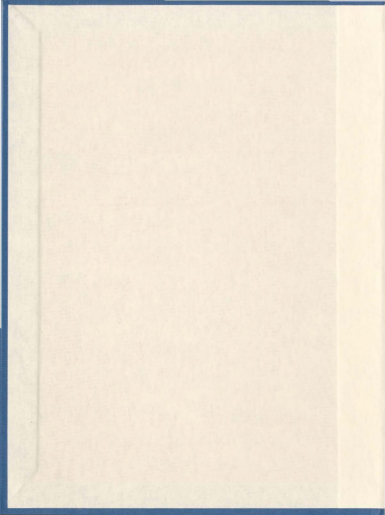


NEITHER MARY NOR MAGDALEN:
THE FALLEN WOMAN, THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE,
AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMAN POET

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Abstract

This study seeks to expand our understanding of the nineteenth-century fallen woman through an exploration of the ways in which she is represented in a small selection of dramatic poetry written by women who were directly involved with fallen women, either through reclamation work, or through social and political writing. The overarching premise of this study is that these female poets—Dora Greenwell (1821-1888), Augusta Webster (1837-1894), and Mathilde Blind (1841-1896)—chose to represent the “fallen” woman in ways that challenged dominant conventions. Their poetry suggests that neither the arguments *for* reclamation—redemption through religious and domestic teaching—nor those for condemnation are adequate, as both are grounded in discourses that have more basis in myth than in reality. Rather, their “fallen woman” poetry, by focusing on the material conditions of fallen women themselves, illuminates the fallen woman’s position and circumstance as complex and contingent and in so doing, challenges the “fallen woman” archetype. Their dramatic monologues, published in 1861, 1870, and 1891 respectively, function collectively in depicting not the voice of *the* fallen woman, but of fallen *women*.

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Mary Carmichael, I thought, still hovering at a little distance above the page, will have her work cut out for her merely as an observer. I am afraid indeed that she will be tempted to become, what I think the less interesting branch of the species — the naturalist-novelist, and not the contemplative. There are so many new facts for her to observe. She will not need to limit herself any longer to the respectable houses of the upper middle classes. She will go without kindness or condescension, but in the spirit of fellowship, into those small, scented rooms where sit the courtesan, the harlot and the lady with the pug dog. There they still sit in the rough and ready-made clothes that the male writer has had preforce to clap upon their shoulders. But Mary Carmichael will have out her scissors and fit them close to every hollow and angle. It will be a curious sight, when it comes, to see these women as they are, but we must wait a little, for Mary Carmichael will still be encumbered with that self-consciousness in the presence of 'sin' which is the legacy of our sexual barbarity. She will still wear the shoddy old fetters of class on her feet.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), 88

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Introduction

There are some questions so painful and perplexing that statesmen, moralists, and philanthropists shrink from them by common consent. The subject to which the following pages are devoted, is one of these.

William R. Greg, "Prostitution" 1850

In London, in 1851, Richard Redgrave's *The Outcast* was hung in the west wing of the Royal Academy of the Arts. Middle- and upper-class society, dressed in their finest, congregated before it, readily recognizing the contemporary scene before them, for depicted is the plight of the "fallen woman," a staple figure of nineteenth-century commentary, discussion, and debate. Indeed, complex and often contradictory discussions of her "fallen" body were constant throughout the period, taking shape in medical, religious, and literary forms. This popularity is not surprising given that her representation transgressed economic, political, social, moral, and philosophical boundaries. She was a perfect rallying point for those wishing to engage in the "Woman Question," whether it be for or against the social and political advancement of women.

Redgrave's oil on canvas image presents a stern and merciless patriarchical figure casting his "fallen" daughter out into the cold: only snowdrifts appear to await the young woman and the illegitimate child bundled in her arms. On hands and knees her sisters plead for their father's mercy, while her brother places his head in his hands, resigned and hopeless. A didactic print hangs on the wall in the picture's indistinct background. Perhaps it depicts Abraham casting out Hagar and Ishmael—a story of guilt and exile. Or perhaps it presents the story of Christ and the adulterous woman; in other words, a story of forgiveness. It is, in fact, the *lack of clarity* of the background print that gives us pause,

for that same ambiguity also reflects nineteenth-century society's multiple and complex representations of the "fallen woman." Indeed, she was both reviled and pitied, and therefore inspired claims for both condemnation *and* redemption.

Some previous scholarship has asserted that the representation of the fallen woman is invariably emblematic of a prudish—if not puritanical—nineteenth-century attitude toward sexuality. This was, however, not the case. Just as the viewer of Redgrave's painting is unable to ascertain whether or not the painter agrees with the father's actions, neither can a contemporary "viewer" of nineteenth-century texts pinpoint a cohesive, single, or constant understanding of the fallen woman. The term, fallen woman, itself served as a catch-all for the wide range of women's departures from the expectations of middle-class ideology regarding sexuality (Logan 9). It included married women who had affairs, unwed mothers, prostitutes, seduced servants, abandoned women—virtually any woman who had, or was expected to have had, sexual relations outside of sanctioned marriage. However, despite the wide range of fallen women, each with her own social context and material conditions, socio-historical texts of the period consistently describe her in archetypal ways. Among other things, the fallen woman was seen as inherently morally depraved, selfish, licentious, and rotten to the core, epithets that served to distance her from her angelic opposite, the angel of the house and guardian of the hearth. While this angel/whore dichotomy reflects the rigid nature of acceptable nineteenth-century sexual standards for women—and while it is reflected in many political and religious tracts of the period—nineteenth-century writers constantly and creatively challenged it.

This study seeks to expand our understanding of the nineteenth-century fallen figure through an exploration of the ways in which she is represented in a small selection of dramatic poetry written by women who were directly involved with fallen women, either through reclamation work, or through social and political writing. The overarching premise of this study is that these female poets—Dora Greenwell (1821-1888), Augusta Webster (1837-1894), and Mathilde Blind (1841-1896)—chose to represent the “fallen” figure in ways that challenged dominant conventions. Their poetry suggests that neither the arguments for reclamation—in other words, redemption through religious and domestic teaching—nor those for condemnation are adequate, as both are grounded in discourses that have more basis in myth than in reality. Rather, their “fallen woman” poetry, by focusing on the material conditions of fallen women themselves, illuminates the fallen figure’s position and circumstance as complex and contingent and in so doing, challenges the “fallen woman” archetype. Their dramatic monologues, published in 1861, 1870, and 1891 respectively, function collectively in depicting not the voice of “*the*” fallen woman, but the voices of fallen women. This distinction is of utmost importance. The singularity and blanket nature of the term “fallen woman” suggests a sameness, in terms not only of circumstance and experience, but also of character and personality, thereby denying the possibility of complexity, variety, and change. The archetype’s necessary denial of such difference and complexity in favour of broad generalizations inevitably resulted in the *lived* suffering of fallen women: even those who sympathized with her “plight” refused to see her “as [she] is” (Greenwell “Hardened” 70-71). This refusal speaks to the rhetorical power of conservative nineteenth-century moral ideology whose discourses in relation to women’s sexuality and desire was articulated in terms of

moral polarities, polarities that were institutionalized by scientific and religious rhetoric and internalized by the countless women who, deemed to be "unnatural," fell "in-between." While recognizing the socially constructed nature of both "fallenness" and the "fallen woman," this study will use both terms in order to ensure clarity. In the light of this choice, the reader can assume the presence of quotation marks when both terms are used.

The fallen woman monologues of Dora Greenwell, Augusta Webster, and Mathilde Blind serve to counter the period's moral polarities. Examined collectively, they embody the diversity that undoubtedly existed among fallen women, from seduced girls who later became "kept women" (Greenwell's "Christina"), to sought-after prostitutes who were once middle-class unwed mothers (Webster's "A Castaway"), or orphaned young girls whose poverty and isolation led them to prostitution and early death (Blind's "The Message"). Examined individually, each monologue reveals one woman's unique struggle with the nineteenth-century discourses that relegated her to one side of the angel/whore binary. Greenwell and Blind articulate this struggle through a narrative of failed reclamation. Both monologues explore the inadequacy of philanthropic initiatives that sought to "reclaim" fallen women through religious and domestic teaching. For the speaker of Webster's poem, the narrative finds its focus in the causes of nineteenth-century prostitution and the double standards that informed the discourse surrounding it. Such diversity among fallen women—in terms of personality and social and economic circumstance—illuminates the inadequacy of the archetype, and thereby challenges the stock condemnation of fallen women. This diversity also reflects the poets' desires that philanthropic efforts embody a similar diversity in terms of the tactics used to "save"

them. Indeed, the reclamation movement's dependence on moral polarities, evident in its over-sentimental and romanticized language for fallen women, incites arguably the angriest rebuke from Greenwell, Webster, and Blind, some of whom were nonetheless active in this area.

In the poems, the fallen narrators articulate their struggles within the narrow parameters of the dominant debates—either through the use of symbolism and metaphor, as seen in Greenwell's work, or through a more overt discussion of material conditions as demonstrated in the poetry of Webster and Blind. In the process, many nineteenth-century myths surrounding fallenness, female sexuality, and desire are dispelled, thus making clear the negative implications of viewing women's "nature" and role in society solely in sexual terms. I suggest that this is the most important contribution made by the three authors whose work I present in this study. The fallen woman poetry published by Dora Greenwell in 1861, Augusta Webster in 1870, and Mathilde Blind in 1891, provides alternatives to dominant discourses of fallenness, offering insight into the perspectives of fallen women themselves and challenging conventional narratives which, as Henry Mayhew argued, "decreed that women who have once left the straight paths of virtue...wander all their days outcast, branded, [and] apart..." (Mayhew, *London Labour* xxix).

I choose to focus on Dora Greenwell, Augusta Webster, and Mathilde Blind for several reasons. The roughly seventy years that span the lives of these writers encompassed profound social and cultural changes in what was possible for women in Britain. The period is one marked by women's fight for education and suffrage, as well as for fair treatment under marriage laws. It is also marked by the turbulence of the

industrial revolution and the rapid growth of the British Empire. The period, therefore, saw profound changes, many of which played themselves out through and on the female body. This social upheaval forms both the context and content of their poetry.

Dora Greenwell devoted much of her adult life to philanthropy, working directly with fallen women, as well as many other isolated and marginalized groups. Augusta Webster, meanwhile, campaigned for women's suffrage in the 1870s. Finally, Mathilde Blind emerged as the feminist ideal of the "New Woman" of the 1880s: strong and independent, she overtly refused the stifling conventionality of normative femininity. In short, these women were active participants in the urban social life of their day and were critically engaged in the dominant debates of the period (Vadillo 2005). They also occupied a privileged social position that granted them not only mobility, but also access to a range of public venues through which they could speak on behalf of others who were denied such power. I would argue that the fallen woman, in her many forms, enacts each poet's most potent and political demand for change.

Early studies of the fallen woman, such as those conducted by George Watt (1984) and Beth Kalikoff (1987), focused primarily on the novel, while studies in poetic form, in general, have focused on the male poet (Garrett, Harris, Culler, etc). While more recent work has attempted to rectify this imbalance through a concerted focus on women poets, there still remain many gaps to be explored. One such gap is in the area of genre: extant scholarship has begun to examine the work of women poets, but has rarely explored the relevance of poetic form in relation to the social and cultural positioning of the authors and their poetic subjects. I assert that a close analysis of the literary genre of the dramatic monologue is fundamental to understanding each poet's political stance in

relation to the fallen woman; indeed, it is a key component in each poet's challenge to, and denial of, the fallen woman archetype. Such an analysis, as I will show, is also crucial to understanding the complex social and political circumstances that surrounded nineteenth-century fallen women.

As a form, the dramatic monologue invites consideration of the politics of speaking, writing, and reading, thus permitting the dramatized presentation of a woman and her "voice" as subject. The form, in turn, serves to demystify the historically specific constraints that bound the subjectivity of fallen women. This demystification occurs as the speaking voice of each monologue grapples overtly with the ideologies regarding women's "nature." Webster's *Eulalie* provides an apt example of this demystification process. Speaking of the coveted angel of the house, *Eulalie* angrily cries: "Oh! those shrill carping virtues, safely housed / From reach of even a smile that should put red / On a decorous cheek..." (113-115). In this passage *Eulalie* grapples with her society's prized maternal and domestic ideology, the discourses of which celebrate domestic angels and nursery saints (Webster "A Castaway" 417). Her assertion is that the "virtue" of such coveted women is kept safe not by any inherent morality, but rather by virtue of the house within which she must reside; if she had no sacred hearth she would not be able to retain her sacred "innocence." Also demonstrated in this excerpt is the form's ability to superimpose the speaking "I" of the author on the "I" of the fallen woman, thereby further destabilizing the angel/harlot binary. Woman writers of the period occupied a privileged socioeconomic position, one that allowed them to "voice" the struggles of the marginalized in literary form with little fear of reprisal. This access to the literary mainstream was, generally speaking, not granted to those of the lower or working classes,

individuals who lacked the requisite education and social status. In short, the form provides fallen women with a podium and from there, with the opportunity to “voice” their internal struggles with the complex and contradictory discourses that sought to both save and condemn them.

Even though the most prominent study of the dramatic form, Robert Langbaum’s *The Poetry of Experience*, a study of male poets of the period, was published over fifty years ago, very little critical scholarship exists on the work of women poets. Indeed, the exclusion of women writers such as Greenwell, Webster, and Blind from studies of the dramatic monologue appears to be so pervasive that it has gone largely unquestioned. However, Cynthia Scheinberg, one of the few scholars who have addressed the omission, argues that women were not only participating in discourses that related to the dramatic monologue, but were also using the form to revise many conventional assumptions about gender and poetics. Her assertion that female use of the dramatic form represents a fascinating instance of female poets “exploring available literary forms for their ability to represent the complex, socially embedded issues facing contemporary women” (106) is crucial to this study. I extend this idea in my exploration of the issues facing nineteenth-century fallen women and their depiction in the dramatic monologue.

Scheinberg’s study is a representative example of the body of scholarship that emerged out of the feminist reconsiderations of fallenness during the 1990s (Leighton, Armstrong, Anderson, Slinn). This study both draws from, and builds on, this body of research. Not only does this work bring necessary recognition to popular and well-respected—but now largely forgotten—poets who made significant contributions to contemporary debates regarding women and their social position, but it does so by

placing an emphasis on the location of this poetry within the broader social, medical, and political discourse of the period. This scholarship broadly asserts that nineteenth-century women's poetry often engaged in social critique; this critique positioned "the" fallen woman as a rallying point for those wishing to engage issues specifically relating to the condition of women. Critics such as Angela Leighton argue that poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Augusta Webster exposed the contradictory nature of the discourses that related to women, discourses that produced fragmented identities, subject to constant struggle and change (Leighton 109). Leighton's observation is key to my study, as I see not only Augusta Webster but also the rarely studied Dora Greenwell and Mathilde Blind making similar revisions, specifically to conventional fallen woman discourses. Such revisions allow me to trace some of the complex shifts in nineteenth-century thinking about the fallen woman, in her many forms, and in her body. These shifts are, in turn, also significant as they illuminate the nineteenth century's myriad complex and constantly changing opinions in relation to women and their role in society. Recognizing this diversity, I have chosen to refer to the period, and its literature, as that of the nineteenth century, rather than the Victorian. Previous research has too often generalized the "Victorian period" as having a single confining view of women; as my work demonstrates, this was in fact not the case. Indeed, the period boasts a remarkable diversity of voices, opinions, and debates regarding women and their position in society, a position that was never stagnant, but always fluid and mobile. The lives and work of Dora Greenwell, Augusta Webster, and Mathilde Blind embody this diversity of opinion.

Given all of this, a close analysis of the social, historical and cultural contexts of the lives and works of Greenwell, Webster, and Blind is integral to my study. Nineteenth-

century moral ideology was promulgated in a variety of forms, including legislative acts, political activism, and moral treatises, among them the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s, the formation of the National Women's Suffrage Association in 1869, and the discussions that resulted from the emergence of the so-called "New Woman" near the end of the nineteenth century. Gender was, of course, central to many of these debates. The "Woman Question," as it was titled during the latter part of the century, denotes the society's constant questioning of the fundamental roles of women. The phrase serves as a catch-all for the debates surrounding women's suffrage and autonomy, as well as women's rights in relation to marriage, reproduction, and property. I argue, therefore, that it is necessary to explore the cultural climate in relation to the "Woman Question."

Accordingly, I analyze the poetry of Greenwell, Webster, and Blind in conjunction with non-literary texts of the period. Of particular relevance to my work are social commentaries such as those published in the prominent *Westminster Review*, medical publications (such as those written on female sexuality and reproduction by Dr. William Acton), and documents from reform institutions, such as those of the Magdalen hospitals (*The Magdalen's Friend*), organizations that sought to transform fallen women into respectable members of society through both religious and domestic teaching. In providing an exploration of both literary and non-literary texts, this study attempts to make clear distinctions between fallen women as literary figures and fallen women as historical figures. It also provides a view of both the fallen woman, an archetypal figure of ideology, and fallen women, actual women who were relegated to the society's margins. This examination of the socio-historical material is also made necessary by the poets' use of dramatic monologue. As a genre, the dramatic monologue plays self against

context, all the while assuming that the predominantly middle-class readers would readily recognize the contemporary debates referenced by the narrator.

In the chapter that follows, I offer a historical contextualization of the nineteenth century. This section will focus in particular on the fluid parameters of the "Woman Question" and introduce key voices of the period in relation to it, among them Sarah Stickney Ellis, William R. Greg, Dr. William Acton, and Josephine Butler. Having established the historical context out of which depictions of this "immoral" woman arise, I then move, in Chapter 3, into a discussion of the poststructural theoretical framework that informs my reading, not only of the period and its texts, but also of the form of dramatic monologue itself. This foregrounding, in both the period and the theoretical framework used to interpret it, will allow me to transition into an analysis of three poems: Dora Greenwell's "Christina" (which is the focus of Chapter 4), Augusta Webster's "A Castaway" (addressed in Chapter 5), and Mathilde Blind's "The Message" (Chapter 6). Each poem depicts a fallen woman not as mirroring one side of the angel/whore binary, but rather, as one struggling within it. It is the depiction of this struggle that serves as a potent challenge to the fallen woman archetype.

1.2 Research Materials

Question: Hello, I'm a visiting graduate student. I'm here to study the nineteenth-century fallen woman: can you give me an idea of what sort of materials you have?

Answer: (with quiet chuckling and a repressed smile) My dear, what *don't* we have?

British Library Journal, Day 1, Page 1

This project has included a five-week research trip to the United Kingdom to do archival research at the British Library, the University Library of Cambridge, and the Women's Library at the London Metropolitan University. I have thus had the exceptional opportunity to access an extensive collection of material available in nineteenth-century studies. The British Library holds mid-century photographs, manuscripts, and newspapers, as well as the Evanson Collection of ephemera relating to nineteenth-century entertainment and everyday life. Materials from the Nineteenth-Century General Collection, which include countless pamphlets, books, and social commentaries relating to prostitution, as well as the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s, were additionally critical to this project. From this collection, I drew specifically on works by Dr. William Acton, including *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects*, as well as on Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* and Augusta Webster's *A Housewife's Opinions*. In addition, the Women's Library provided a remarkable amount of information on the repeal of the Diseases Acts, as well as on the repeal's leader, Josephine Butler. Such materials included Butler's speeches on the Disease Acts, as well as a collection of her personal letters. Collectively, these resources provided the primary socio-historical context for this work.

Additional—and equally integral—nineteenth-century materials that have been compiled from these libraries include a collection of newspapers articles from the *Times*, *Daily News*, and *The Literary Examiner*, a series of periodicals, including *The Magdalen's Friend* and *The Female Mission to the Fallen*, several social tracts, including those written on prostitution, as well as treatises written by medical professionals on women's sexual transgression and "fallenness."

It should be noted, however, that while the listing of such essential archival material is necessary, it does not adequately present how a first-hand experience of the archive can change and shape one's understanding of not only the material, but also the nature of the project itself. I would argue, in fact, that this experiencing of the sensuality of the archive *inevitably* brings about such changes. For it is one thing to read a writer's perfect summation of period texts, or to see a photocopy, but it is another thing entirely to see a *handwritten* letter, for example, from a woman who lived—for 6 months—within a female penitentiary for the "fallen." While it may sound trite, such first-hand experience of the archive breathed life into the contextual material that foregrounds this research, a process that, in turn, also brought the nineteenth-century fallen woman to life.

CHAPTER TWO

Historical and Cultural Context

2.1 The "Woman Question" and Questionable Women

What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberalism and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fever of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights.

Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 7

In 1855, Caroline Norton, a well-known and controversial public figure who campaigned for the legal protection of women throughout the later years of the nineteenth century, wrote a letter to Queen Victoria, in which she argued:

The natural position of woman is inferiority to man. Amen! ...I believe it sincerely, as part of my religion: and I accept it as a matter proved to my reason. I never pretended to the wild and ridiculous doctrine of equality. I will even hold that (as one coming under the general rule that the wife must be inferior to the husband), I occupy that position...I am Mr. Norton's inferior; I am the clouded moon of that sun. Put me then—(and my ambition extends no further)—in the same position as his other inferiors! ...Put me under *some* law of protection; and do not leave me to the mercy of one who has never shewn me mercy. (99)

Norton, forced by law to remain married to a husband who had falsely, and publicly, accused her of adultery, was well acquainted with the limited rights of married women under the rule of the Queen, a sovereign who stood staunchly for duty, marriage, family, and above all, propriety. Her passionate and widely read letter pinpoints several of the issues that fuelled the society's constant debates in relation to women's roles. These debates, surrounding women's suffrage and autonomy, as well as women's rights in relation to marriage, reproduction, and property, were grouped together during the period under the title of the "Woman Question." The phrase denoted a complex array of questions such as: What were the "natural" behaviors, values, and roles for women?

What reforms, if any, were necessary in relation to women's social, political, and, in the case of Caroline Norton, legal status? And, if women's status, or roles, did change, what were the implications for men and masculinity?

Both men and women engaged in these debates; however, the public and political forums were generally open only to the middle and upper classes. Therefore, while women like Caroline Norton—and Dora Greenwell, Augusta Webster, and Mathilde Blind, for that matter—were permitted to speak and publish on the “Woman Question,” so-called “fallen women” were very often not.¹ Nevertheless, even though fallen women did not have the power and position to give voice to their own experiences, their stories were constantly positioned at the centre of debates surrounding the “Woman Question.” Such debates will be the focus of this chapter, the remainder of which will provide the historical and cultural context in which Dora Greenwell's “Christina,” Augusta Webster's “A Castaway,” and Mathilde Blind's “The Message” were written. In giving a “voice” to the “fallen,” each dramatic monologue both contributed to, and reacted against, the discussions and debates surrounding the “Woman Question.”

Nineteenth-century society's constant questioning in relation to women's “nature” and role took shape in social, political, and literary form. The “Woman Question” was inextricably linked to the momentous social changes that would characterize the sixty-three year reign of the Queen. Indeed, the era was an unpredictable and tumultuous one, marked by a succession of events and inventions that would make Britain “the richest

¹ There are at least two letters to the editor, published in *The Times* (1858), signed by “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate,” that appear to be written by “fallen women.” These letters detail the circumstances of each women's “fall” and current living conditions. The depiction in both of these articles is counter to dominant nineteenth-century discussions of fallen women. Such instances, where the “fallen” are granted a public venue to speak on their own behalf, appear to be quite rare. And, in response to these rare occasions, scholars argue about “the degree to which their voices were representative and unmediated” (Surpin 511).

country on earth [and] the first urban industrial society in history" (Henderson and Sharpe 1049). However, while some saw only unquestionable progress in the explosion of railways, factories, telegraphs, and journalism, others saw only destruction and degeneration. For many, this destruction was physically evident on the laboring bodies of millions of working-class men and women, for whom industrialization meant living in urban slums while working long hours for low wages in dark, dismal factories. The nation's unprecedented prosperity was therefore coupled with immense and widespread poverty; while the merchants and manufacturers—only two to three percent of the population—grossed between 10,000 and 30,000 pounds a year, the working classes—roughly ninety-percent of the population in 1860—made less than 100 pounds a year (Henderson and Sharpe 1047). For others, this destruction and degeneration was manifest in the advances made in medicine, science, and technology, which uprooted centuries of assumptions about both human life and the world. As a result, an anxious public was left to question the fundamentals of not only science, but also history, philosophy, and religion. This questioning of centuries-old traditions and beliefs in the midst of successive changes and widespread poverty left the nation's people searching for some form of stability and guidance.

Many nineteenth-century men and women sought refuge in the safety and comfort of home. This home, the private sphere assigned to women, was a sanctuary that stood in sharp contrast to the chaos of dizzying change that characterized the "masculine" public sphere of business and politics. This concept of separate spheres was central to the period's domestic ideology, an ideology that positioned women as belonging within the private home, maintaining and regulating both its moral and economic stability. In an era

characterized by rapid and overwhelming change, this association of home with safety, morality, and stability marked it as sacred, a haven that guarded against the doubt and fear that characterized the public sphere. The keystone of this now sacred hearth was the wife and mother, a woman who provided a source of constant and selfless support for her children and husband. Given a title by Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem *The Angel of the House*, she was the moral centre of the family, a "naturally" self-sacrificing and self-regulating figure, who radiated morality because her "substance" was love, not self-interest or ambition (Poovey 8). As Patmore persuasively argues: "No liken'd excellence can reach / Her, the most excellent of all, / The best half of creation's best, / Its heart to feel, its eye to see, / The crown and complex of the rest, / Its aim and its epitome..." (27-32).

In the light of such high praise, it is perhaps not surprising that the angel was constantly evoked in discussions on the "Woman Question." Depicted by the period's dominant maternal and domestic ideology as inherently moral, her primary purpose was to be a spiritual guide for her family, thereby also strengthening the nation. Therefore, women were counseled in the material practices of maintaining a home, practices that moral and religious discourses equated with elevated spirituality (Blair 1). According to Sarah Stickney Ellis, a popular and prolific writer on domestic and moral education, the young women of Britain needed to be educated primarily in matters of "the heart." As Ellis argued,

The women of England, possessing the grand privilege of being better instructed than those of any other country, in the minutiae of domestic comfort, have obtained a degree of importance in society far beyond what their unobtrusive virtues would appear to claim. The long-established customs of their country have placed in their hands the high and holy duty of cherishing and protecting the

minor morals of life, from whence springs all that is elevated in purpose, and glorious in action. (Ellis 1721)

In addition, as the ideology of separate spheres dictated that the angel rarely needed to leave the sacred hearth, her education was often supplemented by the domestic arts that were meant to entertain: singing, playing the piano, and drawing. Accordingly, women were barred from receiving university accreditation. Neither Oxford nor Cambridge, for example, allowed women to receive degrees.² They could attend classes and take examinations, but could not receive qualification, regardless of how they performed, and thus any education they did acquire was essentially viewed as "voluntary heroism" (Webster, *Housewife's Opinions* 92). After all, as Ellis stated, the most valued, admired, and beloved women, were not "the learned, the accomplished women; the women who could solve problems and elucidate systems of philosophy" (1722). Rather, they were angels, women "dignified with the majesty of moral greatness" (1722).

The prominence of this ideal domestic angel, and her equally ideal sphere, camouflaged male interests; insistence on its "naturalness" justified arguments that would keep women from obtaining not only an education, but also work outside the home and fair treatment under marriage laws. Such stifling social restrictions, in an era that was notoriously self-conscious, resulted in many challenges to the society's most prized angelic figure. The many women who desired an education beyond the cultivation of "the heart" (Ellis 13), for example, represented a particularly prominent challenge, one that sparked many debates that fell under the title of the "Woman Question."

The widely publicized realities of the 1851 Census also illuminated several challenges to the "naturalness" of women's role as wife and mother. It concluded that

² Oxford would not give degrees to women until 1920, and Cambridge not until 1947.

two million of Britain's six million women were in fact self-supporting, and that forty-two percent of the female population between the ages of twenty and forty were unmarried (Poovey 4). An additional contradiction and challenge was found in the fact that the "angel's" confinement to the home was a luxury granted only to the upper and middle classes. It was, therefore, an ideal to which lower and working-class women could never aspire, as they generally had to work outside of the home in order to support their families.

This latter impossibility was manifest in the form of the fallen woman as prostitute, a figure predominantly of the lower classes that was positioned at the *centre* of many of the debates that made up the "Woman Question" at mid-century. While all forms of "fallen women"—women who had affairs, unwed mothers, seduced servants, abandoned women, etc.—presented a particularly potent challenge to the dominant ideology in relation to the angel's sexuality, this "fallen" figure brought women's unpaid—and underpaid—work to the public's attention, and intriguingly, *held* that attention for the remainder of the century. According to Judith Walkowitz, "common prostitutes"³ were generally women who found themselves in a vulnerable social and economic position. Their entry into prostitution—contrary to dominant moralist discourses—was often circumstantial, "a response to local conditions of the urban job market" (14). Nevertheless, often depicted as a beautiful and selfish temptress, the prostitute was undoubtedly the most reviled form of fallen woman, and, as such, she was often at the crux of many of the debates regarding women's "true" nature. Her associations with sexuality outside of sanctioned marriage represented a threat to

³ "Common Prostitute" was the remarkably vague nineteenth-century legal category that generally referred to women who solicited men in public places. In the nineteenth century solicitation was not illegal; rather, law enforcement was primarily charged with maintaining public decorum (Walkowitz 14).

society's most sacred temple: the angel of the house, her ultimate other. In turn, she represented a particularly potent challenge to the myriad social institutions that had invested much in the cult of motherhood. Viewed in this way, as an *unnatural* and threatening social deviant, she was often equated in social texts and tracts with disease and plague; she was an evil to be eradicated. The "fallen woman" monologues of both Augusta Webster and Mathilde Blind, in particular, grapple with, and challenge, such discourse.

It is worth noting that many period texts often use the word "prostitute" interchangeably with "fallen woman." Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) is a case in point. While both Mayhew and the women he interviewed use the term "prostitution" in the text, not all of the women interviewed were prostitutes in the twenty-first-century conception of the word. Rather, "prostitute," like "fallen woman," was often used as a broad category that included women who lived with men outside of legally-sanctioned marriage, abandoned and unwed mothers, and girls who simply lived on the streets. In the light of this diversity, though I use a broad approach for the remainder of this chapter, the rest of this study will, for the purposes of clarity, engage the term as it was understood in nineteenth-century legal discourse; that is, as a woman who solicited men in public (Walkowitz 14). In other words, I will discuss the prostitute as a *form* of fallen woman in the chapters that follow.

2.2 The Prostitute as "Case Study"

The remainder of this chapter will focus on the "Woman Question" as it relates to both the fallen woman—as an ideological construct—and fallen women—the women

who *lived* with the stigma of fallenness—with specific reference to the fallen woman as prostitute. In this way, the prostitute will serve as a kind-of “case study” in discourses surrounding fallen women more generally. There are several reasons for this focus. First, the fallen woman as prostitute was the most widely, overtly, and publicly discussed “fallen” figure.⁴ Her position at the centre of such frequent, and very often forthright, discussions surrounding the “Woman Question” allows for a similarly straightforward discussion of the period’s dominant ideology. Second, an examination of period texts that focus specifically on the nature of her “transgression”—and her transgressing body—will permit a clear demonstration of the period’s dominant medical, moral, and religious discourses as they related to women’s sexuality. Therefore, a discussion of her representation will elucidate all forms of “fallenness,” as these discourses of sexual depravity were applied generally to all forms of fallen women, the prostitute being depicted as the most deviant. Third, she was a perfect rallying point for those wishing to engage in the “Woman Question,” and, for this reason, she became the focus of Dora Greenwell’s philanthropy as well as the poetry of Augusta Webster and Mathilde Blind.

This chapter will therefore proceed by providing a discussion of key voices and texts of the period that made significant, or representative, contributions to the discourses surrounding the “fallen.” These discussions and debates often asserted one of two conflicting views of the fallen woman as prostitute: evil, carnal seducer, or innocent, misguided victim, both of which reflect an understanding of prostitution solely as a moral state (Helsingier et al. 151). However, the turn of the twentieth century marked a shift in

⁴ It should be noted that this “popularity” was undoubtedly related to both geography and visibility. Other forms of “fallenness” were not as overtly public. Gaskell’s “fallen” title character of *Ruth*, for example, temporarily hides her “fallenness” by pretending to be a widow, in order to protect herself and her illegitimate child from the severe reprisal of society. This is an apt example of one of many ways that a “fall” could be, and often was, hidden.

the depiction of the fallen woman; she was represented as a *social* victim, a woman whose "fallen" position was a product of an imperfect society, and not of any inherent evil. Key texts from the period as a whole that will illuminate these discussions include Henry Mayhew's interviews with seamstresses who had turned to prostitution, published in the *Morning Chronicle* (1849), William Rathborne Greg's widely read essay on prostitution for the *Westminster Review* (1850), Dr. William Acton's medical text, *Prostitution* (1857), and, finally, Josephine Butler's 1874 speech on the Contagious Diseases Acts. The critical discussion of these period texts will provide the historical and cultural context of Dora Greenwell's "Christina," Augusta Webster's "A Castaway," and Mathilde Blind's "The Message."

Prior to 1850, prostitution, or "the great social evil," was discussed primarily as a moral issue. The "proper" woman's sexuality was "contained within a system that emphasized reproduction and that attempted to keep patriarchal heredity assured" (Sutphin 512). Chastity, outside of marriage, was equated with morality and therefore any woman who transgressed the society's rules of sexual propriety was "unnatural" and immoral, a threat to the angel of the house. As many nineteenth-century men and women attempted to make a clear distinction between "proper" and "disreputable" women, the fallen woman as prostitute was imagined to be an agent of destruction, often equated in moralist discourses with disease and the plague; in other words, as a source of contagion that threatened the health of the nation. This language is clearly in evidence in an article (1857) written by Albert Smith, found in Charles Dickens' widely read *Household Words*, which provides a representative example of arguments that understood prostitution solely in moral terms. Recounting a walk he had taken through London's

notorious Haymarket, Smith describes what he terms an "absolutely hideous" scene of "flashing satins, and sporting gents, and painted cheeks, and brandy-sparkling eyes, and bad tobacco, and hoarse horse-laugh, and loud indecency." As he crosses the street, in order to force his way through the "mass of evil" he reaches the corner of Haymarket, which he describes as

a cancer in the great heart of the Metropolis, and a shame and a disgrace to the supervision of any police [where] wanton wickedness riots unchecked. The edge of the pavement is completely blockaded. If you happen to be accompanied by wife, daughter, sister, any decent woman, and to be waiting, or not waiting for one of the omnibuses that must pass there—go anywhere, do anything, rather than attempt to elbow through the phalanx of rogues, and thieves, and nameless shames and horrors.

As Smith aligns "fallen" women with "rogues" and "thieves" and places them in the midst of the "mass of evil," it becomes clear that he views prostitution, and the fallen woman, from a "moral" perspective. Viewed in this way, the fallen woman is a disease, "a cancer in the great heart of the Metropolis," which must be expelled from "proper" society, so as not to pose a threat to "decent wom[en]." The middle- or upper-class reader of *Household Words* would have immediately recognized Smith's description of "flashing satins" and "painted cheeks" as those of a prostitute.

However, this view of the fallen woman as an evil temptress, while common, was not the only representation of the figure during the period. At mid-century, the public's desire for facts, statistics, and figures (undoubtedly coupled with prurient curiosity) prompted exploration into the realities of prostitution. Henry Mayhew's interviews with hundreds of street people, which would be compiled into four volumes entitled *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), included interviews with London seamstresses who had turned to prostitution in order to support themselves and often their

families. Mayhew's interviews, each shaped into a form not unlike the dramatic monologue, contradicted the archetypal image of the inherently immoral, carnal seducer. Instead, they presented an image of the fallen woman as a social victim.

Mayhew introduces the voice of one unnamed seamstress by asserting that her story is "perhaps one of the most tragic and touching romances ever read" (88). The reader is informed that she "told her tale with her face hidden in her hands" (88), while sobbing. As the young girl describes her work as a seamstress, making "fine full-fronted white shirts" for which she "got 2^{1/4} each" (89), the harsh economic realities of lower-class London life and their connection to prostitution become abundantly clear. She states, "I am the daughter of a minister of the gospel. My father was an Independent preacher, and I pledge my word, solemnly and sacredly, that it was the low price paid for my labour that drove me to prostitution" (89). Mayhew thus allows a "fallen" woman to articulate, for herself, the circumstances of her fall. The speaker's assertion that she is the daughter of "a minister of the gospel" is particularly telling as it identifies her as one well educated in the doctrine of morality, ironically the same doctrine whose discourses would condemn her. This excerpt illuminates a common thread running through all of Mayhew's interviews with seamstresses who had turned to prostitution: the causes of the sexual "fall" were not reflective of any inherent immorality, but rather of a precarious social and economic position, one common to many women of the working classes.

Many nineteenth-century men and women responded to Mayhew's text. While some, in the name of "decency," hoped that the text would not breach "pure family circles" as a result of its "filthy" content (Walkowitz 179), others, such as William R.

Greg, a journalist and social reformer, applauded the text for its humanizing of the fallen woman.

In 1850, in his widely read essay for the prominent *Westminster Review*, "Prostitution," Greg responded specifically to Mayhew's interviews with seamstresses. However, while he claims, like Mayhew, to view the fallen woman as a victim of society, his text in fact functions in drawing the reader's attention away from the specific material conditions that Mayhew had successfully exposed. This deflection is a result of Greg's ultimate purpose: to make the regulation of prostitution more palatable for his predominantly middle-class readers. It is in this way that his text is representative of the period's myriad social reform journalism that depicted the prostitute as a passive and penitent victim of society, one who required the intervention of government and medical institutions in halting her (supposed) spread of venereal disease. As Greg states: "every heart should bleed for the position of an English prostitute, as it never bled at any form of woe before" (240). His pity here stems from a seemingly staunch belief that such women became "fallen" through no fault of their own, as "every calamity that can afflict human nature seems to have gathered around [the fallen woman] – cold, hunger, disease, often absolute starvation" (240). However, while Greg acknowledges that the root cause of prostitution is economic, he nonetheless proceeds to describe the prostitute as a "diseased Magdalene," a woman whose body is a threat to "proper" society. This being the case, he not surprisingly provides several recommendations to government regarding "the spread of syphilitic infection" (266). He argues that the first steps are in

The establishing by authority of a sufficient number of Lock Hospitals, and the subjecting of all prostitutes (whose haunts and persons would in time become accurately known to them) to a periodical medical inspection, with prompt sequestration or removal to the hospital of all who were found diseased. This

measure might followed up by...the arrest and imprisonment of all prostitutes...practicing their occupation without certificate that they had undergone such medical inspection. (266)³

Greg's solution to the "Great Social Evil" lies, therefore, not in better education and higher wages for women, but rather, in lock hospitals and forced medical examinations. The former, he suggests, are the ideal place for the prostitute's re-education. This re-education, for Greg and the many social reformers who agreed with him, was in the doctrines of morality and domesticity. In reality, lock hospitals, institutions that subjected female patients to coercive religious discipline, functioned primarily to maintain the status quo, whereby women were trained in the very domestic trades whose low wages had led them to prostitution in the first place. It is this way that Greg's essay is representative of the many period texts—both socio-historical and literary—that supported a model of "reform" which sought to regulate sexual transgression through the society's government and medical institutions. This type of "reform" is one that steered the public's attention away from the specific material conditions that caused many women to "fall," conditions that Mayhew's text attempted to expose.

Greg's "Prostitution" is also representative in its depiction of the archetypal narrative of the fallen woman's degeneration and death. He laments that "their downward path [is] a marked and inevitable one...they are almost never rescued...then comes the last sad scene of all, when drink, disease, and starvation have laid her on her death-bed" (241). This narrative of the innocent, but doomed, fallen woman was a longstanding and persuasive one. Many scholars of nineteenth-century culture (Eberle, Nochlin, Speck) cite William Hogarth's 1731 series of engravings, "The Harlot's Progress," as a "text"

³ It is worth noting that periodic genital examination of the male clients was never suggested by Greg, or by the government for that matter, in the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Acts.

that, in Eberle's words, "succinctly depicts the dominant narrative of female sexual transgression throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (4). Hogarth's series presents the fundamental elements of archetypal narratives: the woman's loss of virginity (and reputation), her degeneration (often described in terms of disease/infection), her exile from "respectable" society, and finally, her death (often by venereal disease or suicide). These images are common to the art and literature of the late 1840s and 50s. Thomas Hood's 1844 poem, "The Bridge of Sighs," for example, portrays the suicide of a suffering fallen woman, while the final image of Augustus Egg's 1858 trilogy, "Past and Present," titled "Despair," depicts a mother who cradles her child in her arms while she awaits death in a dark and isolated corner along the Thames, where she will probably soon drown herself. The irrevocable path of seduction, prostitution, and death asserted by Greg's "Prostitution," is thus one that was constantly cited throughout the period. And yet, it is a depiction that serves only to distract the public from that which is truly at fault and needs to be examined: the social and economic conditions that positioned prostitution a viable employment opportunity among few others. It is precisely this examination of the social and economic conditions that is taken up in the poetry of Greenwell, Webster, and Blind.

Institutions of reclamation and/or reform, such as "female homes," refuges, or penitentiaries, sought to present an alternative path for fallen women, one that ended not in death, but in a reintegration into "respectable" society. Therefore, discourses of the reclamation movement of the 1850s onward routinely describe the fallen woman not as an evil and diseased temptress, but as a fallen angel, a woman worthy of sympathy and aid. According to Linda Mahood, the first female penitentiary (London's Magdalen

Hospital) was established in 1758 (75). There were over seventy such institutions across Britain by 1900 (75), an expansive network for the "reformation" of transgressive sexuality.

These reformation activities were generally led by middle-class female reformers, women who often reinforced the ideology of "home and hearth" as being women's "natural" place. It was not uncommon for such middle-class women to engage in philanthropic activities outside the home. Indeed, such charity work was often encouraged, as the skill-set demanded by the job was in line with that of the angel of the house. Depicted as caring and selfless, these unfallen women sought to rescue their fallen "sisters" and reclaim them as respectable members of society. While stepping outside their traditional sphere had the potential to challenge and disrupt the carefully governed division between the public and private realms, the language of the movement worked, rather, to maintain it (Logan 370). For the movement was, as Deborah Logan has observed, safely grounded in the age-old essentialist argument that "women's 'natural' maternalism best suited them to reforming prostitutes, while men's 'natural' business savvy best suited them to the administrative responsibilities of missionary organizations" ("Outstretched Hand" 370). However, while the language of the reform movement functioned in maintaining the ideology of separate spheres, it also provided many middle-class women with a rich opportunity for employment and self-discovery. For women like Dora Greenwell—as well as Adelaide Procter, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Christina Rossetti—working with the reclamation movement also provided inspiration for future creative works.

The ultimate goal of the institutions associated with the movement—penitentiaries, homes, refuges—was to reform prostitutes and other forms of fallen woman through religious and domestic teaching, practices they claimed would restore such women as respectable members of society (generally domestic servants). Prominent figures of this movement, such as Josephine Butler, sought to “reclaim” fallen woman on the premise that they could be redeemed by the fulfillment of their “natural” role. As Lynda Nead, in *Myths of Sexuality*, asserts, reform “presented the possibility of rehabilitation and reintegration with deviant femininity re-formed according to the contours of a norm of domesticity” (208). Dickens’ Urania Cottage, first established in 1847, presents a typical description of one such reform home for fallen women. Dickens described the cottage as a home where fallen women would

be taught all household work that would be useful to them in a home of their own and enable them to make it comfortable and happy...each may have a little flower-garden if she pleases...they will be treated with the greatest kindness [and] will lead an active, cheerful, healthy life: will learn many things it is profitable and good to know, and being entirely removed from all who have any knowledge of their career will bring life afresh and be able to win a good name and character. (99)

Clear from this passage is the fact that while reclamation offered an alternate to the suffering and death often described as the fallen woman’s fate, it left safely intact the ideal model of domesticity—arguably the reclamation movement’s keystone. The goal, then, was to restore the fallen woman to her “natural” position as the moral centre of the household, to return her to her position as angel of house. Therefore, the education or training generally offered at such homes for the fallen was in “household work:” cleaning and sewing, for example, rather than intellectual or professional training, which could

potentially address the material conditions that had likely led to the women's turn to prostitution in the first place.

The narratives of the reclamation movement are of particular interest in this study. These narratives, found in newspapers, social tracts, and periodicals, often depicted the movement's missionaries as Christ-like saviors of innocent and lost lambs. In other words, such stories depict fallen women as passive figures who are *acted upon*; they are in need of the "salvation" offered by their unfallen "sisters" and, as such, they are denied agency in their own reclamation. As Roxanne Eberle observes, "they are invariably the passive recipients of disciplinary policies. And indeed, even as...social reformers painstakingly record narratives of sexual transgression, they simultaneously silence the women who provide them with the 'data' they crave" (138).

An apt example of this silencing is found in Josephine Butler's 1874 "Speech on the Contagious Acts."⁶ In attempting to rally support for her cause (the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts) Butler, well-known social reformer and gifted public speaker, invokes the period's dominant maternal and domestic ideology as she argues that "woman" must be the society's savior. She states, "Surely if any time of the world's history ever called for courageous and independent speech, and for typical and Christ-like acts on the part of women towards their fallen sisters and fallen brothers, this age of ours, this very year of 1874, calls for such!"⁷ Speaking in the impassioned tones of a crusader, Butler thus evokes a Christ-like female missionary charged with the moral reform of her

⁶ This is not to suggest that Butler sought to "disempower" fallen women. On the contrary, she was the lead figure in the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts through which she successfully fought for the rights of "fallen women" on the basis that they could be "reformed." In fact, Butler is often (and rightly) described by nineteenth-century scholars as an important early feminist (Eberle, Helsinger, Logan, etc).

⁷ Discussions of, and allusions to, "fallen" men during the period are quite rare, and while a discussion of male "fallenness" is of great interest, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

"fallen" sisters. Her speech goes on to provide an example of one such female missionary: Marie de Pollalion. The narrative describing Pollalion's "rescue of victims of depravity" clearly demonstrates the movement's reliance on images of fallen women as passive recipients of salvation. As such, the passage is worth quoting at length:

Marie de Pollalion was left a widow early in life; she became governess to the children of the Duchess of Orleans; but finding the atmosphere of the Court prejudicial to moral health, she left it, and devoted herself to the service of the most helpless of the human family....In rescuing the victims of depravity, she endured many humiliations, sometimes even blows and injuries; for she did not hesitate to penetrate to Satan's strongholds in order to rob him of his victims. Clothed in the fire-proof armour of charity, she ventured everywhere and everything.

Hearing, one day, that a poor young girl of her acquaintance had been enticed to a fashionable house of ill-fame, she ran to the place, entered the house, and claimed the girl. She found there several gentlemen of the Court, whom she rebuked with severity, the justice of which they confessed by sudden and precipitate flight; she then took the young girl by the hand and led her from the abode of shame.

This narrative of an unfallen "saviour" of the submissive, and presumably penitent, fallen woman is common during the reclamation movement. The "fallen woman" is therefore depicted as the *object* of reformer discourse, and, as such, is not in possession of any power, or agency with which she could initiate her own "reform," or, more controversial still, with which she could *refuse* or challenge so-called "reform." The monologues of Dora Greenwell, Augusta Webster, and Mathilde Blind critique this silencing and disempowering of the "fallen." Each monologue depicts a fallen woman who refuses the conventional narratives of the passive and penitent fallen woman who awaits "salvation." Each poet therefore refuses the typical "object" position of the fallen women in reformer discourse, a refusal that marks their poetry as particularly significant.

While the reclamation movement claimed that fallen women needed to be "retrained" in order to re-enter "respectable" society, Dr. William Acton, a well-known

specialist in venereal diseases and "disorders of the reproductive organs," asserted that prostitution was "a transitory state, through which an untold number of British women are ever on their passage" (72). In the light of this assertion, he then went on to argue directly against the economic validity of "Magdalen" refuges. In doing so, he used an image of a polluted female body to criticize the techniques of such refuges: "To leave an open stinking ditch unclosed is bad enough—to leave the morass untouched is fatal" (144).

Acton's work is representative of the many scientific studies that paid particular attention to woman's sexual capacity, intellectual capacity, and potential for development. The overwhelming majority of the discussions and "studies" of each these aspects of women's "nature" served only to reinforce the ideal of women's naturally maternal and domestic nature. Mary Poovey observes that "late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century medical men began to represent the differences between male and female bodies and functions as a series of binary oppositions" (6). Women's role as child bearer, and thus mother and caregiver, thus became more significant than any similarity that existed between the sexes. As a result, the discussion of women focused primarily on the reproductive system, as this aspect of her body most readily adhered to her supposed natural, and thus proper, role as mother. In medical circles, therefore, the fallen woman as prostitute was predominantly understood in pathological terms; she was an "unnatural" woman, both polluted and polluting.

In contrast to Greg, Acton believed that prostitution might lead to other professions—rather than death—not to mention the possibility of an improvement in social position, perhaps even marriage, for example (73). If this was the case, the

prostitute's infiltration into respectable society, according to Acton, meant that she was not only a moral threat, but also a physical threat, capable of spreading disease through her clients and through her children (Helsing 156). In light of this shocking "fact," Acton, in his influential book, *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects* (1857), argued that prostitution be deprived, "not only of its moral, but of its physical venom" (73). However, while his text might suggest a distinctive break with conventional discussions of the fallen woman as prostitute, his argument for the prostitute's re-integration into society allowed him to easily rationalize her sexual exploitation (Walkowitz 46). Acton's is a representative voice for the many doctors during the late 1860s and early 1870s who campaigned for legislation that would force women who were suspected of prostitution to undergo periodic examination for venereal diseases. Such legislation was passed under the title of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1864, 1867, and 1869, against which Josephine Butler would launch her thirteen-year long campaign.

The Acts legalized the "regulation" of prostitute's bodies and placed this "regulation" in the hands of law officials as parliament sought to control the spread of syphilis by institutionalizing women who were suspected of having the disease. As Judith Walkowitz observes, "the acts represented a 'high water mark' of an officially sanctioned double standard of sexual morality, one that upheld different standards of chastity for men and women and carefully tried to demarcate pure women from the impure" (70). The Acts, based on the assumption and acceptance of male sexual desire as natural, positioned prostitution as a necessary evil, though neither assumption was overtly stated. Furthermore, they institutionalized the period's obsession with categorizing and

controlling female sexuality. As E. Warwick Slinn argues, prostitutes forced to undergo medical examinations were treated as "mere statistics or objects of pleasure to be treated clinically like animals" (174). In short, the medical treatment of venereal disease, as evidenced by Acton's work, was governed by conventional sexual and social ideologies. The fallen woman as prostitute was thus now not only a contagion of "moral disease," but also a vehicle of actual disease.

The fallen woman was thus constantly positioned at the centre of the many contentious debates that made up the "Woman Question." As highlighted here, discussions of her "fallen" body transgressed social, political, moral, religious, philosophical, and medical boundaries, making her the perfect rallying point for those wishing to provoke and inspire change for women. She often evoked what Roxanne Eberle calls "the specter of early feminism, female desire and political unrest." Therefore, she indeed "fuel[ed] more generalized concerns about British womanhood" (13). The "fallen woman" monologues of Dora Greenwell, Augusta Webster, and Mathilde Blind evoke this powerful "specter." Greenwell's "Christina" exposes the romantic narratives of reclamation as unrealistic, while both Webster's "A Castaway" and Blind's "The Message" grapple directly with the contradictory religious, moral, and scientific discourses that surround the figure of the fallen woman as prostitute. The chapter that follows will provide a discussion of the poststructural theoretical framework that informs my reading, not only of the period and its texts, but also of the form of dramatic monologue itself. This foregrounding, in both the period and the theoretical framework used to interpret it, will allow me to transition into an analysis of Dora Greenwell's

"Christina" (which is the focus of Chapter 4), Augusta Webster's "A Castaway" (addressed in Chapter 5), and Mathilde Blind's "The Message" (Chapter 6).

CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done—the sexual act—and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it.

Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 63

Central to this study is the concept of liminality; in other words, a desire to articulate the indeterminate space that exists between self and other. In this work, I assert that while the fallen woman, as an ideological construct, might be said to function as the proper middle-class woman's "other," she can also be understood as enacting a "border crisis," one that disrupts the hegemonic concept of "woman" by calling into question what the term excludes. Because the "pure" nineteenth-century woman's body was physiologically identical to that of the fallen woman, the border, in this case, the body, disappeared, illuminating the possibility that the "angel," too, possessed the dangerous, contaminated, and condemned body of her defiled other. In order to critically examine this border crisis, I draw on theoretical frameworks proposed by poststructuralists Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva, using the conceptual lenses of the gaze and abjection to illuminate the discourse of sexuality, morality, and womanhood as they related to, and defined, the nineteenth-century fallen woman.

Chris Weedon asserts that poststructuralist theory "challenges all theories of sexual and gender difference which appeal to the fixed meanings of bodies" (102). This challenge is rooted in the assumption that the world contains no natural or given meanings. Rather, discourses *produce* meaning and subjectivity, therefore making both language and subjectivity ongoing sites of political struggle (102-3). Feminist

poststructural analysis takes this a step further by focusing on the deconstruction of binary oppositions, which have traditionally been used to limit women social position. Therefore, a deconstructionist approach reveals how such supposed oppositions as the nineteenth-century angel/whore binary are discursively produced under specific historical, social, and cultural conditions.

3.1 Foucault and the body as a site of power

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976) both introduced a number of ideas that have become central to feminist poststructural scholarship. Such central ideas include the complex and discursive nature of power and its inherent link with knowledge. Additionally central to feminist scholarship is his conception of the body as a site of power, which is fundamental to the construction of subjectivity (Foucault 25). Foucault's poststructuralist notions of power, surveillance, and the gaze are integral to understanding how subjects are constituted. His understanding of power as a determining force in both the construction and maintenance of subjectivity is essential to my research project. I argue that Webster, in particular, broke new ground in the representation of female subjectivity in relation to the constructing and determining factors of nineteenth-century social formations. But it is also worth considering Judith Butler's argument that "bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (*Bodies that Matter* 2). In making this statement, Butler forces one to consider seriously the agency of individuals—and bodies—in disrupting dominant discourses of power. Indeed, Butler reminds us of the inherent "instabilities" of subjectivity; these instabilities, according to Butler, represent a potential challenge to the

"norms" that govern and regulate a given culture. In Butler's words, "it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization...that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law" (2). According to Butler, individuals—and bodies—become "intelligible," or material, through the constant performance of a given society's norms. In order to be viewed as a "proper" nineteenth-century woman, for example, one would have to "act" in accordance with the characteristics deemed "natural" for a woman by the culture. In the case of nineteenth-century British society, such "feminine" characteristics include inherent kindness, moral superiority, and self-sacrifice. The fallen woman as prostitute is dominantly described as "unnatural" on the basis that she is supposedly lacking these characteristics. The prostitute, therefore, represents a point of "instability" in the subjectivity of the "proper" woman. In refusing to perform the norms that constitute "proper" femininity, she illuminates the "instability" of such norms, on which the subjectivity of the "proper" woman (the angel of the house) depends. Therefore she indeed represents a potent challenge to the period's "hegemonic force[s]" as they relate to women's roles.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault theorizes the gaze as a vehicle of power, one that disciplines and therefore determines the actions of subjects (208). He uses Bentham's panopticon, a central tower in a prison which functions in providing constant surveillance of prisoners, as a metaphor for what he terms "the disciplinary gaze" (174). What becomes key, however, in the discipline of the prisoners, is not only that they are constantly being watched from the tower, but also that the sheer presence of the tower suggests constant surveillance. Therefore whether or not someone is actually watching

the prisoners at any given moment becomes irrelevant, for it is the constant possibility of surveillance that ultimately disciplines. As a result, the prisoners police themselves. Seeing and judging, for Foucault, therefore become "vehicles of power, and the gaze is a ubiquitous mechanism of social control..." (Malacrida and Low 4). The term "gaze" will serve, therefore, to ensure a more nuanced understanding of how power and discipline function, particularly within medical, or scientific, institutions at mid-century. The nineteenth-century fallen woman as prostitute, for example, a fiercely marginalized woman, very often became the focus of a medical gaze, one that resulted in the literal policing of her body, through the Contagious Diseases Acts. Indeed, as Jill Matus notes in *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity*, the titles of medical treatises and social tracts illustrate that both morality and hygiene were serious issues of social concern (2). Such texts form what Foucault has called the "medicine of sex" (*History of Sexuality* 117). The accumulation and infiltration in the society's institutions of the language of disease and infection, evidenced in these texts, resulted in the creation of a discourse which functioned to ensure the supposed "moral cleanliness" of the social body (2). This discourse had serious implications for the nineteenth-century fallen woman. Foucault's concepts of power and the gaze, and their relationship to the "medicine of sex" (117), thus serve my examination of both subjectivity and agency, as well as the representations of the fallen women in relation to discourses on sexuality and reproduction.

Eighteenth-century society is Foucault's chosen case study in *History of Sexuality*. He explains that the period saw a proliferation of discourses of sex and sexuality, rather than, as has been argued, the eradication. Foucault asserts that "since the

classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse of sex; and that this carefully analytic discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself" (16). The limits of what could be—and wanted to be—said about sex were broken, resulting in what Foucault describes as "a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex" (23). Stated simply: the desire of modern society to repress sex resulted instead in the proliferation of discourses about sexuality. These discourses took shape in multiple forms: medical, legal, and religious, among others. Given the diversity of forms, this proliferation is more accurately understood as a multiplicity of discourses (33). Through this complex process, sex was transformed into discourse. In Foucault's words,

It is not simply in terms of a continual extension that we must speak of this discourse growth; it should be seen rather as a dispersion of centers from which discourses emanated, a diversification of their forms, and the complex deployment of the network connecting them. Rather than the uniform concern to hide sex, rather than the general prudishness of language, what distinguishes these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into discourse. (34)

The discourses of sex and sexuality surrounding the figure of the fallen woman are an apt example of the discursive practice Foucault describes here. Indeed, the nineteenth century's concern for "public health," a concern that played a significant role in prostitution being cited as the "Great Social Evil," can be understood as a major factor in the proliferation of discourses about sexuality. Foucault's conceptualization of the discourses of sexuality is threaded throughout my analysis of both the literary and non-literary texts of the period as they relate to the nineteenth-century fallen woman.

3.2 Examining the boarder: Julia Kristeva and the abject "fallen" body

While Foucault's analysis of sex and sexuality is foundational to my study, I am also indebted to the work of Julia Kristeva and her theoretical conception of the abject. In her influential 1982 work, *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva "analyzes the ways in which 'proper' subjectivity and sociality require the expulsion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly" (Grosz 71). Drawing primarily on the work of Freud and Lacan, Kristeva's text uses the concept of the abject in an exploration of subjectivity, more specifically, in how subjectivity originates in the corporeal. Therefore, abjection, what she refers to as the "safeguard [and] primer of...culture" (2), is the keystone of her theoretical conception of how subjects are constituted. This concept guides my examination of depictions of the fallen woman's body and of the period's discourses that relate to women's sexuality, both of which are essential to an examination of a figure defined solely by sexual transgression.

According to Kristeva, the abject is the unexpected and frightening recognition that our identity is both *derived* from and *projected* onto the other. It is that which unsettles or troubles the subject in its constant presence and yet constant exclusion from the norms that govern a given culture, a culture that demands bodies be "clean and proper," controlled and governed. Mary Douglas's theoretical concepts of dirt and pollution, in *Purity and Danger*, are illuminating here. Douglas asserts that "rituals of purity and impurity create unity of experience" (2). The nineteenth century's ideological management of "clean bodies" illuminates uncleanness and dirt as that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained; the abject is something that breaches classification and, like the abject, it is anomalous and ambiguous. Thus, the fallen

woman's body here becomes that which is "unclean" or abject; it is the border which cannot be differentiated and therefore cannot be expelled.

Kristeva provides a clear example of the abject in her discussion of the corpse. The corpse, for Kristeva, "the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (*Powers of Horror* 3). The corpse is an object that has been cast out of the cultural world, having once been a subject, a person. In confronting a corpse, that which is most abject, we simultaneously confront our own mortality, that which we most fear. It thus illuminates the boundary between life and death. This repulsion from death, as well as from excrement and bodily fluids, constitutes the subject as a living being in the symbolic order. We fear it because the corpse signifies our own death, but we simultaneously desire it because its presence reminds us that we are alive. The cadaver thus poses as the ultimate threat to the ego; it is the most potent image of the body's materiality as it reminds us that we, as subjects, are in fact not stable and are therefore not in constant control.

Also central to Kristevan abjection is the idea of permeability: the border may exist, but it is a fluid border that defines the self as other, the other as self. As Kristeva observes, the abject is "a border that has encroached upon everything" (*Powers of Horror* 3). Kristeva's focus on permeable borders allows me to theorize the "border" that is crossed, both physically and ideologically, when a "pure" woman becomes a "fallen" woman, both in terms of lived experience, and also, crucially, when the middle-class reader takes on the speaking "I" of the poems themselves.

Nevertheless, I also consider Imogen Tyler's critique, which argues for a more social and political account that considers the consequences of being considered abject in

a particular historical, social, or political context. Tyler rightly questions the transformative potential of abject criticism, "namely, the idea that affirming representations of abjection can be utilized in a renegotiation of social relations" (85). My study is informed by Tyler's critiques. In particular, I explore the implications of positioning the fallen woman as abject. I question and explore what I see as the poets' questioning of what it means to be so defined. My desire is not to affirm representations of abjection, but rather to use the concept of the abject to illuminate some of nineteenth-century society's complex structural and political acts of inclusion/exclusion in relation to the fallen woman. As Tyler argues, such inclusions and exclusions established the foundations of women's social existence (79). The abjection of the fallen woman and her body thus generated the borders of the "pure" or "proper" woman's subjectivity. She is therefore the abject, that which threatens the period's most sacred figure, and therefore that which must be condemned, repelled, and cast out.

3.3 The dramatic monologue and the meeting of 'self' and 'other.'

In addition to analyzing the role and function of the fallen woman and her body, my work also engages with a critical analysis of the dramatic monologue as a literary genre. Accordingly, theoretical lenses that allow me to interrogate the formal conventions of the dramatic monologue are also central to my study. The dramatic monologue is a form that invites consideration of the politics of both speaking and reading. I am interested in the difference this dramatic form makes in representations of women enmeshed in contemporary social issues related to discourses of morality, sexuality, and motherhood. I argue that Greenwell, Webster, and Blind consciously chose this form

because it forces the reader to consider the narrator's subjectivity in relation to the surrounding social and political contexts. Herbert Tucker, for example, has suggested that the dramatic monologue challenged nineteenth-century reading practices. Previously, the first-person poetic "I" of a text was assumed to be the unmediated lyric expression of the poet (Tucker 124). The dramatic form, however, allows poets to inscribe the fallen woman as *a subject*, while simultaneously demystifying the historically specific constraints to *which she was subject*. In other words, it allows the fallen woman to be positioned as an actor, or agent, who is part of a "historically specific continuum" (Brown 97). Recognition of this socio-historical contingency functions in undermining the absolute and categorical judgments that foreground the archetype of *both* angel of the house and the fallen woman. Replacing the archetype in the monologues of Greenwell, Webster, and Blind, then, is a split subject, a woman divided against herself, both acting and reacting to the contradictory discourses that sought to both "save" and "condemn" her.

Guiding my exploration of the dramatic form in relation to the subject of the fallen women are the poststructural concepts of intertextuality and reader response theory. Intertextuality is used to understand what happens when one or more systems of signs are superimposed over others. Kristeva, a prominent figure in intertextuality studies, has referred to texts in terms of two axes: a *horizontal axis* connecting the author and reader of a text, and a *vertical axis*, which connects the text to other texts (*Desire in Language* 66). This layering is particularly relevant in a form that features a speaking "I" that represents a "fallen" woman, but is written by a middle-class woman poet, and read by a predominantly middle-class, male and female, audience. Theorists of intertextuality

problematicize the status of "authorship," treating the writer of a text as the orchestrator of what Roland Barthes refers to as the "already-written" rather than as its originator (Barthes 21).

In addition, the dramatic monologue invites an exploration of the receptive role of the reader. Lynne Pearce uses Barthes' model to conceive of "the reader as a lover, whose object is not to understand the text but to engage (with) it" (6). This evocative statement captures the performative sensuality of the writing/reading relationship, a sensuality encapsulated in the written and spoken "I" of the narrator/author/reader. Pearce's conception of the reader as a lover also points to the productive role of desire in the relationship between reader and text. This desire, when considered in light of Kristevan abjection, allows us to speculate further on the entangled relationship between self and other as this plays itself out on the borders of individual subjectivity. It is in this way that the subject forcibly reminds us that we are both self and other. The conventions of the dramatic monologue thus enable the reader to fulfill her subconscious desire to confront the other.

It is worth noting in relation to this subconscious desire to confront the other that fallen women, upon entering refuges, were often asked to recount the story of their sexual "fall" in a manner not entirely different from the dramatic monologue (Eberle 138). However, once admitted, they were not permitted to speak of their history, as reform promised the erasure of the "disreputable" past and, further, its replacement with a story of "reform" in accordance with middle-class mores. The desire on the part of reformers to hear the fallen woman's narrative of sexual "transgression" can be read as a desire to confront the other, an act that simultaneously defined the borders of their own

"respectable" subjectivity. In addition, while these narratives, spoken by the women themselves and likely depicting poverty and isolation, had the potential to inspire social critique and change, they were rarely, if ever, made public, as "reform" and reintegration into "proper" society depended upon their being silenced. In contrast, the fallen women of Greenwell, Webster, and Blind's texts are invited into middle-class sitting rooms in order to "speak" their narratives, narratives that similarly had the potential to inspire social and political change.

Therefore, like Pearce, I, too, use Barthes' reader response theory in order to explore the politics of reading exemplified by the form of dramatic monologue. I see this exploration as particularly important, as the dramatic monologue was used by Greenwell, Webster, and Blind, in order to engage in social critique, thereby making the reader's position as interpreter a political one. Consider, for example, that the middle-class reader "becomes" the "I" in the practice of reading a monologue. Like the poet, she/he takes on the position of the speaker and is therefore placed, however superficially, into the position of other. Just as the act of writing superimposes the authorial "I" over the "I" of the fallen woman, in a political act designed to draw attention to her tragic and suffering position, so too does the reader's response become political, a process whereby the reader's "I" intermingles with the authorial "I" and the fallen "I." It is through this process that the dramatic monologue, unlike any other literary form, allows the reader to momentarily place him or herself in the position of the fallen, a process wherein the binary oppositions of "pure" and "impure" are momentarily suspended. Furthermore, in reading the monologues of Greenwell, Webster, and Blind, middle-class men and women spoke *in the voice of the "fallen," on behalf of the fallen.* This was of course the case

whether they intended it or not, as the authorial "I" of Greenwell, Webster, and Blind was meant to provoke and inspire change.

In the chapters that follow, I examine closely the ways in which Greenwell, Webster, and Blind invited the predominantly middle class readers of their poems to "speak" in the voice of fallen women.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dora Greenwell (1821-1882) and "Christina"

We learn from the gracious sympathy thus accorded to the Magdalen that, deadly as was this woman's sin, yet it was not necessarily a sin unto death...iniquity is not blasphemy...it may lead to that crime. It is not the crime itself.

"The Accepted Penitent," *The Magdalen's Friend* (1860)

Dora Greenwell's 1861 poem "Christina"² was the first nineteenth-century dramatic monologue devoted to the subject of "fallenness." As such, it marks a significant point of comparison for the later "fallen woman" monologues of Augusta Webster and Mathilde Blind. The monologue is spoken by an unnamed fallen woman who awaits death at a refuge, having long since left the "guilty city far behind [her]" (409). She recounts the story of her "redemption" to a "kind Father" (1), presumably a priest who stands over her deathbed. Her monologue depicts her sexual "fall," subsequent exile from "respectable" society, and her separation from her childhood friend, Christina. As she speaks, her hands cradle a cross, a symbol of the "love and reconciling mercy" (8) of her lost friend, whose life she had been secretly watching since her "fall." The monologue's climax is found in a chance meeting between the "fallen" and "unfallen," wherein the speaker is inspired to seek out *her own* "redemption." The monologue closes by repeating the speaker's final wish: that the Father return the treasured talisman (the cross) to Christina after her death, so that she will know that her fallen friend had found a "surer refuge" (417) and therefore had *chosen* to be reformed.

In this chapter, I will offer a detailed analysis of the key elements of Greenwell's powerful poem, demonstrating the ways in which it both confirms to and challenges

² Dora Greenwell, "Christina," <http://www.englweb.usmd.edu/englfac/fRady/359A/DoraGreenwellChristina.pdf> (June 2010).

dominant fallen woman narratives. I will begin, however, by providing a brief biographical discussion of Greenwell, a devout member of the Church of England, who worked directly with fallen women through the reclamation movement.

4.1 Dora Greenwell: a brief biography

Dora Greenwell, among the most highly praised woman poets of her day, was born outside Durham in the winter of 1821. As the only daughter of William Thomas Greenwell, a squire and magistrate, the young privileged girl was expected to learn the manners and skills of a proper, and therefore marriageable, "lady." However, not satisfied with the traditional skill-set of a gentlewoman—needlework, piano playing, drawing, and singing—Greenwell educated herself using whatever materials were at hand. Her ambitious lesson plan resulted in her becoming adept in languages—French, Italian, and Latin—medieval lore, and social economy (Gray 141). However, while this early, self-garnered education would undoubtedly serve her well in her career as a writer, it was her father's loss of their family property in 1847 that unexpectedly granted her freedom from the expectations of her class. This freedom served as a catalyst for her literary career. Within three years of the loss of her family home and social status, the now twenty-seven year old, unmarried Greenwell would publish her first two books, *Poems* (1848) and *Stories that Might be True* (1850). While these verse works received little critical attention, her later prose works, *A Present Heaven* (1855) and *Patience in Hope* (1860), were "enthusiastically received" (Gray 143). As a result of this success, Greenwell became chiefly known for her spiritual subject matter; indeed her faith is undoubtedly at

the root of her poetry and prose works, a fact that, according to some contemporary reviewers, "worked against her popularity" (147).

However, in addition to such spiritual subject matter, she also published on several contemporary social issues in the prominent *North British Review*. Her articles cover such issues as slavery, mental illness, and the position of single women: all objects of social injustice. Of particular interest is a discussion of "Christina" are her essays that focus on philanthropic work. These essays are titled "Our Single Women" (1862) and "Hardened in Good" (1866). The former argues that more forms of employment need to be opened to women, especially in the light of the 1851 census, which documented the imbalance between the sexes. This essay overtly, and passionately, argues for the creation of institutions through which single women can "do work expressive of their inner growth" (Gray 141). In the latter essay, "Hardened in Good," Greenwell speaks against the too often romanticized and sentimental descriptions of philanthropic work that had become common to nineteenth-century society. She is overtly critical of conventional reclamation narratives, which present fallen women as passive recipients of "salvation." Indeed, her purpose in this essay is to move beyond such "tinsel sentiment" (70), for the fallen woman, according to Greenwell, is very often not "the ideal poor [woman], beauteous, industrious, patient, grateful" (Greenwell "Hardened" 75), but is, rather, "[an] actual woman, with actual incapacities and imperfections who must sometimes be left 'as [she] is'" ("Hardened" 70-71). Her monologue, "Christina," can be read as a part of this project to debunk the conventional romantic myths in order to expose the realities, in this case, of the complex and often difficult nature of reclamation work.

These prose works stem from Greenwell's own experiences with philanthropic organizations. Like many women at mid-century, she saw such work as a possible form of employment for women. William Dorling's 1885 biography of Greenwell provides a catalogue of her philanthropic work, which included ministry to the poor, visiting inmates at the prison, campaigning to establish asylums for the mentally ill, and working with fallen women through the reclamation movement. Her work with fallen women was undoubtedly related to her life-long friendship with another young missionary, Josephine Grey. Gray, later Josephine Butler, would become a lead figure in the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s. Greenwell's "Christina" was likely inspired by this friendship.

During her final years, Greenwell campaigned for women's suffrage, despite her declining health. She died in March of 1882 and was buried in Arno's Vale cemetery in Bristol (Bose 81). In a statement that succinctly summarizes her life and writing, Greenwell once asserted that "women, in social life, are required to withhold and suppress feeling, but in their writing they reveal secret selves with fine minds, strong passions, and exacting consciences made morbid by social constriction" (quoted by Gray 148). Her monologue, "Christina," is among her most powerful challenges to such social constriction.

4.2 "Christina"

Angela Leighton provides one of very few critical readings of Dora Greenwell's "Christina" in her important essay "'Because men made the laws': The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet." Having devoted a brief paragraph to the monologue, she

concludes by asserting that "the religious sentimentality of [the] poem keeps it from [representing] anything more than a failed gesture of philanthropy" (118). Few, if any, scholars of nineteenth-century literature have countered this point. And yet, this, as we shall see, is not the case. Indeed, Greenwell's powerful monologue, while conventional in some ways, serves as an effective counter not only to the period's dominant "Harlot's Progress" narratives, but also to its often sentimental and romanticized narratives of reclamation. Greenwell refuses to depict the penitent and passive fallen woman, suggesting rather, that society's positioning of her as a diseased pariah has caused her to develop a strong resistance, if not aversion, to traditional reclamation efforts. She therefore depicts a fallen woman who seeks out *her own* form of "reclamation" and who therefore initiates her own "salvation." In positioning the fallen woman as an agent in her own right, "Christina" is remarkably unconventional.

The 425-line blank verse dramatic monologue presents the voice of an unnamed speaker who awaits death in a refuge for the fallen. Having asked a "kind Father" (1) to fulfill her dying wish—to return a treasured cross to her long-lost friend, Christina—the speaker then delves into the story of her past, describing the sequence of events that led her to choose reclamation. The monologue details her complex internalization of the period's condemning moralist discourses, discourses that are exemplified in the speaker's description of an evangelical preacher, who used "the terrors of the Lord in his persuading" (41). Indeed, she initially describes herself—and her body—in terms of branding, barrenness, and disease. However, these image patterns progress not towards death, but rather towards images of regeneration and rebirth. The tracing of such patterns to their completion therefore becomes fundamental to understanding the nature of the

"harlot's progress" in Greenwell's powerful poem. Her "fallen" speaker progresses toward reclamation (and spiritual rebirth), and therefore not the degeneration and death of archetypal narratives.

Indeed, as the poem proceeds, it complicates, and ultimately alters, such conventional narratives through its presentation of the speaker's relationship with her childhood, unfallen friend. In fact, the poem presents a complex and reciprocal interaction between Christina and the speaker; this reciprocity undermines any stark dichotomy between angel and harlot, savior and saved. The blurring of such archetypal distinctions finds its ultimate symbolic expression in the poem's climax, a scene of encounter between fallen and unfallen. Upon recognizing her lost childhood friend, having first mistaken her for an angel, Christina passionately embraces the speaker (349). This highly symbolic moment of emotional and physical connection effectively erases any binary distinctions between fallen and unfallen, as *both* women are "saved" by the encounter. The fallen speaker is inspired to seek out her own form of reclamation, while the unfallen Christina is "reformed" through her recognition of the "other" as self.

That said, the poem closes by returning to the present, and therefore by reminding Greenwell's reader that the fallen speaker awaits conventional death at a refuge. Her decision to enter a refuge—albeit on her own terms—suggests that while she refused the reclamation she was offered by Christina, she does not question her society's assertion that she required some form of "salvation." Therefore, Greenwell's "Christina," which will be analyzed in detail in the sections that follow, is significant not because of its overt refusal of the conventional narrative of the "Harlot's Progress," but because of its *revisions* to the narrative. The challenge to conventional narratives inherent in such

revisions will be echoed—and ultimately taken further—by the work of Webster and Blind.

Three key aspects of the poem highlight Greenwell's challenges to dominant discourses as they relate to both fallen women and reclamation: the starkly contrasting images of the Father and the hell-fire minister (and the reclamation tactics associated with each), the narrative of the speaker's "fall" (which introduces the poem's image patterns), and finally, the scene of encounter between fallen and unfallen. I assess each of these elements in the sections that follow. I begin with a discussion of the poem's specific social location: a refuge for the fallen. This section will include an analysis of the speaker's audience, the "kind Father," whose silent presence is fundamental to Greenwell's critique of traditional reclamation narratives. The second section will provide a detailed reading of the speaker's "fall" narrative, a narrative that highlights Greenwell's critique of moralist discourse. In this section, I also offer a close analysis of the poem's image patterns, which progress from symbols of degeneration and decay to those of regeneration and rebirth. The final section will discuss the poem's climactic meeting of fallen and unfallen, and will conclude by suggesting that it is in fact not only the fallen speaker who is "redeemed," but also the unfallen Christina, who is redeemed through her recognition of the other as self, and therefore of the "fallen woman" "as she is."

The opening lines of "Christina" immediately establish Greenwell's challenge to conventional "Harlot's Progress" narratives:

Father, when I am in my grave, kind Father,
Take thou this cross,—I had it from a girl,—
Take it to one that I will tell thee of,—
Unno Christina.

I have kept it by me, treasured it though years
Of evil, when I dared not look upon it;
But of the love and reconciling mercy
Whereof it is a token, now it speaks. (1-9)

While the speaker's seemingly imminent death appears to reflect Greenwell's acquiescence to dominant discourses, this is in fact not entirely the case. For while conventional narratives indeed end in death, this death is generally preceded by a clear moral and spiritual degeneration: once women have fallen, "their downward path [is] a marked and inevitable one" (Greg 241). In contrast, in Greenwell's text, the seemingly irrevocable path of seduction, degeneration, and death is fundamentally complicated, first through the speaker's connection to her unfallen friend, and, second, through her piety, evidenced by her address to a Father and her safekeeping of a treasured cross: "Take thou this cross, I had it from a girl / Take it to one that I will tell thee of / Unto Christina" (1-3). It is also worth noting the speaker's tone in this passage; her commanding that the Father take her treasured cross signifies her ownership of the religious symbol. Furthermore, her decision to give the cross to Christina reflects her sense of control over her own decisions.

In addition, these opening lines also establish the poem's specific social location: a refuge for the fallen. This location subtly highlights Greenwell's second point of critique: sentimental and romanticized narratives of reclamation, which were often perpetuated by such institutions. These narratives generally depict the movement's missionaries as Christ-like saviors to lost, and presumably penitent, lambs. In other words, such stories depict fallen women as passive figures who are *acted upon*, having been denied agency in their own reclamation. In the light of this, Greenwell's

presentation of a "kind Father" becomes significant. His role as *silent* listener functions in highlighting the speaker's position as an agent in the text; he must be *made privy* to the narrative of her reclamation because she has brought about her own "salvation."

The speaker's address to a Father is additionally significant because the understanding sympathy of the priest dramatically contrasts with the unyielding severity of the fire-and-brimstone preacher. Indeed, Greenwell wishes to critique the "wild and stern" preacher who demands that the fallen "Seek God...for [they] must *die*!" (italics in original 52). Having told her final wish to the Father, the speaker proceeds to describe the sequence of events that led her to choose reform. She declares: "Once, ere my soul had burst the fowler's snare, / I heard a wild stern man, that stood and cried / Within the market-place" (32-34). According to Mark Knight and Emma Mason, in *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, one of the many ways evangelicals sought to "persuade" transgressors into seeking salvation was to describe, graphically, the terrible dangers that awaited them in the afterlife if they did not repent (144). Preachers, and well-circulated religious tracts and periodicals, would therefore urge sinners to "repent in order to avoid the terrors of hell" (144). Such preachers and tracts were common features of London's streets. Therefore, the vast majority of Greenwell's predominantly middle-class readers would immediately recognize the speaker's description of the "wild stern man" who called on "the terrors of the Lord in his persuading" (41), as an evangelical preacher. Greenwell's critique of this form of reclamation tactic is clear, for the result of the preacher's vehement talk of death and judgment (42-3) does not have the desired effect on the speaker. Rather, in response to such public cries of shame, the speaker angrily states:

Oh! Then, I thought, if one like me might speak,
If I might find a voice, now would I raise
A yet more bitter and exceeding cry,
'Seek God, run after him, for ye must live!' (53-6)

The line "if one like me might speak," illuminates the limited social position of the fallen woman and, in turn, the importance of dramatic form as it permits the fallen woman a "voice," albeit a mediated one. Greenwell's decision to represent the voice of the fallen woman through dramatic form can also be read as an assertion that she (the fallen woman) is not only worthy and deserving of an audience, but also worthy of reclamation and thus not necessarily bound for hell, as the preacher argues.

In addition, the speaker's visceral reaction to the preacher's words illuminates Greenwell's critique of such methods of reclamation. Such tactics, tantamount to public scorn, denied the speaker a voice in her own "reform." While the preacher's desire is supposedly "to seek, and haply save, some wondering one" (36), his tactics function only in silencing the fallen speaker, who, if given voice and venue, would have spoken of her actual, *lived* experiences of "fallenness." Imagining what she would have said to the preacher, she states:

I know not what it may be in that world
The future world, the wide unknown hereafter,
That waits for us, to be afar from God;
Yet can I witness of a desolation
That I have known; can witness of a place
Where spirits wander up and down in torment,
And tell you what it is to want *him here*." (italics in original 57-63)

This passage highlights the speaker's knowledge of the harsh *social* realities of prostitution. She had gained this knowledge through her lived experience. And yet, while her personal narrative of "desolation" and "torment" has the potential to shock and

provoke change, she is silenced by the “bold and vehement” (38) words of the preacher. Indeed, if “one like [her] might speak,” others might be made privy to the social—and therefore not moral—realities of fallenness. In textually highlighting—in 1861—the fundamental importance of the fallen woman’s experience, voice, and agency, Greenwell’s “Christina” is remarkably unconventional.

It is the speaker’s narrative of her youth and sexual “fall” that marks the poem’s most compelling challenge to conventional fallen woman narratives. Indeed, the circumstances of the speaker’s “fall” introduce Greenwell’s critique of dominant moral and medical discourses as they related to fallen women. In telling her “common tale” (67), the speaker depicts an innocent and impoverished young girl seduced by a presumably knowing and callous man. However, she views herself as guilty, immoral, and diseased. Describing the nature and circumstances of her “fall,” she states:

I had no friends. I was poor
In all but beauty, and an innocence
That was not a virtue—failing in the trial.
Mine is a common tale, all the sadder
Because it is so common: I was sought
By one who wore me for a time, then flung
Me off; a rose with all its sweetness gone,
Yet with enough of bloom to flaunt a while,
Although the worm was busy at its core (64-72).

This narrative presents several external factors that likely led to her “fall”: isolation and poverty, lack of social mobility and economic position, innocence (lack of sexual education), and beauty (corporeal capital). While the speaker also suggests that vanity might have played a role in her downfall—“I that once had scorned / At lowly poverty and honest love”—this vanity appears to be connected to her “innocence / That was not a virtue” (65-66); in other words, her lack of experience and education, similar to that of

George Eliot's *Hetty Sorrel*. At the time of Greenwell's writing of "Christina" (1851), journalists and social reformers were beginning to explore the social and economic causes of female "fallenness." Henry Mayhew's text, cited previously is an example of this. Mayhew's text sought to expose the same external causes of sexual "fallenness" that Greenwell's speaker unconsciously depicts. This recognition of external circumstances is significant, as it exposes sexual "fallenness" as a socio-cultural, and therefore not simply moral, issue.

However, despite this listing of external factors, Greenwell's speaker nonetheless appears to take responsibility for her fall. Therefore, rather than politically analyzing her socially constructed position, the speaker, at this point in the narrative, appears to internalize the period's dominant discourses, describing herself as a cut rose with a "worm busy at its core" (72). In this regard, the monologue maintains dominant discourses; Greenwell's argument is for the importance of the speaker's agency in her own "reform." She therefore does not question the speaker's need for reform, a fact that implicitly highlights her conventional conception of fallenness as a "sin." The image of the cut rose—a mere adornment for a man's lapel—suggests that after her sexual "fall," her life—without reform—would end in degeneration and death. This fate echoes the dominant "Harlot's Progress" narratives of the period. Having been "cut" from her natural position as potential angel of the house, she can only wither, decay, and die.

As the metaphor of the rose is extended—the flower holds a "worm busy at its core" (72)—it becomes clear that the speaker has internalized the language of infection and disease that was often used in medical and religious texts and tracts to describe fallen women during the period. In addition, the image of the worm contains potentially phallic

connotations, while the phrase "busy at its core" has connotations of disease potentially associated with sexual encounter. The colorful preface to Dr. William Acton's widely read book *Prostitution* provides an apt example of such discourse. The text opens by describing prostitution as "eating away at the heart of society" (Introduction A). He thus uses the language of infection and disease to describe both "fallenness" and the body of the fallen woman. His text then goes on to describe venereal disease as "wounds and petrifying sores that are eating into our system" (Introduction B). The "system" refers to society, which is here represented through a metaphor of the body. Greenwell's speaker, having described herself using these same terms, has thus internalized such discourse.

However, as the poem proceeds, it complicates, and ultimately alters, such conventional narratives through its presentation of the speaker's relationship with her childhood, unfallen friend. Indeed these image patterns of degeneration and disease progress instead towards images of regeneration and rebirth. This profound change in the speaker's conception of her "soul" is brought about through her relationship and eventual physical encounter with her unfallen friend, Christina. The poem ultimately presents a complex and reciprocal interaction between Christina and the speaker, which undermines any stark dichotomy between angel and harlot, savior and saved. The speaker, for example, describes how she was a constant, albeit unseen, presence in Christina's life, having "looked upon her in her home" (115) and having watched her weep over the grave of her daughter (153). Conversely, Christina, upon being reunited with her friend—at the poem's climax—twice cries, "I have found thee!" (230), which suggests that the fallen speaker had been a constant presence in her life as well. This constant relation between

fallen and unfallen is further highlighted as the speaker describes her emotional and spiritual connection to her friend:

Across the world-wide gulf betwixt us set
My soul stretched out a bridge, a slender hair,
Wherein repossessing swiftly to and fro,
It linked itself unseen with all her lot. (104-8)

This constant connection between the fallen and unfallen functions in countering any stark dichotomy between the two figures. Dominant narratives often sought to demonize the fallen woman in order to safely distance those who were "fallen" from those who remained "pure," thereby protecting the identity of the angel of house and promoting the ideology that "respectable and disreputable [women] were fundamentally different and could be kept separate" (Sutphin 512). In effectively blurring such archetypal distinctions, Greenwell's monologue presents a potent challenge to convention.

This blurring of archetypal distinctions finds its ultimate symbolic expression in the poem's scene of encounter between fallen and unfallen, the poem's climax. The speaker tells the Father that Christina had found her while she was standing over the grave of her daughter. However, before Christina recognized her lost childhood friend as the "gracious presence" who had often scattered flowers over her child's grave, she mistook her for an angel:

'And who art thou, with charitable hand
Such kindness showing to the dead, the living?
Now let me look upon thy face, for long
My soul hath deemed of thee as of the angels
That come and go unseen, and only traced
By deeds that show some gracious Presence near;
Yet, surely thou art one whom earth hath taught
Through sorrow and through love this gentleness
With grieving hearts, with stricken ones; from mine
The blessing of the sorrowful be on Thee!' (190-99)

In describing the speaker's benevolent and angelic presence, Greenwell—through Christina—appears to suggest the possibility that the narrator can function as an angel precisely because of what she has experienced as a fallen woman: "thou art one whom earth hath taught / Through sorrow and through love." Greenwell's assertion here is for the value of the fallen woman's experience. She suggests that the speaker's intimate knowledge of "desolation" (60) and "torment" (62) has made her capable of great empathy. In other words, it is in knowing such profound "sorrow" that the speaker is suited to the role of angel. In making this suggestion, Greenwell's "Christina" is remarkably challenging to convention.

In response to Christina's assertion that the narrator is an angelic presence, the speaker's desire is for her friend to "look upon [her] as [she] is" (209). At this point in the narrative, she perceives herself as "wretched" (223), describing herself as "a withered leaf" (260). Such terms are, of course, akin to those of dominant moralist discourse. Therefore, as the speaker leads her friend toward the "dim light" of a "great Minster" (213), she expects her unfallen friend to recognize and then inevitably reject her, "being then unto [herself] so hateful" (85). However, Christina's response is joyful and she proceeds to convince the speaker of her value by focusing on the similarities, rather than the supposed inherent differences, between them: "Look on me, / A sinner such as thou,—yet I have loved thee" (283–84). Christina then proceeds to embrace the speaker as the two kneel down in prayer. It is this moment of physical connection that effectively erases any distinction between fallen and unfallen. Once this binary is removed, the speaker undergoes a spiritual transformation. The passage is worth quoting at length:

But I was passive in her arms, I knew

She wrestled sorely for me; yet as one
That feels in heavy dreams a strife go on,
And may not stir a finger, by the chain
Of slumber compassed: so my turbid soul
Slept numb, yet conscious, till within my heart,
That no movement of its own, but rose
Upon Christina's heart that heaved beneath it,
At length this miracle of love was wrought:
Her spirit lay on mine.

[...]

And o'er the chaos of the void within
A breath moved lightly, and my soul stretched out
Its feelers darkly, as a broken vine
Puts forth its bruised tendrils to the sun:
A mighty yearning look took me, and a sigh
Burst from my bosom, cleaving for my soul
A way to follow it. (343-53, 355-61)

This highly symbolic moment of emotional and physical connection indeed erases any binary distinctions between fallen and unfallen: "Her spirit lay on mine." The spiritual transformation in the speaker is signaled by the passage's images, which have transformed from degeneration and death into rebirth and growth: "and my soul stretched out / Its feelers darkly, as a broken vine / Puts forth its bruised tendrils to the sun." However, it is not only the fallen woman who is "saved" by the encounter. Indeed, while the speaker is inspired to seek out her own form of reclamation, the unfallen Christina is "reformed" through her recognition of the "other" as self or, in other words, through a recognition of the fallen woman "as she is" (208). And what she "is," according to Greenwell's monologue, is a potential angel, a woman whose experiences of fallenness have provided her with a profound and valuable knowledge of sorrow. In light of this, Greenwell appears to suggest that it is in treating the fallen woman with respect and

sympathy that her reclamation becomes possible. For it is in doing so that the fallen woman can recognize the inherent value of her experience.

However Greenwell makes it clear that the decision to choose reform can only be made by the fallen woman herself; she must be an agent in her own reclamation. This becomes clear as Christina, overwhelmed with joy at having found her lost friend, invites her to come into her home and replace her lost child as a surrogate daughter (369):

When we arose up from our knees, her face
Was calm and happy, then she kissed me, saying,
"I call thee not my Sister, as of old,
But come with me unto my home, and there
Be thou unto me even as a Daughter,
In place of her God gave and took again,—
So hath He given thee to me. (365-71)

While the speaker recognizes the transformative power of the encounter, calling it "a miracle of love" (351), she nonetheless refuses to accept, choosing rather to seek out her own form of reclamation: "That same night / I left the guilty city far behind me" (408-9). For regardless of Christina's clear desire and devotion to aiding her lost friend, her proposed form of reclamation nonetheless denies the fallen speaker the role of agent in her own reform. By equating her friend with a child, Christina suggests that the speaker is helpless and thus in need of maternal guidance that is best found within the home. Greenwell's speaker refuses this offer of reclamation, thereby simultaneously asserting herself as an agent, a position she is rarely—if ever—granted in conventional reclamation narratives.

In seeking recognition for the fallen woman as *an agent* in the process of reclamation, Greenwell's "Christina" is remarkably significant. However, while the poem is challenging in this regard, it is conventional in its confining the fallen speaker in other

significant ways. While the speaker refuses the reclamation she is offered, she does not question her society's assertion that she requires *some form* of reform. Greenwell thus cannot completely evade moralist discourse, for her speaker must find a "sure refuge" (i.e. heaven, death) (417), from where she can send her childhood friend proof (the cross) that she did indeed choose a path where she could "Go and sin no more!" (387). As a result, the poem closes with the same image with which it opened, depicting a pious fallen woman, who addresses a "Father" and cradles a cross, while she awaits death at a refuge.

Greenwell's monologue is therefore significant not because of its overt refusal of the conventional narrative of the "Harlot's Progress," but because of its *revisions* to the narrative. As we shall see, Augusta Webster's "A Castaway," the focus of the next chapter, is not confined by the moral framework of its predecessor. The 1870 monologue depicts a fallen woman who refuses not only the "reclamation" she is offered, but also her society's presumption that she requires it, for Eulalie, Webster's speaker, is "a woman sure, / No fiend, no slimy thing out of the pools, / A woman with a ripe and smiling lip / That has no venom in its touch I think" (27-31).

CHAPTER FIVE

Augusta Webster (1837-1894) and "A Castaway"

Must we believe the moralists, or may we trust our own experience of average men and women, and reject these imaginations of wholesale depravity, of assignations and intrigues, of guilt in the afternoon cup of tea, and danger in the morning call?

Webster, *A Housewife's Opinions* 20

"A Castaway"² marked Augusta Webster, outspoken feminist and social critic, as among the foremost poets of her day. The 663-line blank verse dramatic monologue presents the voice of Eulalie, a high-class London prostitute, who sits alone in front of her mirror, musing on the course of her life. Having re-read the pages of her childhood diary, she reflects on her innocent past before launching into an extensive critique of the politics of prostitution, politics that position her outside of "proper" society, as the title suggests. While initially focusing her critique on the period's condemning terms for the prostitute, her monologue extends into a remarkably succinct and yet panoramic indictment of the gendered inequalities of nineteenth-century society.

This chapter will proceed by providing a brief biographical discussion of Augusta Webster, a woman who devoted much of her adult life to improving the social and political position of women, including fallen women, who were often the subject of her widely-read social and political writings. This discussion will thereby present the context out which "A Castaway" arose. Having thus provided the biographical details of the author, this chapter will then offer a detailed critical analysis of her remarkably unconventional poem.

² Augusta Webster, "A Castaway," Old Poetry Online, <http://oldpoetry.com/ipoem/16850-Augusta-Davies-Webster-A-Castaway> (June 2010).

5.1 Augusta Webster: A biographical sketch

By 1870, according to the *Examiner* and *London Review*, Webster had succeeded Elizabeth Barrett Browning as Britain's leading poetess. Yet by her death, in 1894, she seems to have disappeared from the literary landscape. Christine Sutphin asserts that the only constructions of Webster—until a hundred years after her death—are “an admiring obituary by Theodore Watts-Dunton, a laudatory entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, [and] an ambivalent introduction to a few of her poems by Mackenzie Bell...” (9). Indeed, the known intimate details of Julia Augusta Webster's life amount to no more than a short, and seemingly unremarkable, biographical sketch.

Augusta Davies was born in Dorset in 1837 to Julia Hume Davies and Vice-Admiral George Davies, a naval officer who was later appointed chief constable of Cambridgeshire. She spent the early years of her life sailing along England's southern coast on board her father's ship, the *Griper*. Like Greenwell, she never received a formal education; however, she became proficient and later fluent in Greek and later learned French and Spanish during brief visits to Geneva and Paris (Sutphin 10). Her success in these language studies is evident in her much-acclaimed translations of *Medea* and *Prometheus* in 1866. This type of education was virtually unheard of for a young woman. As Sutphin points out, knowledge of classical languages was “gentlemanly” (10), and Webster's decision to learn Greek thus represented a challenge to normative femininity. This challenge would find its ultimate expression in “A Castaway,” as we shall see.

Augusta Davies married Thomas Webster, a law lecturer at Cambridge, in 1863; the couple had one child: a daughter. Webster's unconventional social positioning is highlighted by her family's decision to move to London for the sake of her career rather

than that of her husband. In London, Webster became increasingly involved in the city's public and political life, working for the National Committee for Women's Suffrage, taking a position on the London school board, and writing on both literary and social matters for the prominent journal, the *Examiner*.

"A Castaway," the fourth monologue in Webster's critically acclaimed *Portraits*, was published in 1870 and cemented Webster's position among Britain's most pre-eminent poetic voices. The poem, together with the others in the collection, appeared at a critical period in British social and political history. Not only were the Contagious Diseases Acts still being heavily debated, but John Stuart Mill's suffrage amendment to the Reform Bill, introduced in 1867, had recently been defeated. With *Portraits*, Webster, too, entered the political arena, offering in her poetry a stinging indictment of nineteenth-century society's sexual double standards. The dramatic form provided a safe historical and/or cultural distance, which allowed the speakers to express fears, frustrations, and desires that would be all but impossible for a "respectable" nineteenth-century woman to bring forward. Arguably the most famous of these societal critiques is her dramatic monologue, "A Castaway."

5.2 "A Castaway"

Augusta Webster's "A Castaway" was published in *Portraits* in 1870, one year after James Greenwood released his journalistic investigations into the "wilds" of the city's streets. The social and political context of this publication is significant as it illuminates, in part, the very moralistic discourses Webster's powerful poem sought to critique. Greenwood's widely read text, colorfully titled *The Seven Curses of London*,

argued for a "merciful consideration" (202) of the fallen woman, who was positioned by Greenwood as the fourth "curse" of the great city, following neglected children, professional thieves, and beggars. In wholly conventional terms, Greenwood describes the miserable existence of the fallen woman as prostitute:

She is to herself vile, and she has no other resource but to flee to the gin-measure, and therein hide herself from herself. She has no pleasure even. Never was there made a grimmer joke than that which designates her life as a short and *merry* one....I am not now alluding to the low prostitute, the conscienceless wretch who wallows in vice and mire and strong liquor in a back street of Shadwell, but to the woman of some breeding and delicacy, the "well-dressed" creature, in fact, who does not habitually "walk the streets," but betakes herself to places of popular resort for persons of a "fast" turn, and who have money, and are desirous of expending some of it in "seeing life." (202)

Greenwood's depiction of the "well-dressed" prostitute as a self-loathing and drunken "creature" was common to religious texts and tracts that sought to combat "the Great Social Evil" throughout the period. In addition, in presenting an image of the fallen woman as self-loathing and void of pleasure, such descriptions justified arguments for her "salvation" through reclamation. Even the more liberal and pioneering social figures and writers of the period, such as Henry Mayhew and Josephine Butler, were similar to Greenwood in their reliance on a traditionally *moralistic* understanding of prostitution. As we have seen, Dora Greenwell's 1861 monologue, "Christina," was similarly confined. For while the poem's unnamed speaker refused the reclamation she was offered, she did not question her society's assertion that she required *some form* of "salvation." Such texts left intact a fundamental element of the very narratives they sought to critique: the notion of the "fall." This concept was derived—however unconsciously—from conventional moralist and religious discourse, for it signified a sexual, social, and moral *descent*. It is from this depreciated position that the "fallen"

were reclaimed, if not as angels of the house, then certainly as "respectable" seamstresses or servants, a process which effectively maintained the angel/harlot dichotomy of conservative nineteenth-century moral ideology.

Webster's "A Castaway" adamantly challenges such moral and religious conceptions of "fallenness." In fact, the monologue marks a striking shift in nineteenth-century thinking regarding sexual politics and social hierarchy. For Webster, there are no "fallen" women, just as there are no "pure" women. Rather, there are exploited and marginalized women who are denied access to education, work, and the vote, women who are socially constituted within (and by) the complex gender and class biases of the nineteenth-century. Therefore, the monologue, spoken by a high-class London courtesan, pinpoints and relentlessly destabilizes the fundamental elements of archetypal fallen woman narratives. In the process, the monologue challenges not only the stock condemnation of fallen women, but also the cultivated notion of "female essence" that underpins it. The monologue critiques almost every facet of the period's dominant fallen woman narratives, beginning with moral and medical depictions of degeneration, drunkenness, and disease, and then moving swiftly toward religious (reclamation) depictions of innocence, salvation, and death.

The lengthy blank verse dramatic monologue presents the voice of Eulalie, a London prostitute, who sits alone in front of her mirror, musing on the course of her life. She reflects on her innocent past before launching into an extensive critique of the politics of prostitution. The poem appears at first to respond directly to Greenwood's moralist conceptions of the "well-dressed" courtesan, for Eulalie refuses to be reduced to a drunken and self-loathing "creature:" "I am not drunk in the streets, ply not for hire at

infamous corners..." (51). Rather, her monologue reveals a beautiful, educated, and intelligent middle-class woman whose speech, in its scathing critique of the domestic ideal, suggests the presence of some form of agency in her position as prostitute; she lives, after all, in an urban job market with few opportunities for single women. It is in this way that Eulalie represents an entirely new voice in fallen woman discourse, one that is neither villain nor victim, and therefore neither entirely guilty nor entirely innocent in her social position and circumstance. Eulalie is depicted as simultaneously aware of and yet struggling within the social forces that confine her. This internal struggle presents Webster as one overtly refuting her society's dominant discourses regarding women's "nature" or "essence." "A Castaway" appears to have successfully moved beyond what Greenwell terms "the tinsel sentiment" ("Hardened in Good" 70), presenting prostitution as form of labour—and therefore not a form of vice. It therefore effectively transforms what was a religious and moral subject for Butler and Greenwell (and Greenwood) into an undeniably social one, thereby opening up a discussion of women's "fallenness" as inherently connected to broader social issues such as women's limited access to education and work outside the home. Webster's "A Castaway," in short, marks a decisive shift in nineteenth-century representations of the fallen woman, as Eulalie effectively demands that her audience reconsider its longstanding assumptions about prostitution, sexual "fallenness," and social hierarchy.

In making my arguments, I will draw not only on Webster's other published work, notably her essays in the *Examiner*, but also on the fiction and poetry of her contemporaries, in particular Elizabeth Gaskell and Dora Greenwell. I will also draw on the work of prominent social and political figures, such as Josephine Butler and William

Acton. Such a framing allows me to better situate and contextualize Webster's writing in a broader critical frame of both literary and socio-historical writing during the period. Because of Webster's active involvement in political issues as they related to women, I will also draw on biographical details to shape my analysis. These important elements will be woven throughout my analysis of "A Castaway."

For the purposes of clarity, I will focus on four particular aspects of the poem. The first section will discuss Webster's challenge to traditional "fall" narratives by discussing Eulalie's reversal of the traditional pairing of fallen with unfallen. This section will include a brief discussion of reclamation, female education, and domestic training. The second section will discuss the image reflected in Eulalie's "mirror;" in other words, it will critically analyze the physical description of Webster's speaker, a description which illuminates both Eulalie's challenge to and her internalization of dominant discourse. The third section will focus on Eulalie's depiction of prostitution as a trade, arguably the most unconventional feature of Webster's text. The fourth section will discuss the monologue's collapsing of the angel/harlot dichotomy through Eulalie's overt critique of the "nursery saint," her supposed ultimate "other." In challenging this binary, Webster's "A Castaway" effectively erases the distinction between "angel" and "harlot." In doing so, she is able to shift the focus, in discussions of female sexuality, from the moral to the social, thereby stressing the contingencies of the nineteenth-century's woman's identity. In short, freed from the moral framework that confined the work of her predecessor (Greenwell), Webster depicts not a "fallen woman," but a woman whose trade is prostitution.

Fundamental to an exploration of "A Castaway" is an understanding of Webster's position as a well-respected, middle-class female poet. Indeed, in order to present a prostitute as a conduit for critique of the period's sexual double standards, she—the creator—had to be above censure and reproach. She therefore "used her own respectability to enable her disreputable persona to speak" (Sutphin 514). At the time of the poem's composition, Webster was a well-established writer and critic. She had published several volumes of critically acclaimed verse and was a regular contributor to the prominent *Examiner*. Her essays for the *Examiner* consistently exposed women's subordination in marriage, education, and work. Of particular interest to an analysis of "A Castaway" are the essays that critique moral and religious discourses of depravity, impurity, and sin. In her essay "Creating Sins," for example, Webster exposes the inadequacies of moral and religious depictions of "fallenness." For while it is "quite conceivable" that such narratives contain "a little truth" (248), they ultimately fail to represent the actual *lived* experience, and cause(s), of sexual "fallenness." She argues that:

there might be a little truth in some of the stories in pious books about the despondent profligates and fallen women who, on their death-beds, avowed that their whole moral ruin came from having joined in the dancing at a friend's tea-party, or having gone to see *Hamlet*. . . . A weak and ignorant young soul fallen into what it believed abiding taint, and stripped of that comfortable sense of self-respect, might, no doubt, rush or glide, according to its nature, from the first appalling sin against conscience, represented by what ordinarily rational beings cannot even conceive as blamable amusements, into absolute vice, and thanks to early training, never to the end know the difference. (248)

In this passage, Webster effectively dismisses moralistic representations of "fallenness." In equating the "fall" with harmless "amusements," she exposes the narratives of evangelical moralists for what they are: exaggerations of mythic proportions. Such

narratives demonized the fallen woman in order to safely distance those who were “fallen” from those who remained “pure,” thereby protecting the identity of the angel of the house and promoting the ideology that “respectable and disreputable [women] were fundamentally different and could be kept separate” (Sutphin 512). The very title of Webster’s essay, “Creating Sins,” highlights that the distinction between feminine “vice” and feminine “virtue” is socially *created*, and therefore, in reality, did not exist. Webster’s writing as both a social critic and poet works to destabilize such artificial categorical distinctions. Her depiction of Eulalie—a prostitute—as middle-class, intelligent, and “modest” (50) is undoubtedly her most provocative and potent challenge to the angel/harlot dichotomy.

Webster’s “A Castaway” opens with Eulalie reading her childhood diary, the pages of which reveal a past that proponents of domestic ideology would undoubtedly have applauded. Before her fall, Eulalie was “a budding colourless rose” (8) of a clearly middle-class home. She received a “proper” female education: she “studied French an hour, / Read Modern History, Trimmed up her grey hat, / Darned stockings... / [and] went to daily service” (2-5). In granting Eulalie the same childhood as her angelic counterpart, Webster immediately blurs the carefully maintained distinction between harlot and angel. Eulalie asks:

And did I write it? Was I this good girl,
 This budding colourless young rose of home?
 Did I live content in such a life,
 Seeing no larger scope, nor asking it,
 Than this small constant round –old clothes to mend,
 New clothes to make, then go and say my prayers,
 Or carry soup, or take a little walk
 And pick the ragged-robins in the hedge?
 Then for ambition, (was there ever life
 That could forgo that?) to improve my mind

And know French better and sing harder songs;
/.../ No wishes and no cares, almost no hopes
Only the young girl's hazed and golden dreams
That veil the future from her. (7-23)

Webster's predominantly middle-class audience would have likely been shocked by this passage, for it depicts a fallen woman who was once middle-class, innocent, and "pure," having been "lapped in sweet ignorance" (320) by her own angelic mother. Eulalie's reference to her "good grave simple mother" (314) is also significant, as period texts often cite the absence of the angel's guidance as a likely cause of sexual fallenness (Thiel 11). She, therefore, does not fit into the conventional narratives of the reclamation movement, which often described orphaned and/or poor, working-class girls who were seduced by cruel and calculating men; in other words, narratives such as Greenwell's "Christina." This is perhaps not surprising, given Judith Walkowitz's assertion that the vast majority of British prostitutes were, in fact, from the working classes (23). In presenting the fallen woman as a victim of poverty and the sexual "needs" of men, reformers justified arguments for her reclamation. In contrast, by providing her fallen woman with a typical middle-class upbringing, Webster is able to justify arguments for better education and work outside the home.

The Magdalen's Friend and Female Homes Intelligencer, an evangelical periodical published from 1860-64, provides a fitting example of the common misconceptions held by middle-class reformers regarding prostitutes. In an attempt to solicit more middle-class (unfallen) women to the cause, the unnamed author of "A Fallen Sister," for example, asks:

English Ladies, have ever analyzed these two words,—“a Sister”—though “fallen?” Yes, high-born, gently-bred, delicately-nurtured Ladies, that poor Outcast, upon whom you cast an eye of scorn and loathing as perhaps she tramped

up Regent Street this morning, looking wistfully at your luxurious carriage, with its warm wrappings from the cold, ...that poor, weary, outwardly-hardened, sin-debased creature,—a victim of man's brutal requirements,—is, in the sight of our most holy God, your Sister. (*The Magdalen's Friend* 13)

In providing Eulalie, her prostitute speaker, with the same "delicately-nurtured" past as these women, Webster refutes such archetypal fallen woman narratives.

However, this "high born" and "gently bred" past is not the only thing Eulalie and her would-be reformers (saviors) share. Indeed, far from "looking wistfully" at the luxuries of such women, Eulalie lives a comfortable, and indeed luxurious, life; she too, for example, has "rich dress[es] with lace" (456). Such clothing would make her virtually indistinguishable from her unfallen "sisters," for there is "no brand" upon Eulalie's "white brow" (31), as fallenness represents a *social*, and therefore not physical, branding. Possessing the necessary trappings of gentility, Eulalie's "invisibility" is particularly threatening to dominant middle-class society, for the domestic angel's continued prominence depends on her safe distance from such apparently "tainted" women.

It is particularly significant that while Eulalie is in possession of the necessary outer accoutrements of a "proper" lady, she does not desire to live the privileged, innocent, and ignorant life that such accoutrements merit. For Eulalie, such trimmings are merely tools of her trade, a fact that forces a reconsideration of the trappings of femininity themselves. It is worth noting that these tools are, of course, the same "tools" of the angel's trade. According to Webster then, "proper femininity" is nothing more than a performance, one that can be feigned, or even, parodied. The performance therefore calls into question the very foundations upon which the angelic ideal is based.

It becomes clear that Eulalie does not idealize the domestic deity, or her sacred hearth, when she accuses her own young (unfallen) figure, "rose of the home," as having

no ambition, and asks if “there ever [was a] life / That could forgo that?” (15). Her rejection of the “colourless” and repetitive life of normative domesticity here is reminiscent of Florence Nightingale’s *Cassandra* (1860), in which Nightingale, too, vehemently rejects the confining and creatively stunted life of the angel of the house using metaphors of suffocation, paralysis, and starvation (29). Eulalie’s critique is arguably more challenging in that its source is a prostitute. And yet, despite her marginalized position, Eulalie refuses to privilege her innocent and “unfallen” state, instead equating innocence with ignorance.

As I observed in relation to Greenwell’s “Christina,” the pairing of fallen with unfallen is an exceptionally common trope in nineteenth-century poetry. It was also common to reclamation narratives, in which the “fallen” sought desperately to return to their unfallen condition. This is not the case for Webster’s fallen woman, however. Eulalie argues that the cultivation of “purity” functions only in “veil[ing] [the] future” from such young girls, a future that has little in store for them outside of the “glass case” (127) (the home). Indeed, as Eulalie contrasts her former self to her present self, Webster inverts tradition, daring to suggest that the “fallen” state is preferable, as it is free of such childish ignorance and has ambition; “was there ever life / That could forgo that?” (15-16).

Having effectively established the inadequacies of her sheltered (and privileged) middle-class upbringing, Eulalie then turns to the angel’s “lesson plan,” suggesting that an education in “domesticity” leaves women with few options for employment outside of marriage and prostitution. In a speech that echoes Webster’s arguments for female

education in *A Housewife's Opinions*, Eulalie angrily, and overtly, questions the sexual double standards inherent in nineteenth-century female education:

Well, well, the silly rules this silly world
Makes about women! This is one of them.
Why must there be pretence of teaching them
What no one ever cares that they should know,
What, grown out of the schoolroom, they cast off
Like the schoolroom pinafore, no better fit
For any use of real grown-up life,
For any use to her who seeks or waits
The husband and the home, for any use,
For any shallowest pretence of use,
To her who has them? Do I not know this,
I like my betters, that a woman's life,
Her natural life, her good life, her one life,
Is in her husband, God on earth to her,
And what she knows and what she can and is
Is only good as it brings good to him? (376-91)

Sarah Stickney Ellis, the popular and prolific writer on domestic and moral education for women, would undoubtedly have responded to Eulalie's question with a resounding "Yes!" Webster, a life-long advocate for the improvement of women's vocational education, would not. In her essay "Pianist and Martyr," for example, she mocks one of the longstanding elements of a young lady's educational curriculum: the art of piano playing: "they pursue their art of measured sounds aesthetically, not to gratify a taste, but to perform a duty" (*A Housewife's Opinions* 21). Webster highlights her society's ludicrous pairing of moral propriety and "womanly virtue" with musical accomplishment, making blatant the foolish assumption that an accomplished female pianist is "the glory and hope of her sex" (*A Housewife's Opinions* 21). This essay represents one of many that illuminate Webster's severe criticism of women's education during the period. Her essay "University Examinations for Women" makes similarly strong appeals for change, asserting "[a woman's] abilities are in all likelihood some shades more respectable than

those of the male students who carried off the prize..." (*A Housewife's Opinions* 92). If this essay is read in relation to "A Castaway" it becomes clear that Eulalie—complex, intelligent, and articulate—is, without question, a woman who would "carry off the prize," had she only been given the opportunity. A proper education, one that is meant to lead to a specific, professional vocation, would not only provide women with the opportunity for independent employment, but would also save them from "the aimlessness and drifting and fussy futility" (*A Housewife's Opinions* 96) of domesticity. It is this "aimlessness" and "fussy futility" that Eulalie, like Webster, so passionately rejects.

It is particularly noteworthy that Webster provides her prostitute figure with such acute intellectual ability. This approach allows her to decisively pinpoint the inadequacies of both female education and the "aimless" life for which it prepares women. Such intellectual ability was rarely—if ever—granted to fallen women. Even authors who worked directly with fallen women, and whose tracts, fiction, and poetry were meant to challenge dominant discourse, consistently failed to depict fallen women who were capable of analyzing their own socially-constructed position. In *Ruth*, Elizabeth Gaskell presents the title character as "an innocent, inoffensive young creature" (54), seduced by the cold and calculating Mr. Bellingham. And yet, Ruth views herself as guilty throughout the entire novel. As a result, Gaskell's fallen woman text lacks the overt political analysis that Webster's speaker provides. I would argue that it is Eulalie's intellectual ability that positions her as a subject, one who is capable of challenging the social forces that simultaneously create and confine her.

However, while capable of challenging moral, religious, and medical discourses, Eulalie is not immune to their damaging social and psychological effects. Her complex refusal and simultaneous internalization of such discourses becomes evident as she gazes in her "looking-glass" to see

a woman sure,
No fiend, no slimy thing out of the pools,
A woman with a ripe and smiling lip
That has no venom in its touch I think,
With a white brow on which there is no brand;
A woman none dare call not beautiful,
Not womanly in every woman's grace. (28-35)

In describing her beauty—her corporeal capital—Eulalie effectively contradicts the many period texts and tracts that describe the fallen woman as a hideous, drunken creature. Further, her assertion that she is "womanly in every woman's grace," highlights the fact that fallenness has no physical markers. Therefore, Eulalie's beauty, coupled with her coveted "modesty" (50), makes it impossible to distinguish between "wanton" and "angel," Eulalie and her middle-class counterpart.

And yet, while blurring the line between "pure" and "impure," Eulalie consistently views herself as embodying characteristics of dominant fallen woman narratives. This ambiguous self-positioning is reflected in the following passage:

Oh God, so I not know it? I the thing
Of shame and rottenness, the animal
That feed men's lusts and prey on them, I, I,
Who should not dare take the name of wife
On my polluted lips, who in the weed
Hear but my own reviling, I know that.
(393-398)

In this passage, it seems clear that Eulalie has internalized the period's association of prostitution with moral and physical decay. As a "rotten" woman—symbolism analogous

to that used by Greenwell—she cannot even pretend to take on the accoutrements of conventional womanly propriety.

In relation to Eulalie's internalization of the period's conventional discourse, it is important to note that nineteenth-century commentators tried to clearly differentiate between not only "respectable" and "disreputable" women, but also between "good" and "bad" prostitutes. William Acton, for example, in his 1857 study *Prostitution*, argued that "good prostitutes are sober, genteelly dressed, well-ordered, [and] often elegant in person" (64), while "bad" prostitutes are "arrogant" and "mercurial;" a bad prostitute is "a flaunting extravagant queen....fair to the eye, but full of inner rottenness – a mercenary human tigress" (62-63). While Eulalie rejects much of the imagery of the "bad" prostitute, in her assertions that she is modest (50), she still appears to hold the notion that she is "full of inner rottenness" as true. Therefore she appears to construct her self-image in line with Acton's condemning description of the prostitute.

Webster thus presents the complex, emotional struggle of those relegated to society's margins. While some scholars argue that the purpose of such a depiction is to create sympathy for the prostitute (Slinn 174), I would suggest that Webster's purpose is, in fact, more complex. For in depicting Eulalie's internal struggle with the very discourses she attempts to critique, Webster is able to showcase not only the acute intellectual ability of her speaker, but also her complexity. The fallen woman is generally denied such complexity in the archetypal narratives of the period's many social institutions. It is this complexity that presents Eulalie's as a socially *determined* subject, one who cannot be reduced to the simple categorical distinctions of "evil temptress" and/or "fallen angel." It is, equally, this complexity that makes this poem so unique:

standard narratives of the period's many social institutions deny the fallen women such agency and complexity.

Webster depicts Eulalie's subjectivity as determined by nineteenth-century social formations in order to pinpoint the contradictions inherent in the social order, a social order that condemns prostitution while offering women few other sources of employment. Indeed, as Eulalie asserts, "we've bodies to save too; / And so we earn our living" (168-69). It is worth noting that the widely publicized Census of 1851 concluded that women greatly outnumbered men, by a ratio of roughly 2 to 1 (Poovey 10). As a result, two million of Britain's six million women were in fact self-supporting and forty-two percent of the female population between the ages of twenty and forty were unmarried (Poovey 4) and therefore left to "earn [their] living" (69). It is, therefore, abundantly clear that Webster is arguing for a realistic and material understanding of prostitution. This quotation provides an apt example of the monologue's *literal* language, an aesthetic choice that complements Webster's strictly pragmatic depiction of prostitution, a depiction that is free of myth, romance, and sentimentality, each of which were fundamental features of moral, medical, and religious texts and tracts. This stark and literal language functions in effectively removing the fallen woman from her conventional place amid such moral and religious discourses, and positions her, rather, in the midst of the social and cultural. It also effectively transforms the fallen woman from archetype to living human with agency.

Positioned in this way, the prostitute can be understood as one of the many exploited female workers of England's urban job market, a market in which only "those who *need not live* have safer souls" (Webster 167; *italics added*). The keyword here is

need, as it illuminates the fact that middle-class mores have been imposed on the working classes. Indeed, the angel of the house was an ideal to which working-class women could never aspire. Domestic angels, by contrast, privileged as they were by the protection of the "glass case," and provided for by their husbands, did not need to sin (no matter how much they might have wanted to). By depicting prostitution as a trade rather than a sin, Webster challenges the exclusion inherent in middle-class moral values. For the many women who lived *outside* the protection and comfort of middle-class homes, prostitution was a means by which they could provide *for themselves*; "Never having been fitted for anything except marriage, what can girls do to keep alive except carry out that trade which is so darkly resembles marriage, and yet is its moral opposite" (122), asks Angela Leighton.

In describing the realities of her trade, Eulalie is similar to any worker, articulating the nature of her occupation in practical, unsentimental, and factual terms. Not unlike Greenwell and Acton, Eulalie acknowledges that there are different "classes" of prostitutes. But she also challenges this hierarchy, asserting that while differing in "uniform," the nature of their work is essentially the same:

I say let no one be above her trade;
 I own my kindredship with any drab
 Who sells herself as I, although she crouch
 In fetid garrets and I have a home
 All velvet and marqueterie and pastilles,
 Although she hide her skeleton in rags
 And I set fashions and wear cobweb lace:
 The difference lies but in my choicer ware,
 That I sell beauty and she ugliness;
 Our traffic's one -- I'm no sweet slaver-tongue
 To gloze upon it and explain myself
 A sort of fractious angel misconceived --
 Our traffic's one: I own it. And what then?
 I know of worse that are called honourable. (71-85)

This passage is explicit in its description of prostitution as a trade. In describing the different classes of prostitutes, Eulalie makes it clear that, while selling the same "product," hers is of a higher quality than that of her "kindred." As a prostitute with "choicer ware" she is also able to conduct transactions in more respectable locations, and thus away from the "back streets of Shadwell," described by James Greenwood in *The Seven Curses of London*. However, regardless of such differences, Eulalie reminds us that "[our] traffic's one" (76).

Having thus described her trade, Eulalie then proceeds to expose the countless other male professions that each display their own forms of "immorality," and yet are nonetheless "called honourable" (85):

Our lawyers, who, with noble eloquence
And virtuous outbursts, lie to hang a man,
Or lie to save him, which way goes the fee:
Our preachers, gloating on your future hell
For not believing what they doubt themselves:
Our doctors, who sort poisons out by chance,
And wonder how they'll answer, and grow rich:
Our journalists, whose business is to fib
And juggle truths and falsehoods to and fro:
Our tradesmen, who must keep unspotted names
And cheat the least like stealing that they can:
Our -- all of them, the virtuous worthy men
Who feed on the world's follies, vices, wants,
And do their businesses of lies and shams
Honestly, reputably, while the world
Claps hands and cries "good luck," which of their trades,
Their honourable trades, barefaced like mine,
All secrets brazened out, would shew more white? (86-102)

This passage invites the nineteenth-century reader to compare the "vices" of each male profession to those of prostitution. Eulalie convincingly argues that in being "barefaced," prostitution should in fact be privileged over such other businesses of "lies and shams"

(94). This frank discussion of prostitution as a trade more honorable than countless other male professions is remarkably unconventional. Eulalie is part—and product—of a society that prizes wives and mothers on the basis that of their self-sacrificing domesticity. For these women, “business” lies in providing love and support to their husbands, within the bonds of legally-sanctioned marriage. Domestic angels supported the moral and emotional needs of their husbands just as their husbands provided for their material needs.

But, as Eulalie’s critique suggests, the angel of the house was a dependent being, her well-being dependent wholly on the whims of her husband. By contrast, Eulalie, as a professional prostitute, is able to provide for herself, using her “womanly virtues” to ply her trade. She is therefore motivated not by feeling, but by economic necessity. It is in this way that Eulalie counters middle-class, ideological constructions of womanhood. As a single woman operating in a limited job market, Eulalie cannot afford to be “self-sacrificing.” Furthermore, and perhaps more unconventionally, it appears she does not desire to be.

Having thus successfully exposed her society’s most coveted figure—the angel of the house—as an unrealistic ideal, Webster then proceeds to collapse the carefully maintained distinctions between that ideal and its other. This collapsing of binary distinctions becomes clear as Eulalie states:

Oh! those shrill carping virtues, safely housed
From reach of even a smile that should put red
On a decorous cheek, who rail at us
With such a spiteful scorn and rancourousness,
(Which maybe is half envy at the heart),
And boast themselves so measurelessly good
And us so measurelessly unlike them,
What is their wondrous merit that they stay

In comfortable homes whence not a soul
 Has ever thought of tempting them, and wear
 No kisses but a husband's upon lips
 There is no other man desires to kiss—
 Refrain in fact from sin impossible?
 How dare they hate us so? what have they done,
 What borne, to prove them other than we are?
 What right have they to scorn us—glass-case saints,
 Dianas under lock and key—what right
 More than the well-fed helpless barn-door fowl
 To scorn the larcenous wild-birds? (112-130)

In this passage, Eulalie posits what would be virtually unfathomable to Webster's predominantly middle-class readers: she suggests that if the "angel of the house" were not so confined to the inner "sphere," then she, too, would likely "fall" into temptation. This provocative statement suggests that the only difference between "angel" and "harlot" is that the harlot does not have the luxury of the "glass-case." Eulalie therefore questions the supposedly "natural" moral superiority of the "angel of the house," for "what has [she] done, / What has [she] borne" (126-27) to prove this morality on which society so depends and against which the prostitute is condemned? The difference, then, between wife and mistress, angel and demon, as Slinn has noted, is "a difference of economic function rather than inherent (or internal) moral condition" (172).

In the light of Eulalie's astute commentary, it is perhaps not surprising that she refuses to be "reclaimed" as an angel of the house. Instead of following the path laid out by "Christina's" nameless fallen woman, Eulalie speaks of her brief time at a "dreary" (239) refuge with "prison rules" (240) and asserts that she "could not bear it" (239). This is the first of two deviations the poem makes from reclamation narratives. Dominant reclamation narratives asserted that fallen women abhorred their social (and moral) condition, as we saw in Greenwell's "Christina," where the fallen woman describes

herself as "a withered leaf" (272). Further, the basis for Eulalie's refusal challenges the reformist rhetoric of the reclamation movement, which promised to restore fallen woman to their "natural" and "respectable" position in society.

Eulalie, however, can imagine only a "slow pining shivering death by misery and hunger" (254). Webster here appears to suggest that the promises made by female reformers were often unrealistic. It was difficult, if not impossible to restore a woman to "respectability" in a tight job market with few options. Indeed, it was the scant pay of such positions as seamstresses and governesses that often led women to prostitution in the first place, a point that Eulalie highlights: there are "more seamstresses than shirts; / And defter hands at white work than mine / Drop starved at last: dressmakers, milliners, / Too many too they say" (267). For Eulalie, choosing between reclamation and continuing her trade is a choice between "living ill or living well" (255). Webster thus asks the question rarely—if ever—posed to reformers: What happens to the "fallen" *after* they are reclaimed? The answer, for Webster, is bleak, for in a flooded job market with "more seamstresses than shirts," the fallen woman's return to the safety and comfort of the sacred hearth is unlikely.

It is equally unlikely that Webster's fallen woman will return to her "sacred" position as wife and mother, a fact that marks the monologue's second, and perhaps most remarkable, challenge to reclamation narratives. While women reformers, such as Josephine Butler, argued that the causes of prostitution were economic, they nonetheless subscribed wholesale to the ideology of the angel and her sacred hearth, arguing that the fallen woman could be "brought back" to her natural, and "dignified," position of wife and mother. Similarly, several period texts—among them Gaskell's *Ruth*—celebrated

motherhood, leaving its supposed naturalness unquestioned in order to "redeem" the fallen woman. Webster's "A Castaway" presents a potent challenge to such discourse, for not only was Eulalie educated and beautiful, she was a mother, if never a saint. Eulalie had lost her child shortly after his birth,

Yet the baby thing that woke
And wailed an hour or two, and then was dead,
Was mine, and had he lived.....why then my name
Would have been mother. But 'twas well he died:
I could have been no mother, I, lost then
Beyond his saving. (422-26)

In this passage, Webster exposes motherhood as an inadequate solution to the many complex social and economic issues raised by the monologue; Eulalie's socially constructed position in nineteenth-century society is far too complex to be reduced to the conventional "salvation" by maternity narrative. Furthermore, the focus of Webster's powerful critique in "A Castaway" is on the period's complex *system* of gendered inequalities, wherein prostitution is a choice among poor choices. Moreover, in this system, the lives of *both* the fallen woman *and* the angel of the house are limited, albeit in radically different ways. Eulalie is well aware, for example, of the domestic angel's vulnerable position in society. She is confined to the "sacred" hearth and entirely dependent on her husband for survival, a husband who, from Eulalie's perspective, is not "worth crying for or keeping" (100). Eulalie's refusal to see herself as a mother is intimately connected to her ability to recognize the confined and creatively stunted life of the "nursery saint." The mocking term "nursery saint" itself highlights Eulalie's recognition of the contradictions inherent in the sacred figure's depiction: this woman, who supposedly knows nothing of sexuality or desire, has produced a nursery full of children. Eulalie is able to recognize the hypocrisy of the domestic deity's position

because of the knowledge she has gained through her profession. The education Eulalie had garnered from her experiences in the public realm allows her to recognize the exceptionally limited position of the angel of the house, a position that is, in many ways, far more vulnerable than that of the prostitute. This assertion, that the position of the prostitute is preferable to that of the "nursery saint," is perhaps the monologue's most provocative deviation from convention.

Therefore, creating sympathy for the prostitute through maternity—a primary goal of reformers—was not enough for Webster, as it essentially exchanges one form of ideology for another: the fallen woman for the angel. Indeed, as Eulalie states that it "twas well he died: I could have been no mother," her critique moves beyond the arguments of even those that sympathized with the fallen woman. In refusing to redeem her prostitute figure through motherhood, Webster's monologue challenges not only the stock condemnation of fallen women, but also the cultivated notion of "female essence" that underpins it. Eulalie was, in short, not a prostitute Butler could "save." The monologue has therefore moved beyond the Christian model of reclamation represented by her predecessor in "Christina."

Webster's monologue closes by providing her audience with one final irony: Eulalie's speech has not had an audience: "Was that the bell? / Some one at last, thank goodness...Oh is it you? / Most welcome, dear: one gets so moped alone" (623-30). Webster's final lines therefore remind the reader that Eulalie is not granted a podium outside of the text. She, a "fallen woman," is provided access to the public stage only through a "respectable" mediator: Webster. And yet, Sutphin asserts, she is (and was) "heard" (527). In choosing to depict Eulalie as simultaneously aware of and yet

struggling within the social forces that confine her, Webster is able to present prostitution as a socially constructed practice. In doing so she effectively erases distinctions between the "human tigress" and the "nursery saint," the "harlot" and the "angel."

Webster's "A Castaway," in many ways, has effectively laid the groundwork for Blind's "The Message." In the chapter that follows I will examine the ways in which Blind's challenge to conventional narratives moves beyond even that of Webster.

CHAPTER SIX

Mathilde Blind (1841-1896) and "The Message"

Our ideals of moral conduct are really undergoing a process of disintegration and it makes me feel a little giddy, as if the earth were beginning to rock under one's feet.

Mathilde Blind, a letter to Richard Garnett, 1890.

Mathilde Blind's 1891 monologue, "The Message,"¹⁰ is among the last poems written about the "fallen woman." Indeed, by the turn of the twentieth century, the term was rarely used. Blind's poem therefore appears to mark the end of the tradition, making it a fitting point of comparison for the earlier monologues of Greenwell and Webster. As we shall see, while Blind follows the path laid out for her by Greenwell and Webster, in some ways she is able to take her critique further than either of her predecessors did.

Blind's lengthy monologue is narrated by an unnamed "nurse" at a London refuge for the fallen who recounts the final hours of Nellie Dean's life to an unnamed man. The speaker describes her futile attempts to "reach the soul" (50) of the "haunted" girl (4), a woman who responded merely with "an old cynic's sneer" (27) and cried: "I hate you nurse!" (29). Ironically, a transformation does occur, one that is inspired not by the seemingly pious nurse, but by an "angelic" (110) child who delivers flowers to the ward. The child's visit triggers the fallen woman's childhood memories, in the process revealing the circumstances of her "fall." Nellie tells of her loving mother, her abusive father, and her life as an orphaned child left to the mercy of the London slums and the creature-like men (219-20) who lurked there. After relaying her life's history, Nellie dies: "with luminous, transfigured eyes, / As if they glassed on opening skies" (253-54).

¹⁰ Mathilde Blind, "The Message." Internet Archive: Poetical Works of Mathilde Blind, http://www.archive.org/stream/poeticalworksofm00blind/poeticalworksofm00blind_djvu.txt (June 2010).

In this chapter, I will offer a detailed analysis of the key episodes of Blind's poem, demonstrating the ways that "The Message" both confirms and challenges dominant fallen woman narratives. In addition, I will illustrate the poem's links and connections to the poetry of Greenwell and Webster. I begin, however, with a brief biographical introduction.

6.1 Mathilde Blind: a biographic sketch

In the introduction to one of the few contemporary texts that feature the poetry of Mathilde Blind, Judith Wilson outlines what she sees as the key difference between the work of Augusta Webster and Mathilde Blind: "Webster explores how women live within the script that is written for them; Blind, for whom both English and social conventions were second languages, lived to a different script" (101). This script, as we shall see, enabled her to take her critique further than either of her predecessors did.

Blind was born Mathilde Cohen in Mannheim, Germany in 1841. After the death of her father, her mother, Friederike Ettlinger, joined the movement for a united and democratic Germany, where she met, and later married, Karl Blind, a radical political activist and writer. Before Mathilde's eleventh birthday, the family had also been exiled from Germany, France, and Belgium (Diedrick "Subversive Sexuality" 363). The family was granted asylum in England and settled in St John's Wood, where Blind grew up among other exiled intellectual revolutionaries, among them Giuseppe Mazzini and Karl Marx.

It was, therefore, in the midst of radical politics that Blind received her early, and most significant, education. According to Wilson, the formal education she received was

limited and haphazard (102). Her memoirs reveal that at one school she was asked to give up her atheist views or leave, after which she promptly left (Wilson 102). Such independence would be her defining characteristic. Blind lived the rest of her life as an outspoken freethinker, a quintessential "New Woman," using her writing to critique and resist the "proper" feminine scripts that persisted until the end of the century.

Blind published her first volume of lyric poetry at twenty-six, under the pseudonym 'Claude Lake.' The volume's success granted her entrance into the literary realm. At thirty, Blind, a single and independent woman, left the family home and found a place amid the literary radicals and Pre-Raphaelites, among them Ford Maddox Brown and William Michael Rossetti. She also greatly admired the proto-feminist works of George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, and, in particular, Elizabeth Barrett Browning—all writers who challenged the narrow confines of the nineteenth-century gender system. Her lifelong friend and literary advisor Richard Garnett remarked that in Browning's *Aurora Leigh* she "found the confirmation of her own thoughts on 'soulless, unspiritual education, where everything is nipped in the bud and crushed to nothingness,' and 'the first revelation of the world through poetry'" (Diedrick, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 32). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Blind sought out the radical political figures and writers of the late nineteenth century. This important social and professional network, which included Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, Vernon Lee, Eleanor Marx, Mona Caird, and, later, Mary Robinson and Graham Tomson, provided a sense of solidarity for Blind, whose challenges to the period's double standards positioned her, like each of these women (and the men who agreed with and supported them), on the margins of mainstream culture.

Blind's reputation as a poet and critic grew substantially during the 1870s and 1880s. In addition to publishing four books of poetry and two biographies (of George Eliot and Madame Roland), she also wrote several articles for the *Examiner* and the *Athenaeum*. Her success was undoubtedly connected to the community of women with whom she could share her criticisms of sexual politics (Diedrick, "Subversive Sexuality" 374). Her works consistently display a radical and feminist perspective, a perspective that was likely the root cause of her unfavorable reception by several conservative male reviewers (Diedrick, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 35).

The final lines of her first major poem, "The Prophecy of Saint Oran," provide a clear example of this unconventionality:

Cast down the crucifix, take up the plough!
Nor waste your breath which is the life in prayer!
Dare to be men, and break your impious vow!
Nor fly from women as the devil's snare!
For if within, around, beneath, above
There is a living God, that God is love.

In this poem, Blind revises the legend of Oran, an Irish monk who consented to being buried alive in order to appease demons who would not allow a chapel to be built. However, after three days, Oran rose from the dead, asserting that there was no God and no final judgment, after which he was promptly reburied and thus silenced. Blind takes the legend in a different direction; the final lines reveal what Oran might have said had he been permitted to continue speaking after he rose. One can argue that these lines reflect both Blind's feminist perspective and her atheism. It is, then, perhaps not surprising that Blind's publisher withdrew the powerful text from circulation in 1881.

Her dramatic monologue, "The Message," appeared ten years later, in 1891. It was published in *Dramas in Miniature*, her most powerful and political indictment of the

period's long-standing system of gendered inequalities. The subject matter of *Dramas in Miniature* was stark and challenging: female sexual desire and aggression, domestic violence, adultery, and prostitution, and the work received mixed reviews from several of her male contemporaries. In his review for the *Academy*, Eric Robertson, for example, asserted that "'most of her readers [would] indeed continue to think that Miss Blind is at her highest in the earlier study of that 'Ascent of Man,' whose 'noble strenuousness is missing from the 'less profound 'dramas' now published'" (quoted by Diedrick, "Subversive Sexuality" 360). But the work was of great personal importance to Blind. As she noted in a letter to Richard Garnett, this commitment came at immense emotional cost: "I think the volume of poems is nearly complete now, for I shall have no peace till they are done. I was writing...till five o'clock in the morning last week; [...] the emotional intensity was such that it went over me like waves..." (Diedrick, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 37).

In this volume, Blind uses dramatic narrative poems and lyrics to articulate her passionate denunciation of British society's sexual double standards. Her monologue, "The Message," the inspiration behind the volume's death-scene frontispiece, is among the volume's most powerful challenges to such double standards.

6.2 "The Message"

Mathilde Blind's unconventional "fallen woman" monologue, "The Message," was published at the height of her career as a writer and critic. This monologue, like Webster's "A Castaway," links fallenness directly with the period's complex system of gendered inequalities, a system that legally bound women to abusive men; offered little

or no work to young women who, if orphaned, were left to roam the streets forlorn (199); refused women the practical education with which they might recognize "the knowing leer" (221) of some men; and, finally, politely ignored the "guineas [thrown] at the feet" of such vulnerable women (214-15), while nonetheless demanding that once "fallen" they "reform." In short, the story of Nellie's sexual "fall" unequivocally pinpoints the period's gendered inequities as being at fault.

For Blind, as for Webster, prostitution was an undeniably social—not moral—issue. Blind's critique, like Webster's, therefore extends beyond fallen woman narratives to include a denunciation of nineteenth-century marriage, domestic ideology, and the presumed fulfillment of *men's* ideal roles therein. However, as we shall see, Blind takes this critique even further by challenging the sanctity of marriage itself.

The poem's narrative structure, in particular, highlights Blind's challenge to conventional "Harlot's Progress" narratives. Such narratives presented a seemingly inevitable downward trajectory for the fallen woman, from loss of virginity and subsequent loss of reputation, to her degeneration, exile from "respectable" society, and finally, her death. Blind challenges such normative conceptions of "fallenness" by effectively rewriting the "Harlot's Progress." Three key episodes in the poem highlight Blind's challenges to dominant discourses: the unreliability of the narrator, Nellie's transformation (which includes the narrative of the fall), and finally Nellie's death. I assess each of these episodes in the sections that follow. I begin with a discussion of the poem's potentially unreliable narrator, drawing on Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* to make my arguments. In the second section, I offer a close analysis of the child, whose flowers are the catalyst for Nellie's delving into her past. This section will include a detailed

analysis of Nellie's "fall" narrative, arguably the text's most unconventional and challenging element in its outright refusal of archetypal masculinity, which depicted "proper" men as providers and protectors. Finally, I discuss Nellie's Dean's death scene, a seemingly conventional ending that would appear to conform fully to dominant narratives of the period.

"The Message" opens with the narrator's description of the physical suffering of Nellie Dean, who lies tossing and turning on her deathbed (1). The opening effectively positions the fallen woman in the final stages of the conventional "Fallen Woman" narratives. In addition, the opening description establishes the monologue's specific social location: a Christian refuge for the fallen, in which such conventional narratives were often perpetuated. This narrative, spoken by a "nurse" (quite possibly a nun) to an unnamed "Sir," therefore functions primarily in establishing the focus of Blind's critique: moralistic conceptions of "fallenness," which depict the seemingly inevitably degeneration and death of the fallen woman. The nurse states:

From side to side the sufferer tossed
With quick impatient sighs;
Her face was bitten as by frost,
The look as of one hunted crossed
The fever of her eyes.

All seared she seemed with life and woe,
Yet scarcely could have told
More than a score of springs or so;
Her hair had girlhood's morning glow,
And yet her mouth looked old. (1-10)

Blind's predominantly middle-class readers would undoubtedly have recognized the speaker's description as akin to those of Christian reformers. The nurse then attributes Nellie's aggressive reaction to her offer of absolution to the "evil" that had corrupted her

soul (50-1). Having told the unnamed "Sir," for example, that Nellie would "scoff and swear and curse; / Call [her] bad names, and vow each nurse / A fool for being there"

(38-40), she proceeds to provide a didactic diagnosis of such behavior:

We could do nothing, one and all
How much we might beseech;
Her girlish blood had turned to gall:
Far lower than her body's fall
Her soul had sunk from reach.

Her soul had sunk into a slough
Of evil past repair.
The world had been against her; now
Nothing in heaven or earth should bow
Her stubborn knees in prayer. (46-55)

This passage illuminates the strictly moralistic conception of "fallenness" held by the refuge and those whose operated it. Indeed, while recognizing that the "world had been against her" (53), and that "she was not worse than all those men...who shared her sin" (68-70), the nurse nonetheless describes Nellie's soul as a mire of evil that is "past repair" (51).

The dominant, and longstanding, presumption held by such Christian charity institutions was that these women would naturally desire forgiveness for their transgression, regardless of *how* and *why* that "transgression" came about. The *Magdalen's Friend and Female Homes Intelligencer* provides an apt example of such presumption in its "Monthly Address," a small pamphlet that was meant to be passed to fallen women in the street. The unnamed author of the 1860 pamphlet presumes to know the innermost feelings of fallen women, in general:

You cannot think of your infancy and childhood without wishing that you had died before you fell into that life of misery that you are now leading. I know that even now, lost as you may be to every sense of womanly shame and purity, there are times when you feel an agony of remorse at your past life, and when you look

forward with fear and trembling to the future. The future! What a dreadful word it is to you! (*Italics in original*; 1-2)

The presumption exemplified in this passage mirrors that of Blind's speaker, as the author of the "Monthly Address" similarly places "fallenness" on the spectrum of good and evil.

Several contemporary reviewers of Blind's monologue have focused solely on this aspect of the poem and have therefore labeled it conventional. Virginia Blain, for example, in *Victorian Woman Poets: An Annotated Anthology* (2009), asserts that Blind's "The Message" was "rather prosaic in form, and pointed a very heavy temperance moral" (187), neither of which, I argue, is the case. Blind's use of literal or prosaic language, particularly when giving voice to the fallen woman, functions in the same way as Webster's stark verse in "A Castaway;" that is, it counters the romantic and sentimental narratives of reformers. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the monologue's opening is "moral" only on the surface. Blind allows her female Christian charity worker to describe Nellie Dean's "degeneration" in conventional terms so that she may juxtapose them against Nellie's Dean's own voice and own description of her "fall." Indeed, it is by comparing the two narratives that Blind is able to present the nurse's moralistic conceptions as wholly inadequate, if not wholly ridiculous.

Therefore, having thoroughly established the moralist perspective of the speaker, Blind then undercuts her by alluding to the fact that she is unreliable and potentially self-serving. This unreliability is signaled in the fallen woman's name, Nellie Dean, which is virtually identical to that of the often-unreliable narrator of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (spelled Nelly Dean). While Brontë's Nelly Dean is one of the novel's two principal narrators, she is also character in her own right. Therefore, her telling of the complex love

story between Catherine and Heathcliff is subjective and limited. Indeed, Nelly provides Lockwood with her *interpretation* of the events that take place at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, an interpretation that is colored by her own personal motives and limitations. Nelly's reaction to Catherine's confession of her love for Heathcliff—a key moment in Brontë's text—provides an apt example of her unreliability as a narrator. In response to Catherine's confession that Heathcliff is part of "[her] own being" (74), for example, Nelly states: "If I can make sense of your nonsense, Miss, it only goes to convince me that you are ignorant of the duties in marrying; or else that you are a wicked, unprincipled girl. But trouble me with no more secrets. I'll not promise to keep them" (74). Nelly is incapable of understanding the complexities of Catherine's painful position, and, as a result, she merely concludes that Catherine is "wicked." This is also the case for Blind's speaker, whose ability to understand and interpret the "fallen woman's" actions and experiences is limited to the moralistic terms spouted by the reform institution of which she is a part. She therefore concludes that Nellie is "cankered at the core" (78). The complex social and material conditions of Nellie's "fallen" position are therefore entirely lost on the narrator of the monologue.

Blind's subtle reference to Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* reminds the reader to be critical of the nurse's description; indeed, it would be in her best interest to depict the "suffering" fallen woman as decidedly degenerate, as such a representation would function in distancing her from her "naturally" angelic counterpart. This angelic counterpart is of course fundamental to the religious doctrine the nurse (or nun) must uphold, particularly as she recites the description to an unnamed, but clearly patriarchal authority figure ("Sir"). It is interesting to note that Blind provides the name of her fallen

woman just as the "angelic" child appears at her bedside, after which it is assumed that Nellie Dean is permitted to voice her *own* narrative, albeit it through the nurse. Blind therefore effectively dramatizes the attempts of Christian reformers—whether conscious or not—to silence the "real" stories of fallen women, stories that often featured poverty and isolation, in other words, the social realities of prostitution, which, if given audience, might have provoked shock and change.

Nineteenth-century social reform was predicated on replacing such narratives of sexual "transgression" with those of repentance. Ann Jessie Van Sant argues that fallen women—be they abandoned women, unwed mothers, or prostitutes—had real stories of their own to tell, and yet they were forbidden to do so on the basis that:

It would have retarded their development as daughters of woe. Although concealing their stories, as well as burying their names in that of the Magdalen, protected the women's privacy, this separation from their past was part of the strategy for re-writing their future. As they played the pathetic role of repentant prostitute before a public audience, they became more thoroughly what they played." (36)

The inevitable result of this image of the "penitent Magdalen" was the exoneration of the institutional systems that created—and maintained—women's limited socio-economic position, a position that led many to prostitution. Blind's monologue dramatizes this "writing-over" of the fallen woman's "real" story through her representation of the Christian nurse, whose narrative consistently presents her attempts to make Nellie play the part of the Magdalen.

Nellie Dean's adamant rejection of the absolution offered by the nurse marks an additional challenge to the image of the penitent Magdalen asserted by reform institutions. Indeed, her vehement response is remarkably unconventional:

She muttered, "What's the odds to me?"
With an old cynics sneer;

And looked up, cried mockingly,
"I hate you nurse! Why, can't you see
You'll make no convert here!"

And then she shook her fist at Heaven,
And broke into a laugh!
Yes, though her sins were seven times seven,
Let others pray to be forgiven—
She scorned such canting chaff. (26-35)

This passage positions Nellie Dean in stark contrast to the passive and penitent fallen woman of conventional reclamation narratives. It also goes farther than Greenwell's "Christina" in its challenge to such narratives. For while Greenwell's unnamed fallen speaker initially refuses Christina's offer of reclamation, she does not deny the fact that she needs "reform." In contrast, Nellie Dean adamantly refuses not only Christian absolution, but also the presumption that she requires it: "Let others pray to be forgiven / She scorned such canting chaff" (34-35). Nellie recognizes the hypocrisy inherent in the efforts of a nurse who asks Nellie to seek forgiveness for something she had no choice about in the first place. It is in this way that Blind's text effectively challenges moralistic conceptions of fallenness.

In place of the paternalistic efforts of such Christian charity workers, Blind appears to suggest simple acts of human kindness, in other words, charity that is entirely divested of moral or religious doctrine. Indeed, after the fallen woman describes the abuse, isolation, and poverty of her past, the speaker's previous suggestion that she "bow her stubborn knees" (55) in penitence reads as little more than a callous insult. For it is through the simple act of giving flowers to the suffering woman that a young girl inspires Nellie to seek the form of "forgiveness" she requires in order to find peace. For Nellie, "forgiveness" need not come from "God," but from her mother, who was "all the sum /

[she] had of human love" (243-4). It is therefore in treating Nellie Dean not as a fallen woman, but as a woman who is "forlorn" (139), that the young girl inspires this personal "transformation" in Nellie Dean.

The nurse's physical description of the young girl therefore becomes highly symbolic. She describes her as young, "angelically fair" (110), and "deaf as the flowers of May" (130). The girl's deafness is particularly significant as it suggests that she is unaffected, or "deaf," to the period's condemning discourse of the fallen woman. She is therefore able to treat the fallen woman *as a woman*. The "message" of Blind's powerful poem is found in the young girl's floral gift. For it is through the child's treating of Nellie Dean with simple human kindness—rather than condescending judgments—that we are made privy to the circumstances of her fall, and therefore the social realities inherent in both prostitution and "fallenness."

Nellie's Dean's narrative of her youth and sexual "fall" marks the poem's most compelling challenge to conventional fallen woman narratives. Indeed, it is here that we find Blind's powerful critique of nineteenth-century marriage and the presumed fulfillment of men's ideal roles therein. The first memories triggered by the flower's perfume are of her mother, as she knits in their seemingly idyllic country home:

'It was a dream; I'm home again!
I hear the ivy-leaves
Tap-tapping on the leaded pane
Oh, listen! How the laughing rain
Runs from our cottage eaves!

'How very sweet the things do smell!
How bright the pewter shines!
I am at home; I feel so well:
I think I hear the evening bell
Above our nodding pines

'The firelight glows upon the brick,
 And pales the rising moon;
 And when your needles flash and click,
 My heart, my heart, that felt so sick,
 Throbs like a hive in June.' (166-80)

This passage illuminates Nellie's comfortable, but working-class childhood (her father is described as tending a farm later in the poem), a social position that highlights the imposition of middle-class mores on the working classes. Her fond description of the family home, complete with angelic mother by the fireplace, mirrors idyllic depictions of the sacred hearth. In the safety and comfort of this private sphere, the angel of the house provided moral and spiritual guidance to her children and husband.

However, Nellie Dean's childhood home was ideal only on the surface, or, more specifically, only in the *absence* of her father. She states:

If only father would not stay
 A gossip o'er his brew;
 Then, reeling homewards, lose his way,
 Come staggering in at break of day
 And beat you black and blue!

Yet he can be as good as gold,
 When mindful of the farm,
 He tills the field and tends the fowl:
 But never fear, when I'm grown old
 I'll keep him out of harm. (186-90)

In this passage, Blind effectively reveals the comfort and safety of the sacred hearth as polite fiction. In doing so, she also exposes the extreme vulnerability of the angel of the house. Indeed, as Nellie describes her drunk and abusive father, her mother's defenseless position within the domestic home becomes abundantly clear. Blind therefore asks her readers to consider the position of the angel of the house without her "provider and protector." Or, more accurately, she asks that we question who will protect the angel *from*

her "protector." It is in this way that Blind's monologue goes farther than Webster's "A Castaway" in its critique of both sanctioned marriage and the sacred hearth. For Eulalie, the domestic home was a "glass case" (127), one that functioned in *protecting* the "nursery saint" while simultaneously confining her, limiting her intellectual and creative potential. In stark contrast, for Nellie Dean's mother the "sacred hearth" is a dangerous and threatening place of violence and abuse. Therefore, while the men of Eulalie's world are self-serving and disloyal, in Nellie Dean's they are sinister and violent. This distinction is significant as it challenges the sanctity of nineteenth-century marriage, whose many proponents generally took for granted the fulfillment of the husband's role as chivalric guardian therein.

It is therefore worth noting that the husband's role as "provider and protector" was integral to nineteenth-century domestic ideology and normative constructions of masculinity. In turn, the sanctity of the nineteenth-century family rested on an "implied contract of master and protector in relation to a dependent and subordinate" wife and children (Tosh 183). John Tosh asserts, in *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, that establishing a home, protecting it, providing for it, and training its young aspirants" (53) were fundamental to the "proper" husband. In presenting a threatening and sinister counter to the idealized masculine archetype, Blind, in turn, challenges the supposed sanctity of nineteenth-century marriage by suggesting that the privacy of the "private sphere" houses the same "evils" as the London streets. Nellie Dean will experience the same violence, for example, in the "snaky lamplight" (214): "with now a kiss and now a blow, / Strange men would come, and strange men would go" (223-24). As a challenge to dominant narratives, Blind's approach is

particularly powerful as it critiques the period's most sacred institution: marriage. For within marriage, the married woman is just as vulnerable, in some ways, as is the prostitute in the darkness of the public street. In making this point, Blind's critique moves beyond even that of Webster. Indeed, Webster's "glass case" is shattered.

Having effectively exposed the safety and sanctity of the private sphere as little more than middle-class mythology, Blind then turns to the public sphere, and the creature-like men (220) who lurk there. It is at this point in the monologue that Nellie presents the nature of her "fall," the circumstances of which are fundamental to Blind's rewriting of the period's conventional "Harlot's Progress" narratives. After her mother's death, presumably at the hand of the father, the orphaned Nellie describes how she roamed the "never-ending streets" (201) before she "dropped upon the stones" (210). In describing her "fall" she states:

Surely there were no mothers when
Voice hissed in my ear,
'A sovereigns! Quick! Come on!'—and then
A knowing leer! There was but men,
And not a creature near.

I went—I could not help it. Oh,
I didn't want to die!
With now a kiss and now a blow,
Strange men would come, strange men would go;
I didn't care—not I. (216-225)

In this passage Blind presents Nellie's decision to "fall" as a "choice" between life and death: "I could not help it. Oh, / I didn't want to die!" In doing so, she effectively refutes moralist conceptions of "fallenness." Indeed, as the image of Nellie lying "upon the stone" as men "hiss" in her ear is juxtaposed against the nurse's demands for penance, the focus of Blind's critique becomes abundantly clear.

Further, in positioning nineteenth-century men as the ultimate cause of Nellie Dean's "fall"—"A sovereign! Quick! Come on!"—and then /A knowing leer!"—Blind adamantly rejects dominant discourses, which obsessively focused on instances of female "depravity," while rarely—if ever—questioning male behavior. This is, of course, the ultimate function of a taboo. As Angella Leighton has asserted, for nineteenth-century society, "the endlessly elaborated discourse on the tantalizing secret of female sexuality...in fact serve[d] to disguise another, more deep-seated taboo, which creat[ed] the silence on the other side of all this speech" (Leighton 122). Blind's monologue functions in breaking this silence.

Indeed, while other nineteenth-century texts position self-serving men as playing a role in the sexual fall of young—generally naïve—women, few narratives, if any, are as overt and unforgiving as Blind's monologue. The lines, "'A sovereign! Quick! Come on!'—and then / A knowing leer!" position self-serving, callous, and "knowing" men as the irrefutable catalyst of Nellie's "fall." This is in stark contrast to Greenwell's "Christina," in which the reference to the man's role in the fall is fleeting at best: "I was sought / by one that wore me for a time, then flung / me off; a rose with all its sweetness gone" (68-70). Furthermore, while Webster's monologue effectively exposed what Angella Leighton has called "the unmentionable of Victorian prostitution: the male client" (122), Blind's text goes further. In Blind's "fallen woman" narrative, the *imagined* evil of the period's mythic "temptress" has been replaced by very *real* threat: violence and abuse. The deep-seated taboo of "dangerous" female sexuality, functions in veiling far worse than the disloyal husbands we saw in Webster's monologue. As Nellie recalls, "With now a kiss and now a blow / Strange men would come, strange men would go"

(223-24).

Having thus articulated the circumstances of her fall, Nellie Dean dies:

In eager haste she tried to rise,
And struggled up in bed,
With luminous, transfigured eyes,
As if they glassed the opening skies,
Fell back, Sir, and was dead. (251-255)

While some critics, such as Blain, have read this death as akin to the conventional death of Greenwell's unnamed speaker, I would argue that this is not the case. It is significant, for example, that while the speaker of Greenwell's "Christina" sought forgiveness from God, believing that she was in need of "reform," Blind's speaker seeks forgiveness only from her mother, who was "all the sum / [She] had of human love" (243-44). Furthermore, she dies having adamantly refused—till the last—the nurse's demand that she "bow her stubborn knees in prayer" (55). This refusal is exceptionally unconventional. And yet, while Nellie does not seek absolution, the poem nonetheless suggests that she finds peace: "With luminous, transfigured eyes, / As if they glassed the opening skies." Blind's "The Message" therefore subtly *rewrites* the conventional ending of the "Harlot's Progress."

For Nellie Dean, and for Blind, it is "the town [that] is dark" (emphasis added 248); in other words, it is nineteenth-century society and its system of gendered inequalities that requires reform. Indeed, the "darkness," as made clear by Blind's monologue, is found in the system that legally bound women to abusive men, that offered little or no work to young women who, if orphaned, were left to roam the streets forlorn, and, finally, that politely ignored the "guineas [thrown] at the feet" of vulnerable women (214-15), while nonetheless demanding that once "fallen" they "reform." In short, the danger

of "fallenness" for Blind is not found in any mythic "evil temptress," nor is it found in the "fiery" afterlife that supposedly awaits the female transgressor. Rather, the real danger is found in what such myths shroud in silence: men who "leer" and "hiss" before "a kiss and now a blow" (223).

In short, while Blind's "fallen woman" monologue undoubtedly follows the path laid out for her by Greenwell and Webster, she is, in several significant ways, able to take her critique further than either of her predecessors did. In the "The Message," Blind, like Webster, argues prostitution was an undeniably *social* issue, thereby refuting moralist discourse while simultaneously opening up a discussion of women's "fallenness" as inherently connected to broader social issues such as women's limited access to education and work outside the home. Blind's critique, like Webster's, extends beyond fallen woman narratives to include an indictment of nineteenth-century domestic ideology. However, as we have seen, Blind takes this critique even further by challenging the sanctity of marriage itself, a fact that illuminates the poem's most profound challenge to fallen woman archetypes. Indeed, it against the "sanctity" of nineteenth-century marriage that "fallenness" is deemed "unnatural."

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to expand our understanding of the "fallen woman," a staple figure of nineteenth-century commentary, discussion, and debate. It has attempted to do so through an exploration of the ways in which she is represented in a small selection of dramatic poetry written by women who were directly involved with fallen women, either through reclamation work (Greenwell), or through social and political writing (Webster and Blind). As we have seen, this poetry, written by the rarely studied Dora Greenwell, Augusta Webster, and Mathilde Blind, challenges dominant archetypal narratives. Indeed, it exposes the mythic and often romantic terms that ground the period's arguments for both reclamation and condemnation. In countering such myths, their poetry focuses on the diversity and complexity of "fallen" women. Furthermore, in granting the fallen woman a "voice," though their choice of dramatic form, their poetry, first, showcases the subjectivity of such women, and second, reveals their position as socially and historically contingent.

Dora Greenwell's 1861 monologue, "Christina," sought recognition for the fallen woman as *an agent* in the process of reclamation. And yet, the monologue does not question the speaker's "need" for reform. Building on the work of her predecessor, Augusta Webster, in her 1870 "A Castaway," presents prostitution as form of labour—and therefore not a form of vice. In doing so, she effectively transformed what was a religious and moral subject for Greenwell into an undeniably *social* one, thereby opening up a discussion of women's "fallenness" as inherently connected to broader social issues such as women's limited access to education and work outside the home. Mathilde Blind, in her monologue, "The Message," takes this critique even further by challenging the

sanctity of marriage itself, the sacred institution against which "fallenness" is deemed dangerous, threatening, and immoral.

Blind's dramatic monologue is among the last written on the "fallen woman."¹⁰ Indeed as the century drew to a close the term was rarely used. It seems that the period's near-obsession with morality had been largely overcome; or, perhaps there was merely a shift in focus to a different form of "threatening" womanhood. Indeed, the latter years of the nineteenth century reveal a constant discussion of the "New Woman." While it is impossible to form a single definition of this figure, as period descriptions of her were often contradictory, her general characteristics include a strong and independent (often understood as masculine) spirit; The "New Woman" overtly refused the stifling conventionality of normative femininity. Blind, a radically independent, single woman, who devoted her much of her life to improving the status of nineteenth-century women, could be described as the quintessential "New Woman." Perhaps this powerful, public, and often politically engaged, figure became the new focus of cultural anxieties. This is undoubtedly an area for future study. In any case, as women writers—"New Women" or otherwise—begin to write more openly about female sexual desire and passion, the "fallen woman" seems to disappear. Indeed, in the words of Angelia Leighton, she becomes "the ghost of what has been forbidden, denied, [and] divided" (125).

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