

THE POLITICS OF FEMALE  
PLAINNESS IN BRITISH WOMEN'S  
WRITING, 1830-1867

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## **Abstract**

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This thesis explores the representation of female plainness as a choice and as a defining feature of identity in mid-nineteenth-century British women's fiction. I consider how female plainness, contrary to our modern interpretation of it as self-effacing or invisible, became self-defining and empowering. Based on a selection of novels written between the 1830s and 1860s by Charlotte Brontë and other contemporary, but often underexplored, authors such as Margaret Oliphant, Dinah Mulock Craik, Sarah Stickney Ellis, and Eliza Lynn Linton, I examine the ways in which female plainness offered an alternative set of values and opportunities of self-expression within a culture dominated by its own social and cultural notions of female beauty, femininity, and what constitutes acceptable behaviour. I argue that plainness evolves in mid-nineteenth century women's writing as a subversive category that emphasises issues of resistance, empowerment, and female agency. While there already exists a substantial amount of research focused on the representation of the plain heroine in the canonical works of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, this thesis demonstrates the evolving interest in plainness at mid-century in ways not recognised before. The female authors whose works I engage with in this thesis should be recognised as active participants in the debates that shaped the contemporary discourse of plainness and its subversiveness in women's writing. This thesis offers an original stance on plainness in women's writing, acknowledging both its dynamic and creative features as well as the challenges it created.

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## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Plainness: Contexts and Debates</b>	<b>17</b>
On Female Beauty, Plainness, and Ideals of Femininity, 1820s-1870s	19
Plain Dress	29
Female Plainness in and Beyond Brontë's <i>Jane Eyre</i>	39
<b>Chapter 2: '[P]lainer, if possible, than ever': Female Plainness in the Early Works of Charlotte Brontë</b>	<b>51</b>
Early Juvenilia, 1829-1835: Beauty, Fashion, and the Construction of Social Difference	55
Late Juvenilia, 1835-1838: Fading Beauty and the Rise of the Politics of Plainness	61
Plainness and Self-Representation in Brontë's 'Henry Hastings'	66
<b>Chapter 3: Performing Plainness: Women, Dress, and Self-Representation</b>	<b>80</b>
Lucy Snowe and the Anxiety of Colour	83
'[P]lain even to severity': Dinah Mulock Craik's <i>The Head of the Family</i>	98
The Plain Quakeress in Sarah Stickney Ellis's <i>Friends at Their Own Fireside: Or, Pictures of the Private Life of the People Called Quakers</i>	110
<b>Chapter 4: Plainness as a 'Gift' in Margaret Oliphant's <i>The Athelings; or The Three Gifts</i> and Dinah Mulock Craik's <i>A Life for a Life</i></b>	<b>122</b>
'[T]he one had beauty and the other genius of a rare and unusual kind': Contrasting Sisters in Margaret Oliphant's <i>The Athelings: or, The Three Gifts</i>	126
'[A] face by itself, its peculiarities pleasant, its plainness sacred': The Plain Heroine in Dinah Mulock Craik's <i>A Life for a Life</i>	139
<b>Chapter 5: 'An Absolute Negation of All Charms': The Plain Heroine in Eliza Lynn Linton's <i>Sowing the Wind</i></b>	<b>152</b>
'[T]he "rights" of plain girls': Linton and the Politicised Debates on the Fictional Plain Heroine	156
Linton's <i>Sowing the Wind</i>	163
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>187</b>

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in footnotes:

- EEW* Charlotte Brontë, *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Christine Alexander, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1987-1991)
- TA* Charlotte Brontë, *Tales of Angria*, ed. by Heather Glen, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2006)

## Introduction

[S]he supposed she had a right to alter at her ease. She knew she was plainer: if it suited her to grow ugly, why need others fret themselves on the subject?<sup>1</sup>

In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), the narrator describes the eponymous Miss Keeldar's annoyance with her family's concern at her fading beauty. Shirley's response expresses a sense of entitlement and a recognition of her 'right' to be plain 'if it suited her'. The representation of female plainness as a woman's choice and as a defining feature of identity in mid-nineteenth-century British women's fiction is the focus of my thesis. Among its varied meanings, the adjective 'plain' is often opposed to beauty, adornment, and superficiality. My aim in this thesis is to interrogate and expand our understanding of the concept of female plainness and to argue that its connotations become more complex as they intertwine with wider issues of gender, class, and aesthetics, both in women's writing and the wider culture of the period between the 1830s and 1860s.

I focus on fiction written by Charlotte Brontë, Dinah Mulock Craik, Sarah Stickney Ellis, Margaret Oliphant, and Eliza Lynn Linton, in order to explore the ways in which female plainness offered an alternative set of values and opportunities of self-expression within a culture dominated by its own social and cultural notions of female beauty, femininity, and what constitutes acceptable behaviour. I argue that female plainness evolves in mid-nineteenth-century women's writing as a subversive category that emphasises issues of resistance, empowerment, and female agency. In suggesting a 'politics of plainness' in my title, I aim to highlight this sense of interrogation and subversion of cultural and ideal notions of femininity and beauty, which I contend are embedded in the novels' representation of plainness and its meanings. Malin Pereira has maintained that the fictional representation of a character's beauty or, on the other hand, plainness or ugliness, can often point to the narrative's engagement with the

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 416.

‘politics of hegemonic aesthetics’.<sup>2</sup> She suggests that the representation of physical appearance is significant, not merely as a method of describing what a character looks like, but also because it:

allows women writers’ texts their full interaction with culture, both as participation and critique. Such a method of reading allows us to discern how women writers position their texts in relation to both dominant and suppressed aesthetic values and standards – how they negotiate, by participation, interrogation, construction of alternatives, or rejection, prevailing aesthetic systems.<sup>3</sup>

My reading of plainness in this thesis recognises and partakes of this approach which emphasises women writers’ engagement with these ‘systems’. I maintain that plain appearances are not only surface representations, but act as signifiers that facilitate interrogation and challenge. The nineteenth century witnessed heated debates over the ‘woman question’. From Harriet Martineau and Sarah Lewis in the 1830s to Caroline Norton and J. S. Mill in the 1850s and 1860s, these discussions and debates questioned women’s social and political roles, as well as their physiological, psychological, and even moral nature.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of many of these debates lay an awareness of the limitations and injustices faced by women at the time and a quest to shed light on these issues. Women’s fiction participated in these debates and concerns, which also directed, in many instances, their representation of a heroine’s experience.<sup>5</sup> The representation of plainness points to these novels’ involvement not only in questioning the hierarchical and patriarchal organisation of ideals of beauty, but also women’s roles and potential. This thesis traces the reworking and reinterpretation of plainness in mid-century women’s writing in order to explore individuality and self-determination. Plainness, as I will argue, ceases to be a mere opposite to beauty, as in all its connotations of inferiority, invisibility, and lack, it becomes redefined and made to transcend these

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<sup>2</sup> Malin Pereira, *Embodying Beauty: Twentieth-Century American Women Writers Aesthetics* (London: Garland, 2000), xiv.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Alexis Easley, *First-Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830–1870* (London: Routledge, 2017), and Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women’s Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

limiting and constraining meanings. These works and their representation of plainness contribute to the formation of the plain female subject as an individual who is no longer defined by these socially-constructed binaries and norms, but alternatively as a heroine who grows to be worthy in her own right.

Vigorous debates on female beauty and its broader socio-cultural significance in women's writing have occurred from at least the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Famous figures including Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More, and Sara Coleridge questioned the cultural and social conceptions of female beauty. Wollstonecraft, for example, viewed beauty's position as a defining feature of femininity to be a hindrance to women's intellectual development and their rights in society.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Hannah More, and later in the century, Sarah Stickney Ellis feared its interference with feminine modesty, purity, and domesticity.<sup>8</sup> The focus on the mid-nineteenth century in this thesis, specifically the decades from the 1830s to 1860s, relates to my engagement with this period as a major turning point in the literary and aesthetic

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Sarah Scott's *Agreeable Ugliness: or, The Triumph of the Graces* (1754), a first-person narrative by an 'ugly' woman that interrogates the common belief that virtue lies only in a beautiful exterior. Scott's text is an English translation of Pierre Antoine de la Place's *La Laideur Amiable et les Dangers de la Beauté* (1752).

<sup>7</sup> Wollstonecraft challenged the gendered conceptions of beauty. She criticised 'male prejudice, which deems beauty the perfection of woman – mere beauty of features and complexion, the vulgar acceptance of the word, whilst male beauty is allowed to have some connection with the mind'. See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. by Janet Todd, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 140. See also Ana de Freitas Boe, "'I Call Beauty a Social Quality': Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More's Rejoinder to Edmund Burke's Body Politic of the Beautiful", *Women's Writing*, 18, 3 (2011), 348-366.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah More expressed her concerns about social standards of female physical beauty. She maintained: 'many ladies have often a random way of talking rapturously on the general importance and the fascinating power of beauty .... Seek to lower the general value of beauty in her estimation. Use your daughter in all things to a different standard from that of the world'. See Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education: With a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Rank and Fortune* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1799), p. 138. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101075718641&view=1up&seq=9> [accessed March 2020] In *The Daughters of England* (1842), Ellis also addressed plain girls and warned against comparing themselves with beauties; 'go home, then, and consult your mirror; no falsehood will be there. Go home, and find, as you have often done before, that even without beauty, you can make the fireside circle happy there; nor deem your lot a hard one. From many dangers attendant upon beauty you are safe, from many sorrows you are exempt; above all, should you become a wife, from that which is, perhaps, the greatest calamity in woman's history, the loss of her husband's love, because the charms for which alone he valued her have vanished, - this never can be your experience, and so far you are blest'. See Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1842), p. 186. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015064810131&view=1up&seq=7> [accessed March 2020]

conceptualisation of female plainness. This is particularly connected from a literary point of view to the critical reception of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the debates surrounding plainness and its representation in fiction. While, in my epigraph, Brontë's *Shirley* alludes to the heroine's plainness at that given moment and explores it in the light of asserting her agency, it is *Jane Eyre* that intimately represents its heroine's experience of being a plain woman. Indeed, Brontë is central to my thesis because of the way in which her work, particularly *Jane Eyre*, revolutionised the contemporary view of female plainness and all its underlying meanings and implications. While many reviews criticised the novel's choice of the plain heroine and her coarseness, an array of plain heroines began to be featured in novels in the decades that followed its publication.<sup>9</sup> *Jane Eyre* was not only successful and widely-read, but the contemporary response to the novel reinvigorated the significance of plainness and its meanings in both negative and positive ways.

With *Jane Eyre* partly in mind, Douglas Mao identifies the nineteenth-century novel as the genre through which the 'physically less beautiful subject at last came into her own [...] the experience of lacking beauty becomes as discursively shareable as any – becomes legible *as* a human experience'.<sup>10</sup> The increasing popularity of plain heroines following *Jane Eyre*, as I will argue, makes an important point of consideration in assessing the ways in which female plainness became, as Mao remarks, a 'legible human experience' with the potential to destabilise the process of authors and readers' identification only with the ideal beautiful heroine. I particularly pay attention to the ways in which Victorian women writers readily recognised the potential of plainness to offer an empowering stance from which to represent female identity. This thesis seeks to demonstrate that the interest in and representation of plainness was not exclusive to Brontë's famous novels, as is commonly assumed today, but extended to other contemporary works and was part of a wider collective interest in this phenomenon than has hitherto been recognised. By looking at Charlotte Brontë's juvenilia as well as a broader spectrum of relatively less well-known novels by other mid-century authors such as Craik, Oliphant, and Linton, I will show how much more

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<sup>9</sup> See my discussion of *Jane Eyre* in chapter one, pp. 47-49.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Mao, 'The Labor Theory of Beauty: Aesthetic Justice, Blind Justice', in *Aesthetic Subjects*, ed. by Pamela R. Matthews and David McWhirter (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 190-229 (pp. 204-205).

extensive and significant the debate and engagement with female plainness in women's fiction of the period were. I argue that the female authors, whose works I engage with in this thesis, should be recognised as active participants in the debates that shaped the contemporary discourse of plainness and its subversiveness in women's writing.

Despite having broadened the scope of this thesis beyond a sole focus on Brontë, I include discussion of *Jane Eyre* in my Introduction, and the novel remains a touchstone case throughout the thesis in my exploration of the development of the representations of plainness and its subversive agenda. However, the central purpose of this thesis is to move beyond this well-known representation of the plain heroine and explore the concept of plainness both before and after *Jane Eyre*. I have chosen the novels under discussion partly because of the degree of their interaction, both thematic and textual, with Brontë's work. Patsy Stoneman has noted that 'if we were to look before *Jane Eyre* as well as after, we would undoubtedly see the novel as part of a continuous flux of literary production and reproduction'.<sup>11</sup> My thesis aims to take Stoneman's point further by exploring this thread of 'production and reproduction' from Brontë's juvenilia (1830-1839) into the decades that follow (1850-1867) by paying attention to the subversive development of female plainness and its representation in women's fiction.

I explore plainness in two directions. The thesis examines first the rise and interrogation of female plainness in the early works of Charlotte Brontë well before the publication of *Jane Eyre*. The 1830s is a significant period in which Brontë's artistic and authorial identity emerges and develops. Her late juvenilia (1835-39), in particular, was produced in an instrumental phase that led to Brontë's development of the concept of plainness. I then consider the post-*Jane Eyre* phase by looking at the development of the idea of plainness and its representation in Brontë's later works as well as other women's fiction. In my discussion of *Villette*, I reflect on how the novel differs from *Jane Eyre* in its treatment of Lucy Snowe's plainness. Brontë's *Villette* is significant because of its careful attention to the links between plain dress and Lucy's sense of

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<sup>11</sup> Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p. 18. See also *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives*, ed. by Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

agency. In Chapter Three, I draw connections between *Villette* and the novels of Craik and Ellis to demonstrate the significant role that plain dress plays in these narratives and their negotiation of female identity. I then explore plainness in other novels by Craik, Oliphant, and Linton and how they interact and engage with current conceptions and debates on plainness to represent their heroines' individuality and experience of self-expression. These novels, which I discuss in the last two chapters of the thesis, reveal significant intertextual connections with Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and the wider literary debates about the growing interest in plainness in women's writing at the time.

Overall, I explore the ways in which Brontë's early works as well as *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* engage in dialogue with other contemporary fiction by female authors, those who share the interest in this ideal of plainness and its multiple significances in representing female experience and identity. This thesis closely considers and identifies a particular mid-Victorian phase in the engagement with and responses to female plainness, both before and after *Jane Eyre*. It aims to demonstrate that engagement with and reworking of plainness into a meaningful representation of female self-determination was a potent and significant feature of women's writing of the period, which has hitherto been unrecognised. The representation of female plainness, of course, does not cease to be interesting in the decades that follow the 1860s, a point at which I am obliged to limit my research. While George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* (1871-72) is a heroine whose self-appointed plainness continues to fascinate literary critics, the scope of this thesis is limited to the late 1860s in order to allow closer scrutiny of some of these less-known works, ones that need to be brought to attention and situated within this wider discourse of plainness commonly limited to the canonical works of Brontë and Eliot.<sup>12</sup>

There has been considerable scholarly interest in the concept of female beauty in Victorian literature, culture, and society. However, female plainness has also begun to be considered and its meanings unravelled in recent scholarly work. In her seminal study on physiognomy and characterisation in the nineteenth-century novel, Jeanne Fahnestock notes how the period between the 1830s and 1860s was marked by an increased interest in character description that was triggered by the arising interest in

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Rosy Aindow's discussion of Dorothea's plainness in *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 55-88.

physiognomy and its role as an ‘entry into meaning’.<sup>13</sup> She further notes how the ‘heroine of irregular features is capable of irregular conduct. She can act, make mistakes, learn from them, and grow’.<sup>14</sup> Fahnstock’s foundational work points to the ways in which a heroine’s lack of beauty appears to grant her some freedom and becomes an opportunity for self-discovery and growth beyond the constraints associated with Victorian readers’ expectations of the ideal beautiful heroine and her behaviour. Recent scholarly work has begun to recognise and engage with such approaches to reading physical difference in relation to women and their representation in fiction. For example, in her study of the politics of identity and ugliness in early modern culture, Naomi Baker observes that ‘female agency is repeatedly aligned with ugliness’.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in her survey of ugly and plain heroines in American fiction, Charlotte M. Wright maintains that a heroine’s lack of beauty functions ‘as a savior to the woman for whom beauty would be too great a temptation to letting one’s life slip by without real effort to achieve’.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the deliberate absence of beauty as a defining female quality in a work of art can, in effect, be liberating and empowering. As Linda Worley has observed, ‘any deviance from the ideal *should not be read as incidental but rather as purposeful*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as Fahnstock and others have demonstrated, looking closely and considering the significance of the representation of alternative standards that deviate from beauty, including plainness, ugliness, and deformity, can shed light on and contribute to our thinking about the dynamics of female identity formation beyond the one ideal of perfect beauty.

The Victorian novel, with figures like Brontë’s Jane Eyre and later in the century Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver or Dorothea Brooke, has received extensive attention in recent scholarly work due to its engagement with these differences and their wider

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<sup>13</sup> Jeanne Fahnstock, ‘The Heroine of Irregular Features: Physiognomy and Conventions of Heroine Description’, *Victorian Studies*, 24, 3 (1981), 325-350 (p. 325).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>15</sup> Naomi Baker, *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> Charlotte M. Wright, *Plain and Ugly Janes: The Rise of the Ugly Woman in Contemporary American Fiction* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2006), p. 123.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Kraus Worley, ‘The Body, Beauty, and Woman: The Ugly Heroine in Stories by Therese Huber and Gabriele Reuter’, *German Quarterly*, 64, 3 (1991), 368-378 (p. 369).

implications. Carol-Ann Farkas distinguishes between Brontë and Eliot in their representation of plainness.<sup>18</sup> She notes in her reference to Eliot's Mary Garth that:

Mary is plain, and not conventionally passive and acquiescent; if she were a Brontë heroine, her strong personal integrity and work ethic might have been made to dominate this novel. However, plainness in Eliot does not seem to be a special marker for nonconformity as it is in Bronte; rather, Mary's appearance and behaviour, while exemplary, serve rather to signify an approved combination of conformity with common sense.<sup>19</sup>

Farkas discerns the subversive and defining role that plainness plays in Brontë's text when compared with Eliot. I agree that Brontë's forceful representation of the plain heroine and her right to self-determination makes her distinct and crucial to an understanding of female plainness in the nineteenth century and, in particular, its 'non-conforming' potential, as Farkas has noted. Farkas has in mind social non-conformity and the way that a heroine's appearance signals her capacity or inability to transcend these limiting boundaries of acceptable social behaviour. Plainness in Brontë's novel, indeed, has wide social and moral implications that are significant, and on which Farkas and many others focus. However, as I will argue, it also entails an important sense of personal identification with plainness that plays a crucial part in Jane's journey toward self-realisation as a plain woman.

There is, for example, a clear contrast between the plainness of Brontë's heroines and that of Jane Austen's characters. Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) begins with the question of whether Catherine Morland was 'born to be an heroine'.<sup>20</sup> Catherine's physical appearance functions as an important sign in the novel's scheme

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<sup>18</sup> Carol-Ann Farkas, 'Beauty is as Beauty Does: Action and Appearance in Brontë and Eliot', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 29 (2000), 323-349 (p. 340). Lori Hope Lefkowitz has also pointed out that 'Eliot, though she gives us Mary Burge and Mary Garth, Dinah and Dorothea are the real Marys, as both heroines are linked to Madonnas and angels. Eliot's ideals are not ordinary'. See Lori Hope Lefkowitz, *The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 180. However, the position of Mary Garth as a plain minor heroine in *Middlemarch* has been reclaimed in recent scholarly studies. See Bernard J. Paris, *Rereading George Eliot: Changing Responses to Her Experiments in Life* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 81-110; Nicole M. Coonradt, 'Writing Mary Garth: Locating Middle Ground among Female Characters in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies*, 62, 63 (2012), 16-33; and Elisabeth Kinsey-Bull, 'Mary Garth's "Beautiful Soul": "Inner Abilities" as *Bildung* in *Middlemarch*', *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies*, 71, 2 (2019), 164-188.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (London: John Murray, 1818), p. 1.

to challenge the conventionally beautiful heroine of the gothic novel. At the age of ten, Catherine is ‘as plain as any. She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark, lank hair, and strong features’.<sup>21</sup> The novel, however, soon revises its representation of Catherine as she develops into ‘quite a good-looking girl’, one who ‘is almost pretty to-day’.<sup>22</sup> Austen, despite her purposeful detachment of Catherine’s appearance from that of the ideally feminine heroine, nevertheless reveals an urge to soften that fact and make her a girl who grows to be pretty. Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* (1817) becomes also conscious of the loss of her beauty and vitality. She hopes that she will be ‘blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty’.<sup>23</sup> June Sturrock observes that Anne ‘has a physical appearance that changes with time and experience and is explicitly in process’.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the shifting appearance of Anne in the novel and other characters’ reactions to such change become indicative of her psychological state and her responsiveness to what she is experiencing. Anne is later described by a friend of Wentworth as ‘pretty ... Anne Elliot; very pretty when you come to look at her’.<sup>25</sup> Hence, both Catherine Morland and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* are not denied the gift of beauty, but rather come to acquire it at the right time as a result of experience, growth, and love. These novels do not appear to express a rejection of female beauty as much as they oppose its limited role as an indicator of female worth or interiority.

Even among her own works, there appear to be some variances in Brontë’s depiction of a heroine’s plainness. Our first glimpse of Frances Henri’s face in *The Professor* (1857) is hazy and uncertain. Crimsworth distinguishes her difference from the other girls in the school but declares, ‘I can pronounce no encomiums on her beauty for she was not beautiful, nor offer condolence on her plainness for neither was she

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. by James Kinsley, Oxford Worlds’ Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 101.

<sup>24</sup> June Sturrock, *Jane Austen’s Families* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), p. 105. Enit Steiner notices a similar tendency in *Pride and Prejudice* as ‘the gradual discovery of the visual delight that Darcy takes in Elizabeth suggests that Elizabeth’s appearance is always in flux and cannot be captured or categorised’. See Enit Karafili Steiner, *Jane Austen’s Civilized Women: Morality, Gender and the Civilizing Process* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 140.

<sup>25</sup> Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 144.

plain'.<sup>26</sup> W. C. Roscoe, in his appraisal of Brontë, describes Frances as a 'refined and softened Jane Eyre'.<sup>27</sup> The latter novel appears to embrace a firm and unchanged conviction in Jane's plainness that is never abandoned throughout the narrative. Plainness is the original and even final state of Jane rather than beauty. Plainness claims its own desirability in the novel without having to be reframed in the conventional image of female beauty. Hence, the novel, as many other critics have pointed out, remains an important touchstone to understanding the significance and subversiveness of plainness in the Victorian novel. However, the role that Jane's plainness plays as an expression of individuality and self-determination has not been duly recognised when compared to the social and moral components that many critics have found to be at the core of Brontë's work and its representation of plainness.

Brontë's characterisation of the plain heroine has been considered by various critics as an attempt to subvert the social and cultural notions of feminine beauty that were prevalent at the time. Jen Cadwallader, for example, looks at Brontë's representation of the plain heroine in *Jane Eyre* as a reaction to the fairy tale feminine ideal and the cultural values of female beauty it promoted.<sup>28</sup> Farkas, similarly, maintains that plainness in Brontë's novel revolves around her heroine's sense of social alienation that ultimately compels her to recognize her own unique beauty through the 'unconventional' means of moral development.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Brontë's vision of plainness, as I will also argue in my discussion of her juvenilia, stems from and interrogates the cultural construction of ideal femininity and beauty. I specifically show how plainness evolves in her late juvenilia as a reaction to her earlier fascination with and representation of femininity at a younger age, which was largely determined by contemporary culture and its standards of female beauty. Most importantly, however, I argue that plainness is not simply a negation of beauty but comes also to reflect the heroine's sense of self-determination in the tale. Unlike Farkas, I contend that the plain

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<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, ed. by Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 102-3. Margaret E. Mitchell has similarly noted that in Brontë's *Shirley* the 'narrator's presentation of Caroline's charm is slightly ironic... forcing us to acknowledge the possibility of plainness before negating it'. See Margaret E. Mitchell, 'Reforming Beauty in Brontë's *Shirley*', in *Gender and Victorian Reform*, ed. by Anita Rose (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), pp. 152-160 (p. 153).

<sup>27</sup> W. C. Roscoe, 'Miss Brontë', *National Review*, June 1857, pp. 127-64 (p. 161).

<sup>28</sup> Jen Cadwallader, "'Formed for Labour, Not for Love": Plain Jane and the Limits of Female Beauty', *Brontë Studies*, 34, 3 (2009), 234-246.

<sup>29</sup> Farkas, 'Beauty Is as Beauty Does: Action and Appearance in Brontë and Eliot', p. 328, 332.

heroine's self-recognition is not merely the result of her overcoming inferiority and marginalisation, but her plainness also reflects a deep sense of agency that signals her difference from other heroines and the paths they choose.

Other recent studies of *Jane Eyre* take a more nuanced approach to understanding the role of Jane's plainness in the text. Sarah Wootton contends that Jane's plainness does not revolve around her lack of beauty, but is rather an attempt to 'defer' Jane's 'material female identity'.<sup>30</sup> Wootton maintains that the novel contemplates the 'unassertiveness' of Jane's physical reality rather than its 'unattractiveness'. Wootton, thus, appears to dispute the corporeality and legibility of Jane's physical plainness in the novel. A similar mode of reasoning comes across in Laurence Talairach-Vielmas's work, in which she considers the prospects of Jane's invisibility or 'spectral self' on her path toward independence.<sup>31</sup> The visibility and corporeality of Jane's plainness in both studies is underplayed, and instead looked at as a state of non-existence in which the novel upholds Jane's interiority. This element of invisibility is certainly an important point of consideration in reading Brontë's representation of plainness in her works. However, such an approach tends to underestimate the exteriority of plainness and the multiple references to it in the novel. When St. John Rivers contemplates Jane's face, contrary to his sisters' reaction to her appearance, he pronounces his judgement that 'ill or well, she would always be plain'.<sup>32</sup> Rivers detects in his physiognomic scrutiny of Jane's face its discernible plainness, which he affirms as a long-lasting quality. G. H. Lewes, similarly, remarks in his review of the novel: '*We never lose sight of her plainness*; no effort is made to throw romance about her – no extraordinary goodness or cleverness appeals to your admiration; but you admire, you love her' (emphasis mine).<sup>33</sup> Lewes also discerns the overarching presence of Jane's plainness in the novel that constantly directs our view of her. These remarks, I would like to suggest, are not meant to indicate Jane's physical inferiority, but rather to inform the distinct and perpetual delineation of her plainness in the

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<sup>30</sup> Sarah Wootton, 'Female Beauty and Portraits of Self-Effacement in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*', in *The Persistence of Beauty: Victorians to Moderns*, ed. by Michael O'Neill and others (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 15-30 (p. 27, 30).

<sup>31</sup> Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, "'Portrait of a Governess, Disconnected, Poor, and Plain": Staging the Spectral Self in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*', *Brontë Studies*, 34, 2 (2009), 127-137 (p. 135).

<sup>32</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Stephanie Colomb, Longman Classics (Essex: Longman, 1991), p. 362.

<sup>33</sup> G. H. Lewes, 'Recent Novels: French and English', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, December 1847, pp. 686-695 (p. 692).

narrative. Beth Newman, by contrast, frames Brontë's representation of Jane's plainness as a 'strategic self-effacement in the visual sphere'.<sup>34</sup> In this description, Newman invokes the conflicts and paradoxes of visibility and invisibility, exteriority and interiority that I also examine in this thesis. However, I would like to complicate Newman's argument by exploring how this 'strategic self-effacement' could be paradoxically understood as a form of self-representation and self-definition that asserts agency, one that purposefully rebels against a narrow definition of female beauty and self-expression.

In 1836, Charles Lamb referred to the unique amiability of the plain Mrs Conrady in his essay 'That Handsome is that Handsome Does'.<sup>35</sup> He remarked:

No one ever saw Mrs. Conrady, without pronouncing her to be the plainest woman that he ever met with in the course of his life. ... Neither is it of that order of plain faces which improve upon acquaintance ... No, it stands upon its own merits fairly. There it is. It is her mark, her token; that which she is known by.<sup>36</sup>

Lamb's description of Mrs Conrady's plainness acknowledges it to be worthy and admirable in its own right. Such a recognition of plainness as a 'mark' and a 'token' admits the exteriority, visibility, and authenticity of plainness. The significance of Jane's plainness and its multiple forms appears to be dismissed when considering her plainness only in terms of physical absence, invisibility, or self-denial. I aim to move away from the common understanding of plainness as lack of beauty or only a reflection of interiority. As I will demonstrate, the interest and engagement of Victorian women writers with plainness complicates our understanding of plainness as utter self-denial or invisibility. The plain heroines of these novels are not only seen by other characters, but their unique facial features and expressiveness become intriguing and celebrated. Plainness also becomes a form of self-representation and self-expression that destabilises these connotations of weakness and self-effacement. Plainness in Brontë's work, as well as that of others I discuss in this thesis, could be argued to be deliberate.

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<sup>34</sup> Beth Newman, *Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation, and Victorian Femininity* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Lamb, 'That Handsome is that Handsome Does', in *The Prose Works of Charles Lamb: Last Essays of Elia*, 3 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1836), III, pp. 258-26. Google ebook.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 261.

It does not merely develop from a stance of inconspicuousness and inferiority, but becomes a defining feature of identity in the narrative.

A comprehensive study of the representation of plainness in women's writing and its engagement with the contemporary social, gendered, and literary discourse beyond the canonical works of Brontë or Eliot has yet to be written. This thesis does not claim to be comprehensive, but it sets out to begin the process of recovering the significance of hitherto neglected areas in the representation of plainness and the interest it generated during the mid-nineteenth century. This thesis argues that the works I examine, those written both before and after *Jane Eyre*, were equally strategic and creative in their representation of plainness. In their depiction of plainness, these novels readily engage with it as a signifier of female individuality and empowerment. I think that in our choice to limit our reading of plainness to forms of interiority, invisibility, and self-denial, we tend to disregard the manifestations of individuality and self-assertion that are rooted in Brontë's representation of it and which, I argue here, were also central to women's fiction of the period. I contend that the subversiveness of plainness fundamentally arises from the recognition of its visibility and legibility as a quality in its own right. Moreover, these depictions of plainness not only question the premise of the inferiority or invisibility of plainness but engage with it to offer a redefinition of its authenticity and the ways in which it can evolve to claim its own right as a form of beauty and self-definition. As I will argue, the engagement with plainness in women's writing is not only limited to the facial homeliness with which a heroine is born, but also extends to the politics of self-representation and self-expression, particularly in relation to dress, speech, and writing. The novels discussed in this thesis most often begin with the physical description of the heroine as 'plain', but go on to reveal the broader and far-reaching significations of plainness in relation to female identity. My reading of these mid-century narratives reveals the politicised role that plainness plays in the representation of female experience.

Following my discussion of plainness and its wider social, moral, and aesthetic features in the next chapter, my thesis divides into four further chapters, each of which looks at a selection of novels that engage with the concept of female plainness. In tracing the development in the representation of plainness among female authors, I examine these texts chronologically, starting with Brontë's juvenilia in the 1830s and

ending my discussion with some of Linton's works published in the late 1860s. The second chapter of the thesis, "[P]lain, if possible, than ever": Female Plainness in the Early Works of Charlotte Brontë', looks at Brontë's lesser-known attention to and portrayal of female plainness in her early writings (1830-39), mainly through the characters of Marian Hume and more prominently Elizabeth Hastings, who is often referred to as the prototype of Jane Eyre.<sup>37</sup> I follow the development of the symbolic construction of appearance to denote multiple social and moral meanings in Brontë's Angrian narrative, from her early conception of social difference into a more subversive engagement with female subjectivity. In doing this, I will ask why and how female plainness emerges in the context of her early writings amidst her infatuation with the portrayal of her beautiful heroines. The representation of the plain Elizabeth Hastings, as I will argue, reveals some fundamental rethinking of feminine dependence and subjugation in these tales. The narrative's portrayal of Elizabeth's plainness offers an alternative that challenges the earlier possessive and idolatrous vision of beauty in the narrative through a more authentic recognition of the less beautiful heroine. This chapter will reveal the extent to which Brontë experimented with plainness even at this early stage of her writing career to establish her heroine's independence and self-attainment in the late 1830s prior to the publication of *Jane Eyre*.

In Chapter Three, 'Performing Plainness: Women, Dress and Self-Representation', I focus on three novels written in the 1850s that reinforce the idea of plain appearance as a self-willed choice. Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Dinah Mulock Craik's *The Head of the Family* (1852), and Sarah Stickney Ellis's *Friends at Their Own Fireside; or, Pictures of the Private Life of the People Called Quakers* (1858) all feature heroines whose social and psychological experiences can be interpreted by looking at the texts' portrayal of their embodied experience of plainness. I have chosen to focus on *Villette* because, among Brontë's work, this novel is particularly attentive to female dress and the links between identity and self-fashioning. A focus on this aspect of the novel allows me to situate it in relation to other novels of the period that were also attentive to their heroines' plainness. In examining the role of plain dress in these narratives, I will establish its importance as a signifier, not only within the

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<sup>37</sup> Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 168.

contemporary discourse of social distinctions, but also in the realm of representing individual female subjectivity and experience. The depiction of plain dress in these novels communicates a set of meanings that revolve around female agency and resilience.

Continuing to build upon my discussion of the influence of *Jane Eyre*, Chapters Four and Five explore the theme of plainness in works by Oliphant, Craik, and Linton and do so in the context of the Victorian critical debate on Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and its alleged coarseness. In Chapter Four, 'Plainness as a "Gift" in Margaret Oliphant's *The Athelings; or, The Three Gifts* and Dinah Craik's *A Life for a Life*', the 'gift' of both plain heroines is explored as that of genius and expression. The two novels draw upon the idea of female authorship and self-writing, which were important parts of *Jane Eyre*, as well as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). I argue that plainness in these novels is particularly associated with the representation of the heroines' writing experience and its bearing upon both self-expression and self-realisation. In parallel to the plainness of her face, the heroine's writing experience represents her individuality and the pure self-expression it allows in the narrative. This chapter considers the ambivalent representation of female authorship in the works of Oliphant and Craik in the context of the discourse of female plainness.

My fifth and final chapter, "'An Absolute Negation of All Charms": The Plain Heroine in Eliza Lynn Linton's *Sowing the Wind*', follows the journey of the obscure and plain Jane Osborn into recognition and professional success as a journalist, in the light of one of Linton's anonymously published articles in the *Saturday Review* in the same year titled 'Plain Girls'. Linton's work and its overt intertextuality with Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is critical to the consideration of female plainness and its subversiveness in the 1860s. This closing chapter provides a more thorough insight into the contemporary popularity of plain heroines and the debates such intrigue fuelled. Linton's work and its interaction with these debates further demonstrate the contested nature of female plainness and its contravention of social norms and gender ideals. Female plainness plays a very significant role in building up Linton's argument in the article toward proposing educational improvements and career prospects for 'plain girls' who might not be destined to become wives and mothers. Plainness, in both Linton's article and

her novel, seems to destabilise a culturally pre-determined and gendered organisation of feminine roles.

The central argument of this thesis is that the representation of female plainness in women's fiction constitutes part of a larger discourse of plainness that was evolving in the mid-nineteenth century, one that goes beyond the well-known works of Brontë or Eliot. Female plainness emerges as a subversive idea that draws upon the Victorian social, moral, and aesthetic discourses to redefine the position of a plain woman and her worth. Such a consideration of plainness is largely based upon the recognition that it was not simply a synonym for invisibility, inferiority, and marginalisation, as is commonly thought. Throughout my analysis of plainness in these works, I will reveal that it is the conspicuousness and authenticity of female plainness that qualifies it as a sign of empowerment and self-assertion.

## Chapter 1

### Plainness: Contexts and Debates

In her treatment of beauty in the Victorian novel, Lori Hope Lefkowitz states that the term ‘plain’ is a ‘distinctively Victorian adjective’.<sup>1</sup> On a similar note, Douglas Mao briefly hints, while referring to Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, at the significance of the term ‘plain’, suggesting that the ‘nineteenth-century English novel – supported by that powerfully polysemous adjective *plain* – proved crucial in introducing the subjectivity of the less beautiful into representation’.<sup>2</sup> Mao discerns the multiple and intricate meanings of plainness that played a dynamic and significant role in this novel, but falls short of fully exploring these implications. In this chapter, I pay attention to the social, moral, gendered, and literary meanings of plainness as they were used and contested in the first half of the nineteenth century. Engaging with these diverse forms of plainness and the wider contexts in which they were debated will be important when considering the representation of plainness and its meanings in women’s writing at the time. This survey shows that these meanings of plainness were not fixed, but were rather evolving and often contradictory in the way they both shaped and challenged existing social, moral, linguistic, and aesthetic ideals.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* refers to John Gauden’s *A Discourse of Auxiliary Beauty* (1656) as an early text that uses the term ‘plain’ to connote the meanings of homeliness and lack of beauty. Gauden points to ‘the great *variety* of *Gods bounty*, which is first set forth in *Natures* either *plainnesse* or *beauty*, so as to court and please every of our *senses*’ (emphasis in original).<sup>3</sup> In this distinction, Gauden accentuates the binary relationship between beauty and plainness that would prevail in the centuries to come. However, he also underlines the distinctiveness of plainness as a quality that, though different from beauty, has its own merits and commendable

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<sup>1</sup> Lefkowitz, *The Character of Beauty in the Victorian*, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Mao, ‘The Labor Theory of Beauty: Aesthetic Justice, Blind Justice’, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup> John Gauden, *A Discourse of Auxiliary Beauty; or, Artificiall Hansomenesse* (London: R. Royston, 1656), p. 68.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A85852.0001.001/1:15?rgn=div1;view=fulltext> [accessed August 2019]

nature.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is important to acknowledge and recognise that, early on, ‘plain’ developed multiple aesthetic, moral, and social layers of meaning that were both negative and positive. Female plainness, as I will suggest, in its varied contexts, generated similarly conflicting meanings and debates.

The first section of this chapter considers how the ideal of female beauty was subtly contested in the early decades of the nineteenth century before Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. I will demonstrate the ways in which plainness played a role in illustrating and refining these discussions and uncertainties about female beauty. Next, I will continue to focus on physical plainness but also introduce the concept of plain dress and its significance in middle-class discourse about femininity. This leads to a section concentrating on contemporary discussions of the Quaker community and their commitment to plainness, which sheds further light on plain dress and its social agenda. Quaker plainness will provide an important context for my discussion of Brontë’s and Ellis’s work and their representation of plain dress. Finally, I consider the developments and the new patterns of thinking about female plainness at mid-century following *Jane Eyre*. The emerging cult of plain heroines post-*Jane Eyre* generated controversy and debate in literary circles.

One of the aims of this chapter is to explore the contentiousness of the idea of female plainness and the contradictory responses and discourses of plainness that emerged in the first half of the century. Not enough attention in recent scholarly works has been given to exploring these debates, nor the ambivalences that thinking about plainness in its varied forms generated in the first half of the nineteenth century. Most importantly, there has been a dearth of studies on how such debates and ambivalences shaped Victorian women’s fiction. Recognising these patterns will provide an important framework for assessing the development of plainness at the time and the

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Auski maintains that ‘the plain person signified one lacking the gift of a fine appearance, yet meriting in this defect some praise for an excusably ordinary homeliness. Indeed, as a specific term of praise, plainness refers, as early as 1581, to a desirable, laudable freedom from excessive display and ornamentation, especially ostentatiously luxurious embellishment. In this context, “plain” is synonymous with “simple” and happily avoids the connotation of mental deficiency in the simple minded simpleton’. See Peter Auski, *The Christian Plain Style: The Evolution of a Spiritual Ideal* (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), p. 7.

ways in which, while it connoted virtue, respectability, and expressiveness, it also had the paradoxical effect of articulating challenges to normative femininity and beauty.

### **On Female Beauty, Plainness, and Ideals of Femininity, 1820s-1870s**

Beauty dominated the cultural imagination of the early nineteenth century in its conception of ideal femininity. As a consequence, plainness was often imagined as an Other to beauty, not merely in appearance but also in presumptions about character, morality, and social class.<sup>5</sup> Lara Perry highlights in her discussion of art and portraiture how female beauty in the first half of the nineteenth century was considered an ‘ambiguous gift’.<sup>6</sup> The concern about representing female beauty in art rose from the paradox that, in its embodiment of ideal femininity and gentility, it was also capable of featuring the ‘temptations of excess’.<sup>7</sup> Plainness, in its otherness to beauty becomes, as I will demonstrate, a motif that both counteracts and defines certain fears and moral ambivalences about beauty, vanity, and indulgence from different social, aesthetic, and moral viewpoints. These two categories of beauty and plainness intermingled and shaped the cultural meanings of each other in ways that are both marginalising and yet also empowering.

As Perry suggests, ambivalence surrounding the idea of perfect female beauty was apparent in the early years of the nineteenth century. Sara Coleridge’s essay ‘On

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<sup>5</sup> This also included scientific discourse, as the works of Alexander Walker, Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer demonstrate. They all argued that female beauty was a significant indicator of a woman’s moral worth and her fitness to be a wife. In *Woman Psychologically Considered* (1840), Alexander Walker, who published widely on women and beauty, maintains that ‘a woman’s face, whatever may be the vigor or extent of her intellect, whatever the importance of the objects that occupy her, is always in the history of her life, an obstacle or a reason: men have so decreed’. See Alexander Walker, *Woman Psychologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce* (London: A. H. Bailey, 1840), p. 53.

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009729268?type%5B%5D=all&lookfor%5B%5D=alexander%20walker%20woman%20considered&filter%5B%5D=publishDateRange%3A1840-1849&ft=>[accessed August 2018]

For some secondary sources, see Robyn Cooper, ‘Victoria Discourses on Women and Beauty: The Alexander Walker Texts’, *Gender & History*, 5, 1 (1993), 34-55; Lucy Hartley, ‘A Science of Beauty? Femininity, Fitness and the Nineteenth-Century Physiognomic’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 12, 1 (2001), 19-34; and Nancy L. Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer: Feminism, Evolutionism, and the Reconstruction of Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Lara Perry, *History’s Beauties: Women in the National Portrait Gallery, 1856-1900* (England: Ashgate, 2006), p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the Disadvantages Resulting from the Possession of Beauty' (1826) is one clear example that questioned presumptions that link outward beauty with inner grace, arguing that the external could well be the 'cover for faults and deficiencies'.<sup>8</sup> She condemned beauty's vanity and the flaws arising from the consciousness of its possession. In one example, she refers to the 'plain and *unnoticeable*' women, who 'if remarkable at all, will rather be so for their unpretending attire, their natural mien and gestures' (emphasis in original).<sup>9</sup> Coleridge's praise of beautiful women is dedicated to those, who are:

unconscious of admiration, can drink the Circean cup of flattery and by some powerful antidote keep the heady liquor from bewildering their brains and eyes [...], who ... remain sober enough not to fancy themselves any handsomer than they are.<sup>10</sup>

Coleridge's metaphor of sobriety serves as a foil to the intoxicating effect of flattery and vanity associated with the consciousness of one's beauty. In invoking the myth of the goddess Circe, who possessed powers of intoxication, Coleridge underlines the danger attendant upon a woman's consciousness of her beauty; not only in its power to fascinate, but more importantly, in the way it appeals to her sense of vanity. Circe's ability to debase men into beasts figures in Coleridge's critique of a beautiful woman's self-revealing urge to be admired and courted. She describes how 'the desire and consciousness of admiration is seen to influence every look and gesture – their very gait betrays it'.<sup>11</sup> The sense of vanity and lust for admiration and flattery dominates her behaviour in a way that demeans and robs her of her self-respect. What is of interest here is the way that Coleridge's praise of beauties, those sensible enough not to be guided by their beauty and others' admiration, invokes the qualities of naturalness and self-awareness that she pointed to earlier in her acknowledgment of the virtue of plain women. Coleridge celebrates the power of female beauty in its unaffectedness and spontaneity.

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<sup>8</sup> Sara Coleridge, 'On the Disadvantages Resulting from the Possession of Beauty', in Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter: Her Life and Essays* (London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 187-200 (p. 193).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 194-195.

Coleridge's explorations of these attitudes and types of behaviour reflected and questioned social and cultural notions about female beauty and plainness at the time. In Letitia Elizabeth Landon's *Romance and Reality* (1831), the narrator distinguishes between two sisters, Laura and Elizabeth, by pronouncing, 'Laura was pretty, and enacted the beauty; Elizabeth was plain, and therefore was to be sensible'.<sup>12</sup> The description of the two sisters not only differentiates between their physical attractiveness, but ironically exposes the way in which this difference constructed polarised and, to a certain extent, performative social and moral roles for each. Even as these discussions in the 1820s, like those of Coleridge, interrogated the superiority of beauty, female plainness continued to be limited and shaped by social and cultural assumptions that often imagined it as an opposite to beauty. These assumptions and different set of values allocated to beauty and plainness appear to have played a role in reinforcing this binary relationship that Coleridge interrogates in her essay. Coleridge praises the unaffectedness of plain women and instead of viewing that as a necessity due to their lack of beauty, her essay set self-awareness as a standard to which all women must aspire. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot specifically ridicules this notion. The narrator, commenting on Mary Garth, suggests that: 'at the age of two-and-twenty Mary had certainly not attained that perfect good sense and good principle which are usually recommended to the less fortunate girl, as if they were to be obtained in quantities ready mixed'.<sup>13</sup> As we can see, such assumptions were mocked. Like many of the plain heroines, discussed in the thesis, Eliot's Mary is not a plain woman whose identity or potential becomes shaped by these limiting social and cultural expectations. These ideas and binaries, as prevalent as they were, were already questioned as early as the 1820s and 1830s and began to be more overtly undermined, as we can see in Eliot's novel, from the 1870s.

The view of the plain and the beautiful as a binary, which constitutes an understanding of women in culturally determined ways and attaches certain notions to each, although questioned by many, was imbedded in the literary and cultural

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<sup>12</sup> Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *Romance and Reality*, 3 vols (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), I, p. 20.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiuo.ark:/13960/t0qr5b238&view=1up&seq=6> [accessed September 2018]

<sup>13</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 104.

conception of femininity in the culture of the early-to-mid nineteenth-century. A tale published in the *New Monthly Belle Assemblée* (1836), a magazine dedicated to women readers of the middle class, hints at the sexual fall of its character Lucy.<sup>14</sup> The narrator remarks, ‘Alas! for beauty, nine times out of ten, it is fatal to its possessor, for it creates ideas and feelings which *the persons of the plain and homely never could give rise to*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>15</sup> The tale contrasts the power of beauty with the safety of plainness. The latter is presented as the alternative that would have hindered the happening of this mischief. The example of the beautiful and plain here, while aimed at cautioning against beauty’s temptation, constructs pairs of meaning that play off their significance against each other in determined ways. It is this fear about beauty’s fascination that appears to construct plainness’s association with physical restraint and reserve. Female plainness and its connotations of bodily restraint and sensibility in these social and ideological conceptions could be related to what Perry has earlier referred to as moral anxieties about beauty. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, in her appraisal of beauty’s feminine character in the essay ‘Physiognomy’ (1851), alludes to these assumptions.<sup>16</sup> She ridicules the tendency of setting plainness in opposition to beauty’s vanity, suggesting:

What can be more false or cruel than the common plan of forcing upon a young girl the withering conviction of her own plainness? If this be only a foolish sham to counteract the supposed demoralising consciousness of beauty, the world will soon counteract that.<sup>17</sup>

Eastlake’s remark, while she undermines such tendencies, reveals how widespread these assumptions were. It also accentuates the association that plainness developed in relation to concerns about female beauty and its potential to foster self-indulgence and vanity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Love’s Triumph: A Tale’, *New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, July 1836, pp. 34-37.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Lady Elizabeth (Rigby) Eastlake, ‘Physiognomy’, *The Quarterly Review*, December 1851, pp. 62-91 (p. 77).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Kathryn Hughes invokes similar implications in her reference to plainness and the employment of governesses in the mid-century period. She suggests that ‘appeal was now made to the principles of physiognomy to link plainness with moral worth... Underlying this preference for plain governesses there was a sense that a woman who had known grief and hardship, to the degree that she was obliged to go to work, ought to look sufficiently chastened by the experience’. Plainness of a governess, under such circumstances, would act in her favour by attesting to her moral nature and her liability to conform to acceptable behaviour. See Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), p. 127.

The conceptualisation of female plainness and its attributes, as we have seen, was often framed in opposition to cultural notions of beauty. A Prize essay published in *The Ladies' Monthly Magazine* (1823) considered the advantages of those whose want of beauty becomes a potential for self-improvement beyond the constraints of beauty and marriage:<sup>19</sup>

Plain or deformed individuals have the advantage of being early taught that they possess no outward attraction to ensure attention, hence they more sedulously cultivate the inward graces of the mind; [...] the inward satisfaction resulting from those mental resources which, whilst they supply a constant source of amusement in solitude, invigorate the mind against the hour of trial, anticipating, as it were, the advances of age [...] heightened by the consciousness that they have not wholly lived in vain.<sup>20</sup>

The essay, aimed at emphasising the idleness and dangers attendant upon the possession of physical beauty in women, points to a woman's ability to develop knowledge and sense through the example of the plain and deformed, and suggests that self-development is a pressing need for disadvantaged women. Presuming that plain or deformed individuals have limited chance of marriage, the quest for knowledge becomes an alternative that gives value to the life of women not destined for matrimony and domestic life. Attending to the 'inward graces of the mind' becomes a positive alternative and a sort of self-definition that makes her life meaningful.<sup>21</sup> However, the grouping of the 'plain and deformed' in the essay reflects the way in which the language of plainness was also intermingled with that of ugliness and disability in the context of

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<sup>19</sup> 'Which is Preferable, Beauty with Little Understanding, or Great Talen with Personal Deformity', *The Ladies' Monthly Magazine*, May 1823, pp. 249-252.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 251.

<sup>21</sup> This echoes the sentiment of one of Samuel Johnson's pieces from *The Rambler* (1750-52) which was widely reprinted in the early nineteenth century. In 'Victoria, or The Beauty', the beautiful Victoria whose face is transfigured by smallpox takes the advice of her friend who contends that 'Consider yourself, my Victoria, as a being born to know, to reason, and to act'. See Samuel Johnson, 'Victorian, Or The Beauty', in *Classic Tales, Serious and Lively: With Critical Essays on the Merits and Reputations of the Authors*, ed. by H. Mackenzie and others (London: John Hunt & Carew Raynell, 1807), pp. 186 – 197 (p. 197).

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433087358515&view=1up&seq=337> [accessed December 2019]

the early nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Sander Gilman has pointed out that nineteenth-century understanding of deformity was sometimes aesthetically-oriented and judged based on the way it ‘deviates from the norm of the beautiful’.<sup>23</sup> Hence, while disability and plainness are distinct, they share the connotations of difference and inferiority, particularly in relation to women whose beauty is of great aesthetic value. While the essay aimed at empowering plain and deformed women, it nevertheless demonstrates the ambivalent and uncertain contemporary perspectives about alternative standards that fall short of ideal female beauty.

An anonymous article in the *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* entitled ‘Plainness’ (1834) raised readers’ understanding of plainness’s merits by looking at it against the ‘uncertainty and emptiness’ of beauty:<sup>24</sup>

all our associations respecting plain people are of a respectful kind. There is a substantiality, a durability, a respectability, about ugliness, that is quite delightful to the reflecting faculties. [...] Plain looks are something in the regular course of things – a consistent, uniform peculiarity: but beauty is a mere accident.<sup>25</sup>

While plainness was still used synonymously with ugliness at this stage, its positive meanings were, nevertheless, signalled. Such an account dedicated to the exploration of plainness situates it within a distinctly aesthetic realm that reveals its congenial power to please without overwhelming the senses. The spectacle of plainness is

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<sup>22</sup> In their study of ugliness, Sara Rodrigues and Ela Przybylo note the proximity between these terms. They contend that ‘ugliness ... tends to be, more often than not, discussed through a variety of proximate and overlapping yet distinct terms: the nasty, grotesque, abject, feral, plain, unaltered, disgusting, revolting, dirty, and monstrous’. See *On the Politics of Ugliness*, ed. by Sara Rodrigues and Ela Przybylo (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 5. Gretchen E. Henderson also maintains that in the eighteenth century “deformity” and “ugliness” were often used interchangeably’. See Gretchen E., Henderson, *Ugliness: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Picturing Health and Illness: Images of Identity and Difference* (London: Reaktion, 1995), p. 54. In her *Theory on the Classification of Beauty and Deformity* (1815), Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck pointed to the standards that set certain objects as different or deformed, stating that ‘nothing more surely produces deformity, than the application of the rules of any one species of beauty to objects which do not come within its province’. See Mrs Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, *Theory on the Classification of Beauty and Deformity: And Their Correspondence with Physiognomic Expression, Exemplified in Various Works of Art, and Natural Objects, and Illustrated with Four General Charts, and Thirty-Eight Copper Plates* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1815), p. 7.

[https://archive.org/details/gri\\_33125008448660](https://archive.org/details/gri_33125008448660) [accessed October 2017]

<sup>24</sup> ‘Plainness’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 13 December 1834, pp. 361-362.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

rendered as a peculiar aesthetic experience of observation that, unlike beauty, awakens deep interest that withstands time. Beauty is seen to have a powerful, yet transient effect upon the observer that is often fixated upon the visual and sensual. The construction of plainness's aesthetics, on the other hand, rests upon the 'reflecting faculties' to uncover its beauty.<sup>26</sup> These interpretations of plainness echo the connotations in which the nature or meanings of plainness correspond with some uncertainties and anxieties about perfect beauty, as I discussed earlier. In this article, plainness is distinguished for its positive effects that are distinct from the allure and sensual attraction of beauty. Such attempts at conceptualising plainness and identifying its merits are significant, as they gradually lead to a more constructive understanding of plainness and its attributes.

While the usage of the term 'plain' continued to overlap with ugliness or deformity in certain contexts, more articulate definitions of plainness began to emerge at mid-century. In a miscellany published in 1851, the writer differentiates more clearly between plainness and ugliness.<sup>27</sup> The article identifies plainness as the 'midpoint between everybody's idea of beauty and ugliness'.<sup>28</sup> The writer's complaint against both beauty and ugliness is their liability as physical qualities to produce quick unmediated impressions in the observer; beauty fascinates while ugliness repulses. Plainness is presented as that which is most subtle for the human eye, and thus genuine and preferable. The conclusion puts forth a plea that readers 'exalt their notion of plainness' in acknowledgment of its virtue.<sup>29</sup> Ten years later, a miscellany titled 'Plain Features' (1861) further accentuates that point by noting, 'there is a great deal of difference between a person's being plain and being ugly. A person may be very plain, and yet attractive and interesting in both countenance and manner. [...] An ugly face is repulsive'.<sup>30</sup> The process of extracting plainness from the negative connotations of ugliness, as these examples show, appears to have been instrumental in moving towards an acknowledgment of plainness's virtue. It also reveals the ways in which plainness develops its own unique form of attractiveness and charm. The art of the Pre-Raphaelite painters is a major example of the transformation taking place in the artistic

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> 'Plainness', *Eliza Cook's Journal*, 22 March 1851, p. 340-341.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 340.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 341.

<sup>30</sup> 'Plain Features', *Le Follet: Journal du Grand Monde, Fashion, Polite Literature, Beaux Arts &c.*, 1 May 1861, p. 48.

representations of femininity beyond the ideals of female beauty at the time. As Susan P. Casteras maintains, the Pre-Raphaelites were accountable for ‘substituting a new vocabulary of face and figure’.<sup>31</sup> In *The Art of Beauty* (1878), Mary Eliza Haweis, a writer and artist best known for her illustrations of Chaucer’s poems, sarcastically pronounced the Pre-Raphaelite artists to be ‘the plain girls’ best friends’.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, she acknowledged Pre-Raphaelite’s art’s potential to represent its own commendable version of female beauty; ‘they have shown us’, she states, ‘a certain crooked beauty of their own entirely apart from the oddness which supplies the place of actual beauty sometimes, and is almost as attractive’.<sup>33</sup> Haweis, whose work celebrates the power and fascination of female beauty, identifies plainness as a ‘crooked beauty’. Though this form of beauty remains distinct from perfect beauty, as Haweis’s choice of the adjective ‘crooked’ indicates, it yet has the power to attract. Of significance here is the way that plainness was no longer judged to be an Other to perfect beauty, but develops its own distinct charm.

To a certain extent, the association of plainness with beauty at and after mid-century replaced earlier connections between plainness and ugliness. An article in the *Leader and Saturday Analyst* (1850) criticised the limited views that judge beauty according to its ‘completeness of type’.<sup>34</sup>

beauty, which so powerfully enslaves in women, loses its paramount influence with time; while we grow used to plainness, and learn to think it beautiful. [...] Plainness is a *dialect* new to us at first; the gestures of the unsymmetrical features, deviating from the type, do not accurately inform us of the inner intent; but, with use, we learn that dialect: [...] and *then* we say that plainness has grown “beautiful” in our eyes.<sup>35</sup> (emphasis in original)

The article proposes a reversal of influence in which the beautiful grows into the ordinary, while plainness grows into beauty. Plainness was perceived as a form of beauty rather than a divergence from it. Plainness’s ability to produce a more reflective and disinterested experience becomes a focal point in the process of reclaiming it.

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<sup>31</sup> Susan P. Casteras, ‘Pre-Raphaelite Challenges to Victorian Canons of Beauty’, *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 55, 1 (1992), 13-35, (p. 21).

<sup>32</sup> Mary Eliza Joy Haweis, *The Art of Beauty* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1883), p. 273.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 273-274.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Beauty’, *Leader and Saturday Analyst*, 6 July 1850, p. 357.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Matthew Kieran traces attitudes that facilitate aesthetic experiences of the ugly, grotesque, or the ‘incoherent’.<sup>36</sup> He observes that such experiences are rendered pleasurable by ‘virtue of the way they enable us to explore our cognitive attitudes, [ ... ] our fascination with certain anomalies which violate our standard social and moral categories’.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, such accounts present plainness in terms of effects to be felt and decoded, which renders it worthy of aesthetic valuation. The representation of plainness as a ‘dialect’ that one learns and appreciates reveals its capacity, as Kieran notes, to communicate meaning and arouse interest. The associations that the article draws between plainness, curiosity, and communication are particularly significant features and meanings of plainness, ones that will inform my reading of the representation of female plainness and its connotations in the novels under study, both in relation to the heroines’ own experiences of self-expression as well as others’ interest in her unique facial features.

As we can see, defining plainness and distinguishing it from ugliness takes a clearer direction at mid-century. The *National Magazine* featured Thomas Woolnoth’s ‘Comparative Beauty’ (1863), which pushed the idea of facial irregularity as no less beautiful even further.<sup>38</sup> He acknowledges ‘Venus and Apollo’ to be the ideals that have informed the standards of perfect physical beauty in the Western world, yet demonstrates the wide range of possibilities that may inform our perception of beauty. He maintains that beauty had ‘different bearings’ and ‘degrees’ that cannot be limited or exclusively defined according to this ‘proper standard’.<sup>39</sup> In his illustration and physiognomic analysis of the faces of plain women, Woolnoth outlines the variations of these plain features and the way in which they may manifest a woman’s expressiveness and intellect.<sup>40</sup> He notices how expressive features and intellect can set off a plain face in a way that makes it ‘approach the line of Beauty’.<sup>41</sup> Thus, he frames plainness within the structures of beauty. The article ‘Women’s Faces’ (1868) similarly contemplates the distinctiveness of facial plainness, declaring that ‘emotional variety and expression, ..., is the true key to the inexplicable influence of the most irregular

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<sup>36</sup> Matthew Kieran, ‘Aesthetic Value: Beauty, Ugliness and Incoherence’, *Philosophy*, 7, 281 (1997), 383-399.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Woolnoth, ‘Comparative Beauty’, *National Magazine*, July 1863, pp. 97-99.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

faces'.<sup>42</sup> The work even points out that 'men no longer sigh for the perfectly beautiful woman'.<sup>43</sup>

Andrei Poi and Mechtild Widrich observe how beauty as a 'category', ever since the feminist writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and others, has become bound up and essential to constructing our understanding of the non-beautiful.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, the manner with which female plainness becomes perceived, particularly in the first half of the century, appears to a certain extent to be determined by its compatibility, or on the other hand, divergence from ideals of femininity and beauty. It provokes both interest and anxiety about its liability to maintain or break free from socially prescribed ideals and feminine roles. These socially and ideologically constructed polarities were marginalising for women who were not beautiful or ideally feminine. However, these ideas or standards were debated as early as the 1820s and 1830s, to attest to the unrecognised aesthetic potential and power of plainness. As the century progressed, plainness was recognised as distinctive and developed its own definitions beyond the polarities of beauty and ugliness. The notion of plainness as an opposite to beauty began to be challenged in more articulate ways by the 1850s and 1860s. These developments will be important when considering the ways in which plainness as an integral feature in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and other novels daringly deviates from such attitudes that were largely based upon plainness's inferiority. The *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* article 'Plainness' (1834), which I quoted above, celebrates the ways in which plainness not only creates a profound reflective experience beyond mere vision, but also reflects the elements of 'a substantiality, a durability, [and] a respectability'.<sup>45</sup> With these meanings, the article invokes the social and moral dimensions of plainness and its virtue. Such meanings, which will unfold more clearly in the next section, were rooted in the social discourse of the time and were central to early nineteenth century conceptualisations of middle-class femininity and plain dress.

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<sup>42</sup> 'Women's Faces', *Once a Week*, 26 December 1868, pp. 531-533 (p. 532).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 531.

<sup>44</sup> *Ugliness: The Non-Beautiful in Art and Theory*, ed. by Andrei Pop and Mechtild Widrich (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> 'Plainness', *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, p. 361.

## Plain Dress

The period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century witnessed a widespread recognition of the emerging social distinctions that would characterise the social scene of the century. The term ‘plain’ featured prominently in middle-class conceptions of femininity and domesticity, which were largely based upon their opposition to the upper and aristocratic classes. Philippe Perrot, in his *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, describes nineteenth-century Europe as a period moved by ‘a strict social mechanism [...] to regulate the relationship between class and dress’.<sup>46</sup> Clothing was one of the means through which this ‘significant difference’ was achieved between individuals of different social classes.<sup>47</sup> In this section, I explore the significance of female plain dress and its wider social and religious connotations.

In the ‘The Female Choice’, one of Anna Letitia Barbauld’s collection of children’s tales published between 1792 and 1796, the heroine Melissa is offered in her dream two models of womanhood to choose from: a beautiful lady adorned with ornaments or a plainly-dressed housewife.<sup>48</sup> Melissa resists her temptation to choose the first option and instead goes for the model of the domestic woman. The moral of the tale points to the artificiality of beautiful appearances while emphasising the authenticity of the simple and yet genuine housewife. The fairy instructs Melissa that she ‘must dress plainly, live mostly at home, and aim at being useful rather than shining’.<sup>49</sup> The tale encapsulates social and moral themes that were vital to nineteenth-century middle-class conceptions and practices of femininity. An investment in interiority and domesticity established middle-class values that came to be in direct opposition to the indulgence and materiality of the upper classes. As Evelleen Richards notes, the tale delivers its didactic message by affirming the notion that the “female

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<sup>46</sup> Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Richard Bienvenu (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.9.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Anna Laetitia Barbauld and John Aikin, ‘The Female Choice’, in *Evenings At Home; Or, The Juvenile Budget Opened: Consisting of a Variety of Miscellaneous Pieces for the Instruction and Amusement of Young Persons* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1819), pp. 160-165.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433082529748;view=1up;seq=9> [accessed November 2019]

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 163.

choice” hinges on a choice of dress’.<sup>50</sup> In Barbauld’s tale, plainness functions as a tool the heroine chooses and with which she enacts this social and moral difference. The binary of beauty and plainness and their wider connotations of indulgence or, on the other hand, restraint and purity were also rooted in the social discourse of the time.

These distinctions also feature in the discourse of the dress of the lower-class women. There were particularly clear codes of attire recommended for working women such as governesses, servants, and factory workers as the century progressed. Vivienne Richmond notes the tendency and the ‘insistence that only plain sewing and the construction of plain garments be taught to working-class females’.<sup>51</sup> Apart from the obvious economic reasons and benefits, adherence to these codes of plain dress and basic unembellished ways of stitching garments together were also vital to the lower classes because they were inherently more susceptible to being labelled as improper or sexually transgressive. As Karen Sayer states ‘the supposed (im)morality of the (un)deserving poor was ... signified through their disorderly dress’.<sup>52</sup> Hence, a commitment to a plain and neat attire was important to ‘enable a movement away from the sexual’ and ‘offer routes to respectability’.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, undue attention to dress, colour, and adornment among those working women signalled their loose morals and sexual openness. This association between dress and morality became particularly apparent in relation to prostitution in the mid-nineteenth century and onwards.<sup>54</sup> Plainness, thus, just as it counteracted the extravagance of the aristocracy among middle-class women, it also signified protection from the snares of temptations and debasement among those socially-deprived women.

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<sup>50</sup> Evelleen Richards, *Darwin and the Making of Sexual Selection* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 221-222. Richards also points out that Barbauld’s writings and moral tales for children were widely read in the nineteenth century and republished in various editions.

<sup>51</sup> Vivienne Richmond, *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 299.

<sup>52</sup> Karen Sayer, “‘A Sufficiency of Clothing’: Dress and Domesticity in Victorian Britain’, *Textile History*, 33, 1 (2002), 112-122 (p. 118). Vivienne Richmond goes further to note that: ‘not simply the condition but the presence or absence of certain garments could be read as immediate indicators of respectability’. See Richmond, p. 125.

<sup>53</sup> Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 96.

<sup>54</sup> Mariana Valverde examines closely these links between dress and prostitution. See Mariana Valverde, ‘The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse’, *Victorian Studies*, 32, 2 (1989), 169-188.

Nowhere does plainness and its association with self-regulation and restraint become more marked than with the Quakers. As a dissenting religious group, Quakers became prominent around the mid-seventeenth century with George Fox's vision of the inner 'light of Christ' as an emblem of an individual's personal connection with God.<sup>55</sup> The Quaker's adoption of plain style in dress and speech from the seventeenth until around the middle of the nineteenth century was one of the distinguishing features of the group and was vital to their identity.<sup>56</sup> Joseph John Gurney, in his *Observations on the Religious Peculiarities of the Society of Friends* (1824), asserts that 'plainness is one of the most obvious characteristics' of the group.<sup>57</sup> He defines the principle of plain dress adopted by Quakers as one compatible with Christian belief, which abjures vanity and self-love.<sup>58</sup> He explains:

Plainness of apparel has been adopted by the society ... chiefly because ornament in dress is employed to gratify that personal vanity, which, with every other modification of the pride of the human heart, christians are forbidden to indulge and enjoined to subdue.<sup>59</sup>

Gurney's definition of plainness, by associating it with the regulation of human vanity, clearly projects the effect that Quakers saw in plainness a tool for suppressing self-indulgence. In her encyclopaedia of fashion, Valerie Steele echoes Gurney's definition and identifies Quaker dress as a 'nonverbal protest against the aesthetic focus of fashion'.<sup>60</sup> Plainness in dress and speech among Quakers was also derived from their belief in human equality. Plainness was a means of extinguishing social hierarchies in a world defined by social segregation.<sup>61</sup> Their plainness of speech consists, as Gurney

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<sup>55</sup> William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 42-45.

<sup>56</sup> See Joan Kendall, 'The Development of a Distinctive Form of Quaker Dress', *Costume: Journal of the Costume Society*, 19, 1 (1985), 58-74.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph John Gurney, *Observations on the Religious Peculiarities of the Society of Friends* (London: J. and A. Arch, 1824), p. 318.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=yale.39002013403846;view=1up;seq=9> [accessed May 2017]

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, ed. by Valerie Steele, 3 vols (London: Thomson Gale, 2005), I, p. 381.

<sup>61</sup> See Adrian Davies, *The Quakers in English Society, 1655-1725* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 55-57.

puts it, in the ‘disuse of complimentary phraseology’.<sup>62</sup> This includes, for example, not using certain expressions or titles such as ‘Sir/Madam’ to address people.<sup>63</sup>

Various publications on Quakerism in the nineteenth century interrogated the prominence that Quakers placed on plainness in dress as a part of their identity and social interaction. In his study *A Portraiture of Quakerism* (1807), Thomas Clarkson offered a detailed analysis of the beliefs and customs of the group.<sup>64</sup> Appearance is of great importance to them, asserts Clarkson, as ‘the dress, [...] by making them known as such to the world, makes the world overseers, as it were, of their moral conduct [...] it becomes a partial check in favour of morality’.<sup>65</sup> He goes on to observe that ‘deviation’ from the standards of dress known among them was extremely threatening to the deviator and requires ‘admonition’.<sup>66</sup> Quakers saw in it ‘the beginning of an unstable mind. It shows there must have been some improper motive for the change. Hence it argues a weakness in the deviating persons’.<sup>67</sup> Clarkson highlights how a person’s conformity to plainness in attire becomes a criterion of judgment signalling an individual’s power of command over self. Yet it also reveals an important notion that is often associated with Quaker plainness in which self-regulation, as signified through dress, becomes seen as a public exhibition of inner virtue. And this public spectacle of plainness seeks to reinforce conformity by making ‘the world overseers’. Self-surveillance becomes intertwined with a greater web of public surveillance. External appearance in its materialisation of people’s interior becomes a public projection of themselves through which they are to be surveyed and judged. It appears as a tool of discipline in which the individual and the public simultaneously co-operate in ‘overseeing’ and validating compliance.

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<sup>62</sup> Gurney, p. 345.

<sup>63</sup> See Gurney, pp. 319-337.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *A Portraiture of Quakerism, taken from A View of the Moral Education, Discipline, Peculiar Customs, Religious Principles, Political and Civil Economy, and Character of the Society of Friends*, 3 vols (London: R. Taylor and co., 1807).

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433069136624;view=1up;seq=7> [accessed May 2017]

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, I, p. 286.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 285.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Mrs R. J. Greer (1851), a former Quaker, criticised the legibility with which her fellow Quakers emphasised their appearance as an indication and enactment of their respectability:<sup>68</sup>

Hundreds of times I have heard Friends, speaking of the dress, call it “a hedge”, which separated us from the “people of the world”, which preserved us from the snares and temptations to which they were exposed, and which kept us in safety, as long as we remained within its enclosure.<sup>69</sup>

In a way typical of early nineteenth-century discussions of Quaker dress, Mrs Greer’s language (‘safety’, ‘enclosure’) emphasises the means of self-containment the plain dress affords its wearer. Elizabeth Fry, the famous nineteenth-century Quaker social reformer, talks of plainness in her journal as a ‘sort of protection’.<sup>70</sup> These insights into the disciplinary function of the Quaker dress reflect the paradox it entails as a means of self-regulation that yet requires outer surveillance to enforce individual restraint. An article titled ‘Dress of the Quakers’ (1834) by William Howitt criticises Quakers’ confidence in thinking that there is ‘safety to their youth in this barbarous raiment. It is a mark, [...] by which they feel themselves observed; as if clothes were not things that would be taken off’.<sup>71</sup> Howitt’s sarcasm at Quaker ‘raiment’ as a piece of clothing easily put on or taken off undermines the dynamics of power and control attached to it. This becomes clear when Greer further notes that her choice not to comply with the standards of Quaker plainness was often associated in public with her lack of ‘principles to regulate [her] conduct’.<sup>72</sup> The legibility with which plainness is conceived by Quakers to be a tool of discipline becomes apparent in this judgement of Greer’s lack of self-regulation. These conflicting insights on the significance of Quaker dress, both from Quakers themselves and non-Quakers, highlight its appropriation as a disciplinary function to validate conformity or, on the other hand, deviance. Commitment to plainness indicated an individual’s will over his or her own body, setting the limits against its transgression while also internalising public surveillance. Exteriors of

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<sup>68</sup> Mrs. J. R. Greer, *Quakerism; or, The Story of my Life, by a Lady Who for Forty Years was a Member of the Society of Friends* (Dublin: Samuel B. Oldham, 1851), p. 350.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t0vq2v472;view=1up;seq=4> [accessed May 2017]

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> *Elizabeth Fry: A Quaker Life: Selected Letters and Writings*, ed. by Gil Skidmore (Oxford: Altamira, 2005), p. 36.

<sup>71</sup> William Howitt, ‘Dress of the Quakers’, *Leeds Intelligencer*, 18 October 1834, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> Greer, p. 64.

plainness, thus, mediate between an individual's power of self-regulation written over the body and public validation of that.

In an episode of his *Lake Reminiscences* (1834-40) devoted to relating the 'mysterious malady' of his friend Charles Lloyd, Thomas De Quincey highlights the struggle that Quakers feel in the need to censor the externalisation of their inner desire upon their bodies.<sup>73</sup> De Quincey associates Lloyd's mental problems with his Quaker origins, particularly the restraint imposed upon the youth in their expression of themselves and their desires. He explains that Quakers 'apply severe checks to all open manifestations of natural feelings, [...] Not the passions – they are beyond their control – but the expression of these passions by any natural language, this they lay under the heaviest restraint'.<sup>74</sup> De Quincey's allusion to the 'natural' in his account of Quaker discipline and its inconsistency with the basic and natural forms of human expression is intriguing. In its rigid self-suppression and concealment of inner/bodily desires, plainness of dress may bear another paradox regarding the surveillance imposed upon Quakers. It could be argued that Quakers' conformity to plain appearance grants them some control over the way they are to be seen and judged in public. By forcefully denying any externalisation of inner desires over the body, Quakers forge a socially sanctioned image of themselves. There seems to be an interplay of controlling power between individuals and their surroundings in the way that individuals' self-conscious representation of their bodies precedes public judgment of them. Just as the public can detect any perversions through the body, the individual through the means of self-representation controls and obscures this public decipherability of the body. De Quincey's idea of the unnaturalness of such discipline implies its superficiality and its incompatibility with authentic self-expression. Indeed, the performative role that plainness of dress plays in my reading of some nineteenth-century fiction in Chapters Two and Three, similarly, raises questions about the assumed naturalness or candour of plainness. The heroine's plainness and extreme reserve in certain instances provoke her observers' curiosity about her true self hidden under an exterior she chooses to display.

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<sup>73</sup> Thomas De Quincey, 'Sketches of Life and Manners; From the Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, January 1840, VII, pp. 159-167 (p.160).

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101064478090;view=1up;seq=172> [accessed June 2017]

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Many Quaker women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were associated with the public sphere through their work in preaching and social reform. Preachers and philanthropists, such as Elizabeth Ashbridge and Elizabeth Fry, posed a challenge to the notion of the domesticated realm of female experience. Scholars have debated the manifestations of gender equality and female empowerment among Quakers, especially in relation to women's public interaction.<sup>75</sup> In *A Portraiture of Quakerism*, Thomas Clarkson attests to the uniqueness of Quaker women who have 'that which no other body of women have, a public character'.<sup>76</sup> Clarkson particularly points to the validity with which the Quaker women's appearance in public denotes 'utility, and not show'.<sup>77</sup> The plain style of dress upon the bodies of women appears to provoke a certain kind of language that connotes earnestness and modesty, signs that appear to have paved the way for those women to enter the public sphere. Suzanne Keen argues that these beliefs, which ascribed tremendous value to appearance among Quakers, worked reversibly for the benefit of women.<sup>78</sup> Quaker females, notices Keen, 'gained more freedom in the world' as they were 'less likely to require supervision by the world'.<sup>79</sup> Keen's argument brings to light the interplay of control that Quaker bodily appearance creates. Through their dress, these women signify self-restraint and regulate public judgment of their respectability as women and their work through the means of self-representation. The observatory and disciplinary functions attached to the Quaker dress appear to be double-edged as they may alternate between public surveillance of individuals as Clarkson identifies it, and individuals' involvement and manipulation of these circumstances in the way they present their bodies in public. The discourse of plainness draws together the observer and the observed in the struggle for power of control against each other, expressed through appearances as signs.

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<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Phyllis Mackie, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>76</sup> Clarkson, III, pp. 288-98. Sandra Stanley Holton looks closely at the personal life of Quaker women in the nineteenth century with Thomas Clarkson's well-known account of the 'public character' of Quaker women in mind. She notices that Quaker women differed in their understanding and performance of this 'public character'. Their memoirs and journals reflect their struggle to define their roles as both 'Quakerly and womanly'. See Sandra Stanley Holton, *Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory and Radicalism in the Lives of Women Friends, 1780-1930* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Clarkson, III, p. 286.

<sup>78</sup> Suzanne Keen, 'Quaker Dress, Sexuality, and the Domestication of Reform in the Victorian Novel', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30, 1 (2002), 211-236 (p. 233).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

In her study of nineteenth-century American female reformers and abolitionists, Carol Mattingly notes how plain clothing was perceived as an empowering tool used by female speakers in support of their reform movements.<sup>80</sup> She argues that women manipulated this power of ‘dress discourse’ as it appeared on their bodies as a means of ‘discipline[ing] what and how their audience heard’.<sup>81</sup> Mattingly further destabilises here the notion of surveillance over the wearer. The power of discipline could be argued to be in the hands of the wearer against the observing public, precisely by the visual illusion those women created through dress.<sup>82</sup> Keen’s approach to reading the use of Quaker dress in Victorian fiction offers a similar argument to Mattingly’s. She maintains that Quaker dress is used by authors such as Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Anthony Trollope in fiction not to portray a heroine’s religious views but to ‘manipulate’ the meanings associated with it and bring to light the heroines’ social mobility and the ‘respectable kind’ of female sexuality.<sup>83</sup> Keen’s work is significant to my approach because of its emphasis on the visual representation of heroines and, specifically, the deployment of plainness as a means of exploring female agency.

De Quincey, in the same episode of *Lake Reminiscences* that discusses Charles Lloyd, distinguishes between the sexes and their plainness.<sup>84</sup> While he thinks the plain-looking appearance of Quaker men exposes them to ‘ridicule’, the plain dress of the Quaker women has the most positive effect on their public image.<sup>85</sup>

the female Quaker, by her dress, seems even purer than other women ... even the breath of morality, seems as if kept aloof from her person – forcibly held in repulsion by some protecting sanctity. This transcendent purity, and a nun-like gentleness, self-respect, and sequestration from the world – these are all that *her* peculiarity of dress expresses.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Carol Mattingly, ‘Friendly Dress: A Disciplined Use’, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 29, 2 (1999), 25-45 (p. 25).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> For another interesting reading of the role of dark plain dresses as a subversion of domestic femininity in the late nineteenth century, see Carol David, ‘Investitures of Power: Portraits of Professional Women’, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 10, 1 (2001), 5-29.

<sup>83</sup> Keen, p. 231.

<sup>84</sup> De Quincey, p. 161.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

De Quincey's description presents a hyperfeminine image of the Quakeress that specifically highlights her purity and gentleness. However, in his description of this purity, De Quincey ascribes to her body, which is 'kept aloof ... held in repulsion by some protecting sanctity', an act of opposition against visual penetration.<sup>87</sup> The plain body brings to the surface the barriers that surround its female wearer, enacting her uniqueness and bodily inaccessibility. Her embodiment of self-restraint seems to enhance her power of self-possession against others' objectification of her body. The discipline imposed upon the body appears to radiate into disciplining the gaze directed at it. In looking at the evolution of modesty in female dress, Gregory Bolich, echoing De Quincey's account, describes modest dress as a 'defensive gesture against the strange gaze of others and especially the act of the female shielding herself from the gaze of males'.<sup>88</sup> This resistance and 'defensive' tendency ascribed to modest plain appearance reinforces its role in defying visual pleasure. As I argued earlier, these impressions that Quaker plainness invokes were manipulated by women to serve their own purposes. While this conventional and 'nun-like' image of femininity, which De Quincey depicts, does not accurately reflect the plainness of Brontë's heroines nor others I discuss throughout the thesis, it nevertheless, correlates with women writers' grappling with the supremacy of feminine beauty and display in their fiction. The heroine's plainness, unlike the angelic female Quaker, provokes the meanings of agency and resistance against forces that degrade them. Plainness displaces the sensual gratification for which some male characters look. Plainness is presented as an alternative form that subverts this view of the female body as a public spectacle to be objectified.

Plain dress as a sign of purity and morality among the middle classes and, more prominently, among Quakers was interrogated and the claim that plainness embodied these ideals was challenged. These accounts of Quaker plainness, as in De Quincey's writing and that of others, reveal its rootedness in power relations. Plainness is not only self-disciplining but also controls the social and visual dynamics of displaying, seeing, and interpreting the body. Nineteenth-century conceptualisation of plainness by both Quakers and non-Quakers has revealed the conflicting and paradoxical meanings being

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Gregory G. Bolich, *Crossdressing in Context: Dress & Gender*, 4 vols (Raleigh, North Carolina: Psyche's Press: 2006), I, p. 104.

negotiated. These competing interpretations uphold its morality and restraint or, on the other hand, seek to undermine it and reveal its performativity. Quaker plainness offers an important context for looking at women's engagement with these positions through fiction. Although only Sarah Ellis's *Friends at Their Own Fireside*, among the novels I discuss, deals explicitly with Quakers, the effects and aspects of Quaker plainness and its disciplinary dimensions play their role in other fictional representations of female plain dress.

Even as it stands as a marker of social difference or religious non-conformity, the representation of plain dress has the capacity to expose the subjective and internal forces that shape the experience of wearing it, which will be central to my discussion of plainness in the succeeding chapters. Brontë and others are aware of the interplay of outer and inner forces of surveillance that shape a female's experience of her body in a social context. The heroine's attention to her public appearance in the narrative brings to light these undercurrents of internal discipline and outer surveillance. A heroine's choice of plain dress expresses female agency and manifests many of these meanings that draw upon the psychological and social, the private and public in these narratives. Jane Eyre's famous reference to herself as 'Quakerish' projects clearly her self-assertion against Rochester's principles of beauty. Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which is the focus of the coming section, is a prominent mid-century example that engages with these dynamics of plainness. The reception of the novel readily identified the subversive potential of plainness in the narrative and female plainness grew to become part of wider literary debates at the time.

## Female Plainness in and Beyond Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

In her obituary of Charlotte Brontë (1855), Harriet Martineau recollects the former's confrontation with her sisters and her decision to choose a plain heroine for her upcoming novel.<sup>89</sup>

She once told her sisters they were wrong – even morally wrong – in making their heroines beautiful ... ‘I will prove to you that you are wrong. I will show you a heroine as small and plain as myself’.<sup>90</sup>

Brontë's challenge to the cultural and literary notions that uphold the supreme value of a heroine's beauty would ultimately inspire the creation of her revolutionary heroine Jane Eyre. In this confrontation, Brontë appears to identify the role that ‘small’ and ‘plain’ as personal qualities will play in facilitating this representation of femininity in her work. As I have demonstrated in the Introduction, critics have observed and debated the significance of plainness in Brontë's novel and its multiple meanings. Apart from the clear social and moral implications that these terms hold, I will consider how Brontë's decision and choice of plainness renders it a defining feature of Jane's identity. The representation of Jane's plainness not only manifests her difference from the conventional Victorian heroine, but aids in the novel's mission of allowing her to negotiate her own sense of identity and experience of self-expression. Plainness in *Jane Eyre* is multifaceted and, as I argue thorough this thesis, we need to pay attention to the multiple senses of this term and its self-defining features in women's writing.

Jane's conception of her plainness is mostly self-mediated rather than being purely a judgment passed by someone else or seen through someone's eyes. During her first days at Thornfield, Jane consciously engages in surveying her appearance before leaving her room, feeling ready to do so once she has ‘*ascertained that I was myself* in my usual Quaker trim’ (emphasis mine).<sup>91</sup> Jane's notion of self-knowledge as it appears in her statement ‘I was myself’ is realised through this image of plainness. In this context, Jane's plain attire comes to write her own self-representation. In an earlier

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<sup>89</sup> Harriet Martineau, Obituary of Charlotte Brontë, *Daily News*, April 1855. Quoted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 303.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 134.

scene, Jane describes her readiness to embark on her new journey as a governess: ‘I rose; I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain – for I had no article of attire that was not made with extreme simplicity – I was still by nature solicitous to be neat’.<sup>92</sup> Jane’s sense of being ‘obliged to be plain’ is soon backed up by an assertion that she, nevertheless, has always been naturally inclined to appear neat and simple. As soon as she reveals plainness of dress to be an imposed state, she goes on to qualify it as a natural tendency to dress in this manner. Self-knowledge at such moments, however, is also bound up with an awareness of the self as a social being. These inner dialogues certainly entail internalised social pressure that is embedded in Jane’s self-conscious attention to her plain dress. To dress plainly, as I will also demonstrate in my discussion of *Villette*, features moments of inner critical dialogue where the heroine contemplates her need to be plain or dress in a certain manner. Plainness is one of the motifs that bring to light the intelligibility of self-consciousness in the life of some of Brontë’s heroines. The experience of dress and its materiality in these moments of critical self-assessment reveal the inner and psychological elements involved in both perceiving and representing the self and body. The significance of plain dress in manifesting such tensions not only between self and body but also self and social authority, which I explored closely in my discussions of Quakers, will also be central to my reading of Brontë’s juvenilia as well as other novels by Craik and Ellis in Chapter Three.

The significance of plainness in expressing Jane’s self-awareness is also apparent when she forcefully confronts Rochester: ‘Don’t address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, Quakerish governess’.<sup>93</sup> This is an important scene that reinstates Jane’s unshakeable conviction and identification of herself as a plain woman. To be addressed as a beauty appears to dissolve the basis of self-awareness as Jane experiences it throughout the novel. In this statement, Jane emphatically reclaims her authenticity as a plain-looking and plainly-dressed woman. It is an important feature of the novel’s representation of Jane’s experience with self-realisation. In this confrontation, there is an appeal to Rochester to recognise her worth from this

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 274. Maryanne C. Ward maintains that Jane’s categorisation of herself as a ‘Quakerish governess’ foregrounds her affiliation with the group’s abolitionist movements in an attempt to free herself from the masculine grip of Rochester. See Maryanne C. Ward, ‘The Gospel According to Jane Eyre: The Suttee and the Seraglio’, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 35, 1 (2002), 14-24 (pp.16-17).

standpoint that refuses to be situated within cultural ideals of female beauty. Of course, it cannot be denied that Jane's self-assertiveness in this scene is not straightforward and her autobiographical voice takes its time to develop this stance. Brontë's mature fiction sheds light on the problematic framing of the self within the cultural frameworks and social forces that uphold female beauty. While being plain remains an essential part of Jane's identity in the novel, there is also a suppressed longing for beauty.<sup>94</sup> In one such moment in the novel, Jane looks at the mirror and maintains:

I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain: there was hope in its aspect and life in its colour ...; and my eyes seemed as if they had beheld the fount of fruition, and borrowed beams from the lustrous ripple.<sup>95</sup>

This self-encounter in the mirror springs from a different mind-set and a 'blissful' mood, as Jane describes it, which occurs after Rochester declares his love for her. The feeling of being recognised and worth loving appears to allow Jane to distance herself momentarily from the consciousness of her plainness. Her attention to the rays of hope and happiness in her face translates into this rare image of herself as a beauty. The recognition of her beauty, however, seems to relate more to her current mental and psychological state as it is triggered by the recognition and love of Rochester rather than being a physical change. Her contemplation of her face in this scene as she notices these changes in which her 'eyes seemed as if' and 'borrowed beams' appears to capture these effects as an illusory experience where Jane's face lights up to affirm her worth as it is recognised by Rochester. This experience, in which Jane sees her face for what it is not, perhaps foreshadows her doomed relationship with Rochester at this stage of the novel, as it occurs at a time when Jane is unaware of the presence of Rochester's wife Bertha, who is locked in the attic. Just as Jane's perception of her beauty in this scene becomes artificial and questionable, so does the sincerity of Rochester's attachment to and interest in her.

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<sup>94</sup> In *Agnes Grey* (1847), Anne Brontë acknowledges this tension more articulately when the plain and poor Agnes considers her own desire to be beautiful: 'It is foolish to wish for beauty. Sensible people never either desire it for themselves or care about it in others. If the mind be but well cultivated, and the heart well disposed, no one ever cares for the exterior ... but are such assertions supported by actual experience?'. See Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*, ed. by Angeline Goreau, Penguin Classics (England: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 134.

<sup>95</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 272.

The famous scene of the two portraits, in which Jane draws herself as the antithesis of the beautiful Blanche Ingram, reproduces the conventional binaries of beauty and plainness that the novel must destabilise.<sup>96</sup> Jane's reflection upon seeing Blanche in person achieves this effect, as she declares Miss Ingram to be 'a mark beneath jealousy: she was too inferior to excite the feeling ... she was not genuine'.<sup>97</sup> This response offers a revisualisation of Jane's earlier self-labelling as a 'plain, poor, governess'.<sup>98</sup> It is not a negation of her plainness or social inferiority, but rather a reframing of their meanings in relation to self-worth. Annette Federico has maintained that Jane's self-recognition and union with Rochester towards the end of the novel signal her emergence from what she describes as the 'stressful female cycles' in which she has internalised her inferiority to other females.<sup>99</sup> This triumph, argues Federico, reveals the 'transcendence of mind and spirit over body and beauty'.<sup>100</sup> Yet, Federico, like many other critics, is interpreting plainness as an interior quality rather than a physical manifestation that is celebrated in and of itself. While Jane certainly upholds the priority of interiority over exteriority, she still appeals to Rochester to acknowledge her own beauty and worth as a plain woman. This sense of self-mastery, rather than being only a spiritual self-recognition, is also an act of resistance to this socially constructed binary in which she purposefully and assertively learns to disavow, as will later heroines such as Dorothea Johnston in Craik's *A Life for a Life* and Jane Osborn in Linton's *Sowing the Wind*.

Elizabeth Gaskell, describing Charlotte Brontë's appearance in her biography of the author, similarly reframes the connotations of the author's plainness which, as she suggests, had always made her self-conscious.<sup>101</sup> She maintains:

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<sup>96</sup> See Brontë's sketch (1843) in *The Art of the Brontës* in which she draws herself as a 'grotesque stunted little female' in contrast to her beautiful companion Ellen Nussey. As Alexander notes, this reflects Brontë's 'increasingly low self-esteem'. See Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 261.

<sup>97</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 194-5.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>99</sup> Annette Federico, "'A Cool Observer of Her Own Sex Like Me": Girl-Watching in *Jane Eyre*', *Victorian Newsletter*, 80 (1991), 29-31 (p. 32).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Gaskell suggests that 'much of this nervous dread of encountering strangers I ascribed to the idea of her personal ugliness, which had been strongly impressed upon her personal imagination early in life, and which she exaggerated to herself in a remarkable manner'. See Elizabeth Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Angus Easson, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 82.

As for the rest of her features, they were plain, large, and ill set; but, unless you began to catalogue them, you were hardly aware of the fact, for the eyes and power of the countenance over-balanced every physical defect; the crooked mouth and the large nose were forgotten, and the whole face arrested the attention, and presently attracted all those whom she herself would have cared to attract.<sup>102</sup>

Gaskell attempts to bestow on Brontë what G. H. Lewes described as Jane's 'beauty of plainness'.<sup>103</sup> Gaskell directs her readers' attention to the expressiveness of Brontë's face and countenance. This description particularly accentuates the power and beauty of Brontë's eyes, which readily substitute the attraction of perfect beauty.<sup>104</sup> As I will show in Chapters Four and Five, the plain heroine's eyes and their intense expressiveness are emphasised in the novels I discuss. An article 'Physical Perfection' (1860), published in the *National Magazine*, quotes this description of Brontë by Gaskell to illustrate its claim that expression and intellect were superior to perfect regularity of features in a woman.<sup>105</sup> It seems that by the late 1850s, both plain Jane Eyre and her creator had captured the cultural imagination as icons of aesthetic plainness. These attitudes towards an appreciation of plainness and irregularity of features mark a shift in the way beauty becomes perceived in the 1850s and 1860s. Beauty never lost its paramount influence and supremacy as a feminine attribute, but such perspectives as the above show how limited views of beauty as mere physical perfection are being interrogated and undermined. In ways that are in some respects similar to, and in others different from *Jane Eyre*, the works covered in this thesis are actively and in certain cases very boldly engaged in the act of reinterpretation and revision of plainness as a sign of inferiority or Otherness. These narratives are invested in interrogating this binary and exploring plainness as the formation of individual identity. Many of these novels, as we will see, operate upon the binary of the contrasting sisters: the beautiful one and the plain one. However, the emphasis that they place upon

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<sup>102</sup> Gaskell, p. 76.

<sup>103</sup> G. H. Lewes, 'Recent Novels: French and English', p. 692.

<sup>104</sup> Gaskell describes her 'fine eyes blazing with meaning', and in another instance stresses that the 'eyes ([were] very good and expressive)'. See Gaskell, p. 327, 352. The famous pillar portrait of the three sisters by their brother Branwell also puts an emphasis on their faces and eyes. See Jane Sellars, 'Portraits of the Brontës', in *The Brontës in Context*, ed. by Marianne Thormählen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 123-133 (pp. 127-8).

<sup>105</sup> 'Physical Perfection', *National Magazine*, December 1860, pp. 90-95.

the plain sister and her potential for growth and self-attainment, particularly as opposed to the conventional beautiful sister and the marriage plot, demonstrates these attempts to redefine plainness. They direct the reader's attention to plainness's own beauty and the opportunity of self-expression it allows in the narrative.

*Jane Eyre* features moments of intense confrontations between Jane and other characters, such as her aunt Mrs Reed and Rochester, where Jane bluntly expresses herself. Jane's plain-speaking and the transparency with which she articulates her emotions combine to form an important layer of her plainness, beyond its physical connotations. Jane's plainness of speech, or her 'coarseness', was an important feature in the critical reception of her work, which also created some contradictory responses that at once undermined it or upheld its sincerity. Plain-speaking, which was often associated with Christian discourse and plainness of expression well before *Jane Eyre*, was as Deborah Cameron describes it a 'contested ideal'.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, plainness of expression proved to be more complex than its reputed honesty and directness. In her discussion of Romantic and Methodist Poetry and their conception of plain language in the late eighteenth century, Helen Boyle observes:

The plainness designed to be accessible can abandon elegance in favour of homely simplicity, and this has the potential to degenerate into banality and coarseness. Aesthetic objections to this kind of plainness were inflected with class-based distinctions which identified inelegance and coarseness with a lack of sophistication or education.<sup>107</sup>

As Boyle suggests, gendered and social considerations played a significant part in facilitating such distinctions and judgements. Beyond the religious and poetic debates, this counter criticism of plainness as unrefined or vulgar is particularly relevant to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Some reviews of the novel featured highly-charged accusations of coarseness that would motivate Gaskell's account of Brontë in *The Life of Charlotte*

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<sup>106</sup> Deborah Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 64-5.

<sup>107</sup> Helen Boyles, *Romanticism and Methodism: The Problem of Religious Enthusiasm* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 106. See also Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poets and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 65-66.

*Brontë*.<sup>108</sup> Lucasta Miller sums up these concerns about coarseness in Brontë's work by noting that:

The 'coarseness' to which so many critics objected was a catch-all moralistic term which encompasses a range of elements considered unfeminine and indecorous. Linguistically, it included the Brontës' use of slang and swear-words as well as their supposedly inappropriate use of biblical quotations. More fundamentally, the word 'coarse' was applied to the novels' depiction of passion and violence, which were held to challenge the modesty and refinement of normative femininity.<sup>109</sup>

Indeed, these reviews, such as Lady Eastlake's famous review of the novel and others, were fuelled by gendered and social biases that shaped their view of the novel and encompassed the complexities and paradoxes that Boyle refers to. While Jane's outspokenness and direct tone signified a powerful sense of self-expression, it created a model that could not be consolidated within the existing social and gendered ideals and was, thus, condemned as 'coarse'.

On the other hand, in his essay on the Brontës (1857), W. C. Roscoe pays attention to the unique mode of self-expression that pervades in *Jane Eyre*.<sup>110</sup> He maintains:

It has been well said, and every reader perceives it, or ought to do so, that her plain-speaking is itself the result of her purity. What she has that jars on us often in her writings is not so much these things as a certain harshness, a love of the naked fact too unsparing, and a tendency to believe that what is attractive scarcely can be true.<sup>111</sup>

Roscoe reframes in this passage the connotations of Jane's directness and transparency, which are commonly thought of as coarse. Jane's plain-speaking is represented as a pure form of self-expression that brings forth an authentic version of her feelings that is unaffected by refinement or eloquence. The rejection of adornment and the belief that 'what is attractive scarcely can be true' certainly perpetuates the narrative and its

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<sup>108</sup> See Claire O'Callaghan and Sophie Franklin, 'Introduction: The Coarseness of the Brontës Reconsidered', *Brontë Studies*, 44, 1 (2019), 1-4.

<sup>109</sup> Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 18.

<sup>110</sup> Roscoe, 'Miss Brontë', p. 163.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

representation of Jane. As Roscoe contends, we ought to perceive this aspect of her character in the light of its honesty and the novel's authentic depiction of Jane's inner life. Any attempts to adorn her speech or use florid language would come as a negation to the basis of self-expression and authenticity with which this autobiographical writing stands as a 'plain tale with few pretensions'.<sup>112</sup> The connections between plain appearances and speech, as I pointed out earlier, were of paramount importance among Quakers. These links are also apparent in *Jane Eyre* and its foregrounding of plainness to expose its multiple significances in the text and its representation of Jane's experience. Likewise, we will see a remarkable link between facial plainness and plainness of style in writing and expression in my discussion of Oliphant's *The Athelings* and Craik's *A Life for a Life*. Plainness is actively and dynamically extended to cover more than physical appearance in depicting a heroine's experience. Such a representation, however, is bound to bring about similar anxieties and uncertainties as *Jane Eyre*'s plainness did. In Landon's *Romance and Reality*, a character notes, 'I am afraid plain truth is like a plain face – not very attractive'.<sup>113</sup> Such a correlation was certainly 'not very attractive' to contemporary reviewers. However, my reading of these novels argues that this coarse and plain speech, just as plain appearance, becomes experienced as something empowering and freeing.

It is through the tone of repetitive affirmation of Jane's plainness that *Jane Eyre* as a novel invokes what I call the 'politics of plainness'. The uniqueness of Brontë's novel lies in its determined and assertive manner in representing the plainness of its heroine and more importantly its significance in relation to Jane's sense of her own identity. The publication of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, as I have argued in the Introduction, is an important mid-century event that raised questions about female plainness and its representation in women's writing. Elaine Showalter briefly describes the 'post-Jane heroine' as 'plain, rebellious and passionate; ... and she usually was the narrator of her own story'.<sup>114</sup> However, not enough recognition has been given to the extent to which *Jane Eyre* can be seen as a turning point in the history of the representation of plainness in women's fiction and the dialogues it fostered among many of these works.

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<sup>112</sup> Preface to *Jane Eyre*, xxv.

<sup>113</sup> Landon, *Romance and Reality*, I, p. 177.

<sup>114</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 122.

The increasing depiction of plain heroines post-*Jane Eyre* attests to the way in which the novel had become a critical moment that qualified and empowered such a representation of plainness. This interest in plainness is directly expressed in one of Margaret Gatty's tales. In 'The Human Face Divine' (1859), Gatty presents a literary editor who employs a female author for the task of writing a specific piece of fiction for his newspaper on the premise that, 'the autobiography of a woman of unusual abilities, highly cultivated mind, refined tastes and feelings, and ardent affections, but *decidedly plain in person*, would be a remarkably curious and interesting record' (emphasis in original).<sup>115</sup> Gatty's tale clearly invokes the success of *Jane Eyre* as an autobiography of the plain heroine. The editor's remarks reflect a contemporary interest and fascination with what is described in the tale as the 'class of plain young women'.<sup>116</sup> The tale sheds light on the emotional state of the author who is assigned to write this autobiography and the intellectual and artistic inspiration triggered by her mission to reclaim the destiny of her plain heroine. The author is herself a '*plain one*', which further strengthens the emotional intensity of handling the task at hand.<sup>117</sup> She delves deep into her consideration of a woman's plain face and how far her character is destined to be loved and cherished. Gatty's tale and its exploration of the plain author and her plain heroine offer a direct parallel to *Jane Eyre* and Gaskell's biography of Brontë.

A *Saturday Review* article in 1867 pointed to *Jane Eyre* as the 'first triumphant success of this particular school of art. And *Jane Eyre* certainly opened the door to a long train of imitators'.<sup>118</sup> The 'school of art' that Brontë led with her creation of *Jane Eyre* becomes particularly associated with the figure of the 'plain' heroine whom Walter Bagehot had famously satirised as the 'atrocious species of *plain heroines*' (emphasis on original).<sup>119</sup> The same *Saturday Review* article maintains that:

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<sup>115</sup> Mrs. Alfred (Margaret) Gatty, *The Human Face Divine, and Other Tales* (London: George Bell and sons, 1882), p. 5.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12. Gatty's tale is didactic in nature and has a strong moral and religious tone. The author of the tale reaches the conclusion that both she and her fictional heroine must aim to cultivate the 'divine of the soul, which had power to burst through and triumph over all'. The tale ends happily with the editor falling in love with the author in whose face 'the divine shines too brightly'.

<sup>118</sup> 'Women's Heroines', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 2 March 1867, pp. 259-261 (p. 259).

<sup>119</sup> Walter Bagehot, 'The Waverley Novels', *National Review*, April 1858, pp. 444-472 (pp. 459-60).

Vigorous and pertinacious effort has of late years been made to persuade mankind that beauty in women is matter of very little moment ... As a rule, authoresses do not care much about lovely women; ... They can have no patience with such feebleness, ... It became, accordingly, the fashion at one time among feminine writers of fiction to make all their fascinating heroines plain girls with plenty of soul.<sup>120</sup>

The article constructed plainness in women's writing to be in direct opposition to female beauty, 'loveliness' and 'feebleness'. It laid emphasis on the feminist drive that motivates such a representation of plainness, which is aligned exclusively with female authors and their attempts to reshape the representation of femininity in fiction. Hence, these views implore the binary system of beautiful/plain and all their connotations in an attempt to undermine and challenge the increasing representation of the plain heroine and her rise as an anti-type to the conventional Victorian heroine. Indeed, Bagehot's critique of plain heroines is drawn in comparison to the artistic creation of heroines by Walter Scott, which is accomplished with a 'gentle tone of manly admiration'.<sup>121</sup> In a sense this binary of the beautiful/plain also invokes the binary of female/male, particularly in relation to authorship and the superiority of the artistic creation of the latter.<sup>122</sup> These gender-driven discussions over the art of literary characterisation, as they are triggered in mid-century by the emergence of the ideal of plainness, prove to be essential for discursively bringing forth and recognising the subversive connotations that are continually attached to the figure of the plain heroine in Brontë's work, as well as other contemporary novels.

These responses to the representation of plainness in fiction reveal the ways in which the popularity of plainness post-*Jane Eyre* added to the contentiousness of the term 'plain' and its meanings in literature and, particularly, in relation to women's writing.<sup>123</sup> After all, plainness came to be understood as more than an unbeautiful appearance, as it continued to be situated more broadly in relation to literary, social,

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<sup>120</sup> 'Women's Heroines', p. 259.

<sup>121</sup> Bagehot, p. 459.

<sup>122</sup> As Nicola Thompson has observed, a 'distinctly gendered aesthetics of reception' dominates the critical treatment of literary works in the nineteenth century. See Nicola Diane Thompson, *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1996), p. 10.

<sup>123</sup> The term 'plain' became noticeably used in titles of tales published in the periodical press, such as 'Plain Mary Allen' (1864) and 'The Romance of a Plain Face' (1871), which were both published in *The London Reader*.

and gender ideals. In the *Westminster Review*, an article identified two newly published novels, *Riverston* by Georgiana Marion Craik (1857) and *The White House by the Sea; A Love Story* by Matilda Betham-Edwards (1857), as texts that represent ‘daughters direct of Miss Jane Eyre’.<sup>124</sup> The review particularly criticises the heroine of *Riverston* who ‘represents principle, as opposed to impulse’.<sup>125</sup>

It is in the nature of things that she should marry an old broken, if not blind, gentleman, at the close of the third volume. Young men do not appreciate principle as opposed to impulse. We confess for ourselves, that we do not greatly care for these ladies in books. In actual life they are admirable; in books they are tedious, morbid, distasteful.<sup>126</sup>

There is a sense in which the heroine that bears the influence of Jane Eyre represented an attitude and ethic that are at odds with the ideal heroine, who is often submissive and gentle. The reviewer undermined the inner strength of the heroine. Such independence negates the charm of a heroine and instead makes her ‘morbid’ and only worthy of an ‘old broken’ husband. On the other hand, a review of the novel *Mr. Wynyard’s Ward* (1867) by Harriet Parr discerned the heroine’s ‘personal plainness and courageous bearing towards her lover’.<sup>127</sup> The heroine ‘resembles Jane Eyre, and many touches in her portraiture indicate Currer Bell’s influence’.<sup>128</sup> The novel’s heroine is distinguished not only for her plainness but also for her admirable traits of character. As I suggested earlier, female plainness did not exclusively stand for or represent a lack of physical beauty. It became noticeably associated with other aspects of character such as plain-speaking, courage, independence, and inner strength, which were both commended and undermined by contemporary reviews.

The competing and conflicting interpretations of plainness, explored in this chapter, in its wider social, aesthetic, and literary configurations reveal its complex nature. This chapter has demonstrated how debates on female plainness and attempts to recognise and define its characteristics were more prevalent and culturally important than we might have previously recognised. Determining the nature of plainness and its

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<sup>124</sup> ‘Belles Lettres and Art’, *Westminster Review*, January 1858, pp. 291-304 (p. 297).

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> ‘Mr. Wynyard’s Ward’, *The Athenaeum*, May 1857, pp. 688-89 (p. 688).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

attributes underwent changes and developments that played an important role in shaping cultural conceptions of it. While female beauty and plainness often continued to be shaped and defined by binary relations, plainness, nevertheless, acquired its own set of meanings and characteristics that reframed its value and positive features. Questioning the assumption regarding the inferiority of plainness was apparent as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century and became more evident towards the 1850s and 1860s. My discussion of plain dress has highlighted the extent to which dress was used as a tool to express social status or religious non-conformity, while also paradoxically revealing elements of performance.

It was Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, however, that imposed upon the mid-nineteenth century a picture of female plainness that would invigorate its subversive meanings in relation to femininity and self-expression. Considering the responses that the novel created and the ways in which the plain heroine grew to be a success and a sought-after ideal in women's writing of the time shows us the extent to which Brontë's work and innovation were a major turning point. Brontë's experimentation with plainness in her early writings in the late 1830s and the materialisation of her vision of the plain heroine in *Jane Eyre* proved to be a non-ending process that continued to create interest and debates in the decades following its publication. The collective interest in plainness among female authors post-*Jane Eyre* allowed many of them to contribute to this discourse, which continued to shape the meanings of female plainness and its representation in women's writing, as my coming chapters will demonstrate. The gradual development in social, cultural, and aesthetic thinking about female plainness in the first half of the century becomes even more visible when we consider the increasing and daring representation of plain heroines and their right to self-assertion in women's fiction.

## Chapter 2

### ‘[P]lainer, if possible, than ever’: Female Plainness in the Early Works of Charlotte Brontë

Charlotte Brontë’s juvenilia, unlike her mature novels with their independent plain heroines, is dominated by female beauties who represent her imaginary aristocratic world. The tiny pages of the juvenilia manuscripts bring to life Brontë’s imaginative narratives of beauty and social superiority.<sup>1</sup> In one of her early stories, ‘The Fairy Gift. A Tale’ (1830), the character of Captain Bud, while still a young man, narrates to Charles Wellesley one of his unforgettable dreams prior to becoming a successful politician and historian in the Angrian state.<sup>2</sup> Bud relates his encounter with a fairy who grants him four wishes, the first being his ‘desire for beauty’.<sup>3</sup> Because of his newly acquired beautiful appearance, he is able to secure a marriage to an aristocratic widow, thus raising his social status. Amid the splendour of his new lavish life, Bud meets Cecilia Standon, who he notes has a ‘graceful demeanour ... without any of that haughty superciliousness’.<sup>4</sup> It is this appraisal of Cecilia that provokes Bud’s wife’s jealousy, leading to the end of his opulent lifestyle. As the wife aims to strangle her husband in revenge, the fairy appears again, asking Bud whether he wishes to ‘return to [his] former rank of a happy, honest labourer, being deprived of the beauty which has been the source of so much trouble’.<sup>5</sup> Bud rejoices in his former state, being ‘plain and coarse as ever’.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, his plainness and coarseness by the end of the tale point to a state of happiness and freedom, which his experience of aristocratic life had denied him. His plainness and coarseness relate to his ordinary appearance and social inferiority, but also signify Bud’s natural state of existence where he is most true to himself. Plainness in this tale, with its multiple meanings, confounds and perhaps undermines the desire for beauty and social status. The tale raises questions about

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<sup>1</sup> The Brontë juvenilia was written in very small hand-made books. See Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Brontë, ‘Visits in Verreopolis’, in *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Christine Alexander, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1987-1991), I, pp. 319-324.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 323-324.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

plainness that will be central to my discussion of Brontë's plain heroines in her early writings.

The appearance of this story in the early 1830s amid Brontë's growing enthusiasm for writing and sketching her aristocratic world seems rather surprising and exceptional when considered alongside her other contemporary tales, in which she celebrates the splendour of 'high life'. Charles Wellesley, the narrator of the tale 'High Life in Verdopolis' (1834), begins by asserting, 'I like high life: I like its manners, its splendors, its luxuries, the beings which move in its enchanted sphere. I like to consider the habits of those beings, their way of thinking'.<sup>7</sup> Bud, on the other hand, critiques the artificiality of aristocratic manners, experiencing the affliction of a vicious wife that reinforces his faith in his poor plain origins. This rejection of aristocratic life voiced by Bud will take a long course until it is fully realised in Brontë's mature novels.<sup>8</sup> The experience of Bud's social transformation and the associations of plainness with sincerity, and beauty with artificiality, will be echoed again in Brontë's other tales. Her attention to the appearance of her female characters engages with the construction of social distinctions and debates over female beauty and display in the early 1800s, in which plainness is often featured as a foil to beauty's vanity and indulgence. Beauty and plainness (in their multiple meanings), as this chapter will argue, evolve in Brontë's juvenilia as a signifying binary that indicates conflicting social, moral and personal realities.

Brontë's juvenilia are a series of fragmented writings that are comprised of different styles and genres such as stories, plays, poems, and diaries. They are characterised by their experimental, fluid, and very often chaotic style. Christine Alexander maintains that one of the outstanding aspects of Brontë's juvenilia is the way in which these writings 'constitute a literary marketplace where various roles and ideas can be explored and questioned'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the lack of a linear development to events

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<sup>7</sup> Brontë, 'High Life in Verdopolis', *EEW*, II (part 2), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> In her 'Farewell to Angria' (1839), Brontë expresses clearly and directly the end of her literary infatuation with the 'high life' of the Angrian state. See Charlotte Brontë, 'Farewell to Angria', in *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal: Selected Early Writings*, ed. by Christine Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 314. See also Susan Meyer who suggests that Brontë's assimilation and rejection of 'racial, gender and class hierarchy' precedes the creation of her mature fiction. Susan Meyer, "'Black' Rage and White Women: Ideological Self-Formation in Charlotte Brontë's African Tales", *South Central Review*, 8, 4 (1991), 28-40 (p. 37).

<sup>9</sup> Christine Alexander, 'Introduction', in *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal: Selected Early Writings*, xx.

and characters in these works sheds light on Brontë's highly experimental and progressive style of writing. Heather Glen echoes Alexander as she considers the fragmented nature of Brontë's Angrian tales, written in the latter stages of her juvenilia in the late 1830s, arguing that this 'aesthetic disjunction' could be seen as a purposeful experimentation with 'different ideas of "character" – as essential nature, as performance, as moral standing in the world'.<sup>10</sup> These interruptions and experiments allow for the exploration and scrutiny of different characters as well as questioning the wider social and literary culture that inspired many of these creations, as the earlier example of Bud demonstrates. The focus on the representation and configuration of female beauty and plainness in this chapter reveals the way in which they became a significant part of this experimental style that enables the representation of different female identities.

The culture of the fashionable literary annuals of the 1820s and 1830s and their celebration of titled beauty was a potent influence upon Brontë in her formative years. The images of beautiful women in these annuals, which 'displayed the unique blend of female sexuality and social grace' just as they captured the imagination of female readers of the middle classes, certainly shaped Brontë's conception of femininity and its representation in her early works.<sup>11</sup> However, Brontë's gradual and growing interest in the representation of plainness reveals the ways in which it was in dialogue with the uncertainties and questions that some of her contemporaries such as Sara Coleridge considered in relation to the social and cultural conception of female beauty and its potential to be an obstacle to female self-realisation. Indeed, Brontë's representation of plainness and its connotations in the narrative, as I will argue, stems from and interrogates her own fascination with female beauty. Brontë's representation of plainness is unique because, while it connotes the heroine's virtue and reserve, it also more importantly reflects her engagement with plainness as an enactment of female self-determination in contrast to the passivity and subjugation of her beauties. The representation of plainness demonstrates the juvenilia's experimental style and the significance of appearance in articulating broader meanings about the heroines.

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<sup>10</sup> Heather Glen, 'Experiments in Fiction: Charlotte Brontë's Last Angrian Tales', *Women's Writing*, 14, 1 (2007), 4-22 (p. 5, 15).

<sup>11</sup> Terence Hoagwood and Kathryn Ledbetter, *Colour'd Shadows: Contexts in Publishing, Printing, and Reading Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 97.

This chapter looks at Brontë's less well-known interest in female plainness in her early writings, particularly through the character of Elizabeth Hastings in 'Henry Hastings' (1839), who is often referred to as the prototype of Jane Eyre.<sup>12</sup> Female plainness in these early writings draws attention to the social and moral distinction that Brontë attributes to her plain-looking heroines in contrast to the moral ambiguity and sexual dissipation of her beauties. There is a gradual shift in Brontë's representation of female appearance in her early works from being a sign of social status into a more subversive and cynical depiction of female experience and vulnerability. Plainness becomes even more intriguing in these writings, particularly towards the end of Charlotte's composition of these imaginative Angrian tales in the late 1830s, as it begins subtly to interrogate and subvert her earlier conceptions of femininity and beauty. In one of the very few discussions of the representation of female appearance in Brontë's juvenilia, Elaine Arvan Andrews argues that the shift that Brontë undertakes in characterising her plain heroine, Elizabeth Hastings, in the late 1830s marks her resistance to contemporary models of femininity and display into a more authentic representation of her heroine.<sup>13</sup> While I agree with Andrews and my own reading of the tale 'Henry Hastings' supports her claim, I argue that Brontë, early on in her work and well before the Angrian tales (1838-1839), experimented with fashion and the construction of difference in her writings. A closer look at her earlier writings will reveal her less recognised attention to the representation of social and moral difference. Moreover, plainness in its emphasis upon virtue also creates space for the articulation of a more subversive stance to dominance and female dependence.

At this stage of her writing, that of the late 1830s and her Angrian tales, Brontë is more attentive than earlier to the psychological representation of characters and their emotional conflicts. The social experience of the plain body is transformed into an exploration of the psychological and subjective state of the female self in terms that counteract the image of feminine beauty and submission presented earlier throughout the narrative. As perfect beauty begins to uncover its hollowness with the wasting of her beautiful heroines, plainness evolves as a signifier of depth and resilience. This

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> Elaine Arvan Andrews, 'The "Lure of the Fabulous": Gift-Book Beauties and Charlotte Brontë's Early Heroines', *Women's Writing*, 16, 2 (2009), 263-282 (pp. 266-269).

significant phase of Brontë's literary work, well before the success of *Jane Eyre*, will prove instrumental to her later representation of female plainness that would lead to the success of her realist mid-century novels. It reveals her early attention to and consideration of the challenges and limitations to female self-realisation that will continue to dominate her latter works.

The chapter will follow the development of the construction of appearance to denote multiple social and moral meanings in Brontë's Angrian narrative from her early conception of social difference into a more subversive engagement with female subjectivity. It begins by considering Brontë's attention to visual details in representing the physical beauty of her heroines and indicating their social class. The second part of the chapter looks at Brontë's late juvenilia between 1835 and 1839, a period in which her treatment of her heroines' fading beauty points to their objectification and abuse. Brontë's thorough exploration of female plainness in the tale 'Henry Hastings' is analysed in the third and main part of this chapter to shed light on her depiction of female individuality that counteracts the image of self-loss represented earlier with the dying wives of Zamorna. Plainness in Brontë's fiction is not only related to facial irregularity but also goes into the realm of plainness as a self-imposition, particularly through dress.

### **Early Juvenilia, 1829-1835: Beauty, Fashion, and the Construction of Social Difference**

The early tales of Brontë reflect her growing enthusiasm for the emergence of her principal Byronic hero Arthur, the Marquis of Douro (Zamorna), as a driving force in the narrative. Zamorna's passionate relationships with women and their infatuation with his charm take a large share of Brontë's involvement in the narrative in contrast to her brother's keener interest in war and military affairs in their Saga. Zamorna's women are depicted with great care by Brontë, whose interest in the visual arts, especially portrait painting, transforms her literary portrayal of them into a detailed account of their appearance and fashion.<sup>14</sup> The process of dressing her heroines in these tales and rendering them as visible icons of female beauty also entails signalling their

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<sup>14</sup> See Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës*.

social status. Fashion becomes an effective sign with which to achieve that. The silver fork genre, popular in the 1820s and 1830s, was a potent influence on Brontë's juvenilia.<sup>15</sup> In two recent studies, Edward Copeland and Cheryl Wilson emphasise the genre's focused depiction of social difference and the role that fashion plays in these works to materialise such distinctions.<sup>16</sup> Copeland asserts that this attention to fashion, was particularly significant because it 'constitutes an exploration of social status generated by the reform years'.<sup>17</sup> Brontë's handling of the social difference between the rivals Zenobia Ellrington and Marian Hume over the love of Zamorna is a clear example of the role that fashion and appearance play in the narrative. As with Bud's tale, the depiction of physical appearance emphasises larger issues of class and morality in the juvenilia.

Zenobia Ellrington is a prominent female character in the juvenilia whose physical characterisation replicates contemporary ideals of aristocratic female beauty. In a poem, Zamorna describes a portrait of Zenobia:

You have an aspect passing fair,  
 A form of beauteous guise,  
 A Juno-like, majestic air,  
 And piercing, radiant eyes;

And you have locks whose jetty light  
 Is like the raven's wing;  
 And oh! When from your forehead bright  
 Those glossy locks you fling,

How down your shoulders fair they stream,  
 And down your stately neck!  
 How richly, with their dusky gleam,  
 Your queen-like form they deck!<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Heather Glen's Introduction to Charlotte Brontë, *Tales of Angria*, ed. by Heather Glen, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2006), xiv-xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Copeland, *The Silver Fork Novel: Fashionable Fiction in the Age of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Cheryl A. Wilson, *Fashioning the Silver Fork Novel* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Copeland, p. 29. The figure of the dandy is a common example that is often associated with the genre's depiction and satire of fashionable society. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham* (1828) is one well-known example.

<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *The Poems of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Tom Winnifrith (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1984), p. 124.

The poem's celebration of Zenobia's physical appearance and attributes serves to enhance her image as a recognisable woman of letters whose beauty, intellect, and aristocratic breeding are pronounced. The poem's specific attention to Zenobia's 'radiant eyes', locks of hair over the forehead, and her 'stately neck' highlights and accentuates her status as an aristocratic lady of letters. The character of Zenobia, often referred to as the 'Verdopolitan de-Staël', has been commonly associated with contemporary literary figures such as Madame De Staël's *Corinne* and Lady Blessington.<sup>19</sup> Physical beauty was, in many cases, an indispensable charm for the public intellectual woman seeking literary recognition during the first half of the century.<sup>20</sup> Zenobia's physical beauty stands as an emulation of the aristocratic and public culture presented in the literary annuals of the 1820s and 1830s, which fascinated Brontë in her youth and which she eagerly reproduces in her imaginative tales.

The marriage of Florence Marian Hume, the daughter of the Duke's physician Sir Alexander Hume Badey, brings to our attention early in the narrative Brontë's awareness and engagement with her contemporary social discourse.<sup>21</sup> While on the one hand, the first half of the century produced literary works that represent the glamour of aristocratic life for middle-class readers, the same period witnessed an increasing interest in the production of conduct-books and manuals illustrating the ideal nature of bourgeois femininity and domesticity.<sup>22</sup> These accounts reinforced the authority of female dress as a marker of social and moral difference, recommending modesty and simplicity. Hannah More, in *Moral Sketches of Prevailing Opinions and Manners* (1819), a copy of which the Brontës owned, criticises female excessive attention to appearances, asserting that 'sobriety and simplicity, ... so conspicuously, and so beautifully distinguish the religion of the New Testament'.<sup>23</sup> This is emphasised in

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<sup>19</sup> See *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 48. See also Julian North, 'Appearing Before the Public: Charlotte Brontë and the Author Portrait in the 1830s', *Brontë Studies*, 41, 1 (2016), 60-74.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Richard Madden's discussion of the literary career of Lady Blessington. Richard Robert Madden, *The Literary Life and Correspondence of the Countess of Blessington*, 3 vols (London: T. C. Newby, 1855).

<sup>21</sup> Christine Alexander has suggested that the real-life inspiration of Marian's character was Elizabeth Hume the daughter of the Duke of Wellington's actual physician. See *EEW*, I, p. 184

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 34-39.

<sup>23</sup> See Barker, p. 145. Hannah More, *Moral Sketches of Prevailing Opinions and Manners, Foreign and Domestic* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1819), p. 197.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hw2rez&view=1up&seq=27> [accessed September 2019]

Brontë's handling of the rivalry between Marian and Zenobia over the love of Zamorna. In an early description of Marian, her 'exquisite beauty' is emphasised and complemented by her plain and simple style of clothing.<sup>24</sup>

The hue of her cheek ... the clear azure of her eyes ... the silken tresses of her hazel hair... her dress was almost Quaker-like in its simplicity. Pure white or vernal green were the colours she constantly wore, without any jewels, save one row of pearls round her neck.<sup>25</sup>

Marian's beauty is represented as natural and pure. Unlike the extravagant appearance of aristocratic women, Marian's red cheeks and blue eyes are portrayed as an expression of her natural and unadorned beauty. Moreover, Marian's social position as a middle-class daughter in these tales plays an important role in Brontë's choice of dress and its symbolic dimension in the text. Marian's simplicity of dress and lack of ornament become her distinguishing features throughout the narrative and often underpin the contrast between her and other female aristocratic characters, particularly Zenobia.<sup>26</sup> Her plain dress bears the sign of this difference and attests to her purity and modesty. The description of Marian's 'Quaker-like' plainness reproduces the image of the hyperfeminine and pure Quaker woman that De Quincey described. Her exclusively white and green dresses pose a contrast to the varied shades of red that her rival Zenobia often wears. White and green, in their denotation of purity and nature, materialise Marian's maidenly and domestic character. Colour contrast, as I will also argue in my discussion of *Villette*, facilitates the representation of the female body – its reserve or, on the other hand, its display. Marian represents a vision of femininity and beauty that is distinct from Zenobia's. The references to her features, dress, and colours accentuate the naturalness and simplicity of her appearance in order to reinforce emphatically this difference. They are the tools that Brontë readily plays with to showcase her characterisation of each heroine.

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<sup>24</sup> Brontë, 'Albion and Marina', *EEW*, I, p. 289. Of course, the connotation of the plainness of dress in this tale denoting middle-class sobriety differs from coarse plainness in the earlier tale of Captain Bud.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> The narrative maintains this emphasis upon dress as an indicator of social difference. In 'The Foundling', the tale draws a contrast between Lady Julia and Marian: 'she [Lady Julia] was dressed in a rich dark satin robe, ornamented with a profusion of jewels. ... Her companion [Marian] was equally beautiful, but of a smaller stature and slighter form... she wore only a green silk frock and pearl necklace, and a myrtle wreath twined among her luxuriant auburn ringlets'. See Brontë, 'The Foundling', *EEW*, II (part 1), p. 77.

The description of Marian throughout the narrative accentuates these meanings of simplicity and domesticity. In the following poem, Zamorna expresses his love for Marian:

The pea[r]l within the shell concealed  
Oft sheds a fairer light  
Than those whose beauties are revealed  
To our restricted sight.

So she who sweetly shines at home,  
And seldom wanders thence,  
Is of her partner's happy dome  
The best intelligence.

The highest talents of her mind,  
The sunlight of her heart,  
Are all to illumine her home designed,  
And never thence they part.<sup>27</sup>

Marian's description in these stanzas and her constant associations with austerity and pearls reveals these as signs of her purity and domesticity. Zamorna's poem invokes middle-class ideals of domesticity that Brontë is eager to emphasise in relation to her heroine Marian. The poem locates Marian's worth within the domesticated realm of her existence. Moreover, the poem's appraisal of Marian's beauty and purity is set in direct opposition to Zenobia's public and intellectual life. This becomes particularly clear in the way that Marian's domestic nature is marked out as a reflection of the 'highest talents of her mind' and the 'best intelligence', which undermines Zenobia's pride in her position as a lady of letters. In 'Lily Hart' (1833), the heroine, like Marian, is often distinguished from other aristocratic beauties. In the tale, Lily marries Prince John, becoming the Marchioness of Fidena. Lily, orphaned after the death of her father, is described as a beautiful young woman to whose 'attractions were added a charming simplicity of dress and manner, all the refined accomplishments of a polite education, and the more solid advantages of a useful one'.<sup>28</sup> Again, Brontë is instating Lily's social background in a manner that highlights her domestic character. Lily's character plays a very minor role in Brontë's tale. She, just like Marian, is rarely given a voice. The action of the narrative, especially the earlier works in the juvenilia, does not involve

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<sup>27</sup> Brontë, 'Visits in Verreopolis', *EEW*, I, pp. 300-301.

<sup>28</sup> Brontë, 'Lily Heart', *EEW*, II (part 1), p. 304.

any deep interrogation of a minor character's motives or action. These distinctions represented here through the characters of Marian and Lily are only portrayed through the surface carrying connotations of social difference.

Zenobia's response to Zamorna's choice of Marian as his wife undermines his earlier praise of her:

What is my rival? Nought but a weak girl,  
Ungifted with the state and majesty  
That mark superior minds. Her eyes gleam not  
Like windows to a soul of loftiness;  
She hath not raven locks that lightly wave  
Over a brow whose calm placidity  
Might emulate the white and polished marble.<sup>29</sup>

Zenobia establishes her putative superiority over her rival Marian, undermining Zamorna's praise of her. She instead accentuates her intellectual power, questioning Charles Wellesley's earlier praise of Marian's beauty; 'is there a spark of mind visible in that round, rosy face of hers?'<sup>30</sup> Zenobia celebrates her own abundant beauty and expressive features by pointing to Marian's inferiority and idleness. The rivalry between the two heroines is played out through the language of social and moral opposition in which appearance plays a major role. Brontë's ability as an adolescent to adopt the language of conflicting contemporary social discourses of upper and middle classes through the system of fashion and appearance as signs is apparent. She reproduces in her representation of Marian and Zenobia a distinctive construction of class-based feminine subjectivities that would be further reinforced and interrogated in her later tales. Both beauty and plainness, as physical indicators of social difference at this early stage of Brontë's work, will develop their own subversive meanings as the narrative progresses to represent a more thorough consideration of a heroine's emotional and moral state.

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<sup>29</sup> Brontë, 'Visits in Verreopolis', *EEW*, I, p. 305.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 302.

## Late Juvenilia, 1835-1838: Fading Beauty and the Rise of the Politics of Plainness

It is not until Brontë's Angrian tales, written in the late 1830s and after the end of her collaboration with her brother Branwell in writing their 'Angrian Saga', that the appearance of plainness becomes a more potent symbol in relation to the heroine's subjectivity. This is particularly the case in 'Henry Hastings' (1839), which revolves around Elizabeth, a governess and the 'protégé' of the Angrian beauty Jane Moore. Understanding Brontë's development of her heroine's plainness and its subversiveness, however, demands that we also look at her interrogation of the concept of beauty in some of her works written around the same time. The narrative's treatment of Zamorna's beautiful wives Marian Hume and Mary Percy emphasises their anxiety and affliction, which foreshadows their deaths. The scenes that describe their condition share the imagery of absence and wasting, which contrasts with the earlier idolisation of their perfect beauty. This narrative standpoint highlights Brontë's active interrogation of her heroines' excessive attachment to Zamorna and consequently their subjugation.

After Brontë attempts several modifications to rework her character's fate in her manuscripts, Marian ultimately dies of consumption. During her illness, she is neglected by Zamorna and is instead looked after by Prince John (Fidena). He accompanies Marian during her last days, and laments her deterioration caused by the absence of her husband Zamorna:

all the tenderness in the world were insufficient to raise that blighted lily so long as the sunshine of those eyes which had been her idolatry was withered, and so long as the music of that voice she had loved so fondly and truly sounded too far off to be heard.<sup>31</sup>

Zamorna's wives' blind devotion to him and their anxiety about his disregard of them begin to be alarming. The afflicted and 'blighted' Marian suffers from her own excessive love for her husband, her 'idolatry'. Marian's slow death is characterised by the loss of beauty and vitality, worsened by Zamorna's neglect and which, ironically,

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<sup>31</sup> Brontë, 'Corner Dishes: A Peep into a Picture Book', *EEW*, II (part 2), pp. 90-91.

can no longer sustain Zamorna's interest and attachment to her. Marian's end is predicted by Henry Percy, her former lover before her marriage to Zamorna, who warns readers that 'the cheek that glows for it, will soon turn deadly pale'.<sup>32</sup> The image of female beauty that comes to life in the narrative through the admiring gaze of Zamorna is doomed to end tragically.

During Brontë's formative years, the fashionable literary annuals celebrated the sensuality and beauty of women through their pages, inspiring the creation of many of Brontë's early heroines. Letitia Elizabeth Landon, among others, was an important literary figure who contributed to creating and editing these collections that celebrate feminine beauty. Recent critical work has tended to interrogate the assumptions that underlie Landon's poetry as an embodiment of patriarchal values of femininity and submissiveness. Anne Mellor, for instance, has looked at the way in which Landon's reproduction of the Burkean aesthetic model of femininity and beauty through her poems led eventually to the destruction of the very essence of this 'construction', as 'the beauty of her heroines inevitably fades'.<sup>33</sup> For example, in a poem titled 'Leades and Cydippe', the beauty and joy of Queen Cydippe fade after the long absence of her beloved husband, leading to her death.<sup>34</sup>

He came not! Then the heart's decay  
Wasted her silently away:-  
A sweet fount, which the mid-day sun  
Has all too hotly looked upon!  
It is most sad to watch the fall  
Of autumn leaves! – but worst of all  
It is to watch the flower of spring  
Faded in its fresh blossoming!<sup>35</sup>

The deaths of both Marian and Cydippe are similarly captured in terms of withering youth and beauty caused by the neglect and abandonment by their lovers. Brontë's juvenilia, similar to Landon's poetry, deals with beauty as a cultural construct of a

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<sup>32</sup> Brontë, 'Stanzas on the Fate of Henry Percy', *EEW*, II (part 2), p. 142. Henry Percy is Marian's former lover whom she mistakenly thought had died in a shipwreck. See 'The Secret', *EEW*, II (part 1), pp. 293-300.

<sup>33</sup> Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 120.

<sup>34</sup> Letitia Elizabeth Landon, 'Leades and Cydippe', in *The Improvisatrice; and other Poems* (London: Hurst, Robinson and Co., 1825), p. 55.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044024162588&view=1up&seq=17> [accessed October 2018]

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

woman's value that becomes largely determined by the love and interest of a man, and in Brontë's case, of Zamorna. The tale's attention to the emotional turmoil of the heroine manifests itself more clearly at this stage through the imagery of physical wasting. For Brontë, this transition from blooming beauty into hollowness appears to suggest the annihilation of female subjectivity.

Brontë's depiction of Zamorna's turbulent relationship with Mary Percy (his wife after Marian) also alludes to Mary's emotionally unstable state and her fading beauty, but with even more cynicism. In a scene where Zamorna visits Mary, the narrator comments on his motives:

he was come now partly to please himself with her beauty, partly to dream away an hour in amiable meditations on the sorcery of female charms and the peril of doting on them too fondly, being guided by them too implicitly.<sup>36</sup>

Mary's presence before her husband is reduced to mere corporeality. Her perfect beauty, as it is seen here through the sensual gaze of Zamorna, exposes the reality of female beauty as a social construct that denies a woman her individual identity and reduces her to a mere image. Here, Brontë begins to reveal her distrust of physical beauty as an indication of a woman's worth. The sense of abuse and sexual objectification that is often associated with Zamorna's treatment of his beautiful women becomes apparent. As the narrative develops, Mary's exquisite and aristocratic beauty begins to be overshadowed by her feelings of distress. Mary is overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and jealousy due to her husband's frequent abandonment of her and increasing attention to his mistress, Mina Laury.<sup>37</sup> Feeling that her earlier majestic beauty is fading, Mary confronts Zamorna, declaring, 'I am neither so handsome nor so cheerful as I once was, but you ought to forgive my decay because you have caused it'.<sup>38</sup> Mary's concern about the loss of her beauty and the way it may affect her relationship with her husband haunts her. However, in this resentful declaration of Zamorna's involvement in Mary's 'decay', Brontë voices her unease about the fate and weakness of her heroine whose existence becomes determined by Zamorna's care only. Zamorna's response further highlights Brontë's resentment: 'Mary, never again

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<sup>36</sup> Brontë, 'Stancliffe's Hotel', *TA*, p. 119.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.

<sup>38</sup> Brontë, 'Mina Laury', *TA*, p. 61.

reproach yourself with loss of beauty till I give the hint first ... And as for your devotion and tenderness, though I chide its excess sometimes, because it wastes and bleaches you almost to a shadow'.<sup>39</sup> Brontë at this stage appears to be more concerned and distrustful of her hero as she points to his abusiveness. Zamorna disregards Mary's anxiety about her appearance, setting his own gaze as the only measure of her decay. His response reveals the very essence of Mary's existence in the shadow of her husband, where her blind submission to him comes to foreshadow, paradoxically, her absence. This waning of the body symbolises its gradual disentanglement from the grip of the hero into the stillness of death. This effect of wasting is emphasised in the imagery of 'bleaching', particularly as it contrasts with the narrative's elaborate description of the beauty, colourful dresses, and ornaments of the heroines. This process of the draining of colour signifies decay, exploitation, and ultimately death. Whiteness, rather than a sign of purity as it was with Marian, comes to reveal the loss of substance, life, and vitality with which Mary is afflicted, along with toxicity and deprivation. The reoccurring framing of female beauty and its decay in the narrative reaffirms, as I will argue, the way in which plainness begins to take a stance against self-loss in the tale 'Henry Hastings'. The transformation in Brontë's writings of this perfect beauty into a withering one reasserts the limitations of physical beauty in forming the value of a woman, especially as its decay leads to her non-existence.

Brontë's evolving unease with her hero Zamorna appears to be even more realised at this stage of writing. In one scene, Zamorna visits Mary's chamber as she is sleeping.

Is that person (Zamorna) about to wake her ...? Pity there is not another living soul in the room to bid him stand away, and let her sleep! What is the individual smiling at? He seems to find matter for amusement in the exhaustion of that slender form and marble face, and the saintly folding of those little fairy hands. Villain, don't touch her! ... Man, you look no fit guardian for that shrine!<sup>40</sup>

The narrator's description of Zamorna confronts more closely his abuse of his wife. Zamorna's wickedness here and his intention to interrupt Mary's sleep appear to represent the larger issue of Zamorna's oppression of women and Brontë's resentment

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Brontë, 'Stancliffe's Hotel', *TA*, pp. 118-119.

of it. The description of Mary's motionless body and her 'slender form and marble face' indicate wasting, hunger as well as fragility. The image appears to suggest more anger and resistance to Zamorna than previously. In the passage's allusion to the fairy tale of 'The Sleeping Beauty', the image of Mary's fatigued body and the narrative voice appear to mockingly resist and defy the influence of Zamorna instead of welcoming his kiss to revive this sleeping princess. Amid her husband's lack of respect and commitment, Mary's unvoiced anger appears to translate into this image of bodily wasting and self-starvation. Brontë's mature works, particularly *Shirley*, have been often discussed in relation to their representation of female slenderness and hunger. Deirdre Lashgari, for example, considers the heroines' self-inflicted hunger in the novel *Shirley* in light of their social and gendered oppression and lack of opportunity, 'as each of them symbolically disrupts the dysfunctional society that has starved them by inscribing that hunger on their own bodies'.<sup>41</sup> Contrary to the earlier scene where Zamorna voyeuristically engages in the 'meditations on the sorcery of [the] female charms' of Mary, her body this time appears deliberately to deny him that pleasure. Mary's loss of beauty, her thinness, and her enshrined body in this description come to signify not only death but also Mary's freedom from the tyranny of her husband. Brontë at this stage seems to be ambivalently positioned between her own devotion to her hero and the growing consciousness of his character being unfit for any faithful depiction of genuine love that does not cost a woman her subjectivity.<sup>42</sup> This sense of resistance that Brontë's narrative begins to voice becomes even more apparent in the tale of Elizabeth Hastings, whose plainness, as I will argue in the next section, stands for her resilience in safeguarding her individuality as a woman. We may begin to look at Elizabeth's plainness in its resistance and defiance against the male gaze through its positioning as a foil to Brontë's representation of the dying beauty of her heroines. Plainness destabilises beauty's primacy in forming the value or romantic attachment of the heroine.

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<sup>41</sup> Deirdre Lashgari, 'What Some Women Can't Swallow: Hunger as Protest in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*', in *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment*, ed. by Lillian R. Furst and Peter W. Graham (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 141-152.

<sup>42</sup> Juliet Barker describes Brontë's infatuation with Zamorna at this stage as a 'major handicap: if she could only shake off his shackles she was capable of creating a spirited and lively heroine'. See Barker, p. 300.

## Plainness and Self-Representation in Brontë's 'Henry Hastings'

The tale 'Henry Hastings' relates Elizabeth's experience as she tries to rescue her brother Henry from degradation after he is charged with treason, while also having to be independent and strong enough to overcome the difficulties of single life.<sup>43</sup> This tale presents one of Brontë's first experiments with the plain heroine.<sup>44</sup> 'Henry Hastings', even prior to *Jane Eyre*, begins to engage with plainness as a symbol of resistance and an enactment of female agency. Elizabeth, as one character describes her, is a 'pale undersized young woman dressed as plainly as a Quakeress in grey'.<sup>45</sup> The image of Elizabeth as a 'Quakeress' in this tale is distinct from that of Marian Hume. Rather than being a mere reflection of her purity, Elizabeth's commitment to plainness highlights her individuality and quest for independence. The construction of Elizabeth's plainness, in terms of the lack of facial beauty and the plainness of her dress, engages with forms of dominance and objectification experienced by other heroines. This process sheds light on Brontë's more thorough consideration of female subjectivity at this stage. Physical plainness becomes an integral part of Elizabeth's survival within her social circle. It invokes many of the performative effects of Quaker plainness that I have explored in the previous chapter. The heroine's beauty or on the other hand, her plainness, as we will see, comes to offer different positions of making the self visible to the dominant male gaze in the late juvenilia.

In 'Henry Hastings', the tale's beginning presents a female whose 'bonnet and veil effectively shaded it [her face] from observation' and stirs in the narrator Charles Townshend an enthusiasm to unveil visually her face until she is announced to be 'young – but not handsome'.<sup>46</sup> The narrator's encounter with Elizabeth in the text reflects this sense of voyeuristic gazing that is, ironically, disrupted by Brontë revealing that the lady is 'not handsome'. The declaration of the heroine's lack of beauty disrupts

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<sup>43</sup> Drew Lamonica reads the tale in the light of Charlotte and Branwell's sister-brother relationship. The composition of the tale 'Henry Hastings', she argues, stands as a 'symbolic end' to Charlotte and Branwell's literary collaboration and the family's anxiety regarding his condition. See Drew Lamonica, *We Are Three Sisters: Self and Family in the Writing of the Brontës* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2003), pp. 51-57.

<sup>44</sup> Christine Alexander has also located an unfinished two-page manuscript that presents the character of Miss West, a plain governess. See Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, pp. 184-187.

<sup>45</sup> Brontë, 'Henry Hastings', *TA*, p. 239.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

visual pleasure and frustrates the observer's attempts to gaze at her. This act of defiance against visual penetration will be further complicated in the tale through the manifestations of female plainness. Yet, the tale soon reveals its different vision of Elizabeth's character.

Had she dressed herself stylishly and curled her hair, no one would have called her plain – but in a brown silk frock – a simple collar and hair parted on her forehead in smooth braids – she was just an insignificant – unattractive young woman wholly without the bloom – majesty or fullness of beauty – She looked like a person of quick perception and dexterous address.<sup>47</sup>

This description of Elizabeth's appearance reflects her unique plainness. Through the male gaze of Townshend and his framing of Elizabeth's appearance in light of contemporary ideals of feminine beauty, Brontë appears to expose her vision of this heroine into, what I argue to be, self-willed plainness. This plain appearance of the heroine in the tale seems to take the form of what Susan Bordo describes as the act of 'constructing [...] the appropriate surface presentation of the self'.<sup>48</sup> By deflecting the traits of feminine beauty, which are no longer the assets of her bodily presence, Elizabeth appears to be reversing the dynamics of female objectification. She signals her body as her own territory rather than a beautiful spectacle continually surveyed by others. Elizabeth's body as it is dispossessed of the 'bloom – majesty or fullness of beauty' presents a remarkable inconsistency with Brontë's earlier portrayal of women in her other tales, whose abundant beauty and physique are notable for being 'white, round and statuesque'.<sup>49</sup> The works of Alexander Walker on female beauty in the late 1830s and 1840s associate beauty with sexual selection, stressing that the female body is the most vital indicator 'of goodness, of suitableness, of sympathy, of progressive perfection'.<sup>50</sup> The female body, 'to be beautiful, must possess a moderate fullness', asserts Walker.<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth's shaded beauty and smallness appear to declare her body as unattractive and even consciously and defiantly 'protected', as De Quincey describes

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 234.

<sup>48</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 170.

<sup>49</sup> Brontë, 'Henry Hastings', *TA*, p. 238.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander Walker, *Beauty; Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1836), p. 3.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hws3k8;view=1up;seq=411> [ accessed April 2017]

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 345.

the plain Quakeress, against articulating any signs of pleasure and sexual availability.<sup>52</sup> Christine Alexander has argued that Brontë's 'choice of narrative voice' in her tales of the late 1830s 'began to confront more directly the sexual fantasies that dominated her early writing'.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Brontë's characterisation of Elizabeth's plainness and Townshend's view of it seems to go beyond creating the effect of purity, as was the case with Marian Hume, into a more extreme form of sanctioning the body's sexual appeal.

Jane Moore, whose beauty is celebrated in the tale, is described as an object of exchange in which the eyes of people 'were crowding to the shrine of this idol'.<sup>54</sup> Brontë's depiction of Moore's beauty in this image of idolatry highlights the excessive visual penetration associated with her body.<sup>55</sup> The sexual and visual connotations ascribed to Moore represent her body as static and exploited. Elizabeth, who is her 'dim dusk foil', is shielded precisely by her appearance from these penetrations into her body.<sup>56</sup> This visual element, crucial to the construction and perception of female appearance in Brontë's early writings, is very significant. It becomes even more problematic when we begin to consider the role of plainness in confounding visual pleasure and penetration. To resist being framed and seen in a certain mould, as Townshend's observation of Elizabeth suggests, offers an alternative that challenges the earlier possessive and idolatrous vision of beauty in the narrative into a more authentic recognition of the less beautiful heroine.

The introduction of the character of William Percy in 'The Duke of Zamorna', written before 'Henry Hastings', is significant as it begins to settle Brontë's uncertainty about Zamorna and paves the way for the introduction of the heroine Elizabeth and a new ideal of love. In this tale, many of the conversations between Percy and Townshend, which largely inform our perception of Elizabeth in 'Henry Hastings', begin to introduce gradually a different vision of female beauty. In a conversation with

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<sup>52</sup> De Quincey, p. 161.

<sup>53</sup> Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster, *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 166.

<sup>54</sup> Brontë, 'Henry Hastings', *TA*, p. 239.

<sup>55</sup> Kathleen Vejvoda looks at Brontë's treatment of idolatry in her work and how both her own visual curiosity and contemporary anti-Catholic culture made her aware of the contentious nature of visual experience and pleasure. See Kathleen Vejvoda, 'Idolatry in *Jane Eyre*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31,1 (2003), 241-261.

<sup>56</sup> Brontë, 'Henry Hastings', *TA*, p. 239.

his friend Townshend, in which they criticise the emptiness of Jane Moore's alluring beauty, Percy reflects upon his own ideals of beauty: 'neither, Townshend, would I step within the influence of passions whose vortex is too deep and rapid to be exposed rapidly to view, but must be concealed by the curtain of an indifferent demeanour'.<sup>57</sup> Percy's reproach to Jane's external beauty as the mirror of no genuine interiority sets the terms on which the treatment of Elizabeth's character in the coming tale would be established. Percy's view raises an important question about Brontë's need at this stage to present a male character with attitudes that would enable the creation and recognition of her newly emerging feminine ideal, the plain heroine. Percy's acute observation of Elizabeth during the tale proves her worthiness and kindles his interest in her. Kate Brown rightly defines Brontë's conceptualisation of plainness as coming to 'describe not a lack of complexity, as we might expect, but rather the reverse, a content that can only be known through close reading'.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Percy's attitude toward Elizabeth and his growing interest in her character are portrayed as an exercise in unravelling her 'concealed' inner beauty. This scrutiny directed at Elizabeth is at once eroticised in the tale and deemed threatening for her.

The tale continues to pursue its representation of Elizabeth's unique beauty. In one scene, as the Hastings' residence is visited by officials for the arrest of Elizabeth's brother Henry, Percy notices a portrait of a beautiful female that has an 'indubitable likeness to Jane Moore' placed on a table.<sup>59</sup>

I could see by the dim candle on the table that it was a portrait ...The image smiling all by itself in this frozen, dreary room reminded me of that legendary lady who pricked her finger, and having fallen into a trance, was enshrined in a splendid chamber where she sat twenty years, in all the stillness of death and all the beauty of life.<sup>60</sup>

It is not suggested in the tale that this portrait may have been drawn by Elizabeth, in a scene reminiscent of Jane Eyre's portrait of Blanche Ingram. However, the existence

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<sup>57</sup> Brontë, 'The Duke of Zamorna', *TA*, p. 169, 182. Percy goes even further in visualising the character of his future love interest Elizabeth, asserting 'I will never marry till I can find a woman who has endured sufferings as poignant as I have done, who has felt them as intensely, who has denied her feelings as absolutely'.

<sup>58</sup> Kate E. Brown, 'Beloved Objects: Mourning, Materiality, and Charlotte Brontë's Never-Ending Story', *ELH*, 65, 2 (1998), 395-421(p. 402).

<sup>59</sup> Brontë, 'Henry Hastings', *TA*, p. 256.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 255-256.

of this portrait of female beauty in the Hastings' house and its confinement in the darkness, as Percy depicts it in another allusion to the fairy tale of 'The Sleeping Beauty', seems to metaphorically allude to the narrative's quest to explore through the gaze of Percy Elizabeth's own beauty, which is waiting to be seen and exposed. In the tale, interest in the uniqueness of Elizabeth comes to us as readers through the inquisitive eyes of Percy as he tries to unveil the beauty within. The association of beauty with death, as we have seen, was explicit in Brontë's treatment of Zamorna's wives and their fading beauty. But in this scene, the still and trapped beauty of this portrait seems to be given the promise of the 'beauty of life', particularly as it is the kind of beauty that is protected and awaiting light to be seen and appreciated unlike the corporeal beauty of other women. The prospect of Elizabeth's independence appears to be based upon this figurative darkness that hinders the manifestation of her physical beauty. The dazzling glow of beautiful women only leads to their own subjugation. However, Elizabeth's survival will depend on her rejection of Percy even as he sees her inner beauty through her plain appearance. Elizabeth's subjectivity proves more complex to define than the mere presence and interest of Percy would ever offer as we will see.

Brontë's Angrian tales place beauty at the heart of female sexual exploitation, where the character's consciousness of her appeal accentuates self-indulgence and the expression of desire that ultimately leads to her submission. Of course, it cannot be denied that the experience of the plain heroine also entails temptations and a desire for beauty. In many of Brontë's mature novels, such as *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, the heroines have ambivalent views on female beauty, being both tempted by it and rejecting its artificiality. As she stands before the Queen during her brother's trial, Elizabeth's 'heart confessed, as it had a thousand times done before, the dazzling omnipotence of beauty, the degradation of personal insignificance'.<sup>61</sup> This theme persists in many of Brontë's writings as the desire for beauty is continually entangled with the furious psychological battle to assert one's self and respectability in vulnerable conditions. However, Brontë's representation of the characters of Zamorna's beautiful mistresses Mina Laury and Caroline Vernon, whose coquettish manners and love of self-display present a contrasting example to Elizabeth, further points to this rejection of ideal beauty and its

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 263.

implications in these tales. In 'Mina Laury' (1838), Brontë describes Mina's ecstasy in her role as Zamorna's mistress:

She had dressed herself splendidly ... Glittering through her curls there was a band of fine diamonds ... These ornaments, so regal in their nature, had been the gift of royalty, and were worn now chiefly for the associations of soft and happy moments which their gleam might be supposed to convey.<sup>62</sup>

Mina's fashionable appearance shows her pleasure in materialising upon her body the signs of majestic breeding. Brontë's earlier representation of social difference through fashion between Marian and Zenobia becomes more problematic in these tales because fashion takes on meanings of social and sexual transgression. Zamorna's response to Mina's attire reminiscent of 'an Angrian country gentleman's dolly' sarcastically undermines the legitimacy of her ornaments as a reflection of genuine aristocratic taste, as Mina had hoped.<sup>63</sup> On the contrary, Zamorna's reference to Mina as his 'dolly' underscores her inferiority, exploitation, and subjugation in her morally-questionable status as a mistress. Mina Laury, Caroline Vernon, and Elizabeth Hastings all experience social inferiority in different ways. While Mina and Caroline overcome their social vulnerability through their roles as beautiful mistresses, Elizabeth's plainness begins to acquire its symbolic position in the narrative as a sign of respectability. Elizabeth's moral standing manifests itself through her plainness of dress.

Elizabeth's plainness, however, does not fail to expose its more subversive features. Throughout 'Henry Hastings', ambiguity surrounds the plain Elizabeth. Townshend, the narrator, exclaims that 'her features were masked with an expression foreign to them – her movements were restrained and guarded'.<sup>64</sup> The description of Elizabeth's reserve brings to the surface again the logic of resistance associated here with her appearance. Elizabeth's self-imposed containment within her plain appearance exposes it not only as a means of internal repression but also as an external form of resistance to objectification. The way Elizabeth's appearance lacks the 'studied arrangement and decorative taste by which women [...] endeavour to please those with whom they associate' highlights the absence of these physical manifestations as a

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<sup>62</sup> Brontë, 'Mina Laury', *TA*, p. 48.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>64</sup> Brontë, 'Henry Hastings', *TA*, p. 242.

defensive act.<sup>65</sup> The art of pleasing is replaced with a more powerful form of establishing self-presence. Her appearance suppresses the manifestations of her femininity and social vulnerability, leaving no traces of identification upon her body. This encounter between Elizabeth's physical presentation of herself and the Other's gaze captures the power relations that are negotiated in this battle for asserting control.

Elizabeth's body is described in a scene as 'folded in her shawl ... in as comfortable a frame of mind as she could desire'.<sup>66</sup> The imagery of the 'shawl' acting as a shield around Elizabeth's body against the outside world is fundamental to the interpretation of her plainness in the tale. Elizabeth's commitment to plainness brings to light her awareness and engagement in controlling the image that people see of her. Plainness, and more generally clothing in Brontë's fiction from its embryonic stages as seen here in 'Henry Hastings', exposes its complexity as an artifice through which to represent the self and yet ensure its invisibility. Elizabeth resists the visual scrutiny of other characters, manipulating the disciplinary power of plainness and reserve for her own benefit in the way that she embodies it as a means of control against others. Plainness in all its meanings of directness and transparency, as we have seen in my discussion of Quakers, is counteracted by the criticism of its standing as a true or 'natural' expression of one's inner reality due to the extreme discipline linked to it. Elizabeth's plainness, with all its connotations of virtue and respectability, also points to her shielded inner life. William Percy's description of her 'veil of reserve and propriety' epitomises the nature of her plainness as one based on suppression and concealment.<sup>67</sup> The very act of self-suppression exercised by Elizabeth appears to be motivated by an awareness of her position as a continually scrutinized subject. The sense of empowerment that she experiences in containing her inner and disruptive emotions and desires becomes apparent in the tale. Elizabeth's psychological turmoil, which the narrative rarely puts into words, appears to manifest itself through the habit of self-enclosure that continually intrigues both Percy and Townshend.<sup>68</sup> The former contemplates Elizabeth's isolation from her surroundings and admits his inability to

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 231.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 291.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 258.

<sup>68</sup> The imagery of enclosure is indeed recurrent in both Brontë's work and others' accounts of her. In one example from Gaskell's biography, she describes 'the slight still frame [of Charlotte] encloses a force of strong fiery life, which nothing has been able to freeze or extinguish'. See Gaskell, p. 364.

discern the ‘thoughts ... in her mind’.<sup>69</sup> Jane Moore asserts that Elizabeth is a unique character but ‘can’t tell how’.<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth’s public appearance, in all its reserve and plainness, highlights its performativity and points to this shielded interiority.

In a poem titled ‘The Mask’ by Landon that appeared in the 1833 version of *Heath’s Book of Beauty*, the poet depicts female masking and concealment in a manner similar to Brontë’s representation of her heroine’s depth.<sup>71</sup>

UNVEIL’D, unmask’d! not so, not so!  
Ah! Thine are closer worn

....  
The mask and veil which thou dost wear  
Are of thyself a part;  
No mask can ever hide thy face  
As that conceals thy heart.

....  
No eager impulses ere fling  
Their warmth upon thy cheek  
No varying hues, from red to pale,  
Thy inward feelings speak.<sup>72</sup>

The poem is accompanied by an image of a lady holding on to her veil and mask while directing her gaze at the spectator. Hence, the poem sets this action of masking and veiling as a part of the heroine’s public display to be seen. The poem seems to celebrate the empowerment the heroine feels in projecting this duality of the seen self and the concealed one. Both the material and metaphorical masking in the poem stand for the act of self-representation that defies the manifestation of a true inner reality. Landon’s model of the depth of the soul is echoed in Brontë’s tale of the plain heroine defying the penetrating gaze and fearing the vulnerability of exposure.<sup>73</sup> Christine Alexander

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<sup>69</sup> Brontë, ‘Henry Hastings’, *TA*, p. 241.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>71</sup> Letitia Elizabeth Landon, ‘The Mask’, in *Heath’s Book of Beauty with Nineteen Beautifully Finished Engravings from Drawings by the First Artists* (London: Longman, 1833), pp. 51-53.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433074787288&view=1up&seq=14> [accessed May 2017]

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Brontë herself experienced similar apprehensions. In a letter to Ellen Nussey, she confesses ‘these feelings are absurd ... I try to hide them but they only sting the deeper for concealment’. See *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), I, p. 152. In one of her fragments written during her stay at Roe-Head school (1836-37), Brontë also describes ‘the labour it took’ to exert upon herself a ‘moderate appearance of calmness’. See Brontë, *TA*, p. 453. In a recent article, Christine Alexander has emphasised this tendency by noting that ‘the need to dissemble, to mask her true self and opinions constantly in public became the bane of her life’. See Christine Alexander ‘Early Ambitions: Charlotte Brontë, Henry Kirke White and Robert Southey’, *Brontë Studies*, 43, 1 (2018), 14-31 (pp. 16-17).

has located an untitled and unfinished manuscript, believed to be written prior to ‘Henry Hastings’, that presents the character of Miss West whom she predicts was a precursor to Elizabeth.<sup>74</sup> Miss West, a governess to the aristocratic daughters of Mr. Lonsdale, experiences similar anxieties about her public appearance. In one scene, the narrator remarks, ‘now in her own humble bedroom – *wearing her own costume, countenance and character* – How does she look thus freed from disguise and restraint?’ (emphasis mine).<sup>75</sup> The heroine’s awareness of the duality of her existence becomes visible in the text. Self-denial, which becomes paradoxically self-empowering, is experienced as an integral part of the heroine’s social experience and her path toward independence. In Percy’s criticism of Jane Moore’s animalistic beauty and the artificiality of her capriciousness, he condemns this self-display when a woman ‘puts on character and acts a part at will’.<sup>76</sup> But one questions the exclusiveness of this performance of a ‘part at will’, as Percy describes it, to the display of feminine beauty. The tale in its representation of Elizabeth’s plainness and reserve appears to render this act of enclosure and self-consciousness in public likewise a performance. If a woman puts on a role to secure the admiration of others, then so does she who bears the vulnerability of social inferiority. It is the cost of that ‘dark side of “respectable” human nature’, as Brontë once described it to Mrs. Gaskell.<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth’s independence depends upon the denial of her own desires and others’ ability to act upon them. Landon and Brontë, in their celebration of female beauty that constitutes a considerable part of their literary production, can still find means of presenting female agency.

The efficacy of Elizabeth’s plain dress in making her conscious of her own presence and impenetrable to others becomes particularly clear in the tale’s emphasis on direct visual interaction as a threat to her reserve. As he starts to develop an interest in Elizabeth, William Percy can detect her mutual intrigue as her eyes reveal what ‘she imagined buried out of sight in her inmost heart’.<sup>78</sup> Percy urges Elizabeth to submit in recognition of their love: ‘Elizabeth, your eyes betray you – they speak the language of a very ardent, very imaginative temperament – they confess not only that you love me,

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<sup>74</sup> Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>75</sup> Undated manuscript by Brontë. Quoted in Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>76</sup> Brontë, ‘The Duke of Zamorna’, *TA*, p. 169.

<sup>77</sup> Gaskell, p. 135.

<sup>78</sup> Brontë, ‘Henry Hastings’, *TA*, p. 285.

but that you cannot live without me – yield to your nature’.<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth’s exterior counteracts the force that Percy recognises in her eyes, further stressing Elizabeth’s control over her body and the impression it imparts. Percy’s plea to Elizabeth to ‘yield to your nature’ underscores Elizabeth’s struggle not only as internal between passion and reason, but also external. Her plainness, which enacts the power of self-possession, must defy the penetrating gaze of Percy and his ability to detect her inner desires. This scene seems reminiscent of Lord Byron’s poem ‘To a Beautiful Quaker’ (1806), which offers a similar emphasis on the eyes as the medium of expression between the speaker and the Quaker lady: ‘But soul’s interpreters, the eyes, | Spurn such restraint, and scorn disguise’.<sup>80</sup> Byron captures the expression of passion as visually carried out, while the body denies the materialisation of these effects. Robert Polito argues that this poem by Byron presents an unusual disruption between language and the expression of desire and its corresponding ‘corporeal demonstrations’.<sup>81</sup> Though Byron does not refer to the woman’s body, his allusion to ‘restraint’ and ‘disguise’ could be seen to refer to the body’s exterior and its defiance to the manifestation of these desires. The eyes subjugate the restrained body, exposing its repressed desire. Direct visual confrontation here between Elizabeth and Percy threatens to dissolve this control. To allow the flow of the burning inner desire threatens the heroine’s existence, placing her in an even more vulnerable condition in the patriarchal world of Angria. As Elizabeth resists the temptations of passion and rejects Percy, she bids him farewell: ‘I implore you not to follow me – the night is light – *I am afraid of nothing but myself*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth’s sense of herself as the biggest threat to her own wellbeing places great emphasis on her journey of disciplining and imposing on her body restraint to evade its degeneracy. The plain body appears to be the site of resistance and containment of suppressed desires that Elizabeth must overcome in order to achieve independence. Elizabeth’s deliberate withdrawal from the circle of femininity and normative female sexuality has been vital for her survival.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 304.

<sup>80</sup> George Gordon Byron, ‘To a Beautiful Quaker’, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), I, pp. 141-42.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Polito, *At the Titan’s Breakfast: Three Essays on Byron’s Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 27.

<sup>82</sup> Brontë, ‘Henry Hastings’, *TA*, p. 305.

The tale goes on to relate Elizabeth's professional success as a governess, connecting her appearance with mobility: 'she dressed well – plainer, if possible, than ever ... she moved about as brisk as a bee'.<sup>83</sup> The association between plainness and briskness in Elizabeth's professional life reinforces the authority of her plainness in affording her the control and agency she needs in life. Elizabeth's quest for independence is signified here through her commitment to severe plainness and its reflection of her self-determination as she 'vowed to leave her visions/ And seek life's arousing stir'.<sup>84</sup> Plainness in this tale coincides with the heroine's quest for financial independence and her need to survive socially within this context. Patricia Menon locates Elizabeth's autonomy in the fact that she is 'protected against loss of selfhood by her financial independence'.<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth, as the 'little dignified governess' with a neat and plain appearance, dismantles feminine idleness and subjugation.<sup>86</sup> Plainness in its capacity to create the effect of efficiency and respectability enacts and symbolises Elizabeth's efforts to live within the 'strictest limits of rectitude'.<sup>87</sup> In *The Victorian Governess*, Kathryn Hughes argues that around mid-century the physiognomic notion that associated plainness with righteousness influenced the standards of hiring governesses.<sup>88</sup> Women's plain bodies connoted that they were 'sufficiently chastened' by their need to better their social and financial conditions.<sup>89</sup> Elizabeth's body, indeed, performs and participates in this 'network of cultural codes'.<sup>90</sup> Self-fashioning for women, as I have mentioned earlier, precedes and manipulates social judgement and labelling. Elizabeth's appearance cannot be separated from her social experience and the fashion sign-system she engages with for survival. Her experience shows that it is in such positions that women may find empowerment from within these oppressive systems to assert their agency and independence.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 288.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 290.

<sup>85</sup> Patricia Menon, *Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Brontë and the Mentor-Lover* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 83.

<sup>86</sup> Brontë, 'Henry Hastings', *TA*, p. 288.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p. 304.

<sup>88</sup> Hughes, *The Victorian Governess*, p. 127. Mary Maurice in *Governess Life* (1849) highlights the relevance of a governess's physical appearance to her employability prospects: 'the inquiry which is frequently made before engaging an instructress, "Is she handsome or attractive?" If so, it is conclusive against her'. See Mary Atkinson Maurice, *Governess Life: Its Trials, Duties, and Encouragements* (London: John W. Parker, 1849), p. 15. Google ebook.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*, ed. by Cynthia G. Kuhn and Cindy L. Carlson (New York: Cambria Press, 2007), p. 3.

In 'Caroline Vernon' (1839), written a few months after 'Henry Hastings', Brontë appears to abandon temporarily her characterisation of the resilient plain heroine when she explores Caroline's quest for beauty. Caroline, daughter of the courtesan Louisa Vernon and the young ward of Zamorna, is presented as a character who is very conscious of her ordinary appearance and dark features, which would be obstacles to the fulfilment of her romantic dreams and desires. Caroline regrets that she 'had neither rosy cheeks, nor a straight Grecian nose, nor an alabaster neck, and so she sorrowfully thought to herself she could never be considered as a pretty girl'.<sup>91</sup> She laments her luck: 'Oh, if I were only better looking! Adventures never happen to plain, fat people'.<sup>92</sup> Caroline's aspirations for perfect physical beauty soon begin to reveal her inclination as a character toward self-indulgence. Her concern that she was not someone destined for any 'adventures' in life thus stands for her desire to fulfil and experience the romantic and sexual yearnings that she feels. In a conversation with Northangerland about his ward Caroline, Zamorna reveals these traits of her character:

if your fear is that Caroline will not have beauty sufficient to attract licentiousness, and imagination warm enough to understand approaches, to meet them and kindle at them, and a mind and passion strong enough to carry her a long way in the career of dissipation if she once enters it, set yourself at rest, for she is, or will be, fit for all this and much more.<sup>93</sup>

Despite Caroline's body-consciousness, the narrative voice and other characters' observations point to a quite different destiny that awaits the not so plain or timid Caroline. The tale of the dark beauty Caroline Vernon offers an alternative to Elizabeth's story with the exploration of female passion that is given freedom to rise and find expression. The tale ends with the sexual fall of Caroline caused by the abusive Zamorna. The ending of the tale declares its heroine Caroline as 'destroyed; she can never hold her head up again'.<sup>94</sup> Brontë's representation of Caroline in this tale appears to pay less attention to Zamorna's sexual exploitation of woman, instead shedding light on Caroline's own role in leading to her personal ruin. Caroline's story explores the

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<sup>91</sup> Brontë, 'Caroline Vernon', *TA*, p. 373.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, p. 381.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p. 351.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p. 439.

‘trajectory of her sexual awakening and its moral consequences’.<sup>95</sup> The tale touches upon the idea of will-power and self-denial that arises in Brontë’s work at this early stage before its deeper exploration in the mature novels. Brontë’s attention to the moral character of her heroines appears to direct her representation of the experiences of Elizabeth, Mina, and Caroline in distinct ways in these tales. Each of them envisions a path for herself that dictates her relationship to her own body, desires and appearance.<sup>96</sup> More than ever in these tales, references to women’s interest in attaining perfect physical beauty signals a woman’s capacity to transgress the limits of respectable femininity, especially as is the case with Mina Laury and Caroline Vernon due to their humble social status. To exhibit one’s self and desires in this Angrian world of sexuality and indulgence is to endanger one’s own existence as a free soul. It is here that plainness in the form of a deliberate rejection of beauty takes on meanings of resistance. With this alternation between those two contrasting heroines Elizabeth and Caroline, Brontë appears to be reinforcing rather than letting go of her vision of female plainness. Caroline’s beauty and fall in her last Angrian tale serve to stress the authenticity of Elizabeth’s plainness as a subversive stance against self-loss.

These examples of female plainness clearly show Brontë’s literary experimentation with her interest in physiognomy from an early age and her awareness of its significance for her characters’ social experiences. Plainness of appearance as a symbolic representation in Brontë’s early writings is an important feature with which we can assess her attempts to subvert depictions of ideal femininity that have been alluring but dangerous.<sup>97</sup> The manifestations of physical plainness, as painful as it may be for the heroines’ lived experiences, appear to guard them principally against their own inclinations. Female sexuality, often associated during the period with a lack of

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<sup>95</sup> Andrews, p. 271.

<sup>96</sup> It would be hard to determine what were Brontë’s views on sexual purity at this early stage of her writing. As Tom Winnifrith has suggested, the juvenilia, with its overtly sexual tone, cannot be taken as a direct expression of her ‘views on sexual morality’. See Tom Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background: Romance and Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 105. Rejecting Percy’s offer at the end of the tale ‘Henry Hastings’, however, suggests that Brontë denies her heroine sexual fulfilment on terms that degrade her. Brontë’s *Villette*, as discussed in Chapter Two, appears to resolve this matter more openly than any earlier work.

<sup>97</sup> I use the word ‘dangerous’ to convey Brontë’s realisation that her imaginary world is a threat to her conception of real life. Winifred Gérin describes Brontë’s departure from the artistic imagination of her juvenilia as an attempt to resist its power and fascination, ‘as if aware that the flame if unchecked would overpower her’. See Winifred Gérin, *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 40.

self-control and even madness, undermines the command over self and dispossesses the female body of its subjectivity.<sup>98</sup> Plainness in dress counteracts these forces of sexual desire and self-indulgence, conquering its wearer's expression of it, as well as obscuring public detection of it. Plainness, as I suggested in the Introduction, has been often interpreted in Brontë's mature fiction as the heroine's need to be invisible and observant of others. Their interest in the observation of others is certainly an important part of Brontë's heroines' experience of their social surroundings, yet Elizabeth's plainness also significantly accounts for her agency as a woman in setting the terms of how she is to be observed.

This chapter has shed light on Brontë's formative years and her fascination with elite life, which inspired many of the artistic and literary creations of her youth. However, as I argued, these writings gradually evolved and expanded their experimental and thematic style, revealing an underlying resistance to these influences that shaped her work and its representation of femininity. The representation of Elizabeth Hastings's plainness and experience was an important indication of this transition in the late 1830s. The depiction of beauty and plainness, as contrasting physical and moral states in these tales, reveals Brontë's engagement in framing the narrative's representation of female subjugation, or on the other hand, independence. The publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847 became a turning point that established these connections between plainness and self-determination even further. As we shall see in the next chapter, these implications continue to direct Brontë's representation of plainness in her last novel *Villette* as well as other novels by Craik and Ellis in equally controversial ways. The interplay between the inner and social forces that shape the experience of wearing a plain dress and its emblematic function in the narrative become even more conspicuous in the different contexts of these novels of the 1850s. These texts reveal an important development post-*Jane Eyre* in the way that the representation of plain dress proclaims even greater significance in the exploration of female agency in women's fiction.

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<sup>98</sup> See, for example, Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830 – 1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987), and Andrew Scull, *The Most Solitary of Afflictions: Madness and Society in Britain, 1700 – 1900* (London: Yale University Press, 1993).

## Chapter 3

### Performing Plainness: Women, Dress, and Self-Representation

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, the character of Elizabeth Hastings marks an important milestone in Brontë's literary journey and experimentation with female plainness before the publication of her mature novels. In the wake of *Jane Eyre's* success, as I indicated earlier, female plainness gained wider significance in women's writing. This chapter considers the representation of plainness in Brontë's own work as well as other female writers in this post-*Jane Eyre* period in the 1850s. My discussion focuses on the engagement of women writers with the discourse of female plainness that was gaining momentum at the time, as well as the debates on Quaker plain dress. Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Dinah Mulock Craik's *The Head of the Family* (1852), and Sarah Stickney Ellis's *Friends at Their Own Fireside; or, Pictures of the Private Life of the People Called Quakers* (1858) feature heroines whose social and psychological experiences can be interpreted through looking at the texts' portrayal of their identification with plainness. My discussion of these three mid-century novels shares with the previous chapter the focus on women, plain dress, and self-representation. Reading these novels alongside each other reveals a close relationship between them in the way that they creatively explore the connections between plainness and self-fashioning. Brontë, Craik, and Ellis, each in her own way, create heroines who perceive their plainness to be an empowering part of their existence and a form of resistance, both to inner forces such as their own suppressed desires, and to external and social pressures on them as women. Beyond its social and moral meanings, plainness comes to attest to their agency and self-assertion rather than self-effacement.

Maura Spiegel traces the development in the representation of plain dress from Victorian times and its associations with modesty and purity up to its deployment in contemporary film.<sup>1</sup> She concludes that plainness in these films uncovers its falsity as an indicator of purity, as it is 'rendered as no less performance than fashionableness'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maura Spiegel, 'Adornment in the Afterlife of Victorian Fashion', in *Fashion in Film*, ed. by Munich, Adrienne (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 181-202.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

This chapter argues that the mid-nineteenth century novelists under discussion were equally experimenting with the idea of plainness as a performance. Indeed, as I have argued in Chapter One, the complexity and subversiveness of plainness in this period, especially after the publication of *Jane Eyre*, was being recognised and many writers became attentive to its multiple layers of meaning, those that go beyond the typical connotations of modesty and purity. In a *Quarterly Review* essay, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake emphasises her belief that there was a ‘symbolical language’ of dress.<sup>3</sup> In a passage where she accentuates the natural feminine instinct and desire for beauty among women, Eastlake refers to an exception apparent in the case of single old women.<sup>4</sup> She points to the:

promotion of dress among ladies which may be plainer still to some – *and this is the law of self-interest*. It is all very well for bachelors to be restricted to a costume which expresses nothing beyond a general sense of their own unfitness to be seen - ... but heaven forbid that spinsters should ever take to the same outward neutrality. With their habitual delicacy of mind, and reserve of manner, dress becomes a sort of symbolical language – a kind of personal glossary – a species of body phrenology.<sup>5</sup> (emphasis mine)

By equating the role of dress with the functions of a ‘glossary’ or ‘phrenology’, Eastlake readily recognises it as an indispensable signifier. She identifies dress in her discussion as a tool of self-expression and, most importantly, as a reflection of social identity.<sup>6</sup> Eastlake’s reference to the plainness and reserve recommended for spinsters, however, points to a contradiction that unsettles this notion of dress as expressing a clear link between the inner and the outer. Her discussion of plainness articulates what

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<sup>3</sup> Lady Elizabeth (Rigby) Eastlake, ‘Art of Dress’, *Quarterly Review*, March 1847, pp. 372-399 (p. 375).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. For a more detailed discussion of Brontë and Eastlake and their appropriation of dress as a sign of individuality versus class identity, see LuAnn McCracken Fletcher, ‘Dress Codes: Fashioning Taste in Eastlake and the Brontës’, *Victorians Institute Journal*, 34 (2006), 65-92.

<sup>6</sup> Earlier in the century, Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34) identified clothing as the material and visible form of a spiritual reality. He maintained, ‘*Man is a spirit*, and bound by invisible bonds to *All Men*; secondly, that *he wears clothes*, which are the visible emblems of the fact’ (emphasis in original). Carlyle’s delineation of clothes’ materialisation of its wearer’s reality accentuates its physiognomic and symbolic function as a visual tool of interaction and judgement. See Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (London: Chapman Hall, 1831), p. 7, 47.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t4mk66s4b&view=1up&seq=11> [accessed February 2019]

I explore in this chapter as the performativity of plainness. The role that plainness as a sign plays in relation to a woman's 'law of self-interest', as Eastlake suggests, reveals this performative function of dress. Plainness is not only distinct from the 'outward neutrality' of young women, but also comes to affirm the self-restraint and self-abnegation that such a woman must embrace and externally manifest. Plainness in its denotation of those meanings, be it a real expression of the inner life of the woman wearing it or not, must be implemented for the sake of social and moral accountability. In both spinsters and middle-class domestic women, plain dress becomes a language that communicates a set of social and moral meanings about the woman wearing it and her standing in the world. Also, as I demonstrated in my discussion of Quaker plain dress in the first chapter, women were often aware and attentive to the role that their plain dress played in relation to their act of self-representation. Eastlake's and other mid-century female novelists' exploration of plainness attests to the ways in which they negotiated it as part of the larger social and moral discourse on dress. The heroines of the three novels that I look at in this chapter are all to a certain extent products of their social class and its intricate codes of representation. However, as Sara Bernstein notes, 'anti-fashion could be in equal degrees, a marker of one's socially marginal status or a powerful indicator of independence and individuality'.<sup>7</sup> The representation of the heroine's plain dress in these narratives is not merely a reflection of her social status, but it becomes an expression of agency and an exploration of her inner life and resilience. The performance of plainness in these novels is motivated by an acute awareness of the role of plainness, its social meanings, and the sense of empowerment it grants the heroine.

Diana Crane explores women's clothing during the mid-nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century as 'nonverbal symbols ... of self-expression' that compensated for the wearers' restrictedness of power and authority as women.<sup>8</sup> She specifically considers women whose dress in the second half of the century began to acquire some masculine touches, as for example wearing a tie or a suit jacket,

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<sup>7</sup> Sara T. Bernstein, "'In This Same Gown of Shadow": Functions of Fashion in *Villette*', in *The Brontës in the World of the Arts*, ed. by Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 149-68 (p. 158).

<sup>8</sup> Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 100.

identifying these as forms of subverting restricted gender roles.<sup>9</sup> The rebellion of female characters I look at in these three mid-century novels is not illustrated in their clothing's subversion of gender norms in this way, but rather through adhering to acceptable forms of dress within which they find the power to exert control.<sup>10</sup> Conformity to these social codes of physical appearance signifies their resistance to the gaze. In the contexts of these novels, gaze refers to the male gaze, which privileges masculine authority and the objectification of women, but it also more broadly includes being under the gaze of authoritarian social systems.<sup>11</sup> My discussion of female plainness explores the ways in which self-fashioning unsettles the power and authority of this hegemonic gaze. The role of plainness in these novels is explored beyond its common associations with modesty, and instead is considered in relation to the heroines' subjective identification with plain dress in negotiating their identity, inner life, and social existence. Despite their different psychological and social experiences, the heroines have set plainness as their subjective intervention in fashioning their bodies and how they are seen in society. To be dislocated out of this constructed image of the self is very intimidating for these women. Bodily and psychological fears that the heroine experiences are contained within the figurative confines of the plain dress. The power of their plainness and the control it affords them is reaffirmed in scenes where they are tempted or urged to abandon it.

### **Lucy Snowe and the Anxiety of Colour**

At the outset of Brontë's *Villette*, Lucy Snowe cunningly presents a visual self-image that the reader must then renounce:

I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, [...] Picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy, stretched on a cushioned deck, warmed

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> Lucy Snowe's experience of being dressed as a transvestite on stage in *Villette* is an exception.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan are leading theorists in this field. See, for example, Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), and E. Ann Kaplan edited collection, *Feminism and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000). For a more recent and comprehensive work see James D. Bloom, *Reading the Male Gaze in Literature and Culture: Studies in Erotic Epistemology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

with constant sunshine, rocked by breezes indolently soft. However, it cannot be concealed that, in that case, I must somehow have fallen over-board, or that there must have been wreck at last.<sup>12</sup>

After presenting the prospect of her being ‘idle, basking, [and] plump’, Lucy then shipwrecks that image. Her physical obscurity establishes itself against the idleness of that picture of femininity. Brontë’s works often share this urge by the author and her heroines to disconnect themselves from the cultural norms of beauty and femininity, as it is then that the heroine can exercise her agency in representing the self. Lucy does not offer an alternative picture of herself here, but as the narrative unfolds we get a sense of the way self-fashioning begins to define her social presence.

Despite the different phases of Brontë’s literary career in which ‘Henry Hastings’ and *Villette* were written, the texts nevertheless, share a similar approach in representing the heroine’s commitment to plainness as a reflection of the complexity of both her inner life and social existence. In one of the early scenes of *Villette*, Lucy refers to her ‘thin, haggard, and hollow-eyed’ face, which comes to reflect her emotional and financial distress after the death of her mistress.<sup>13</sup> However, Lucy often deliberately denies us a description of her appearance. In different episodes, she experiences the dread of facing her image in the mirror, but she refuses to capture or articulate what she saw. In one scene, Lucy faces the mirror alongside Ginevra Fanshawe. While Ginevra indulges in contemplating her reflection, Lucy refrains from giving any description of herself and instead focuses on depicting Ginevra’s self-love.<sup>14</sup> When she accidentally faces a mirror in the concert episode, she acknowledges that she takes a moment to look at herself, only to maintain, ‘no need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret’.<sup>15</sup> She rarely offers her readers any detailed description of her facial features. Her physical or corporeal image in the novel, nevertheless, often emerges through her meticulous attention to dress. The plain dress of Brontë’s heroines was an equally important feature of her earlier works. However, considering the relative invisibility of Lucy’s face in comparison with those of Elizabeth or Jane, dress takes on

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<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Sally Minogue, Wordsworth Classics (Hertford: Wordsworth, 1993), p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

even greater significance in this novel. A choice of dress, often a plain grey one, is not only significant in terms of its construction of Lucy's social image, but also in highlighting the psychological effects experienced in being contained within or dislocated out of this bodily image of plainness. In my reading of *Villette* and its bearing upon the other novels discussed in this chapter, I aim to show how plainness is a more significant motif than previously recognised and one that complicates our understanding of Lucy's invisibility. Lucy's experience reveals the ways in which invisibility is more than being merely out of sight or denying the reader a physical description of herself, as it instead can be thought of as a performance. The heroine's quest for invisibility is, ironically, bound up with the act of self-representation.

When Lucy, under the influence of opium, wanders around the town watching the fete celebrations, she becomes alarmed upon noticing the observant eyes of Dr. John; 'He might think, he might even believe that Lucy was contained within that shawl, and sheltered under that hat; he could never be certain'.<sup>16</sup> In this declaration, reminiscent of Elizabeth Hastings's similar experience of wearing the shawl as a metaphorical shield against others, Lucy delights in this sense of uncertainty that could never affirm her observer's speculations about her identity and existence at that specific moment. Lucy's experience of being seen, and yet not exactly known or identified, reflects the heroine's intricate sense of herself as a subject under scrutiny. The heroine's need for invisibility is not presented in terms of her isolation or withdrawal from society, but is rather expressed through the act of self-fashioning. The items of clothing referred to in this scene, which both obscure and reveal her body, indicate Lucy's agency and authority over her observer. Lucy's plainness, in a similar manner, is a significant part of her experience with self-fashioning. Her plainness is not merely a stylistic or personal preference, it is a performance that facilitates her social interaction. On her first days at the Belgian school, Lucy notices Mme Beck's thorough examination of her during what the latter believes to be Lucy's sleep and, rather than disturbing Mme Beck's mission, she surveys her skills. Once Mme Beck starts examining Lucy's clothes, the latter shows her awareness of the implications that clothes have in signifying self: 'I divined her motive for this proceeding, viz., the wish to form from the garments a judgment respecting the wearer, her station, means,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 428.

neatness'.<sup>17</sup> Lucy's cool reaction toward Mme Beck's action in searching through her clothes foregrounds her awareness and readiness to be part of this social system of labelling and judging. This scene between Mme Beck and Lucy exposes the interplay of power in the way each of them believes she is instating authority over the other by means of acquiring knowledge. Many of Lucy's confrontations with others or herself will reveal how clothing, and particularly plainness and darkness of colour, forms a defence against her own lurking desires and the observer's gaze.

Ginevra's question to Lucy 'are you nobody? [...] Do – *do* tell me who you are?' highlights this sense of uncertainty about Lucy's identity.<sup>18</sup> Lucy's unspoken reaction to this question sheds light on the purpose behind her obscurity.

As for me, it quite sufficed to my mental tranquillity that I was known where it imported that known I should be; [...] There are people whom a lowered position degrades morally, to whom loss of connection costs loss of self-respect: are not these justified in placing the highest value on that station and association which is their safeguard from debasement? If a man feels that he would become contemptible in his own eyes were it generally known that his ancestry were simple and not gentle, poor and not rich, workers and not capitalists, would it be right severely to blame him for keeping these fatal facts out of sight - for starting, trembling, quailing at the chance which threatens exposure? ... wherever an accumulation of small defences is found, whether surrounding the prude's virtue or the man of the world's respectability, there, be sure, it is needed.<sup>19</sup>

Lucy is aware of the intensity of social and moral prejudices that govern certain individuals and their social experiences. The passage echoes the harshness of these social and moral biases, but nevertheless reveals a strong-willed mechanism of coping that sets self-fashioning as a powerful stance against being judged. Clothing, in this case, is a means of performing and controlling the body's position in this social discourse. A distinction between private and public realities must be realised in order to transform the body's threatening expression of social vulnerability as well as inner

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 289.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 289-99.

desires into a 'safeguard from debasement'.<sup>20</sup> What Lucy refers to as the 'accumulation of small defences' are the manifestations of self-regulation and respectability. The plain dress seems to create a level of impenetrability in its wearer that actualizes Lucy's need to be only 'known where it imported that known I should be'. The sense of awareness that Lucy voices in this passage re-casts Jane Eyre's assertion 'I was myself' when referring to her plain dress. Lucy's reflections in the above passage echo the concern over the forces, both internal and social, which constrain individuals and their ability to experience, naturally and spontaneously, being themselves. Her thoughts reveal some of the paradoxes inherent in the representation of Lucy's experience with plainness. Considering Lucy's social status, her plainness of dress could be thought of as socially-imposed rather than chosen. However, Lucy's thoughts in this passage also reveal her awareness and manipulation of these social codes and meanings, which renders her plainness as a means of exercising agency rather than her completely succumbing to social authority.

Nancy Armstrong argues that by the mid-nineteenth century the interest in photography created what she terms 'pictorial thinking', where individuals are framed and judged according to certain patterns.<sup>21</sup> Armstrong specifically refers to Lucy Snowe as a person whose wish to remain invisible and subdued fails to comply with this emerging modern need to view individuals within certain 'visual norms'.<sup>22</sup> Lucy's consciousness of this notion, especially in the charged environment of surveillance in Villetta, makes her eager to set the terms through which she is to be seen. Plainness, then, facilitates her public existence, enacting her respectability while defying objectification or visual penetration by others. Lucy's occupation of the middle ground between the obscurity of plainness in the material world of Villetta and the respectability connoted by the public image of female plainness reconciles these divisions and perhaps provides an answer to the question that Jill Matus and others have

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<sup>20</sup> As Sally Shuttleworth has demonstrated in her work on Brontë, 'the condition of selfhood is dependent on having something to conceal: it is the very disjunction between inner and outer form which creates the self'. See Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 128.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-27.

found to be prevalent in the novel: ‘what is the state between invisibility and making a “spectacle of one self”’.<sup>23</sup>

During the Fete day’s celebration, Lucy refuses to wear ‘a transparent white dress’ and meticulously chooses instead a ‘crape-like material of purple-gray’ that made her feel ‘at home and at ease; an advantage’.<sup>24</sup> Favouring dark colours in dress such as black or grey over light ones like pink or white is common in many of Brontë’s writings.<sup>25</sup> In such scenes where the heroine internally negotiates a choice of colour or fabric, the dialogue cannot be treated trivially as it echoes larger implications about her awareness of their effect on the body and how it is perceived. Lucy’s attention to the ‘transparency’ of the white dress in contrast to the thicker ‘crape-like’ fabric, materially as well as figuratively, establishes the measures she takes to control the body’s visibility. Such measures in terms of colour and fabric choices bring into play both the physical and psychological factors that are involved in the experience of dress. Feeling ‘at ease’, as Lucy declares, with her choice of a darker colour and a thicker fabric affirms the sense of relief and safety it affords her. Colour symbolism, particularly the opposition between grey and pink in Lucy’s dress, plays a role in representing the intricate links between self-awareness, dress, and performance in the novel. These colours have been often explored in relation to the English-French divide that pervades the novel. Judith E. Pike, for example, maintains that Brontë’s heroines’ rejection of the ‘iconic pink dress’ in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* is based on its association with ‘French women and coquetry’.<sup>26</sup> Apart from these cosmopolitan biases, grey and pink also insinuate a self-divide that manifests itself in Lucy’s experience with dress and colours in the novel.

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<sup>23</sup> Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representation of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 133.

<sup>24</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p. 120.

<sup>25</sup> *Jane Eyre* reveals her anxiety about Rochester’s choice of a ‘superb pink satin’ and urges him to choose instead a ‘sober black satin’. In a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey (10 May, 1851), Brontë shows a similar meticulousness in choice of fabric, writing: ‘got one which seemed grave and quiet there amongst all the splendours – but now it looks infinitely too gay with its pink lining – I saw some beautiful silks of pale sweet colours but had not the spirit or the means to launch out at the rate of five shillings per yard’. See *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, II, p. 613.

<sup>26</sup> Judith E. Pike, “‘How English Is Lucy Snowe’?: Pink Frocks and a French Clock in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*”, in *Time, Space, and Place in Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Diane Long Hoeveler and Deborah Denenholz Morse (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 169-183 (p. 177, 172). Heather Glen also notes that the pink dress in *Villette* like other material objects, is ‘invested with fetishistic significance’. See Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 215.

A plain grey dress is what Lucy commonly wears while at school. The colour grey develops its own symbolism in the novel, particularly as it contrasts with pink and comes to stand as the measure against which Lucy's inclination to wear pink is assessed by M. Paul. Grey as a colour is often associated with qualities akin to plainness. Among its varied associations, grey is often linked with the lack of bodily self-display, illness, death, and mourning. Talia Schaffer, for instance, notes that grey was considered a half-mourning colour that 'posited clothing devoid of enjoyment ... [and] ignored the fashion of the day'.<sup>27</sup> Moreover as Rosy Aindow suggests, the grey dress, as much as it establishes the respectability of the woman wearing it, also 'points to the social and economic vulnerability of its wearer'.<sup>28</sup> Although Lucy is a young woman in her twenties, her social vulnerability and heartfelt sense of self-denial appear to necessitate this rejection of fashion and adornment. Alain Lescart explores the grey dress in *Villette* in relation to the *grisette*, which in its French context refers to working-class women who are independent but often thought of as women of loose morals.<sup>29</sup> He contends that both Mme Beck and Lucy dress in a similar way to the *grisette* and share their independence of character but are conscious of their need to detach themselves from these immoral connotations.<sup>30</sup> The grey dress, thus, exhibits different connotations of independence and sexuality that are not mutually exclusive. However, in this particular Belgian context, a plain, grey dress allows Lucy to assimilate with the environment of the school. It seems that part of the performativity and 'safety' attached to the grey dress relates to it being a uniform worn by many in the school setting, which enables Lucy to perform the image of 'French gray' as an independent woman working for her own living.<sup>31</sup> In an early chapter before Lucy sets off for Villette, she remarks:

I had a staid manner of my own which ere now had been as good to me as cloak and hood of hodden gray; since under its favour I had been enabled to achieve with impunity, and even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited

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<sup>27</sup> Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthete: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> Aindow, *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914*, p. 103. See Aindow for a discussion of some late nineteenth-century novels and their heroines' attempts to climb the social ladder through their attention to plain dark dress.

<sup>29</sup> Alain Lescart, 'All Women are Grisettes in *Villette*', *Brontë Studies*, 30, 2 (2005), 103-111 (p. 103).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>31</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p. 206. Upon finding a letter addressed to 'la robe grise', Lucy wonders to whom it is directed as most women in the school wear grey, including herself. She exclaims, 'I wore indeed a dress of French gray'.

and unsettled air, would in some minds have stamped me as a dreamer and zealot.<sup>32</sup>

In this passage, Lucy's 'staid manner', which as she declares helped her overcome and manipulate certain situations, is compared to a 'cloak and hood of hodden gray' over the body. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hodden as a 'woollen cloth of a coarse quality' that was normally worn by people of lower-classes such as peasants.<sup>33</sup> It is commonly associated with the colour grey because it comes as the 'natural' colour of the cloth achieved through the combination of black and white fleece. Clothing and fabrics, as this example shows, take on multiple figurative meanings in the novel that reveal Lucy's agency and manipulation. This simile evokes the connotations of concealment and reserve associated with grey and appears to foreshadow the significance of this colour in the narrative. Moreover, the 'gray hodden', as a coarse fabric, is further noteworthy for the element of thickness with which it achieves its covering effect. These meanings of uniformity, suppression, and concealment that appeal to Lucy become particularly clear when she experiences dressing differently. The colour pink, as I will demonstrate, threatens to negate Lucy's plainness and greyness and all the meanings they imply in relation to her identity and social being.

Lucy's studied self-display is endangered when Mrs. Bretton urges her to wear a pink dress for the concert. Here, Lucy begins to reveal an anxiety towards colour and its effect on the representation of her body. She asserts that she was 'quietly over-ruled' in wearing this dress for the satisfaction of Mrs. Bretton.<sup>34</sup> Again, we see here a purposeful declaration by Lucy to her readers of the disengagement of the subjective self in making such a choice. Anxiety about colour and fabric, as I suggested, relates to the level of visual penetration they allow into her body. The sexual and material connotation, which such colours exhibit about her public physical existence among others, threatens her. As Cassandra Albinson suggests, the colour pink in portraits of women in the eighteenth century would be read as a 'legible sign of the strength of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> 'hodden', *OED* online,  
<https://www-oed-com.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/view/Entry/87526?redirectedFrom=hodden&>  
[accessed September 2019]

<sup>34</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p. 193.

female desire and the fleeting nature of female youth and fertility'.<sup>35</sup> Pink becomes a symbol of beauty, youth, frivolity, and sexual maturity. Pink is also a colour that is commonly associated with blushing. The blush, in its nineteenth-century context, was often seen as an external sign of the body's sensations and emotions, one that surfaces involuntarily on the skin.<sup>36</sup> Pink, thus, involves an element of externalisation that could betray what is within. As Mary Ann O'Farrell indicates, 'identifying the blush entails imagining it as the writing of the body'.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, as Valerie Steele notes, pink displays its 'associations with nakedness and, by extension with vulnerability'.<sup>38</sup> These associations of the colour pink appeal to emotions and experiences that Lucy must deny herself. In its eroticism, fleshliness, and externality, pink incites attention to the body which Lucy has long sought to evade with her 'sombre daily attire not being calculated to attract notice'.<sup>39</sup>

When asked to enjoy her reflection in the mirror, Lucy is apprehensive. As she directs her figure toward the mirror, she does so with 'some fear and trembling; with more fear and trembling, I turned away'.<sup>40</sup> The mirroring of the words in her expression of anxiety at that moment underpins the complexity of not only facing herself, but also conveying what she saw. Her inability to face the mirror highlights her vulnerability in the presence of her reflected image, a version of herself she disqualified earlier and is unable to confront. Lucy's inability to take part in this dialogue, as expressed in the mirror confrontation, between the plain body and the ornamented one interestingly brings to light the process through which she negotiates her public appearance and the threat of exposure any deviance from that may cause. Heather Glen notes how mirrors in *Villette* reflect 'visual experience as complex and problematic, and as figuring a problematic relation to the world'.<sup>41</sup> The complexity of facing her own reflection in this

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<sup>35</sup> A. Cassandra Albinson, 'Feminine Desire and Fragility: Pink in Eighteenth-century Portraiture', in *Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color*, ed. by Valerie Steele (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018), pp. 115-126 (p. 125).

<sup>36</sup> See Thomas H. Burgess's *The Physiology or Mechanism of Blushing: Illustrative of the Influence of Mental Emotion on the Capillary Circulation; with a General View of the Sympathies, and the Organic Relations of those Structures with which they Seem to be Connected* (1839), and Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) which are two leading nineteenth-century texts that analyse the meaning of the blush.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Ann O'Farrell, *Telling Complexions: The Nineteenth-Century English Novel and the Blush* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Steele, *Pink: The History of a Punk, Pretty, Powerful Color*, p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p. 206.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>41</sup> Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*, p. 226.

scene is apparent. The mirror image allows her to gaze at her own body as it stands as a perceived object; not on terms she has established, but quite the contrary. The reflection in the mirror encompasses both personal and social concerns about the body and its display in public.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the body and 'externalisation' offers an insight in looking at plainness and Lucy's apparent anxiety about colour.<sup>42</sup> Bourdieu investigates peasants' failure to integrate fully into the life of the city, which leads in some cases to their introvertedness. He exemplifies his argument through a scene where some peasants attend a ball and feel insecure about their body-image and are thus unable to participate in social interaction.<sup>43</sup> He offers an explanation for their inability to interact with others through dancing:

He is awkward and clumsy in all situations that require his body to 'come out of oneself' or to offer one's body on display. To put one's body out on display, as in dancing, presupposes that one consents to externalizing one self and that one has a contented awareness of the image of oneself that one projects towards others.<sup>44</sup>

Bourdieu notes the significance of this act of 'externalization' that accompanies the display of one's body and the 'awareness' of its visibility. Lucy's controlled public image is not only jeopardised by the contrast between the pink dress and her ordinary one, but also in her 'contented awareness' that she would actually be seen in this way. This awareness implies that, even if persons don't entirely approve or identify with this image of themselves, in appearing publicly so, they express some kind of consent to be seen or judged as such. Thus, in attending the concert, Lucy's pink dress could become a reflection of her taste and most importantly a projection of her 'consent' to be seen in it. This awareness, as Bourdieu suggests, is not experienced spontaneously or naturally but rather underlies the anxiety and inner struggle involved in this act of self-display.<sup>45</sup> Lucy is aware that such an appearance in her case is far from being a random choice of colour, but is rather embedded in a web of social recognition and judging. It threatens

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<sup>42</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Peasant and His Body', *Ethnography*, 5, 4 (2004), 579-599.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 585.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> For a similar approach in analysing how working-class women experience and 'live their social locations with unease', see Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable*, p. 11

her own will over her public image. Plainness and greyness counteract these fears and give her the command and control both over the self and others. The disparity of grey and pink is clearly articulated in the novel through their contrast in signifying the reserve and control of the body, or on the other hand, its externality. M. Paul's observational duties at the school are well-known, yet the novel conveys his keen visual interest in Lucy in scenes when she is dressed differently. During the concert, she notices M. Paul as he 'was looking at me gravely and intently: at me, or rather, at my pink dress'.<sup>46</sup> In such moments where the ornamented body appears, Lucy appears to weaken her grip of control over her own image and invite this disciplinary inspection of it, represented here by M. Paul.

*Villette* differs from Brontë's earlier writing in the way it begins to interrogate its own representation of female plainness and its reflection of Lucy's psychological struggle and maturing. Lucy's experience of wearing a pink dress at the concert aggravates the tension between herself and M. Paul and channels their eroticised disputes over her ornamented appearance into a romantic relationship. While Jane Eyre defiantly refuses to abide by Rochester's proposition that she wear pink silk, Lucy displays more readiness to experiment with wearing it as the novel progresses. Sitting in a classroom wearing her usual plain grey dress, Lucy reflects upon M. Paul's concerns about her appearance:

He was free to confess that when he first knew me [...] I satisfied him on this point: *the gravity, the austere simplicity, obvious in this particular, were such as to inspire the highest hopes for my interests.* What fatal influence had impelled me lately to introduce flowers under the brim of my bonnet.<sup>47</sup>  
(emphasis mine)

M. Paul's exaggerated analysis of variations in Lucy's style of dress echoes the novel's concern about public visibility and the intricate codes of representation that Lucy has been projecting and risks losing. These concerns are mostly negotiated in Lucy and M. Paul's conversations over her dress. The link that M. Paul draws between Lucy's simplicity and what he sees as the 'highest hopes for [her] interests' is a crucial idea that Brontë seems to have been pursuing from the beginning of the novel. Self-

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<sup>46</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p. 206.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 311.

adornment with the shades of pink in her dress and flowers as ornaments, however, begins to unsettle Lucy's commitment to her dark plain style. In justifying her choice of the dress she wore at the concert to M. Paul, who refers to it as a '*scarlet gown*' (emphasis in original), Lucy responds by stating that 'it was pink, and pale pink too; and further subdued by black lace'.<sup>48</sup> The shade of 'pale pink' that Lucy specifies here softens the meanings of sexuality and youthfulness attached to pink and scarlet. However, while pink posed a threat earlier, it is a dominant colour now and the dark shades of grey and black become less prominent ones. This repositioning of the colours pink and black is significant as it figuratively underpins Lucy's more articulate bodily presence, which in turn indicates a less radical stance toward self-denial. Joan Quarm briefly alludes to the significance of the shades of pink in *Villette* and their association with the different stages of Lucy's relationship with Dr Bretton, in which Lucy's bright pink, silk dress becomes an expression of her closeness to him as his 'favoured companion'.<sup>49</sup> Quarm maintains, 'gray symbolised life without love. Pink silk and lace were the ultimate social success. Pink print is diminishing, not of joy, but of material expectations', as Lucy learns to let go of her love for Bretton.<sup>50</sup> While I agree with Quarm that these colours begin to lose many of their material connotations towards the end of the novel, they nevertheless, signify an important phase in Lucy's journey, as she not only abandons her fantasy of love but reaches a new level of self-realisation. I propose a reversal in the sequence that Quarm suggests, in which pale pink expresses a sense of agency rather than loss. It is significant to note the sense of assertion with which Lucy states and conveys her experience of wearing pink here to challenge M. Paul. This defiance and self-assertion pose a contrast to her earlier anxiety, which arose as a result of wearing pink against her will at the concert.

The contention over Lucy's pink dress continues to dominate the encounters between Lucy and M. Paul. As the school goes on a trip to the countryside, Lucy describes to the reader her unease about the dress she is wearing:

It was rather my wish, for a certain reason I had, to keep slightly aloof from notice, and being paired with Ginevra Fanshawe, ... I tried to make her useful

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Joan Quarm, 'Pink Silk and Purple Gray: Charlotte Brontë's Wish-Fulfillment in *Villette*', *Brontë Studies*, 31, 1 (2006), 1-6 (p. 6).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

by interposing her always between myself and M. Paul, shifting my place, according as I heard him coming up to the right hand or left. My motive for this manoeuvre might be traced to the circumstance of the new print dress I wore, being pink in colour – ... For a while, the shifting system, together with some modifications in the arrangement of a black silk scarf, answered my purpose.<sup>51</sup>

The pink dress emerges as a sign of the erotic tension that is building up between M. Paul and Lucy. The pair appear to play with this colour and its loaded meanings to tease the other. Lucy's description of her experience with this 'manoeuvre' seems to underpin her manipulation of M. Paul. Lucy interposes Ginevra between her and her opponent as a shield in an attempt to cover her body. Positioning Ginevra, who is a symbol of beauty and coquetry in the novel, as a substitute for herself appears to intensify further the irony of Lucy's concern about her pink dress. Her 'arrangement of a black silk scarf' over her dress to neutralise its colour is another attempt to distract M. Paul, one that also points to the diminishing opposition between these colours. Lucy's physical presence at this stage of the novel is driven by different dynamics of self-representation.

M. Paul confronts Lucy and, in response to her manipulation of him in these manoeuvres, addresses her as a 'coquette'. As he senses her anger, he goes on to remark: 'à vrai dire je ne suis pas fâché, peut-être même suis je content qu'on s'est fait si belle pour ma petite fête'.<sup>52</sup> Lucy, in a scene reminiscent of Jane Eyre's defiance to Rochester, replies back: 'Mais ma robe n'est pas belle, Monsieur—elle n'est que propre'.<sup>53</sup> Despite Lucy's more articulate bodily presence signified by the pink dress, she rebels against M. Paul's description of her dress as 'pretty'. She instead acknowledges it to be 'neat' and 'proper'. Lucy's neatness and cleanliness are self-assigned. This defiance reflects her mindfulness of the limits that she would impose upon herself. She rejects being labelled as a beauty because that fails to reflect her authenticity. As I have outlined earlier, the intricacy with which nineteenth-century culture handled the associations between women, respectability, and clothing has created a system of making moral and social judgements. Many of these assumptions came across through the socially and culturally constructed polarities of what is

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<sup>51</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p. 354.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 355. 'Don't worry! To tell the truth I am not annoyed, even perhaps pleased that someone has made herself look so pretty for my outing' (translations from Wordsworth Classics edn, 1993).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 'But my dress is not pretty, sir – it is only neat'.

'respectable/not respectable, lady/ woman, pure/impure'.<sup>54</sup> In her response to M. Paul, Lucy readily negotiates and asserts her position. If M. Paul stands here as a model of social authority, then Lucy also reveals her agency in locating herself within the space that best describes her and her authenticity. Moreover, her own touches to her dress, such as adding a black shawl or choosing a paler shade of pink, attest to this agency in managing the body and its image.

Beth Newman in her analysis of *Villette* sees Lucy's engagement in adorning her body and her relish in M. Paul's scrutiny as a 'way for her own repressed desire for "notice" to achieve satisfaction'.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, Marjorie Garson argues that these changes in the latter part of the novel signal a possible end to Lucy's 'polarising of flesh and spirit'.<sup>56</sup> M. Paul plays an important role in enabling Lucy to transcend this strict life sentence and experience her 'emotional hunger'.<sup>57</sup> I agree with both Newman and Garson in that Lucy at this stage comes to sense her bodily presence as less threatening than she earlier did.<sup>58</sup> I argue that Lucy's perception of her plainness becomes an important part of this growth and self-realisation, particularly when considering the changes that take place in relation to clothing's social and performative character with which Lucy has been engaged. Lucy's need to perform plainness begins to diminish as the novel moves toward its ending, and instead she is given the chance to experience a more subjective and less-radical form of self-representation. M. Paul recommends that if Lucy chooses to dress in this way she must do it 'in the same spirit as if its material were "bure" [homespun], and its hue "gris de poussière" [grey as dust]'.<sup>59</sup> This statement suggests her liberation from these material symbols into a more spiritual form of self-recognition. M. Paul appears to indicate Lucy's own moral accountability and self-sufficiency beyond the materiality of the colour grey or even pink and their signification. Lucy's independence cannot be solely defined by these socially-charged

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<sup>54</sup> Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 123.

<sup>55</sup> Newman, *Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation, and Victorian Femininity*, p. 55.

<sup>56</sup> Marjorie Garson, *Moral Taste: Aesthetics, Subjectivity and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 282.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>58</sup> Pike, on the other hand, argues that Brontë overcomes the 'English/French divide' in *Villette* as she 'slowly dismantles her [Lucy's] fixed identity' as an English woman. This is signified by Lucy's pleasure in wearing the pink dress that she once rejected (based on its association with the French women and corruption) and her 'growing fondness for dress, chocolate, coffee, and a Frenchman' as the novel concludes. See Pike, p. 169, 178, 182.

<sup>59</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p. 312.

external signs. Their conversation instates the power of Lucy's own moral command in handling her needs and desires. Lucy's own school and her own walls at the end of the novel not only echo her independence but also signify her liberation from the pressures of socially inflicted surveillance over the body and the need to confront it for asserting one's self.

Lucy's plainness signifies agency in many parts of the novel, yet it also reveals the complexity of this experience and its meanings in the text. The performance of plainness and the different experiences of vulnerability, protection, concealment, and exposure, are all rooted in Lucy's first-person narrative and her journey of becoming. Lucy's style of narration has been commonly described by critics as unreliable and manipulative as she consciously alternates between revealing and withholding information.<sup>60</sup> The experience of dress, likewise, points to the ways in which the body becomes controlled by the same conflicts and paradoxes of self-representation, which are never fixed but rather complex and variable. As we have seen, Brontë's *Villette* continued to be in dialogue with *Jane Eyre*, exploring and interrogating the role that plainness played in Lucy's life and her self-perception. This interest, as I indicated earlier, was not exclusive to Brontë's work. Craik's *The Head of the Family* is an important text that contributes to this debate in the 1850s. The novel reveals the author's engagement with plainness and female dress to uncover broader and more subversive meanings that go beyond its role as an expression of social status or modesty. With plainness being a deliberate choice taken by the heroines, the novel raises further questions about female agency and performance.

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<sup>60</sup> Numerous studies refer to Lucy's unreliable narrative voice in *Villette*. See, for example, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, "Faithful Narrator" or "Partial Eulogist": First-Person Narration in Brontë's *Villette*, *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 15, 3 (1985), 244-255; Elizabeth Preston, 'Relational Reconsiderations: Reliability, Heterosexuality, and Narrative Authority in *Villette*', *Style*, 30, 3 (1996), 386-408, and Eleanor Salotto, '*Villette* and the Perversions of Feminine Identity', in *Gender Reconstructions: Pornography and Perversions in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Cindy Carlson and others (England: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 53-75.

### ‘[P]lain even to severity’: Dinah Mulock Craik’s *The Head of the Family*

The writings of Dinah Mulock Craik have received considerable attention in the last few decades. The works of Elaine Showalter and Sally Mitchell have stressed the diversity of the author’s works and her engagement with contemporary social and moral discourses.<sup>61</sup> It is, however, Craik’s novels *Olive* (1850) and *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) that continue to receive greater attention from scholars. *The Head of the Family* (1852) is one of Craik’s early fictional works written in between these two novels and after the success of *The Ogilvies* (1849). The novel is set in Scotland and revolves around the Graeme family, whose patriarch Ninian Graeme becomes the provider for his orphan siblings after the death of their parents.

Rachel Armstrong and Hope Ansted, the leading female characters of the novel, are endowed with physical beauty and yet both seem determined to contain their appearance and the fascination it inspires through their dark and plain dresses. A closer look at this aspect of the narrative reveals the significance of this image of plainness in relation to the heroines’ public self-representation, as was the case with Lucy Snowe. Craik’s novel and Brontë’s *Villette*, published only one year apart, share the interest in female plainness and its wider connotations in the narrative. However, the heroines’ identification with plainness in *The Head of the Family*, perhaps even more so than *Villette*, reveals the inner and emotional turmoil that they cannot verbally communicate. Despite Rachel and Hope’s personal and social differences, their plainness of attire plays an important role in reflecting their emotional vulnerability, the ‘struggling life within’, and their quest to survive as independent women.<sup>62</sup> Rachel and Hope are not given the same agency and voice as Lucy. Unlike Lucy’s first-person narrative, *The Head of the Family* is narrated by the leading male character, Ninian, whose interest in and attachment to Rachel and Hope takes a large share of the novel’s action and often inform our perception of their experiences and struggles. As a narrator, Ninian is often sympathetic towards the heroines and their difficult lives. His perspective is often

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<sup>61</sup> Elaine Showalter, ‘Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment: A Case Study in Victorian Female Authorship’, *Feminist Studies*, 2, 2 (1975), 5-23, and Sally Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* (Boston: Twayne, 1983).

<sup>62</sup> Dinah Maria Craik, *The Head of the Family* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1883), p. 30.  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t47p8ws3h&view=1up&seq=8> [accessed December 2018]

distinct from other male characters and their objectifying gaze of both Rachel and Hope. A contemporary review of the novel points out Ninian's tendency to mirror some of the 'tenderness and susceptibility of the other sex'.<sup>63</sup> His sensitivity and compassion towards the heroines play an important role in uncovering their struggles as women. However, as I will argue, plain dress also proclaims a significant narrative perspective in the novel that compensates for the lack of female voice. In the novel, self-expression emerges through acts of self-fashioning in which the heroines consciously engage. Abandonment of this constructed image of plainness proves threatening yet potentially liberating.

Ninian's first encounter with Rachel Armstrong comes early in the novel during his visit to Mrs. Forsyth's house, where Rachel resides. He is informed of Rachel's unstable mental state and her delusions about an allegedly imaginary husband. Rachel is presented as an emotionally disturbed woman preoccupied with the memory of her husband, whom she believes has gone abroad:

Ninian thought he had scarcely ever seen such a striking-looking woman ... And yet she was mad! For a moment Ninian could hardly bring himself to believe the fact. There was such a passionate intensity in her look, such a grace and womanly refinement about her dress and mien, quite different from the carelessness usually manifested by those hapless ones from whom Heaven has taken the light of reason.<sup>64</sup>

The 'passionate intensity in her look', which Ninian notices, points to a suppressed inner life that begins to manifest itself before Ninian's eyes and arouses his curiosity about Rachel. Indeed, the first part of the novel reveals a sense of uncertainty about her mental state. Ninian's bewilderment and attention to her refined and graceful appearance early on appear to rebuke the claims about her insanity and make us question the real state of her condition.<sup>65</sup> Medical practices in the nineteenth-century

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<sup>63</sup> 'The Head of the Family. A Novel', *The New Quarterly Review and Digest of Current Literature, British, American, French, and German*, January 1852, pp. 54 -55 (p. 54).

<sup>64</sup> Craik, *The Head of the Family*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>65</sup> In the confession scene of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), the narrator similarly points to this unexpected variance apparent in Lady Audley's beauty and refined appearance: 'All mental distress is with some show of reason, associated in our minds with loose disordered garments, and dishevelled hair, and an appearance in every way the reverse of my lady's'. See Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by Lyn Pykett, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 288.

witnessed an increasing interest in physiognomy and the diagnosis of insanity. Clothing, in particular, was thought of as an important indication of patients' mental state and their response to treatment.<sup>66</sup> John Conolly, one of the leading early nineteenth-century psychiatrists, maintained that 'among the most constant indications of insanity are to be observed negligence or peculiarity as to dress; and many patients seem to lose the power of regulating it'.<sup>67</sup> Rachel's appearance, however, does not reflect this sense of 'negligence or peculiarity'. Ninian's conversations with Rachel reveal her conviction that she is truly married and awaiting the return of her husband, who has made her vow to keep their marriage a secret, and thus she has no physical proof of their alleged marriage. Rachel's emotional turmoil therefore relates to her inner struggle and inability to express herself, and this suppression leads to her mental instability. At this early phase of the novel, Rachel's appearance does not show any signs of plainness, yet her dress becomes an important indication of her condition that leads Ninian to question the reality of her mental illness. Conolly argued that neat and tidy dress is recommended for those who feel emotionally disturbed, as failing to appear well-dressed would lead to 'feelings of personal discomfort, and such feelings are unfavourable to mental composure'.<sup>68</sup> In this period, dress was expected to play a role not only in reflecting one's mental state, but also in shaping and controlling a person's attitude and mental health. Rachel's attention to appearance reveals a sense of self-awareness and recognition of the significance of dress in communicating meanings about the wearer. Rachel's neat appearance is an act of self-fashioning that confronts both her own personal fears of insanity and self-loss, as well as the social judgement of her as such.

Rachel's feelings of anger, shame, and betrayal, the expression of which is interpreted as madness in the novel, are suppressed through acts of control over her

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<sup>66</sup> The works of both John Conolly and Hugh Welch Diamond reflect a preoccupation with physiognomy in the detection and treatment of insanity. See Sandra L. Gilman, *Seeing the Insane* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), and for a specific discussion of dress, insanity, and physiognomy, see Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 158-173.

<sup>67</sup> John Conolly, *The Construction and Government of Lunatic Asylums and Hospitals for the Insane* (London: John Churchill, 1847), pp. 59-60.  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433011464744&view=1up&seq=7> [accessed December 2018]

<sup>68</sup> John Conolly, *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity: with Suggestions for the Better Protection and Care of the Insane* (London: John Taylor, 1830), p. 199. Google ebook.

body. Pamela J. Ormond maintains that Rachel's mental struggle in the novel revolves around her sense of being a 'fallen' woman.<sup>69</sup> Rachel's ambiguous social position in the absence of her husband and her emotional instability point toward her need to confront this uncertainty. As Ninian speaks to her, he notices how 'she set her teeth together, as if it needed more than even the obstinacy of insanity to maintain her self-imposed silence'.<sup>70</sup> Rachel appears to struggle with suppressing her emotions and thoughts. The act of 'sett[ing] her teeth together' in resistance to self-expression indicates this state of self-enclosure and suppression. In a similar manner, her dress appears to negate the outward manifestation of her internal chaos. She confesses to Ninian the burden of having to keep pretensions and be silent about her marriage: 'I am young in deceit. I cannot even hide my feelings as I ought'.<sup>71</sup> These acts of resistance and self-composure, mostly apparent through her attention to appearance and her silence, reveal the measures that she takes against any real expression of her anguish and suffering. Ninian's attention to and observations of Rachel's condition disrupt the proposed idea of her madness in the novel through an exploration of her victimised state caused by the absence of her husband and the social humiliation it places her in. These descriptions demonstrate the role that dress plays in expressing her inner and mental state. This feature of the novel, as these early descriptions of the heroine's dress show, is significant and will be even more apparent as Rachel begins to dress plainly despite her success and glamorous life as an actress.

As the novel progresses, we are given further clues of the manner in which Rachel chooses to dress and how that reveals more about her character and emotional state. After she learns of her husband's deception and his abandonment of her in a letter written to her, Rachel leaves the house of her guardian Mrs. Forsyth and later takes on the profession of an actress. Ninian's meeting with Rachel the actress brings about more uncertainty surrounding her condition. She undergoes a radical transformation on stage where her brilliant acting and expression become incompatible with her reserved appearance and attitude in everyday life. Rachel's plainness of 'attire, all black – she never wore anything else' becomes a significant feature that constitutes her image

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<sup>69</sup> Pamela J. Ormond, 'An Entirely Different Order of Writer: A Re-Evaluation of Dinah Mulock Craik' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2013), p. 265.

<sup>70</sup> Craik, *The Head of the Family*, p. 21-22.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

‘when off the stage’.<sup>72</sup> Her conscious choice of a plain dress will be repeatedly marked out during this phase of the novel. The different experiences of real life and the theatre begin to emphasise the dichotomies of Rachel’s existence. What attracts Ninian is the ‘fierce, restless glitter in her eyes’ that transforms off-stage into a ‘perfectly self-possessed manner – cold, not positively, but negatively, from the utter absence of anything like feeling or warmth’.<sup>73</sup> The plainness of Rachel becomes an important expression of this spiritless and dreary attitude that contrasts with the expressive energies of the actress. Rachel’s withdrawal is highlighted in the contrast that Ninian notices between her and other women.

If Rachel had meant to draw the line between tragedy and comedy, she could not better have done so than by the contrast her own appearance formed to the other ladies. *She was still in her high, black dress, plain even to severity. She had no jewels – not one.*<sup>74</sup> (emphasis mine)

Rachel’s distinctive plainness, as Ninian depicts it, foregrounds the ‘severity’ of her emotional condition. It unsettles the assumption that she has moved on with her life after the abandonment of her husband and her success as an actress. The plainness of her dress and the absence of any ornament connotes a sense of imposed self-denial that, ironically, contrasts with the intensity and expressiveness of theatrical experience. Ninian notices the ‘silence her demeanour imposed’.<sup>75</sup> Her attitude and unusual appearance become often associated with ‘silence’ and ‘expressionless demeanour’.<sup>76</sup> Rachel’s utter plainness manifests these connotations of withdrawal and becomes a deliberate suppression of her beauty and femininity. However, I argue that Rachel’s plainness, in its reflection of silence and detachment, becomes a form of self-expression. It represents her intervention in fashioning the body to become an expression of a silenced and unvoiced inner life.

The novel sheds light on the reasons behind Rachel’s current condition through her conversation with Ninian, who is at this stage more interested in uncovering the reality of her pain rather than celebrating her success. In a conversation between them,

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 408.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, pp. 334, 340.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 340.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 348.

Ninian expresses his concern about her ‘dignity’ and ‘reputation’ as an actress.<sup>77</sup> She replies, ‘I have none to lose’.<sup>78</sup> At this moment, the narrative reveals that ‘in these words, slow and cold, evincing the calm of utter despair, was the key to the woman’s whole present life’.<sup>79</sup> This self-division that Rachel has been engaged in begins to crystallise in relation to her inner suffering that is never voiced. It shows that even her success as an actress and the ecstasy of theatrical experience cannot eliminate her heartfelt pain and suffering. Ninian points to the ‘constant suffering and degradation of which her public triumphs offered but poor atonement’.<sup>80</sup> Her plain appearance non-verbally communicates Rachel’s commitment to these polarities of existence and her refusal to let go of what she recognises as a legitimate victimised state caused by the ill-use of her husband. The authenticity of her artistic expression, in spite of its liberating forces, remains distant from the recognition of her real condition and its oppressiveness. I argue that Rachel’s plainness becomes a performance over which she is in control and one that precisely manifests this state of withdrawal and expressionlessness. In one scene, Rachel confronts Mr. Lyonell, who proposes to her, maintaining, ‘you will oblige me by seeing in me only the actress, and not again interfere with the private life or private feelings of the woman’.<sup>81</sup> This is a dichotomy that Rachel clings to and identifies as the only true expression of her current situation. The suppressed pain and degradation that she experiences in her life, both when Ninian first met her and as an actress, are almost never verbally articulated but often indicated through the act of self-fashioning. While earlier Rachel’s neatness of dress was an attempt to disguise her inner emotional distress, her later plainness, paradoxically, appears to be an expression of the anguish that she seems to establish as a fundamental part of her identity and social presence.

Like Brontë’s *Villette*, Craik pays attention to the heroine’s theatrical experience and its wider implications in the narrative. Lucy and Rachel’s felt freedom and liberation through artistic expression, paradoxically, serve to enhance our perception of their suppressed everyday existence. Ironically, it reveals the ways in which the idea of performances becomes increasingly a part of their normal life away

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 357.

from the stage. Lucy's plainness and meticulous attention to what she esteems as respectable dress are exchanged for the most subversive form of self-representation as she plays the role of a fop on stage. This acting role gives Lucy unprecedented ecstasy. She realises this experience to be only a fleeting moment of liberation that must be 'fastened ... with the lock of a resolution which neither Time nor temptation has since picked'.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, Rachel abandons the beauty and delight of the theatre because they fail to attest to the reality of her internal suffering and sense of betrayal which remain a fundamental part of her fragmented existence. Her life away from the stage demands a different kind of performance, one that expresses her unvoiced pain and loss.

Rachel's plainness is not something entirely new to her, as it had at one time been an authentic part of her character. In one of their conversations before her rising fame as an actress, Rachel tells Ninian about her past: 'you should have known me in those days! I was plain – I was coarse... When my passions rose I could do anything – anything! And I had no counsellor to rule me, no intellect or education to guide me'.<sup>83</sup> Rachel's reference to herself as 'plain' and 'coarse' indicates her previous inferior social position before her marriage, but nevertheless reflects a sense of freedom and spontaneity that in her current condition she is far from experiencing. The symbolic significance of plainness in Rachel's life is further complicated by the way it develops two distinctly paradoxical meanings in relation to self-expression in the novel. Rachel's current plainness negates the earlier naturalness and spontaneity she experienced as a plain woman, and it instead becomes a self-imposed embodiment of her indignation and oppression. The clashing meanings of expression and silence in these different phases of Rachel's life further emphasise the significance of the narrative's perpetual allusion to her plainness at this stage. Rachel's plainness, rather than being a representation of transparency and authenticity as was the case in her former state, reveals how under such social circumstances she has become robbed of her innocence and the freedom of being one's self.

The character and experience of Hope Ansted in the novel are distinct from that of Rachel, but what unites them is their conscious need to be in control of their bodies

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<sup>82</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p. 129.

<sup>83</sup> Craik, *The Head of the Family*, p. 40.

and how they look. Hope becomes the ward of Ninian after she finishes her studies at boarding school and is abandoned by her father. In the first glimpses Ninian and his companion, Mr Ulverston, have of Hope in the novel, her Quakerish plainness is eroticised.<sup>84</sup>

“By Jove! what a pretty face there is under that Quakerish bonnet,” cried he, starting off, in his impulsive way, on a new tack, and forgetting everything else in his eagerness to stare at a plainly-dressed girl, who stood pensive and desolate amidst her luggage. Ninian was not the sort of young man to run wild after “pretty faces,” so he just glanced that way, pitying the blank, frightened, helpless look that dulled the beauty of her features.<sup>85</sup>

Mr. Ulverston’s voyeuristic gaze detects Hope’s beauty and objectifies it. Ninian, on the other hand, notices the impediments that hinder the expression and glow of her beauty. His observation sets in perspective her vulnerability, which inhibits the physical display of her body and beauty. The blankness upon her face points to the lack of expression that robs her features of their beauty and intensity. The plainness of her dress harmonises with the expressionlessness of her face as they both reflect her distress and vulnerability. Plainness in its negation of Hope and Rachel’s beauty and spontaneity points to the psychological and internal forces that shape their condition and life. Hope’s first days with the Graeme family stir up their curiosity about her identity and upbringing. They notice her extreme shyness and the peculiarity of her appearance that does not complement her physique. Ninian’s sister notes that ‘she’s not a bad figure, but for that odious brown merino dress, and white linen collar’.<sup>86</sup> Throughout the novel, Hope’s physical beauty seems to never reach its potential to please, as it is continually inhibited by her reserve and refusal to be adorned. Her choice of clothing will soon reveal her agency in constructing the body’s physical image, which hides under it her emotional state and social anxiety.

Hope’s innocence and shyness often lead to the reoccurring description of her in the novel as a ‘child’ in indication of her purity.<sup>87</sup> Yet under Hope’s child-like purity

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<sup>84</sup> The erotic appeal of female Quaker-like plainness is common in the nineteenth-century novel, as for example *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch*. See Keen, ‘Quaker Dress, Sexuality, and the Domestication of Reform in the Victorian Novel’.

<sup>85</sup> Craik, *The Head of the Family*, p. 26.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p. 124.

and manner there seems to reside an inner power that sustains her. Ninian begins to discern Hope's character after she spends some time in their household, noting that her 'freezing boarding-school formalities were wearing off, and her *true nature appearing now and then*' (emphasis mine).<sup>88</sup> Ninian's scrutiny of Hope's 'true nature' that appears amid the restraint she imposes upon herself indicates her rigid upbringing and the vulnerability of her social position, of which it seems she is well-aware. This becomes clear when Hope considers taking on the position of a governess to seek independence. Ninian objects to her decision, stressing the hardships that she may experience. He particularly points to the danger that her physical beauty may pose to her well-being: 'there is one thing more besides the world's cares – its dangers ... being beautiful, other people will perhaps love you the more, or at least admire you. This admiration might harm you, wrong you, insult you'.<sup>89</sup> Ninian's concern about the threat of her physical beauty again underpins Hope's vulnerability. The narrative seems to maintain throughout an ambivalent attitude toward Hope's beauty, where her own personal display of it, as well as others' reaction to it, poses a threat to her subjectivity. Her efforts and restraint, symbolised by her plain dress, communicate her need to establish the body's stand against its own objectification. The novel's references to Hope's beauty, particularly through Ninian's eyes, bring to the surface this sense of conflict between celebrating her unique beauty and the narrative's unease about it. In another scene when Ninian learns of Hope's father's intention to marry her off, he silently contemplates the charm of his beloved as her 'soft profile, drooping, delicate and womanly, ... growing into that spiritual beauty as it was uplifted in the twilight'.<sup>90</sup> Ninian's feelings of love must be silenced and Hope's beauty in front of him is visualised as transforming into 'spiritual beauty' that is 'uplifted' in an image of defiance against the harsh reality. From the beginning of the novel, Ninian is able to perceive and appreciate Hope's authentic beauty. He is attentive to the struggles and exploitation that await her as a vulnerable and beautiful woman. The imagery of her beauty leaving the corporeal body up into the sky appears to re-emphasise the narrative's concern about Hope's future and the sexual exploitation to which she may be subjected. The novel, in its treatment of both its heroines Rachel and Hope, often

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

alludes to their beauty but goes on to emphasise how it is hindered by circumstances and social constraints that make it hard for them to be their beautiful, authentic selves.

The appearance of Hope's father, Mr. Ansted to claim back his daughter to live with him in London does not alleviate the pressure of her social vulnerability and anxiety. Mr. Ansted faces legal problems and struggles with his own unstable financial position. Upon his visit to Hope in her London residence, Ninian again observes her reserve:

Narrowly, with eager gaze, Ninian observed her. She was dressed gracefully and well, but with extreme plainness. Her whole aspect, her demeanour, and among the group of men, where she was the only lady, marked one whom necessity had taught dignity, self-possession, and self-control.<sup>91</sup>

Hope's condition, as Ninian pictures it here, captures her inner struggle to contain her body against social forces that undermine her. Her appearance and demeanour are at once the signs that Ninian detects of her inner state and the means she employs to combat the hardships of life. Like Rachel, Hope dresses 'gracefully' but with 'extreme plainness'. This element of plainness, especially as it contrasts with the refinement of their dress, is continually marked out as a deliberate choice. While Rachel's plainness became an external manifestation of her inner anguish and withdrawal, Hope, on the other hand, sees in it an opportunity of safeguarding her 'dignity'. Hope's plainness becomes a form of self-assertion against social relations and circumstances that undermine her individuality. Her reserved manner and self-control are described as a 'veil over that once transparent character which seemed to hide her feelings even from him who loved her and knew her best'.<sup>92</sup> The idea of veiling seems to take on metaphorical as well as physical manifestations in the novel's representation of Hope's struggle and experience. The appearance of plainness and its metaphorical links with veiling at once voices the heroine's inner turmoil, as well as her resistance to the objectifying gaze that undermines her subjectivity and moral standing. In another scene where Ninian gazes at Hope, the narrator exclaims, 'she was beautiful – more beautiful than even Ninian had first thought, *when he saw her under the shade* which her father's

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 262.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 263.

presence seemed continually to throw over her' (emphasis mine).<sup>93</sup> Hope is represented as someone who is continually detached from experiencing her true authentic self in this world. As a character, Hope is often denied a voice, but nevertheless, Ninian's continuous attention to her reserve points to her unrepresented inner life and resilience in such conditions. Hope refuses to comply with her father's plea to wear some ornaments, insisting 'I cannot, papa. I have told you so before'.<sup>94</sup> Such resistance expresses her agency and will to fashion the body and fight against its debasement.

Russell J. Perkin has described Hope as 'one of the most mindless and vapid of all Victorian heroines'.<sup>95</sup> This observation echoes a contemporary review that sees the character of Hope as a 'radical defect' in the novel as she is 'incapable of any deep and abiding emotion'.<sup>96</sup> She is even deemed as unworthy of being happily united in marriage at the end of the novel to Ninian.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, Hope's character is not as intriguing as Rachel Armstrong or other contemporary heroines who strove to subvert their gendered and social reality. There is a sense of weakness and submission about Hope's character and action. However, it is noteworthy that Hope's awareness of her vulnerability and her expression of defiance to social oppression, while not articulated clearly, manifests itself in ways that are indirect yet meaningful. Elaine Showalter's early insights into Craik's work have shown that as an author she 'did feel that women could both read between the lines of each other's books and refrain from betraying the messages that they deciphered'.<sup>98</sup> Hope's consciousness of her own appearance and dress points to ways in which we can understand her plainness not as weakness, but rather as negotiating her value and position as a woman in such vulnerable conditions. Sally Mitchell has rightly argued that Hope's interaction with her oppressive reality is characterised by her 'tendency to resist quietly'.<sup>99</sup> Hope's plainness, as I argued, plays an important role in manifesting these meanings of resistance in the novel. It reveals a

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 262.

<sup>95</sup> J. Russell Perkin, 'Narrative Voice and the "Feminine" Novelist: Dinah Mulock and George Eliot', *Victorian Review*, 18, 1 (1992), 24-42 (p. 32).

<sup>96</sup> 'The Head of the Family; A Novel', *The Literary Gazette: A Weekly Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, 31 January 1852, pp. 105-107 (p. 106).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Showalter, 'Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment: A Case Study in Victorian Female Authorship', p. 21.

<sup>99</sup> Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik*, p. 33.

different side of her character, more determined and aware rather than ‘mindless and vapid’, as Perkin described her.

Rachel and Hope’s identification with plainness, even as it expressed a sense of self-determination in the face of social constraints that surround them, reveals their different attitudes and self-perception. In considering the experiences of the two heroines, Sally Mitchell indicates that Craik ‘was pointing out the difference in their approach to life’.<sup>100</sup> She specifically points to Rachel as the ‘sort of woman who educated herself only for marriage and has an identity only through her relationship with a man’.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Rachel’s suffering is a product of her past, which continues to enslave her and colour her outlook on life. The silence and blankness, of which her plainness becomes an expression, reflects this void in her life that she couldn’t fill with the joy of her current success. Hope’s plainness and reserve, on the other hand, point to her self-awareness. As Ninian’s observations of her appearance repeatedly show, Hope’s core beauty is gradually uncovered and her self-realisation beyond these inhibitions will be epitomised by their marriage at the end of the novel. These different meanings and experiences of self-determination that plainness takes on in the narrative emphasise how both Rachel and Hope as women negotiate their subjectivity through adhering to the image of plainness. This rejection of beauty and adornment becomes meaningful for each of them despite their different circumstances.

Hope and Rachel are both victims of patriarchy. Their performance of plainness articulates many of these complexities in the novel and takes on the language of resistance to the external world. Plainness will go on to shed light on the inner conflicts of Quaker women in Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *Friends at Their Own Fireside: Or, Pictures of the Private Life of the People Called Quakers* (1858), a fictional narrative of Quaker life and rituals. While plainness provokes our attention in Craik’s *The Head of the Family* due to its performativity and its incompatibility in certain contexts with the heroine’s station, the representation of plainness in a Quaker context presupposes its naturalness and its members’ identification with it. Indeed, Ellis’s portrayal and exploration of plainness, unlike that of Brontë and Craik, arises particularly from its position as a fundamental part of the practice of the Quaker community. The novel

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<sup>100</sup> Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading, 1835 – 1880* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 113.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

sheds light on women's awareness and engagement with the dynamics of self-fashioning that become a significant part of their plainness. The exploration of female plainness in this novel confounds the notions of discipline attached to Quaker plainness, and instead brings to light women's agency in navigating their identity and personal space in such a context. Ellis's work will continue to demonstrate the extent to which female plainness grew, beyond Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, to be a significant motif that created discussions about female identity across a wide spectrum of contexts and issues.

### **The Plain Quakeress in Sarah Stickney Ellis's *Friends at Their Own Fireside: Or, Pictures of the Private Life of the People Called Quakers***

Sarah Stickney Ellis is mostly known today for her series of conduct books published in the first half of the nineteenth century, including *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839). She is commonly thought of as an advocate of the Victorian domestic ideal for women. However, recent scholars have begun to question this claim and argue for a more sophisticated reading of Ellis's works and her discussion of female roles.<sup>102</sup> Ellis's *Friends at Their Own Fireside: Or, Pictures of the Private Life of the People Called Quakers* (1858) is a fictional narrative in which the life and practices of a Quaker family are detailed. Ellis herself was born to a Quaker family and converted to Congregationalism after her marriage to Rev. William Ellis in 1837. As Henrietta Twycross-Martin maintains, Ellis's interest in and representation of the 'anti-slavery and temperance movements' in her works owe a lot to her Quaker origins.<sup>103</sup>

In her preface to the novel, Ellis reveals that her aim in writing it was 'to attempt something like a picture, painted in words, which should faithfully illustrate the social

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<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Henrietta Twycross-Martin, 'Woman Supportive or Woman Manipulative? The "Mrs Ellis" Woman', in *Wollstonecraft's Daughters: Womanhood in England and France, 1780-1920*, ed. by Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 109-119; and Caroline Austin-Bolt, 'Sarah Ellis's *The Women of England*: Domestic Happiness and Gender Performance', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 37, 3 (2015), 183-195.

<sup>103</sup> Henrietta Twycross-Martin, 'The Drunkard, the Brute and the Paterfamilias: The Temperance Fiction of the Early Victorian Writer Sarah Stickney Ellis', in *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture*, ed. by Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), pp. 6-30 (p. 7).

and domestic life of the Society of Friends'.<sup>104</sup> She emphasises the need for such a truthful portrayal of the society to 'do [them] justice' amid what appears to be contemporary prejudiced views against them.<sup>105</sup> Emma Lapsansky maintains that Ellis's 'romanticized view of a gentle and loving Quaker family' in her novel has been important and influenced later fictional works of the twentieth century that represent Quakers in a positive light.<sup>106</sup> Ellis's choice to set the action of the novel in the early nineteenth century seems also significant as the period of mid-century witnessed a transformation in the Quaker community and its members' commitment to some of their beliefs and doctrines, as some, for example, chose to abandon plainness of dress.<sup>107</sup> The novel revolves around the family of Jacob Law, his wife Rebecca, their children, and his three spinster sisters. The plot of the narrative does not concentrate on action, but rather is more concerned with the description of Quaker rituals and the private experiences of the characters in this religious and social context. The novel's attention to its Quaker female characters' experiences and identification with plainness raises important questions about female identity and how it was shaped within this context.

While the novel was praised by contemporary reviewers in regard to its honest depiction of Quaker life, there appears to be a consensus among reviewers concerning Ellis's emphasis on the rigidity of the Society's enforced discipline and practices. One of the reviews, for example, noticed the novel's subversive undertone as it 'sets out with a sort of mild protest against the obvious follies of Quakerism'.<sup>108</sup> Another maintains that the action of the narrative in its depiction of the characters' experiences illustrates the way 'Quakerism has effected its own destruction by its unnatural restraints, which are at variance with instinct, impulse, reason, and everything else'.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Sarah S. Ellis, *Friends at Their Own Fireside: or, Pictures of the Private Life of the People Called Quakers*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1858), ii.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiuo.ark:/13960/t4rj4tc32;view=1up;seq=5> [accessed October 2018]

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Emma Jones Lapsansky, 'Past Plainness to Present Simplicity: A Search for Quaker Identity', in *Quaker Aesthetics: Reflections on a Quaker Ethic in American Design and Consumption, 1720-1920*, ed. by Emma Jones Lapsansky and Anne A. Verplanck (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 1-15 (p. 10).

<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth Isichei looks at the debates circulating at the time among Quakers regarding some of their practices. See Elizabeth Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 158-165.

<sup>108</sup> 'Quakers', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 3 July 1858, p. 19.

<sup>109</sup> 'Friends at Their Own Fireside', *Leader and Saturday Analyst*, 5 June 1858, pp. 546-547 (p. 546).

In its account of Quaker life, the narrative is particularly attentive to the human psychological experience in such a context. It does not offer any direct criticism of Quaker doctrines. However, as these reviews and my own reading of the novel suggest, the narrative's representation of the character's psychological and inner experience sheds light on its underlying critique of the harshness of Quaker discipline.

My discussion of Quakers in Chapter One has considered the firm measures they took to ensure their youth's commitment to Quaker practices, of which plain regulated appearance was of paramount importance. In her introduction to her characters' style of dress, Ellis highlights early on the fact that 'speaking as well as dressing in *neutral tints* would seem to be one of the elements of their social intercourse' (emphasis in original).<sup>110</sup> The emphasis on individuals' commitment to codes of dress and speech as part of their 'social intercourse' clearly indicates the role that these signs play in this social context. In my reading of Ellis's work in relation to other novels in this chapter, I argue that plainness among Quaker women, while it is a natural extension of their belief in human morality and equality, could be equally understood as a performance. The novel is preoccupied with the appearance of plainness and how it is experienced differently by women within this social context, where the external becomes fixated on as a sign of morality and restraint. For Quakers, plainness holds a prominent role in its capacity to discipline the individual and reflect adherence to Quaker practices. However, this standard of plainness also raises questions about its naturalness and legibility. As has been proposed earlier, the idea of a woman's ability to manipulate her external appearance for certain purposes is viable and becomes important in looking at these novels' representation of the heroine's plainness.

In this Quaker context, female plainness can be perceived as an act of appropriating the self within this specific social environment and its moral codes. These performances and acts of bodily restraint appear to be founded upon the heroine's awareness of the role of these physical indicators as signs that are socially driven. The narrative presents the Law sisters and their niece, Susannah, as women who pay meticulous attention to their dress and appearance. On the other hand, their non-Quaker friend Jane Gordon, who is fascinated by Quaker beliefs and falls in love with

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<sup>110</sup> Ellis, *Friends at Their Own Fireside*, I, p. 4.

Susannah's brother Reuben, refuses to abide by the principle of plainness. Conformity to plainness of appearance or not constitutes moral, social, and psychological differences within the novel's context. Nevertheless, it is through this difference that the narrative interrogates the concept of Quaker plainness in order to determine its authenticity and shed light on its role in reflecting the heroine's identity.

The three Law sisters - Rachel, Grace, and Isabel - are minor characters who represent an ideal picture of earnest Quaker women. Ellis represents Rachel's struggle to conceal her facial beauty and any signs of adornment it may convey:

Rachel's ever-blooming face flushes up a little more than usual; she wishes it would not do so, but it will in spite of the many times she has been upstairs to bathe it with cold water, and to smoothe the lock of hair, which, in spite of all her endeavours, will persist in curling around her temples.<sup>111</sup>

Rachel's 'blooming' face manifests her youth and natural beauty. Likewise, her hair's tendency to curl occurs naturally without any interference from her. Paradoxically, it is the action taken against her own natural beauty that is deliberate and seems radical. The passage accentuates the spontaneity and naturalness of these manifestations of feminine beauty that Rachel is determined to combat. Her struggle with her own natural beauty and her appearance is one of the early descriptions in the novel that reflects the complexity of this experience. Such acts highlight the internalisation of these fears of outer beauty and their implications in the consciousness of Rachel and other women in the novel. Susannah Law experiences similar anxiety about her face's natural physiological tendency to blush. Rachel and Susannah's anxiety about blushing appears to lie in the fact that it is 'a perceived event of the body' that has the 'capacity ... to reflect a readable self', as Mary Ann O'Farrell describes it.<sup>112</sup> Nineteenth-century understanding of the nature of blushing as a manifestation of excited human emotion was prevalent. Thomas Burgess in *The Physiology or Mechanism of Blushing* (1839) proposed that blushing was designed by the Creator so that the human 'soul might have sovereign power of displaying in the cheek, ... the various internal emotions of the

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>112</sup> Mary Ann O'Farrell explores the inherent anxieties in the female experience of blushing in the nineteenth-century novel. See O'Farrell, p. 5.

moral feelings'.<sup>113</sup> The irrelevance of Susannah's blushing to any current excitement of feeling has yet the possibility of being interpreted as such. The display of female beauty and its moral connotations takes on a more radical position among Quaker society. The narrator goes on to remark whether a blush was not 'the seal of nature set upon her cheek to testify that she was human like others'.<sup>114</sup> The novel's criticism of this stance against the spontaneity and naturalness of these facial manifestations of beauty represents in a broader sense the struggle that those women feel in a world where physical signs hold a prominent position. The physiological and social meanings ascribed to blushing become major forces that create the tension and threat that those women feel.

Rebecca Law experiences similar consciousness regarding her own physical beauty. Her role as a public woman and a minister seems to involve imposing strict measures against the display of her own natural physical attractiveness:

Her dress was the perfection of neatness, and, somehow or other, notwithstanding its extreme plainness, was so adjusted as to set off her person altogether to the best advantage ... To be sure her arms and hands were remarkable for their beauty, and it would be too much to say, that she was wholly unconscious of this fact, when she folded them upon her clear muslin apron, or gathered around her person the pale drab coloured silken shawl.<sup>115</sup>

What these descriptions of women seem to emphasise is their labour of self-fashioning, in which their appearance embodies the perfect image of bodily restraint. As the passage indicates, Rebecca is conscious of her beauty that is apparent despite her 'extreme plainness'. These gestures involving the folding of the hands and wearing a shawl that covers her upper body underpin the complexity of experiencing one's beauty and the self-awareness that such an experience demands. The representation of Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) similarly sheds light on her natural beauty and how it is paradoxically enhanced by her plainness. As the narrator

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<sup>113</sup> Thomas H. Burgess, *The Physiology or Mechanism of Blushing: Illustrative of the Influence of Mental Emotion on the Capillary Circulation; with a General View of the Sympathies, and the Organic Relations of those Structures with which they Seem to be Connected* (London: John Churchill, 1839), p. 49.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hl1y5e&view=1up&seq=7> [accessed September 2018]

<sup>114</sup> Ellis, *Friends at Their Own Fireside*, I, p. 136.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

notes, Dorothea's 'profile as well as stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments'.<sup>116</sup> Dorothea's beauty exhibits itself in accordance with her purity and unaffectedness beyond any external embellishments. The representation of Rebecca and Dorothea entails a similar paradox that is apparent in the way in which their efforts to subdue their beauty through plainness, ironically, set it off to a greater advantage. There is a sense of struggle between Rebecca's exerted effort to inhibit her natural beauty and its appearance as an extension of her plainness. Her social and authoritative position in society must be exercised with caution. Her public appearance, in its denotation of her Quakerism, materialises her reliability and authenticity as one. Carol Mattingly has argued in her discussion of female reformers and their adoption of a Quaker-like dress in their public appearance that a Quaker dress significantly 'allowed for a play of various positive images' of female respectability and reliability.<sup>117</sup> By appearing plain, those women 'wrapped themselves in the religious and social significance that accompanied the dress'.<sup>118</sup> Quaker plainness, thus, created an 'image' that allowed a woman to occupy such a position manipulatively. Quaker women themselves, as the example of Rebecca Law indicates, were just as attentive to this notion as non-Quakers. A woman's physical appearance must serve her position and affirm her conformity.

The representation of female plainness becomes further complicated in the novel with the introduction of Jane Gordon, a non-Quaker who forms a close friendship with Isabel Law. Jane becomes intrigued and curious about Quaker beliefs and practices, and even begins to consider the prospect of being a member of the society. Reuben Law, the only son of the Law family, falls in love with Jane, prompting anxiety among the family at the prospect of this union. Jane's acceptance of Quakerism but refusal to abide by its strict principles of plainness render her as an unsuitable wife for Reuben. Her opposition to the standards of plain appearance is based on her view that these are 'merest trifles' that do not attest to her sense of 'true religion'.<sup>119</sup> In her romantic adventure with Reuben, the novel stresses her vivacity.

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<sup>116</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> Mattingly, 'Friendly Dress: A Disciplined Use', p. 34.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Ellis, *Friends at Their Own Fireside*, I, p. 139.

she was very womanly, and being such, it would be useless to pretend that she was wholly insensible to this strange outburst of feeling, with all its romance – all its folly, but at the same time with all its truth.<sup>120</sup>

The novel's description of Jane's womanliness and romantic experience emphasises the spontaneity of her impulses and feelings. Jane sees in the lifestyle of Quaker discipline a threat to her sense of individuality and freedom of expression. The novel appears to invite us to see beyond appearances and come to feel the imprisoned souls of her fellow Quaker women. Jane exclaims, 'no wonder that so many women with warm, yearning, generous hearts, shrink from the living death within this iron prison'.<sup>121</sup> Jane's experience with Quakers in the novel brings the perspective of an outsider who notices their cruel everyday reality. Jane senses the harshness in denying women the ability to openly experience and express their femininity, inner desires, and thoughts. The novel repeatedly sheds light on the truthfulness of Jane's emotional experience, and thus, self-expression is emphasised as a lawful human right that many Quaker women are denied from experiencing. Despite Reuben's efforts to persuade Jane to conform and become a Plain Friend for the sake of their union in marriage, Jane's conviction remains unchanged.

The praise of Jane's genuineness in the novel further confounds its treatment of women's physical plainness. Jane's characterisation in the narrative sheds light on her individuality as a woman. However, her honest character and her willingness to be part of Reuben's Quaker community do not compensate for her rejection of certain Quaker principles. Through the narrative's emphasis on Jane's dismissed internal goodness by Reuben's family for the mere necessity of its external validation of that, Ellis appears to challenge the legibility of these appearances as indicative of inner power. The letters of Elizabeth Fry, a nineteenth-century Quaker social reformer, reflect a similar concern over the extreme policing of plain appearances among Quakers. In a letter, she expresses her unease about these extreme measures, suggesting that 'bitter experience has proved to me, that Friends rest too much on externals; ... and have led me earnestly to desire, that we may dwell less on externals, and more on the spiritual work'.<sup>122</sup> The example of Jane's character in the novel comes to convey a similar moral, where her

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, pp. 63-64.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p. 150.

<sup>122</sup> *Elizabeth Fry: A Quaker Life*, p. 165.

authenticity cannot be acknowledged without an external form to validate that. Ironically, the failure of Reuben's marriage to Jane results in his own abandonment of Quaker practices and his mental deterioration, leading ultimately to his death.

The performativity of physical plainness becomes even more intelligible in the novel's representation of the experiences of Susannah Law, the moral force of the text. She is a good Quaker woman whose constant support of her family and brother Reuben is sustained throughout the action of the novel. But nevertheless, insights into the inner life of Susannah's character reveal her struggle to create a balance between acknowledging her inner desires and finding a means of expression. One of the early reviews of the novel describes Susannah as someone who 'outwardly ... conforms ... , while she is conscious of the earthquakes under her feet'.<sup>123</sup> The conflict between externality and internality becomes a fundamental part of Susannah's life. However, it is suggested in the novel that her ability to subdue her inner sensations and keep them hidden grants her power and relief. Her romantic relationship with Paul Rutherford intensifies her emotions and the need to control them. The narrator observes Susannah's growing feelings for Paul and her stance against the urge to communicate these feelings verbally to her family:

That she was beloved, deeply and fervently by one whom she admired and trusted, was enough for this single hearted woman, who like so many of her sex, was far too delicate to ask for the practical import of those expressions ... And thus Susannah lived on through a kind of charmed existence, which no one could interrupt because it was exposed to none, and cherished beneath her plain and simple garb, perhaps as much of the ideal as may be found where fancy has more to do with external embellishment.<sup>124</sup>

Through Susannah's pleasure in feeling that her fond admiration of Paul can be kept a secret, the power of the individual's control over one's bodily and verbal expression is revealed. The joy of her 'charmed existence' indicates the sanctity of her inner life. The metaphor of her 'plain and simple garb' as a shield over her body providing protection against the penetrating gaze of others into her inner reality further highlights her awareness of the duality of her existence and her manipulation of that for her own

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<sup>123</sup> 'Friends at Their Own Fireside', *Leader and Saturday Analyst*, p. 546.

<sup>124</sup> Ellis, *Friends at Their Own Fireside*, I, p. 206-207.

interest. The heroine's reserve and physical plainness, as the chapter has demonstrated, often bear the meanings of veiling and shielding one's self and interiority from others. The empowerment that is often associated with this experience proves fundamental to the heroine's sense of self and identity. The opposition between interiority and exteriority is played out in the passage to reveal Susannah's manipulation of these for her own sense of privacy. Ironically, Susannah's ability to subdue her emotions and any external indications of excited passions becomes the 'ideal' in contrast to the traditional tendency of women to fixate on 'external embellishment' in its reflection of their femininity and love. Moreover, the narrator goes on to subvert the connotations of impassivity, guilelessness, or naivety that her 'plain and simple' dress may reflect. Instead, it accentuates the emotional intensity with which Susannah experiences this romantic attachment. The narrator remarks, 'how often is the placid, the still, the apparently subdued character, entirely misunderstood in this respect. People think them cold'.<sup>125</sup> The 'plain and simple' exterior of Susannah is exposed to be far from reflecting the reality and intensity of her current emotional state.

This becomes further complicated as Susannah experiences an emotional crisis when she discovers Paul's betrayal and his secret marriage to another woman. The revelation of this marriage prompts Susannah's emotional distress and her anxiety about the expression of her grief; 'Susannah had been afraid of her enemy. She now became afraid of herself – often the worst enemy of all'.<sup>126</sup> Susannah's struggle soon revolves around her capability to control the release of her emotions and the physical manifestations of her inner distress. After the novel sheds light on Quakers' assessment of any changes in appearance or behaviour among youth, especially as an indication of the 'necessary accompaniment of excited feeling', the narrative soon shifts its attention to Susannah's awareness of this fact during her distress:<sup>127</sup>

It was thus that Susannah left her room, in all respect as neat as usual, from the topmost fluting of her muslin crown, to the sole of her softly-treading shoes. As no one observed any difference in her look or manner, so there was no subject of inquiry; and all that she had seen, heard, and suffered, on that eventful

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p. 207.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, II, pp. 253-254.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, pp. 254-255.

morning, - all the mingled feelings and the poignant agony remained locked within her breast without the betrayal of any outward sign or trace.<sup>128</sup>

Susannah's appearance is, ironically, revealed as a performance motivated by her knowledge of the fact that any real representation of her current emotional state would be threatening to her familial and social position. The fashioning of the body becomes invested in eradicating any outer signs that expose its lurking reality. Susannah's efforts exemplify her need, as other women in this chapter, to manipulate their surroundings in constructing a social image that protects their interests and neutralises the expression of their psychological turmoil. This dichotomy of experience, or as a contemporary reviewer has described it as the state of 'external conformity, inner duplicity', becomes apparent with the novel's dramatisation of Susannah's struggle, not only with her lover's betrayal but also in censoring the expression of her feelings which inevitably must remain unspoken.<sup>129</sup> Despite the apparent disjunction between outer and inner that we as readers come to recognise in Susannah's current state, her control over her physical appearance is instated in the novel as a legitimate performance that combats her inner struggle. Her experience is rendered as a justifiable means of coping and surviving within her social surroundings. In one of the novel's early descriptions of Susannah's character, she is depicted as someone 'combining at once such depth of feeling, with such entire mastery over every look, word, movement, or other manifestations of it'.<sup>130</sup> Susannah's experience here crystallises these enforced measures of control over the self. The novel deconstructs the legibility of the exterior as a sincere representation of the inner self, refuting the notion that 'because there is an outward conformity with decorum in look and manner, there is no burning passion, or rebellious feeling beneath'.<sup>131</sup> Plainness is rendered as a means of control against the observer as much as it is believed among Quakers to have a disciplining effect upon the wearer.

Jane Gordon and Susannah Law represent contrasting examples of women whose subjectivities are examined in the novel through their commitment to, or

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, pp. 255-256.

<sup>129</sup> 'Friends at Their Own Fireside; or, Pictures of the Private Life of the People Called Quakers', *The Athenaeum*, 19 June 1858, pp. 781-782 (p. 781).

<sup>130</sup> Ellis, *Friends at Their Own Fireside*, I, p. 49.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, II, p. 2.

rejection of, these physical and psychological constraints. Jane's rejection of plainness is based on its irreconcilability with her need to be open and expressive of herself. Susannah, on the other hand, perceives her plain garments as a source of empowerment against moments of weakness and, more importantly, as a veil that protects her against social and moral debasement. Jane and Susannah's similar experiences of romance create distinctive responses to self-expression. In Ellis's portrayal of Quaker life, the plain dress of her female characters becomes a prominent motif that highlights the polarities and the performances that are involved in their experience as wearers of it. Plainness, as I argued, is both empowering and inhibiting. The denial of one's own beauty, spontaneity, and self-expression in the context of the novel's representation of plainness points to its peculiarity and rigidity. However, plainness also underlies the empowering experience of upholding one's sacred interiority. The experience of those women with Quaker plainness emphasises these paradoxes and undermines some of its connotations of social control over individuals. It instead sheds light on the values of subjectivity, inwardness, and resistance that are explored in the novel's representation of female plainness.

In his review of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, G.H. Lewes commends the narrative's 'power ... of connecting external appearances with internal effects – of representing psychological interpretation of material phenomena'.<sup>132</sup> My discussion of plain dress in this chapter has emphasised the way in which these mid-century novels explore this 'power' of connection and draw upon plainness to underline and negotiate these psychological and physical, private and public effects. This chapter explored the thematic parallels between Brontë's work and other novels by Craik and Ellis in the 1850s. My analysis of dress and performativity in *Villette* adds another layer of meaning to the novel's first-person narration and its conflicts of self-representation. In Craik and Ellis's novels, the heroines are not given the privilege of self-narration. However, their commitment to plainness throughout the course of the narrative reveals their agency in negotiating self-representation. The heroines' performance of plainness embodied the expression of subjectivity and empowerment in these harsh and socially repressive contexts. Plainness thus reveals its power as a sign that communicates meanings of

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<sup>132</sup> G. H. Lewes, Unsigned review, *Fraser's Magazine*, December 1847. Quoted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, p. 86

agency, empowerment, and resistance in more significant ways than have been previously recognised.

The subsequent chapters of the thesis will continue to trace the connection between Brontë's work and other novels. The representation of female plainness in novels by Margaret Oliphant and Eliza Lynn Linton demonstrates direct intertextual links with Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. These works were published in the 1850s and 1860s, a time that witnessed the rising popularity of plain heroines in women's fiction and the debates they fuelled. The shared interest of these mid-century novels in the exploration of plainness and its connection to wider issues about female identity and roles powerfully suggests that the discourse of plainness continued to gain momentum after the publication of *Jane Eyre* and was in a perpetual state of dialogue and debate in women's fiction.

## Chapter 4

### Plainness as a ‘Gift’ in Margaret Oliphant’s *The Athelings; or The Three Gifts* and Dinah Mulock Craik’s *A Life for a Life*

My focus in the coming two chapters is on the traces of the *Jane Eyre* phenomenon among what may be described as the more conservative voices of female authors at mid-century: Margaret Oliphant, Dinah Mulock Craik and Eliza Lynn Linton. My reading of the representation of the plain heroine in some of their works supports my argument about the subversive potential of female plainness. Seemingly an integral element of the contemporary literary exploration of female plainness, the discursive formation of a female type modelled on the plain Jane Eyre served to shift the focus away from traditional constructions of women in literature. Those authors engaged with changes and anxieties about female roles that were surfacing at the time, despite their conservative, and as Nicola Thompson suggests, often problematic attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Oliphant, Craik and Linton’s works, among others, were problematic because they ‘reveal endlessly contradictory perspectives on the woman question’.<sup>2</sup> Through looking at their depiction of the plain heroine, this chapter will shed light on their engagement with such uncertainties. Of course, each novel experiments with this challenge differently, but the texts under study share an interest in the way that the fictional representation of a plain heroine unsettles her domestic role and points to her ambitious, artistic, and authorial character. Perhaps some of these works, for example Oliphant’s *The Athelings; or The Three Gifts* (1857), do that more subtly than others, such as Craik or Linton’s work in the 1860s, but nevertheless they all project an underlying resistance

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<sup>1</sup> Nicola Diane Thompson, ‘Responding to the Woman Question: Rereading Noncanonical Victorian Women Novelists’, in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, p. 3. Oliphant and Linton’s work, among others, has often been overlooked for any serious or subversive engagement with female concerns, partly due to their conservative and often essentialist views on women and their initial rejection of the suffrage movement. However, scholarly work in the last few decades has revolutionised our understanding of their interrogation and representation of femininity. For a comprehensive study of those authors, see Valerie Sanders, *Eve’s Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Ann Heilmann and Valerie Sanders, ‘The Rebel, the Lady and the “Anti”’: Femininity, Anti-Feminism, and the Victorian Woman Writer’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 29, 3 (2006), 289-300; and *Antifeminism and the Victorian Novel: Rereading Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, ed. by Tamara S. Wagner (New York: Cambria, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

to conventionality that is enabled and constructed in their works by the disavowal of perfect female beauty.

Oliphant's *The Athelings* and Craik's *A Life for a Life* (1859) were in dialogue with the contemporary interest in the notion of plainness and female experience. Denied the charm of physical beauty, both heroines' capacity for expression is celebrated as their 'gift'.<sup>3</sup> Oliphant's 'not very pretty' Agnes Atheling experiences the joy of being a published author, while on the other hand, Craik's 'ordinary' Theodora "Dora" Johnston relieves her frustration with social limitations through her diary-writing. The novels operate according to the logic of the common nineteenth-century fictional topos of the contrasting sisters. The plainness of one of the sisters comes to signify the narrative's quest to offer a deeper exploration of her character. The pending question over the plain heroine's 'gift' or uniqueness in both novels is integral to the narrative's quest to define her role and purpose. Female beauty is commonly alluded to as a 'gift' and even a 'gift from God' in some nineteenth-century accounts.<sup>4</sup> The fairy-tale *Sleeping Beauty* in Western culture is one prominent example of the privilege of the gift of beauty granted to the princess by the fairies. Female beauty is often represented as an ultimate gift that readily manifests its privilege and worth.<sup>5</sup> Plainness, on the other hand, often demands to be supplemented or enhanced with other merits. Both novels in their early pages and through their physical characterisation of the heroines Agnes and Theodora, in contrast to their beautiful sisters, conjoin their plainness with the quest to unravel their core beauty. Plainness is not their gift per se, but rather it is the motif through which the text mediates its representation of their real gifts of writing and expression. The image of a heroine's plain face as featureless or unattractive is gradually transformed as the novel utilises what is conventionally perceived as the lack of beauty into exploring the charm of her expressiveness.

The representation of the plain heroine could be argued to offer an alternative to the image of the beautiful author (often associated with the tradition of the poetess), which had its influence on nineteenth-century literary culture. As Susan Brown has

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<sup>3</sup> The 'gift' is a term used in both novels.

<sup>4</sup> For example, an article maintains that 'beauty, no doubt, is always a fading charm, and to its envied possessor in many cases, a fatal one. Yet it is a good gift from God'. See 'Studies from the Old Testament', *Sunday Magazine*, 1 October 1867, pp. 49-54 (p. 53).

<sup>5</sup> It cannot be denied, however, that many accounts of female beauty deemed it as a 'dangerous gift' if not complemented with modesty and reserve.

suggested, early nineteenth-century culture ‘conflates the woman poet’s body with her literary corpus’.<sup>6</sup> Lady Blessington and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, whose works celebrated female beauty, are commonly associated with this tradition of the beautiful poetesses.<sup>7</sup> A review of one of Lady Blessington’s works in the *Literary Gazette* (1822) confirms this conflation by remarking, ‘the pen of Lady Blesinton [sic.] is, like herself, so graceful and charming’.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, the representation of the heroine’s plain face in these novels and its bearing on her writing style operates on a distinct level. In parallel to the plainness of her face, her writing represents her individuality and the pure self-expression it allows in the narrative. Their style of writing is not governed by rhetorical flourishes or literary conventions, which lends a freeing aspect to their experience of writing. The merit of their writing lies in its plainness of style and the elements of honesty and straightforwardness it reflects in ways that invoke the sincerity of Jane Eyre’s autobiography. These novels creatively blend their representation of the unconventional plain heroine and her distinctive experience of being a writer.

However, it cannot be denied that in their allusion to the plain heroine’s writing talent, both novels are attentive to the social and cultural ambivalences that surround the idea of female authorship. Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) has attracted attention in recent decades, particularly in relation to its problematic representation of Brontë as a female author.<sup>9</sup> The novels of Oliphant and Craik, as well as Gaskell’s biography, are literary products of their specific historical moment, which share their anxious treatment of the issue of female authorship and its bearings upon

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Brown, ‘The Victorian Poetess’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 180-202 (p. 181). See also Gail Savage, ‘The Poisoned Apple: Beauty and England’s First Feminist Generation: Caroline Norton, Barbara Bodichon, George Eliot’, in *Female Beauty Systems: Beauty as Social Capital in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. by Christine Adams and Tracy Adams (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 125-152.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) stands out as a text that celebrates the autonomy and self-representation of the female writer. Nevertheless, the image of Aurora’s beauty still haunts the text in its representation of the poetess. See Dolores Rosenblum’s reading of the text where she argues that the blindness of Romney ‘effect[s] his removal from the world of appearances, so that Aurora can never be to him an icon of female beauty’. See Dolores Rosenblum, ‘Face to Face: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* and Nineteenth-Century Poetry’, in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Tess Cosslett (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 83-100 (p. 95).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Journal of a Tour through the Netherlands to Paris in 1321’, *The Literary Gazette: A Weekly Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, 28 September 1822, pp. 608-607 (p. 608).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 131-150.

the domestic character of the female subject.<sup>10</sup> Gaskell's handling of the assumed division between Brontë the woman and Brontë the author has been investigated by some scholars, who highlight Gaskell's holistic rather than binary approach of representing the two. Hughes and Lund, for example, maintain that Gaskell sought to 'link rather than separate womanhood and female authorship'.<sup>11</sup> Linda Peterson has also examined Gaskell's formulation of what she famously described in the biography as the 'parallel currents' that underlie the cultural binary of domesticity and authorship.<sup>12</sup> Peterson contends that Gaskell precisely reconciles the two by constructing her subject's literary vocation as 'linked to inspiration, imagination, and genius', which does not hinder her domestic and womanly duties and in which the represented model of the author is 'more concerned with artistic expression than with professionalism'.<sup>13</sup> The novels by Oliphant and Craik, published at the same time as Gaskell's biography, also represent these oppositions of the proper woman versus the woman writer ambivalently. Neither novel discussed in this chapter seeks or pursues 'professionalism', or even the proper acknowledgment of the heroine as an authoress. Genius and the need for self-expression are presented as what makes the heroine's 'gift' of writing valuable. The urge to write becomes an essential component of self-expression within their domestic space. This chapter, then, looks at the ambivalent representation of female authorship in the works of Oliphant and Craik in the context of the discourse of female plainness. They both utilise the aesthetics of their heroines' plainness as the context within which their genius is to be established in the narrative. Apart from the conflict and demands of authorship and domesticity, the two novels

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<sup>10</sup> As June Sturrock notes, the work of Gaskell and others such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning points to a 'new and more public phase in the ongoing attempt to define the woman writer'. See June Sturrock, 'Literary Women of the 1850s and Charlotte Mary Yonge's *Dynevor Terrace*', in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, pp. 116-134 (p. 117).

<sup>11</sup> Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell's Work* (London: University of Virginia Press, 1999), p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, pp. 141-150.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141, 148. Oliphant echoes Gaskell in her piece on the Brontë sisters, pointing to their success which is 'nothing but genius on the part of a writer possessing little experience or knowledge of the world, and no sort of social training or adventitious aid'. See Margaret Oliphant, 'The Brontë Sisters', in *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign: A Book of Appreciations* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1897), p. 4. However, Christine Alexander has recently argued that, contrary to Gaskell's defence of her, Brontë's knowledge and ambition for professional authorship were profound from a very early age, well before her published works. See Christine Alexander, 'Early Ambitions: Charlotte Brontë, Henry Kirke White and Robert Southey', *Brontë Studies*, 43,1 (2018), 14-31.

explore the ‘parallels’ of plainness and writing as a space for the heroine’s authentic self to emerge and write itself for representation.

**‘[T]he one had beauty and the other genius of a rare and unusual kind’:  
Contrasting Sisters in Oliphant’s *The Athelings: or, The Three Gifts***

Margaret Oliphant’s fiction has received greater attention in the last few decades as her works are reclaimed for their original engagement with and assessment of contemporary Victorian culture and domestic ideology. As both Valerie Sanders and Ann Heilmann indicate, the sheer number of both journalistic and fictional works produced by Oliphant during her lifetime and the development of her thought makes it difficult to pin down clearly what her attitudes were towards female roles.<sup>14</sup> However, Oliphant’s reputation as an anti-feminist has been contested in recent scholarly studies, many of which have considered her engagement with contemporary debates on women. As Valerie Sanders has recently and rightly argued, it is ‘more appropriate now to discuss Oliphant more widely in terms of gender, rather than anti/feminism’.<sup>15</sup> Some of the scholarly work published in the 1990s analysing Oliphant’s ‘subversive’ undertone in many of her works has been instrumental in shaping our view of her today.<sup>16</sup> Oliphant’s later novels, including *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866), *Phoebe Junior* (1876), and *Hester* (1883), often thought of as her masterpieces, have been noted for their progressive representation of female experience and individuality.<sup>17</sup> However, *The Athelings*, as I will argue, can be read as an early work that attempts the representation of the unconventional experience of Agnes that is explored through the concept of

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<sup>14</sup> Heilmann and Sanders, ‘The Rebel, the Lady and the “Anti”’, p. 291. Ann Heilmann further suggests that we may best consider Oliphant’s literary works and views as existing within an ‘ambiguous, often fluid’ position. See Ann Heilmann, ‘Mrs Grundy’s Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant between Orthodoxy and the New Woman’, *Women’s Writing*, 6, 2 (1999), 215-237.

<sup>15</sup> Valerie Sanders, *Margaret Oliphant* (Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2020), p. 192.

<sup>16</sup> The work of Margaret Rubik and the collection of essays edited by D. J. Trela are particularly important. See Margarete Rubik, *The Novels of Mrs. Oliphant: A Subversive View of Traditional Themes* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), and *Margaret Oliphant: Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive*, ed. by D. J. Trela (London: Associated University Press, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Andrea Kaston Tange, ‘Redesigning Femininity: *Miss Marjoribanks*’s Drawing-Room of Opportunity’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36,1 (2008), 163-186; George Levine, ‘Taking Oliphant Seriously: *A Country Gentleman and his Family*’, *ELH*, 83, 1 (2016), 233-258; and Elisabeth Jay, ‘Margaret Oliphant’s Fin-de-Siècle Novels’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 49 (2019), 11-28.

female plainness. My reading of the novel supports recent critical views of Oliphant's work as subtly acknowledging the social and cultural limitations placed upon women.

In her autobiography, Oliphant contemplates the difference between herself and Brontë as writers. She maintains, 'I don't suppose my powers are equal to hers ... but yet I have had far more experience and, I think a fuller conception of life'.<sup>18</sup> However, she often expressed her admiration of Brontë's work. In one of her early and well-known articles, published in 1855, Oliphant commemorates Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as a great work of art that has revolutionised the standards of female writing at the time.<sup>19</sup> She points to the way in which the remarkable eponymous heroine 'stole upon the scene – pale, small, by no means beautiful – something of a genius, something of a vixen – a dangerous little person, inimical to the peace of society'.<sup>20</sup> Elisabeth Jay notes that, despite Oliphant's admiration of *Jane Eyre*, it is not until later in the century with a novel like *Janet* (1891) that Brontë's work proves to be influential on Oliphant's own representation of female experience or, in Jay's words, 'to bear her own very different construction of a woman's place in the world'.<sup>21</sup> However, I would argue that Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was also important and its influence present in Oliphant's earlier novels, particularly *The Athelings*, serialised in *Blackwood's* between 1856 and 1857. The representation of Agnes Atheling as a plain heroine reflects the uniqueness and genius that Oliphant recognised in *Jane Eyre*. Oliphant notes the distinctiveness of Brontë's heroine, and yet she acknowledges the 'dangerous' and 'inimical' nature of her character. Oliphant's description reflects contemporary prejudice against the novel and its heroine. This sense of uncertainty, as I will argue, also casts its light upon Oliphant's novel and its own experiment with the representation of the plain heroine. The allusion to the heroine's lack of beauty in Oliphant's *The Athelings*, just as in her reference to

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Lancashire: Broadview Press, 2002), pp. 43-44. As Elaine Showalter and Deirdre D'Albertis note, the success of contemporary literary figures such as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot influenced Oliphant's and other less-known female authors' self-perception and their recognition of their authorial experience. See Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, pp. 105-112; and Deirdre D'Albertis, 'The Domestic Drone: Margaret Oliphant and a Political History of the Novel', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 37, 4 (1997), 805-829 (pp. 808-809).

<sup>19</sup> Oliphant, 'Modern Novelists – Great and Small', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, May 1855, pp. 554-568. For a discussion of Oliphant's multiple references to Brontë in her works, see Joan Bellamy, 'A Lifetime of Reviewing: Margaret Oliphant on Charlotte Brontë', *Brontë Studies*, 29, 1 (2004), 37-42.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 557.

<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself, A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 56-66.

*Jane Eyre*, is often bound up with cultural and gendered anxieties about female roles. This is mostly expressed in the novel through the narrative's ambivalence about the appropriateness of literary writing as a feminine pursuit.

The novel revolves around the family life of the middle-class Atheling family. As its subtitle 'Three Gifts' indicates, the text assigns to each of the three Atheling siblings a unique gift that the narrative sets on exploring. Marian is gifted with perfect physical beauty, Agnes with genius and expression, and their brother Charlie follows his vocation to become a lawyer. While each of the siblings takes their own path, Agnes, the elder sister, appears to be given a more prominent and active role in the text. From its very first sentence the novel sets up the opposition between the sisters in terms of their contrasting appearance:

One of them is very pretty – you can see that at a glance: under the simple bonnet, and through the thin little veil, which throws no cloud upon its beauty, shines the sweetest girl's face imaginable ... The other one is not very pretty; she is twenty: she is taller, paler, not so bright of natural expression, yet as far from being commonplace as can be conceived.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the obvious contrast to her sister's beauty, Agnes's plainness is not represented as inferior to it. However, unlike the corporeality of Marian's gift of beauty in which she 'could not help shining forth so fair and sweet', Agnes's plainness will take a longer course in the narrative to reveal its merit fully.<sup>23</sup> The contrasting physical characterisation of the sisters, while emphasising the exteriority of Marian's beauty, leaves the image of Agnes's face open to interpretation. This openness paves the way for the introduction of Agnes's unconventional gift. It appears to beg our attention as readers to anticipate a more profound sense of potential in a way that we do not with Marian's perfect beauty. The beautiful Marian is announced as 'neither clever nor ambitious, and had, in all circumstances, the sweetest faculty of content'.<sup>24</sup> Her gift of beauty seems to surmount all other pursuits and renders her as the conventionally ideal

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<sup>22</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *The Athelings, Or, The Three Gifts*, 3 Vols (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1857), I, p. 3.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiuo.ark:/13960/t3kw5zx3w&view=1up&seq=6> [accessed May 2018]

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, I, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

Victorian heroine. Agnes, on the other hand, clearly presents a more challenging female type to represent in the narrative.

Just as the novel is about to reveal Agnes's unique gift, the chapter abruptly ends with the narrator announcing, 'we pause till the morning to exhibit the gift of Agnes Atheling, how it was regarded, and what it was'.<sup>25</sup> As much as this creates a sense of anticipation in the reader, it also maintains a sense of uncertainty as to the nature and value of Agnes's gift. As the next chapter begins, the narrator directly engages with readers:

most courteous reader! Suspend your judgement. It was not her fault. This poor child had no more blame in the matter than Marian had for her beauty, which was equally involuntary. Agnes Atheling was not wise; she had no particular gift for conversation ... Yet genius, in some kind and degree, certainly did belong to her, for the girl had that strange faculty of expression which is independent of education, knowledge or culture as any wandering angel. When she had anything to say (upon paper), she said it with so much grace and beauty of language, that Mr Atheling's old correspondents puzzled and shook their grey heads over it, charmed and astonished without knowing why.<sup>26</sup>

'[G]enius', as the driving force behind Agnes's power of expression and literary writing, is established as her gift. The novel's treatment of Agnes's genius and literary talent, as the passage indicates with its apologetic tone, appears rather ambivalent and unsure from its very beginnings. This announcement seems driven by the urge to prevent readers from forming a negative judgement about Agnes's unfeminine gift. Her gift of expression is posited as naturally-occurring and not in any way nurtured by education, which seems to qualify further the novel's approval of her talent. The declaration of her gift as 'involuntary', just as Marian's beauty would be, is also significant. The parallel that the passage establishes between beauty and expression as God-given gifts bestowed upon the two sisters, I believe, further establishes the centrality of Agnes's plainness to the exploration of her genius. This becomes particularly clear in the passage's suggestion that Agnes's beauty was that of the 'grace and beauty of language'. Hence, the novel's opening revelation that Agnes was 'not

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

very pretty' is soon redefined and her unique beauty is that of expression. Agnes is often assigned the task of letter-writing by her parents, through which she lets 'her pearls and her diamonds drop from her lips after this fashion, with the prodigality of a young spendthrift'.<sup>27</sup> In this metaphor of the magnificence and power of her language, the very essence of Agnes's beauty and attractiveness is further established to lie within her expressive ability. This excess is rendered as a positive exercise of her talent that pours forth and claims its superiority and usefulness. Agnes's plainness proves instrumental to the narrative's construction of her character, as it is her lack of beauty that allows the text to form and set its own vision of her unique beauty; the beauty of expression.

The novel soon expands its vision of Agnes as a successful and published author. Agnes confronts her brother Charlie, stressing that 'If I were a man, I should be content with nothing less than the greatest – I know that!'<sup>28</sup> Agnes's ambition begins to crystallise in the narrative as she soon becomes known among her small community as the author of *Hope Hazlewood, A History*. Agnes's amateur attempts at writing a novel are taken to another level when Mr Burlington, a publisher, offers to put her work in print. The novel soon proves to be a success, spreading joy and pride in the family.<sup>29</sup> Agnes's success leads to her introduction into society through Mrs Edgerley, an aristocratic woman of letters. The Atheling sisters' introduction into proper society after Mrs Edgerley's invitation for them to spend some time in her mansion proves difficult for the girls as it is their first exposure to society outside their own warm and happy family life. Amid the girls' experience of the splendid social life at Mrs Edgerley's home, the narrator comments:

Agnes Atheling was not beautiful. When people looked at her, they never thought of her face, what were its features or its complexion. These were both agreeable enough to make no detraction from the interest of the bright and animated intelligence which was indeed the only beauty belonging to her. She

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> The family's shared interest in Agnes's artistic endeavours seems significant as it enhances the novel's domestication of her writing activity. As Zsuzsanna Varga rightly maintains, Oliphant's heroines effectively 'conceive of their artistic practice as an essentially familial act'. See Zsuzsanna Varga, 'Spinsters and Authors: Women's Roles in Margaret Oliphant's Writing' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2003), p. 117.

did not know herself with what entire and transparent honesty her eyes and lips expressed her sentiments; and it never occurred to her that her own looks, as she stood thus, somewhat defiant, and full of an imaginative and heroic pride, looking out upon all those strangers, made the brightest comment possible upon the scene.<sup>30</sup>

The reiterated reminder that Agnes is ‘not beautiful’ sheds light on the way in which the novel constantly detaches Agnes from the common connotations of female beauty. Instead, it redirects our attention to the unique beauty of her intelligence and expressiveness, proclaimed as the ‘only beauty belonging to her’. It is through such process, which we also find in other texts such as Brontë’s ‘Henry Hastings’, that the narrative reveals its rejection of mere corporeal beauty to bring to the surface the heroine’s core beauty. This language of unveiling and the invitation to go beyond the exteriority of beauty prove pivotal to the staging of the heroine’s intellect and her appeal in the novel. However, what distinguishes this novel’s allusion to the expressiveness of Agnes’s face is its association with her capacity for writing and verbal expression in the novel. The manner in which her ‘eyes and lips expressed her sentiments’ accentuates this parallel between Agnes’s facial and verbal expressiveness. The novel’s visualisation of Agnes’s face persistently manifests her gift of expression and accentuates the ‘entire and transparent honesty’ that shines through her eyes, which is also a dominant characteristic of her style of writing.

Agnes’s face is later described as ‘remarkable enough ... in an assembly of people whose looks were regulated after the most approved principles, and who were generally adepts in the admirable art of expressing nothing’.<sup>31</sup> Agnes’s plainness is distinguished for its incompatibility with norms and the ‘approved principles’ only to demonstrate its unique expressiveness. The novel’s handling and representation of Agnes’s plainness continually undermines and subverts the very essence of perfect beauty while emphasising the power and vigour of expression. In one scene in which the novel begins to introduce Rector Lionel Rivers’ interest in Agnes, the narrator describes his attention to her unconventional face and attitude:

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<sup>30</sup> Oliphant, *The Athelings*, I, p. 215.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

He was glad to know Agnes, the intelligent listener who followed his sermons – *the eager bright young eyes which flashed warfare and defiance* on his solemn deliverances ... Lionel Rivers was not very sensitively alive to the beautiful: he saw little to attract his eye, much less his heart, in that pretty drooping Marian... he read the bright and constant comment on what he said himself, and what others said, *that ran and sparkled in the face of Agnes*.<sup>32</sup> (emphasis mine)

Agnes's face displays her thriving intellect. The rector's keen interest in Agnes in this scene stems from her face's transparency in reflecting her active mind and rebellious thoughts. While Agnes's ideas of 'warfare and defiance' remain mostly silenced in the novel, they nevertheless mark their presence upon her eyes and face, which the Rector here indulges in contemplating and 'read[ing]'. This feature of the plain heroine, the face that communicates a kind of language and meaning that others detect, is prominent in both the novels of Oliphant and Craik. The power of expression is not exclusive to verbal language, but is envisioned here as erupting from within. The description of Agnes's face reveals the pure expression of inwardness that the novel, from its beginnings, has pursued and identified in exploring her plainness and its multiple meanings in the text. The novel continues to capture the uniqueness of Agnes's plain face that, despite its contravention of norms, possesses its own charm and attraction.

As Agnes writes another novel, this time inspired by the real love story of her sister Marian and Winterbourne, the narrator comments on her treatment of her characters:

She was not at all an experienced young lady, though she was an author ... It was not very much of a story, neither was it written with that full perfection of style which comes by experience and the progress of years; but it had something in its faulty grace, and earnestness, and simplicity, which was perhaps more attractive than the matured perfectness of a style which had been carefully formed, and "left nothing to desire".<sup>33</sup>

The novel still celebrates Agnes's vivid imagination and acknowledges her as an 'author', despite upholding her immaturity as a writer who lacks a fully developed artistic style. The narrative repeatedly enacts the distance that it wishes to create

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, II, p. 208.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, III, p. 128.

between Agnes's experience of writing and that of the professional female author. The allusion to Agnes's amateur literary endeavours sheds light on the novel's treatment of her imperfections from the outset. It is noteworthy that both Agnes's plain face and her amateur style of writing are frequently reclaimed in the novel for their superiority to any conventional view of perfect beauty or professional and acclaimed authorship. Agnes's face, just like her novel, bears neither the signs of 'perfection' nor 'grace', but nevertheless, in its 'earnestness, and simplicity, ... was perhaps more attractive'. The representation of Agnes as a character and her literary vocation in the novel becomes invested in reclaiming the authenticity and worthiness of her pursuits despite their seeming imperfection. In its endorsement and celebration of the 'simplicity' and 'earnestness' of her writing, the novel portrays writing as a part of Agnes's quest for self-expression that, although noble, is never meant to be fully realised or perfected. On the one hand, it could be argued that the novel strategically points to Agnes's simplicity of style to indicate her literary amateurism, and, thus, resolve the anxiety over the prospects of her literary success. However, the simplicity of language, which distinguishes Agnes's style of writing, is celebrated here for its uniqueness. It accentuates the individuality of her style that claims its own beauty; the beauty of authenticity and transparency rather than that of perfection and embellishments. Hence, the novel's representation of Agnes as an amateur author lends a liberating aspect to her experience of writing. As Wendy Parkins suggests, the 'simplicity' of a work indicates a 'sense of harmony ...; practicality for everyday life; and unostentatious beauty'.<sup>34</sup> These meanings of plainness, which were vital for Jane Eyre's experience of self-expression, are present in this novel and its representation of Agnes's literary work, as well as what it comes to stand for. Her work is not meant to belong or be part of the harsh world of literary conventions and rhetorical flourishes, but rather it presents the individual experience of free self-expression.

*The Athelings* has received limited critical attention in comparison with Oliphant's other more sophisticated works. However, almost every brief reference to the novel seems to indicate a consensus among scholars on the narrative's determination to contain and domesticate Agnes's authorship.<sup>35</sup> Despite the heroine's

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<sup>34</sup> Wendy Parkins, *Jane Morris: The Burden of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 162.

<sup>35</sup> See for example Rubik, pp. 42-43.

success and the publication of her novel, the narrative resolutely underscores Agnes's attempts at writing, presenting them as spontaneous and motivated by immature impulses rather than intellectual knowledge and training. As Agnes eagerly awaits to hear of the reception of the novel by readers after its publication, the narrator comments:

if the young adventurer had been a man, this would have been a solemn crisis, full of fate: it was even so to a woman, seeking her own independence; but Agnes Atheling was only a girl in the heart of her family.<sup>36</sup>

The novel renders Agnes's anticipation and knowledge of her position in the world of writing as a mere childish act as she was 'so ignorant of what might be the real issue of the first step into the world'.<sup>37</sup> In exploring Agnes's literary talent, the novel appears to strive constantly to balance out its celebration of her gift and its qualification of it as immature attempts at writing rather than a determination to enter the professional and public world of authorship.<sup>38</sup> As I argued, Agnes's plain style of writing plays a significant role in this process of distancing Agnes from the world of authorship without undermining her genius and talent. Her plainness is a distinctive feature of her work that claims its own beauty and worthiness in the novel, highlighting Agnes's spontaneity. Nevertheless, even as it celebrates the merit of Agnes's plainness, the novel remains hesitant about her potential to grow into an acclaimed author. In one scene where the narrator alludes to Agnes's under-developed skill of dress-making, the reader is assured that 'with this sweet stream of common life around her, you may be sure her genius did her very little harm'.<sup>39</sup> The novel emphatically denies any suggestion that Agnes's genius may interfere in her performance of her essential feminine nature.

In the novel, Agnes is repeatedly disqualified as being fit for the public life of authorship. In a discussion between Agnes and the Rector Lionel Rivers regarding Agnes's writing experience, he exclaims, 'I think a woman's intellect ought to be receptive without endeavouring to produce ... intelligence is the noblest gift of a

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<sup>36</sup> Oliphant, *The Athelings*, I, p. 155.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Margaret Rubik reads Oliphant's attitude here as an indication of the way in which she 'assumes the defensive pose towards her artistic work so typical of women writers in the nineteenth century'. See Rubik, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Oliphant, *The Athelings*, I, p. 24.

woman; originality is neither to be wished nor looked for'.<sup>40</sup> Agnes cunningly responds by indicating, 'If you object to originality, I do not think you need to be angry with me'.<sup>41</sup> The narrator goes on to comment that Agnes 'was half inclined to play with the lion, but the lion was in a very ill humour, and would see no sport in the matter'.<sup>42</sup> It perhaps seems surprising that in one of the very few instances in the novel where Agnes is given the voice to be assertive about her literary talent, she denies herself that pleasure. Agnes's mild response to Rivers' condemnation of female authorship and her acceptance that her work is not that of 'originality' further underscores the novel's anxiety about Agnes's role as an author. Margaret Rubik questions our obliviousness as modern readers and critics of Oliphant's subtle interrogation of conservative female roles and their limitations.<sup>43</sup> Oliphant's engagement with these issues, argues Rubik, can be seen through a closer look at the narrative voice in some of her novels and more specifically the 'problematic relationship between narrator and author'.<sup>44</sup> Rubik points our attention to a "'woman's" narrative voice' that directs and even occasionally manipulates the voice of the omniscient narrator.<sup>45</sup> In Agnes's unspoken reaction, the suppressed female voice of the novel indicates its presence but fails to articulate its stance fully. The novel appears to imply Agnes's urge to defend herself against the Rector, but ultimately the narrative silences this desire. The novel, as I have suggested, is occupied with the need to tailor its representation of Agnes's experience within acceptable boundaries. *The Athelings* does not directly shun Agnes's literary talent, but instead rather hesitantly mediates its legitimacy and continually contains it within a domestic atmosphere.

Agnes, in comparison to her sister Marian, takes on a more active and dynamic role in the novel. *The Athelings* has been often referred to as an autobiographical novel

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, II, p. 247.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Rubik, p. 23

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. In considering Oliphant's journalistic work, Ann Heilmann has also pointed out that the 'masculinist tone of her articles is disrupted by the intrusion of a subversive female voice'. See Heilmann, 'Mrs Grundy's Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant between Orthodoxy and the New Woman', p. 218.

in which Oliphant identifies with her heroine Agnes as a young author.<sup>46</sup> Oliphant's *Autobiography*, published in 1899, has received attention for the way it offers an insight into her own authorial experience and, more broadly, the Victorian experience of female authorship. As Elisabeth Jay indicates in her introduction to a recent edition of the *Autobiography*, Oliphant's consideration of her authorial experience is overshadowed with the sense that her 'artistic achievement ... [was] handicapped by domestic responsibilities'.<sup>47</sup> *The Athelings* carefully contemplates the line that separates Agnes's immature and spontaneous activity of writing in the domestic sphere and the public world of authorship and publishing. Oliphant's own sense of this division and the urge to qualify one's literary vocation, as Gaskell also does with her biography of Brontë, are still relevant to her representation of Agnes's experience in the novel, even though a period of almost fifty years separates their production. As much as the essential domestic nature of Agnes is set to triumph in the narrative, it is nevertheless often subtly contested with the heroine's need to exercise her ambition and abilities.

The novel soon declares that 'Agnes, a different young genius then, full of visionary ideas of fame, ... did not palpitate any longer with the glorious young fancies of a visionary ambition'.<sup>48</sup> The narrative gradually resolves Agnes's literary ambition and quest for success, and the full domestication of the character and the relinquishing of her ambition is realised in the novel by her growing romantic attachment to the Rector. The need to embrace Agnes's essential feminine nature requires the disavowal of these 'ideas of fame' and the recognition of its limits. This crystallises in the novel's last chapter which pictures Agnes at her home.

In her feminine attitude and occupation, making a meditative pause, bowing her head upon her hand, thinking of something, with those quiet walls of home

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<sup>46</sup> See Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself, A Literary Life*, p. 260; Rubik, pp. 42-43; and John Stock Clarke, 'The Novels of Margaret Oliphant' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 1983), pp. 220-222. A review of the novel in the *Saturday Review* maintains that 'the young authoress and her first book are very prettily drawn; and as they are drawn by a lady, we are warranted in supposing that they embody real experience of the subject'. See 'The Athelings', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 5 August 1857, pp. 164-165 (p. 165).

<sup>47</sup> Oliphant, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, p. 16. As Jay has earlier argued in *The Literary Life*, Oliphant's commitment to her maternal role, exemplified in her assertion that 'I would rather be remembered as a mother', is only one side to the story. Jay contends that it was 'only one version among the multiple fictions or experimental egos with which her own relating of her life so artfully played'. See Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself, A Literary Life*, p. 45. See also Sanders, *Margaret Oliphant*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>48</sup> Oliphant, *The Athelings*, III, p. 239.

around her – the open door, the open window, and no one else visible in the serene and peaceful house, she made, in her fair and thoughtful young womanhood, as sweet a type as one could desire of the serene and happy confidence of a quiet English home.<sup>49</sup>

The novel ends with the announcement of the arrival of Rivers and their marriage. Agnes is represented by the end of the text as a ‘fair’ and ‘sweet’ woman, which signifies her maturity and overcoming of her childish ambition. Ironically, Agnes is described here with the same words that were used at the beginning of the novel to present the character of her sister Marian, which then were used signal the latter’s difference from the ambitious Agnes. In this passage, Agnes is modelled after the perfect domestic woman, appearing to grow into someone ideally feminine and beautiful. The narrator, indeed, exclaims, ‘she was changed’.<sup>50</sup> As Jay maintains, ‘the demands of a romantic plot triumph over any deeper exploration of the woman writer’s life’ in the novel.<sup>51</sup> The image of the ‘sweet’ and feminine Agnes in this domestic setting begins to overshadow the earlier intensity with which her unconventional face and intellect were depicted. The novel appears to declare Agnes’s readiness to embrace her role as a wife through this conventional and typical nineteenth-century representation of femininity. However, the imagery of the ‘open door [and] window’ in contrast to the ‘quiet walls of the home around her’ creates a sense of ambiguity, evoking the novel’s concern with the conflict of the private and public world of the female author that it interrogates from its early pages. As much as this scene anticipates the arrival of Rivers to win Agnes as his wife, there is a sense of a parallel world that Agnes is being detached from within the ‘walls of home’. Tamara Hall offers an interesting reading of the deployment of the motif of windows in one of Oliphant’s late gothic tales ‘The Library Window’ (1896), arguing that the window can be seen as a symbol of the anxious interplay of public and private spheres in relation to the figure of the female author.<sup>52</sup> The window, contends Hall, ‘points to the ambivalence with which nineteenth-century women writers represent the desire to write, as well as their inability to imagine women as writers of text rather than as themselves texts written

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 251.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself, A Literary Life*, p. 260.

<sup>52</sup> Tamar Heller, ‘Textual Seductions: Women’s Reading and Writing in Margaret Oliphant’s “The Library Window”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 25, 1 (1997), 23-37 (p. 26).

over by cultural narratives'.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the symbolic image of the window, as the passage above hints, appears to allude to the novel's inability to resolve fully its own ambivalent treatment of Agnes's potential, which is ultimately suppressed by announcing her role as the perfect wife.

Female authorship remained a contentious issue that forced some authors to conventionally end their narratives with the domestication of the heroine.<sup>54</sup> The final visualisation of Agnes at the end of the novel as 'fair' and as 'sweet a type as one could desire', ironically undermines the early attempts to explore her genius and individuality. Agnes's plainness and its reflection of her genius and difference are undercut by the image of the ideal heroine surrendering to her essential nature. The subversiveness of female plainness, given its mid-century context, is explored in the narrative but never fully endorsed. Oliphant recognised the individuality of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and could be argued to have endorsed some of this distinctiveness and unconventionality in her representation of the character of the plain Agnes Atheling. However, Oliphant's novel sets the boundaries that she found lacking in Brontë's novel with its openly transgressive undertone. *The Athelings* considers the intellectual and literary prospects of Agnes while asserting the superiority of her domestic and feminine nature. Agnes's coming of age and her symbolically restored beauty puts an end to this experiment and dictates recognition of her ideal femininity.

This journey of growth that the ending of *The Athelings* highlights, with Agnes as a domesticated wife, takes a different and a more daring direction in Craik's *A Life for a Life*. Writing and self-expression are integral layers to the representation of the plain heroine in both novels. However, Dora's gift in *A Life for a Life* is not linked to literary writing, but rather to the process of writing and self-contemplation through the pages of her diary. Dora's frankness and plainness of language become a means of establishing self-authenticity. The sense of uncertainty about Agnes's plainness and her gift in the beginnings of *The Athelings* will continue to dominate Craik's representation

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>54</sup> See June Sturrock's reading of Charlotte Mary Yonge's treatment of female authorship in *Dynevor Terrace*, published in the same year as Oliphant's *The Athelings*. Yonge, like her contemporaries Oliphant and Gaskell, experiences the same dilemma where she is obliged to 'manipulate her narrative so that the literary ambitions are represented as permissible, even laudable, in a woman if they are duly subordinated'. See June Sturrock, 'Literary Women of the 1850s and Charlotte Mary Yonge's *Dynevor Terrace*', p. 124.

of the plain Dora. However, Dora's diary resolves this uncertainty in the way it comes to signify self-realisation in the narrative.

**'[A] face by itself, its peculiarities pleasant, its plainness sacred': The Plain Heroine in Dinah Mulock Craik's *A Life for a Life***

Dinah Mulock Craik, mostly known as the successful author of *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), was a prolific writer of novels as well as a regular contributor to the periodical press with her short tales and articles. As Oliphant notes in her article 'Modern Novelists – Great and Small', the influence of Brontë's work upon Craik's is quite spectacular.<sup>55</sup> Today, it is often Craik's novel *Olive* (1850), featuring a 'plain' and physically-deformed heroine who finds solace in her art, that is mostly associated with Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Recent scholarly work has emphasised the role of Olive's deformity in paving the way for the novel's representation of her potential as a female artist.<sup>56</sup> As Tabitha Sparks notes, Olive's 'bodily disadvantage' allows the text to explore these 'specifically unfeminine freedoms'.<sup>57</sup> However, I argue that more recognition needs to be given to Craik's *A Life for a Life* (1859) as a text that is closely connected with the contemporary debate on *Jane Eyre* and its defiance against the conventional representation of a female character. A contemporary reviewer of the novel describes Dora as one of the 'small, plainish, bright-eyed, ... young women ... who are now so much and so deservedly in fashion with our superior novelists'.<sup>58</sup> Another review notes, 'the authoress, in sketching a heroine neither plain nor pretty, letting admiration slip carelessly by, and taking refuge in sound sense, had evidently "Jane Eyre" in her mind'.<sup>59</sup> These reviews recognise this pattern of characterisation

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<sup>55</sup> Oliphant, 'Modern Novelists – Great and Small', p. 260.

<sup>56</sup> In *Olive*, the narrator remarks: 'that personal deformity which she thought excluded her from a woman's natural destiny, gave her freedom in her own'. See Dinah Mulock Craik, *Olive* (London: Macmillan and co., 1875), p. 165. <https://archive.org/details/olivebyauthorog00craigoog/page/n182> [accessed September 2019]. For a discussion of Olive's deformity and her artistic endeavours in the novel, see Erin V. Obermueller, 'The Artist's Model in Mid-Victorian Women's Fiction', *Women's Writing*, 11, 1 (2004), 55-72; and Antonia Losano, *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), pp. 185-198.

<sup>57</sup> Tabitha Sparks, 'Dinah Mulock Craik's *Olive*: Deformity, Gender and Female Destiny', *Women's Writing*, 20, 3 (2013), 358-369 (p. 362).

<sup>58</sup> 'A Life for a Life', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 10 December 1859, pp. 708 – 709 (p. 708).

<sup>59</sup> 'A Life for a Life; by the Author of *John Halifax*', *The New Quarterly Review and Digest of Current Literature, British, American, French, and German*, July 1859, pp. 306-307 (p. 306).

arising from Brontë's work. Dora's homeliness as an 'ordinary' looking woman, like Olive's deformity, is in dialogue with this discourse of plainness and plays a significant role in the novel's quest to represent her individuality and journey of personal growth. Craik's *A Life for a Life* manifests its quest for a distinctive characterisation of the plain heroine and her unconventional experience, perhaps even more so than her earlier novel *Olive*. The former could be argued to represent a more thorough and intimate image of Dora as we are given glimpses of her inner life through the epistolary use of the diary.

*A Life for a Life* is often thought of as one of Craik's fictional masterpieces.<sup>60</sup> The novel, through its diary structure as well as letters exchanged between the heroine Theodora 'Dora' Johnston and her male counterpart, Max Urquhart, explores the characters' journeys towards self-discovery and ultimately their marital union, made possible by their deep affection and understanding of each other. Dora's struggle to find the meaning and purpose of her existence, amid her dissatisfaction with the limitations of her life as a middle-class daughter of a clergyman, is one of the driving forces behind her urge to articulate many of her ideas and concerns through her diary. The military surgeon Dr Urquhart, on the other hand, is agonized by the guilt of accidentally committing manslaughter. His diary voices his attempts to overcome his anguish through his medical service in war. The use of the diary and letters in the novel is significant as it often informs our perception of the characters and gives an intimate picture of their inner life. The novel employs Dora and Max's shared aim for self-realisation, as it is expressed in their diaries and correspondence, to unravel their identities. The narrative form does not seem to privilege one narrative voice over the other, especially when considering their gender. Unlike *The Athelings*, the voices of Max and Dora complement each other, and thus the narrative moves beyond a divided male/female voice into an exploration of their inner life and companionship.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Harriet Parr, in her praise of Craik's works, remarks that the novel was just as sophisticated as *John Halifax, Gentleman*. See Margaret Oliphant and others, *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign: A Book of Appreciations*, p. 235.

<sup>61</sup> These features of the novel did not go unnoticed by reviewers, who criticised the 'greater equality of women with man'. See 'A Life for a Life, by the author of "John Halifax"', *The Christian Remembrancer*, October 1859, pp. 305-339 (p. 308). The *Saturday Review* deemed the mutual affection between the two a weakness in the novel whereby the author 'has no thought or ideas to give him [Max Urquhart] which she has not already allotted to the heroine. The Doctor, therefore, is merely a solemn repetition of the lady'. Max's interest and admiration of Dora's unconventional character is judged to be an instrument used to reaffirm the heroine's own sense of worthiness and the novel's celebration of her difference. See 'A Life for a Life', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, p. 708.

Like its contemporary *The Athelings*, there is a correlation in Craik's novel between Dora's plainness and her quest for self-definition. Dora is seeking her identity and purpose as 'Miss Dora – Theodora – “the gift of God” ... A gift – what for and to whom? ... I never have been able to find out'.<sup>62</sup> This is one of the significant motives that drives her story in the novel. The allusion to this existing gift, signified by her name 'Theodora' and which according to her is still in need of revelation and a clearer definition, is reminiscent of Oliphant's treatment of Agnes's gift. Craik's novel shares with Oliphant's the prominence of female plainness as a motif for unveiling their heroines' inner life and potential, which becomes entwined with their articulateness and the significance of their writing as a form of self-expression. Craik, however, as we shall see, appears more assertive in her representation of Dora and her desire for self-expression than Oliphant is in *The Athelings*. Sally Mitchell has noted that writing *A Life for a Life* took place at a stage in Craik's literary career where she 'was no longer simply reflecting public values; she was using the dramatic and affective power of fiction in an attempt to form an opinion'.<sup>63</sup> The representation of Dora's journey reflects this urge to shed light on women's struggle and their right for self-determination. Towards the beginning of the novel, the lines 'the aforesaid Theodora Johnston, aged twenty five' signal Dora's dissatisfaction with her current state as a young woman who can no longer be like her fifteen-year old self, 'thinking, planning, dreaming, looking forward to such a wonderful, impossible life'.<sup>64</sup> The novel explores Dora's quest to find a voice and a meaningful way to exist amidst social constraints that surround her. Even as the novel ends with its heroine's marriage and domestication, it upholds Dora and Max's equality. Their marriage epitomises their joint paths of self-discovery and transcendence of social limitations.

Dora's first experience of self-contemplation occurs during the family's excitement prior to attending a ball. In contrast, Dora is unenthusiastic, and she

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<sup>62</sup> Craik, *A Life for a Life: A Novel* (New York: Carleton, 1864), p. 7.  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ucw.ark:/13960/t4fn1zq6r;view=2up;seq=10;size=125> [accessed June 2018]

<sup>63</sup> Sally Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik*, p. 58. Tracy Seeley also maintains that the success of *John Halifax, Gentleman* was a turning point for Craik as she gained more freedom and authority as a writer. See Tracy Seeley, 'Victorian Women's Essays and Dinah Mulock's Thoughts: Creating an Ethos for Argument', *Prose Studies*, 19, 1 (1996), 93-109.

<sup>64</sup> Craik, *A Life for a Life*, p. 32.

compares herself to her more beautiful sisters Lisabel and Penelope. As she does so, she begins to contemplate the lack of beauty in her 'ordinary' face:

Tis a good thing to be good-looking. And next best, perhaps, is downright ugliness, - nice, interesting, attractive ugliness – such as I have seen in some women: nay, I have somewhere read that ugly women have often been loved best. *But to be just ordinary*; of ordinary height, ordinary figure, and, oh me! Let me lift up my head from the desk to the looking-glass, and take a good stare at an undeniably ordinary face.<sup>65</sup> (emphasis mine)

As Dora considers the prospects of both beauty and ugliness, she sets to distance herself from those two extremes by proclaiming to be 'ordinary'. Interestingly, her resistance to present herself as either beautiful or ugly allows her to occupy a fluid position in between, which will acquire its own meaning and significance as the narrative unfolds. Dora's representation of herself as 'just ordinary' in this mirror confrontation appears to signify both the narrative and the heroine's need to locate and define the essence of her existence, which still cannot be strictly categorised or identified. Dora's diary, as I will demonstrate, is all about bringing to light her own personal experience of writing one's self for representation, a process that involves intimate moments of doubt and self-questioning. The defiance against a rigid categorisation of her exterior signifies the novel's mission to shed light on Dora's journey of spiritual and psychological growth. Dora's physical representation in this scene seems to go against our ability as readers to form a clear judgement about her as a character. With this ambiguity, the novel appears to suspend its representation of Dora's corporeal image as it sets the tone of its defiance to a conventional view of its heroine and her future. Dora's identity, as it is captured here in the image of her ordinary and featureless face, is not modelled after any ideally-feminine type but appears to be licensed and given freedom to grow into her own authentic self. Our appreciation of Dora and her ordinariness will gradually unfold and become greater as the novel progresses, particularly as her diary-writing comes to complement this representation.

In one of his early encounters with Dora, Max notices her as she 'seemed to be the plain one of the family: unnoticed – one might almost guess, neglected', but soon

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, pp. 7-8.

goes on to give a deeper and more positive description of her appearance.<sup>66</sup> Max's curiosity and his observations of Dora's unusual appearance and attitude contribute to the narrative's reappraisal of Dora's earlier uncertainty about her beauty. In the following note made in his diary, he describes her physical appearance with a detailed physiognomic perception of her whole physical presence and attitude:

Her dress, of some soft, dark color, which fell in folds, and did not rustle or spread; her hair, which was twisted at the back, without any bows or laces, such as I see ladies wear, and brought down, smooth and soft, over the forehead, formed a sufficient contrast to her sisters to make me notice her; besides, it was a style more according to my taste. I hate to see a woman all flounces and filligigs, ... Hair curved over the brow like a Saxon arch, under the doorway of which two intelligent eyes stand sentinel, vouching for the worth of what is within – grant these, and the rest of the features may be any thing you choose, if not absolutely ugly. The only peculiarity about these was a squareness of chin, and closeness of mouth, indicating more strength than sweetness of disposition, until the young lady smiled.<sup>67</sup>

Max eagerly detects Dora's own unique beauty of intelligence and expression. The power of the eyes and their language is a feature that is emphasised in both Oliphant and Craik's novels and often serves to emphasise the heroine's inner beauty and the power of intellect and expression shining from within. Dora's hair over her eyes as it appears like a 'Saxon arch', a style commonly associated with extreme simplicity and plainness, further accentuates the beauty of her eyes and their revelation of her interiority. Dora's beauty, as seen through Max's eyes, is celebrated in its natural and unadorned state. Max's interest appears to be triggered by her unique features and the meanings they invoke for an observer like him in understanding and delving deep into her character. Indeed, his visual interest in Dora is motivated by her facial incompatibility with ideal beauty and his attention to the distinctiveness and strength of her face. Its peculiarities, including the 'squareness of chin', are rendered in a positive light. The unveiling of plainness's beauty, as both novels show us, becomes an

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

important process through which the heroine's individuality and 'the worth of what is within' are revealed to the reader.

Max develops more interest in Dora's character as the novel progresses. In one of his observations, he emphasises the power of expression that her face reflects.

In repose, her features are ordinary; nor did they for one moment recall to me the flashing, youthful face. Full of action and energy, which had amused me that night at the cedars. Some faces catch the reflection of the moment so vividly that you never see them twice alike. Others, solidly and composedly handsome, scarcely vary at all, and I think it is of these last that one would soonest weary. Irregular features have generally most character. The Venus di Medici would have made a very stupid fireside companion.<sup>68</sup>

Max's description of Dora's 'ordinary' face reveals its own unique beauty and enriches it with meaning and a sense of superiority that earlier Dora couldn't recognise in her own face. Though Max acknowledges the very plainness of her face, he nevertheless attests to its expressiveness and ability to convey different emotional experiences which surpass any perfect beauty. Ideal beauty in the image of the Venus di Medici, a renowned symbol of feminine beauty, is undermined and even ridiculed for its static appearance that is devoid of emotion and life. An irregular face, on the other hand, is celebrated as a source of vivacity and energy. Max's view of Dora is distinct from a male's voyeuristic gaze that would find gratification in the externality of physical beauty. Like Brontë, Craik appears to utilise the hero's unconventional perceptions of female beauty to support the narrative's conceptualisation of the heroine's plainness, which claims its own right as her beauty in the novel. Dora and Max's willingness to go beyond a static definition of beauty into an exploration of depth and difference is a significant part of the novel's treatment of their quest for self-realisation.

Dora's diary expresses an authentic and unmediated voice of the heroine. She articulates some of her personal frustrations with an unfulfilled social life, and exclaims:

I think women as well as men, require something to do. I wish I had it .... I am beginning to fear I lead a wretchedly idle life; all young ladies at home do, ...

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

My quarter century of life has been of no more use to myself or any human creature than that fly's which my fire has stirred up to a foolish buzzing in the window-curtain before it drops and dies. I might drop down and die in the same manner, leaving no better memorial.<sup>69</sup>

Dora feels herself at odds with what is expected of her as a woman. She is frustrated by her inability to take part in the socially predetermined roles set for her. The imagery of the fly, aroused by her own anger, underpins Dora's frustration that if not expressed and overcome would aggravate her feelings of suppression and emotional struggle. Dora's own narrative and representation of herself at this phase of her life contain many of the ambivalences and anxieties that her quest to define her existence keeps stirring. Her sense of estrangement further intensifies the need to find one's purpose and place in life. The process of writing and, more profoundly, the experience of the internal dialogue it encapsulates are fundamental aspects of the narrative's treatment of this dilemma.

Dora's experiences of self-confrontation, articulated in her own diary, continue to reveal some of her conceptions of herself:

Dora Johnston thought I ... Do not consider yourself so much better than your fellow-creatures ... What! Girl, is this scorn of conventionality – your grand habit of thinking and judging for yourself – your noble independence of all follies of society.<sup>70</sup>

Dora's staging of herself in this imagery of resistance to 'conventionality' further projects the narrative's distinctive characterisation of her plainness, outspokenness, and bluntness, which combine into an important expression of her individuality and differentiate her from her sisters. Unlike *The Athelings*, *A Life for a Life* does not subtly and carefully expose its heroine's difference. The introduction of Dora's character to the plot of the novel bluntly discloses its vision of the unique heroine. Both Dora's physical and verbal plainness are explicitly presented and made instrumental to her experience of both self-representation as well as self-realisation. However, despite Dora's self-assertiveness, she appears to grapple with uncertainty about her unconventional attitudes. She writes this diary entry in response to one of her early

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, pp. 105-106.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

meetings with Max, in which she bluntly undermines his military service and confronts him with her ideas about the incompatibility between Christian faith and war. She reflects on their conversation, thinking: ‘I spoke strongly – more strongly perhaps than a young woman, whose opinions are more instincts and emotions than matured principles, ought to speak’.<sup>71</sup> The novel’s treatment of Dora’s rebellion and outspokenness expresses her right to self-expression, but also voices her recognition and ambivalence about her difference. Dora questions herself: ‘oh! should I ever learn to hold my tongue, or gabble pretty harmless nonsense as other girls?’<sup>72</sup> Dora’s plainness of speech, like her ordinary appearance at the beginning of the novel, begins to reveal a strong sense of self-questioning. Although her rejection of social norms can be fulfilling and liberating, it nevertheless still poses an obstacle to her ability to understand her own motives and behaviour. Despite their different treatment of the plain heroine, both novels by Oliphant and Craik acknowledge the tension and contradictions that arise with such a representation of female individuality.

The idea of plain-speaking and self-expression, both verbally and through writing, become integral to the text and Dora’s journey. Early in the novel, Dora expresses her interest in and devotion to writing:

What a treat it is to get home and lock myself in my own room – the tiniest and safest nook in all Rockmount – and spurt out my wrath in the blackest of ink with the boldest of pens. Bless you! (Query, who can I be blessing, for nobody will ever read this), what does it matter? And after all, I repeat, it relieves my mind.<sup>73</sup>

With those words, the novel establishes the integral part that the diary plays in articulating Dora’s inner experiences and struggles. It is set as the space in which Dora can exercise and lay down with intensity her thoughts and aspirations. Lynn M. Linder has observed the novel’s attention to the process in which ‘self-reflection within the diary’ becomes ‘a means of constructing a self’.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the diary leads the narrative’s quest for attaining self-realisation for both Dora and Max. Various studies have

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> Lynn M. Linder, ‘Dual-ing Diaries, Intersecting Identities: Victorian Subjectivity and Dinah Mulock Craik’s *A Life for a Life*’, *Victorians Institute Journal*, 39 (2011), 203-226 (p. 220).

emphasised the role of the diary in a woman's life and its relevance to female private experience of self-expression.<sup>75</sup> However, the complexity of this experience of 'construction' and writing the self in the diary lies in the fact that it becomes a shareable and collective experience in the novel. The tension of being read and being known is recognised here by Dora. As the passage indicates, the narrative from its early pages interrogates the assumption that the diary is a private space, specifically through Dora's frequent interruptions of herself when writing.

This sense of self-consciousness that Dora experiences and becomes hindered by, even in her most private moments, continues to occur. Dora declares:

I am not, and never pretended to be, a humble person. I feel there is that in me which is worth something, but a return for which I have never yet received. Give me its fair equivalent, its full and honest price, and oh, if I could expend it every mite, how boundlessly rich I should grow! This last sentence means nothing; nor do I quite understand it myself. Writing a journal is a safety-valve for much folly, yet I am by no means sure that I ought to have written the last page. However, no more of this; let me tell the story of my day.<sup>76</sup>

Dora's conscious interruption of the flow of her thoughts and frustration, as occurs in this diary entry, expresses a deep awareness of this state of private self-interrogation and the threat of exposure or judgement it also entails. The text here emphasises again the integral part that the activity of diary writing plays in articulating the concerns of a suppressed female voice battling with her own inner struggle, as well as with enforced social boundaries and restrictions. Dora's reflections play out the inherent anxiety of private and public selves as the female writer experiences it, a theme we have already seen addressed in the works of Gaskell and Oliphant. As Catherine Delafield indicates, Dora 'is clearly wrestling with the difficulties of performance and self-projection'.<sup>77</sup> This interruption occurs at a significant moment of acknowledging the deprivation that

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<sup>75</sup> See Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 32-33; and Catherine Delafield, *Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 25-37. On the other hand, J. Russell Perkin has noted that the narrative's technique of a diary 'effects a feminization and domestication' that many contemporary reviewers thought inappropriate, particularly from the perspective of a male character such as Max Urquhart. See J. Russell Perkin, 'Narrative Voice and the "Feminine" Novelist: Dinah Mulock and George Eliot', p. 34.

<sup>76</sup> Craik, *A Life for a Life*, p. 90.

<sup>77</sup> Delafield, p. 74.

the heroine feels in her current state. In her declaration that ‘this last sentence means nothing; nor do I quite understand it myself’, there seems to be a sense of deliberate self-annihilation of the writer. As much as the diary presumably permits the flow of an unmediated and uninterrupted female voice, it soon reveals the intricacy of it as an artifice of free self-expression. The diary, as a space for self-expression, becomes problematic just as the role of authorship is in Oliphant’s novel. Dora’s diary, which fundamentally signifies the quest for finding one’s true self and vocation, begins to reveal its own restrictions and inhibitions.

A contemporary review in the *Christian Remembrancer* review suggests that Craik’s use of the diary in the novel reveals ‘a plan which admits of an amount of reflection, comment, and impassioned protest, which could hardly be tolerated in any other form’.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, the reviewer of the *Saturday Review* questions the bearings of some of the passages in Dora’s diary on the novel and wonders whether the author ‘thought them characteristic of the fictitious person supposed to be keeping the journal, or the authoress herself considered them true, valuable, and substantially important remarks’.<sup>79</sup> Both reviews appear attentive to the diary’s role in the novel as a medium for the expression of unconventional views. Dora’s outspokenness and her written thoughts become a vehicle of self-expression. However, Craik’s management of Dora’s consciousness and interruptions of her thoughts in the diary, and the reviews’ criticism of its rebellious undertone, both attest to its complexity. Amid many of her experienced frustrations in the novel, Dora exclaims, ‘my heart is full; how shall I write about these things, which never could be spoken about?’<sup>80</sup> As the novel progresses, Dora’s diary evolves as a problematic space for self-expression, both stimulating yet also inhibiting.

Dora’s acknowledgment of ‘that in me which is worth something’ captures her interiority.<sup>81</sup> *A Life for a Life* appears to have resisted a conventional view of Dora’s character to qualify this representation of her inner life and growth. The hazy sketch at the beginning of the novel of Dora’s image as an ordinary woman takes its most truthful and authentic shape in the diary, as Dora writes herself for representation and lays down her inner thoughts and insecurities. Our view as readers of Dora’s inner life, as it is

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<sup>78</sup> ‘*A Life for a Life*, by the author of “John Halifax”’, *The Christian Remembrancer*, p. 311.

<sup>79</sup> ‘*A Life for a Life*’, *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, p. 708.

<sup>80</sup> Craik, *A Life for a Life*, p. 232.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

expressed in her diary, takes precedence over any pre-supposed idea of her character. In the novel, Dora's plainness and writing appear to be strategically interwoven as they complement and actualise the novel's mission to reveal her own individuality. The potential of Dora's plainness to grow into its own beauty is a theme that the novel pursues and one that is closely connected to her diary and the way in which it represents an outlet for expression and ultimately self-realisation. The essence of this journey of discovery that the novel explores with its intimate representation of Dora's plainness and her experience of writing is expressed beautifully in one of her observations about first impressions:

It must be curious to any one ... to try and recall the face you then viewed critically, carelessly, or with the most absolute indifference - ... *trace the process by which it has become what it is now* – a face by itself, its peculiarities pleasant, *its plainness sacred*, and its beauties beautiful above all faces in the world.<sup>82</sup> (emphasis mine)

Dora's thoughts here capture one of the main themes of the novel that is particularly prevalent in its representation of her character and the diary. It is a 'process', as Dora describes it, in which a person's face comes to acquire its own beauty and special meaning for someone else. This process in the novel is initiated by the early representation of Dora's face as a blank featureless thing that grows into its own authentic beauty and becomes loveable in its own unique way. Max's observations and fascination with Dora's appearance and unconventional beauty highlight this in the novel. More importantly, the diary takes on this role in its intimate representation of Dora's authentic self, which indeed makes her 'plainness sacred'. The sanctity of Dora's plainness in this novel is epitomised by its manifestation of her individuality and her journey towards becoming her true self.

Dora's growing romantic attachment with Max becomes complicated by the revelation that he killed her brother, an obstacle that stands in the way of their marriage. Their diaries and correspondence continue to play an important role in conveying their inner struggle and emotions during this difficult time. The novel eventually resolves this tension by representing Dora's transcendence of these obstacles and her ability to

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 125.

acknowledge the supremacy of forgiveness and tolerance, despite her father's objection. The novel culminates with Dora and Max's marriage and decision to move to Canada, epitomising the triumph of their joint journey of self-realisation, signified by the act of writing throughout the novel. Dora's uncertainty about her physical appearance as an 'ordinary' heroine signifies the awaiting journey of self-discovery in the narrative. Her initial sense of loss and self-questioning at the beginning of the novel is overcome by the spiritual transcendence of obstacles and doubts experienced throughout her story. Her ultimate marriage, signifying rebirth and renewal, is certainly distinct from Agnes Atheling's experience as she grows into the ideal Victorian wife. The connotations of individuality and self-determination that both novels explore through the representation of their unconventional plain heroines are more forcefully affirmed in Craik's novel.

Oliphant's *The Athelings* and Craik's *A Life for a Life*, both published in the late 1850s, share the pattern of establishing their heroine's facial plainness at the outset to enable and intensify the narrative's quest to unveil their depth and worth. The early allusion to the plainness of the heroine at the beginning of both novels, as I have argued, proves instrumental to the way in which the narrative approaches its representation of each character and her indefinable gift. The conventional role of the beautiful sister, present as ordained for domestic life in both novels, is undermined by the representation of the plainness of both Agnes and Dora. The characters of both heroines are distinct from those of their ideal sisters, not only in appearance but also in the way the narrative conceives their potential and future. Female plainness and its connotations of depth and genius run parallel to the novel's introduction of the heroines' writing experience and its bearing upon self-expression.

Female plainness, as these mid-century female narratives exemplify, manifests its capacity for signifying resistance to conventionality. On the one hand, it challenges the corporeality of physical beauty to set in perspective and manifest the heroine's more profound expressiveness. Moreover, despite the more conservative writings of Craik and Oliphant, the way in which the plain heroine is represented in their work entails a subversive element, one that reveals the character's discomfort with unfulfilled ambition and repressed femininity. Both novels demonstrate a foundation in the contemporary debate and rapidly changing definition of female roles. The final

chapter, on plainness in some of Linton's work, demonstrates to a greater extent the contemporary interest in female plainness. Linton's *Sowing the Wind* not only makes specific allusions to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, but also overtly engages with the contemporary debates on the plain heroine, revealing implicit gender biases. A more profound sense of the plain heroine's right to self-determination, and even professional success marks Linton's representation of the plain Jane Osborn.

## Chapter 5

### **‘An Absolute Negation of All Charms’: The Plain Heroine in Eliza Lynn Linton’s *Sowing the Wind***

Eliza Lynn Linton is mostly known today as the author of one of the most controversial journal articles published in the nineteenth century, ‘The Girl of the Period’ (1868). The article, published in the *Saturday Review*, harshly criticised the so-called ‘girl of the period’ whose excessive fascination with material consumption and disregard for notions of modesty and gentility, according to Linton, came to characterise her.<sup>1</sup> Linton’s discussion of women in both her journalism and works of fiction was and continues to be highly controversial. She is often classified, alongside other authors such as Margaret Oliphant, as an anti-feminist.<sup>2</sup> Their published views on women at the time were often conservative and supportive of traditional domestic roles for women. This was particularly controversial because their writing coincided with the ongoing debates on the rights of women in society that developed in the 1850s and continued up to the end of the century. Moreover, in their position as independent and professional female writers, they posed a contrast to the feminine roles they were advocating. However, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, literary critics in the last few decades have begun to question and challenge the classification of some of these views and works as exclusively anti-feminist. Valerie Sanders has noted the variances between Linton’s journalism and fiction, wondering, ‘why is her journalism so much more overtly anti-feminist than her fiction’.<sup>3</sup> Both Andrea Broomfield and Susan Hamilton argue against taking Linton’s controversial writings on femininity at face value and urge us to reassess her work as a part of the contemporary journalism culture rather than an outspoken plea against women’s rights.<sup>4</sup> Broomfield, more specifically,

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<sup>1</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton, ‘The Girl of the Period’, *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 25 March 1868, pp. 339-340.

<sup>2</sup> See Sanders and Heilmann.

<sup>3</sup> Sanders, *Eve’s Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists*, p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea L. Broomfield, ‘Much More Than an Antifeminist: Eliza Lynn Linton’s Contribution to the Rise of Victorian Popular Journalism’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29, 2 (2001), 267-283; and Susan Hamilton, ‘Marketing Antifeminism: Eliza Lynn Linton’s “Wild Women” Series and the Possibilities of Periodical Signature’, in *Antifeminism and the Victorian Novel: Rereading Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, ed. by Tamara S. Wagner (New York: Cambria Press, 2009), pp. 37-56.

maintains that Linton's articles in the *Saturday Review* are skilfully written with 'dazzling verbal displays' that manipulate readers' understanding of her work and render certain extremes as 'norms'.<sup>5</sup> Linton's work as Sanders, Broomfield, and others have noted is certainly problematic and often entails serious inconsistencies and ambiguities. This chapter considers the representation of plainness in Linton's work across the genres of journalism and fiction. I pay attention to Linton's engagement with the debates on the plain heroine and the role that her representation of female plainness plays in articulating as well as contesting ideas about female empowerment and self-determination in these works.

This chapter looks at Linton's novel *Sowing the Wind* (1867) in the light of 'Plain Girls', one of her anonymously published articles in the *Saturday Review* in the same year.<sup>6</sup> The 'Plain Girls' article is particularly interesting due to the way it problematises Linton's conservative views on feminine roles and maternal instincts. Female plainness plays an important role in building up Linton's argument in the article toward proposing educational improvements and career prospects for 'plain girls' who might not be destined to become wives and mothers. Physical plainness, as a quality that came to be associated with unconventional heroines by mid-century, creatively and strategically articulates Linton's argument against marriage as the only possible and socially approved future for women. Plainness, in both Linton's article and her novel, seems to destabilise a culturally pre-determined and gendered organisation of feminine roles. Little attention has been paid by critics to the role of female plainness in articulating such a subversive stance to ideal femininity in Linton's work, especially amid her arguably conventional and often essentialist views on female nature and maternal roles. The motif of plainness in both works plays an important role that allows us to see how each text conceives of this rejection of beauty both as a literal and figurative departure from the conventional attitudes, norms, and refinements of ideal femininity. Of course, a novel and an article have their own distinctive generic features and contexts. Linton's polemical propositions in the article are in dialogue with the debates on plain heroines and their representation in women's writing at the time. The fictional representation of the plain heroine, on the other hand, reveals the ways in

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<sup>5</sup> Broomfield, p. 273.

<sup>6</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton, 'Plain Girls', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 19 October 1867, pp. 495-496.

which Linton more closely, and yet ambivalently, explores the life experience of Jane Osborn in *Sowing the Wind* amid the gendered and social contradictions that arise in parallel.

Linton's *Sowing the Wind* follows the journey of the obscure and plain Jane Osborn as she moves towards recognition and professional success. The novel, with great emphasis, establishes Jane's deviance from traditional notions of femininity, validating instead her plainness, strength, and openness as a path toward self-assertion and professional success. A contemporary review declares Linton's Jane Osborn as 'one of the plain heroines who are perpetually brought in in modern novels, as a protest against the traditional supremacy of female charms'.<sup>7</sup> The review notes this trend and pattern of characterisation that, as suggested in my Introduction, became popular at the time. Indeed, the meanings of female plainness and its violation of norms forcefully mark their presence in the novel and are confronted articulately, even more so than by Oliphant and Craik. Linton's *Sowing the Wind* takes a more extreme approach in its representation of Jane Osborn's plainness as the novel also explores her masculinity and male-identification as she enters the world of journalism. Jane's professional success and her pride of 'being on the press, ... of being able to do the work of a man among men' further complicate the novel's exploration of her plainness and its bearing upon her desire for fulfilment and success, particularly in the way that these pursuits were socially and culturally identified as masculine.<sup>8</sup> Female plainness and masculinity are entwined in this narrative to define its subversive representation of Jane. In addition to Jane's lack of beauty, the very nature of her moral pursuits, her plain speaking, and her professional work destabilises her gender identity as feminine and disrupts the culturally-constructed distinction between masculine and feminine, exposing the narrative's ambivalence and uncertainty about its own representation of this unconventional heroine.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Sowing the Wind', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 23 March 1867, pp. 373-374 (p. 374).

<sup>8</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, ed. by Deborah T Meem and Kate Holterhoff, Victorian Secrets (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2015), p. 200. See Kimberly Stern for a specific discussion of the novel in the light of the male-dominated world of journalism. Kimberly J. Stern, *The Social Life of Criticism: Gender, Critical Writing, and the Politics of Belonging* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), pp. 148-153.

Such a representation of plainness in both Linton's novel and her article indicates the way in which her work is linked to the wider discourse of plainness that I have discussed in my Introduction, and which is commonly associated with Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The success of the latter could be argued to have had an influence upon Linton and her approach to writing fiction. After the publication of two historical novels, Linton experimented with the fictional representation of contemporary middle-class life in her novel *Realities: A Tale of Modern Life* (1851). In a correspondence between Linton and the publisher Richard Bentley as the former was about to publish her new novel, she wrote: 'I confidently expect a success equal to *Jane Eyre*. This may sound vain, but I feel *sure* of it'.<sup>9</sup> She also indicated that her work would be 'bold', something perhaps similar and inspired by the nature of Brontë's work, by asking: 'You will not be afraid of anything *rather* heretical and bold? I must write you know as I feel!' (emphasis in original).<sup>10</sup> The novel stands in marked contrast to her earlier works dealing with ancient times. In *Realities*, she is critical of patriarchy and the lack of rights for divorced women. Andrea Broomfield notes the 'raw anger and frustrations' that characterise this novel, which also point to the different path Linton was taking in writing fiction.<sup>11</sup>

*Sowing the Wind* could be argued not only to bear evidence of the influence of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in its representation of a plain and independent heroine facing the difficulties of life with resilience, but also demonstrates its intertextual relationship with the wider literary and gendered discourse of plainness. Both Linton's article and novel reveal an awareness of and engagement with the concept of plainness and its subversiveness. The very lack of feminine beauty, as I have suggested earlier, is not merely a physical trait but rather comes to articulate deeper meanings about female identity and independence. Jane's lack of beauty has both physical and figurative

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Novels*, ed. by Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (London: Garland Publishing, 1996), p. 122.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Linton often compared her work with others such as Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Upon her intention to publish another novel in 1863, she writes to the publisher: 'It would be stupid to praise my own work, but I do think that if *Adam Bede*, and *Jane Eyre*, and *East Lynne* made their mark so quickly and deeply, this of mine will also; for it is not a weaker book than any of them'. Quoted in Nancy F. Anderson, *Woman Against Women in Victorian England: A Life of Eliza Lynn Linton* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 56, 99.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea L. Broomfield, 'Blending Journalism with Fiction: Eliza Lynn Linton and Her Rise to Fame as a Popular Novelist', in *The Rebel of the Family*, ed. by Deborah T. Meem (Lancashire: Broadview Press, 2002), pp. 441-455 (p. 446).

meanings. The novel's exploration of Jane's plainness, masculinity, and independence is shaped and expressed in the narrative through the language of opposition to female beauty, finery, and delicacy. In this purposeful negation of feminine qualities and beauty, Jane can identify and assert herself as a strong independent woman who is able to exercise moral influence on those around her. The novel presents Jane's facial plainness and plain-speaking as an unmediated expression of her soul, ambition, and moral influence.

### **'[T]he "rights" of plain girls': Linton and the Politicised Debates on the Fictional Plain Heroine**

The central question posed in the article 'Plain Girls', published anonymously in 1867, is 'What ... is to become of plain girls'.<sup>12</sup> The concern with the destiny of plain-looking girls leads to the article's discussion of possible future prospects for women who are potentially 'marked out by heaven for a married life'.<sup>13</sup> The article, hence, questions the fate of plain-looking girls, those who might not be destined to get married, under social circumstances that uphold domestic life as the only conventionally desirable path for women. The article suggests that 'it has become essential for the welfare of women that they should, as far as possible, be taught that they may have a career open to them even if they never marry'.<sup>14</sup> Linton, the author, appears to be conscious of the controversial nature of the argument she is about to propose in the article and the cultural and gendered implications that are implicit in relation to it. She acknowledges the gratification that the role of a wife and mother offers a woman, but she aims in the article to break the confines of this limited conception of a woman's destiny and future. She maintains:

One difficulty presented by this matrimonial view of woman's destiny is to know what, under the present conditions in which society finds itself placed, is to become of plain girls. Their mission is a subject which no philosopher as yet has adequately handled. If marriage is the object of all feminine endeavours and

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<sup>12</sup> Linton, 'Plain Girls', p. 495.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 496.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

ambitions, it certainly seems rather hard that Providence should have condemned plain girls to start in the race at such an obvious disadvantage.<sup>15</sup>

Linton begins to construct and build her argument subtly in favour of professional opportunities for women. After alluding to various examples of happily married plain women, Linton maintains that the article's argument in favour of alternative possibilities for plain girls is made possible and openly proposed due to contemporary circumstances in which girls may not be destined for a married life given the value of female beauty in society. Drawing on literary representation of female plainness, she refers to the 'clever authoress of *Jane Eyre*' and other female authors who followed in her steps with the 'boldest effort to rectify the inequalities of the position of plain girls' and reclaim their worth.<sup>16</sup> Linton acknowledges the efforts of female authors who have contributed to reclaiming the value and potential of plain heroines 'with volumes of intellect speaking through their deep eyes and from their massive foreheads'.<sup>17</sup> She accentuates here the unique facial features commonly highlighted in novels and that often come to indicate their lively inner life and intellect, such as the eyes and foreheads of the plain heroine. Linton, nevertheless, contends that 'their mission' is a matter that had at the time not been explored as sufficiently as it should have been. It is clearly another destiny or 'mission' that Linton appears to insist on and envision for plain girls.

The representation of a plain heroine's life, Linton argues, despite the attempts of some female authors, is not often told in a novel as it should be. Female authors, due to lack of education and training, fall short on their ability to portray female experience and needs truly, as they are continually constrained by their own lack of imagination and social expectations.<sup>18</sup> Linton proposes:

Lest it should be supposed that the above calculation of what plain girls may do leaves some of their power and success still unaccounted for, it is quite right and proper to add that the story of plain girls, if it were carefully written, would contain many instances ... of splendid and exceptional triumph. ... What is

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

wanted is a Golden Treasury containing the narrative of the most successful plain girls.<sup>19</sup>

Linton's plea for a 'carefully written' account of female plainness aims to revolutionise and raise the bar of expectations commonly associated with the socially and emotionally deprived plain heroine. In proposing that a better account of a plain heroine should be written than already exists, Linton seems more concerned and resolute on exploring the potential of plainness for representing a woman's professional advancement and experience rather than the common themes of romantic love. Linton clearly understands the position that the figure of the plain heroine came to occupy in contemporary literary debates. Her discussion in the article of the opportunities that need to be given to plain girls in real life is particularly associated with their representation in contemporary fiction. Linton's emphasis upon the exploration of the 'power', 'success', and 'triumph' of the plain heroine highlights her unique vision. She distinctly points out that 'what is wanted' of a plain heroine's tale is at odds with the ways in which plain girls are currently being represented. That 'Golden Treasury' that Linton proposes here must attest to the triumph of 'the most successful plain girls', whose abilities and intellect remain neglected and often subordinated to the exploration of romantic love.

Linton's argument in 'Plain Girls' cannot be taken out of the context within which it was produced. Her article appears to be in dialogue with other writings that appeared in the same year. One article titled 'Women's Heroines', published a few months before Linton's in the *Saturday Review*, criticised the contemporary fad of fictional plain heroines.<sup>20</sup> The article considers the phenomenon of the plain-looking heroine as an exclusive product of fiction written by female authors.<sup>21</sup> In its analysis of the motivation behind 'feminine fiction', the article suggests that female authors' characterisation of heroines is driven by the desire to grant them liberties and successes

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> The author of the article is unknown, though it is suggested that it may have been written by J. R. Green. Articles published in the volume *Modern Women and What is Said of Them*, intro. by Mrs. Lucia Gilbert Calhoun (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1868) were mainly written by Linton and Green. See Herbert Van Thal, *Eliza Lynn Linton, The Girl of the Period: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1979), p. 229.

<sup>21</sup> 'Women's Heroines', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, pp. 259-260.

that they were themselves denied.<sup>22</sup> The recognition and love given to the plain heroine in these novels become an expression of the author's own fantasies and an attempt to 'console oneself for the shortcomings of the social life around, by building up an imaginary picture of social life'.<sup>23</sup> It is clear that the article, in its acknowledgement of the contemporary range of plain heroines in fiction, is ridiculing and undermining the works of some female authors by associating plainness with the author's own personal frustrations and their underdeveloped skills as literary writers. The article goes further to suggest cunningly that the increasing depictions of plain heroines in women's fiction are 'a well-meant protest in favour of what may be called, in these days of political excitement, the "rights" of plain girls'.<sup>24</sup> The rising popularity of plain heroines is being explicitly associated with the wider discourse on women's rights at the time. The article's analysis of the motives that drive and pique the interest of women writers in such a trope highlights what it identifies as the underlying radical intentions present in their choice of plainness. As I suggested earlier in my discussion of *Jane Eyre*, the literary reception of women's writing contributed to shaping conceptions about the subversiveness of female plainness. The plain heroine is seen as a figure who embodies the spirit of revolt, gaining momentum at the time with the advent of the women's suffrage movement. Linton's article 'Plain Girls' could well be a direct allusion to 'Women's Heroines', which condemns the works of female authors and their advocacy of the "'rights" of plain girls'. Linton's discussion of the right of women to education and professional opportunities engages with this emerging political frame to plainness and its representation in women's writing. The dialogue between the two articles in regard to the meanings of plainness in women's writing is bringing such discussion into a politicised and public debate. These discussions from the 1860s shed light on a new and intriguing dimension to the debates about female plainness and its political connotations.

The article 'Women's Heroines' was particularly attentive to these underlying political implications in its criticism of Linton's *Sowing the Wind*, newly published at

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 260. The article even hints at the author's jealousy of the beauty of her heroines. It specifically mentions George Eliot's representation of Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*, exclaiming: 'we feel that the writer of *Adam Bede* is eyeing Hetty all over from the beginning to the end, ... one may fairly doubt whether a man could have painted Hetty. When one sees the picture, one understands its truth; but men who draw pretty faces usually do so with more enthusiasm'. See 'Women's Heroines', p. 260.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the time, and the novel's treatment of the husband figure and his insanity.<sup>25</sup> St. John Aylott's mental deterioration in the novel is caused by many factors, one of which is his wife Isola's revolt against his authority as a husband. The angelic and submissive Isola, as she is at the beginning of the novel, develops strength as she tries to assert her individuality and rights as a mother. The article, with irony, suggests:

It is not every day that we have the valuable lesson of the rights of wives so plainly or so practically put before us, but when it is put before us, we recognise the service that may be conferred on literature and society by lady authors. To assert the great cause of the independence of the female sex is one of the ends of feminine fiction, just as the assertion of the rights of plain girls is another one.<sup>26</sup>

The article does not specifically refer here to Jane Osborn whose plainness and masculine figure are significant characteristics of her physical appearance in the novel. Instead, it condemns the novel's transgressive treatment of the role and duty of the wife toward her husband. It alludes to the manner in which the novel 'so plainly' represents the rights of its heroine Isola and her challenge to the authoritative male figure of St. John. Nonetheless, as I will discuss in my reading of the novel, it is the character of the plain Jane Osborn in *Sowing the Wind* who plays an important role in helping Isola recognise the destructive effects that her blind submission to her husband has had on her character and personal freedom. The specific parallel that the article draws between female independence, as criticised in *Sowing the Wind*, and the 'rights of plain girls' not only reflects the provocative nature of the two, but also clearly discerns the role that Jane's plainness plays in the course of the narrative. Jane's plainness is, indeed, a defining feature of her identity, which is rooted in the narrative's treatment of the injustices she sees in life around her. The article highlights these subversive features it identified in women writers' representation of plainness, which is repeatedly associated with the broader movement for women's rights. In her distinction from the ideal woman, the plain heroine invokes the notion of female rebellion.

These discussions of the figure of the plain heroine are intriguing indicators of the way plainness came to hold a prominent and often controversial position in the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

cultural imagination of the period. They reveal the broader political frame for conceptualising the plain heroine and her position in women's fiction. While on the one hand the article 'Women's Heroines' seeks to demonstrate the inferiority of feminine fiction and the political subtexts of these writings, Linton plays with the associations of plainness to outline her argument in favour of female empowerment. Introducing 'plain girls' as a group of women for whom we need to consider alternative education and career prospects in Linton's article is particularly deliberate. The beginning of the article considers these professional and educational opportunities exclusively in relation to plain women due to their lack of marriage prospects. However, the plea that Linton makes in the article is extended to a call for giving this choice to all women. Although Linton appears to have been strategic about her reference to plainness, she ends her discussion in the article by stating:

plainness or loveliness apart, a very large number of womankind have no reason to expect any very happy chance in married life; and if marriage is to be set before all women as the one ideal, a number of feminine lives will always turn out to have been failures.<sup>27</sup>

As Linton disregards here the physical appearance of women and all its connotations, she shows that all women should be given a choice beyond the 'one ideal' of marriage. She directly articulates, by means of the figure of the plain woman, her view on the need for more opportunities for women who must be treated as individuals with their own desires and needs.

While Linton's critique of the coquettish beauty in the 'Girl of the Period' has received wide attention from literary scholars, little or almost no consideration has been paid to emphasise Linton's engagement with plainness in both 'Plain Girls' and *Sowing the Wind* to explore an alternative model of female subjectivity. Understanding Linton amid her inconsistencies and the contradictory insights in her works is always problematic. We may consider her reference to plainness in the context of these debates as a way of looking at Linton's subversive stance against her contemporary culture and the limitations imposed upon women, despite the common view of her as anti-feminist. This chapter aims to assess the significance of female plainness as a trope in Linton's

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<sup>27</sup> Linton, 'Plain Girls', p. 496.

work and its potential to articulate such arguments. In 'Plain Girls', Linton's conservatism shows in the article's early emphasis upon the sacredness of marriage. Linton's proposal for considering educational and career opportunities for plain single women is preceded with an extended elaboration on a woman's role as wife and mother. As I suggested earlier, Linton seems attentive to the radical nature of the propositions of the article and its engagement with the politicised debates on plain heroines. This becomes particularly clear in the subtle and gradual manner in which the article articulates its view on the right of women to enjoy better educational and professional opportunities. Nevertheless, Linton's references to female plainness and engagement with its wider connotations in these debates express tactically the article's argument in favour of 'plain girls' and their empowerment.

Linton creates her own model of the plain heroine in the novel *Sowing the Wind*, published in the same year as her article. The novel shares the article's engagement in considering professional opportunities for single plain women. However, the novel expands on these ideas and more articulately explores the social and professional experience of Jane Osborn. The genre of the novel and its different features allow Linton to be more experimental in her representation of the plain heroine and the uncertainties that arise. In the novel, Jane's plainness and ambition are set forth against female beauty and gentility, making us question how far *Sowing the Wind* fulfilled the purpose of the projected 'Golden Treasury' that Linton had proposed in her article. Of course, this mission proves to be more complex than one might imagine, as plain Jane Osborn's ambition raises questions surrounding her gender identity. It would be difficult to argue that Linton is completely in favour of the model of womanhood that she represents in the novel. The narrative, with its celebration of the strength and stamina of Jane, still reveals its hesitance about her masculine nature and attitude. However, Jane's success and authoritative moral presence are enabled through this defiance to conventional femininity and beauty.

## **Linton's *Sowing the Wind***

Jane Osborn might appear as a minor character in *Sowing the Wind*, especially in contrast to the novel's primary concern with the unhappy marriage of St. John Aylott and his angelic wife Isola. The self-centred St. John controls and emotionally abuses Isola. Jane Osborn, a poor woman supporting her mother after the father's death, poses a sharp contrast to her lovely and feminine cousin Isola. The novel explores two different models of female subjectivities and experiences, exemplified through the characters of Jane and Isola.<sup>28</sup> Jane, however, becomes the moral voice of the novel and plays a significant role in its treatment of and resolution to the couple's relationship. Jane's intervention and confrontations with St. John put an end to Isola's dependence upon her abusive husband and gradual recognition of her own worth as a woman and mother. The novel highlights Jane's deep sense of moral duty toward her cousin and her determination to help Isola overcome her miserable and helpless position as St. John's wife. Jane's mission in the novel becomes centred on her feelings of duty toward her cousin, as she believes 'it is my place to tell Isola of her faults ... If I try to make her into one of the nobler kind of women with self-reliance and independence, I am only doing my true human duty'.<sup>29</sup> Isola finally overcomes her dependence on her husband and becomes 'quite ready to be a strong-minded woman', one who finds solace and purpose in her role as a mother when she adopts the orphaned nephew of St. John as her own son.<sup>30</sup> The marriage collapses with the announcement of St. John's disinheritance and his mental deterioration by the end of the novel.<sup>31</sup>

My reading of the novel will focus on the character of Jane as a 'plain' heroine. From its beginnings, the novel reveals and asserts its unconventional vision of Jane. It

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<sup>28</sup> Nancy Anderson offers an excellent psychoanalytic view of Linton. She proposes that Linton had developed from an early age a deep psychological ambivalence toward womanhood triggered by the loss of her mother and the sharp contrast between her and her beautiful sister Lucy. Linton herself, like her predecessor Charlotte Brontë, was very self-conscious of her physical appearance as a plain-looking woman. These deeply-troubled feelings of jealousy and difference played an important role in shaping Linton's views on women and the characterisation of her heroines in contrasting pairs. See Anderson, pp. 13-14.

<sup>29</sup> Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, p. 66.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 242.

<sup>31</sup> The novel is often associated with sensation fiction, popular in the 1860s, due its representation of common themes of madness and disinheritance. See Deborah T. Meem and Kate Holterhoff's introduction to the edition of the novel published by Victorian Secrets (2015), pp. 11-17.

pays close attention to the ‘unlovely boy-woman, that ill-dressed, crumpled’ Jane Osborn.<sup>32</sup> Her plainness and masculine appearance play a significant role in communicating and manifesting the narrative’s radical representation of Jane’s experience and strength of character. The echo of the plain Jane in *Sowing the Wind* actively signals and indicates its intertextuality with Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and indeed the contemporary debates about the popular and unconventional plain heroine. The novel experiments with this motif of plainness in exploring its heroine’s ambition and contravention of normative femininity. The narrative plays with the meanings and connotations of female beauty and the lack of it to explore Jane’s unconventional character. In one scene, Jane explains to her fellow journalist Harvey Wyndham her reasons for enjoying the social company of men and the intellectual rigour and knowledge she derives from that in contrast to the idle company of her sex. Wyndham contemplates Jane’s strength and intellectual stamina, thinking to himself, ‘if ever woman was privileged by nature to escape the danger of such like misrepresentations it was she, the least lovely and the least loveable woman’.<sup>33</sup> Jane is envisioned here by Wyndham as that chosen woman who is ‘privileged by nature’ to transcend the idleness of her sex, despite her lack of loveliness or lovability. Indeed, as Wyndham’s observation of Jane’s character indicates, Linton creates a heroine who emphatically and utterly rejects and comes to renounce all feminine ideals. In its representation of Jane as a plain and independent woman, the novel invokes her plainness and masculinity as signs for demystifying feminine weakness and dependence. Jane’s plain and masculine face takes on an emblematic role in the novel as it is constantly celebrated as the reflection of genuine moral power and courage.

In one of the early appearances of Jane in the novel, the editors of *The Comet* journal Wyndham and Smith discuss Jane’s letter expressing her wish to apply for a position in the journal. After the death of her father, Jane is left with no financial support and feels the need to provide for her mother. Smith expresses his approval of the idea, and as they discuss female employment and its appropriateness, he comments: ‘They must live, you know; and if they have not men to work for them, they must work for themselves’.<sup>34</sup> In this statement, Smith anticipates Linton’s argument in her article

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<sup>32</sup> Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, p. 64.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 199.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

'Plain Girls', where she proposes that single women must be given a chance to work and earn their own living. Jane's entrance into the world of professional journalism, as much as it is motivated by her ambition, is also ironically enabled by her need to provide for her family. This financial need allows Linton to explore and affirm female literary and journalistic capabilities in the novel.

When the editors of *The Comet* meet with Jane for the first time, she is described as a 'tall, bony girl, of twenty-one or thereabouts; not so much coarse as strong, not so much bold as hard. She was decidedly plain; but she had fine grey eyes, large, deep-set, and intelligent'.<sup>35</sup> The first physical description of Jane in the novel highlights both her masculine 'tall, bony' figure and plain face. The novel early on appears to anticipate and rebuke the negative connotations of coarseness that were often associated with such a heroine. It establishes its own vision and definition of Jane's personality and appearance by affirming that she was 'not so much coarse as *strong*, not so much bold as *hard*' (emphasis mine). The novel aims to reframe and detach Jane from the sexual and aggressive meanings that would be normally attached to such terms as was the case with Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In this description, the text plays with words as it challenges common views and seeks to emphasise its own distinctive representation of Jane's strength of character and firmness beyond these negative and undermining connotations. This early representation of Jane outlines the narrative's resistance to and rejection of the social and cultural expectations that are commonly associated with such a masculine and strong heroine. It rather upholds its own vision of this strength and hardness that will be further explored as the novel progresses. Moreover, the distinctiveness of Jane's eyes prevails over the plainness of her 'decidedly plain' face. It points to an inner power and substance that will manifest itself in the novel. The power of the eyes is a feature that is emphasised in Gaskell's description of Brontë's face, as well as in Oliphant's and Craik's attention to the expressiveness of their plain heroines' eyes, as I have suggested in the previous chapter. The remarkable and deep eyes become a reflection of a heroine's interiority and her power of expression and intellect. In another scene, the narrator describes Jane's face as it 'lighted up with so much intelligence when she spoke, that nothing was seen but the deep-set clear grey

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

eyes ... the powerful, purpose-like face'.<sup>36</sup> Jane's eyes take prominence in our appreciation of her face and its intelligence. The plain face of a heroine, as I show in these mid-century novels, redefines the ideal of female beauty and dynamically explores their facial features as a reflection of their power of intellect and expression. The description of Jane's face as 'powerful' and 'purpose-like' particularly rejects the image of the corporeal and superficial beauty of a woman's face. It comes to signify her inner strength and determination. As the novel progresses, we realise that Jane is driven by a deep sense of moral duty to speak the truth and give voice to her helpless cousin Isola. The image of her face in this description enacts this powerfulness and purpose.

When Isola sees her cousin Jane, she has a similar reaction: 'she looked into her freckled face, plain and unattractive as it was, she felt the strength and honesty that shone through it, and knew that here was one whom she could respect and believe in'.<sup>37</sup> Jane's plain face, as the reactions of both Smith and Isola show, carries an important figurative significance in the novel. Despite its unfeminine and unattractive appearance, her visage in its plainness projects larger allusions to moral power and honesty that come to defy and undermine her lack of beauty. The description of Jane's face often gives it prominence as a reflection and projection of her 'strength and honesty'. All of these attributes of power and honesty that shine through Jane's face take shape in the novel in her powerful actions and plain-speaking. The novel pays attention to the transparency and lack of refinement that Jane upholds in her attitude toward others. Her face and masculine appearance early on come to reveal and expose these traits of character.

The novel, as Isola's description of Jane shows, acknowledges and upholds the fact that the latter's face is 'plain and unattractive'. However, the novel also appears determined on exposing its own unique vision of Jane's beauty. In one scene, as Jane learns of her newly-assigned position in the journal, the narrator comments on her face: 'at that moment she looked almost handsome, her face was so full of hope and the strength which comes from pleasant thoughts'.<sup>38</sup> Jane's beauty is portrayed as a quality that comes from within and shines through her face. It is particularly associated with

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

her ambition and strength of character which alone gives that masculine and plain woman her beauty in the novel.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the novel presents and specifically alludes to Jane's prospects of beauty in moments when she asserts herself and is determined to enact her role and duty by speaking up plainly and honestly about injustices. The narrator points again to the hints of beauty upon Jane's face as she expresses her sense of duty toward her cousin Isola, who she decides to help. The narrator comments, 'she said this with a certain religious fervour that made her plain face almost beautiful, if stern still, and severe'.<sup>40</sup> The prospect of Jane's beauty is often considered in relation to her sense of moral duty and the determination to pursue it unfailingly. However, even as it considers this element of beauty, the novel remains faithful, as I also argue in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, to its representation of her facial features, described here as 'stern' and 'severe' and indicative of her strength of character and resilience. Jane Osborn's charm and beauty in such moments are not at odds with her stern features but rather a part of them. The novel readily defines and celebrates Jane's unique and unconventional beauty.

In one scene, the narrator draws a comparison between the faces of Jane and St. John. The passage's detailed description of the former's face in comparison with that of the latter demonstrates her superiority and the power of her face as a reflection of that:

Her large grey eyes were dark and bright with the warmth of her emotion; her rugged face was rendered grand, if not beautiful, with the magnificence of truth and earnestness that was in it; the square brow looked more than ever powerful by the side of St. John's weaker oval; the head more massive; the jaw more full of energy and strength: she stood before him instinct with power and courageous purpose, looking straight into his face – while he, with his self-masking action and downcast eyes, turned half way from her sullen, angry, retreating. They made a marvellous contrast, both in appearance and circumstances – she, the

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<sup>39</sup> In the novel, the allusion to the beauty of Jane's face comes in contrast to the beautiful Marcy Tremouille, described as 'the loveliest thing of the kind to be seen, and would have sent the artists who used to illustrate the "Books of Beauty" and "Forget-me-nots" wild with delight at its fitness for the kind of art. But it was beauty only – no more; ... in her face she had no real power of mind' (p. 102). The power of intellect becomes a marker of difference and a sign of a far superior beauty.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

working woman, toiling and suffering, but ever with a firm-set purpose that could not be beaten back nor turned aside.<sup>41</sup>

The novel regards Jane's face and features with utmost attention, exposing its morally influential role in the text to unravel the meanings of female power. The description of Jane's face bears resemblance to other contemporary icons who were not ideally beautiful, as for example the Pre-Raphaelite model Jane Morris and Wilkie Collins's Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*.<sup>42</sup> Those women presented a unique vision of beauty that is not ideally feminine but still fascinating. David Mason describes Pre-Raphaelite models as 'figures with heads phrenologically clumsy, faces strongly marked and irregular, and very pronounced ankles and knuckles'.<sup>43</sup> The description of Jane's face in the passage in which she appears alongside St. John accentuates this irregularity to which Mason refers. Her brows and jaw emphasise her masculine appearance and carry empowering physiognomic meanings. The contrast between Jane's square brow and St. John's oval one evokes John Caspar Lavater's physiognomic analysis of each. Lavater argues that 'the less curved, that is, the more square the top, the more determination, perseverance, and sternness'.<sup>44</sup> Jane's face and her direct and fearless encounter with St. John in this scene reveal her determination and even superiority over his power as a man, as he is exposed here as artificial, unworthy, and even effete weak.<sup>45</sup> One of the early descriptions of St. John in the novel presents his appearance which is not ideally masculine. He is described as 'tall,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 281.

<sup>42</sup> Marian Halcombe is an androgynous figure, with a masculine face that poses a contrast to her feminine figure. Collins's Halcombe is commonly associated with Pre-Raphaelite ideals of female beauty, and Jane Morris in particular. See Sophia Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), p. 83; and Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (London: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 137. There is no direct evidence that Linton may have been familiar with any portraits of Jane Morris. However, according to her husband W. J. Linton's biographer, there was a 'close acquaintance between him and Rossetti'. See Francis Barrymore Smith, *Radical Artisan, William James Linton, 1812-97* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), p. 63. From 1865 onwards, Rossetti had an active interest in drawing portraits of Morris. See Debra N. Mancoff, 'Seeing Mrs. Morris: Photographs of Jane Morris from the Collection of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 62, 3 (2001), 376-402.

<sup>43</sup> David Masson, 'Pre-Raphaelitism in Art and Literature', *British Quarterly Review*, 16 August 1852, pp. 197-220 (p. 203).

<sup>44</sup> John Caspar Lavater, *How to Read the Face: or, Physiognomy Explained* (London: C. Goodman, 1860), p. 7. Google ebook.

<sup>45</sup> The *Saturday Review* journal published one of the harshest reviews of the novel condemning its obtrusive undertone for advocating female supremacy. The novel is marked by the reviewer as an 'exponent of this lurking rivalry' between the sexes. See 'Sowing the Wind', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, p. 374.

and slightly built, but with shoulders too narrow and drooping for the firmer kind of manly beauty, and with a habit of carrying his head turned over the left shoulder shyly, which gave him a boyish and retreating expression'.<sup>46</sup> His small figure and tendency to shy away contrast with Jane's well-built figure and openness. In this scene, Jane confronts St. John with his need to overcome his prejudices and work to provide for his wife and nephew after the loss of his wealth. In many scenes of the novel, Jane voices and articulates Isola's silenced need to confront her husband about his abuse and carelessness.

The description of Jane and St. John's faces in this passage presents an ironic contrast in appearance between them. It invokes specific gendered categories that are ironically inverted in their association with each of them. The language of the passage echoes Edmund Burke's differentiation between the beautiful and the sublime and its gendered implications. Burke indicates that 'beauty should be smooth, and polished; the *great, rugged and negligent*... beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be *solid, and even massive*' (emphasis mine).<sup>47</sup> Jane's 'rugged ..., grand ... and massive' face is associated here with the masculine ideals of the great and the sublime. She poses a contrast to St. John's face as he shies away from her. St. John's 'self-masking action and downcast eyes' contrast with Jane's expressive face and her assertiveness. His weakness and debility, which prevent him from taking any action in his current situation, are indicated in his reaction. Jane's face and features, on the other hand, light up with the 'magnificence of truth and earnestness'. Her face is animated with purpose and defiance. Jane's physical description and attitude come to represent this grandness and powerfulness that is denied here to the unworthy male figure of St. John. The representation of this character seems like another reference to Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and the character of St. John Rivers. At first glance, the two St. Johns appear to be distinctly different characters, as the righteous and self-determined St. John Rivers poses a sharp contrast to the indolent St. John Aylott. However, both possess a selfish nature and have similar perceptions of women, demanding submission within marriage.

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<sup>46</sup> Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, p. 27.

<sup>47</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: F.C. and J. Rivington and Otridge and son, 1812), pp. 237-238. In this passage, 'great' is used as a synonym to the 'sublime'.  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101075679538&view=1up&seq=9> [accessed June 2019]

These doomed relationships present a vision of union between the sexes that both novels reject.

Jane's lack of beauty physically and metaphorically signifies the narrative's quest to present an authentic version of Jane's character and experience of self-expression. Plainness, as I have suggested, becomes invested in challenging a typical view of a woman's capabilities. In her article 'Beauty and Brains', published a year after the novel in the *Saturday Review*, Linton contends that 'to most men, indeed, the feminine strongmindedness that can discuss immoral problems without blushing, ... is a quality as unwomanly as a well-developed bicep or a huge fist would be'.<sup>48</sup> In this simile, female outspokenness is presented as a quality that is at odds with ideal femininity just as a strong and well-built body would be. In the novel, Jane's character defiantly transcends these social limitations. Her strength of character and plainness take on both physical and verbal manifestations in the narrative. The narrator emphasises, 'this was the way in which Jane Osborn did things; utterly unlovely and ungraceful as to form, but with the core ever straight and true ... no finery with it – no phrasing as she called it; just honest help'.<sup>49</sup> The passage distinguishes between 'form' and 'core'. It underpins its utter rejection of the feminine qualities of loveliness, grace, and finery and all their connotations of female beauty and artificiality. It extracts and distances Jane's mission of 'honest help' from these superficialities and invites us to see and identify her superior aim. By committing to her purpose of giving voice to the truth, Jane plays an important role in resolving one of the main conflicts in the novel, which is Isola's blind devotion to her husband. The very unloveliness and ungracefulness of Jane's character and voice are epitomised here as the foundation on which the novel can represent and affirm the truthfulness and sincerity of Jane's motives. The denunciation of 'finery' and 'phrasing' in this passage and their associations with beauty and femininity emphatically reasserts the authenticity of both Jane's plain appearance and her plain-speaking, which are repeatedly highlighted and associated in the narrative. Linton's *Sowing the Wind* valorises its heroine's plainness to unravel deeper significances about Jane's potential and standing in the world.

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<sup>48</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton, 'Beauty and Brains', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 5 September 1868, pp. 318-319 (p. 319).

<sup>49</sup> Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, p. 239.

This shift in emphasis from the exteriority of Jane's appearance into the recognition of her inner and authentic reality is highlighted again as the narrator reflects upon Mrs Osborn's biased description of her daughter's personality:

bringing into full relief all the hardness and unpleasantness which characterised her, while leaving out of sight the unselfishness and the generosity, the truthfulness and honesty, which would have gained forgiveness for even worse offences than an untidy habit of attire and an displeasing method of speech.<sup>50</sup>

The novel invites us to go beyond these notions or prejudiced judgments fixed upon an 'untidy habit of attire and an displeasing method of speech' into an appreciation of the nobility and goodness of Jane, which if really known and valued, would rule out all other culturally and gender-driven biases or judgments. The narrative is invested in highlighting the authenticity of Jane's experience and journey despite all the connotations of transgression and harshness that come along with it. It pursues the revelation of Jane's power and purpose, which cannot be tailored or modelled according to cultural notions of propriety and gender norms. In her article 'Plain Girls', Linton critiques the 'selfish' nature of society and the feminine ideals they uphold. She maintains, 'the want of refinement in a woman who undertakes any active business of profession [is] better suited to the caprice and fanciful fastidiousness of men than to the real requirements, in the present age, of the other sex'.<sup>51</sup> Linton undermines these social superficialities that hinder women from reaching their potential or giving value and worth to their abilities. The novel also criticises and attempts to liberate Jane from these notions of propriety that stand as limitations and hindrances to the freedom of being true to one's self. The narrative conceives of Jane's plain-speaking as a courageous articulation of truth and an integral part of her journey toward self-realisation, growth, and moral influence.<sup>52</sup> However, it is important to note that the novel, while it also voices these concerns as the article did, does so with more uncertainty. The form of fictional narrative is much more ambiguous and, as I will argue, it becomes confronted

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>51</sup> Linton, 'Plain Girls', p. 496.

<sup>52</sup> A friend of Linton (Lady Paget) had similarly praised her 'straightness which always attracted me to her. She despised shams and hated falseness'. Quoted in van Thal, *Eliza Lynn Linton, The Girl of the Period: A Biography*, p. 206.

with the need to consider the limitations of its own propositions and the liberties it grants to the heroine.

Recent scholarly work has emphasised the role that Gaskell's biography played in excusing Brontë's name from accusations of coarseness.<sup>53</sup> Gaskell's work is a prominent and contemporary example of a text that had to deal with the dilemma of vindicating the transgressions of the female author. Gaskell often relates her discussion of coarseness and the Brontës to their harsh environment and surroundings.<sup>54</sup> Linton's novel, as I suggested earlier, is clearly attentive to these sensitivities and considerations.<sup>55</sup> While Gaskell appears determined to contain and showcase the domestic and feminine nature of Brontë and formulate her coarseness in relation to external influences and environment, Linton in *Sowing the Wind* does not shy away from attesting to the coarseness and harshness of Jane's attitudes and manners. The novel upholds the model of subjectivity that it represents and specifically links it to the superior moral aims of Jane. In one scene, the narrator poses an open-ended question: 'What signified an ungainly manner or an unlovely person compared with truth and strength?'<sup>56</sup> Bringing forth Jane's strength and power of influence becomes an ultimate goal that must be superior to the niceties of approved social conduct. Indeed, the novel does not seek to give a justification for Jane's behaviour, but rather it validates the motives of Jane and her role in the novel. The representation of Jane invites us to see beyond our fixations on the externality and superficiality of these ideals. Jane's sense of moral duty and her determination to create a difference and influence her surroundings are enabled through her refusal to be another idle and another silenced

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Linda Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market*; and Hughes and Lund, *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell's Work*.

<sup>54</sup> In the biography, Gaskell writes: 'they who have objected to the representation of coarseness and shrank from it with repugnance, as if such conceptions arose out of the writers, should learn that, not from imagination – not from internal conception – but from the hard cruel facts, pressed down, by external life, upon their very senses, for long months and years together, did they write out what they saw, obeying the stern dictates of their consciences'. See Gaskell, pp. 50-51.

<sup>55</sup> It is unknown whether Linton had read Gaskell's biography of Brontë or not. When Linton was assigned as one of those who would write a piece on one of the female authors to be commemorated in *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign: A Book of Appreciations*, she chose Gaskell but ended up writing on George Eliot because Gaskell had already been assigned for Edna Lyall. She writes in a letter: 'They have given me my choice, of all the chief; but I have set aside George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, Mrs Craik and Harriet Martineau, and if I do any at all, have chosen Mrs Gaskell. Not that I know anything of her and I have not read her books since I was a young woman, but my impression of her is sweet. She was such an unaffected woman – to my memory, at least. I saw her once, and she seemed to me such a dear, and not as affected as either George Eliot or Mrs Craik. I should have to read all her books again if I did her'. Quoted in Van Thal, p. 207.

<sup>56</sup> Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, p. 65.

version of femininity. Jane's unmediated mode of self-expression becomes an empowering aspect of her character.

Linton's celebration of Jane's power and influence, however, carries with it some concerns about the nature of her character. As much as the novel is unapologetic about its representation of Jane's roughness and outspokenness, it nevertheless reveals its unease with some of Jane's shortcomings as a woman. With all her strength and purpose, the narrative sheds light on what it perceives as Jane's 'basic blemish'.<sup>57</sup>

But was it strange if this strong and capable woman, laden as she was with the weighty needs of life, showed more impatience than forbearance with feeble superficialities? Had she been as sweet as she was strong she would have been as patient as she was energetic; but Jane Osborn was an instance of how really heroic virtues may exist without beauty, and how neither strength nor truth, neither energy nor self-sacrifice can make a woman lovely unless there be love as well. This one word made all the difference between her and Isola Aylott; and in this one word lay the basic blemish of Jane's character, and the marring by insufficiency of her else noble nature.<sup>58</sup>

The ability to show 'love' and compassion is marked out by the narrator as one of Jane's main shortcomings as a character. At the same moment as her virtues are considered, an absolute appraisal of them is interrupted by the narrative's anxiety about the absence of the essential feminine virtue of compassion and forbearance.<sup>59</sup> This comment is set in the novel in relation to Jane's cruel attitude and lack of compassion toward her mother. An anxious and often ambivalently paradoxical undertone, as can be seen, interferes in the novel's tendency to celebrate Jane's power fully. There is a sense of the narrative voice being divided against itself – torn between fully acknowledging Jane's individuality and confronting its concern about her unfeminine nature. The

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> However, Jane's inability to feel love for others becomes questionable in the novel, particularly through her relationship with both Wyndham and Isola. The two of them bring out in Jane some unconscious feelings of affection that she must overthrow and conquer. While Jane's admiration for Wyndham is emphasised in the novel as will be discussed soon, her fleeting erotic impulse as she 'bent her rugged face towards her cousin's, and kissed the rounder, fairer cheek affectionately. Then she left the room ... troubled at her own impulsiveness, and calling herself a donkey' (pp. 254-255) is abruptly cut in the novel. For a discussion on Linton and non-normative sexuality, see Deborah T. Meem, 'Eliza Lynn Linton and the Rise of Lesbian Consciousness', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 7, 4 (1997), 537-560.

passage's allusion to these personal qualities of Jane and its polarisation of 'sweet vs. strong/ patient vs. energetic' point to the novel's uneasy attitude about Jane's character. Nancy Anderson maintains that the novel reflects Linton's own personal dilemma and 'conflicted feelings about her own life and her ideal of womanly behavior'.<sup>60</sup> In this passage, the novel appears to interrogate and question its own conception of Jane as a strong and determined woman. This is clear in the statement that 'neither strength nor truth', which were repeatedly celebrated as the ultimate qualities of Jane and which dictate her role in the novel, can compensate for her lack of 'love'. This becomes further emphasised in the novel with Jane's apparent lack of maternal instinct and motherly feelings toward the child in their care before he is adopted by Isola. Jane is 'fretted with the care of a young infant, an occupation in every way so uncongenial to her'.<sup>61</sup> Isola, in contrast to Jane, finds purpose in life through her experience of being a mother for this child.

In her own words, Jane gives her cousin Isola a sincere depiction of herself:

I go about the world feeling myself something like Beauty's Beast – only not quite so amiable perhaps, for he was a good sort of a beast, though rather muffish too – but just the most unlovely disagreeable woman in the world, though not a bad fellow at heart ... I am not a bad fellow, but I am not a good woman; scarcely a woman in the moral sense at all; and I don't want to be one, for I think them such desperate slaves and cowards, and such donkeys too! – and I would rather be the Beast ten times over than a slave or a coward. But of course this is the very thing which makes me such a queer wretch! There is nothing purely feminine about me. I don't like babies; I despise obedient wives.<sup>62</sup>

In Jane's allusion to herself as 'Beauty's Beast', the novel further stresses the beauty of her interior hidden under this rough unfeminine exterior.<sup>63</sup> Linton disqualifies the exterior as a marker of inner morality, constantly stressing that her heroine's

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<sup>60</sup> Anderson, p. 107. Anderson also refers to a letter where Eliza tells a friend about the end of her marriage to Linton. She reflects upon her inability to feel 'love'. She writes: 'It sounds so harsh, so unwomanly, for a wife not to feel perfect happiness in her husband's society... The Love, the Home, the Mothership, the Matronship – all, all have gone – died – and will never wake up to life again! And yet I long for love and I pine for a home'. See Anderson, p. 106.

<sup>61</sup> Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, p. 153.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>63</sup> Perhaps an allusion to the handsome prince trapped in the body of a beast.

unbeautiful exterior only serves to strengthen the conviction in her virtuous inner nature. In her discussion of the classic tale of 'Beauty and the Beast', Sara Halprin notes that 'in these stories ugliness is understood to be a phase of identity, a temporary disguise to be dropped when the spirit is able to manifest itself'.<sup>64</sup> However, Jane's ugliness and harshness in *Sowing the Wind* are not 'temporary' or ever abandoned, but rather are integral parts of her character and nature. The narrative is constantly faced with the conflict of revealing the merit of this perceived ugliness. Jane, in this moment of self-representation, acknowledges this conflict but, nevertheless, remains committed to and conscious of the superior purpose that her duty demands in contrast to beauty or eloquence. Her moral duty reigns over these superficialities that neither the novel nor Jane is willing to accept. Jane's self-analysis here could be seen as a response to the novel's uncertainty about her masculine and active nature. Identifying herself as a 'queer wretch' emphasises her socially ambivalent position as a person whose attitudes fail to comply with a polarised view of gender. Jane contends, 'I am not a bad fellow, but I am not a good woman', suggesting a sense of fluidity. In her analysis of Jane's character, Kimberly Stern classifies her as a "'transitional" figure trapped between categories'.<sup>65</sup> She resists being identified positively or negatively with either of these categories of gender signified here by 'fellow' and 'woman'. Jane is aware of her inability to represent herself in a uniform and intelligible way due to a polarised view of gender roles at the time.<sup>66</sup> If Jane's weakness, as the novel sometimes suggests, lies in the fact that she is 'scarcely a woman', then Jane's self-description alternatively suggests that her moral power shines through because of this transcendence of womanly idleness. Jane's words or her own voice in the novel appear to engage with the narrative's uncertainty about her gender identity and standing. The text indecisively both deems this conception of Jane's unsexed self as a 'weakness' and yet supports its

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<sup>64</sup> Sara Halprin, "Look at My Ugly Face": *Myths and Musings on Beauty and Other Perilous Obsessions with Women's Appearance* (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 157.

<sup>65</sup> Stern, p. 151.

<sup>66</sup> Of course, it would be wrong to assume that this gender binary was absolute and went on largely unquestioned at the time. Hilary Fraser and others have demonstrated in their study of Victorian periodicals the way in which it reflected a culture that 'disclosed the instability of the concept of gender as a binary category'. See Hilary Fraser, Judith Johnston, and Stephanie Green, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 7. Linton's novel and other contemporary works voiced these uncertainties. See, for instance, Ardel Haeflele-Thomas, *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012) for a reading of the non-normative representation of gender and sexuality in novels from the 1860s onwards.

authenticity in a way that celebrates and acknowledges its heroine's power.<sup>67</sup> Through the assertion 'I would rather be the Beast', Jane suggests that if she cannot be free to embody her own version of what it means for her to be a woman, then she would rather hold on to that socially-perceived ugliness and be an embodiment of that 'Beast'.

As Linton's biographers have demonstrated, her uncertainty about the debates surrounding female emancipation were motivated by anxiety about the loss of the essential nature of sexual difference.<sup>68</sup> She feared that the pleas for female emancipation might lead to the blurring of this intrinsic difference and the 'distinctive virtues' of the sexes.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, however, Linton's novel in its representation of Jane as a woman who transgresses the limits of femininity and experiences professional life as a male could be argued to push the boundaries against her own arguments. Jane appears unable to experience the vigour of her moral influence and power without feeling the need to reject the idle nature of her sex. Despite her own belief in sexual difference, Linton's novel experiments through its ambitious, single, and plain Jane Osborn with the dilemma of the unsexed heroine who learns to adapt herself to masculine ideals. Jane openly describes to her cousin Isola the ecstasy she feels in her current state:

“to feel that strange thrill of secret mental power – no, I would not give up that for all the happiness of your so called womanly women! You do not know the intense delight of such a life as mine,” she continued fervently. “Poor, shabby, ugly, hard-worked, an absolute negation of all charms and all apparent pleasures – to look at there is nothing in me for any one to envy; and yet, Isola, when I think of myself as one of the real influential workers of the world – one of the uncatalogued movers of society and men's minds – I feel as if I had found the

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<sup>67</sup> As Stern puts it, 'Jane thus represents both the promise of the professional female critic and the dangers posed by her attempts to fulfil the model of unsexed femininity the profession demands'. See Stern, p. 148.

<sup>68</sup> See Anderson, pp. 127-130. Evelleen Richards has also explored Linton's adoption of Darwinian scientific views on the inferiority of women and their innate limitations. See Evelleen Richards, 'Redrawing the Boundaries: Darwinian Science and Victorian Women Intellectuals', in *Victorian Science in Context*, ed. by Bernard Lightman (London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 119-138.

<sup>69</sup> See George Somes Layard, *Mrs. Lynn Linton: Her Life, Letters, and Opinions* (London: Methuen, 1901), p. 140.

treasure which you are all seeking, and that my share in life has been a Benjamin's mess!<sup>70</sup>

As suggested earlier, Jane's own words and description of her feelings in the novel often pose a contrast to the narrator's anxious comments about her lack of femininity. Jane's words vindicate her need to feel the excitement that her role as a professional worker provides. In this passage, Jane points to her commitment to her individuality and purpose, asserting that this 'life is mine'. Her relish in her 'share in life' in this biblical allusion highlights the social and educational limitations enforced upon women that she is keen on exposing and surpassing. Jane is aware that from a traditional perspective of a woman's life, hers would be deemed a failure. However, for Jane it signifies her victory over the limitations imposed upon her sex. In her book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam maintains that the figure of the masculine woman in the nineteenth century was often regarded as a sign that 'codifies a unique form of social rebellion; ... it represents the healthful alternative to what are considered the histrionics of conventional femininities'.<sup>71</sup> Based on her views on the distinctiveness of sex, it would be difficult to argue that Linton thought of female masculinity as a 'healthful' thing. However, the individual case of Jane in the novel considers her masculine attitude as a particularly enabling trait that allows her to pursue intellectual and professional development. The novel represents the case of a woman whose longing for intellectual and professional attainment opens the possibilities for breaking down the repetitive performativity of one's gender identity. In her words to Isola, the 'treasure which you are all seeking' is a declaration that underpins Jane's attainment of that which had been denied to her sex. Professionalism is a path out of reach for the ideal Victorian woman, and comes to be experienced in the novel through this form of gender transgression.<sup>72</sup>

While the novel rarely pictures Jane in moments of weakness, these begin to become apparent through her sincere admiration of Harvey Wyndham, with whom she begins to fall in love:

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<sup>70</sup> Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, p. 248.

<sup>71</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> For more on female masculinity in sensation fiction of the period, see Lillian Craton, *The Victorian Freak Show: The Significance of Disability and Physical Differences in 19th-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambria Press, 2009), pp. 121 -146.

And for all her masculine strength of brain Jane Osborn was but a woman when called on to determine the pattern of Harvey Wyndham's moral nature. Little of imagination and less of romance as she had in her nature, she had just so much as had enabled her to create an ideal Wyndham who stood to her as the representative of all she most prized in man.<sup>73</sup>

Even in all its ambivalence about Jane's unfemininity, the novel here condemns her romantic outlook as it prevents her from better judging Wyndham's nature. Jane's attachment to Wyndham and their short romantic fling brings forth an unrecognisable side of Jane's character unknown to us as readers. Ironically, this suppressed side of Jane's character, where she is 'but a woman', is deemed as a weakness and a threat to her will-power. Upon Wyndham's confession to Jane about his intention to quit his position in the journal, 'Jane Osborn, hard, plain, abrupt, ungainly Jane, laid her face upon her crossed arms and sobbed as if her strong heart would break'.<sup>74</sup> The description of Jane in this passage creates the effect of contrast between her strong character as we already know her and her unexpected reaction to Wyndham's departure. A contemporary review in the *Athenaeum* satirises Jane's fall for Wyndham, sarcastically suggesting that 'the woman who steels herself, as a rule, against all soft and womanly feelings is most likely to find her armour give way in an unexpected place'.<sup>75</sup> However, the novel appears to be much more strategic than the reviewer thinks in its allusion to Jane's prospects of marriage to Wyndham, which is eventually dismissed. This experience of disappointment, though heart-breaking for Jane, makes her more defiant than ever in her pursuit of success and self-realisation.

After Jane learns of Wyndham's marriage to Marcy Tremouille, the novel presents its final vision of Jane as the narrative moves toward its ending:

it somehow took all the colour out of her life, and destroyed the one sole filmy web of romance she had ever woven. She grew gaunt and old in a month; ... her bony frame grew leaner; her indifference to dress and to all feminine niceties of appearance increased to an almost savage state of carelessness; and *she aged and hardened till all womanhood seemed rasped out of her, as she went daily*

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<sup>73</sup> Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, p. 235.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 203-204.

<sup>75</sup> 'Sowing the Wind: A Novel', *The Athenaeum*, 9 March 1867, 316-317 (p. 316).

*to office-work like a man*, and blew up composers and readers like a man too.<sup>76</sup>  
(emphasis mine)

The novel puts an end to its heroine's prospects of marriage to a man like Wyndham who, despite his encouragement and acknowledgement of Jane's intellectual and literary talent, would threaten her independence and vigour. The 'savage state of carelessness' that Jane comes to lead life with further underpins her plainness, roughness, and crudeness that the novel has dealt with from the beginning in its purest form. It points to her complete emancipation from the 'feminine niceties' that she rejects. In another mocking reaction to the novel's resolution, the *Saturday Review* satirically undermines the ending: 'we are fairly grieved that no better fate has been found for Jane, after all her brave and disinterested battle with life, than to subside into the acrid and angular old maid'.<sup>77</sup> The novel, however, seems to equate this waning of the body with a greater determination and resilience as Jane 'went daily to office-work like a man, and blew up composers and readers like a man too'. By disregarding the possibility of any romantic attachment to Wyndham, the novel offers its final vision of Jane as a heroine whose 'womanhood seemed rasped out of her'. This dissolution of Jane as a woman at the end of the novel continues to voice the narrative's pervasive sense of ambivalence even as it embraces Jane's masculine nature, which attains her fulfilment and professional success.

In her article 'Passing Faces' (1855), Linton observes the faces of people on London streets and refers to the 'strong-minded female' as one 'who wears rough coats with men's pockets and large bone buttons, and whose bonnets fling a spiteful defiance at both beauty and fashion'.<sup>78</sup> Linton, a decade later, comes to represent through the character of Jane Osborn this masculine independent woman who, as she describes it in her article, purposefully disavows beauty. The aim of this chapter has been to examine the role that plainness plays in Linton's work, particularly 'Plain Girls' and *Sowing the Wind*, in order to shed light on the limitations of female domestic roles and the wider context within which plainness was politicised and associated with women's rights. As we have seen, female plainness is presented in Linton's work in powerful and evocative ways. In both the essay and novel, plainness is an important motif that

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<sup>76</sup> Linton, *Sowing the Wind*, p. 340.

<sup>77</sup> 'Sowing the Wind', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, p. 374.

<sup>78</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton, 'Passing Faces', *Household Words*, 14 April 1855, pp. 261-264 (p. 262).

leads to the exploration of an alternative female experience deviating from normative gender ideals into female empowerment and independence. The contemporary debate about female plainness and all the uncertainties it generated about its appropriateness to offer a meaningful representation of femininity are confronted and bluntly dealt with in the novel.

Linton's representation of female plainness in the late 1860s reflects the growing complexity of such plainness as a quality that had developed its own politicised and gendered meanings. Was that 'Golden Treasury' that Linton pleaded for in her article 'Plain Girls' achieved in her novel *Sowing the Wind* through its successful plain Jane Osborn? Jane's plainness certainly plays an integral part in this fictional representation of her character and gender identity as a professional female journalist. Jane's plainness was rendered as an enabling quality rather than a hindrance to her self-realisation. However, her success and triumph proved to be more complex than Linton had envisioned in her article. In Linton's work, plainness becomes problematic because it is interwoven with larger issues of gender roles and female masculinity. Jane Osborn's plain face is associated with power and determination, leaving a positive influence upon her surroundings, but repeatedly voicing the author's deeply embedded concerns about her unwomanly nature. Jane, the plain heroine in *Sowing the Wind*, is not only an individual whose life is threatened by financial need but is also a woman striving for power and influence. Later in her life, Linton stated, 'I think now, as I thought when I wrote these papers, that a public and professional life for women is incompatible with the discharge of their highest duties or the cultivation of their noblest qualities'.<sup>79</sup> Linton's novel, likewise, cannot overcome this division. The novel had to silence Jane's suppressed female nature at the end in favour of granting her the path towards success in the male sphere of literary journalism.

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Layard, p. 145.

## Conclusion

In her book *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art*, Wendy Steiner wonders ‘how to imagine female beauty, in art or outside it, without invoking stories of dominance, victimization, and false consciousness’.<sup>1</sup> This question, as we have seen, was certainly on the mind of Charlotte Brontë in the late 1830s while writing her *Tales of Angria* well before the success of her mature novels. Today, we tend to identify Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* as the text that championed the plain heroine in Victorian fiction. However, this thesis set out to contribute something new to literary studies of the nineteenth century by offering a broader perspective on female plainness in women’s fiction at the time. Many studies of plainness, prominently in the fiction of Brontë or Eliot, stand in isolation from the wider cultural discourse on plainness and tend to overlook the contemporary interest in this trope, particularly in lesser-known fiction. My research presents a more holistic reading of plainness in the mid-nineteenth century, highlighting the often disregarded contributions of female authors to shaping the discourse of plainness that, as we have seen, rapidly extended well beyond Brontë’s work. This thesis awards Brontë the merit and recognition she deserves as someone who paved the way and looms over our imagination and perception of plainness, but goes on to give a more comprehensive and detailed reading of other contemporary works that also deserve recognition. By offering a close reading of novels by Margaret Oliphant, Dinah Mulock Craik, Sarah Stickney Ellis, and Eliza Lynn Linton, my work sheds new light upon the mid-nineteenth-century conceptualisation of female plainness in women’s writing. In considering the various elements relevant to the representation of plainness as the social, moral and aesthetic discourse of beauty, dress, language and physiognomy, this thesis offers an original stance on plainness in women’s writing acknowledging both its dynamic and creative features as well as the challenges it created.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Free Press, 2001), xx.

The exteriority or the visible physical manifestation of the heroine's plainness in these texts, as I have indicated throughout this thesis, should not be underestimated. Liz Frost has maintained that in relation to women, it is very often the case that the 'construction of ... subjectivity involves necessarily engaging with the externals, which usually means the visual'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the visibility of plainness, whether through the heroine's face or dress in these novels, is apparent and it is often the starting point from which other aspects of plainness are explored and signified throughout. My reading of plainness in these works identifies it not as a negative attribute, a way of effacing the self, but rather as a potentially empowering form of self-representation. This thesis has steered away from the common interpretation of plainness and its association with purity and invisibility. Instead, I have shown how the representation of female plainness allowed writers to explore the shifting dynamics of vulnerability and empowerment in female experience. While the works of fiction I have focused on are sensitive to the difficulties encountered by the heroines, they suggest that ultimately plainness can transform the heroine's sense of vulnerability into an expression of empowerment.

Starting with Brontë's juvenilia, the thesis shows how Brontë engaged experimentally with the theme of female plainness and began to challenge her own, early fascination with aristocratic beauty, well before her mature novels. Her exploration at this stage of plainness as an expression of female self-determination, was an important basis for the development of this theme in her masterpiece *Jane Eyre* in 1847. While it was important to shed light on Brontë's interest in plainness during her formative years, I have also explored the representation of plainness in *Villette*, a novel which has received less attention in relation to this theme than *Jane Eyre*. Following this, I have then shown how the significance of female plainness was negotiated more broadly in women's fiction of the 1850s and 1860s. The performance that the heroine's plain dress created in the novels of Brontë, Craik, and Ellis in the 1850s exposed a narrative of female agency and resilience. Authors such as Oliphant, Craik, and Linton, whose novels reveal intertextual links with *Jane Eyre* and a shrewd understanding of the debates that surrounded it, experimented with female plainness to explore their own

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<sup>2</sup> Liz Frost, "'Doing Looks': Women, Appearance and Mental Health", in *Women's Bodies: Discipline and Transgression*, ed. by Jane Arthurs and Jean Grimshaw (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 117-136 (p. 123).

heroines' self-determining potential through a wide range of themes such as female authorship. My reading of these works has emphasised the dialogue, interaction and intertextuality that these texts had with Brontë's work and the debates that it created. The representation of female plainness in women's writing was a fertile testing ground for exploring alternative models of female subjectivity and self-realisation. In surveying these decades, I have shown that the conceptualisation of female plainness and its meanings in women's writing was in a perpetual state of discussion and development.

This literary dialogue between the novels on which this thesis has focused, reveals the way in which the representation of female plainness across the different contexts of these narratives was meaningful for women writers' exploration of individual identity. In her autobiography, Wendy W. Fairey contemplates the different phases of her life in parallel to some famous novels that shaped her early years.<sup>3</sup> In considering *Jane Eyre* and reflecting upon her own plainness as a young woman in contrast to her mother's beauty and glamour as a Hollywood star, she maintains, 'in my own life, I think, plainness was also a means of holding onto myself in a milieu that thrives on artifice ... *to be plain becomes the only possible expression of authenticity*' (emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup> Looking back, Fairey can perceive the role that her plainness played in expressing and attaining a sense of 'authenticity' that she could not experience in a beauty-oriented culture. Like Fairey, many of the female authors discussed in this thesis have discerned these qualities, which were vital for their own representation of female plainness. The discourse of plainness in women's writing post-*Jane Eyre* has shown us that women writers have recognised and engaged with features of plainness in Brontë's work that extended beyond the social and moral frameworks that critics have tended to focus on in their appreciation of *Jane Eyre* and its choice of the plain heroine.<sup>5</sup> Brontë as well as other women writers were more radical in their choice of plainness than has been thought. In addition to these social and moral implications, female plainness was

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<sup>3</sup> Wendy W. Fairey, *Bookmarked: Reading My Way from Hollywood to Brooklyn* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>5</sup> Beth Newman, for example, maintains that Brontë's 'project goes beyond simply sticking up for plain women, and is as well understood as ideological as "moral". It was the ideological implications of the triumph of social obscurity over rank'. See Newman, *Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation, and Victorian Femininity*, p. 26.

an important expression of individuality and self-realisation. I think we tend to overlook the discourse of female plainness that arose from the success of *Jane Eyre* and which, through the contributions of other authors and their dialogue with Brontë's work, had further established the potential of plainness to forge meaningful self-determination in the face of social constraints in the different contexts of these mid-century novels. This broader picture proved to be significant in enhancing our understanding of Brontë's vision that upheld the individual identity of the heroine as a woman who transcends the social and cultural limitations set upon her self-realisation as a plain woman. In considering the discourse of female plainness in women's writing at mid-century, this thesis has engaged in a reflexive process that kept leading us back into reaffirming the influence and innovation of Brontë as well as pointing forward to highlighting the wider engagement of other female authors and their significant, albeit often overlooked, contribution to this discourse. Collectively, these ongoing interactions between Brontë and other women writers in their choice of plainness have stressed the way in which it became a potent signifier of female empowerment in each of these novels, from Brontë up to Linton.

The politics of female plainness that this thesis identifies in women's writing, from as early as Brontë's juvenilia and up to the 1860s, reveals how these fictional representations of plainness were involved in interrogating conceptions about women and their roles. The representation of a female's plain physical appearance was not merely, as in the physiognomic perspective, a reflection of personal traits, but served as a much more contentious sign. For example, as my discussion of Oliphant and Craik's novels in Chapter Four has demonstrated, the representation of the plain heroine and her writing experience raised broader questions about gender, expression, and self-realisation. Following *Jane Eyre*, the representations of plainness in women's writing often challenged existing thinking and practices, depicting self-assertive and outspoken heroines. These novels were frequently criticised by reviewers for undermining gender ideals. In the late 1860s, as my discussion of articles published in the *Saturday Review* indicated, plainness in women's fiction grew to be a politicised public debate in which the plain heroine was seen as a subversive figure almost akin to the suffragist. These developments in the conceptualisation of female plainness reflect the overarching social, gendered, and political questions and subtexts that were deeply rooted in these representations of the plain heroine and her experience. Female plainness presents itself

as an important fictional trope that contributes to our understanding of the way women's fiction engaged with its contemporary culture and the wider discourse on femininity and the 'woman question'.

My thesis has examined the concept of plainness exclusively in relation to women's writing. This is particularly due to the gendered nature of the debate over plainness and its continuous association with female authors in mid-century. Moreover, the way in which the plain heroine became a thriving ideal and offered opportunities of experimentation with alternative models of femininity makes it particularly interesting to examine in relation to women's writing. An important question that further scholarly work might assess is the contributions of male authors to this discourse. Walter Bagehot, in his criticism of women's fiction and its fascination with the figure of the plain heroine, as I have mentioned earlier, sets that in direct opposition to the 'gentle tone of manly admiration' with which Walter Scott created his heroines.<sup>6</sup> However, such a gendered perspective certainly has its limitations. The character of Marian Halcombe in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* is a famous instance of the representation of a plain and masculine heroine in fiction by a male author.<sup>7</sup> Much scholarly interest has focused on the significance of Marian's ugliness and her fluid gender identity in Collins's novel.<sup>8</sup> More work needs to be done to assess whether these patterns of characterisation and attention to plainness were also present in the works of male authors in the mid-nineteenth century.

Today, the unrealistic stereotypes and at times unnatural images of beautiful women that populate advertisements and magazine covers are often challenged. Issues of female objectification, fractured body-image, and mental health have begun to be debated more articulately in modern times to combat the effect of these socially and culturally constructed ideals of beauty. The case of female plainness in the mid-nineteenth century might be different from our modern times, but nonetheless it allows

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<sup>6</sup> Bagehot, p. 459.

<sup>7</sup> See also Lisa Jadwin, "'Caricatured, Not Faithfully Rendered': *Bleak House* as a Revision of *Jane Eyre*", *Modern Language Studies*, 26, 2/3 (1996), 111-133.

<sup>8</sup> Lyn Pykett's work was a pioneering study on the subject. See Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992). For more recent works, see, for example, Rachel Ablow, 'Good Vibrations: the Sensationalization of Masculinity in *The Woman in White*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 37 (2004), 158-80; and Brooke S. Cameron, 'The Resilient Marian Halcombe: On Feminine Feeling and Wilkie Collins's Debt to Amatory Fiction', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 10 (2014), 1-24.

us to recognise the ways in which this representation enabled women novelists to also challenge social and cultural ideals. This thesis has argued that these mid-century novels by Brontë, Craik, Ellis, Oliphant, and Linton should be recognised as important contributions to the debates that shaped the contemporary discourse of plainness and its subversiveness in women's writing. My reading of these texts has demonstrated the centrality of plainness in forming female identity and attended to the broader and far-reaching meanings of plainness that were at work in these narratives. The competing and conflicting interpretations of plainness in these works and their contemporary reviews reveal the contested nature of female plainness. The plain heroine in mid-century fiction emerges as a subversive figure who triggers larger cultural anxieties about women, gender, and freedom in a period of change.

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