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## Defining Heroinism: Heartthrobs Refining Heroines in 18th and 19th Century Women's Literature

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Murray State University Honors College

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Certificate of Approval

“A Hero in Her Way”: Analyzing the Narrative of Refinement in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Women’s  
Literature

Grace M. Gibson  
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Approved to fulfill the  
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Defining Heroism: Heartthrobs Refining Heroines

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Murray State University Honors Diploma

Grace M. Gibson

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*“She always intended to marry at some time or another, as all the Heroines had done, yet she thought such an Event ought to be brought about with an infinite deal of Trouble; and that is was necessary she should pass to this State thro’ a great Number of Cares, Disappointments, and Distresses.”* (27)

*The Female Quixote*

Charlotte Lennox’s 1752 novel *The Female Quixote* follows Arabella, a young heroine whose beauty is only rivaled by her folly. As a quixotic figure, Arabella’s understanding of her role in the world is forged entirely by the novels she reads, by what “all the Heroines had done” before her, yet, unlike some of her more humorous and unlikely fancies, she is not incorrect in her estimation of the “infinite Trouble” of marriage and the many “necessary” passages required of her before attaining it. While the vague framing of “one time or another” appears to project a randomness to the nature of marriage, it more keenly points to the inevitability of it in the heroine’s story, and the actual attainment of it, as Arabella will demonstrate over the course of the novel, is far from random. Rather, Arabella’s story attests to the prescribed passages the heroine must take in pursuit of this goal, most notably the refinement required of her person, her mind, and her manners from the hand of the hero before being granted his hand in marriage. For Arabella, this refinement means curing her quixotic traits before her cousin Mr. Glanville will descend to marry her.

The notion of curing the quixote is not exclusive to Lennox, and it is just one of many ways the rhetoric of refinement surfaces in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women’s literature. In the hallmark feminist text *Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar illustrate the way the history of “literary paternity” reduced women to “mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts” (12). Not only does the patriarchal pen frame women as passive subjects, but it also defines them as figures “created by, from, and for men.” As the female author emerges, then, she is forced to navigate how to give life and grant identity

to a female subject separate from the male figure, who had exercised “rights of ownership” over female characters within, and outside of, their texts (12). In this attempt, early female authors adopt a narrative that will allow them to frame a heroine who is still largely invented and authored by a male presence. While Lennox does this quite plainly, painting a heroine whose folly is apparent and pervasive throughout the text, this notion of the hero shaping the heroine into marriage material is continued and challenged by later female authors. Most closely resembling this idea is Frances Burney’s 1778 work *Evelina*, following a namesake heroine with exceptional virtue and grace yet dismissed as rustic upon her entrance to high society. Two decades later, it is cleverly parodied by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* with Catherine Morland, another quixotic heroine with seeming deficiencies in all feminine qualities. Another half a century later, it is turned on its head, though not entirely abandoned, by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, whose namesake heroine defies every expectation of beauty, exceptionalism, and malleability. It is significant that the majority of these texts are named simply after the heroine they center on, for their stories prove to be no more than journeys of defining a name, finding identity, and, in a sense, being authored, all through the confines of this narrative of refinement. Accordingly, all of these heroines enter their texts as similarly blank slates in some way unaccustomed to or unfit for society, just as their female authors were taking their first uneasy steps into a daunting literary world, tiptoeing their way around the existing male marketplace. These authors had to learn from and be refined by their male counterparts in the same way their heroines had to be molded by their respective heroes in order to achieve the goals of what I call *heroinism*, attaining this unique identity, acquiring a mate, as well as, in the case of the female author, the status of author. With its emphasis on improvement and a goal of marriage, this narrative presents a rather narrow scope of freedom for the female subject. Despite this, early

female novelists like Lennox, Burney, Austen, and Brontë preserve many of its elements both to please the literary men who had “penned” them in and also to veil their more subversive goals with a relative adherence to the expectations for women of the period (Gilbert and Gubar 13). However, they also adapted this narrative of refinement in subtle yet significant ways, utilizing different narrative strategies that changed the proximity of author, narrator, and reader as well as altering the characterization of the mentor, in order to subvert gendered concepts of identity formation. In this way, the narrative of refinement exists as a structure that is made to be subverted. Emerging from a state of confinement for the female writer, the narrative of refinement in the heroine’s journey is deliberately continued and changed by early female authors in an attempt to challenge the limitations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female readers and writers. To be a heroine was once to be nothing more than a passive subject, but by altering this narrative, female authors can envision a world where their heroines begin to exercise the authorial agency they seek, where, as Mary Wollstonecraft imagines, they can have not “power over men; but over themselves” (“A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”).

## The Heroine’s Journey

Readers have long since remarked on the connection between authorship and identity, and Judith Gardiner explores the ways in which writing by women in particular reveals a uniquely feminine process of identity formation. Rooted in theorists like Erik Erikson, who describes how gendered biological differences create the expectation that “a young woman spends adolescence looking for a man through whom she can fulfill herself,” Gardiner asserts the idea that “the woman writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathic identification with her



character” (350, 357). Thus, these female novelists forge their stories with this dual purpose, enforcing a narrative that will allow their heroines to fulfill themselves while also vicariously engaging in their own authorial identity formation. It is for this reason that heroinism emerges as a concept very different from the existing notion of heroism. While the hero’s journey has rather enduring goals of attaining honor and social ascension, the path of the heroine, rather, focuses on acquiring the security and comfort found in the institution of marriage. Because marriage is, at least initially, the sole route through which a female protagonist can achieve the identity and security she seeks, it is not the actual attainment of this goal that is important but rather the means by which the heroine can ascend to the status of wife. The heroine’s journey also differs in its application of the protagonist’s gender counterpart. While the heroine is typically framed as a prize used to motivate the hero to complete his journey, the heroes of early female authors like Lennox, Burney, Austen, and Brontë, however, are far less passive in the path of the heroine and are, as I will argue, used as a device to refine and train the heroine to fit her highly feminized and virtuous role before, ultimately, rewarding her with his offer of marriage. Thus, while heroines are simply rewards for the hero’s journey, heroes are both the prize and the means to attain it in the novelistic pursuits of the heroine.

Collectively labeling all of these authors as novelists is misleading, though, for the novel, as modern readers perceive it, had not yet emerged by the time Lennox, and arguably Burney, was writing. Analyzing work from this era, from the mid-eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century, captures what John Richetti calls a “continuing and unresolved debate about the nature of that evolving narrative convention we now confidently call the novel” (8). Richetti outlines a clear narrative shift that led to the formation of the novel, which begins with a cultural abandonment of the “narrative of the improbable” in favor of realism and rationality (3). As a

mid-century text, Lennox's *The Female Quixote* demonstrates this shift in narrative expectations beautifully, marrying romantic notions of chivalry and intrigue with the new eighteenth-century search for the ordinary and experiential. Burney's *Evelina* comes to represent the sentimental novel, which focused on her heroine's "private and domestic virtues" while also expressing the "limitations of...individualism," particularly for a female protagonist (Richetti 8). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, "when Jane Austen...flourished," a clear and familiar form of the novel had emerged, though its consumption was still far from celebrated (3). Like any new diversion in its conception, novel reading was frowned upon if enjoyed too much, a fact that Austen challenges in *Northanger Abbey*. By the time Brontë was writing in the mid-nineteenth century, the novel was not only an accepted form but a widely consumed one, though she still made significant contributions to the form in expanding the intimacy of narration and the bounds of the female experience. Thus, the evolution of heroinism and the narrative of refinement was, in many ways, congruent with the emergence of, and acceptance of, the novel.

Richetti also outlines the novel's unique interest in the individual, one's potential for identity formation, social ambition, and moral ascension (3-4). However, as Joseph Campbell outlines, if "man," in the long history of heroes, is "the one who comes to know," then these novelistic opportunities seem to break down when "the adventurer...is a maid" (108). Campbell suggests that, when this narrative focuses on a woman, "she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty, and her yearning, is fit to become the consort of the immortal," the immortal being the "heavenly husband" who makes her an offer of marriage (108). Once again, it appears that the process of becoming "fit" for such a role is what guides the heroine's journey. Asserting that she must become fit, however, suggests the heroine starts her story in some way unfit for her immortal mate, and this is the crux of every heroine in the narrative of refinement. In order for

these heroines to be malleable, and therefore marriable, beings, they must first be in some way in need of refinement. Whether orphaned, isolated, or just unfeminine, each of the heroines encountered in these texts enter their respective societies as a blank slate. It is important to note that the term blank slate is nothing short of a loaded one, for by the eighteenth century, John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) was shifting the way people, and our novelists, perceived how consciousness and personhood forms:

Let us then suppose the mind to have no ideas in it, to be like white paper with nothing written on it. How then does it come to be written on? From where does it get that vast store which the busy and boundless imagination of man has painted on it—all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience.

(18)

In other words, for Locke we are not born with innate ideas inscribed upon our minds; rather, his concept of the *tabula rasa* suggests that humans enter the world entirely blank, as “white paper” primed to be written upon. However, Robert Duschinsky, in his study of the way *tabula rasa* operated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, claims it has wrongly become a “rhetorical extreme...an image of utter human malleability” (509). He proposes a more accurate translation here as “formlessness prior to text” or even “the erasure of text...to make room for something new” (510). Both of these are more intriguing descriptions, and perhaps more fitting for our heroines, who are, though not necessarily blank, in some way formless or in need of rewriting. This concept of writing upon or rewriting the “white paper” is particularly interesting when considering the earlier female novelists, for whom the idea of authorship and writing upon the world was so new. However, there also seems to be a gendered element to this idea of the blank slate, the impression that women are innately more blank than men. This coincides with the

depiction of Arabella in *The Female Quixote* who, because she spends the formative years of her life “in perfect Retirement” in the country with her father and is permitted to receive “no Part of her Education from another,” was never properly written upon by experience (Lennox 6-7). Instead, she is left, quite literally, impressionable and easily inscribed upon by the novels she reads. Because of her father’s failure to write upon her, she adopts the absorptive reading habits that prove so detrimental to her, and, in this way, the gendered reading of the blank slate caters directly to the notion of the female quixote and the stigma of novel reading. If women are perceived as beings born more truly blank than men, then they are more susceptible to the winding roads of intrigue offered by the romantic and sentimental forms, and it is also with this logic that men are responsible for acting as the mentors to refine these heroines and engage in the writing and rewriting necessary to make them suitable for marriage.

## *The Female Quixote*: Rewriting a Novel Mind

“...I would yet rather hear Instructions than Compliments. If therefore you have observed in me any dangerous Tenets, corrupt passions, or criminal Desires, I conjure you to discover me to myself.” (370)

Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* represents this narrative in its primitive form, and it embodies many of the conventions later novels will begin to manipulate. Arabella’s story and its relatively simple depiction of the narrative of refinement, a flawed heroine being cured by a male mentor leading to the reward of marriage, is useful to establish precedence and provide a lens through which the other novels can be read. Lennox’s heroine, Arabella, is a young woman whose looks and natural graces “drew the Admiration of all that saw her” (6). Her mind, too, was one of “uncommon Quickness” and “capable of great Improvements,” a quality essential to a heroine’s narrative of refinement, as much of the story focuses on curing her of her folly and flawed reason (7). However, this quality also proves dangerous when not cultivated properly, for,

though the young heroine shows a keen interest in reading, the excess of romance novels at her disposal coupled with the fact that she was “wholly secluded from the world” creates a heroine whose quixotic qualities constantly combat her natural grace and beauty (6). Reminiscent of Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Arabella’s seclusion causes her to turn to books as the sole source of her “Diversions...Notions and Expectations,” leaving her mind tarnished by entirely unrealistic understandings of love, the world, and her role in it (7). Gilbert and Gubar explore how women in the traditional hero’s narrative were presented in only two ways, the angel in the house and the devil in the house. The former “leads a life...in considerable isolation on a country estate...a life without external events – a life whose story cannot be told because there is no story” (22). This notion is undeniably reminiscent of Arabella in *The Female Quixote*, who uses novels to create these “external events” in an attempt to forge her own story in the absence of one. It makes sense, then, that Arabella’s quixotism emerges from her exclusion; her imaginative readings allow her to escape a world in which she is confined. Thus, this search for identity and yearning for a story entirely colors the heroine’s journey, beginning, as Arabella did, as a storyless angel in need of refinement to make a suitable mate. The conditions of this confinement, however, are overshadowed by the folly it creates. Thus, the tragic underpinnings of Arabella’s state often seem lost on the other characters in the novel, who can “hardly forbear smiling” when faced with her ridiculous notions, and readers likely experience similar responses (277). Buried under this humor, though, Lennox paints a heroine who is truly tormented by her lack of belonging and understanding, one who struggles to define herself when the books she has “hitherto read as Copies of Life” are revealed to be “empty Fictions” (377).

Returning to the concept of the blank slate, because of Arabella’s quixotic traits, she represents an entirely tarnished slate, one in need of total erasure and rewriting. Though her

beauty and amiability are unmatched by any other member of her sex, she has one, clearly defined defect, and her hero makes it known he cannot condescend to marry her until a total “Cure of her Mind” has been enacted (367). Mirroring Campbell’s language, she must be made “fit” before becoming the “consort of the immortal” and fulfilling the goals of heroicism. Though her father, the Marquis, is the one who pleasantly remarks that her mind is “capable of great Improvements,” it is not the father figure that will ultimately enact such a cure but rather her cousin and future husband Mr. Glanville (6). Lennox sets this expectation up directly, for after one of Arabella’s theatrical episodes, Glanville’s father pulls him aside and reminds him that “since she was to be his Wife, it was his Business to produce a Reformation in her,” which he does through many ploys, tests of patience, and much pleading (64). It is only then that he can see her as a worthy heroine, fit to reward with an offer of marriage. This expectation of the husband as the heroic mentor is mirrored by eighteenth-century women’s conduct books. In one of such publications titled *The Lady’s Prospector*, Abbé d’Ancourt promotes the idea that “if Woman owes her Being to the Comfort and Profit of man, ‘tis highly reasonable that she should be careful and diligent to content and please him” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 23). Therefore, because men were responsible for providing, and the only way to attain, the security and comfort women sought, they were granted sole authority over making all of the necessary improvements in her to ensure that she is a pleasing mate once given that privilege.

The nature of conduct literature –aiming to instruct women on all of the moral, social, and physical improvements she should make to be a proper daughter, wife, and mother– likens it to the figure of the mentor. However, as all of the novelists seem to assert, it represents a bad mentor, an avenue through which men like Ancourt could further patronize, restrain, and control the image of women through their writing. The didactic nature and sheer abundance of these

conduct books reinforces the notion that women exist as far blanker slates than men, or rather just slates that have far less opportunities to be formally inscribed upon. One thing Lennox, as well as the later authors, seems to capture is the capacity for the female author, and the novel itself, to act as an alternative form of mentor to the female reader. As Lennox's depiction of the quixote would suggest, women, when left with no other outlets of experience, are highly susceptible to the notions they encounter in literature; in this way, the form of the novel is a rival mentor for the heroes who cure the quixote, which proves to be true for Glanville, who is constantly combating the romantic notions harbored by Arabella's novel reading. The conditions of the narrative of refinement, in which the heroic mentor is able to shape his heroine to suit his tastes and Glanville successfully erases the Arabella's quixotic misreading, seem to suggest that heroes are the more successful mentors. However, the very novels that contain and critique this narrative and the women framing it are perhaps the real mentors being in these texts, a notion that the later novelists will begin to explore more explicitly.

Arabella's case is intriguing though, for her flaw has far more implications than the simple lack of deportment or feminine charm promoted in conduct books. Rather, she is consistently confused, and often frustrated, when the reality for eighteenth-century women seems to constantly contradict what romantic tales of heroes suggest, where "Woman," as Joseph Campbell writes, "represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know" (106). Campbell's quote is significant here because women not only represent the culmination of what can be known for these heroes but also the unknown. Their stories are as hidden from the humble hero as they are from the female novel reader. In the romance novels Arabella encounters, women act primarily as passive goddesses, idols of admiration, or the prize awaiting the hero upon his return. However, if these expectations have evolved and the reality

surrounding Arabella is now very different, as perception of her would suggest, then her story seems to be the first to ask what a modern heroine's story should be. If, as the Countess tells Arabella, "the same actions that made a Man a Hero" in antiquity "would constitute him a Murderer" in the eighteenth century, then the role of the heroine has inevitably changed as well, and Arabella is faced with reconciling not only how a heroine can act beyond the narrative of the hero but also how she can do so without "bringing an Imputation on her Chastity," the eighteenth-century woman's evil dragon (Lennox 328). Therefore, by correcting Arabella's false notions of the world, Glanville is indirectly instructing Arabella of her proper role in it as well as revealing to all women their presumed place in the narrative. Beyond humorously exploring a female quixote, then, Lennox seems to be essentially paving the narrative of the modern heroine, particularly one painted by a woman.

## *Evelina*: A Rustic Redeemed

*"The heroine of these memoirs, young, artless, and inexperienced, is... but the offspring of Nature, and of Nature in her simplest attire."* (10)

Two decades after the publication of *The Female Quixote*, Frances Burney's debut novel *Evelina* (1778) both continues and critiques this narrative of refinement more explicitly than Lennox. While Lennox frames a heroine who is ultimately entirely reformed by her mentor, Burney adopts subtle narrative strategies that disrupt, though not entirely abandon this structure. As an epistolary novel, *Evelina* presents a somewhat of filtered retelling of events that provides some distance from the reality of the narrative, yet it also proves more intimate to the mind of the heroine than Lennox's third person narration. Additionally, as a sentimental novel, it celebrates the heroine's "private and domestic virtue" yet emphasizes the limits enforced by her sex and her social exclusion (Richetti 3). While Arabella represents a slate in need of rewriting, Burney's



Evelina represents a truly blank slate; anything can be written upon her. While she, like Arabella, spends her formative years in near total isolation with a dear father figure, the conditions of Evelina's exclusion are contested from the beginning. The novel begins with an appeal from the uncouth Madame Duval to detain her "helpless orphan" granddaughter from the man whose care she was placed under at a time when "a mother's protection was so peculiarly necessary for her peace and her reputation" (14). This concern, from a grandmother who was in all ways unfit to raise a young woman, "uneducated and unprincipled; ungentle in her temper, and unamiable in her manners," instantly questions the sole authority of a man to cultivate all of the desired qualities and decidedly feminine virtues in this young lady (15). However, Burney seems to promote the ability of a man to do just that. With a departed mother and ill-bred grandmother, Reverend Mr. Villars was given total agency over "the mind and morals" of this young heroine, Evelina (16). Villars proves to be a dedicated and devoted mentor, telling Mrs. Mirvan that Evelina was the one for "whom alone I have lately wished to live...she is the one whom to serve I would with transport to die" (22). This devotion is important, as most of the correspondence in this novel is between Villars and Evelina. Her words are framed for him as her intended audience. As a reader, the intimacy captured in this narrative style is unique, for because these letters are addressed to the one man Evelina trusts most in the world, readers are inclined to believe they are the heroine's purest thoughts.

In his diligence and practice, Villars certainly raises a bright and amiable young woman, and, like the Marquis with young Arabella, he bestows Evelina with the education, temper, and manners fit for a lady. In his anxiousness, however, he admits to keeping her "too rigidly sequestered" from the world, a fact that proves detrimental to her eventual entrance into it (19). Though, unlike Arabella, she is not overcome by the romantic notions harbored by excessive

novel reading, Evelina does find herself entirely ignorant of the intricacies of high society. She lacks any “experience” in this environment, which Locke outlines as the only way to be inscribed upon (18). Evelina is eager for such experience, such an entrance into the sophisticated city, but the education she finds there is not what she expects. The coquettes and ball-goers she encounters in London prove to be more concerned with artificial social refinement than any moral or intellectual pursuits. Through the enforcement of this superficial refinement, Burney begins to establish the limits of the heroine, even in the ambitious form of the novel. Thus, while Evelina is bestowed with many of the crucial qualities of a coming-of-age heroine— lovely, meek, and perfectly instructed by her guardian in all moral pursuits— her behavior upon her entrance into the city is marked by many instances of what the onlookers label as ill breeding. At her first dance upon her entrance to London, Evelina shows that she is unaware of the impropriety of accepting another dancing partner after declining a previous offer, a social blunder which prompts even the brash Mr. Lovel to label her “ill-bred,” ignorant,” and “rustic” (37). This instance of misreading a previously unencountered situation is not unlike Arabella’s many moments of misreading her world. While Arabella’s lapses stemmed from an excess of reading, Evelina’s seems to reflect a lack of reading. Her ignorance not only reflects the seclusion of her young girlhood but also her apparent exclusion from conduct literature. This is also seen in the fact that she is prone to fits of laughter, which, as Patricia Hamilton explains in her exploration of politeness in the period, was considered “the characteristic of folly and ill-manners” in the eyes of eighteenth-century onlookers (429). These lapses in deportment set her up as a figure devoid of mentors, even poor mentors like those found in romance novels or conduct literature. Though she praises the guidance of Mr. Villars, following in Lennox’s stead, Burney asserts the need for a heroic mentor to intervene, without whom her social blunders would persist. Thus,

both authors seem to distinguish between what the father figure perceives as an amiable daughter and what the heroic mentor considers an apt partner, reinforcing the notion that the refinement that will take place is solely aimed at marriage.

Burney's heroic figure takes the form of the illustrious Lord Orville, who labels his heroine a "poor weak girl" upon his first encounter with her, and it is clear her "rustic" qualities and unpolished social shrewdness must be reconciled before the two can make a worthy match (37). Both Mr. Villars and Lord Orville are revered for their exceptional moral character, but Orville in particular, who readers are able to see Evelina interact with more directly, is "universally admired for his manner and deportment" as well as, as Hamilton argues, exceptional female sensibilities (286). These feminine virtues, outlined as "propriety, sensitivity, and compassion" set him apart from the "exaggerated representation of masculine traits" displayed by the other men in *Evelina* (Hamilton 421). This distinction between Orville, the hero and feminine refiner, and the other male characters is evident in the scene where Mr. Coverly and Mr. Lovel discuss the details of a reckless phaeton race, an uncouth gamble that clearly shocks the ladies present. Lord Orville interjects to "compromise the matter" and propose "something less dangerous" to appease the women in the room, whose fear he seems to reciprocate (287). This degree of propriety and politeness not only contradicts the precarious actions of the other men but also aligns with the cautionary sensibilities of the women present who "tremble all over" at the very thought of "such a scheme" (287). After this proposal, Coverly directly addresses this by remarking that Orville's phaeton driving is "as careful as an old woman" (288). Coverly's comment, which is essentially an attack of his softened masculinity, starkly separates Orville from the libertines in the room and begins to establish him as an exemplar, someone Evelina is meant to learn from and be directly refined by.

Orville's femininity extends to his display of sensibility, or sentimentality, which Hamilton outlines as a "regard for the feelings of others" (431). We see proof of Lord Orville's unique sympathy when the two meet during one of Evelina's uncomfortable outings with the Brangthons, the buffoonish extended family she stays with while in London. During a fireworks show, Evelina encounters two impish young women who decide to playfully lock arms with her and Mr. Brown and begin parading them around. It is during this charade when Evelina spots Orville from across the crowd, at which point she remarks "Good God, with what expressive eyes did he regard me...yes my dear Sir, he looked *greatly* concerned" (236). Surrounded by the blatant disregard of her party, Evelina's shock at the singularity of Orville's sympathy is evident. In her exploration of politeness in this era, Martha Koehler notes that this sensibility and compassion for the feelings of others was also promoted in both sexes in eighteenth-century conduct literature; however, the other male characters in the novel prove that this trait was not an enduring masculine value. Thus, it can be asserted that Burney is using Lord Orville as somewhat of an effeminate moral being, someone meant to act both as a model of feminine conduct for Evelina as well as an example of how the existing "model of masculinity" can be replaced "with one based on feeling and sensibility" (Koehler 24). By doing so, Burney is placing Orville in the position of the moral paragon, a figure of example whose function is to be imitated. This role, traditionally filled by women in earlier sentimental novels, is one that Burney expresses her open disapproval of in the preface of *Evelina*. Knowing her readership's expectation of such a moral figure in her virtuous Evelina, she prevents such a reading by stating "The heroine of these memoirs, young artless, and inexperienced, is 'No faultless Monster, that the World ne'er saw'" (9). While she dismisses Evelina as a moral paragon, Koehler argues instead that Burney makes Evelina a creator of paragons, and, in doing so, she is both

contributing to the “masculinization of a traditionally feminine role,” in which she places Lord Orville, and also a feminization of ideal male conduct (26). Burney’s strategy, however, goes far beyond simply swapping traditional gender roles. She not only makes Orville this exemplary figure of morality for readers but essentially an instructor of feminine virtue for Evelina, the means by which she can find the identity and security needed for a heroine to complete her journey.

It is evident from both Burney’s “Preface” dismissing paragons and her heroine’s shortcomings in the beginning of the novel that Evelina is far from perfect and relies largely on Mr. Villars for guidance. In her extended distance from him, however, she begins to enlist Orville’s instruction with equal eagerness: “There is no young creature, my Lord, who so greatly wants, or so earnestly wishes for, the advice and assistance of her friends, as I do” (306). Though she has previously been “blest with the ablest of men to guide and instruct” her “upon every occasion,” Orville’s refined sentiments take him beyond the moral realm of Mr. Villars’ guidance and into the high demands of heroinism, notably the social savvy and fortitude she lacks to fulfill the lofty expectations of the novel, including ascending the social structure and acquiring security in marriage, which only the heroic mentor can provide (306). When Mr. Villars reluctantly consigns Evelina to Madame Duval’s charge, he implores her to evade the same tragic fate of her mother by learning “not only to judge but to act for” herself, avoid situations she perceives as improper, and end her meek passivity (166). He is essentially outlining the areas in which she must excel to achieve the demands of heroinism. Certainly, Evelina does show improvement in all of these areas and proves the success of her refinement. This improvement is most evident in the scene where she is forced to attend the Hampstead ball with Mr. Smith, where she quickly declares her desire to not dance at all. When Mr. Smith boasts

he does not “at all fear of prevailing with the young lady,” Evelina is quick to prove him wrong by declaring “Indeed, Sir you are mistaken...you may be assured my resolution will not alter” (222). Mr. Smith is forced instead to dance with Madam Duval, much to his chagrin and Evelina’s amusement. This behavior is so far removed from her first precarious encounters with dancing partners in which she let men like the foolish Sir Clement lead her aimlessly around a ballroom and feared turning down fops like Mr. Lovel. Not only has he equipped her with the social knowledge and fortitude she needed to decline Mr. Smith’s offer, Lord Orville has also served as an exemplary male figure that allows her to refine her choice of partners.

She continues to refine her company using the example of Lord Orville, as she quickly becomes entirely exasperated with the Branghtons and Madam Duval. When Tom Branghton misguidedly visits Lord Orville to apologize for breaking the window of his carriage, she has finally had enough and exclaims “You all drive me wild! You have done me irreparable injury; but I will hear no more!” (249). A mere moment later, she finally stands up to Madame Duval after she threatens to never take her to Paris unless she agrees to marry Tom Branghton, to which Evelina “frankly told her that in this point she could never obey her” (253). Thus, by the end of the second volume, it is clear that she has successfully followed the pleading advice of Mr. Villars, as she has learned to act for herself, avoid improper situations, and be less passive. It is no surprise, then, that by the end of *Evelina* she fulfills all of the heroine’s goals. Though hastily, she marries a high-ranking man and, even more successfully, marries for love, a recount captured in the single line “All is over, my dearest Sir, and the fate of your Evelina is decided!” (406). The finality of this statement is telling, for though readers do not witness the actual ceremony, they can sense Evelina’s surety, her contentment and relief after gaining this security and identity in marriage. Interestingly, in the letter before this, Evelina signs with her surname, stating “for the

first—and probably last time I shall ever own my name, permit me to sign myself...Evelina Belmont” (404). Thus, the first time she claims the name of the man who fled her ill-fated mother is when she sheds it, and in doing so, she is proudly demonstrating this assumption of a new identity through marriage. In symbolically discarding a name she never claimed, she is reinforcing her lack of identity prior to Lord Orville’s intervention and also emphasizing his role in forming it, for Evelina’s happy ending would not have been secured without the careful instruction of the hero. If Evelina had failed to refine her behavior after so much exposure to Lord Orville’s social shrewdness, it is likely she would have remained the “poor weak girl” he proclaimed her as after their first meeting, thus never prompting the proposal that would propel her to security (37).

It is important to establish, both to understand the intentions of Burney and the malleability of her heroine, that the reason these men succeeded in their endeavors to refine her was because of their perceived perfection. It is clear that Evelina regards Mr. Villars and Lord Orville with admiration and amazement on their apparent faultlessness, and she frequently makes reports to the former on the moral and social superiority of the latter. In one letter, she describes how she regards Orville as “an object of ideal perfection, formed by my own imagination” (Burney 174). Evelina’s use of the word “imagination” is surprisingly self-aware, as it is the one time she directly addresses that her perception of Orville may differ from his reality, from the ideal she has created. Critics have long since remarked on the unnatural idealism of these male mentors. In her examination of politeness in *Evelina*, Hamilton notes the tendency to read Burney’s Lord Orville as “too perfect a character to have ever existed in real life” (416). Certainly, while he can be seen as a new model of the ideal male for the author and an admirable teacher for the heroine, it is difficult to discern if his behavior is really as perfect as it seems.

Burney's use of the epistolary form complicates this analysis, as the entirety of *Evelina* is filtered through the mind of the heroine before being reproduced in her letters, allowing her memory and validity to falter depending on time and language to differ depending on her correspondent.

Interestingly, the filter provided by the epistolary form also allows Evelina to act as an author for her own story, specifically crafting the words she relays to Mr. Villars and shaping Orville into the character she wants to perceive. Ultimately, men like Orville do read as unrealistic, not just because they are forced to complete two competing components of the heroine's plot, the model gentlemanly suiter and the feminized refiner, but also because, in describing them, Evelina is able to exercise a sort of ownership over them, and perhaps this is a reality that Burney can only frame in this fanciful way.

## *Northanger Abbey*: Instructing the Unseasoned Reader

*"The advantages of natural folly in a beautiful girl have already been set forth by the capital pen of a sister author; - and to her treatment of the subject I will only add in justice to men, that...imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms."* (125)

Nearly forty years later, upon the posthumous publishing of Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland becomes another heroine faced with inadequacies that must be refined before Mr. Tilney can see her as a potential partner. By the nineteenth century, the familiar form of the novel was beginning to solidify, and Austen's work came to represent the uniquely feminine contribution to it. *Northanger Abbey*, in particular, is a notable example of this, for it not only participates in the form but also experiments with previous versions of it, markedly sentimental and gothic clichés. It is also one of her earliest novelistic efforts; though published after her death in 1817, it was speculated to have been written much earlier in 1798, which makes her command of style and manipulation of popular narrative structures that much more impressive. In this novel, Austen also commands a mix of free-indirect discourse, a narrative style Burney



anticipated in her later novels, and a rather decisive narrative voice. The use of free-indirect discourse provides an unusually perceptive perspective. As Jane Spencer explains, this new narrative style gives “a closer rendition than the earlier novel (*Evelina*) of its heroine’s thoughts and feelings” (23). While *Evelina*’s letters are filtered directly through the mind of their heroine, they can only manage to do so through recollection and reflection. *Northanger Abbey*’s free-indirect discourse, however, incorporates elements of inward first-person into the dominant third-person narration. A crucial aspect of this form’s command of emotional complexity is the alternation of control by character and narrator. While Austen allows moments of Catherine’s inward turn, which can lead to the imaginative reading of the world she falls prey to, she also frequently turns to her frank narrator, who often does not bother to bring the heroine back to reality. Rather, she permits Catherine to be carried away by the gothic quests, the sentimental cliches, and her hero’s perfection. Through this permissiveness, the narrator seems to be actively working against Catherine, both allowing and alerting the reader to her heroine’s faults, but she maintains a decisive and sarcastic tone that reminds readers of her bias, a level of awareness Burney’s epistolary form cannot manage. Ultimately, it is through this narrator that Austen carries out her critiques of the form and also challenges the narrative of refinement for her heroine.

Readers witness the impact of this unique style from the very first line of *Northanger Abbey*, opening with the narrator stating, “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine” (37). Already Austen engages with the concept of the heroine far more directly and begins with a more unpolished and teachable protagonist than what Burney offers in *Evelina*, for, while Catherine Morland is more aware of the expectations of her society, she is an objection to traditional gender norms from the

beginning. Interestingly, Austen seems to suggest here, like Locke, that heroinism is not something that can be ascribed at birth, and Catherine must be inscribed upon in a way that will shape her into fitting that role. Certainly, Catherine's apparent want of beauty and wit makes her a bit of an unusual Austen heroine, but her fondness of "all of boys' play," hatred of "confinement and cleanliness," and incompetence in any and all productive pastimes makes her deficient in seemingly all feminine qualities (37-39). Unlike Burney, who never utilizes the word heroine in the entirety of *Evelina*, Austen's *Northanger Abbey* focuses almost solely on Catherine's path to refined heroinism. We know from Catherine's plainness, ignorance, and awkwardness that the existing concept of heroinism that Austen is challenging, which was championed by women like Lennox and Burney, is founded on exceptionalism, both in feminine pursuits in drawing, writing, and improving as well as beauty. While Catherine's young womanhood brings improvement in her complexion and figure, the narrator stresses that there is still "by nature nothing heroic about her," which, once again, mirrors Locke's notion that nature alone cannot determine one's form. However, the narrator has already explicitly set her up as a "heroine in training," suggesting an intervention of some sort must be enacted, some refinement must take place, something must be written upon her, before she can fill this role (39). Following in the stead of Lennox and Burney, this intervention is the introduction of a male mentor.

While Burney shaped Orville as a feminized moral example, someone with both the masculine qualities to make a worthy suitor but also the refined feminine qualities to act as a mentor for *Evelina*, Austen takes this even further in *Northanger Abbey*. Regarding Austen's seemingly unfeminine and unpolished heroine, Catherine, the narrator remarks "Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way," suggesting such a figure is the only way to mold her into heroine material (41). Austen barely attempts to disguise her playful, and in many ways

critical, participation in such a tradition, as this novel can be perceived as Austen's critique of the state of the female reader, writer, and the culture surrounding the novel as a whole. Similar to Burney and Orville, Austen uses Henry Tilney as a caricature of this feminized refiner; he seems the perfect tutor, almost unnaturally endowed with every female refinement, including a keen knowledge of muslins, journaling, landscapes, and gardening. Upon their first meeting, Mrs. Allen remarks with astonishment that "Men commonly take such little notice of such things," and even Catherine regards him in disbelief, "How can you be so –," a question she cuts short but can presumably be completed with the word feminine (51). The rupture at the end of this sentence not only conveys Catherine's incredulity but also Austen's emphasis of Tilney's impossible perfection, his cumulative exemplification of every aspect of femininity that Catherine lacks. Their astonishment is warranted; he is meant to appear as an impossible figure, participating in an impossibly restrictive plot.

He not only acts as a model for female virtue and deportment but also an enjoyer of female pastimes, which even Catherine fails to express. This is most clearly seen in the fact that Tilney joins Catherine in perhaps the only feminine action she enjoys, novel reading. By the time *Northanger Abbey* was being written, though the novel was a recognizable form, it was still a highly stigmatized one. In her analysis of female quixotism in *Northanger Abbey*, Jodi Wyatt describes how novels, largely consumed by the female population, were surrounded by a mass of anti-novel discourse, which viewed them not only as an inferior form of media but also a destructive one. They were thought to "mislead the mind...enfeeble the heart" and "lead the unwary amidst the winding mazes of intrigue," notions that were as injurious to the female author as the silent female reader (Wyatt 261). Austen would have undoubtedly encountered this not only in *The Female Quixote* but also in countless examples of anti-novel discourse in the late

eighteenth century. Critics warned against the effects of novels well before Austen, and just one example is Vicessimus Knox's 1778 essay "On Novel Reading." Knox pays particular attention to the ways in which novels "may corrupt a mind unseasoned by experience." While attributing merit to the novels of some of his male contemporaries, such as those by Tobias Smollett, he maintains that "it is advisable to defer the perusal of his works, till the judgment is mature." Catherine, as Knox would suggest, possesses precisely the sort of unseasoned mind and immature judgment that makes one more susceptible to the novel's intrigue. However, Tilney, also well versed in histories and Latin, does not fall prey to the "absorbed, imaginative reading" that proves so damaging to Catherine (Wyett 161). Rather, he represents a reader whose mind and judgment are suitably primed to shield against the sentimentality and temptation encountered in the novel. This asserts the need for Tilney, a mature novel reader, to correct and refine Catherine's judgment. By enjoying both the destructive and romanticized novels read by young women and the literature praised by educated men, Tilney adopts aspects of the female mind into his existing male toolkit, "giving him the advantage over his companions whose reading had been more restricted" (Wyett 267). This puts him in the perfect position to act as an exemplar to Catherine, demonstrating a refined way to participate in a feminine pastime.

Despite this, Wyett argues that *Northanger Abbey*, unlike previous quixote stories written by women, "shifts the focus away from reforming the heroine" (262). Instead, Austen's real goal was to legitimize the form of the novel, particularly women's participation in reading and writing them, yet she accomplishes this by strategically framing and subverting the narrative of refinement. While making Catherine's refiner an avid novel reader certainly challenges the notion that novels were an inferior form of entertainment consumed only by uneducated women, *Northanger Abbey* proves to be less successful in granting legitimacy to the form than in

critiquing the notion that if everyone is born as a blank slate, then men are more able to refine and inscribe upon themselves while women need to the instruction of a man to do so properly. Regardless of Austen's intentions regarding the acceptance of the novel and women's participation in reading and writing them, like Lennox's novel half a century prior, it still takes Tilney "curing the quixote," refining the heroine, and rewarding her with marriage to fulfill this goal (262). Thus, in *Northanger Abbey*, the narrative of refinement acts as a sort of riptide for the acceptance of the novel, a current that overrides a genuine resistance to present discourse or rather waters down the novel's true intentions. Part of Austen's genius is the fact that she can accomplish both of these goals simultaneously, and being aware of this allows us to look at all of her choices as an author, and all of Catherine's instructions as a heroine in training, as possessing this dual purpose.

Throughout her acquaintance with Mr. Tilney, we see Catherine frequently discouraged when he discusses subjects she is ignorant of with the "eagerness of real taste" (124). During their walk in which the Tilneys discuss landscapes, she is quick to lament "her want of knowledge," and Henry's "lecture of the picturesque immediately" follows, leaving the future heroine with a sliver of his keen perception and taste (125). Austen's phrasing of this blatant refinement in which Catherine simply asks and Henry immediately administers knowledge demonstrates the ways in which she has simplified this narrative in order to critique it. It also satirizes the ease with which young women can be impressed upon, which mirrors Knox's warning at the speed with which novels can corrupt a "mind unseasoned by experience." However, Austen seems to assert that the experience that novels provide is productive; they are able to season the mind in a different way, a way more organic than the heroic mentor's prescribed instruction. Evidence of Tilney's effective refinement continues when Catherine

professes enthusiastically to have “just learned to love a hyacinth,” though the narrator explains in the first paragraph of the novel that the heroine “by nature had no taste for a garden” (38, 175). Mr. Tilney seems pleased with such progress, telling her that “a taste for flowers is always desirable in your sex...you may in time come to love a rose” (175). This language is important here because Tilney is quite explicitly changing Catherine’s “nature” for the expressed purpose of making her “desirable.” Learning to sew or draw landscapes is one thing, but here Catherine is learning to “love” something, directly altering her judgment. Tilney’s pride in her improvements extends to a rather condescending encouragement to continue to expand her tastes, ruminating that “a teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing” (Austen 175), which is reminiscent of Arabella’s boasted “mind capable of great improvements” (Lennox 7).

While Henry is essentially instructing Catherine in the feminine qualities she lacks, he is also sure to check her when she errs in overly feminine behavior, such as when she begins to adopt the romanticized and absorptive reading of the world that was thought to be the product of too much novel reading on the impressionable female mind. When she expresses one of such instances of her over-imagination to Henry, she commits what Toby Benis calls “one of the more significant faux pas in the history of the courtship plot” by revealing that she had entertained the notion that General Tilney was not only an antagonistic husband and father but also the savage murderer of his late wife (179). Henry politely, though with the seriousness of an attentive tutor, leads her to see the folly of her behavior and implores her to “consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained...Remember the country and age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians...Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?” (195-196). His insistence for her to consider the age and country in which they live is reminiscent of the Countess’ plea to Arabella to consider that “what was honorable a thousand

Years ago may probably be look'd upon as infamous now" and when judging the "Heroes of Romance...as Christians, we shall find them impious and base" (Lennox 328-329). Both instances of curing the quixote rely on notions of Christianity and the beliefs of modern Britishness to return their heroines to reason. Relying on these structures returns the heroine to the scrutiny of her society, particularly to her marketability in marriage. Henry is essentially telling Catherine that her over-imagination makes her unmarriageable in a Christian, English context, and because marriage is the ultimate goal of the heroine, Catherine is forced to abandon her present convictions. Accordingly, her shame at her behavior is evident, and this lecture marks the end of her romantic visions at the Abbey, reclaiming it from the "Catholic settings of Ann Radcliffe's gothic novels" it was in Catherine's imagination to the "Georgian country home" it represents for Tilney (Benis 180). This shift demonstrates the success of Henry's refinement in extricating Catherine from the imaginative realm of fiction to a non-fiction reality. In this way, he is both seasoning her mind and priming her for more tempered reading habits, both in the real world and within the context of the novel.

Catherine's receptiveness to this refinement, like *Evelina's*, seems to stem from the faultlessness she attributes to her tutor, Mr. Tilney. This perception of perfection proves to eclipse all of her own reasoning. After one of his lectures, in which he makes what Catherine could have, and perhaps should have, perceived as an offensive stance on the understanding of women, the narrator remarks, "It was no effort of Catherine to believe that Henry Tilney could ever be wrong" (128). Without the narrative voice interjecting to cue the reader in on Catherine's clouded judgment, Austen's readers would have been as far from understanding Tilney's true nature as they were in *Evelina's* letters praising Orville. Thus, unlike with *Evelina*, in which readers often dismiss the perfect image they get of Lord Orville as an unrealistic caricature of a

man, Austen's use of free-indirect discourse allows for readers to read into Tilney's unspoken imperfections by addressing Catherine's limited perception. Not only does this keep Tilney from reading as entirely unrealistic, E.J. Clery suggests there is actually a "quality of hyperrealism in her male characters" that stems from the fact that their "destinies drive forward the female plot" in ways that remain largely unstated (334-335). Clery claims that Austen was the first to utilize the narrative potential of "keeping the hero's point of view in reserve"; the most obvious example of this is the fact that "the hero's feelings and intentions," which are eclipsed from both heroine and reader, determine the single most important event in the heroine's story, the marriage proposal (339).

Like the other heroines, this anticipated proposal is extended upon Catherine's successful refinement. Even the rhetoric surrounding her proposal comments on Catherine's coarseness, as her mother remarks "Catherine would make a sad, heedless young housekeeper for sure" (237). The narrator, though, is quick to console readers of "there being nothing like practice," playfully hinting at the heroine's continued progress even after taking up her role as wife (237). Like Evelina and Orville, the two wed in an unceremonious ceremony, contained in the single sentence, "Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang, and everybody smiled," a wittily reductive line that captures the idea that it is not the aftermath or even attainment of this conclusion that matters but rather the process of preparing the heroine for acquiring it. In most stories, the point at which the protagonist fulfills their goals is a triumphant climax, but this repeated reductionism of marriage attainment, which is congruent with the previous two novels, is telling. This consistent anti-climax appears deliberate, as if to make the reader doubt that the alterations made to the heroine were worth the hero it won her. All of this remains unstated, though, and while Austen may do so more deliberately and critically than Lennox or Burney, she



is still participating in and perpetuating this narrative of refinement for the female subject. It will still take time for the female novelist to go beyond simply critiquing and begin shifting the course of heroinism.

## *Jane Eyre*: The Vindictively Blank Slate

*“If I am not formed for love, it follows that I am not formed for marriage. Would it not be strange...to be chained to a man who regarded one but as a useful tool?”* (479)

While the earlier novels establish a clear avenue through which their unpolished heroines are introduced into the world, refined by their male suitors, and married in unceremonious fashion in the final pages of the story, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* establishes an entirely new precedent for the heroine’s journey. It is a novel that generations of readers have reacted strongly to, occupying, as Cora Kaplan argues, “a place of privilege in the feminist canon,” markedly for its depiction of the “difficulties that Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome” (173; Gilbert and Gubar 338). By its publication in 1847, *Jane Eyre* both delighted and dared its readership, offering an intimate and enticing tale that wildly expanded the limits of the female subject, particularly for the ways Brontë’s novel both continues the narrative of refinement enforced by previous novels and also entirely complicates it.

Her heroine, like Arabella and Evelina, was separated from much of her family, orphaned and left with a cruel aunt and tormenting cousins, before eventually being sent to Lowood school, where she spent ten years of her young girlhood sequestered from the outside world. Such a beginning seems to set her up as a blank slate; however, deviating from Locke’s ideas of human nature, Jane appears to possess some form of innate goodness that prevents her from being corrupted by her callous family or the punitive Mr. Brocklehurst. However, I argue that

Jane is a slate that has consistently resisted being written upon, a vindictively blank slate. It would be wrong, though, to say she is not in some way colored by the bad experiences she has had since birth. She enters Lowood as a plain and overly passionate child, marred with what her aunt labels “bad character” and a “deceitful disposition” (Brontë 45). While Mrs. Reed's distaste for the child certainly leads her to misconstrue Jane's true character, there is no denying that Jane is plagued by fits of anger and longing. For example, before leaving her care, Jane lashes out at her aunt, saying “I am glad you are no relation of mine...I will never come to see you when I grow up; and if anyone asks me how I liked you...I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty” (44). Such outbursts litter the early pages of the novel, and even the young Jane reflects on her fault in giving her “furious feelings uncontrolled play” (45). This reflection is key because Jane is admittedly reproaching herself, which demonstrates an awareness of her faults that prevents readers from simply dismissing her as a tantrum-prone child. Readers sympathize with her from the beginning largely due to this very reflective first-person narration, though it is at first paired with this childlike passion. Upon arriving in Lowood, she still expresses this temper, telling her friend Helen of one of her teachers “if I were in your place I should dislike her, I should resist her; if she struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand; I should break it under her nose” (66). Such violent resistance from a young heroine is surprising and, in normal circumstances, would be entirely off-putting, yet Jane is able to solicit a unique sympathy from readers, largely due to the utter torment of her early life. At eight-years-old, she emerges as a much more unpolished heroine than the previous ones, violently, and quite literally, resisting any refinement from the beginning.

However, she was also resisting the people who enforced this refinement, for unlike the other heroines who were blessed with doting guardians like the Marquis or Mr. Villars, Jane is

faced with consistently poor mentors in her youth, Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst. Both her aunt and headmaster perceive her as an innately wicked child in need of intervention, but it is only after entering Lowood, where Jane becomes another victim in Brocklehurst's misogynistic moralist mission to enact an almost systematic refinement of young women, that the figure of the male mentor is first mocked. Brocklehurst pronounces his mission to "mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh" and "to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety" (76). It is through this pervasive and depraved form of refinement, in which a pupil with hair that "curls naturally" is instructed to shave her head because of the headmaster's insistence on hair being "arranged closely, modestly, and plainly," that Brontë begins to criticize the model of the male mentor in the heroine's story, and she does so much more boldly than the previous novelists. While his stated goals for the young ladies under his care are not so far removed from that of the Marquis and Mr. Villars, his character and intentions more closely align with the influence offered by Madam Duval for Evelina or Isabella Thorpe for Catherine. These are other bad mentors whose presence directly combats the efforts of the heroic mentor; Madame Duval's lack of deportment threatens to thwart Lord Orville's example of social shrewdness as much as Isabella Thorpe's manipulative linguistic exchanges stall the progress made by Tilney's lectures in proper judgment. However, it is important to note that these heroines encounter their misleading mentors upon their entrance to society, after already being guided and inscribed upon by foundational parental figures in childhood. Thus, unlike the other novels, Jane must learn to actively discern which mentors are good at a young age, and her story becomes more about navigating all of these attempts at refinement, which she will find by means and through characters very different from the previous refined heroines.

When Jane escapes the oppression of Reed house and enters the new world of Lowood school, the previous novels prepare readers for the introduction of a heroic figure to both charm and change the heroine, yet this expectation is once again broken. As mentioned earlier, young Jane entered Lowood as an overly passionate and vindictive child, yet, many years later, she leaves it as a seemingly quiet and mild-mannered young woman. Such a change, though enacted within the walls of Lowood, was made apart from the headmaster's extreme moral mission. In fact, Jane's first mentor was as far from pleasing Mr. Brocklehurst as Jane herself. Shortly after entering Lowood, Jane meets Helen Burns, a girl constantly reprimanded by the teachers and set apart from her pupils for her distractedness and untidiness. Helen explains her faults plainly to Jane, saying "I seldom put, and never keep my things in order; I am careless; I forget rules; I read when I should learn my lessons" (67). Matching this description, readers first glimpse Helen "absorbed, silent, abstracted from all round her by the companionship of a book," and already Brontë evokes the figure of the quixote (66). Like the previous quixotes, Helen's distractedness seems to be a product of her immersive novel reading, frequently marrying fiction and her reality, which Brontë depicts quite plainly when remarking that, during her lessons, Helen often finds herself "in Northumberland, and all the noises I hear around me are the bubbling of a little brook...then..I have to be wakened" (68). While Brontë may not have explicitly framed Helen as a quixote, she does characterize her, above all other qualities, as a reader, and a rather imaginative one. In all ways, Helen appears to be a figure constantly in need of waking, yet she also proves to awaken things in Jane, and this use of the female reader as a mentor figure is very telling to the ways in which the perception of novel reading has changed since the previous three works. It is notable that readers' first image of Jane is also of her reading. In the opening scene of the novel, she sits perusing a volume on birds, perhaps intrigued by the distant regions they,

unlike she, may flee to. When John Reed discovers her, he promptly orders her to hand over the book, shortly after hurling it at her head. While Jane is also not directly introduced as a quixote figure, she does express an “eager attention with passages of love and adventure” and “feared nothing but interruption” when engrossed in them (11). John Reed’s response to finding her reading also seems to suggest he at least perceives her quixotic qualities, and that behavior is rather explicitly discouraged when the book becomes the weapon of her abuse. After this incident, Brontë does not engage with the image of the quixote again until introducing Helen who, like Jane, seems to use novels as a distraction from her reality.

Paired against Jane’s temper and taste for vengeance, Helen’s sense of compliance and accountability makes her the perfect foil to the fervent young heroine. Not only does Brontë subvert the traditional mentor by making Helen seemingly Jane’s equal in two significant ways, both a woman and a quixote, she also brings her mentor back down to the mortal plane, breaking the illusion of perfection in the previous refiners. Unlike Orville or Tilney, Helen is very reluctant to ascribe to herself any moral superiority, though she presents Jane with better ways to respond to her chastisers. Rather, Helen concedes that she has “a wretchedly defective nature” because, as much as her teachers, and even the lovely Miss Temple, try to correct her ways, they “have not influence to cure me of my faults” (67). In spite of her stubbornness, Helen seems to lament this fact and scorn her lack of malleability, and perhaps her role as a mentor to Jane centers more on this point. Instead of insisting that Jane follow in her perfect moral example like the other heroic mentors, Helen advises her to avoid such resistance to being “cured.”

As much as Helen’s guidance seems to impact young Jane, she dies before her pupil can fully undergo any refinement, yet after Helen’s death, Jane does seem to heed to her advice by taking on the mentor of Miss Temple, the superintendent of Lowood school and perhaps the only

thing keeping the girls from succumbing entirely to Brocklehurst's wrath and depravity. Recalling the awe she felt at first seeing Miss Temple, Jane remarks how she must have a "considerable organ of veneration" for the reverence she felt for her in that instant (56). This immediate sense of adoration she inspires coupled with the allegorical name Temple sets her up as a figure Jane is meant to idolize and express an almost religious devotion towards, which she certainly does. Jane reflects on the effect of Ms. Temple's mentorship:

I had imbibed from her something of her nature and much of her habits; more harmonious thoughts; what seemed better regulated feelings had become the inmates of my mind. I had given in allegiance to duty and order; I was quiet; I believed I was content: to the eyes of others, usually even to my own, I appeared a disciplined and subdued character. (100)

Upon first reading this reflection, it is easy to presume that Jane had been refined by Ms. Temple in the same ways the previous heroines had by their heavenly husbands, yet, even in this rumination, readers can discern Jane's uncertainty with her own words, her disconnectedness from them. Jane later admits that, after her marriage and departure, Ms. Temple had "taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity," and now Jane is "beginning to feel the stirrings of old emotions" (101). Reverting to her childlike whims after the death of Helen and departure of Ms. Temple suggests that Jane had not yet been fully refined by her mentors in the way that Evelina and Catherine had, though they left undoubtable emotional impressions on her. Thus, even in the wake of proper mentors, Jane's true nature maintains its lack of malleability, and this is where Brontë begins to negate the necessity of refinement and assert the need for further, and perhaps alternative forms of, fulfillment for her heroine. Though she mourns the loss of her childhood mentors, their absence is, in a way, freeing the heroine from

the shackles that have suppressed her nature since her youth. When Jane looks out at the Lowood grounds on her final night there, she seems to be assessing her own desires for the first time, and she seeks two things, experience outside of the small world she had previously known and “liberty” (120). It is here that the heroine’s true pilgrimage begins, pursuing the same experience in the world Evelina and Catherine lacked, but this time she is doing so without the intervention of a mentor figure, seeking her own fulfillment rather than another’s refinement.

Moreover, Jane undergoes a second entrance into a new world, this time embarking on her employment at Thornfield, where she is governess to a young ward of the master of the house, one Edward Fairfax Rochester. Though the introduction of Rochester at the beginning of Jane’s pilgrimage of identity mirrors that of the other heroic mentors and seemingly sets him up as her missing puzzle piece to achieving the goals of heroinism, Brontë quickly subverts the expected characterization of him. It is not difficult to see that the brooding, and in many ways vulgar, Mr. Rochester hardly resembles the likes of Lord Orville or Mr. Tilney, though equally well bred and wealthy. With his many tales of his escapades abroad, which won him many lovers and a love child, Adele, Rochester is scarcely the moral paragon or tempered novel reader we witness in the other heroes. Rather, with his “dark face...stern features and a heavy brow” that carry the weight of his mysterious past, Rochester more closely resembles the Byronic hero, a Romantic archetype of a moody and enigmatic male character (134). Searching for a feminized refiner in such a coarse, Byronic character seems impossible, and Brontë would agree, for she not only fails to make Rochester a mentor figure but also arguably bestows that role onto her heroine. Though one of the things that Jane longs for on her last night in Lowood is “experience” outside of the small world she had hitherto known, the kind of experience and sexual liberty Rochester offers is a frightening one for her (102). However, this difference in experience is

exciting for Rochester; to him, Jane is a girl with a “clean conscience...unpolluted memory...without blot or contamination...a source of pure refreshment” (158-59). Interesting, Rochester is evoking the image of the blank slate, noting how Jane’s lack of experience leaves her room to be inscribed upon. However, unlike the other heroes, he is enthralled by her ignorance, her lack of experience, and rather than using her as a figure to mold and refine from his own superior experience, he uses her as a source of refreshment to forget, and forgive, his faults. The Jane we meet in the Reed house is far from perfect and seems rather naturally vindictive and passionate, yet the Jane received by Rochester needs no refinement. In fact, Rochester appears, rather, to seek this refinement from the heroine herself. He frequently showers her with stories of his adventures and misfortunes abroad, stories that left him “hard and tough as an Indian-rubber ball,” and he quickly expresses interest in Jane’s role in helping him with his “final transformation...back to flesh” (153). Such a role reversal is a surprising one, and Jane’s puzzled internal question of “how could I tell if he was capable of being re-transformed?” demonstrates the novelty and newness of the heroine’s entrance into the role of refiner. Brontë strategically uses Jane’s inward turn to reiterate this language of transformation and foreshadow its eventual fulfillment (156).

Thus, unlike the previous novels, Rochester neither insists on nor enforces any form of refinement for his heroine, yet it is the expectation and fear of this refinement, fear that figures like Mrs. Reed and Brocklehurst enforced as deeply for Jane as the earlier novelists did for Brontë, that ultimately prevents Jane from pursuing a life of happiness with Rochester. The stubbornness and defiance that characterizes Jane from the beginning does not suddenly dissolve under the accepting hand of Mr. Rochester. In fact, Jane’s resistance to being written upon resurfaces most strongly when Jane is most enamored with Rochester, in the glowing weeks



before their wedding. He insists on showering her with fine, womanly adornments and gifts, dresses, jewels, and flowers, items in all ways foreign to the plain and homely heroine. Jane is quick to resist these embellishments in a manner that entirely subverts the narrative of refinement and expresses her utter fear of succumbing to it: “I am not an angel...and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself...you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me” (300). Her keen use of the words “angel” and “celestial” recall the storyless angels that Gilbert and Gubar outlined, which Brontë is deliberately distancing her heroine from. Unlike Evelina and Catherine, who accept their need for refinement in order to fulfill the marriage plot, Jane explicitly tells Rochester to not expect such malleability from her, even in the wake of their betrothal. In fact, Jane eventually breaks both expectations, deciding to flee after her ruined wedding day. Her leaving was, in a sense, fleeing this anticipated refinement, ignoring Helen’s regrets to passively submit to the will of others. She feared being another woman Rochester would love and grow tired of, living a life of pure, though uncertain, bliss abroad. Perhaps more pressingly, she resisted being written upon by anyone other than herself, and this is where Brontë begins to connect the idea of authorship to the heroine’s journey, where female subjects can assert their authority in forming their own story by avoiding this refinement.

It is impossible to discuss Jane’s many instances of fleeing enforced refinement without mentioning St. John Rivers, who comes the closest to tempting this heroine to a state of “reform.” He is perhaps another example of Brontë’s critique of the male mentor, for, his instruction towards and successful impressions on Jane are numerous. St. John tells her directly “I want you to give up German and learn Hindostantee,” as he sought a “pupil” with which to practice and found her the most capable of “sitting at a task the longest,” acknowledging the

same teachable disposition tutors like Mr. Tilney lauded (458). His influence on her is evident, as Jane remarks at his swift control over her every action and reaction:

By degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind: His praise and notice were more restraining than his indifference. I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by, because a tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him. (459)

Suddenly, Jane, who has flouted all previous efforts of refinement, finds her actions governed by an avoidance of what is “distasteful” to this man. He has taken the “liberty of mind” which this heroine is keenly intent on keeping. To Jane, this enforced refinement is more than a simple change of dress or manners, it is a total loss of liberty and agency, a loss of selfhood. Despite this, like the previous heroines, she has somehow fallen “under a freezing spell” that allows her nature to be molded by the hand of this “exacting master,” the figure of the male mentor; yet, unlike the other heroines, she still attests “I did not love my servitude” (459). However, Brontë continues with this mockery of the previously established goals of heroinism when this feigned heroic mentor extends an offer of marriage after his perceived successful refinement. He assures her that she has demonstrated all of the qualities he wished to extract from her in his instruction, saying “you are docile, diligent...and very heroic” (464). The addition of the word “heroic” here is notable, and very telling, for it demonstrates Brontë’s deliberate application of the narrative of refinement. Not only is Rivers praising her for her good qualities but also seemingly evaluating the success of his mentoring, and once he has determined her to be “heroic” or suitable heroine material, he resolves to marry her. His wishes are very nearly met, for Jane long contemplates if she should finally “cease struggling with him,” heeding Helen’s advice to succumb to the refinement she long avoided and submit to the previously paved path of the heroine (482).

Despite her resistance, Jane is seemingly prepared to accept this fate were it not for the supernatural intervention of Rochester's resounding recitation of "Jane! Jane! Jane!" (483).

It is with these words that Jane emerges from the reverie of near-refinement and returns to the one man who never enforced such alterations, for though Rochester expresses his eagerness to adorn Jane with fine things, unlike Glanville, Orville, Tilney, or Rivers, he makes no genuine attempt to alter his heroine. While, like Catherine, Jane seems to lack the natural grace and beauty of other women in Rochester's life, such as Blanche Ingram, and, like Evelina, she feels that her lack of experience in the outside world, particularly high society, makes her an inferior match for Rochester, neither of these things must be reconciled, she need not be refined in these ways, before the two can fulfill the marriage plot. As Brontë boldly demonstrates and Gilbert and Gubar beautifully illustrate, the two must only be made equal. Even in their first conversation in the drawing room, Rochester assures her that "I don't wish to treat you as an inferior," and all of his consequent conduct with her proves this declaration to be in earnest (Brontë 156). When Jane tells Rochester how greatly she "grieves to leave Thornfield," it is because it is in this place where the two could be equal, where she could talk "face to face...with an original, a vigorous, and expanded mind," and where Brontë can envision the revolutionary world where "the prince and Cinderella are democratically equal. Pamela is just as good as Mr. B, master and servant are profoundly alike" (292; Gilbert and Gubar 354). This notion of equality is a revolutionary one not only in the fact that it subverts the expectations of refinement set by the previous novels but also in the sense that Brontë's contemporaries and critics would be aghast at the notion of a woman, particularly one orphaned and isolated in the way Jane had been, who is intellectually and socially equal to a man of wealth and experience.

While Jane is first grieved to leave a place where she and Rochester are so uniquely equal, what ultimately pushes her to leave is the revelation, or rather reminder, of their unsurpassable inequality. Aside from the obvious differences between the two caused by “twenty years’ difference in age and a century’s advance in experience” (Brontë 156), their largest rift exists between their blatant disparities in sexual experience, which the discovery of Rochester’s hidden wife only exacerbates (Gilbert and Gubar 355). However, when she returns to him in Ferndean, it is clear they have both undergone the transformation Brontë hints at in one of their initial interactions, and it is this transformation that ultimately establishes them as equals. For Rochester, his transformation “back to flesh” occurs after Bertha Mason burns down Thornfield, after which he is both physically maimed and mentally degraded, resolved to live the remainder of his days in lonely isolation and contemplation in the seclusion of Ferndean. It is only after this transformation, when Rochester is blind, battered, and more bitter than ever, that the two can begin to reach a state of near equality, where the marriage of true minds can take place.

More importantly, Jane too becomes not just fit to be Rochester’s equal, but also fit to be alone, for her pilgrimage of identity is ultimately completed when she arrives at the steps of Moor House. Jane long laments her lack of family, but upon the death of her uncle, she finds herself not only in possession of a great fortune but also the “fraternal and sisterly love” she has been “craving” since her youth (447). The three kind strangers who had taken her in and garnered her friendship are revealed to be her only relations, cousins whose “blood on each side flows from the same source” (444). This discovery, beyond that of her newfound wealth, secures Jane’s future felicity. This is evident when Mr. Rivers attempts to sway her against splitting her wealth between her three cousins. He tells her “your aspirations for family ties and domestic happiness may be realized otherwise than by the means you contemplate: you may marry,” and

Jane's reaction to this proves her fulfillment is final: "Marry! I don't want to marry, and never shall marry" (447). Though readers know her story does not end here, perpetually and pleasantly toiling in her cottage in Morland surrounded by the sisterly affection of Diana and Mary, it appears as though this life would fulfill her. Thus, she is the first of the aforementioned heroines to reach a state of fulfillment outside of the institution of marriage and without the refinement of a heroic male mentor.

However, Jane's story does ultimately return to this institution, and scholars, like Esther Godfrey, have long remarked that "the plot conventions from Jane's rise to fortune and the marriage union...contradict the novel's more disruptive aspects" (853). Others have gone so far as to call the ending "excruciating" for the "dissonance" that emerges from contrasting feminist and oppressive conservative goals (Zare 205). While the ending certainly disrupts the novel's previous insistence on subversiveness, for readers can easily envision a life of quiet contentment for Jane in Moor House, it does not undermine Rochester's, or rather Brontë's, bold insistence on a marriage of true minds. In a world full of enforced refinement, Rochester offers a way for the heroine to obtain her goal of marriage and identity without sacrificing her true nature to the narrative of refinement. It is for this reason that Jane is so bound to him, enough to flee this potential life of contentment in Morton, for "The hero who can take her as she is...is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world" (Campbell 106). This is true not just for Jane but also for Brontë, whose "created world" Jane traverses, and her hero, Rochester, brooding and unhandsome as he is, is the first to take his heroine as she is. This seems to be the ultimate goal of the heroine's journey, the unreachable end novelists scarcely envision before Brontë. This desire for unconditional acceptance by their male counterparts, though never explicitly expressed by the earlier heroines, was inevitably in their hearts as well as those of their authors. For the

female author, this translates to a desire for men to take their novels as what they are and allow these female writers the agency to become the gods of their own created world. After the attempt of so many people, even those closest to her, to refine her, from Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, the many teachers at Lowood, and her cousin St. John Rivers, Rochester's unconditional acceptance of Jane is even more remarkable, and critics who find that the end of the novel, which ultimately ends in as glittering and happy a fulfillment of the marriage plot as any of the previous novels, undermines the strides Brontë made in her progressive, feminist mission, are underestimating the weight that this simple acceptance, this marriage of equality, had on the progress of the heroine's story and the rewriting of the narrative of refinement.

Not only does Jane resist the refinement of others at every step of her story, but she also asserts her authority in narrating it herself. While the other novels applied increasingly intimate narrative strategies to the minds of their heroines, from Lennox's distant third person, to Burney's filtered epistolary form, to Austen's both distant and telling free indirect discourse, none came as close to the true minds of their heroines than Brontë's autobiographical first-person, in which Jane can both relate her story and engage with her remembered self. Carla Kaplan sees this style as central to the narrative, casting the entire novel as Jane's search for an ideal listener, and proven by her choice to narrate her own story ten years after her marriage to Rochester, Kaplan suggests not only that "Jane finds her ideal listener/lover but that Brontë does as well— in us" (6). Thus, Jane's story is not just one of social ascendance, from "victim to agent...governess to wife" but rather the "story of her own longing to talk," to find an audience to which to narrate her trials, her longing, and her love. Accordingly, Kaplan sees this as Jane's growth as a writer, projecting her voice to an "unknown and unpredictable other (the reader)" (9). From her childhood declaration of "speak I must" to her married reflection of "we talk, I

believe, all day long,” Jane has not only found that audience in her constant companion but also in her readers, who she regularly and affectionately engages with throughout her narration (Brontë 68, 519). Brontë, too, delights in the agency of authorship and the audience, the ideal listeners, it grants her.

This is why “Reader, I married him” is one of the most resounding and emphatic lines in all of literature, proclaiming not just Jane’s engagement of equality but Brontë’s engagement with her readers (517). This line, though perhaps the most reductive of all the wedding accounts, does not convey the same hurried anti-climax as the previous marriages. Rather, as contested as the conclusion of the novel is, readers need not question the heroine’s absolute happiness. This happiness, beyond reflecting Jane’s marriage of true minds, captures Brontë’s realization of her literary maternity. If all of these female authors, as Gilbert and Gubar outline, emerged from a patriarchal literary history where women were imprisoned by the male pen, then the narrative of refinement appears to maintain this dynamic of male authorship in a female text. By framing their heroines as a slate that is written upon or rewritten by a male mentor, these novelists seem to perpetuate the notion that the real figures doing the authoring in these texts are the same ones granting the heroines their identity and security, the heroes and “heavenly husbands” who refine and reward them. However, if the narrative of refinement is a way to preserve an illusion of male authority in constructing female identity, then these female authors, by altering and subverting this narrative in strategic ways, can begin to assert their own authorial agency. Brontë, then, is not only depicting a heroine who flees any suppression of her nature but also vicariously fleeing the literary men who attempt to dictate the female literary identity.

## Conclusion

While Brontë may be the first to break this the most boldly, allowing her heroine to author herself amid a barrage of attempted refinement, the earlier authors pursued, and in many ways achieved, this end in similarly meaningful ways, notably in their choice of narration. Burney's epistolary form, for instance, because it captures events in a perpetual retelling and reflection, does not necessarily project an immediate reality to its readers. More importantly, however, it grants total subjectivity to its heroine. *Evelina* is able to author her own story in ways much more explicit than the other heroines, and any elements used to question her narrative bias, such as Orville's unattainable perfection, reveal the impact of this subjectivity on her storytelling. Whether true to reality or not, Burney's choice of the epistolary form allows *Evelina* total agency over depicting, and essentially writing the slate, of Lord Orville, both for her correspondents and her readership. While *Evelina*, the heroine, is successfully refined and remade by and for Orville, *Evelina*, the novel, features a hero who is entirely constructed and authored by the mind of the heroine. Austen, too, proves to be keenly interested in the extent to which her heroine can construct her reality and identity. By using the figure of the quixote, she is directly engaging in Catherine's ability to author her world and alter her reality through her reading. Through Tilney, she depicts the male reaction to this female subjectivity, and, in correcting her judgment, he is asserting his own authorial agency, his power to dictate her perception. However, Austen's narration also does significant work to alter our reading of this seemingly straightforward refinement. With her use of free-indirect discourse, Austen allows Catherine to intermittently control her story, and when the narrator interjects, it is often to inject skepticism not only on Catherine's quixotic misreadings but also Tilney's prescriptive



instruction. Through this narrator, Austen can instill a conscience in her readers, a cue to recognize the critiques implicit in her satirical and exaggerated use of this narrative.

Thus, hidden in these tales of female refinement, these early female authors imbed brief outlets of agency for their heroines, and through the many iterations of this narrative, they solidify a shift from women as mere subjects to authors of their own story, within and outside of their texts. What is scarcely imagined in *The Female Quixote* and steadily nurtured in later novels can be fully realized in *Jane Eyre*. The exasperated plea that marks the end of Arabella's resistance "I conjure you to discover me to myself" (Lennox 370) stands in stark contrast to Jane's exclamation "I will be myself," demonstrating the "liberty of mind" this heroine holds so dear and makes possible for her descendant readers and writers (Brontë 300).

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