that Katherine would have had limited options to exercise her natural intellectual talents within society. According to Elliott, as a result of not being able to exercise her intellect and strong personality in acceptable ways, Katherine inevitably slips into the stereotypical female role of the shrew. Elliott contends that those who would “rail against Katherine’s railing . . . should have put themselves in her place” (303). As a woman in society, Katherine “could not wear a sword nor assume the doublet and hose. Under provocation she must either scold or sulk, and the lesser evil of the two was to scold” (303). In this instance, Elliott is clearly referring to a previous time when men wore “the doublet and hose,” but she would certainly also be identifying with Katherine from the Victorian viewpoint that socially condoned behaviors are essentially gender appropriate. Elliott here implies that, unlike Katherine or women in Elizabethan England, Victorian women who were reading about Katherine have more opportunity for expressing their intellect and should view Katherine as a sympathetic character, due to the lack of options for expression available to her. While strong, spirited men could go out in search of adventure and exercise their anger and energy in acceptable physical venues, such as warfare, women had only the domestic venue and then only the use of “her tongue, where woman’s natural weapon of defence is to be found” (303). Thus, although Katherine’s shrewish behavior is less than ideal behavior for a woman, it is more socially

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79 Victorian theorists, such as Charles Darwin, G. Stanley Hall and Havelock Ellis, speculated that traits—both practical and gender specific—were carried passively in the woman and were biologically controlled. While the importance of proper cultural training and indoctrination was not overlooked or ignored in nineteenth-century society, debate occasionally focused on the learned versus the inherent nature of socially condoned gender behavior. Elliott seems to be leaning toward the view that both biology and environment are required to properly influence gender normative behaviors.
acceptable for Katherine to scold than to brawl—so, in some sense, Katherine is adhering to societal norms. What is more, as Elliott notes, Kate’s “tongue was the only member allowed full liberty . . . To have closed Kate’s mouth would have been like sitting on a safety valve. What the consequences would have been we dare not say, for in those days she could not have stumped the country in favour of woman’s suffrage” (303).  

Elliott’s reference to the contemporary Victorian issue of suffrage reveals both her awareness of cultural and historical differences between the play and her own world and simultaneously suggests her inclination to frame her analysis of Katherine in contrast to contemporary Victorian gender norms as a means of gaining a greater understanding of Katherine’s character. Clearly, Elliott sees in Katherine the potential of a New Woman or a female activist and is excusing her shrewish behavior because of the absence of constructive venues through which Katherine could exercise her verbal prowess, her intellect, or even her anger. As Elliott observes, Kate “had no soul for the feminine pursuits of her age and country, and little inclination for prayer and devotion” (304). Elliott here stresses the socially constructed gender norms that would have affected Katherine and simultaneously conveys her own attitudes toward the limitations of socially imposed gender expectations.

Elliott further attributes Katherine’s tendency toward scolding to the stifling intellectual atmosphere of her home life with Bianca, who was neither inclined or equipped to engage in intellectual debates or discussions with Katherine: “How aggravating [Bianca’s] imperturbability of temper must have been to Katherine’s restless antagonistic nature” (304). This incompatibility would, in Elliott’s view, have exacerbated Katherine’s tendencies to speak out. Elliott also

80 When discussing appropriate spheres for each gender, Ruskin observes in 1865 that “[t]he man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest” (77). Alternately, the private sphere is reserved for woman, so that “she is protected from all danger and temptation” (77). While these spheres were being contested and broadened during Elliott’s time, many Victorians still observed the general realm of spheres based upon gender. Elliott appears to be referencing these spheres as a point of empathy, particularly for female Victorian readers of Shakespeare’s play.
suggests that she can relate to Katherine’s frustration because “only those can know who have a
touch of the same disposition in themselves” and that, had Katherine enjoyed the occasional
intellectual discussion, she might have been much happier and more pleasant (304). This view
clearly places responsibility for Katherine’s demeanor on the circumstances of her existence and
also establishes Elliott’s personal identification with this character. Elliott further implies that
Katherine had to adhere to societal expectations by stating that “[i]t is not fair to put all the
blame on Kate . . . and I am inclined to make every excuse for Katherine’s vagaries. She was no
mere scold. It was not railing for railing she exchanged, but wit for wit, and everything she
uttered betokened wonderful intelligence” (304). Elliott sees Katherine as an extremely
sympathetic character who was unfortunate enough to live in an era when female intelligence
was not given the same level of opportunity for expression that was available in Victorian times,
when an author such as Elliott could not only express her ideas but could engage in active debate
about those ideas and even publish her writing. Yet, her previous acknowledgment of sharing
sympathy with Katherine’s frustration also suggests the continuing limitations imposed upon
women by society during Elliott’s own time. In this way, Elliott applies her understanding of
nineteenth-century gender norms to her analysis of Katherine and actively engages in a discourse
of the gender ideology that had existed in Elizabethan and, to some extent, persisted in Victorian
times through her analysis of this character.

Elliott further considers the implications of an impending marriage on Katherine’s
shrewish behavior, noting historical considerations as well: “in those days, when the only thing a
woman could aspire to was to be married, she had a genuine grievance” (304). In Elliott’s view,
this would have seriously disturbed Katherine—knowing that she would be expected to marry
and cede control of herself to a husband. Despite the imposition of marriage, Elliott, like
O’Brien, feels that Petruchio is a good match for the willful Katherine: “This gentleman wanted a wife with spirit, and it delighted him to hear how she had treated her music teacher” (307). Unlike O’Brien, however, Elliott focuses the bulk of her analysis on Katherine’s reactions to Petruchio rather than on Petruchio’s motivations. Elliott cites the exchange between Petruchio and Katherine, in which the former professes that he is “... moved to woo thee for my wife,” to which Katherine replies, “Moved? In good time! Let him that moved you hither / Remove you hence. I knew you at the first / You were a movable” (*The Taming of the Shrew* II.i.194-6). Elliott describes this encounter as “a diverting passage of arms in which the lady certainly does not come off second best” (307). Essentially, Elliott points to Katherine’s ability to banter with Petruchio and to match him, wit for wit, as evidence of her assertiveness and intellect. Moreover, it is in this encounter that Elliott sees Katherine making a decision as to how she shall conduct herself in marriage: “Katherine learnt her future lord’s nature and resolved to stoop to conquer” (307). This viewpoint informs Elliott’s subsequent analysis of Katherine’s motivation throughout the remainder of the play, namely, that Katherine has no intention of genuinely submitting to Petruchio’s authority or control.

Elliott contends that, after Katherine’s marriage to Petruchio, Katherine recognizes Petruchio’s pride and determines to make a show of submitting to his will, but she does so without any authentic change of heart. Elliott first cites the scene in which Petruchio deprives Katherine of meat on the pretense that the meat has been burned. In response to Petruchio throwing the meat on the floor, Katherine replies, “I pray you, husband, be not so disquiet. / The meat was well, if you were so contented” (*The Taming of the Shrew* IV.i.156-7). In her analysis of this encounter, Elliott attributes Katherine’s subsequent change in behavior to a superficial show of acquiescence: “she took his sermonizing and proing, his railing and blasphemy, as
meekly as a lamb, professing all possible submission, and pretending not to know ‘which way to stand, to look, to speak,’ whilst Petruchio prided himself on gaining a great moral victory” (Elliott 308). Elliott indicates her belief that Katherine is playing a part by using terms like “professing” and “pretending” to suggest Katherine’s conscious attempts to fool Petruchio. Meanwhile, by noting Petruchio’s pride, Elliott implies that Petruchio is convinced by Katherine’s performance. In this reading, then, Elliott is ascribing a form of agency to Katherine, in that Katherine is constructing identity to serve her immediate needs by adopting and then subverting the existing cultural norms of society. While Katherine is clearly representative of an individual attempt to evoke change in her immediate circumstances rather than system-wide political change, it is nonetheless relevant that this is one of the few means of empowerment available to her, and Elliott recognizes the significance of this as such.  

Moreover, Elliott appears to be cognizant of the example that Katherine represents to Victorian women who might also attempt to subvert societal norms as a means of creating personal empowerment within an established patriarchal paradigm. By acknowledging this as an act of defiance, Elliott is also essentially contesting the established cultural norms that governed marriage through her analysis of this character.

Elliott sees Katherine as performing the role of the submissive wife for the remainder of the play and suggests that she will ultimately prove her inherent superiority: “in the journey back to her father’s she shows herself the better of the two. Petruchio is simply a fool and a bully, but in Katherine’s answers there is wit in spite of their absurdity” (308). At this point in the play,

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81 Judith Butler discusses the agency that is recognized in feminist approaches to cultural norms of sex and gender: “Although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of disidentification is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation” (Bodies That Matter 4). What Katherine is doing in this scene, as interpreted by Elliott, is to essentially cultivate an established identification in the hopes of reaching a personal political goal—the ability to exist within a patriarchal paradigm—while also disidentifying herself, to use Butler’s terminology, to avoid adhering to the precepts of that socially expected identity, in order to undermine the established paradigm.
Elliott, unlike O’Brien, sees no redeeming qualities or endearing charms to recommend Petruchio, unless, of course, it’s his gullibility and pliability, for, as Elliott notes, “Katherine’s scheme prospers” (308). Elliott further asserts her “opinion that in time Katherine would prove to have tamed Petruchio rather than he to have subdued her” (308-9). It is because Katherine is intelligent and witty that she recognizes the futility of openly attempting to defy societal conventions that were designed to regulate and control gendered behavior, such as those within marriage under the practice of coverture. Instead, Katherine was astute enough to realize that she would need to subvert the system as a means of empowering herself. Elliott makes this belief clear when she introduces Kate’s final speech by stating that “[w]e know not how their married life turned out, but we should think it was a very happy one, and that Katherine, after all, proved the ruling spirit of the household, having learnt the secret of making her lord imagine that he was the master, whilst she really directed everything he did” (309). By treating the character of Katherine as though she were an actual woman, who would live on with the consequences or benefits of her actions, Elliott implicitly suggests the viability of such a strategy for a Victorian wife who found herself married to a boorish, oppressive husband, who might be inclined to misuse the legal authority that he held over his wife. This perspective is reiterated by Elliott’s subsequent advice to readers of her analysis, presumably Victorian women, in regard to Kate’s closing speech: “We cannot, however, do better than commit to memory and convert to practice her concluding words upon the conjugal duties of a true wife” (309). Given that Elliott had previously argued on behalf of Katherine’s subversion of patriarchal marital power, Elliott seems to suggest that Katherine’s speech is to be taken as an ironic manifesto of her subversive tactics, as well as to suggest that Victorian women should take note. In this instance, Elliott uses her critique of Katherine to challenge established social and gender norms and urges her female
audience to take a more assertive role in their own lives by using whatever means are available to them, including subversion.

**Lady Macbeth**

Lady Macbeth—the name calls up all sorts of negative connotations of monstrous womanhood and would hardly seem a fitting subject for female critics attempting to elucidate the essentially positive and admirable nature of femininity; however, Anna Jameson, Helena Faucit, and Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott all consider the character of Lady Macbeth in an attempt to understand the motivation of this vilified character. All three critics determine that Lady Macbeth is inherently feminine and, to varying degrees, sympathetic, as a result of her femininity. Jameson sees Lady Macbeth as ambitious but driven by her intellect, her strength of will, and her essential femininity, which motivates her to act wickedly for the benefit of her husband. Jameson also finds fault with the admittedly minimal attention given to Lady Macbeth by male critics and proceeds to refute critical views that designate Lady Macbeth as an inhuman monster. Faucit’s treatment of Lady Macbeth is quite brief, but she does manage to convey her view that Lady Macbeth is forceful, yet feminine in her selflessness, essentially suggesting that Lady Macbeth feels guilt over her actions and has only carried them out to promote her husband. Once again, Faucit engages with notions of agency as well. Faucit mitigates Lady Macbeth’s agency by suggesting that, historically, Lady Macbeth’s actions would have been normalized by the violence of the times in which she lived; Faucit then negates her own agency as a critic by claiming disdain for this character even as she reportedly portrays Lady Macbeth

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82 Faucit’s analysis of Lady Macbeth initially appears in her chapter on Rosalind, which originates from a letter addressed to Robert Browning; subsequently, Faucit includes a brief appendix to further discuss Lady Macbeth but, rather than present her own direct analysis of this character, she cites a review of her stage portrayal of Lady Macbeth. The review she cites, taken from a letter, is written by a man; thus, in contrast to both Jameson and Elliott, who dispute male readings of Lady Macbeth, Faucit turns to the authority of a male voice to speak for her.
sympathetically. Elliott is, by far, the most thorough and the most sympathetic of these critics in her treatment of Lady Macbeth. Elliott notes Lady Macbeth’s strength of character, her deep love for her husband, her overwhelming maternal instincts, and her significant intellect. All three critics apply gender normative concepts to their understanding of Lady Macbeth and do so to create sympathy for her. These critics defend the motivation for Lady Macbeth’s actions as emanating from a genuine love for her husband, thereby justifying her behavior, to some extent, while also attempting to humanize this character for Victorian audiences. By insisting that audiences recognize Lady Macbeth’s essential humanity, they are able to contribute to the Victorian discourse surrounding gender mores and culturally formed conceptions of womanhood and marriage.

Jameson begins her consideration of Lady Macbeth by taking issue with the scant but overwhelmingly negative tenor of existing criticism of this character. In Jameson’s view, Lady Macbeth is sympathetic rather than monstrous because of her essential humanity. Jameson disputes “the common-place idea of Lady Macbeth, though endowed with the rarest powers, the loftiest energies, and the profoundest affections, is nothing but a fierce, cruel woman, brandishing a couple of daggers, and inciting her husband to butcher a poor old king” (360). Jameson points out that Lady Macbeth would not be terrifying if we did not, on some level, sympathize with her, noting that “this sympathy is in proportion to the degree of pride, passion, and intellect, we may ourselves possess” (360-1). Jameson even goes as far as to point to the existence of similar types of women in “these civilized times,” women who, “under the influence of a diseased or excited appetite for power or distinction, would sacrifice the happiness of a daughter, the fortunes of a husband, the principles of a son, and peril their own souls” (361). In
this instance, Jameson seems to focus on the negative but human qualities of Lady Macbeth and to characterize her as a cautionary figure for nineteenth-century women. 

Jameson specifically laments the lack of critical attention given to Lady Macbeth, noting that male critics have tended to bypass Lady Macbeth in favor of more thoroughly considering her husband, the leading male character of the play: “though acknowledged to be one of the poet’s most sublime creations, she has been passed over with comparatively few words: generally speaking, the commentators seem to have considered Lady Macbeth rather with reference to her husband, and as influencing the action of the drama, than as an individual conception of amazing power, poetry, and beauty” (361). Jameson clearly conveys her own admiration for this female character and sees her as a character worthy of notice in her own right.

Jameson takes particular issue with the criticism of Samuel Johnson and Augustus von Schlegel. Jameson observes that when discussing Lady Macbeth, “Dr. Johnson . . . seems to have regarded her as nothing better than a kind of ogress” and that “Schlegel dismisses her in haste, as a species of female fury” (362). Jameson also notes that neither critic devotes much attention to this character: “she is passed over with one or two slight allusions” (362). Jameson’s comments imply that these critics have overlooked this, to her mind, remarkable character, because she happens to be female. As Liebler observes, “[f]emale tragic heroes have been dramatized since Sophocles wrote Antigone; the way we ‘listen’ to them, regrettably, has been conditioned by centuries of patriarchal instruction” (The Female Tragic Hero 5). Jameson notes the implicitly patriarchal tendency of male critics to dismiss Lady Macbeth rather than to see her as a tragic

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83 Like Jameson, Liebler disputes the notion “that women readers and audiences were not likely to recognize themselves admirably in . . . Renaissance plays” (The Female Tragic Hero 3). Whether admirable or cautionary, Jameson seems to argue this same principle and to insist that female readers do recognize the similarity between Victorian gender norms and what is observable in Lady Macbeth’s behavior as a woman and a wife.
hero in her own right.\textsuperscript{84} By also establishing Lady Macbeth as a powerful, beautiful, and intelligent character, she is establishing an Aristotelian sense of empathy and admiration, thereby casting Lady Macbeth in the role of a classical tragic hero. The additional implication here, given the monstrous reputation that Lady Macbeth had garnered, is that Jameson is justifying her attention to this character that had previously been neglected by males, because she is a female critic and can better understand Lady Macbeth’s motivation, essentially validating her attention to this character by virtue of her own gender.

Jameson begins her own analysis by acknowledging the popular view of Lady Macbeth as an ambitious monster, before disputing this as overly simplistic and reductive: “In the mind of Lady Macbeth, ambition is represented as the ruling motive, an intense overmastering passion, which is gratified at the expense of every just and generous principle, and every feminine feeling” (362). While acknowledging that an abundance of ambition manifests in this character at the expense of her more acceptable, “feminine feeling,” Jameson goes on to say that “Lady Macbeth’s amazing power of intellect, her inexorable determination of purpose, her superhuman strength of nerve, render her as fearful in herself as her deeds are hateful; yet she is not a mere monster of depravity, with whom we have nothing in common . . . the woman herself remains a woman to the last—still linked with her sex and with humanity” (363). This passage reveals the complexity of Jameson’s own views of gender as well. Jameson attributes to Lady Macbeth very positive traits—an “amazing power of intellect,” combined with “inexorable determination of purpose” and “superhuman strength of nerve”—traits that would be admirable in other circumstances but, for Lady Macbeth, these become “fearful.” Admittedly, the fearful nature of Lady Macbeth is because of her actions, but the implication is also that these traits are more

\textsuperscript{84} Jameson also references William Hazlitt’s criticism of Lady Macbeth, which is more palatable to her, but she still finds his treatment of this character to be essentially dismissive (Jameson 362).
typically associated with males, thus making her more unnatural to unsympathetic critics. This view is further suggested when Jameson contends that “the woman herself remains a woman to the last.” The way in which Jameson claims this feminine aspect of Lady Macbeth’s character suggests that she sees her womanhood as both complex and redemptive and the previously named masculine traits as potentially threatening if present in excess.

Jameson continues with her discussion of the dueling gender specific traits that co-existed in Lady Macbeth. Although acknowledging that Lady Macbeth is “the more active agent of the two,” she also notes that it was Macbeth who first thought of murdering Duncan (363-4). Jameson further claims that it is Lady Macbeth’s “commanding intellect” that forces her into a more active role once the idea of murder is introduced (364). Jameson then draws specific attention to gender by noting that Lady Macbeth’s “masculine indifference to blood and death” co-existed with more feminine traits (366). Specifically, Jameson explains that “in Lady Macbeth’s concentrated, strong-nerved ambition, the ruling passion of her mind, there is yet a touch of womanhood; she is ambitious less for herself than for her husband” (367). The selfless nature of Lady Macbeth’s concern for her husband is a key element to understanding this character, according to Jameson, who notes that Lady Macbeth, in her “soliloquy, after reading her husband’s letter,” thinks only of her husband and his needs and demonstrates “no want of wifely and womanly respect and love for him” (367). Jameson contrasts the more traditionally masculine tendencies of ambition and fierce intellect with the feminine motivation for her ambition—the relatively selfless desire to see her husband succeed. Promoting the success of one’s husband would have been seen as an admirable trait in a woman—in both Elizabethan and Victorian England—but the presence of male traits gives her a means of exacting her desires. Jameson sees Lady Macbeth as a devoted and selfless wife whose main goal is to assist and care
for her husband. The further implication of Jameson’s analysis is that Lady Macbeth had the traits required to enact the plan that her husband initiated, and she then became caught up in her selfless desire to promote him. Moreover, Jameson claims that Macbeth recognizes these traits in his wife and utilizes them to his advantage: “Macbeth leans upon her strength, trusts in her fidelity, and throws himself on her tenderness” (371). Jameson’s view of Lady Macbeth as demonstrating strength, fidelity and tenderness—all positive traits, the last of which is particularly feminine—underscores her sympathetic and favorable view of the essence of this character, if not of her deeds.

Jameson concludes her analysis of Lady Macbeth much the same as she began the chapter, with a final defense of this character against male critics who paint Lady Macbeth as monstrous and inhuman. Jameson disputes Richard Cumberland’s description of Lady Macbeth as “naturally cruel,” by observing that “If Lady Macbeth had been naturally cruel,” she would not have needed to call “on the spirits that wait on mortal thoughts to unsex her; nor would she have been loved to excess by a man of Macbeth’s character” (373). Next, Jameson addresses a Professor Richardson’s view of Lady Macbeth as being “invariably savage,” by contending that, if she were savage, she “would not have comforted and sustained her husband in his despair” (374). Finally, in response to John Foster’s description of Lady Macbeth as being “endued with ‘pure demoniac firmness’” (qtd on 373), Jameson reasons that, “If endued with pure demoniac firmness, her woman’s nature would . . . have been so horribly avenged,—she would not have died of remorse and despair” (374). In this series of responses, Jameson is essentially arguing that Lady Macbeth is an inherently feminine, loving wife who shows tenderness and compassion for her husband, if not for Duncan. In addition, her cruel acts haunt her and cause her own demise, demonstrating that this character is not fundamentally evil but has gone astray, as so
many other admirable and equally sympathetic male tragic heroes have been depicted. As Liebler has observed, “[t]he female tragic hero engages in a struggle exactly as rigorous, exactly as dangerous, and exactly as futile as that of any of her masculine counterparts” (*The Female Tragic Hero* 2). To Jameson’s mind, Lady Macbeth is an admirable woman who has acted, in many ways, according to established gender norms for women; unfortunately, her predominantly feminine inclinations or traits have led her away from her humanistic morals. Essentially, Jameson argues that taking any traits to an extreme, even the positive feminine traits exhibited by Lady Macbeth, can result in a loss of perspective, essentially casting Lady Macbeth as a cautionary figure and as a warning against excess and obsession.

Helena Faucit also discusses Lady Macbeth within her chapter on Rosalind and, indirectly, in a subsequent appendix, revealing her conflicting views of this character. Faucit begins by stating her “antipathy” for Lady Macbeth but almost immediately qualifies this statement by claiming that she didn’t “dislike . . . the character as a whole” (231-2). Faucit elaborates by referring to her experience of portraying this character on stage and notes that she was “filled . . . with a shrinking horror” during the first two acts of the play but “could not but admire the stern grandeur of the indomitable will” (232). Faucit is clearly conflicted in her response to this character, admiring Lady Macbeth’s presence and traits even as she claims disdain for her deeds. Faucit herself sums up her feelings, claiming that, we “can understand the wife who would adventure so much for so great a prize, though we may not sympathize with her” (232). Faucit seems to struggle from the start with establishing her reaction to this character—on the one hand, she is acting as a loving and loyal wife, but Lady Macbeth is achieving her goal by engaging in reprehensible deeds.
Faucit next attempts to justify, or perhaps to mitigate, the brutality of Lady Macbeth’s role in the murder of Duncan by asserting that the age in which Lady Macbeth existed was a much more brutal time when violence and murder were the norm: “Deeds of violence were common; succession in the direct line was often disturbed by the doctrine that ‘might was right’; the moral sense was not over-nice, when a great stake was to be played for” (232). In this instance, Faucit seems to be normalizing murder in order to make Lady Macbeth’s association with violence more excusable and to render her character more sympathetic. What makes this consideration of historical mores particularly interesting is Faucit’s previously stated disdain for portraying Lady Macbeth in the first two acts of the play; thus, this seems to be a sort of rationalization regarding the fictional Lady Macbeth that also serves to justify Faucit’s grudging admiration and sympathy for this character.

Faucit further suggests a degree of sympathy for this character, as well as the conflict this creates for her, when she comments on Lady Macbeth’s fainting scene. Faucit observes that it’s “[n]o wonder that she faints. It was not Macbeth alone, as we soon see, whose sleep was haunted by the affliction of terrible dreams. She says nothing of them, for hers was the braver, more self-sustained nature of the two . . . he has no thought of what she, too, is suffering” (232-3). Here, Faucit seems to acknowledge and admire Lady Macbeth’s stoicism and to criticize the self-centered Macbeth for not being more aware of his wife’s suffering. By acknowledging that Lady Macbeth does suffer, Faucit is also implicitly contesting the popular view that this character is a heartless monster. After observing these presumably favorable and sympathetic traits in Lady Macbeth, however, Faucit professes that she only agreed to play the role of Lady Macbeth “upon an emergency” because the actress who had originally been engaged for the role had fallen ill (233). This tendency of Faucit’s to back away from any suggestion of agency in promoting a
favorable analysis of Lady Macbeth suggests Faucit’s own sense of what might be acceptable gender ideals and mores for her as a nineteenth-century actress. She must have felt that her social position was somewhat precarious since her profession made her a public figure and, in turn, she depended on positive public perception to continue enjoying a successful career. Given this situation, the contrary nature of Faucit’s commentary on Lady Macbeth suggests the fluid, often contentious, and very public nature of nineteenth-century discourse concerning socially imposed gender mores.

Faucit’s conflicted reaction to Lady Macbeth is further demonstrated by her hesitation to devote an entire chapter to this character, despite requests that she do precisely that. Faucit states that “[m]any friends have made requests” that she write about Lady Macbeth, but she declines, because she doesn’t have “the love for [her] subject” that she felt for the other characters she writes about (400-1). Rather than offer her own detailed assessment of this character in a chapter dedicated to Lady Macbeth, Faucit offers the critical views of William Carleton, the nineteenth-century author, who witnessed her stage performance of Lady Macbeth and comments on Faucit’s interpretation of this character. Faucit introduces Carleton’s comments by deferring to the “recorded impressions produced by Lady Macbeth, as I acted her, upon the minds of men of high authority” (401). Here, Faucit takes credit for the sympathetic stage presentation of Lady Macbeth but shies away from claiming full authority, instead offering a male view “of high

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85 Although Faucit was an extremely popular and successful actress, she would likely have been quite familiar with the popular prejudices against actresses, which held that any woman appearing on the stage was somewhat loose morally. Tracy Davis discusses the personal and professional climate for Victorian actresses, noting that “the advantages of middle-class respectability attributed to the late-Victorian stage were actually enjoyed by very few performers—and even fewer women. The reality for most was a low working-class wage, social ostracism, and the constant threat of unemployment” (xiii). Faucit certainly enjoyed more professional stability than many actresses at the height of her career but, coming from such a background, depending as she did on male theater-managers for employment, she must have been quite sensitive to the importance of public perception in her personal and professional life, which would seem to be demonstrated through her hesitation to champion Lady Macbeth by producing an entirely sympathetic reading of this character.
authority” as a means of validating her interpretation of this character. Faucit then proceeds to offer Carleton’s analysis of her performance rather than embark on her own written, versus performed, interpretation of Lady Macbeth.

In an excerpt from a letter that Carleton wrote to Dr. William Stokes, Carleton notes that Faucit’s performance has cast Lady Macbeth in a very different and more sympathetic light than previous interpretations: “this woman, it seems to me, is simply urging her husband forward through her love for him, which prompts her to wish for the gratification of his ambition, to commit a murder” (qtd on 402). Carleton also notes that previous actresses have portrayed Lady Macbeth with “inhuman ferocity” (qtd on 402). This assessment suggests that Faucit’s portrayal reflects sympathy for Lady Macbeth as a devoted wife. Carleton also contends that, in Faucit’s Lady Macbeth, there is the “ill-suppressed anguish of a gentle spirit, and a perceptible struggle to subdue the manifestations of that guilt” (qtd on 403). Faucit’s performance clearly conveys her sympathy for Lady Macbeth as a “gentle spirit,” but she is hesitant to provide written analysis and commentary on this character, preferring to offer Carleton’s reactions instead. In this way, Faucit essentially removes any direct agency from her association with her sympathetic interpretation of Lady Macbeth.

Aside from the sympathetic nature of Faucit’s portrayal, Carleton’s critique also emphasizes the impact of her performance and the inherent ability of female critics and performers to shape public perceptions of literary figures and, by extension, of gender. Tracy Davis contends that, during the Victorian era, “[w]omen performers defied ideas of passive middle-class femininity and personified active self-sufficiency” (xiv). Considering Faucit’s occupation as an actress and an author, she was in a unique position to engage with and perhaps to challenge established Victorian conceptions of femininity, yet, her position, depending as it
did on public approval and perception, was also quite precarious. In his critique of Faucit’s performance, Carleton notes that Faucit’s portrayal of Lady Macbeth reveals the wife’s love, the gentle spirit, and the guilty conscience of this female character that had previously been demonized. Faucit’s ability to humanize this polarizing figure suggests that she is perpetuating a subtle shift in perception among her audience that might be seen to extend to real life scenarios in the future by challenging the popular view of women as dichotomous figures—either sinner or saint—and promoting a more heterogeneous view of womanhood.

Like Jameson and Faucit, Elliott sees Lady Macbeth as sympathetic; unlike Faucit, however, Elliott is very vocal in her empathy for Lady Macbeth and sees this character as one who is fundamentally misunderstood, more victim than villainess. Elliott claims that Lady Macbeth’s passion emerges as a maternal impulse toward Macbeth, but Elliott also notes that the depth and intensity of Lady Macbeth’s passion renders her somewhat threatening to cultural norms. Elliott applies popular Victorian gender norms for women to her analysis of this character in order to explain Lady Macbeth’s motivation and to create some degree of sympathy and even admiration for Shakespeare’s character. In fact, in her preface to *Lady Macbeth: A Study* (1884), Elliott characterizes Lady Macbeth as a “wonderful woman” with whom she identifies: “My impressions of Lady Macbeth were formed during a . . . time of solitude, when I was denied everything but the ‘heritage of suffering,’ and in my sick-room the image of this wonderful woman grew and grew before my mental vision, as the statue grows under the sculptor’s tool, until, at last, I saw her—as I wish to present her to my readers” (iii–iv). Although Elliott was

86 The majority of Elliott’s analysis of Shakespeare’s female characters appears in her more substantial work, *Shakespeare’s Garden of Girls* (1885); her analysis of Lady Macbeth, however, appears in a separate publication. The edition of Elliott’s *Lady Macbeth: A Study* that I examined is located at the Houghton Library, Harvard University and was in the library of Algernon Charles Swinburne. The book bears an inscription from Elliott, addressed to Swinburne, as well. While this circumstantial evidence might suggest an acquaintance between Elliott and Swinburne, the lack of biological information on Elliott renders any such conclusions as merely speculative.
not the first female critic to write about Lady Macbeth sympathetically—as previously noted, Anna Jameson had done so some fifty-two years earlier—Elliott’s stated purpose, to convey to her readers how she came to see Lady Macbeth as a “wonderful woman,” stresses the sense of admiration that Elliott feels for this character, as well as suggesting their shared experiences, via gender. To many readers and audiences of Shakespeare’s play, Lady Macbeth is seen as a murderer, a coldly calculating manipulator, and an ambition driven monster, who is cast in the typically deviant and sexualized role of the Eve figure—the woman whose influence is destructive and dangerous; however, Elliott saw in this character the influence of social, biological, and cultural gender norms that rendered Lady Macbeth eminently sympathetic, admirably feminine, and essentially misunderstood.

Like Jameson before her, Elliott begins her study by acknowledging the derogatory opinions that literary critics typically express about Lady Macbeth: “almost all commentators and exponents of Shakespeare have agreed in their scathing denunciations of the character of Lady Macbeth, and seem to have taken no trouble to discover any extenuating circumstances that might modify the enormity of her crime or account for much of the odium that attaches to her name” (1). While it’s not particularly surprising that few critics had looked for redeemable qualities in Lady Macbeth, particularly given the scant amount of critical attention paid to Shakespeare’s female characters overall, Elliott’s willingness to depict Lady Macbeth as a sympathetic character based on cultural norms of gendered behavior is somewhat unusual, particularly given the likelihood of becoming identified with an apparently cold blooded murderer via gender specific traits. Elliott subsequently notes that, “no one has been found to champion the cause of one who, with all her crimes, was a true woman; for I believe it requires only a little care and patience to discover in Lady Macbeth many true womanly traits and even
endearing qualities” (1-2). Elliott establishes that she is not judging Lady Macbeth’s actions as much as she is considering and justifying her motivation as a woman. To do so, Elliott draws on the ‘true womanly traits’ or socially condoned gender norms with which she is most familiar—those of the Victorian era that apply to the doctrines of marriage and motherhood.

Elliott first discusses Lady Macbeth’s utter devotion to her husband—an admirable feminine trait—and contends that this love and devotion for her husband are only intensified by her maternal grief. In Elliott’s reading of Lady Macbeth, she relies on an earlier legend, which held that Lady Macbeth’s children had been slain.87 Shakespeare also alludes to this legend when Lady Macbeth says “. . . I have given suck, and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me” (Macbeth I.vii.55-56). This presumed state of thwarted motherhood not only gives Lady Macbeth a more understandable motive for her subsequent actions, in Elliott’s view, but also creates a sense of sympathy for the grief she must feel over her lost child. Elliott notes that, “of all the pathetic yearnings those of a childless mother are the most touching” and further contends that the suffering of such a one “can only be realized by those who have passed through such suffering” (3-4).88 It is directly as a result of this sorrow, according to Elliott, that Lady Macbeth clings “more tenaciously to her husband” (4). The biological drive of a woman to have children, and the maternal instincts that this would awaken in her, were widely held principles of biological determinism, a school of scientific theory and philosophy that was quite popular

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87 While Shakespeare is generally thought to have based his characterization of Lady Macbeth on the depiction of more than one character in Holinshed’s Chronicles, Elliott seems to be partially basing her analysis on the legend of Queen Gruoch of Scotland, an eleventh-century figure who did have at least one child who was slain. Jameson refers to this legend in Shakespeare’s Heroines as well (Jameson 358).

88 Elliott’s language seems to imply that she has experienced the loss of a child and can therefore sympathize with Lady Macbeth in a way that others cannot. This is also suggested by her prefatory remarks, in which she explains that she pondered the character of Lady Macbeth while she was confined to a sick-bed. Unfortunately, biographical material on Elliott is scarce—Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts note that Elliott “is not included in contemporary or twentieth-century biographical dictionaries of nineteenth-century authors” (Women Reading Shakespeare 173)—so her own circumstances must remain speculative at this time.
during the Victorian era. Those adhering to such doctrines believed that women and men were biologically predetermined to participate in certain activities. For women, the primary activity would be childbirth and motherhood. According to Elliott, the deaths of Lady Macbeth’s children would have interrupted her natural maternal instincts after they had previously been initiated, which would then have caused her to redirect her maternal energies; Elliott contends that she employed this urge by focusing on the other culturally approved means of expression for a woman—marriage. Elliott uses this premise to justify Lady Macbeth’s extreme measures to protect and advance her husband. While it is acceptable to Elliott that Lady Macbeth wishes to advance the interests of her husband, the problem is that Lady Macbeth takes this desire too far as a result of her thwarted maternal instincts. Moreover, Elliott believes that Macbeth recognizes and manipulates his wife’s devotion in order to instigate his wife into plotting the murder of Duncan. According to Elliott, Lady Macbeth’s biggest flaw at this point is that she is “blind in her wifely devotion” (5), which allows her to be swayed by her husband’s ambitions.

Elliott also points to the play for evidence of Macbeth’s initial instigation of the murder plot and takes issue with some of the terminology previously employed by critics to designate Lady Macbeth as monstrous and driven by ambition. Elliott traces one of the first suggestions of ill intent, within the context of the play, to the letter sent to Lady Macbeth by her husband, in which Macbeth tells his wife of his encounter with the “Weird Sisters” who addressed him by saying “Hail, king that shalt be” (Macbeth I.v.8-10). Elliott notes that in the letter, Macbeth repeatedly refers to his greatness to come, thereby expressing his own political ambitions to Lady Macbeth: “she is not the instigator to crime. The first suggestion comes from him. She reads between the lines of his letter and knows that in his mind there is more than his hand dare express” (Elliott 6). Elliott also notes that Macbeth had previously suggested his ambition in an
aside, while in the presence of Duncan: “. . . Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (Macbeth I.iv.50-51). When discussing this allusion to Macbeth’s ambition and dark intentions, Elliott notes that “it is very clear that his wife understood from his letter more than he openly expressed” (7). In Elliott’s view, this suggestion from Macbeth, given his wife’s devotion to him, is enough to lead her to give “effect to his desires” (8). Thus, Lady Macbeth is not the “fiend wife” that others claim her to be for initiating the foul murder but the devoted wife who loses the perspective of her own morality and goes too far to assist her husband in achieving his goals (7). Moreover, Elliott sees Lady Macbeth’s determination “that nothing shall stand in the way of her husband’s ambition” as “woman-like” (8). By attempting to satisfy her husband’s wishes, Lady Macbeth is functioning within her socially condoned role as wife to Macbeth. In Elliott’s view, Lady Macbeth’s character combines feminine devotion to her husband with the strength of will needed to carry out very unpleasant tasks, which essentially creates an ideal breeding ground for the reprehensible act of Duncan’s murder.

Much as Jameson had done in her critique of Lady Macbeth, Elliott further attempts to refute the perception of this character as monstrous by citing the same speech that many critics point to as evidence of her monstrosity: “. . . Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty! . . .” (Macbeth I.v.40-43). This speech, spoken by Lady Macbeth in preparation for the murder of Duncan, is typically cited as evidence of her unnatural impulses. Like Jameson before her, Elliott also believes that Lady Macbeth’s request to “unsex herself” is actually necessary for her to commit the crime because she is too feminine to see it through. These lines are not spoken as a demand but as a plea to give her the ability to act in a coldly masculine manner so that she can secure success for her husband. In Elliott’s view, Lady Macbeth’s desire to please and help her husband
somewhat mitigates even the heinous crime of murder: “she does not glory in crime; she shows
no thirst for blood. In order to accomplish her purpose, she has to invoke supernatural aid to
unsex her, and render her woman’s breast callous to pity and remorse” (8). Thus, her inherent
womanly nature and the socially condoned desire to please her husband are taken to unnatural extremes, because she has become too devoted to him.

Presumably, this excess of devotion—motivated in part by her stifled maternal instincts—would not have been so dangerous in another woman, but, as Elliott notes, Lady Macbeth’s “strength of will was her distinguishing characteristic,” which leads her to “lay aside her womanhood, or rather all its sweeter and softer features to help her husband achieve his ambition” (8-9). In Elliott’s estimation, the play depicts the perfect mixture of conditions to facilitate the murderous plan—a wife so devoted to her husband that she loses her own moral compass, a husband driven by ambition who recognizes and wishes to harness his wife’s devotion for his own ends, and a woman who possesses the strength of will to put aside her own feminine nature in order to fulfill her husband’s needs. Elliott’s view implicitly suggests the double standard of endowing men with legal and practical power within society and marriage, expecting women to submit to their husband’s wishes, and subsequently blaming women for submitting to husbands whose desires are contrary to social expectations. Elliott doesn’t defend Lady Macbeth’s actions, but she does defend her motivation, acknowledging it as proper for a wife to work toward helping her husband reach his goals and wanting to satisfy his needs and desires, a very typical perspective of gender in Victorian England. In this way, Elliott uses the norms of socialized behavior to exonerate Lady Macbeth—to some extent—to nineteenth-century readers.
Elliott further questions the validity of targeting Lady Macbeth as the guiltier party in the scheme to kill Duncan—something previous critics had done regularly. Elliott first takes issue with Coleridge’s assessment of Lady Macbeth’s motives, because “he makes no allowance for the expression of her face, or the tones of her voice” (10-11). Aside from Elliott’s point that there is a plausible alternative to the way in which Coleridge interprets the character’s words, Elliott’s reference to facial expression and verbal inflection also implies that Elliott is imagining Lady Macbeth as an actual woman, whether in reality or as represented on stage, rather than as a fictional character. Elliott then turns her attention to Schlegel’s criticism of Lady Macbeth as the ambition driven instigator of the crime: “But whilst Lady Macbeth is the bolder, I cannot see that she is the guiltier of the two, as so many commentators aver. Schlegel is very empathetic in his denunciation; but, if we judge her by what Shakespeare has put into her mouth, I fail to find, in anything she says, that deep, overweening ambition,—i.e., on her own account,—with which she is credited” (17). In this instance, Elliott grounds her refutation in the language of the play but still suggests that the majority of male critics have ascribed to Lady Macbeth a particular motivation that is built on supposition rather than on an examination of the psychological and cultural factors that might be influencing Lady Macbeth’s development and behavior as a character. Lady Macbeth is, in Elliott’s view, motivated and influenced by the gender normative behaviors that dictate appropriate goals and ideals for married women, which takes precedence in Lady Macbeth’s perception of reality. Clearly, in her discussion of previous criticism, Elliott is making a determined attempt to justify Lady Macbeth’s behavior and, in the process, reveals her own view that to understand this character’s motivation, one must understand her position as a woman. To achieve this end, Elliott applies standard Victorian concepts of gender appropriate traits to her analysis of Lady Macbeth, something that male critics have failed to do.
Elliott further contends that Macbeth’s own weakness of character necessitates Lady Macbeth’s strength of character. According to Elliott, because Macbeth recognizes that his wife is strong in character, as well as capable and determined, he can afford the luxury of guilt in his private moments. Macbeth does appear to have second thoughts at one point and Lady Macbeth spurs him on to act, which would seem to suggest that Lady Macbeth is the true impetus behind the scheme to kill Duncan, but Elliott disagrees. At one point, Macbeth says, “We will proceed no further in this business. / He hath honored me of late, and I have bought / Golden opinions from all sorts of people, / Which would be worn now in their newest gloss, / Not cast aside so soon” (*Macbeth* I.vii.32-36). According to Elliott, Lady Macbeth, having been previously spurred on by her husband to plot the murder of Duncan, can not simply stop her forward motion and is not so changeable as Macbeth apparently is. Lady Macbeth responds to her husband’s hesitation with scathing determination:

> Was the hope drunk  
> Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?  
> And wakes it now, to look so green and pale  
> At what it did so freely? From this time  
> Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard  
> To be the same in thine own act and valor  
> As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that  
> Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life,  
> And live a coward in thine own esteem,  
> Letting “I dare not” wait upon “I would,”  
> Like the poor cat i’ th’ adage? (I.vii.36-46)

When considering this exchange between Lady Macbeth and her husband, Elliott speculates that, Macbeth’s reply to Lady Macbeth’s initial question, being “such an excuse, put forward with the feeble uncertainty of a weak unstable mind, must have aroused all her contempt” (Elliott 21). Lady Macbeth thus exhibits the sort of steadfast resolve that one might see as an attribute in other circumstances, which underscores Elliott’s argument that Lady Macbeth is a strong, self-
possessed character who simply loses her own moral perspective in order to promote her husband’s desires. These traits are also typically associated with men—considered the ‘stronger’ sex in Victorian England. Furthermore, Elliott attributes to Macbeth a “feeble uncertainty” and a “weak unstable mind,” features typically associated with women as negative feminine characteristics in order to establish Macbeth as the weaker of the two, implicitly suggesting that Lady Macbeth becomes more masculine because of necessity, due to her husband’s lack of masculinity.

While still essentially feminine, in Elliott’s opinion, Lady Macbeth shows more strength and steadfast resolve than her husband: “She recognizes [their plan] as a crime, and never parleys with her conscience, or attempts to excuse the fearful deed” (24). To Elliott, this behavior is not cold or calculating, as so many previous critics have judged it, but is instead a direct result of the situation in which she finds herself—namely, in a marriage to an ambitious but weak man whom she loves as a mother would love a son. She sees what needs to be done to promote Macbeth’s goals and desires and she determines to do it, whatever the cost to herself. And the cost of what is an immoral and unnatural plan of action is high, in Elliott’s assessment: “The cold, stern reasoning with which she answers Macbeth manifests her scarcely concealed disdain . . . such insinuations of cowardice . . . may appear unnecessarily cutting and unkind from the wife he loved so fondly; but they are scarcely unnatural when we take into account her wearied and overstrung condition” (25). Her unmitigated devotion to Macbeth has led her to this place, so her reaction to him, though seemingly harsh, is actually fueled by the position Macbeth has put her in, at least in Elliott’s view. Given that he has put his wife in an unnatural position, particularly for a woman, as a result of his own lack of traditionally male traits, her response becomes
understandable in that she feels she must take on the masculine traits that her husband lacks in order to attain their goals.\textsuperscript{89}

Elliott further points to Lady Macbeth’s “strong intellectual capabilities,” which would have had no real outlet due to the limitations of opportunity for women, as an integral element in this character’s motivation: “she had nothing to do but live amongst her maidens at Inverness Castle,” which “could scarcely have afforded much scope for the exercise of her mental powers” (23). This was the case until Macbeth expressed his ambition to her and in that way “opened up a vision of a field for her extraordinary activities” (23). Elliott thus implies that, had Lady Macbeth been given more legitimate opportunities to engage her intellect in productive endeavors, she would not have jumped so quickly into the role of a murderous plotter. Elliott also notes that Lady Macbeth “is of that maternal, protective sort,” whose “devotion is of that deep inexhaustible kind which loves best in weakness” (22). Thus, Lady Macbeth is not simply an unnaturally masculine woman, she is a strong, capable, truly feminine woman who is thwarted at every turn—she has no children to occupy her time, attention, or devotion and she has no legitimate pursuits to engage her mind. This, then, is the extreme case of a woman who, through the stifling influence of her environment, acts in a manner that is out of accord with society’s morals; however, she is motivated by socially acknowledged and accepted female gender norms, at least, in Elliott’s view. Understanding this factor in Lady Macbeth’s behavior is the key to understanding Elliott’s sympathy for and identification with Lady Macbeth. As a female scholar, although they have reversed their gendered roles within the marriage, to some extent, Elliott would likely have interpreted the marriage between Lady Macbeth and her husband as theoretically meeting the notion of a complementary marriage, meaning that the natural benefits and deficits of one partner are compensated for by the other partner. As Ruskin explains, complementary partnerships occur in marriage when “[e]ach has what the other has not: each completes the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give” (\textit{Sesame and Lilies} 77). In the case of Lady Macbeth and her husband, of course, the traits and behaviors of these two characters complement one another but for ill effect. Typically, Victorians would have expected these traits to run according to gender normative tendencies but, as Elliott has pointed out, such is not always the case in the marriage between Lady Macbeth and her husband.
Elliott, who has already claimed an affinity with the character of Lady Macbeth, would have been well aware of the limitations that a lack of sufficient access to education may have had on intellectual women. As Laura Morgan Green points out, even those women who “were involved in university education in the 1870s and early 1880s often did not take the same classes or exams as men, receive the same or indeed any degrees upon completion of their course of study, or have the same rights of institutional affiliation” (5). This educational environment would have formed the backdrop for Elliott’s experience and her analysis of Lady Macbeth; moreover, her sympathy for Lady Macbeth as a thwarted intellectual emphasizes Elliott’s tendency to equate Lady Macbeth’s circumstances with Victorian conceptions of womanhood and, in the process, Elliott both reflects and subtly attempts to shape those same conceptions.

Despite her efforts to justify Lady Macbeth’s role in the plot and to liberate her character from the monstrous reputation she has gained from other critics, Elliott does acknowledge the horror of Lady Macbeth’s part in the murder of Duncan and the permanent effect she imagines this act would have had on Lady Macbeth’s femininity: “All womanliness, all lines of beauty are for ever erased from her face in that moment” (32). Elliott further describes the murder scene and Lady Macbeth’s successful attempt to “unsex” herself: “She is cold, malignant, fiendish, and her little hand grasps the murderous weapon with feverish intensity” but “she lays down the dagger on the pillow, and . . . quits the fatal chamber. Her nerves are so shaken that she has to fortify herself with some of the liquor with which she had so recently plied the attendant grooms” (32-3). Thus, Elliott acknowledges the monstrosity of this action, but she also notes Lady Macbeth’s initial inability to complete the act, because the sleeping Duncan had too closely resembled her father: “. . . Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t” (Macbeth II.ii.12-13). Despite her initial hesitation, however, it is Lady Macbeth who re-enters the bedchamber of the
murdered Duncan to replace the bloody daggers on the pillow, in order to frame the sleeping guards (II.ii). Elliott seems horrified that “a woman, young, beautiful, and gifted, should have lent herself to a crime so terrible” and comments on the increasing lack of femininity in this character after the murder has transpired, at least in the short term (35). Elliott sees Lady Macbeth’s involvement as harsh and consequential on a personal level, all but destroying her inherent sense of self, and she also sees this as the beginning of Lady Macbeth’s unraveling: “How abandoned to her wickedness she must have been . . . She has indeed become unsexed” (36). Even more abhorrent to Elliott than the bloody act of murder is a murder perpetrated by a woman—in her eyes, this is truly unnatural. Elliott is careful to note, however, that despite the depravity of this act, Lady Macbeth’s motivation continued to stem from her feminine desire to fulfill Macbeth’s goals, and she observes that Lady Macbeth’s response to Macbeth exiting the murder scene and appearing in the courtyard of the castle is a cry of “My husband!” (Macbeth II.ii.14). However horrific her intended actions were, however heartless her determination may have seemed, Lady Macbeth’s motivation was centered in her devotion to her husband and it is Lady Macbeth’s adherence to social and cultural gender norms that enables Elliott to continue to see this character in a sympathetic light, despite her immoral behavior.

Elliott continues her analysis by noting that, after the murder occurs, more traditionally Victorian female gendered traits begin returning to Lady Macbeth’s character. First, when Macbeth starts to regret their actions and says, “. . . Better be with the dead, / Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, / Than on the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy. . . . “ (Macbeth III.ii.21-24), Lady Macbeth responds by trying to ease his mind: “Come on, / Gentle my lord, sleek o’er your rugged looks. / Be bright and jovial among your guests tonight” (III.ii.29-31). Elliott sees Lady Macbeth’s reaction as eminently unselfish: “Does it not speak for
her unselfish womanliness that not a murmur escapes her; but, with infinite patience, she turns on all occasions to allay his fears, and to soothe the grief that, in her own case, is consuming her spirit? Not once does she hint at her own suffering; hence some have concluded she was callous” (Elliott 50). Elliott’s assessment of Lady Macbeth clearly and explicitly draws on the gendered norms of Victorian England—contending that Lady Macbeth is the selfless wife who puts her concerns for her husband above her own, like a truly devoted angel in the house rather than a callous self-promoter. What’s more, Elliott sees Lady Macbeth’s silence regarding her own suffering as more typically gendered behavior: “Women there are who suffer in silence and alone. They have a dual existence: one of mental and spiritual unrest, and another of apparent calm, which is the only one palpable to their nearest and dearest” (50-1). The silence of women, whether chosen or imposed, especially in suffering, is a well established Victorian cultural norm, and one that was shared by Elizabethans as well.  

Contemporary to Elliott are depictions in literature that demonstrate the prevalence of female silence, such as Bertha in Jane Eyre or Aunt Esther in Mary Barton. Neither of these women is able to give voice to the totality of her suffering, but the presence of suffering for both women is made evident—both are marginalized, both are victimized, and both are silenced. By giving voice to her sympathetic views about Lady Macbeth and the silence and isolation that character endures, Elliott is able to join in the discussion of gender ideology and to defend what she sees as the dismissive vilification of Lady Macbeth by established critics. In Elliott’s estimation, the unsexed Lady Macbeth of the murder scene must also silence her own feelings of guilt in deference to the sense of duty she feels  

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90 Martha Vicinus has edited a collection of essays titled, Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age, which deals with the subject of silence among women during the Victorian era as well as exploring the conditions of life inherent for Victorian women, particularly as evidenced through the literature of the period. For a treatment of similar issues as applicable to early modern women and Shakespeare’s treatment of silence as it relates to women and women’s issues, see Lynda Bose’s article, “Scolding Bridles and Bridling Scolds,” and Penny Gay’s book, As She Likes It: Shakespeare’s Unruly Women. These authors explore the extent of silence surrounding women and how this silence is represented in both cultural and dramatic settings as a means of imposing social control.
toward her husband, but she does so at great personal expense to herself, demonstrating the selflessness that was so highly esteemed during the Victorian period as representative of ideal femininity.

In Elliott’s view, what is perhaps worse than the actual suffering of Lady Macbeth is her husband’s indifference to her situation. Macbeth emotionally abandons the woman who has done so much to further his ambition and who has sacrificed so much to console and support him. Because Lady Macbeth has no one with whom to share her own suffering and guilt, she sinks further and further into her own misery. Elliott first notes Macbeth’s emotional abandonment of his wife by observing that, after the murder of Duncan, Macbeth begins to shut his wife out of his daily concerns and to turn to her as a depository for his own guilt: “Macbeth did not ask her counsel now, but he made her the recipient of all his lamenting, unheedful of her growing agony” (Elliot 50). Faced with her husband “lamenting” over his part in their crime, Lady Macbeth replies in what some have seen as a harsh manner by saying, “. . . What’s done is done” (Macbeth III.ii.14). Elliott, however, supposes that Lady Macbeth’s advice was borne of her intelligence and her pragmatic nature rather than of any inherent callousness: “With a strong intellect like that of Lady Macbeth, endued as she was with passionate and unswerving devotion to her husband, she would resolutely bury all reminders of the past from his gaze, and, to reassure him, would preach ‘what’s done is done,’ even although her inmost soul gave the lie to her doctrine” (Elliott 51). In Elliott’s opinion, Lady Macbeth is once again neglecting her own interests and wellbeing in order to calm her husband’s rattled nerves. Elliott surmises that Lady Macbeth’s extreme isolation coupled with her alienation from her husband, to whom she has been so dedicated and devoted, must have weighed very heavily on her (52-3). Even in this state of alienation from her husband’s support, however, Lady Macbeth remains unselfish: “A less
unselfish nature would have wanted some outlet for her own perturbations, for the grief that was hurrying her to a dishonoured and unregretted grave; but she is still gentle and tender with him, and surpresses all exclamations of pain with stoicism” (64). To associate Lady Macbeth with adjectives such as “gentle,” “tender,” and “unselfish” firmly grounds this character in established nineteenth-century feminine gender norms and marks Elliott’s attempt to liberate Lady Macbeth from her popularly held depiction as monstrous, callous, and cruel.

Elliott doesn’t simply rely on her speculations as to Lady Macbeth’s feminine motivation however; she also points to the play and to Lady Macbeth’s ultimate madness as evidence of her essential humanity and lack of monstrosity. The first evidence of Lady Macbeth’s own feelings of guilt emerges in her sleep-walking episodes: “When in the night-watches her perturbed nature still asserts itself, she acts and re-acts the dreary tragedy. It shows how great the physical strain must have been for her to give way to somnambulism as soon as she feels herself free to unbend. It speaks volumes for the secret torture of her poor brain that, when the need for exertion is removed, she sinks into the semi-imbecility of despair” (71). In her sleep walking, Elliott sees evidence of Lady Macbeth’s essential humanity and the burden that her actions have become to her. In contrast, if she were a cold, callous murderer, such as Lady Macbeth is widely considered to be by Elliott’s contemporaries, she would not have shown the least regret or guilt for her actions. Unlike Macbeth, however, Lady Macbeth has not been able to unburden herself of her guilt and, as a result, it manifests in this nocturnal turmoil. First, we learn that Lady Macbeth’s attendant reports to the doctor that she has “seen her rise from her bed, throw her nightgown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon ‘t, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep” (Macbeth V.i.3-7). Elliott points to Lady Macbeth’s sleep writing as proof of her humanity: “Might not Shakspere [sic] have meant
to suggest that, burdened with the guilt of their terrible crime, her heart found relief in a written confession of what her lips dare not express” (Elliott 72). In Elliott’s estimation, every impulse of Lady Macbeth’s being is to confess what she has done—from reliving the crime to conveying her role via writing and ultimately with the wringing of her hands—all of which indicates to Elliott the torment that Lady Macbeth felt because of her actions.

In Lady Macbeth’s suffering, Elliott finds sympathy for this tortured character: “As we mentally dissect the ‘sorely charged’ heart we are filled with pity for the miserable woman, and it is with a feeling of relief that she passes from our sight. The psychological study is too painful” (74). Despite her horrendous actions, Lady Macbeth is, for Elliott, a tragic woman who loved her husband to an unhealthy extreme, a woman who was determined and selfless in the way in which she tried to promote his wishes, and a woman who ultimately paid the price of putting her husband’s wishes above her own sense of morality. According to Elliott, through all of these trials, Lady Macbeth stands as a testament to the depth of feminine devotion, even at the cost of her own soul. Elliott views Lady Macbeth as a tragic figure whose great potential has been brought low by her own flaws and acknowledges “the energetic and powerful resistance to oppression, suppression, silencing, and eradication” that Liebler has more recently identified as the purview of tragic drama in the Early Modern period for “both male and female protagonists” (The Female Tragic Hero 5). In this sense, Lady Macbeth can be seen as a cautionary figure in that she stands as a reminder of what might happen should women become too extreme in their devotion to a husband and, in the process, lose sight of their own inherent morality. Conversely, by representing Lady Macbeth as a sympathetic figure, Elliott is essentially promoting a more sympathetic and holistic approach to understanding gender in a larger sense. If a woman is expected to act a certain way and the commission of those behaviors leads to unwanted or
socially taboo actions, she might not merit forgiveness, but she certainly merits sympathy and compassion, since her feminine instincts have led her to such regrettable actions.

Throughout her psychological study of Lady Macbeth, Elliott establishes her view that Lady Macbeth is not a monster but a woman whose excessive love for and devotion to her husband, coupled with her inherent intelligence and willfulness, have led her to take part in a monstrous act; rather than contempt, however, the essentially feminine and, in Elliott’s view, noble motivation for her crime and the subsequent mental anguish that she endures as a result, should prevent us from feeling merely contempt for her and should, instead, enable us to feel compassion for this misguided woman: “we are more inclined to attribute her death to heartbreak than to suicide. Hers was a noble, though warped nature, one that, having devoted itself to a beloved and absorbing object could allow no bar or hindrance in its efforts to attain the desired end” (84). Thus, in Elliott’s eyes, Lady Macbeth is an example of a woman whose legitimate desire to support, love, and assist her husband becomes corrupted by her husband’s willingness to take advantage of his wife’s devotion only to abandon her in the end. This is the essence of Elliott’s conclusions in her study of Lady Macbeth.

All three critics draw on their own perceptions of culturally condoned gender normative behavior in order to better understand Lady Macbeth. Although Jameson and Faucit treat Lady Macbeth sympathetically, neither does so to the extent to which Elliott does. For Elliott to attempt to legitimize Lady Macbeth as a caring, if misguided, woman and as an unselfishly devoted wife is a rather courageous, defiant position for her to take. Elliott, more so than either of her predecessors, explicitly identifies with Lady Macbeth based on what she perceives as their shared femininity and attempts to validate and redeem Lady Macbeth’s behavior for her audience. In the process, Elliott also reveals her own view that idealized femininity can be taken
too far, that excessive love for and devotion to one’s husband can be a dangerous practice, that intelligence in women who have no legitimate outlet for that drive can result in detrimental behaviors, and that society often demonizes that which it doesn’t understand—in this case, the drives and psychology of a woman whose ideals are not so different than those promoted for most women during the Victorian era. Thus, the responsibility for Lady Macbeth’s crimes does not belong exclusively to her or to her husband but is also shared, to some extent, by the society that imposes such gender normative expectations upon women, particularly within the cultural paradigm of marriage. The implications of this analysis are that gender normative behaviors in Victorian England merit scrutiny and, perhaps, qualification in order to ultimately benefit individuals, in particular, and society, in general.

Conclusion

The critical views expressed about Shakespeare’s female characters by Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott convey the range of gender mores to which each critic adheres, as well as suggesting the change in attitudes toward female autonomy, intelligence, and independence that took place during the nineteenth century. As these critics consider Shakespeare’s defiant daughters and devoted wives—Juliet, Katherine, and Lady Macbeth—they reveal a complex and fluid sense of femininity, which underscores the varied approaches to the Woman Question in Victorian England among women. Jameson, while very sympathetic to these female characters, also affirms many traditionally feminine traits; O’Brien tends to promote those traditionally feminine traits of devotion and passivity, even as she acknowledges the potential for the misuse of patriarchal authority; Faucit conveys her consistently conflicted feelings over female agency by recognizing and immediately mitigating such instances in the
female characters she studies, thereby demonstrating the same anxiety through her own writing that she also attributes to the objects of her analysis; finally, Elliott consistently adheres to her admiration for and identification with strong, intelligent women who recognize the validity and presence of their own femininity throughout her analysis of Juliet, Katherine, and Lady Macbeth. This range of critical views does more than merely reflect the presence of diverse attitudes toward gender, however; by engaging in critical analysis of these somewhat problematic Shakespearean female characters, Jameson, O’Brien, Faucit, and Elliott are engaging in a public discourse about women as a means of shaping gender ideology and Victorian conceptions of womanhood.
Chapter Three: The Wise and Witty Women

Shakespeare’s wise and witty women—Portia, Beatrice, and Rosalind—are among his most endearing depictions of womanhood, so it is not surprising that these fictional heroines drew the attention of nineteenth-century critics, Anna Jameson, Helena Faucit, and Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott, who point to these characters as evidence of Shakespeare’s admiration for generally positive female characterizations. Portia, Beatrice, and Rosalind, although lacking formal education, exhibit intellect, wit, and a shrewd understanding of human nature—qualities that clearly appealed to the Victorian critics who wrote about them—all while functioning outside of the typical female sphere of domestic duties and behaviors. Anna Jameson, writing in the early and mid-nineteenth century, comments on all three of these characters in her book, *Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1832; 1858), and lays a foundation for the subsequent analyses performed by Helena Faucit and Madeleine Leigh-Noel Elliott, whose respective books—*On Some of Shakespeare’s Female Characters* and *Shakespeare’s Garden of Girls*—were published in 1885. Collectively, their analyses of these wise and witty female characters present a trajectory of gender ideology that reveals a developing conception of womanhood during the Victorian period. Jameson, the earliest of these writers, reveals a somewhat traditional, idealized view of femininity through her critique of these characters. Faucit, who was a professional actress long before she began writing about Shakespeare’s female characters, tends to struggle with her own conception of appropriate agency for women in her analysis of Shakespeare’s plays. Elliott, a contemporary of Faucit’s, conveys in her analysis a conception of womanhood that adheres to many traditional notions of femininity, such as a belief in the essentially feminine nature of women, even as she challenges many commonly held suppositions concerning intellectual women. All three critics see these Shakespearean heroines as significant because of
the positive gender models that they represent: for example, Jameson, Faucit, and Elliott see
Portia as an exemplary instance of female intelligence, propriety, and ability, but they differ in
their assessment of how these traits in Portia relate to actual Victorian gender expectations, such
as a woman’s role within marriage; in the character of Beatrice, these critics see an essentially
good-natured, witty woman who was more interested in mirth than in deep thought or profound
philosophy because of her tranquil environment but who also has the potential to become
shrewish if she remains unchecked; finally, these critics view Rosalind as an inherently
intelligent and feminine heroine who exhibits many appropriately feminine traits, such as
selflessness, but they differ on the degree of assertiveness or agency that is demonstrated by
Rosalind within the context of her relations with Celia and Orlando. All three critics alternately
justify or chide the behavior of these characters in relation to Victorian gender ideologies but are
generally receptive to the potential for female intelligence presented by these dramatic models.

Jameson, Faucit, and Elliott consistently draw parallels to contemporaneous societal
practices and Victorian gender ideology as they analyze Shakespeare’s representations of these
wise and witty women and, in the process, provide commentary on social issues impacting
women in the nineteenth century. The notion of spheres based on gender becomes particularly
relevant in their critical examinations of these female characters, since Portia, Beatrice, and
Rosalind all act in ways that are distinctly unfeminine, according to established gender norms of
the Victorian period. All three characters exhibit masculine traits, either by design, as in the case
of Portia and Rosalind donning male disguise, or via inherent traits that are more closely aligned
with male gender norms—being outspoken, being assertive, possessing a sharp intellect, and
demonstrating the ability to reason. Jameson, Faucit and Elliott suggest that deviation from
Victorian gender norms is acceptable in these characters, to a point and in varying degrees,
because these behaviors are often motivated by a selfless sense of duty, love, and concern for another—all representing more acceptable feminine traits—and because gender norms are reinstated at the end of these plays.

These critics also address a range of topical issues regarding gender; they consider, for instance, what constitutes an appropriate degree of agency and independence in women and whether assertive behavior ever crosses a line, becoming indecorous or inappropriate. Moreover, because Portia, Beatrice, and Rosalind are represented as highly intelligent characters, Jameson, Faucit, and Elliott engage with the issue of women’s intellectual potential and education—a debate that had been taking place throughout the Victorian period. Although women were gaining far greater access to educational opportunities by the time that Faucit and Elliott were writing than they had enjoyed earlier in the period, when Jameson was writing, the nature of female intellectual potential was consistently a point of debate within Victorian society.91 For example, Laura Green, notes the reluctance of nineteenth-century female novelists to cast women in a totally divergent role from established normative behaviors for women: “even as women’s intellectual ambitions assumed importance in such narratives, and in the authors’ own lives, novelists continued to thread those ambitions through the needle’s eye of a plot of courtship and marriage that, if it bent under their weight, nevertheless refused to break” (xi). This situation is similar to the approach that Jameson, Faucit, and Elliott take in their critical analyses of Shakespeare’s characters, essentially legitimizing female intellectualism while affirming the ultimate goal of marriage within the context of the relevant plays. These critics also use their

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91 In a lecture titled *The Communion of Labour: A Second Lecture on the Social Employments of Women*, which was delivered by Jameson in 1856, Jameson argues for a more equitable system of education for boys and girls within the parish system (excerpted in *Shakespeare’s Heroines* 386). J.S. Mill’s treatise, *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) raises many of the same issues and, at the start of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf famously cites the inequity of male and female education in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), demonstrating the consistency of this issue as a point of interest and debate throughout the nineteenth century.
respective analyses of Portia, Beatrice and Rosalind to touch on the importance of environmental factors on development, particularly in relation to the nature of women and their potential to become educated beyond the immediate necessities of domesticity. Similarly, the legal and practical matter of coverture\textsuperscript{92} is introduced in their critical consideration of these Shakespearean heroines, since all three characters marry at the end of their respective plays and at least two of the characters—Portia and Rosalind—bring substantial wealth and property to the “union.” In their respective discussions of these characters, the critics consider the effect of marriage upon Portia, Beatrice, and Rosalind and, in some cases, make parallels to the philosophical state of marital practices in the nineteenth century and to the effects of those practices on Victorian women, particularly in connection with the idea of complementary marriages. Ultimately, Jameson, Faucit and Elliott look at these characters as fictional creations that embody the traits of real women and who are affected by issues that impact women in Victorian England, so that their critical analyses dovetail with social commentary in ways that engage, construct and reshape then contemporary gender ideology.

\textbf{Portia}

Portia is, perhaps, the most uniformly praised of all Shakespeare’s female characters by Jameson, Faucit, and Elliott; these critics do, however, differ somewhat in their perceptions of Portia, and those differences reveal their varying attitudes toward Victorian gender norms. All three critics see Portia as passionate, gentle, and intelligent, but both Jameson and Faucit portray Portia as adhering to common gender norms, while Elliott makes the case that Portia challenges

\textsuperscript{92} Under the practice of coverture, a wife was subsumed by her husband upon marriage, which triggered an automatic transference of wealth and property from the woman to her husband. This legal practice was in place during the Elizabethan and Victorian periods and often had a significant impact on the courtship process and the implications of any marital union for women of wealth or property, as is the case for Portia and Rosalind.
popular Victorian misconceptions about intelligent women. Jameson describes Portia as a woman of intelligence and specifies that such women often lack societal recognition, but she qualifies this statement by also contending that even intellectual women typically have an intelligence that is inferior to male intelligence. Faucit also emphasizes Portia’s femininity but is careful to remove as much agency as possible from Portia’s potentially destabilizing behaviors, namely Portia’s cross-dressing and her impersonation of a law clerk. Much of Faucit’s analysis of Portia is speculative and not based on textual evidence, suggesting the subjective nature of Faucit’s critique, particularly in relation to gender norms and questions of agency. Elliott sees Portia as highly intelligent and takes issue with commonly held, disparaging notions about intelligent women. All three critics point to Portia as an ideal woman, all three discuss Portia’s marriage and her relationship to Bassanio, and all three discuss Portia’s impersonation of a male law clerk and her skill within the courtroom to establish her exemplary nature. The essential differences among these critics are rooted in their respective approaches to Portia as a representative of established gender norms and their individual perceptions of Victorian gender ideology.

At the start of her discussion about Portia, Jameson expresses an adherence to gender norms through her belief in the popularly held view that a woman’s intellect “is inferior in power, and different in kind” when compared to a man’s intellect (75). Jameson does allow for exceptions to this rule, however, since intellect varies among individuals; hence, the most

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93 Intelligent women who were categorized as bluestockings or, later in the century, as New Women, often met with derision from members of both genders for their attempts to function outside of the traditionally feminized sphere of the home. Often, such women were treated as anomalies and were perceived as being unnaturally masculine by many in Victorian society, a situation that does not escape these critics, given their collective attempts to feminize Portia. Even Elliott, who seems to actively embrace Portia’s intelligence more than Jameson or Faucit, makes it clear that Portia is an extremely feminine character in conjunction with—and not in spite of—her exceptional intelligence as a means of challenging negative misconceptions that vilified intelligent women during the Victorian period.
intelligent woman might have an intellect that is superior to the least intelligent man but, on the whole, her belief is that female intellect is inferior to male intellect. When it comes to the nature of the intellect, Jameson sees a woman’s intellect as being magnified by “sympathies and moral qualities” that, in her opinion, men don’t possess in the same degree as women (75). Jameson’s views reflect the commonly held belief of the early Victorian period that women, while less rational than men, were far more emotional and were often seen as morally superior to men.

Although Jameson’s view of the inherent inferiority of the female intellect may seem disparaging to modern readers, she actually celebrates Portia as an exemplary model of female intelligence and sympathetic tendencies, noting that Portia has “the noblest and most loveable qualities that ever met together in woman” (77). To Jameson, then, Portia is a shining example of ideal womanhood.

Jameson also takes issue with the lack of critical attention given to Portia by critics such as William Hazlitt, whom Jameson categorizes as being unfairly negative in his treatment of Portia, and August Wilhelm Schlegel, who, she feels, is somewhat dismissive of Portia. According to Jameson, Schlegel does not see Portia as a significant presence in Shakespeare’s play and deems her to be simply a “rich, beautiful, clever heiress” (qtd on 78). Jameson reacts: “Whether the fault lie in the writer or translator, I do protest against the word clever. Portia clever! What an epithet to apply to this heavenly compound of talent, feeling, wisdom, beauty,

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94 In her chapter on Portia, Jameson alludes to Hazlitt’s criticism of this character: “It is singular, that hitherto no critical justice has been done to the character of Portia; it is yet more wonderful, that one of the finest writers on the eternal subject of Shakespeare and his perfections, should accuse Portia of pedantry and affectation, and confess she is not a great favourite of his—a confession quite worthy of him, who avers his predilection for servant-maids, and his preference of the Fannys and the Pamela’s over the Clementinas and Clarissas” (77-8). Hoeckley, in her editorial notes to the Broadview edition of Jameson’s work, notes that Jameson is here alluding “to Hazlitt’s reading of Samuel Richardson’s novels” and that Jameson is somewhat critical of his “literary acumen for preferring heroines who are more uncomplicatedly submissive” (in Jameson 78).
and gentleness!” (78). In contrast, Jameson conveys her own view that Portia’s intellect, religiosity, honor and “tenderness of heart” render this character “loveable as a woman,” as well as “admirable for her mental endowments” (84). Jameson’s comments reveal her desire to characterize Portia as an ideal portrait of womanhood, one that is in keeping with the traditional, socially imposed gender norms of femininity, but hers is a portrait that also allows for women to be considered as actively intelligent rather than merely possessing some sort of incidental cleverness of the sort that male critics such as Hazlitt and Schlegel had previously attributed to Portia.

Jameson’s general belief in and adherence to distinct gender traits and spheres of behavior also informs her understanding of the nature of Portia’s relationship with Bassanio, as well as their likelihood of achieving a complementary union through marriage. Jameson observes that it is through Portia’s passionate feelings of love for Bassanio that her essential femininity is the most apparent, and she argues that Portia’s intellect simply gives her passion greater sincerity and power: “The sources of thought multiply beyond calculation the sources of feeling; and mingled, they rush together, a torrent deep as strong. Because Portia is endued with that enlarged comprehension which looks before and after, she does not feel the less, but the more: because from the height of her commanding intellect she can contemplate the force, the tendency, the consequences of her own sentiments” (88). These arguments suggest that Jameson felt the need to first acknowledge and then mitigate Portia’s obvious intellect by more closely aligning that intellect with the power of feeling—a more appropriate trait for women. Moreover, Jameson notes that, in marriage, Portia is admirable for exercising self-denial and transferring her wealth

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95 Jameson includes a footnote in her second edition about Schlegel’s comments, acknowledging that the problem was likely with the translation: “I am informed that the original German word is geistreiche; literally, rich in soul or spirit, a just and beautiful epithet” (78). Jameson’s initial reaction is indicative of her consistently stated perception that male critics, on the whole, tended to be dismissive of Shakespeare’s female characters, treating them as secondary characters or as ornamental additions to the plot, not merit ing close analysis in their own right.
and power to Bassanio: “Her subsequent surrender of herself in heart and soul, of her maiden freedom, and her vast possessions, can never be read without deep emotions” (88). Jameson is alluding to Portia’s reaction when Bassanio chooses the correct casket, becomes engaged to Portia, and then receives word that his friend, Antonio, is being held because of the debt that Bassanio had incurred. It is in this scene that Portia then urges Bassanio to hurry their union so that he might have access to her money:

First go with me to church and call me wife,  
And then away to Venice to your friend;  
For never shall you lie by Portia’s side  
With an unquiet soul. You shall have gold  
To pay the petty debt twenty times over. (Merchant of Venice III.ii.303-7)

Although such a transfer of wealth would likely take place upon marriage, according to the practice of coverture,96 Portia’s desire to speed this process along suggests to Jameson that Portia has an appropriate sense of propriety that reflects the cultural norms of the time, norms that Jameson also seems to observe—certainly, coverture continued as an active legal term and practice during the early and middle part of the nineteenth century, when Jameson was writing. Jameson’s defense of Portia as an appropriate wife who adheres to cultural norms within marriage further strengthens her implicit position that Portia does not represent a threat to established social and cultural gender norms but is, in fact, exhibiting and reaffirming these socially normative behaviors.

96 Amy Louise Erickson cites the complicated and often conflicting legal system of the early modern period as a site of discrepancy in terms of legal property rights for female heirs upon marriage, as would be the case for Portia. Erickson notes that “the laws governing property in marriage and inheritance . . . [within] different legal jurisdictions were at odds with each other on several points” (28). Eventually, during “the two centuries after 1660,” common law took precedence over ecclesiastical and manorial law, which “was done ostensibly in the name of ‘rationalizing’ the legal system and clarifying rights of private property, but in practice it consolidated the narrow common law view of marriage and inheritance, and established absolute rights to private ownership of property for men only” (29). While it was not a certainty, the likelihood was that the bulk of an estate inherited by a woman would be transferred to her husband upon their marriage under the auspices of common law.
Jameson concludes her assessment of Portia by expressing her view that “many women” have had such qualities as those manifested through the character of Portia but could not live to their full potential in the Victorian era without negative consequences, due to societal constraints:

A woman constituted like Portia, and placed in this age, and in the actual state of society, would find society arm’d against her; and instead of being like Portia, a gracious, happy, beloved, and loving creature, would be a victim, immolated in fire . . . With her, the world without would be at war with the world within; in the perpetual strife, either her nature would ‘be subdued to the element it worked in,’ and bending to a necessity it could neither escape nor approve, lose at last something of its original brightness; or otherwise—a perpetual spirit of resistance, cherished as a safeguard, might perhaps in the end destroy the equipoise; firmness would become pride and self-assurance, and the soft, sweet, feminine texture of the mind, settle into rigidity. Is there then no sanctuary for such a mind?—Where shall it find a refuge from the world?—Where seek for strength against itself? Where, but in heaven? (Jameson 92)

In this instance, Jameson’s explicit commentary on nineteenth-century social factors, via her analysis of Portia, indicates her own displeasure with established gender ideology and cultural norms. Jameson’s comments convey her frustration over the limitations placed on intelligent women by her own contemporaneous society and suggest the complexity of her own ideological struggles—even as she acknowledges the limits of society and implies that any negative traits in a woman such as Portia would likely have arisen from social limitations, she is essentially reaffirming the traditional gender norms that held pride, self-assurance and rigidity to be particularly repugnant in women, who should maintain an air of sweetness and brightness.

Although Jameson clearly adheres to many of the socially constructed precepts of femininity, she is also being distinctly critical of what she sees as the inequitable societal factors that Victorian gender ideology and practice imposed on women.

Given the popularity of Jameson’s book, the potential for her views to have influenced popular ideology is significant. In Uneven Developments, Mary Poovey identifies the fluidity of
gender ideology in the mid-nineteenth century and discusses “the unevenness within the
construction and deployment of mid-Victorian representations of gender, and representations of
women in particular. This unevenness not only characterizes the conservative ideological work
of these representations, but it also allowed for the emergence in the 1850s of a genuinely—
although incompletely articulated—oppositional voice” (4). Jameson’s assessment of Portia
would seem to constitute just such a moment and presages the ideological conflict that is often
reflected in subsequent criticism by such later Victorian female critics as Faucit and Elliott. In
this manner, then, Jameson uses the platform of Shakespearean criticism to convey her own ideas
about gender and society and, thus, to enter actively into the nineteenth-century public discourse
surrounding gender.

Faucit’s analysis of Portia also engages with popularly held nineteenth-century
conceptions of gender by affirming Portia’s femininity, even as she identifies in Portia more
traditionally male characteristics. Faucit is clearly aware that the very nature of Portia’s activities
within the play—cross-dressing, impersonating a legal clerk, and solving the legal puzzle that
men were unable to solve—is not in keeping with Victorian ideologies that commonly relegated
women to duties in the domestic sphere. This contradiction of ideology is not unique to Portia
and has been discussed, in more general terms, by Elizabeth Langland, who observes that the
popular “representation of middle-class Victorian womanhood was . . . driven by contradiction
from its inception. . . . The image of the passive domestic angel, which complemented that of the
active, public man, was contradicted by the bourgeois wife’s pivotal supervisory role within the
class system” (62). Portia is, of course, in charge of the house at Belmont and occupies just such
a role within the context of the play, gaining experience which gives her the assertiveness,
competence and easy agency to perpetrate her convincing impersonation of a male law clerk.
This is precisely the contradiction with which Faucit struggles in her discussion and analysis of Portia.

Faucit’s chapter on Portia began as a letter written to her friend, Miss Geraldine Jewsbury, who was a well regarded novelist and critic in her own right. While praising Portia’s intelligence, Faucit is careful to first praise her femininity by agreeing with her friend’s assessment of Portia as a “real, typical, great lady and woman” (qtd on 25). Faucit then proceeds to cast Portia in a more androgynous light by calling her “a perfect piece of Nature’s handiwork” and observing that “[h]er character combines all the graces of the richest womanhood with the strength of purpose, the wise helpfulness, and sustained power of the noblest manhood” (26).

Faucit’s description of Portia explicitly combines the spheres of gender, underscoring Faucit’s simultaneous adherence to and defiance of traditional gender norms, particularly in consideration of her agreement with the previously stated view that Portia is representative of “real, typical” women (25). Thus, in Faucit’s eyes, Portia’s character also represents actual women whose traits are not exclusively either masculine or feminine.

Faucit sees Portia’s androgyny within the context of her marriage to Bassanio as well and notes that the case against Shylock provides the opportunity “to show that the union of Portia with Bassanio is indeed a ‘marriage of true minds’” (30). Faucit also makes it clear that she doesn’t see Portia’s transference of her wealth to Bassanio as simply a normal matter of course, but as a means for Portia to prove her devotion: “she must give him the right to use her means as his own; he must indeed be lord of all” (31). While there is the practical and legal matter of coverture, dictating the transference of wealth and possessions to the man upon marriage, Faucit also seems to suggest that this is Portia’s way of conforming to societal expectations. Faucit’s

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97 The legal practice of coverture essentially ended with the passage of the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 and Faucit’s book was published in 1885, which suggests that this is an issue with which she would have been
language—contending as she does that Portia desires that Bassanio “be lord of all”—suggests that she sees in Portia’s actions the simultaneous desire to assert herself and to submit to social norms; Faucit points out that it is Portia who insists that she and Bassanio marry without delay ( Merchant of Venice III.ii) and is thus asserting her wishes, even as she is also willingly acceding to the legal practice of coverture. In essence, Portia is making demands but the demands are acceptable because they ultimately conform to cultural gender norms. Faucit’s analysis suggests both a desire to show that Portia is an equal to Bassanio and with a hesitation to represent Portia as a threatening or destabilizing presence. In Faucit’s view, Portia has the potential to destabilize cultural norms, but she actively chooses not to do so.

It is this very sense of agency in Portia that Faucit then seemingly attempts to mitigate in her discussion of Portia’s use of a male disguise and her subsequent court appearance, by attributing to Bellario the decision for Portia to impersonate a male law clerk. Faucit acknowledges that there is no explicit textual evidence that Bellario suggests the impersonation, then proffers this interpretation despite her previous assertion that she would “try to form a clear and definite conception of Portia’s character, and her influence upon the main incidents of the play, by a conscientious study of her in the leaves of the great master’s ‘unvalued book’” (25). Despite the lack of textual evidence to support this point, Faucit expresses her belief that Portia met with Bellario and found him sick, which she imagines would have prompted his suggestion that Portia take his place in court (32). Moreover, she claims that the defense presented by Portia in court was likely a combination of the “peculiar training” she would have received from familiar and which was likely being publicly debated while she was in the process of composing the various analyses in her book. For much of Faucit’s own life, coverture would have been the normal course of marriage for a woman and it is certainly likely that, as an intellectual and professional woman, she would have been aware of the public debates concerning a woman’s right to own property and act autonomously within marriage but, in this instance, she appears to be attributing feminine agency to Portia’s desire to share her wealth, as opposed to simply an adherence to the legal practices of the day.
Bellario combined with “a happy instinct . . . upon the flaw in the bond” (31). Faucit further imagines how Portia would have felt facing the challenge of representing herself as a law clerk in the court: “With what trepidation, with what anxious sense of responsibility, must she find herself engaged in such a task” (32). Faucit’s reaction to Portia’s situation reflects her own understanding of societal gender norms and the limitations that were placed on women to adhere to strict codes of behavior, presumably resulting in enormous discomfort for a woman bold enough to defy such normative behaviors. Faucit also speculates that Portia would inevitably have faced some difficulty because she also had to “cease to be a woman” for her court appearance (33). In this case, Faucit’s earlier assessment that Portia possesses the best male qualities in combination with the best feminine attributes seems to have been forgotten. Instead, Faucit first removes the agency for concocting this plan from Portia and then speculates that she must have felt an extraordinary sense of trepidation and anxiety over her court appearance.98 Since Faucit cites no textual evidence in the play, it would seem that Faucit is projecting her own belief that a woman attempting to function in a man’s world, despite any inherent skills that she possessed, would undoubtedly feel disadvantaged because she would be operating outside of her ‘natural’ sphere, or, at any rate, outside of the sphere assigned to her by society.

It is also somewhat curious that Faucit never cites or discusses how Portia came to be in male disguise. In Merchant of Venice, it is Portia’s idea to go forth with Nerissa dressed as men: “When we are both accoutered like young men / I’ll prove the prettier fellow of the two, / And wear my dagger with the braver grace” (III.iv.63-5). Faucit completely ignores Portia’s agency in

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98 Faucit would likely have had a greater awareness of the implications of performance than most Victorians given that she was a leading stage actress. Faucit, however, seems to be acutely aware of the distinction between performing a part on stage and performing gender within a social context since the idea of Portia performing the role of a man raises a great deal of anxiety in Faucit’s mind. This calls to mind Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, as discussed in Gender Trouble, and the potentially destabilizing effects that a failure or refusal to perform one’s socially constructed and assigned gender role might have on society, which appears to be the root of Faucit’s discomfort.
this scene and instead attributes hesitation and anxiety to Portia’s performance as a male in the subsequent courtroom scene. Given Faucit’s selective use of textual support and the frequent imposition of her own subjective views, it seems likely that Faucit either feels it necessary to diminish Portia’s agency and to mitigate perceptions of Portia as a domineering female in order to present Portia as a sympathetic character to her late Victorian audience or that Faucit herself feels this ambivalence about a woman’s inherent attributes existing in opposition to her assigned role within society.

To further establish Portia’s adherence to accepted gender norms, Faucit attributes the spirit of goodness and mercy to her motivation: “In Portia we see embodied the spirit of good, which it is her first, her paramount desire, should prevail over the spirit of evil” (35). Faucit points to the famous mercy speech to establish Portia’s truly feminine nature: “The quality of mercy is not strained. / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes” (Merchant of Venice IV.i.182-5). In her analysis of this speech, Faucit not only draws attention to what she sees as Portia’s genuinely good nature but attributes to Portia the desire to teach Shylock “mercy and forgiveness” and speculates that “[s]he would gladly have given largely of her fortune to turn Shylock from his cruel purpose—to give him an insight into the happiness, the blessedness, of showing mercy and forgiveness” (Faucit 35). Once again, Faucit aligns Portia with the more typically feminine traits of gentle goodness and pious mercy in the courtroom scene to firmly establish that, despite delivering this speech in the guise of a man, Portia is expressly driven by her femininity, thus tempering Portia’s potentially contentious behavior with an implicit desire to adhere to established gender normative behaviors.
Faucit continues her commentary on Portia by speculating on how events might have unfolded after Shakespeare’s conclusion of the play. It is in this speculation that Faucit most definitively reveals her own Victorian perceptions of gender—a factor which she openly recognizes—and depicts Portia as an extremely feminized woman. Faucit supposes that Portia’s “woman’s heart” would direct her to ensure that Shylock’s conversion was genuine (39). Faucit further imagines that Portia would dedicate her time and effort to teaching and guiding Shylock in the ways of Christianity and would commit to a “life of self-denial” to do so (41). Moreover, Faucit claims that in her imagined ending, Portia would also exert a positive influence on Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, who, “under the roof of Portia, and within the sphere of her noble influence, could not fail to grow better and purer” (41). In Faucit’s assessment of the imagined relationship between Portia and Jessica, she firmly grounds Portia’s “sphere” of influence in the home, imagines Portia’s self-denial in her future dealings with Shylock, and speculates on her ability to influence Jessica by virtue of her own goodness and purity, all of which are traits closely identified with established Victorian conceptions of womanhood.

Faucit acknowledges that her own readers and critics have commented that her “imaginings” reflect a Victorian rather than an Elizabethan attitude (43). The critic admits that this may be true but defends her view of Portia, nonetheless, based on her assessment that Portia would feel compelled to help Shylock: “Could her happiness be unalloyed while another suffered shame and misery, no matter whether deserved or not, because of her? I still ‘dream’ that it could not, and believe that, quietly and privately, as her high station permitted, she might have done what no other dared, or perhaps cared to do” (44). Faucit here attributes to Portia the feminine traits of selflessness and service. Much as Victorian women were expected to excel in charitable works and deeds, Faucit supposes that Portia would exhibit these traits and thus align herself
with the feminine gender norms of Victorian England. It is clear from her commentary that Faucit sees Portia as the most significant character in the play, but, more importantly, Faucit treats Portia as a living, breathing example of Victorian femininity—pious, selfless, noble, and good—even as she mitigates Portia’s more threatening or destabilizing behaviors and traits. Perhaps Faucit is also implicitly drawing parallels between herself and Portia. Faucit’s position as a professional actress—a profession which would have been seen by many Victorians as disreputable—could inform her commentary about Portia, underscoring her desire to stress the admirable qualities of a woman who may appear to be somewhat nonconformist in her behaviors. In this way, Faucit’s understanding of Portia’s activities within the context of the play—both actual, as in donning male dress, and speculative, as in tutoring Shylock—reveals her own conflicting attitudes toward nineteenth-century gender ideology and conceptions of womanhood.

Elliott, like Jameson and Faucit, also celebrates Portia’s femininity, but she does so in order to challenge rather than to affirm Victorian conceptions of female intelligence and womanhood. Elliott notes Portia’s “surpassing beauty of character” (103) and comments on Portia’s unique situation as the single mistress of Belmont, observing that “amidst all this brightness and luxury, there is no one to whom she owes obedience” (104). While such independence might seem contrary to social and cultural norms for most women in Elizabethan and Victorian England, Portia’s situation is hardly ideal and has left her unhappy. Elliott cites Portia’s first lines in the play as evidence of her ennui: “By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world” (Merchant of Venice I.ii.1-2). Elliott contends that Portia’s lackluster attitude is because her life and circumstances “had produced nothing worthy of her womanly devotion” up until this point (Elliott 105). Portia’s state is tied to the unusual circumstances
surrounding her courtship—namely, the casket trial, which denotes a lack of agency in her ability to choose a husband—a point which is clearly linked to her state of mind in the play, as expressed by Portia’s own assessment: “I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?” (*Merchant of Venice* I.i.22-6). Elliott comments on the powerlessness that this situation forces upon Portia: “there hung the uncertainty lest her hand, in obedience to her oath of duty to her father, should be given where her heart could not accompany it” (105). In *Nobody’s Angels*, Elizabeth Langland notes that Victorian domestic ideology is an unstable amalgam of at least two other major ideologies: a patriarchal ideology regulating interactions between men and women and a bourgeois ideology justifying the class system and supporting the social status quo. Frequently interpreted only as victims of patriarchal oppression, bourgeois women were both oppressed as women and oppressors as middle-class managers. And they helped facilitate change not as agents fighting against oppression to generate new opportunities, but as subjects positioned unevenly within those power operations. (18)

Elliott sees Portia through the lens of Victorian England’s domestic ideology as just such a figure—a female subject who occupies a position that essentially mitigates the power roles representative of patriarchy by virtue of her more empowered role within the domestic sphere as a result of her class and the authority that she represents within the household. Portia enjoys power and authority within the home even as her personal power over the choice of a husband is negated by her deceased father’s will. Elliott’s focus on this aspect of the play is understandable

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99 Nancy Armstrong cites J. S. Mill’s belief that “the choice of the man who is to govern a woman to the end of her life, is always supposed to be voluntarily made by herself” (qtd in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* 39); Armstrong observes that Mill “believes, in other words, that the sexual contract regulates social relationships so firmly that political change—the enfranchisement of women—cannot in fact change the political order” (39). Thus, by the Victorian period it was generally accepted that most women should enjoy the right of acceptance or rejection when considering potential husbands without fear of destabilizing the norms of patriarchy, while for Elizabethan women of wealth it would have been more common to leave such decisions to the girl’s parents, although a woman might have had significant input into this selection process. The notion that Portia does not even enjoy the luxury of selecting her own husband is thus more closely aligned with Victorian concepts about marriage that Elliott clearly applies to Portia’s situation and one to which she wholly attributes Portia’s general malaise.
given that the choice of a husband, or at least the ability for a woman to reject the choice that her family had proffered, would have been one of the few areas in which a nineteenth-century woman would have had a certain degree of autonomy, while still remaining within socially imposed gender norms. Elliott further observes that Portia would “not unnaturally [have] chafed” at her powerlessness in choosing a husband (108), particularly in a social and cultural setting in which men held significant authority over their wives via the practice of coverture. Despite Elliott’s apparent belief that women should have the ability to choose their husbands, she doesn’t attempt to claim that women always choose wisely. In fact, Elliott observes that the opposite was true for Portia, who ultimately was married to her choice of a suitor, Bassanio, although Elliott does not see Bassanio as the best choice for Portia.

When discussing the pairing of Bassanio and Portia, Elliott makes it very clear that she sees Portia as the superior partner in this union and uses this instance in the play to draw explicit comparisons to Victorian women. Elliott notes the common tendency of women to build up their image of a man and even to ignore a man’s negative traits until these women “worship the image that they in their fondness have set up” (112). Elliott continues by relating personal experiences of women she knew who would become enamored of bad but personable men, particularly an acquaintance of hers who was a bluestocking and a “man-hater” who fell in love with a “suave” man who was a ne’er-do-well (113). In Elliott’s opinion, this is also the case for Portia, to some extent. Elliott observes that “Portia may be a perfect woman” but that no earthly woman is without flaws of some sort and that Portia’s weakness may be that she lacks “much of her natural discrimination in the judgment of men’s characters,” particularly regarding their mercenary
motives (113). Portia’s chief weakness, then, in Elliott’s view, is her love for Bassanio, a man whom Elliott estimates to be Portia’s inferior.

Elliott continues her negative assessment of Bassanio and expresses her belief that these characters offer parallels to Victorian cultural and gender norms: “To my mind Bassanio is a type of very many of our day; men to be met with everywhere in good society who attract to themselves the regard of pure women and good men without possessing any positive recommendations and no great principles of action. Bassanio was young, good-looking, and had been rich. His riches he had squandered” (114). Elliott continues by noting that, after imposing on the kindness of his friends, Bassanio turns to Portia as a source of both love and wealth. Despite her view of Bassanio as an unsavory, mercenary suitor and a spendthrift friend, Elliott expresses the belief that, in time, he would likely grow to genuinely love a woman like Portia (116). Elliott’s assessment of Bassanio and of Portia provides a means for her to critique common Victorian marital practices and negative gender norms. Many nineteenth-century authors, from Jane Austen and Mary Robinson to Charlotte Brontë, depict the cultural phenomenon of men marrying women to obtain their money, a situation made all the more common by coverture laws that transferred ownership of a woman’s property to her husband.

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100 In The Subjection of Women, J.S. Mill discusses the matter of regulating wealth when brokering a marriage that will transfer a woman’s wealth to a husband and how this would have been handled in the nineteenth century: “since, parental feeling being stronger with fathers than the class feeling of their own sex, a father generally prefers his own daughter to a son-in-law who is a stranger to him. By means of settlements the rich usually contrive to withdraw the whole or part of the inherited property of the wife from the absolute control of the husband; but they do not succeed in keeping it under her control; the utmost they can do only prevents the husband from squandering it, at the same time debarring the rightful owner from its use” (36). Mill’s assessment of Victorian marital practices involving wealthy women is quite relevant to Elliott’s discussion of Portia and the casket trial since this is essentially the dilemma that Portia’s father had tried to avoid with the challenge decreed in his will. Mill is writing in 1861, well before the first Married Women’s Property Act was passed in 1870, which merely underscores the significance of this issue in the minds of many Victorians and demonstrates the likelihood that such situations and practices would have been quite familiar and significant to women during Elliott’s lifetime. Although Elliott sees Portia’s deference to Bassanio as a flaw, she is also implicitly criticizing Portia’s deceased father and his failed attempts to properly protect his daughter from an unsuitable suitor via the casket trial.
upon marriage.\textsuperscript{101} Yet, Elliott remains idealistic in her belief that Portia’s inherent goodness and femininity will rehabilitate Bassanio, which reflects the traditional Victorian gender ideology that promoted the saving graces of genuine womanly love. In this instance, then, Elliott appears to be informing her analysis of Portia in regard to marriage with actual examples of feminine behavior as well as commonly held gender norms—both to criticize Portia’s judgment and to applaud her inherent feminine influence.

In a further attempt to use her analysis of Portia to contest the gender ideology of the period, Elliott discusses the nature of the relationship between Portia and Bassanio after he has chosen the correct casket (\textit{Merchant of Venice} III.ii). Traditional gender norms would dictate Portia’s subordination within the marriage, the commonly held belief that men generally had greater intellectual capabilities, and the belief that men were in many ways superior to women, thereby justifying the established male role as head of household. Elliott, however, does not believe that Portia and Bassanio fit this paradigm. Elliott argues that Portia is “[i]mmeasurably superior” to Bassanio but “would scorn the very idea of his inferiority” (118). Portia is in love with Bassanio and this makes her idealistic, but this also suggests that Portia’s immersion into accepted gender roles is so thorough that she would not dream of placing herself above her betrothed. According to Elliott, this is why Portia addresses Bassanio in such a submissive manner, once he has chosen correctly:

\begin{center}
\textit{. . . the full sum of me
Is sum of something, which, to term in gross,
Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticed;}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{101} Amy Louise Erickson considers the nature of marriage settlements in Elizabethan England in \textit{Women and Property in Early Modern England}: “Conveyancing manuals throughout the early modern period demonstrate that the primary purpose of a marriage settlement was to preserve the wife’s property rights. The sample forms of settlement presented incorporated any one or more of the following features: setting the amount of the wife’s jointure; allowing her to make a will under coverture; obliging her husband to leave her worth so much money at his death; or binding him to pay portions to her children by a precious husband” (104). While settlements were not uncommon during the period, no such mention is made of a settlement in \textit{The Merchant of Venice}. 
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed
As from her lord, her governor, her king. (*Merchant of Venice* III.ii.157-65)

In Elliott’s view, however, Portia’s desire to conform to societal expectations is not enough to combat the inherent independence and superiority of Portia’s character: “But whilst Portia is sincere and thorough in her subjection to the man her heart has chosen as its lord, she assumes the place of partner and not that of servant” (120). In this instance, Elliott is both affirming Portia’s essential femininity and propriety even as she uses her interpretation of Shakespeare’s character to challenge accepted Victorian cultural norms that place limits on individuals based on gender, particularly within marriage. The inherent conflict that this situation imposes on Portia implicitly suggests the same sort of conflicts that Victorian women navigated on a daily basis in a society that regulated so many aspects of behavior through cultural practice and the social expression of gender ideologies. Elliott clearly sees Portia occupying a role as partner rather than subordinate to Bassanio, regardless of how societal convention might have viewed their relative status within marriage.102

According to Elliott, Portia’s inherent intellect is also the reason why she succeeds in her courtroom ruse. Elliott, unlike Faucit, sees the motivation for Portia’s male disguise as “fun and innocent mirth” rather than as a real or concerted effort to destabilize established gender norms

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102 A similar situation is depicted in George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch*, within the context of Dorothea’s marriage to Will Ladislaw. Dorothea chooses to forego her inheritance from Casaubon, under the terms of her deceased former husband’s will, in order to pursue her genuine love for Ladislaw. In another parallel, her public ambition toward social reform ceases as she occupies the role of wife and mother; however, one is left with the distinct impression that Dorothea and Will share a more equitable partnership in private than the socially constructed paradigm of marriage might recognize. While not commonly promoted as an ideal, philosophical or theoretical equity within marriage was certainly seen as possible, at least within the private sphere, by some in Victorian society.
Elliott emphasizes Portia’s essential femininity, particularly her selflessness and generosity, within the courtroom disguise, noting that “No man would have lent himself so readily to such a proceeding for another man’s sake” (124). Elliott admittedly sees Portia’s courtroom performance as “womanlike” in that she holds back her winning point to the end, thereby exhibiting the feminine trait of patience (125). Elliott notes that Portia gives Shylock a chance to show mercy but ultimately “throws the halter round his neck” when “the blackness of his purpose [is] fully manifested” (126). So Portia gives Shylock the opportunity to reform to remove any doubt that he truly deserves a harsh punishment, thus justifying her subsequent condemnation of him. In Elliott’s estimation, it is “[i]n this we think we see the woman. A man would have made shorter work of it, and quashed the case at once; but not so Portia” (126). Thus, while Portia’s intellect is responsible for her victory, her demeanor, approach, and attitude are steeped in her femininity. In this instance, Elliott acknowledges the ways in which Portia defies certain accepted gender norms but simultaneously makes it very clear that her femininity is the driving force for her actions.

Her analysis suggests that Elliott sees Portia as an idealized feminine woman who also possesses what have traditionally been seen as male characteristics—namely, a high intellect, effective rational powers, an inherent independence, and the ability to function in the male world of business and law with great success. It is Portia who is ultimately able to protect her own

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103 While Faucit had seen Portia’s performance of gender as a point of angst, Elliott seems to see this as an outward expression of Portia’s playfulness but one that is notably initiated by a desire to help Bassanio and Antonio. Faucit had found the need for Portia to present herself in the guise of a man as problematic but Elliott mitigates this problem by attributing Portia’s actions to feminine playfulness and a sincere motivation to help her future husband.

104 Naomi Conn Liebler discusses the nature of disruption and reinstatement of order in Shakespeare’s tragedies in her work, *Festive Tragedy*; the same general paradigm holds true in Shakespeare’s comedies as well: “In so far as a play is arranged around ideological questions . . . we must bear in mind that the protagonist has been designed specifically to demonstrate particular qualities that a certain interest defines as representing the ideal, the best and the brightest embodiments of its society’s values” (14). What Elliott seems to be doing, via her analysis of Portia, is inscribing the character and the play with prominent Victorian gender ideologies, whether as a point of affirmation or of protest, to reflect the ‘embodiments of . . . society’s values.’
wealth in the courtroom scene, something that her deceased father’s edict nearly failed to do, and to redeem the debt that Antonio owes to Shylock when men have failed at these ventures already. Elliott sees such a view as potentially damaging, however, given the public perception of intelligent women during the late nineteenth century as unnaturally hard and masculine and, as a result, unsympathetic. Elliott claims that such a conflict over gender norms is elemental within Victorian society: “We have been taught to regard Portia as Shakespeare’s type of a strong-minded woman, and very rightly so; but how different his idea is from the popular one current at the present day” (117). Elliott is here acknowledging the common nineteenth-century education of girls and women through the study of Shakespeare’s plays. As Gail Marshall notes, “The relationship between the growth of Shakespeare’s significance and of women’s literacy is deeply embedded in Victorian culture” (13). Shakespeare’s female characters were often held up as models for young girls, but these characters did not always mesh with the ideals of femininity. Marshall contends that the nature of the exposure to Shakespeare’s plays that women experienced often determined the extent to which such characters were seen as role models (Marshall 13). 105 Elliott also explicitly recognizes the inherent contradictions between Shakespeare’s conception of womanhood and practical Victorian attitudes toward gender. She elaborates on the negative perception that most Victorians had of strong women as “hard-featured, loud talking, [and] forbidding-looking beings in semi-masculine or dowdy attire” (117). To Elliott’s mind, this popular misconception of strong women is directly at odds with the

105 Marshall relates one such occurrence relating to an essay contest run by the Girls’ Own Paper in 1887. Marshall notes that the editors admonished a handful of essayists because the female authors had “wandered from the subject in a curious manner, and made their essays a vehicle for expressing their ideas on some social problem. The vexed question of ‘women’s rights’ was answerable for four of these failures” (qtd on 41). While some girls saw Portia as a potential advocate for women’s rights, other girls thought that Portia, being eminently feminine, would object to “our clever girls becoming second-rate men, instead of first-rate women” (qtd on 41). Elliott seems to capture the essential elements of this debate in her analysis of Portia, asserting Portia’s femininity, her independent tendencies, and her inherent superiority.
gentle, kind and intrinsically feminine nature of Portia and reveals the misconceptions of socially imposed gender ideologies held by many during the late nineteenth century. One need look no further than George Gissing’s late nineteenth-century novel, *The Odd Women*, for an example of conflicting attitudes toward the New Woman persona and the contentious environment that often sprang up around such women. In Gissing’s novel, for instance, we see the conflict created within the character of Rhoda as well as the derision she attracts from many in society; Rhoda alternately wants independence and a satisfying romance but finds that these two elements seem to be incompatible within the context of her life and the social norms of Victorian England. Elliott seems to be contesting such misconceptions to insist that intelligent women can attain a balance between their inherent femininity and intellectualism.

In support of her view that Portia can remain feminine despite her intellect, Elliott cites someone whom she only acknowledges as “an American writer,” who writes that, “in Portia, Shakespeare anticipated the intellect of women who wield gracefully the tools of men, not sacrificing a trait of their essential womanliness. To most the idea of an intellectual woman is associated with the absence of everything that is tender, or, at anyrate [sic], romantic. But it is not so with Portia” (qtd on 128). Through this citation, Elliott underscores the social debate over the gender norms that she is challenging, by means of her analysis of Portia. Elliott contends that “Portia has been called the most wonderful of all Shakespeare’s feminine creations, for in her he has made clear that the possession of the highest intellectual endowments is compatible in a woman with the age and susceptibilities for tender and romantic love” (117). Elliott takes some pains to convince her audience that Portia’s “head and heart work harmoniously together” to reveal “the pure light of a true woman’s character” (128). Elliott consistently characterizes Portia as a feminine woman who is also self-possessed, intelligent and quite capable of ruling herself.
The extent to which Elliott feels she must defend Portia as an example of an intelligent but still feminine woman is a clear indication of her conscious attempt to deconstruct and reshape what she views as popular Victorian misconceptions of womanhood.

**Beatrice**

Beatrice, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, is a light-hearted, happy and intelligent female character; she is portrayed as a woman who enjoys witty banter and who doesn’t shy away from engaging in such banter with the men in her life, particularly with Benedick. Jameson, Faucit and Elliott generally agree in their assessment of Beatrice as a heroine, namely that Beatrice’s general mirth and lack of intellectual depth is likely due to a lack of suffering in Beatrice’s life, leaving her no need to become introspective or philosophical. According to these critics, Beatrice’s brand of wit is a form of sport or an example of entertainment rather than an overtly shrewish attempt to dominate those around her in any real practical way, which would tend to be perceived as an unpalatable trait in a woman. Moreover, despite her protestations against marriage, Beatrice soon falls in love and gives herself over to the passion that she feels—an appropriately feminine reaction—and engages in self-reproach for her previously irreverent behavior, which gains the approval of all three critics. Through their consideration of Shakespeare’s Beatrice, Jameson, Faucit and Elliott reveal their generally convergent attitudes toward gender norms—specifically, toward intelligence in women, the potential for shrewishness, the need for women to be open to deserved criticism and to exhibit a willingness to change, the importance of loyalty and solidarity amongst women, the redemptive quality of love, and the role that women should play in marriage; for all these similarities, however, these critics do disagree somewhat on the degree to which Beatrice’s behavior is sympathetic or
excusable. While Beatrice never truly adheres to socially imposed dictates insisting that women should be gentle, patient, demure, and passive, particularly when dealing with men, she does make an attempt to mitigate some of the more aggressive elements of her behavior once she falls in love with Benedick. All three critics initially admonish Beatrice’s use of wit to dominate Benedick, but these critics ultimately see Beatrice’s willingness to marry Benedick as the means by which she establishes her inherent femininity and, thereby, gains their tolerant approval.

Jameson, writing during the early to mid nineteenth century, notes many of the same positive traits in Beatrice that Faucit and Elliott also consider—Beatrice’s combination of intelligence and spirit, her passion and loyalty toward her cousin, and her essentially good nature. Unlike Faucit and Elliott, however, Jameson views much of Beatrice’s behavior as indefensible, particularly Beatrice’s dominance of Benedick and her initial attitudes against marriage, which Jameson perceives as unbecoming in a woman; the criticism against Beatrice’s behavior that is leveled by Faucit and Elliott is much milder than Jameson’s and the two later Victorian critics are more inclined to excuse Beatrice’s eccentricities in behavior, perhaps reflecting a greater degree of tolerance toward witty, verbal tendencies in women during the late nineteenth century than had previously been demonstrated. The major difference between Faucit and Elliott is that the former sees Beatrice as noble, genteel and ladylike, whereas the latter sees Beatrice as willful and possessing merely a superficial wit. Because Elliott sees Beatrice as essentially good natured, however, she finds her character tolerable. It would be fair to say that Jameson is offended by Beatrice’s initial attitudes toward marriage, while Faucit is delighted by Beatrice’s character, and Elliott is somewhat disdainful of Beatrice’s frivolity, particularly if she
is to be held up as a model for Victorian women or girls to emulate. (Elliott’s concern is indicative of the popularity of educating young girls with Shakespeare’s plays.\footnote{Gail Marshall provides extensive evidence that Shakespeare’s plays were an inherent element in the education of girls and women during the late nineteenth century but to varying degrees and with often unpredictable results. Marshall cites Kathleen Knox, the author of an 1885 article titled “On the Study of Shakespeare for Girls,” who expresses concern similar to Elliott’s over the advent of the New Woman and the potential to use Shakespeare’s female characters as models in a letter that was written to a younger female acquaintance of hers: “in this age of feminine eagerness and prominence, when everything in life, literature and science is being attempted by women, and often—as must infallibly be the case at the beginning of every great movement—with woeful [sic] lack of judgment, it will be well to have such a standard of sanity, moderation, and harmony as is presented to us by Shakespeare’s world, where the men, even, fail when they are immoderate, violent or unbalanced in character or aim” (qtd on 2). Although Knox proceeds to refer specifically to the tragedies as an appropriate caution for young women, Elliott’s concern is not far distant from Knox’s. Elliott wants young girls to emulate the best traits in Beatrice but not to appropriate the negative aspects of her character. Both authors urge a discerning, critical eye when extrapolating behavior to model from Shakespeare’s female characters.})

Jameson begins her critique of Beatrice by noting that, “[i]n Beatrice, high intellect and high animal spirits meet,” while also observing that Beatrice’s wit contains “a touch of insolence, not unfrequent [sic] in women when the wit predominates over reflection and imagination” (110-111). Jameson’s observations suggest that she finds Beatrice analogous to a type of woman with whom she is familiar and also reflect Jameson’s perceptions of gender ideology. Jameson concludes that Beatrice’s nature is lacking because of her incompatibility with established gender norms that promote the more passive traits of “reflection and imagination” in women. Jameson’s ambivalence toward Beatrice is also apparent when she then defends Beatrice: “though wilful, [she] is not wayward; she is volatile, not unfeeling” (111). Thus, to Jameson’s mind, willfulness and volatility, both being undesirable traits in a woman, are tempered in Beatrice because the expression of these traits is not so extreme that Beatrice becomes “wayward” or “unfeeling,” which would render her actions as wholly unacceptable feminine behavior.

Jameson’s application of gender norms to her understanding of Beatrice is even more pronounced when she notes that Beatrice’s “independence and gay indifference of temper, the laughing defiance of love and marriage, the satirical freedom of expression, common to both
[Beatrice and Benedick] are more becoming to the masculine than to the feminine character” (112). This assessment reveals that Jameson’s objections to Beatrice are grounded in her understanding of gender norms that stress the clear demarcation of socially accepted attitudes toward love and marriage for both men and women. Jameson apparently believes that women should be dependent and embrace the culturally constructed norms of devotional love culminating in marriage. Jameson also notes that women should carefully monitor what they say and the way in which they express their views. By doing so, Jameson is implicitly letting her reader know that she tries to refrain from such satire and is suggesting the self-consciously restrained manner in which she, as an author, is attempting to express herself. Thus, Jameson’s commentary becomes implicitly self-reflexive in this instance, which suggests her awareness of acceptable Victorian societal norms for women and her conscious effort to act within those norms.

In regard to marriage, Jameson considers what type of union Beatrice and Benedick might experience, given that “they are well-matched” in nature and temperament (117). Jameson contends that Beatrice and Benedick might achieve a happy union, despite Beatrice’s flaws: “when we recollect that to the wit and imperious temper of Beatrice is united a magnanimity of spirit which would naturally place her far above all selfishness, and all paltry struggles for power—when we perceive, in the midst of her sarcastic levity and volubility of tongue, so much of generous affection, and such a high sense of female virtue and honour, we are inclined to hope the best” (117). Jameson’s analysis of Beatrice in this instance is littered with references to gendered traits that she perceives as admirable, such as Beatrice’s lack of selfishness. She also sees Beatrice as being “far above . . . all paltry struggles for power,” which implies that Jameson believes that Beatrice would accept an inferior position within her marriage to Benedick, thus
eliminating the potential for a power struggle.\textsuperscript{107} Jameson further sees Beatrice’s “generous affections” and “high sense of female virtue and honour,” as commendable feminine qualities that will provide the opportunity for a happy marriage. Jameson’s conclusion is that Beatrice has the potential for happiness in marriage because her feminine traits outweigh her more masculine tendencies, thus providing at least the potential for her to successfully conform to societal expectations, via her marriage to Benedick. In Jameson’s view, Beatrice must mitigate her masculine tendencies and nurture her more appropriate feminine traits and inclinations, but Beatrice’s genuine love for Benedick suggests that she will be able to do so.

Faucit, who sees Beatrice in a much more favorable light than Jameson had, begins her chapter on this character by addressing John Ruskin, the Victorian author, critic and artist, who was a member and, for a time, one of the Vice Presidents of the New Shakspere Society.\textsuperscript{108} Faucit’s comments on Beatrice are contained in a letter addressed to Ruskin in which she expresses her understanding that Ruskin appreciates the character of Beatrice and that she finds Beatrice to be a “brilliant and charming woman” (289).\textsuperscript{109} In this instance, Faucit seems to be

\textsuperscript{107} While Jameson’s intent is clearly to reaffirm the submissive position within marriage for women, such a reference here to a potential ‘power struggle’ within the marriage also implies the commonality of power struggles within the marital sphere between husband and wife, particularly when evenly matched in terms of intelligence and temperament.

\textsuperscript{108} John Ruskin is listed as a member of the Society in several issues of \textit{The Transactions of the New Shakspere Society}, dating back as far as the 1874 edition, which provides Ruskin’s name among the roll. The Society would undoubtedly have been an organization of interest for Faucit, a leading Shakespearean actress in the nineteenth century. The Society also provided a forum for female criticism of Shakespeare in a scholarly setting. Ruskin’s membership in the Society overlapped with Robert Browning’s, another prominent nineteenth century literary figure who began serving as president of the Society in 1879 and with whom Faucit was also acquainted. Faucit’s analysis of Rosalind is contained in a letter to Browning and Browning was a close friend of the actor Charles Macready, Faucit’s mentor and professional associate. Clearly, Faucit was well acquainted with prominent members of the New Shakspere Society, including Ruskin and Browning, although she is not listed as an active participant in the Society.

\textsuperscript{109} Ruskin’s views on gender reflect a very tempered support of feminine intellectuality in conjunction with a traditional adherence to many gender normative behaviors. For instance, in \textit{Sesame and Lilies}, Ruskin discusses the premise of female intellectuality: “We hear of the ‘mission’ and of the ‘rights’ of Woman, as if these could ever be separate from the mission and the rights of Man;--as if she and her lord were creatures of independent kind, and of irreconcilable claim. This, at least, is wrong. And not less wrong . . . is the idea that woman is only the shadow and attendant image of her lord, owing him a thoughtless and servile obedience, and supported altogether in her
encouraged by Ruskin’s scholarly support for a character like Beatrice, whose demeanor clashes somewhat with traditional conceptions of womanhood. Faucit’s favorable view of Beatrice is evident throughout her analysis of this character, as she frequently emphasizes Beatrice’s best qualities while excusing or explaining away any of Beatrice’s traits that might be perceived as negative characteristics in a woman.

When it comes to Beatrice’s true nature and wit, Faucit makes it clear that she believes Beatrice is a “noble lady” (299) and acknowledges that her humor is sharp but that she has “no real malice” (300). This distinction is important to Faucit because she explicitly states that Beatrice is not shrewish but is simply a “woman of spirit” (301). Faucit admits that, at times, Beatrice’s wit seems harsh, but Faucit also observes that Beatrice has never been “softened” by “suffering” and attributes Beatrice’s harshness to this fact (290). In Faucit’s view, Beatrice’s wit is a sport, like “sword play,” but is not intended to hurt her opponent (290). The critic refers to an exchange between Beatrice and Don Pedro as evidence of Beatrice’s nature in a scene that takes place following Beatrice’s initially witty and playful exchanges with Benedick, when Don Pedro propositions Beatrice and observes that she has “. . . a merry heart” (*Much Ado About Nothing* II.i.298). Beatrice then replies in kind: “I was born to speak all mirth and no matter” (*Much Ado About Nothing* II.i.314-15). As Faucit notes, Beatrice herself tells us that she is all mirth and Don Pedro seems to be satisfied with her response, suggesting that she is seen as harmless and mirthful within the context of the play as well. According to Faucit, it is “[i]n the very gaiety of weakness by the preeminence of his fortitude” (69-70). Ruskin’s defense of women is, of course, tempered by language such as the phrase “her lord,” in reference to a woman’s husband, clearly demonstrating the subordinate role of women within marriage. Immediately following these claims that women have more potential than traditionally acknowledged by many in society, Ruskin states his belief that woman “was made to be the helpmate of man. As if he could be helped effectively by a shadow, or worthily by a slave!” (70). Ruskin demonstrates the common tendency of nineteenth-century social and literary critics to see the role of women from a male perspective. What Faucit and other female critics attempt to do is to view these women and female characters from a primarily female perspective, not one that is determined solely by male influence.
heart [that Beatrice] flashes around her the playful lightning of sarcasm and repartee” with which readers have come to associate her (Faucit 290). Perceiving Beatrice as merely willful enables Faucit to overlook her potentially vociferous, shrewish nature, which could be seen as problematic in a woman, and to admire Beatrice’s lighthearted sense of playfulness and intelligence instead. Presumably, if Beatrice did express more “matter” in her discourse, she would be deemed a much more threatening and destabilizing presence.

Once she has established what she perceives as Beatrice’s genuine goodness, Faucit considers Beatrice’s attitude toward marriage. Faucit contends that Beatrice savors her independence but is not opposed to the concept of marriage if the woman enters into the union by choice (306). Faucit points to Beatrice’s advice to Hero as proof of this attitude and notes that when Antonio is counseling Hero, he says, “Well, niece, I trust you will be ruled by your father” (Much Ado About Nothing II.i.47-8). To this comment, Beatrice adds her opinion: “Yes, faith, it is my cousin’s duty to make curtsy and say, ‘Father, as it pleases you.’ But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say, ‘Father, as it please me.’” (II.i.49-52 qtd in Faucit 306). Faucit emphasizes Beatrice’s more assertive, autonomous position regarding choice in marriage by contrasting her view with Antonio’s presumption that Hero should be led by her father. Faucit also contends that Beatrice does not attract her uncle’s wrath because “Leonato loves Beatrice too well to be angry at this instigation to possible rebellion” (Faucit 307). Here Beatrice’s words are, in fact, used in a potentially destabilizing manner, one which Faucit is quick to mitigate by pointing to the closeness of Beatrice’s relationship with Leonato. Although Faucit seems to raise this issue as an example of how much leeway Beatrice is given to voice her opinion, this observation also raises the issue of a woman’s right to act autonomously when choosing a husband versus the propriety of a woman being
guided by a male authority, such as a father. Although women would typically have had the right of refusing a marriage proposal by the late nineteenth century, obtaining a father’s blessing or asking a father for his daughter’s hand in marriage was still a prevalent social practice. Thus, Beatrice’s assertive attitude regarding a woman’s right to choose a mate has additional, albeit more subtle, implications in connection with Victorian gender ideology. Of course, there are many literary instances of women choosing badly when given the opportunity of choosing a husband for themselves, for instance, Little Em’ly in Dickens’ *David Copperfield* and her choice of Steerforth or Dorothea in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and her choice of Casaubon represent just two examples of female characters in Victorian novels whose poor choices in selecting a potential mate have the potential to stifle their long term happiness. Thus, even though Victorian audiences may have been accustomed to women exercising more choice in the selection of a husband, this freedom seems to have been the site of social anxiety, both on the part of women who would be affected by poor choices and on the part of a society that would have to deal with the potential consequences of incompatible unions.

Faucit makes it clear that, in her opinion, marriage is the natural outcome for Beatrice, and rightly so to her mind, but she also views Beatrice’s advice to her cousin favorably, suggesting what are likely her own views regarding marriage and female autonomy when choosing a husband—that marriage is desirable for women but that women should exercise their own best judgment when choosing a future husband.

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110 The rights of women regarding marriage and the quality of their choices when selecting a husband had been the topic of debate for some time prior to the Victorian period. Mary Astell’s *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700) and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) both deal with this topic and advise caution when choosing a husband. While some women were guided by their families or lacked the experience to choose their future mate wisely, the majority of women would have had the opportunity to freely accept or reject a proposal, aligning Beatrice’s views on marriage and female choice more closely to Victorians than Elizabethan practices, which tended to put greater stock in parental authority over such decisions, although the degree of input that Elizabethan women would have had in the selection of husband would likely have varied, at least in part due to class, monetary, and social circumstances within the family.
Even more endearing to Faucit is Beatrice’s reaction to Hero’s criticism of her generally untoward and harsh behavior, specifically charging Beatrice with “pride and scornfulness” (313). The scene to which Faucit refers occurs when Beatrice overhears Hero describe her as follows:

Why, you speak truth. I never yet saw man,
How wise, how noble, young, rarely featured,
But she would spell him backward. If fair-faced,
She would swear the gentleman should be her sister;
If black, why, Nature, drawing of an antic,
Made a foul blot; if tall, a lance ill-headed;
If low, an agate very vilely cut;
If speaking, why, a vane blown with all winds;
If silent, why a block moved with none.
So turns she every man the wrong side out
And never gives to truth and virtue
Which simpleness and merit purchaseth. (III.i.59-70)

Faucit categorizes Beatrice’s reaction to her cousin’s criticism as being filled with “shame and bitter self-reproach” (314). Beatrice reacts to Hero’s criticism by saying, “What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true? / Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much? / Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!” (Much Ado III.i.107-9). Faucit believes that this reaction provides evidence that Beatrice “has become to herself another woman” (315). Unlike Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew, Beatrice hears what others think of her and finds it enough to inspire Beatrice to soften her attitudes. As Faucit observes, “It is not so much that her nature is changed, as that it has been suddenly developed” (315). Moreover, Faucit believes that Beatrice’s reaction validates her status as a good and admirable lady: “She does not blame others. She feels no shade of bitterness against Hero, her reproaches are all against herself” (315). Presumably, Faucit admires Beatrice’s intelligence, her willingness to accept criticism, and her determination to change her behavior so that she is more in accord with traditional female gender norms, which generally dictated that women should be more gentle, kind, and demure than Beatrice had been.
Her willingness to change her behavior in order to conform to societal expectations is what endears Beatrice to Faucit.

While Faucit approves of Beatrice’s self-deprecation upon hearing Hero’s critique of her behavior, she seems to identify with Beatrice the most strongly when Beatrice subsequently defends the honor of her cousin. Beatrice reacts to the false accusations made against Hero by vouching for her purity to Benedick, Leonato and the Friar: “... until last night, / I have this twelvemonth been her bedfellow” (Much Ado IV.i.148-9). According to Faucit, Beatrice’s “courage” and “tenderness” when she defends Hero is what endears her to Benedick as well (319). Faucit also strongly identifies with Beatrice’s feelings of frustration and helplessness, due to her gender, when trying to help Hero against what she perceives as the villainy of Claudio: “Is ‘a not approved in the height a villain, that hath slandered, scorned, dishonored my kinswoman? Oh, that I were a man! What, bear her in hand until they come to take hands, and then, with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancor—Oh God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace” (Much Ado IV.i.300-6). Faucit is struck by “the strength and earnestness of her nature” (Faucit 321). When Beatrice bemoans the state of affairs and expresses her desire to be a man, Faucit contends that, because she’s a woman, there is little she can be expected to do to correct this dishonor done to her cousin and that Beatrice’s wish to be a man is a “thought that has for some time been uppermost in her mind” (320). The implication is clearly that Faucit can identify with Beatrice’s sense of frustration and powerlessness, based on the societal implications of gender as a determiner of agency in the late nineteenth century and given the general restrictions placed on women. Faucit further defends Beatrice’s reaction to Claudio’s accusations against Hero by asserting that Beatrice is not callously risking Benedick’s life by asking him to kill Claudio but that she is a “noble woman” whose main focus is to clear
Hero’s name; moreover, Faucit contends that, had Beatrice been a man, she would have taken the task on herself without hesitation: “I am confident that all women who are worthy of a brave man’s love will understand and sympathise [sic] with the feeling that animates Beatrice” (322). Thus, Beatrice is, in Faucit’s eyes, merely defending her cousin with the only means available to her as a woman in this situation—by asking a man to represent her and to act as her agent. Beatrice’s loyalty to her cousin sets Beatrice apart as a woman of worth and character in Faucit’s eyes.

In the conclusion of her analysis, Faucit remarks that the character of Beatrice is “one of my great master’s brightest creations” (327) and that Beatrice represents “a complex yet harmonious character” (328). Ultimately, Faucit’s view is that Beatrice emerges as a witty, intelligent, and independent woman who is willing to adhere to gender norms, within reason, and to sacrifice some of her independence, via marriage to the right man, in order to achieve her own personal happiness. The need to compromise one’s personal leanings and attitudes in order to accord more closely with society’s ideals is certainly not limited to any one gender; however, the frequency with which this would have happened for intelligent, willful and independent women in Victorian England is suggested in Faucit’s commentary. Faucit seems to be suggesting that, in order to experience a happy and harmonious life, it might be both necessary and reasonable to expect women to compromise their own natural tendencies, somewhat, in order to conform to societal expectations.

Elliott, while much more critical of Beatrice than Faucit is, also seems to think highly of Beatrice at times. Elliott begins her commentary on Beatrice by contending that “Beatrice is one of the most charming creations of Shakespeare’s wit” (176). Like Faucit, Elliott believes that Beatrice is witty without being shrewish, and she speculates that Beatrice has avoided
shrewishness because “she has been fortunate enough to meet with appreciation. Her uncle not only loved her, but understood and admired her” (177). Elliott emphasizes the importance of environmental factors on Beatrice’s temperament and on the development of her character and further draws parallels to real life situations for many women—Victorian or otherwise: “Many a bright intellect has burnt itself out for want of being appreciated at home, for want of air, of that congeniality of surroundings without which the most ardent natures lose their devotion, and the keenest enthusiasm dwindles into indifference” (177-8). It seems quite likely that Elliott is speaking from her own first hand observations in this instance and is recalling bright or intellectual women who have faced more unpleasant realities than Beatrice experiences within the context of the play. Much like Beatrice, Dorothea, in George Eliot’s Middlemarch, is raised and cared for by her uncle, Mr. Brooke, who, with all good intentions, fails to provide Dorothea with maternal guidance, particularly in relation to marriage. Elliott, who is consistently sympathetic to intelligent female characters in her writing, also contends that “We cannot sufficiently estimate the value of early surroundings in forming character” (178). Elliott’s views on this matter, via the topic of Beatrice’s wit and nature, illustrate one position in an ongoing Victorian debate that involved the premise of biology versus environmental influences in determining personality and gender traits. Clearly, Elliott felt that an inherently willful nature could manifest in a positive way, if nurtured appropriately, or in a negative manner, as is the case in the shrewishness of characters such as Shakespeare’s Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew. In Elliott’s view, Beatrice’s outcome was positive mainly because she was reared in a nurturing and encouraging environment and experienced positive reinforcement of her mirthful, outspoken behavior.
Despite this positive development of character, Elliott sees Beatrice’s wit as superficial and “of no great depth,” because of her “unclouded” existence and the reality that “Beatrice had not graduated in the school of suffering” (178-9). Like Faucit, Elliott sees in Beatrice no philosophical bent that would add more substance to her wit and perhaps soften it somewhat. Beatrice’s potential as a case study of developing womanhood, and the cautionary tale that this study offers, recommends her to Elliott as being worthy of notice: “She, who apparently aspired only to be a wit, was becoming a woman, with all a woman’s tender emotions and large sympathies. It is this that makes the study of her character not only fascinating but extremely profitable” (178). This comment suggests the use of Shakespeare’s female characters to teach girls about literature as well as indoctrinating them into Victorian gender norms. Gail Marshall notes that this practice was commonplace in nineteenth-century approaches to educating girls but did not always achieve the desired result—sometimes girls used this opportunity to model more assertive behaviors or to enter into the more active role of a Shakespearean critic, thereby gaining a degree of voice and agency that they had not previously enjoyed. As Marshall notes, while some nineteenth-century readers of Shakespeare tended to see his female characters as timeless, other female readers found it helpful to see his characters as “the products of another time and political context” because this enabled them to “envisage and articulate a potential for women beyond the vision of the nineteenth century. For these women, the only possibility was to produce readings which ran counter to conservative gender ideologies” (44). Given this environment, Elliott’s commentary on the appropriateness of studying Beatrice takes on additional dimensions. The profitable element to which Elliott is referring is Beatrice’s willingness to demonstrate her inherently feminine qualities and, by so doing, to tone down the inclination she shows to rail with her wit. This is of the utmost importance because, in Elliott’s
view, the worst fate is to be “an unlovable woman . . . such a one is a monster, a being beside nature” (178). Through her analysis, Elliott seems to suggest that women should conform to certain gender normative behaviors that seem to her to be reasonable, namely acting with appropriate decorum and restraint. In Elliott’s view, then, female intelligence does not justify what she considers to be unfeminine conduct.

When considering Beatrice’s emotional reaction to the false accusations made against Hero by Don John and Claudio, however, Elliott suggests that Beatrice’s lack of intellectual depth becomes apparent: “All her womanhood is up in arms against the slanderers of her cousin. She cannot reason, she can only feel” (179). One gets the impression that, while this excess of womanly feeling is acceptable to Elliott because it springs from Beatrice’s loyalty to Hero, it is not completely desirable. Because Beatrice has no philosophical bent, in Elliott’s view, her response lacks rational logic or thoughtful solutions to the problem. Instead, she urges Benedick to gain recompense by challenging Claudio to a duel, which would have brought scant resolution to the problem even had such a duel occurred. In fact, Elliott notes that Beatrice’s “type” is “not uncommon” in that she displays “great activity . . . high animal spirits, and [is possessed] of true but wayward affections” (179). It is this passionate nature that, according to Elliott, will serve Beatrice well as a wife. Elliott’s observations allude to her professed familiarity with this type of woman; what’s more, the disparaging nature of her comments suggests a mediocre endorsement of Beatrice as a character of value. Elliott appreciates intelligence in women but wants to see female intelligence accompanied by seriousness and emotional depth, two areas in which she finds Beatrice lacking.

Elliott seems to feel and declare more empathy and even solidarity with Lady Macbeth than she does with Beatrice. In this case, the difference appears to be one of temperament rather than agency—Lady Macbeth acts consistently out of devotion to her husband, in Elliott’s view, and exhibits a profound and weighty intelligence whereas Beatrice seems to lack such depth. This merely provides another indication that Elliott adheres to the philosophy that the role of women in society should be serious and substantial rather than incidental and superficial.
Elliott contends that women like Beatrice are well suited for marriage and will prove to be true, loyal, and entertaining as wives (179-80). This is why Elliott believes that Beatrice is best fitted for marriage. When commenting on Beatrice’s nature and propensity for marriage, Elliott says “We cannot conceive Beatrice retaining her sprightliness of wit and vivacity of manner in a state of old maidenhood” (183). Thus, Elliott believes that Beatrice, much like Katherine in *Taming of the Shrew*, needs the companionship and complement of a husband to prevent her assertive tendencies from becoming a negative aspect of her character. Elliott elaborates on this idea by noting that Beatrice’s “wit would soon turn into sour vinegar were she to live alone and unloved” (183). Elliott also notes that marriage to Benedick is an agreeable proposition to Beatrice, which presumably makes the situation much more amicable: “With thorough womanly abandonment, she throws herself into the arms of love, no longer mistress of her own destinies. Few women love so now-a-days” (184). Elliott seems to be praising Beatrice’s “womanly heart” and her willingness to abandon her independent aims in favor of a complementary and favorable union with Benedick while also bemoaning the lack of such appropriately feminine behavior among Victorian women (183). Elliott is not necessarily supporting marriage at all cost, however, since she clearly sees Beatrice and Benedick as a complementary couple—the ideal in Victorian conceptions of marriage: “each would be proud of the other, as they kept the edge of their mental weapons keen by constant conflict” (187). What’s more, Elliott believes that the couple “would grow together and become each the complement of the other” (187). The theory of complementary marriage during the Victorian period held that each gender brought distinct traits and inherent qualities to a marriage. Through the marital union, the two distinct parts formed one whole or complete being. Similarly, the traits of the marital partner might temper or complement a spouse in order to tame or limit a behavior that
has the potential to become unseemly—for instance, in women such a trait would be wittiness that could lead to shrewish behaviors and, in men, this might be a hardness of spirit that would make them unfeeling citizens. Ultimately, then, Elliott seems to subscribe to the belief that, for many women, marriage is an appropriate and reasonable goal, particularly if the result is a complementary marriage, thus emphasizing her support of this cultural ideology.

Lest her audience think that she is praising Beatrice’s nature, however, Elliott is quick to clarify her position, noting that Beatrice “is not altogether what we should like her to be. She is lovable in spite of her nature, not on account of it. A perfect woman is lovely for what she is, not for what we wish her to be; and though her willfulness may amuse us, we cannot but deprecate it” (180-1). This is a fairly strong criticism of Beatrice’s nature and seems to be intended as a caution for those women who might endeavor to emulate Beatrice’s sharpness of wit and sarcastic nature. The one saving grace in Beatrice’s character—to Elliott’s mind—is that, even though “Beatrice will not submit to be out-talked . . . she will gladly surrender her wild heart to [Benedick’s] loving hand” (188). By acquiescing to accepted gender norms, via marriage, Beatrice redeems herself. Just to drive this point home, Elliott notes that “The lesson to be learned from the character of Beatrice is the worthlessness of mere wit” (190). Elliott’s criticism stresses her belief that, while superficial wit might be entertaining in a woman, it is of no real merit, particularly when held against the measure of more appropriately feminine characteristics of passion, gentleness, and devotion. Elliott’s assessment once again underscores her awareness of the role that Shakespeare’s female characters occupied as models for female behavior and conveys an element of didacticism in her analysis, suggesting that she is also aware of the potential influence her own writing might carry on the shaping of gender ideologies and cultural norms.
While Elliott doesn’t explicitly discuss the advent of Beatrice’s silence, which occurs at the end of the play once she and Benedick marry, she does note that words are better than silence in Beatrice: “better to hear such a woman as Beatrice scold and gibe than to see her still and silent” (183). Elliott contends that a woman with Beatrice’s nature would need to express her opinions or she would become miserable and would likely try to inflict her misery on others; however, if given the opportunity to voice her opinions with Benedick, she would be able to retain her mirthful disposition. Elliott’s view of Beatrice is ironic in that marriage effectively silences the heroine, within the context of the play. The last time Beatrice speaks, it is to claim that the only reason she is willing to marry Benedick is out of pity: “I would not deny you, but by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption” (Much Ado V.iv.94-6). The next line, spoken by Benedick, is, “Peace! I will stop your mouth” (V.iv.97). At this point in the play, Benedick kisses his new wife and she ceases to speak. Despite this silencing of Beatrice, it is clear that Elliott imagines Beatrice will have a voice within her marriage, because she and Benedick are a complementary couple; however, Elliott’s position seems to be based more on her earlier observations than on any actual analysis of the final scene of the play. Given Elliott’s previously explicit criticism of Beatrice’s superficial wit and her praise of Beatrice’s adherence to gender norms, the view that she expresses here seems to suggest Elliott’s somewhat conflicting attitudes toward the cultural reality that marriage often resulted in the legal and practical silencing of women.\footnote{In her discussion of early modern feminists, Amy Louise Erickson observes that “[s]ome of these women, in both the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, adopted the language of female virtue, asserting their own chastity and denying any aspiration to social equality with men. This can be seen as a means of protection and legitimization, whether conscious or not” (Women and Property in Early Modern England 13-14). This tactic seems to be employed here and elsewhere by Elliott when analyzing female characters. In the case of Beatrice, however, Elliott’s divided loyalties seem particularly singular, perhaps because Beatrice very narrowly escapes being labeled as a shrew in Elliott’s eyes, which would necessitate Elliott criticizing female intelligence, something that she appears loathe to do.}
In fact, none of the critics discussed here mention the silence of Beatrice in the concluding scene of the play. The failure of these critics to mention Beatrice’s silence, given that their critiques made frequent mention of her wit and volubility in other scenes, suggests that they either take her silence as a typical result of marriage and, thus, not worth mentioning because of its commonality, or their omission suggests that female silence after marriage may have been acceptable to them, at least in the public sphere. They may also interpret Beatrice’s silence in this situation as merely temporary. While single women were able to operate autonomously in England in legal situations, which would necessitate a distinct use of feminine voice, coverture essentially transfers that public voice to the husband. Elliott’s distaste for a silent Beatrice, particularly in conjunction with the apparent acceptance of such a practice by Jameson and Faucit, suggests the conflicting and evolving Victorian attitudes toward gender ideology and the variability of normative behaviors as well as their acceptance among scholarly, worldly and educated women, such as we find with Jameson, Faucit and Elliott. The most famous and most extreme instance of the silencing of a wife in a Victorian novel is, of course, Bertha—Rochester’s lunatic wife in *Jane Eyre*—who has been given due attention by modern feminist critics, most notably by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic*. Although Beatrice represents a presumably less extreme example of silence after marriage, it is singular that only Elliott finds it necessary to address this character’s silence and then only in an indirect manner, suggesting the commonality of female silence within marriage as a normative occurrence in Victorian England.

It is evident that all three critics, Jameson, Faucit and Elliott, saw Beatrice as a delightful character who could also represent, for Victorian women and girls, a lesson in the need to keep aggressive or assertive tendencies in check, the desirability of being open to criticism and the
willingness to adapt one’s behavior to fit expectations, and, ultimately, reminding readers of the need to adhere to certain expected gender norms—namely, marriage and gentleness of bearing—in order to achieve some form of stability and happiness. Inherent in their critiques is also the recognition that volubility in women has the potential to actively destabilize societal norms and, thus, necessitates a certain degree of depth and seriousness, as well as intelligence.

**Rosalind**

Shakespeare’s Rosalind, in *As You Like It*, combines the intelligence of Portia and the humor of Beatrice while sharing the assertive and self-possessed natures of both. Jameson, Faucit and Elliott write about Rosalind as an intelligent and essentially feminine character, noting Rosalind’s tendency to be loyal, selfless and passionate and, as a result, extremely sympathetic. These traits, which embody well established Victorian gender norms for women, are emphasized by these critics to stress Rosalind’s inherent femininity, despite her use of a male disguise. The significant difference among these critics is that Jameson and Faucit view Rosalind as a more traditional woman and wife, whose intelligence is witty, whose demeanor is mirthful, and whose role in marriage is to defer submissively to her husband, Orlando, while Elliott sees Rosalind’s intelligence and agency, particularly regarding her use of a male disguise, as arising from a purposeful intent as opposed to emanating solely from necessity. Elliott agrees that Rosalind displays pity, selflessness, and a deeply abiding love for her cousin and for Orlando, but, according to Elliott, Rosalind’s disguise enables her to engage in more assertive behavior. When donning her disguise as Ganymede, Rosalind is able to ensure the safety of herself and her cousin and to gain some assurance of Orlando’s fidelity and love. The Ganymede disguise allows Rosalind to occupy a more active role within the context of the play than that typically enjoyed
by women in Elizabethan or Victorian society. Elliott also sees Rosalind as intellectually superior to Orlando and envisions a much more equitable marriage between the couple than Jameson or Faucit imagine. Through their respective analyses of Rosalind, these critics reveal a range of attitudes regarding female intelligence, agency and propriety, especially in regard to marriage, that inevitably reflect their own attitudes toward socially condoned gender normative behaviors.

Jameson devotes much of her chapter on Rosalind to comparing this heroine to Beatrice and Portia, concluding that Rosalind occupies a position among Shakespeare’s witty and wise women that is on a par with that of Portia. In Jameson’s view, however, there are some essential differences between Portia and Rosalind: “Portia is dignified, splendid and romantic; Rosalind is playful, pastoral and picturesque . . . one is epic and the other lyric” (119). Although the implication could be that Rosalind emerges as the inferior character of the two, Jameson’s emphasis on context suggests that she sees Portia and Rosalind as having comparably admirable feminine traits, even though “Rosalind has not the impressive eloquence of Portia” (122). Jameson emphasizes the context of each heroine’s discourse within her respective play—Portia’s, which focuses on the law, and Rosalind’s, which centers on love and courtship—and attributes apparent differences in intellectual depth to context rather than substance. Thus, Jameson remains sympathetic to Rosalind and perceives her as an intelligent female character.

When Jameson compares Rosalind to Beatrice, however, it becomes clear that Jameson favors Rosalind’s character as a more admirable representation of womanhood: “I come now to Rosalind, whom I should have ranked before Beatrice, inasmuch as the greater degree of her sex’s softness and sensibility, united with equal wit and intellect, give her the superiority as a woman; but that, as a dramatic character, she is inferior in force” (118). Jameson’s distinction
between actual and fictional applications of feminine traits and general behavior reveals that her primary purpose in analyzing Shakespeare’s female characters is often to assess, consider and comment on the socially constructed gender ideology that is represented through these characters, more than (as is more usual) to discuss the dramatic effect of Shakespeare’s heroines. Moreover, Jameson does not distinguish between Elizabethan and Victorian gender ideology, which suggests that she sees these characters as embodying universal traits that are not limited to a particular era in history. Jameson’s approach to these characters suggests that she sees certain traits as inherently feminine even as she seems to be distinctly aware of the Victorian societal context in which women must function.

Jameson sees Rosalind’s essential character as feminine but elusive. In her analysis, Jameson comments on the difficulty of trying to effectively categorize Rosalind as a type of woman: “She is like a compound of essences, so volatile in their nature, and so exquisitely blended, that on any attempt to analyze them, they seem to escape us” (118). Despite the elusive nature of this character, Jameson does state her contention that Rosalind possesses a certain “sprightliness” as well as “softness and sentiment” (119). All of these traits strike Jameson as favorable: “The impression left upon our hearts and minds by the character of Rosalind—by the mixture of playfulness, sensibility and . . . naïveté—is like a delicious strain of music. There is depth of delight, and a subtlety of words to express that delight, which is enchanting” (121). The “sensibility” that Jameson attributes to Rosalind suggests a degree of feeling and sensitivity, similar to the type of sensibility typically associated with women during the nineteenth century—for instance, in Jane Austen’s popular early nineteenth century novel, *Sense and Sensibility*—a trait most commonly, although not exclusively, associated with women. Jameson’s assessment of Rosalind also employs the traditionally feminized traits of
“playfulness” and “naïveté” to associate Rosalind with youth and femininity. Ascribing juvenile characteristics to women was a common practice in Victorian England and often served as justification for the more dependent, submissive role that women typically occupied within social contexts, such as marriage. Such associations between women and children were well established by the Victorian period and were discussed by such early feminists as Mary Astell in Some Reflections upon Marriage (1700) and Mary Wollstonecraft in Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792). In fiction, George Eliot presents us with the character of Rosamond, the idealized personification of femininity whose primary goal in the novel is to marry Lydgate. Although Rosamond attains her goal, theirs is not a happy union, suggesting that Eliot did not favor such idealized extremes of femininity or, at least, that she did not view them as practical. Jameson conveys her approbation for such popular nineteenth-century gender affiliations by casting Rosalind in these submissive terms and concluding that the character is delightful and “enchanting” as a result of having “playfulness” and “naïveté.”

Marriage is, of course, the ultimate objective for Rosalind and is central to her continued use of a male disguise when interacting with Orlando in Arden. The notion of androgyny via such a disguise doesn’t really enter into Jameson’s view of Rosalind, because Jameson sees Rosalind’s use of a male disguise as necessary for procuring the desired outcome of a successful marriage. Jameson also contends that Rosalind’s disguise never alters or diminishes her essentially feminine nature: “As her vivacity never lessens our impression of her sensibility, so she wears her masculine attire without the slightest impugnment of her delicacy” (120). Jameson sees Rosalind as essentially feminine largely because of her motivation: “What depth of love in her passion for Orlando! whether disguised beneath a saucy playfulness, or breaking forth with a
fond impatience” (120). Because Rosalind’s love for Orlando is genuine, her behavior and use of a disguise is eminently feminine and, therefore, acceptable to Jameson.

Jameson also points to the nature of Rosalind’s wit and justifies her presumptions because of this character’s essential femininity: “how beautifully is the dialogue managed between herself and Orlando! How well she assumes the airs of a saucy page, without throwing off her feminine sweetness! How her wit flutters free as air over every subject! With what a careless grace, yet with what exquisite propriety!” (120). Jameson also points to Rosalind’s reaction to the blood-stained handkerchief, when she nearly faints at the sight of Orlando’s blood, as evidence of Rosalind’s inherently feminine nature. After nearly fainting, Rosalind as Ganymede recovers herself enough to say “I pray you, tell your brother how well I counterfeited—“ (As You Like It IV.iii.168-9 qtd in Jameson 120), thereby maintaining her disguise as a male, indicating that this character is aware of the need to hide her inherent femininity and emphasizing the artificiality of her male disguise. Jameson’s analysis of Rosalind, on the whole, however, is generally abstract and focuses more on general impressions than on specific particulars of behavior. Jameson cites very few specific examples to support her views of Rosalind. In the absence of a close textual reading of the play or of a targeted analysis of this character’s specific actions, Jameson instead provides her own impressions of idealized femininity via her analysis of Rosalind. By using terms such as “sweetness” and “grace” in connection with feminine propriety, Jameson also reaffirms common gender norms typically applauded in nineteenth-century women, revealing her personal conception of gender ideology in the process.

Faucit, like Jameson, is very approving of Rosalind as an example of femininity. Faucit’s comments about Rosalind were first presented in a letter addressed to Robert Browning. In
addition to being an established poet, Browning, like Ruskin, was a member of the New Shakspere Society. Browning was also a dramatist and a friend of the well known actor, Charles Macready, with whom Faucit had worked closely. Faucit is addressing Browning here in his capacity as a dramatist and undoubtedly because of his connection to the New Shakspere Society and his likely interest in Shakespeare’s characters. She notes that her thoughts on Rosalind are the result of a request from Browning for Faucit’s analysis of this character (227). This affiliation between herself and Browning, given Browning’s prominence in literary circles, essentially casts Faucit in the role of an expert and imbues her subsequent analysis of this character with authority.

Faucit begins her discussion of Rosalind by assessing the nature of this heroine and her femininity, contending that Rosalind has a “joyous, buoyant side” that is “inextricably mingled with deep womanly tenderness, with an active intellect disciplined by fine culture” (236). This affinity between Rosalind and womanly traits is further emphasized when Faucit notes that, “at the core of all that Rosalind says and does, lies a passionate love as pure and all-absorbing as ever swayed a woman’s heart” (236). Faucit explicitly associates Rosalind with ‘womanly’ traits as a means of establishing her gender normative tendencies, countering her more dissonant behaviors. In her subsequent analysis, Faucit consistently focuses on Rosalind’s love as the primary motivation for all of her actions—it is the basis for her loyalty toward Celia and the main motive for exercising her wit in regard to Orlando. This type of passionate and consistent

113 Faucit certainly sees Browning as a significant member of the dramatic and literary circles in which she circulated, which is made clear when she addresses Browning in the opening pages of her chapter on Rosalind as follows: “you made common cause with Mr. Macready in raising the drama of our time to a level not unworthy of the country of Shakespeare!” (228). In this way, she casts Browning as dramatist and Shakespearean scholar and elevates the status of her own scholarship in the process. As previously mentioned, Browning also served as president of the Society at the invitation of its founder, F. J. Furnivall.
love is also seen by Faucit as an admirable feminine trait that effectively mitigates any potential threat to established gender norms that Rosalind’s male disguise might pose.

Faucit stresses the legitimacy and non-threatening nature of Rosalind’s cross-dressing by attributing the initial agency for this action to Celia, noting that it is Celia who first suggests that Rosalind dress in disguise: “I’ll put myself in poor and mean attire, / [. . . ] / The like do you: so shall we pass along, / And never stir assailants” (As You Like It I. iii. 109-112 qtd in Faucit 250). This initial suggestion by Celia inspires Rosalind to dress in male attire as a means of protection, thus improving on Celia’s suggestion: “. . . Were it not better, / Because that I am more than common tall, / That I did suit me all points like a man?” (I.iii.112-114). Faucit stresses that Rosalind agrees to this plan as a means of protecting her cousin and that a male disguise is the most effective means of doing so. As she had done previously, in her analysis of Portia, Faucit makes a point of justifying Rosalind’s use of male disguise and mannerisms by attributing the agency for this choice to other characters, thus making Rosalind’s potentially destabilizing actions less threatening. Faucit also notes that Rosalind’s desire to protect Celia is selfless in nature, a fact that is further emphasized by the character’s strong concern for her cousin, despite her own predicament: “she tries to forget her own fatigue, and to comfort ‘the weaker vessel’ her still more weary cousin” (Faucit 253). While Faucit does imagine “these two charming women in the full enjoyment of their new-born liberty” (254), she suggests that Rosalind’s disguise was clearly born of necessity and is not an overt attempt to destabilize gender norms.

Rosalind’s continued use of a male disguise to converse with Orlando is also justified by Faucit as an action that is eminently understandable because it is motivated by love. Faucit further mitigates this behavior by stressing Rosalind’s inherently feminine nature: “For all of her mannish dress and airs, there was, of course, something of a feminine character about the youth”
Faucit observes that “it is only by resort to a rough and saucy greeting and manner that she could mask . . . the trembling of her voice, and the womanly tremor of her limbs” (257-8).

Faucit’s perception is that Rosalind is a timid woman who carries on this pretense out of love—for both Celia and Orlando—and not out of any inherent desire to express a masculine or androgynous nature. This is also clearly Faucit’s perception; its lack of basis on textual evidence suggests the subjective nature of her analysis. Moreover, Faucit posits that it is only Rosalind’s keen intelligence that enables her to maintain this pretense of a masculine demeanor: “so ready is her intelligence, that she does not forget to keep up the illusion about herself, by throwing in the phrase, that boys as well as women ‘are for the most part cattle of this colour’” (*As You Like It* III. iii. 403-4 qtd in Faucit 261). The exchange to which Faucit is referring takes place during the first encounter between Orlando and Rosalind as Ganymede, when she is attempting to gain his confidence and begins teaching him how to cure himself of his love for Rosalind. According to Faucit, Rosalind retreats into male gendered traits and critiques traditionally female gender behaviors when she is most keenly feeling her femininity and only does so out of the need to hide her inherently feminine characteristics. Faucit suggests that when “Rosalind finds herself running into a strain of serious earnest, with too much of the apprehensive woman in it . . . she takes up her former cue of exaggerating the capriciousness of her own sex” (271). The cumulative impact of Faucit’s analysis is that Rosalind has legitimate reasons for donning male dress and displaying masculine attributes and that this necessity is actually grounded in the character’s femininity.

Any lingering doubt as to Rosalind’s motivation or essential femininity is vanquished, in Faucit’s view, by Rosalind’s deep, abiding love for Orlando and their subsequent marriage.

Faucit cites Rosalind’s reaction after hearing that Orlando has escaped death—when Rosalind as
Ganymede nearly swoons and then initiates the marriage plan (As You Like It IV.iii)—as evidence of Rosalind’s genuine love for Orlando. Faucit remarks that Orlando has become “essential” to Rosalind’s happiness and that, as a result, “[t]he time has come for her to yield” (278). Faucit identifies this as the moment in the play when Rosalind prepares to resume her feminine identity by marrying and, thus, yielding to Orlando. As his wife, Rosalind will presumably occupy a more passive and submissive role than she had while disguised as Ganymede. Faucit cites the marriage ceremony in Act V, scene iv, when Rosalind turns to both her father, the Duke, and then to Orlando and repeats the same line—“To you I give myself, for I am yours”—to stress Rosalind’s passivity within the context of her marriage to Orlando (As You Like It 115-116 qtd in Faucit 281). Faucit notes Rosalind’s intentional transference of power from her father to her new husband, in terms of gender norms, by observing “the surrender which a loving daughter here makes of herself to the lover” (281). This marks, for Faucit, the resumption of Rosalind’s explicit role as a woman and serves as an indication of the implicitly feminine nature of Rosalind’s character that has been lurking just beneath the surface of her male disguise for much of the play.

Faucit notes that, following the marriage ceremony and Rosalind’s public resumption of her role as a woman, Rosalind is silenced and paradoxically begins to function as a purveyor of power through the act of coverture in marriage: “No word escapes from Rosalind’s lips, as we watch her there, the woman in all her beauty and perfect grace, now calmly happy, beside a father restored to ‘a potent dukedom,’ and a lover whom she knows to be wholly worthy to wield that dukedom, when in due season she will endow him with it as her husband” (281-2). In this instance, Faucit acknowledges Rosalind’s more traditionally feminine passivity—both self-imposed and culturally imposed—even as she recognizes that the source of Orlando’s wealth
will be Rosalind. Faucit’s assessment conveys her adherence to established gender norms as well as her awareness of the inequitable arrangement into which Rosalind is entering, therefore her description of Rosalind as possessing a “perfect grace” and being “calmly happy” suggests that Faucit applauds Rosalind’s new role as Orlando’s wife; it is undeniable, however, that the act of marriage will cast Rosalind in the role of Orlando’s possession, as pointed out by Faucit, who observes that Orlando will “not only possess in her an honoured, beloved, and admired companion, but will also find wise guidance and support in her clear intelligence and courageous wit!” (282). The evident admiration that Faucit expresses for Rosalind, in combination with her somewhat subjective analysis of this character, suggests that she is not merely considering Rosalind within the context of Shakespearean gender norms but that she personally identifies with these gender norms—a supposition that is also strengthened by her failure to distinguish between Victorian and Elizabethan dramatic norms or gender ideology in her analysis, although she acknowledges such historical differences at other times in On Some of Shakespeare’s Female Characters.

Elliott’s view of Rosalind is also steeped in the gendered norms of the Victorian era. When she first considers this character, Elliott emphasizes Rosalind’s selfless nature by noting that, despite Rosalind’s own difficulties at the start of the play, “she struggles to be merry, to forget herself, and to devise sports for the amusement of her more favored cousin” (75). Much like Faucit, Elliott sees Rosalind’s devotion to her cousin and her selflessness as a testament to the quality of Rosalind’s nature. Moreover, she attributes many of Rosalind’s reactions—her loyalty to Celia, her disdain for “the levity of the courtier,” and her potential to experience a deep and all-encompassing love—to her “womanly heart” (75-6). Ultimately, Elliott contends that Rosalind has “a character that, the more closely it is contemplated, appears the more crystalline
in its perfection of purity” (96). Elliott consistently sees Rosalind’s femininity as the primary motivating influence and mitigating factor for all of her actions, which essentially nullifies any potential she may have to threaten established gender norms by disguising herself as a man.

Elliott is clearly aware of the potential that Rosalind has to be viewed as a masculine figure and, like Faucit, seems to emphasize Rosalind’s femininity to counter this potential interpretation. Elliott observes that it is Rosalind, not Celia, who takes “the bolder step to suit herself ‘in all points like a man,’ spite of the ‘hidden woman’s fear’ she knows will cower in the deep recesses of her gentle heart” (77). Like Faucit, Elliott also gives credit for the initial idea of going forth in disguise to Celia but, unlike Faucit, Elliott attributes greater agency to Rosalind for taking “the bolder step to suit herself” (77). By stressing the feminine aspects of Rosalind’s character, however, Elliott still casts Rosalind’s assertiveness in a socially acceptable light.

Elliott also observes that there is a change of attitude in Rosalind from Act II, scene iv, when Rosalind makes her first appearance in the forest of Arden dressed as a boy and expresses an air of weariness, to Act III, scene ii, when Rosalind discovers Orlando’s love poems; Elliott attributes this shift from weariness to enthusiasm to Rosalind’s inherent femininity and love for Orlando. In Rosalind’s first appearance as the male, Ganymede, Elliott contends that she “assumes a half-jocular manner, which betrays the woman from its scarcely hidden hysteria. She is half-crying with weariness, and yet determined to laugh off such weakness” (Elliott 79). In this instance, Elliott emphasizes Rosalind’s inherently feminine traits and her selflessness, via her desire to cheer her cousin. In Act II, however, when Rosalind discovers the love poems written to her by Orlando, her attitude changes: “Rosalind, who before was so heavy in spirits becomes the life of the forest. The magician’s rod has touched her and she is transformed” (79). This description suggests that Elliott sees Rosalind as a more serious-minded, purposeful character
than as a mirthful, sprightly or light-hearted woman, as Jameson and Faucit seem to view her. Elliott perceives Rosalind’s initial use of a male disguise as a necessary evil that hangs heavily upon her, until she encounters Orlando, at which time, she discerns another purpose for the disguise—to enable her to engage in dialogue with Orlando—and from that moment on, “[t]he man’s attire is no longer abhorrent” (81). Elliott wants to make it very clear that Rosalind always has a definitive, necessary, and useful purpose for impersonating a man and that her subsequent delight in her male guise has more to do with her love for Orlando than with any intrinsic joy derived from impersonating a man.

Elliott also stresses Rosalind’s love for Orlando as a point that more closely allies Rosalind to accepted gender norms when she considers Rosalind’s motivation for attempting to ‘cure’ Orlando of his love. It is at the close of Act III, scene ii that Rosalind, dressed as Ganymede, says to Orlando, “I would cure you, if you would but call me Rosalind and come every day to my cote and woo me” (As You Like It 415-16). In this instance, the motivation for Rosalind’s use of the male disguise is, in Elliott’s opinion, her very womanly love for Orlando. Elliott contends that Rosalind “cannot tire of hearing him confess his love . . . and her girlish ecstasy increases with every fresh assurance, as in mock gravity she goes on to condemn love as a madness” (83). Thus, Rosalind’s professed disdain for love is necessary to conceal the depths of passion that she feels for Orlando. Lest anyone claim that such discourse marks Rosalind as unwomanly, Elliott notes that this is a rare opportunity for a woman to “gaug[e] the depths of her lover’s heart” (86). In Elliott’s view, Rosalind is not toying with her lover but is reassuring herself of his genuine feelings for her, thereby justifying Rosalind’s assertive actions.

The depth of Rosalind’s love is a primary means through which Elliott praises the feminine qualities of this character: “She is so perfectly natural in her passion, so devotedly
attached to her lover, that I question whether money or position would affect her. She would love Orlando although they had to travel life’s journey together on a crust of bread” (86-7). The all-encompassing love Elliott attributes to Rosalind suggests an association with feminine gendered traits, such as devotion, submission, and dedication to a man. Elliott does not see Rosalind as an inferior partner to Orlando, however, nor does she see the depth of Rosalind’s love as negative or improper: “Rosalind’s intellect and wit are of a far higher order than Orlando’s, but she is unconscious of the fact, and assumes no air of superiority on that account” (87). Elliott’s analysis of the couple suggests that, in her view, intellectual superiority in women is not extraordinary or even unusual, a belief that was not always widely accepted during the Victorian era. Elliott’s critique of Beatrice challenges accepted gender norms and attempts to reshape attitudes toward socially imposed gender norms in women. Moreover, Elliott’s comments suggest that the only really offensive or untoward aspect of a pairing between Rosalind and Orlando, one in which a woman is inherently more intelligent than a man, would be for the woman to flaunt her intellectual superiority. Presumably, then, Elliott’s sense of appropriate gendered behavior is that intellectually superior women should remain humble and refrain from dominating men with their intelligence. This position suggests a gender ideology that ascribes to inherent ability and variation among women in conjunction with an adherence to traditionally accepted gendered behaviors, such as modesty and passivity in women. Elliott’s analysis, perhaps unintentionally, emphasizes the dichotomous nature of gender normative behavior for women in Victorian England—that women whose inherent attributes might conflict with socially constructed gender norms must keep those qualities internal and hidden, to a certain extent, even as more socially acceptable behaviors, such as docility and passivity, are demonstrated to adhere to gender normative expectations.
In terms of marriage, however, Elliott is acutely aware of the disadvantage at which
cwomen are placed by society and ascribes the same knowledge to Rosalind. Elliott observes that
during the faux wedding ceremony between Rosalind as Ganymede and Orlando, “the first
premonition of what might darken her future crosses Rosalind’s mind. She still holds Orlando’s
hand, she remembers his vows but she knows that life is not all sunshine, men are not always
faithful” (90). Elliott is referring to the moment immediately after Rosalind as Ganymede and
Orlando have exchanged vows, when Rosalind says to Orlando, “Now tell me how long you
would have her after you have possessed her” (As You Like It IV.i.136-7). Elliott notes that this
thought “checks for a moment [Rosalind’s] voluble flow of fun” (90-1). Here, Elliott alludes to
the very vulnerable position in which women were placed within the cultural practice of
betrothal and marriage. Women in both the Elizabethan and Victorian ages were placed at a great
disadvantage by cultural norms that favored men, both legally, via coverture, and practically, via
social tolerance of behaviors such as infidelity and spousal abuse on the part of the man,
behaviors that would not have been acceptable in women. As Lisa Surridge observes in Bleak
Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction, “wife beating stood at the vortex of some of the
most urgent issues of the period: marital coverture, divorce, domesticity, manliness, and
women’s rights” (6). The inequitable nature of marriage for women is a point that Elliott is
keenly aware of in relation to her understanding of Rosalind’s motivation as a female character.
Moreover, Elliott’s reference to men in general, by noting that “men are not always faithful,”
underscores her application of extant nineteenth-century gender ideology and practice to her
understanding of Rosalind’s character and situation. Elliott treats the union not as a fictional
marriage in which all will be well but as a real union, fraught with real problems.
These observations lead Elliott into a discussion of marriage that seems to be informed by her personal experiences and to reflect her own understanding of Victorian gender ideology. Elliott considers Celia and Rosalind as types of women and muses on the sort of marital situations that would best favor each. Similarly, Victorian novels, such as George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, often explored the nature of pairings and how personalities complemented one another or created friction within marriage, such as is the case in *Middlemarch* with Celia and Chettam’s union presenting an example of the former and Rosamond and Lydgate’s marriage constituting an example of the latter. Elliott contends that Rosalind’s cousin, Celia, “is like many excellent women, sweet, loving, and dependent, who, when trouble assaults them, bow their heads to the blast, and yield in helpless submission” (94). Given Celia’s nature as a more submissive, dependent sort of woman, Elliott believes that Celia would likely marry “a domineering, masterful lord like Oliver” (94). Rosalind, on the other hand, possessing greater intellectual aptitude and a more daring and assertive nature than Celia, “would rule her husband right royally all her life, spite of her worship of him” (94). Clearly, Elliott does not see such traits as intelligence, assertiveness, courage, and strength of character—all traits she associates with Rosalind—as unfeminine, despite the commonly held Victorian beliefs that these traits were traditionally masculine and typically affiliated with men. On the contrary, Elliott suggests that the nature of femininity merely dictates the way in which a woman expresses these traits. By stressing Rosalind’s femininity and womanly nature, Elliott promotes the existence of intelligence, assertiveness, and devotion combined with what she perceives as appropriate female behaviors and thus contributes to the deconstruction and reconstruction of popular gender ideology in the nineteenth century.
Elliott further contemplates the marriage between Rosalind and Orlando, musing as to their fate: “We take leave of them happily married, but whether it is a case of marriage in haste and repentance at leisure or not, must be decided by each of us according to his humor” (97).

Elliott also comments on the examples and practice of marriage that she has witnessed among members of Victorian society:

To be wooed and caressed, and flattered, and fooled to the top of one’s bent is one thing; to be a household drudge, neglected, treated as mere property, to have one’s body full of aches, one’s mind full of anxiety, is another. If men would have their wives keep the freshness of May, they must preserve the wooing gentleness of April . . . it is only when the husband affords the genial showers of kindly love and forethought, varied by the sunshine of cheerful smiles, that the wife can respond with the flowers of an ever-increasing tender attractiveness. (97)

In this instance, Elliott puts the onus for a happy marriage squarely on the husband—a reversal of typical gender norms that commonly placed responsibility for the domestic sphere on women, regardless of a husband’s attitudes or demeanor. Elliott’s references to the drudgery of an unhappy marriage for women also emphasize the relative powerlessness that women will have once they have married and become legally subsumed by their husbands under coverture.114

These very likely scenarios and Elliott’s citation of such practices may reflect ideological support of the need for practical change, such as was beginning to take place in the late nineteenth century with the introduction of the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882. At the very least, Elliott is using her analysis of this play to remind her audience of the need for caution when choosing a mate, particularly for women.

114 In Women and Property in Early Modern England, Amy Louise Erickson comments on the relative powerlessness of women within the state of marriage: “It is impossible to overemphasize the ramifications of coverture upon property practices: women were never appointed overseers of wills, and virtually never trustees of funds or guardians of children—not simply because men were assumed more responsible, but also because if a woman married her legal responsibilities passed to her husband, who, to the man or woman making a will or setting up a trust, was an unknown quantity” (229). Although explicitly discussing the ramifications of coverture on property, the same condition can be applied to political and practical power, which underscores the need for women to marry wisely. Elliott is keenly aware that this powerlessness will be an untenable situation for many women who have chosen badly and are then confined to a life of ‘drudgery’ as a result of their choice.
Elliott ultimately portrays Rosalind as an actual type of woman rather than merely as a fictional character when she claims that “in no other play does Shakespeare give such insight into a pure maidenly heart” (95). Elliott clearly sees Rosalind as a model of womanhood, a perspective that is in keeping with the Victorian propensity to point to Shakespeare’s female characters as models of behavior for girls and to use Shakespeare’s drama as a foundation for female education. Elliott further comments on the actual practices of men and women within Victorian society, via her analysis of Rosalind, when she comments on the benefits of studying Shakespeare for Victorian women. She cites an occasion when she met two “mature virgins of eight-and-thirty and forty summers,” respectively, whose mother had never allowed them to read Shakespeare (96). Elliott’s response is one of sympathy for the women and implicit disdain for their mother: “Never to have read Shakespeare! How I pitied them as I no longer wondered at their cold, unsympathetic manners and voices!” (96). For Elliott, Shakespeare’s drama and characterizations present an opportunity to study human nature, to expand and deepen one’s understanding of people and society. It should come as no surprise, then, that Elliott would consistently turn to Shakespeare’s female characters as exemplars of practical femininity.

**Conclusion**

Jameson, Faucit and Elliott struggle with the ideological problem of legitimizing Shakespeare’s admirable, intelligent, and engaging female characters—Portia, Beatrice, and Rosalind—when these characters blur the lines between male and female behaviors, but all three critics manage to justify and redeem Shakespeare’s heroines by virtue of their inherent femininity, thereby reinforcing a belief in the need for women to act appropriately within a social context. Because the destabilization of gender norms is nullified through the affirmation of
cultural norms, namely via marriage, these characters essentially reaffirm the validity of much Victorian gender ideology, even as they contest other preconceived notions of inherently gendered traits, such as intellectuality.

Societal attitudes toward women and women’s issues throughout the nineteenth century reflect a range of both development and stasis in gender ideology; while much progress was made in legislating greater autonomy for women through the latter half of the nineteenth century, many in society still viewed women as inherently domestic, maternal, and essentially uneducatable. In addition, throughout the nineteenth century, most Victorians continued to view marriage as the primary objective for middle class women, a view that seems to be upheld by the respective analyses of Shakespeare’s wise and witty women that is performed by Jameson, Faucit, and Elliott. These critics express attitudes toward gender ideology that reflect a willingness to promote female intellectuality even as they adhere to traditional gender norms that govern female behavior, such as passivity, religiosity, selflessness, and appropriately emotional expressions of love. While there are general points of agreement among these critics, their often divergent and very distinct perceptions of gender appropriate behavior tends to demonstrate the complexity of gender ideology among women, particularly among women who were contemporaries, such as Faucit and Elliott.


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**Secondary Texts**


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